Plan C: The Sequel!

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| Fandom: | Supergirl (TV 2015) |
| Relationship: | Kara Danvers/Lena Luthor, Alex Danvers/Maggie Sawyer, Lucy Lane/Susan Vasquez, J'onn J'onzz & M'gann M'orzz, Jimmy Olsen/Winn Schott Jr./Lyra Strayd, Jimmy Olsen/Lucy Lane/Winn Schott Jr./Lyra Strayd |
| Character: | Kara Danvers, Lena Luthor, Alex Danvers, Maggie Sawyer, Maxwell Lord (sort of), Gertrude (Supergirl TV 2015), Grady (The Flash: Duet), Millie Foss, Tommy Moran, Roulette (kind of), Jimmy Olsen, Winn Schott Jr., Lyra Strayd, Bastian Strayd, Lucy Lane, Original Hank Henshaw (if you squint), Hank Henshaw | J'onn J'onzz, Lillian Luthor, Lex Luthor, Cat Grant, Diana of Themyscira||Wonder Woman (Mentioned), Eliza Danvers, Jess the Secretary, Music Meister |
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Plan C: The Sequel!

by IShipItAllAndThenSome

Summary

Tallulah, still living in the musical bubble universe, takes up the mantle of superhero (Lady Law) to avenge Kara. Of course, at some point, she meets an intrepid reporter named Kit Sorrel who looks just like the woman who inspired her vigilante quest for justice. Her sister, police dispatcher Veronica ‘Ronnie’ Sorrel, and the PI she ‘colludes’ with, Eloise Garcia, end up embroiled in the mess. But as Tallulah investigates the city’s crimes, two new bosses take over, and these women are worse than anyone she’s ever dealt with. Can these mob casualties, dispatchers, newsies, and dicks suss out the truth and survive ’til credits roll, or will the secrets they keep get in the way?
Lena bolted upright in a cold sweat, heart pounding faster than she could open her eyes. Her hand was on her phone, almost ripping the damned socket off the wall with how fiercely she unplugged it, and she was dialing half-blind, eyes burning.

“Kara?”

“Lena…” Kara groaned sleepily. She pushed upright; Lena could hear her sheets shifting as her body did. She could hear her running a hand through her hair. She could hear her breathing. “It’s, like, three in the morning. Are you okay? I can be over in thirty seconds if you need me.”

Lena shook her head, vibrating with relief. “No, I’m - I’m fine. I had - ” She laughed, derisive.

“You had what, sweetheart?” Kara’s voice was gentle, coaxing, utterly free of judgement, utterly brimming with earnest affection.

“I had a bad dream.” Lena laid back down, curled up on her side, and put Kara on speaker so she could pretend she was in the room.

“What happened in your dream, Lena-Bean?”

Lena snorted. “You’re ridiculous.”

“You love it.” Kara laid down, too, sliding onto her back. “And you’re avoiding the question.”

Eyes squeezed shut, Lena whispered, “You died.”

“I’m not going to die. Okay? I promise, I’m not going to die on you.”

“You got shot. You were bleeding, and I was holding you, I was begging you not to go, and you…”

“Sweetheart, nothing can make me bleed. Not even hormones. Alex got so mad when she found out Kryptonians don’t get periods, and I got so mad when I found out how expensive tampons are.”

Even though Kara was telling the truth, and trying to calm her down without condescension or insensitivity, Lena couldn’t get the image out of her head.

“I think it - I think it was… That pocket universe you told me about last night, remember that?”

“Yeah, the Music Meister.”

“Because I remember you said you were in a gold dress,” Lena murmured, fingers twisting in the excess fabric hanging off the pillowcase. “And I remember gold fabric and red blood between my fingers. They were closed, I was applying pressure, but it kept - it kept spilling out.”

By the time she’d finished speaking, Lena’s voice was small, choked, but Kara was still warm and
soothing and gloriously alive. “Hey, Lena, it’s okay. I dreamed about it, too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. But I think I had a better time there than you did. Wish you could’ve seen it.”

“Oh, yeah?” Even sleepy, Lena’s mind was sharp as a trap, clamping down on the strangest things. “What did you dream about?”

“We were in your - her - little closet. Getting my measurements. Those soft hands on my skin. Those brilliant green eyes looking up at me. Being kissed.”

Lena sighed, legs uncoiling. “You got to dream about me kissing you?”

“Well, that. And you telling me you loved me.”

“I can hear you grinning.”

Kara laughed, a giddy sort of giggle. “Superhearing?”

Lena blew a tentative raspberry, which made Kara laugh even louder, but even that laugh couldn’t shake the quiet fear in her voice when she managed to admit that she didn’t want to go to sleep. She didn’t have to say why.

“Okay, Lena-Bean,” Kara said, cavalier.

“You’re not going to try and convince me? ‘Take care of yourself, Lena;’ ‘you need to sleep, Lena;’ ‘I don’t care that it’s organic, wheatgrass shots are not food, Lena.’”

Another shifting sheets noise, and then Kara began to sing, very very softly. “Stay awake, don’t rest your head. Don’t lie down upon your bed. While the moon drifts in the skies, stay awake, don’t close your eyes.”

“Kara…”

“Though the world is fast asleep, though your pillow’s soft and deep, you’re not sleepy as you seem - stay awake, don’t nod and dream.”

“…”

“Stay awake, don’t nod and dream…”

Lena slept.

KT:

Sitting in the police station, draped in an itchy grey shock blanket, wet hair plastered to her cheeks, Tallulah knew she needed that blanket. She had to be in shock - what other explanation could there be for how she felt? How else could she be stony inside when Kara’s blood was drying on her fingers?

“Now, Miss..?”
The cop sat down at his desk, looking expectantly at her. After a moment, an interminable stretch of silent hell, she managed, “Lynch. Tallulah Lynch,” and immediately started to cry.

Quiet tears were a skill, hard earned but necessary. She’d grown up in a freezing dorm of children made cruel by loneliness overseen by people who just wanted you gone; crying was a one-way, non-refundable ticket to getting beat up and bleeding all over the bathroom until your nose clotted.

“Hey, now, don’t - don’t do that.” The cop offered her his handkerchief, waving it at her like he was shooing her off. “We just gotta ask a few perfunctory questions before we put this mess to bed.”

Lena dabbed at her eyes, blew her nose. The handkerchief had watery streaks of black where her mascara had run down her face, and she felt utterly ashamed by that evidence of weakness. Worse, still, was the little bit of red bleeding through from the other side, dragging up an ugly sob that hurt to swallow back.

“So, uh, who were the people involved in the shooting?”

“Mistah Cuttah and the Foss fathers. Two of Cuttah’s boys and one of the Foss’ fellas.”

The cop gave a distasteful little sneer. “Good thing they got taken out, filthy little - I ain’t gonna use that language around a lady. Who was the fella and the dame near you?”

“Barry - Barry Allen and… And..!” Tallulah curled forwards, face in her hands, shoulders shaking hard enough to register on the Richter Scale. “And Kara Danvers.”

“And what were you doin’ out there?”

“I heard gunshots,” she sniffled, shaking herself, sitting up as straight as she could. “I - they were singers at Mistah Cuttah’s club, and as soon’s they finished their number, there were gunshots, an’ they ran on out to help, so I - I followed ‘em. I followed her.”

“You’re the only survivor,” the cop noted.

“I was too late. The bosses was all wearin’ Chicago overcoats when I got out there, and Kara and Barry were just… layin’ there. Barely breathin’. Talkin’ to each other, tryin’a keep each other awake.” Tallulah squeezed her eyes shut, took a deep breath. “I couldn’t keep her awake. I was - I was talkin’ to her, I was applyin’ pressure t’the wound, an’ it wasn’t enough. She just… she slipped away.”

Clearing his throat, the cop said, “Well, it’s all over now. You don’t hafta come back - we know who done the killin’, we know who got killed, an’ we ain’t gonna tread on no toes gettin’ answers we don’t need.” He smiled, a little too hard, and clapped her on the shoulder. “Why don’t you go on home, Miss Lynch, get some sleep, huh?”

Tallulah stood so fast her chair screeched on the floor and toppled over. “How’m I s’posed to get some sleep, huh? How’m I s’posed t’do that when you ain’t gonna try and shut the dregs’a those operations down? My - my friend got killed, Officer! How’m I s’posed to sleep when you ain’t doin’ your job, and she ain’t gettin’ any justice?”

She was icy again, cold and hard and sharp enough to cut glass, her bloody finger jabbing fiercely in his face. She wasn’t shaking anymore. Tears were boiling in her eyes, but she was solid as rock.

“Ma’am, you gotta calm down - ”

“Don’t ma’am me! Do your damn job! That’s what you can do, if you want me to calm down!”
Tallulah reared up, two inches from his face. “What good are you, huh? What’s the point of you?”

“Look, you’re hysterical, but now they’re dead, they ain’t a problem, and we ain’t stupid enough to start one because some dizzy dame’s gettin’ all, so make tracks and let the big boys do their jobs.”

“You ain’t worth the brass in your buzzer - any by the looks of it, there ain’t none there, anyway!” Tallulah threw his handkerchief in his face and, on a wicked impulse, spat at him.

“Brass badge or not, baby, I’m bigger’n you,” he hollered as she stormed away.

She was almost out the door when she realized the stupid blanket was clinging to her still, and fumbled it off just so she could fling it to the floor. The longer it took, the greater her frustration, and by the time she had it in hand, she was crying again, knees buckling.

“Hey, kid, you okay?” someone asked, voice soft.

Tallulah sniffled, wiped her face, stood. “I’m fine. I’m - ‘m sorry I made a scene, I just…”

The woman smiled, sympathetic, and gestured towards her hand, where Kara’s blood was dry and cracking. “Someone kicked off, huh?”

Tallulah nodded, bitterly whispering, “And they ain’t gonna do a fuckin’ thing about it.”

The woman’s expression matched Tallulah’s tone. “Somethin’s in the coffeepot, I swear to god.” She extended a hand. “C’mon. You gimme that thing, and I’ll - ”

Whatever she was going to offer was cut off by the staticky grumblings of a scuffed steel box: 10-31 at Maple and 17th, we need backup, 10-31, Maple and 17th, please respond.

“Sorrel on dispatch, I’ll have a unit at Maple and 17th ETA five minutes.” The woman stood and yelled, “McCann, Bundy, get your asses down to Maple and 17th!”

Two officers, ostensibly McCann and Bundy, rolled their eyes and loped as slowly as they could towards the front door.

“Are they tryn’a stiff you?”

Dispatcher Sorrel shrugged. “They don’t like ladies in their space. They don’t like ladies bossin’ ‘em around.”

“They shouldn’t go outside, then. We’re 52% of the damn population - it must be hell on ‘em,” Tallulah scoffed. “Thank god for that.”

Dispatcher Sorrel huffed a laugh, then took her blanket. “They say it’s a sign of a healthy civilization if there are more women than men.”

Tallulah gave a wet snicker, then wiped under her eyes, black smudging along her finger. “Yeah? Good for us.”

The Dispatcher took her hand and gently squeezed it. “You’re gonna be okay.”

“She was… I didn’t know her long, but she was the closest thing I had to family. To anything.”

“No one should have to let someone like that go,” the dispatcher murmured. “Tell you what. I’m gonna open this drawer to get a tampon -”
Every man in the office looked away like she’d started making sausage.

“- and you just take one, too.”

“But I don’t gotta - ”

The dispatcher shushed her silently, finger on lips, and opened her top drawer before walking off.

In that drawer lay a nest of the same metal boxes that was on top of the dispatcher’s desk - police scanners. Tallulah had quick fingers and no reason not to take one.

It came with a thin, wrinkly user’s manual, complete with rudimentary internal schematics, and Tallulah stayed up all night to get it running and to listen. As she looked at the diagrams, something in her insisted that if the paper in the speaker was replaced with silk rayon, the sound would be clearer, so she switched it out with the carefulest of hands.

Then she turned it on.

As a crystal clear voice spilled out, saying Suspect turning off 17th onto Bay, he’s getting away, repeat: he’s getting away.

Tallulah stood up, jaw tight. “You might be bigger, Officer Smooth, but I’m gonna be better.”

Outside her window was the sign for Birch Street, and faint footsteps were approaching from maybe three blocks away, audible through the thunderstorm.

Bay was three blocks down from Birch - about five minutes - but it took only two for Tallulah to put on gloves and more comfortable shoes and clothes and climb out her window, down the fire escape.

Three minutes of waiting paid off, and some jackass waving a knife was running right underfoot. Tallulah jumped down off the last landing, over the rail, and managed to kick him in the shoulder on the way down. His knife skittered on the concrete, and he wobbled.

“What the fuck?”

“Doncha know not to point things in a lady’s face?” she asked, kicking the knife away. She took advantage of the stance to drive her fist into his face, knocking him down. “It’s rude.”

With that, she took off his tie and knotted his wrists together to a yield sign two feet away. The cops were still a block and a half back, but she didn’t want to risk being seen, so she ran around the block and up the next fire escape, climbing up until she reached the roof - just in time to watch them cuff the guy.

⚖

Cutter’s club was closed down.

Tallulah had woken up at her usual time, exhausted from a day and a night that still hadn’t quite hit her. None of it seemed real - she hadn’t met a gorgeous girl and kissed her and wanted her and watched her die, she hadn’t sucker punched a criminal before the cops had even reached him, she hadn’t run up and down buildings just to do it - and she wasn’t sure she wanted it to be until she got to work.
There wasn’t blood in the streets, but then, the rain had washed it all away. Spent casings clogged
the storm sewers. The doors weren’t blocked off by cops or police tape or anything, but the place
was locked up tight, because the only person with the key was Cutter Moran, and he was dead.

_Tommy might take over,_ Tallulah thought, staring dumbly at the club, _but he’s gonna make brodie
after brodie until the place is crushed under his mistakes. His own goons’d end up shooting him._

She wondered if Millie Foss was going to take over her dads’ game now that they were dead, but
they’d always kept her out of the business, and even though she was a sharp twist, she’d have to
figure everything out first, and that could take weeks - months - of chaos and bloodshed. The city’s
people couldn’t afford to wait for the violence to start again.

She stared into the street, reasoning, “Someone’s gotta shut this down, and the coppers sure won’t.
They ain’t even layin’ down the law when the bosses are dead.”

She didn’t have to say that she wanted to lay down the law.

She didn’t have to say that she wanted to shut it all down.

She did, however, have to ask some questions.

Tallulah walked to the bus stop and waited for a few minutes. When it didn’t come, she kept the
pattern up - get to stop, wait at stop, leave stop, repeat et. al. - until she was only ten blocks away
from Grady’s apartment and there was really no point in waiting again. So she started walking again,
broke out into a run after half a block, and got to Grady in only five minutes.

This was, in part, due to him coming around the corner of his own block while she came up onto it
and her actually slamming into him.

“Woah, hey, what’s the hurry?” His arms were full of brown paper bags that, thankfully hadn’t
fallen. “Tallulah! What are you doin’ out of your closet?”

“You think I live there or somethin’?” She found her hands were shaking. “How’d you get out last
night? You get out okay?”

Grady gave her a look. “Are you kidding me? ‘Did I get out okay’ she says - last I heard, you were
gettin’ hauled down to the station for questioning!”

“I don’t know why they wanted to know what I saw. They ain’t doin’ any investigation or anything,
so, uh, so I think I’m gonna.” Tallulah grabbed one of his bags and smiled tightly over the top. “An’
you know more about Mistah Cuttah than anyone. You were everywhere in that joint, Grady, so I
thought, ain’t nobody better to ask than you.”

Grady rolled his eyes. “Just once, I’d like someone to come to me for my winning personality.”

“Oh, come on, Sidecar, your personality’s got a participation ribbon at best,” Tallulah ribbed,
elbowing him gently.

“Yeah, you ain’t no prize, either,” he shot back. Then he jerked his head towards the building.
“C’mon, Lynch, in you go. I got milk in that bag.”

“None of it’s gonna go bad, it’s all in cans.”

They started up the street, and after a moment of futzing with the key, they got into the building.
“Thank god, I’m on the ground floor,” Grady groaned, unlocking his own door with slightly less difficulty and walking in in front of her. “You want coffee or somethin’? It’s early as hell.”

“Alright, why not?” Tallulah walked in and set her bag down on his kitchen table, kicking the door shut behind her and unloading it. “Black. A little sugar, if you can spare a pinch.”

“A cup for a neighbor.” Grady opened the sugar jar, then looked over at her with a gleam in his eyes. “But I don’t like my neighbors much.”

Tallulah laughed and continued unbagging. As she looked determinedly down at the canned milk and other foods in the bag, she asked, “You go by the club this morning?”

“Yeah. Took the train back, let me off right under my grocery store.” Grady’s stove ticked for a minute before he gave up on the pilot light and lit a match. “Why, did you?”

“Yeah.” Tallulah started putting the cans away, neatly stacked according to type and expiration date. “They didn’t even clean the place up.”

“One of the doorknobs got dinged.” Grady sighed. “Tommy Moran’s gonna fuck it up if he steps in.”

“Boy, do I know it.”

Grady turned, leaning against his scuffed laminate countertop with his arms crossed. “I been working there since I was a kid.”

“Day I turned eighteen, Mistah Cuttah hired me.” Tallulah closed the cupboards, a little harder than she had to, and, too softly, said, “I woulda been on the streets, if not for him.”

“I usedta dump ashtrays.” Grady let out a sharp breath through his nose. “My pops was one of his foot soldiers. Bad guy. Patsied for the whole organization - probably the best thing that sorry sonovagun ever did - so Cuttah took me under his wing. Gave me a job. Gave me a home.”

“Gave you a family.” Tallulah nodded; she knew from experience. “He wasn’t lawful, but he wasn’t awful.”

Grady snorted. Behind him, water simmered. “You okay?” he asked. “You were screamin’, last night.”


They were silent long enough for water to boil. Grady made them each a cup, complete with a pinch of sugar for her and a splash of milk for him, then sat at the table. When she did the same, he looked her dead in the face and said, “Ask me what you need to know.”

“Was Mistah Cuttah grooming anyone to be the heir? Was he teaching Tommy anything? Was he teaching anyone anything?”

Grady shook his head. “He’s a very private man.”

“Was he planning anything for the next few weeks? Shipments, raids, acquisitions?”

“He was gonna sell some guns, but they’re in evidence lockup right now.” Grady took a sip. “One of his, uh, juice joints was nearly done with the next batch of whiskey; shipment wouldn’t be until next
week.”

Tallulah nodded. “Any guess as to the day?”

“He always shipped whiskey on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“What’s the address?”

Eyebrows raised, Grady asked, “You planning on jumping in or something?”

“I ain’t getting in on crime.”

“Alright, fair’s fair. It’s on Maple somewhere.” Another sip. “What else?”

Rather than ask straightaway, Tallulah pulled a notepad out of her pocket. She scribbled down *juice out maple T/T*, then asked, “What about his structure? I know he took out two guys last night and they got… taken out.”

“Yeah. Uh… I don’t have this verified, so take it with a grain of salt, alright?”

“Information’s information, Sidecar. Just knowing their names’ is gonna help me.”

“Okay, but after this, I get to ask you something. Deal?”

Tallulah didn’t even hesitate, offering a hand to shake as she replied, “Deal.”

Grady shook it, sealing the bargain, and spent the next hour and a half describing the layout of the Cutter hierarchy. Tallulah took detailed notes and vowed to make a proper diagram once she had everything she could get. Once he was done, her hand was shaking and half-numb, but she felt good.

“Is that all you need?” he asked, downing the dregs of his coffee.

Tallulah found hers had gone cold before she could drink it, but tossed it back anyway. “If you know anything about the Fosses, I’ll take that, too. And any smaller rivals that might try to take Mistah Cuttah’s toys.”

“I know a little. If you want more, you should go to Iris. She knows more than anyone, even with her dads’ tryn’a hide it from her.”

Tallulah nodded, scribbling *SEE MILLIE* at the top of a non-immediate blank page, and then wrote down everything Grady knew - even addresses for other club employees.

“You have all the information, don’cha?” she chuckled.

“I listen, Lynch, I listen.” Grady took their cups, rinsed them out, and sat back down to ask, “What are you gonna do with this?”

Tallulah bit her lip and, after a beat, shook her head. “I can’t tell you that, pal.”

“I thought I could ask anything.”

She looked away, her hands suddenly aching to be busy again. She started twirling her little pencil, faster and faster and faster. “Nothing about this. Anything else, but not this.”

Hands up, Grady nodded. “Alright. I bartend - ‘know your limits’ - I get it. The canary who died last
night. Who was she?"

“She started workin’ two weeks ago, right?"

“Yeah, I know. I remember her audition. Cuttah said he was gonna make good money with her.” Grady looked down, then back up at her - dead in the eye. “Who was she to you?"

“I knew her for a day, Grady. I don’t…” Tallulah shrugged miserably. “I don’t know who she was to me. I don’t know who she coulda been. All I know is I wish I could know. She was a good girl, a smart cookie with a fantastic voice and a figure to die for - she coulda made something of her life and she died because she was tryin’ t’do the right thing, and that ain’t fair.” Her fingers were tight around the pencil now, knuckles white, and her jaw clenched. “And nothing’s fair. Nothing is. But there are some people who deserve fair more than the rest of us, and she was one of them.”

Grady nodded. “Is that why..?”

Tallulah sniffed; the pencil snapped. “Yeah.”

After a moment, he patted her hand, collected the shards, tossed them out. He didn’t return to his seat, leaning on the end of the table closest to her. “Tell you what, Lynch. I’m gonna poke around for you.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I’m doin’ it anyway. And I won’t make a thing of it, I won’t get in the way. But if I come across something, I’ll pass it along.”

“Thanks, Grady.”

“Anything for one of Cuttah’s kids,” he replied, giving her shoulder a squeeze, “right?”

Tallulah nodded. “If you ever need something, give me a call, okay? Eye for an eye.” She tore out the last page in her notebook and scribbled her number down, sliding it over to him. “I gotta go look for a job.”

“Someone might step in.”

“But ’til then, I got a sawbuck and a Lincoln in the bank, and I don’t know if my next paycheck’s gonna get to me.”

“If you want,” Grady said confidentially, “I got a key for the delivery door. You can go into the closet, collect your supplies. It’s somethin’ to do for no cost to you, and you can work your magic out of your own home.”

Tallulah grinned. “You’re an angel, Grady, you’re a saint.”

“I pour drinks, I listen, I do favors. If it’s that easy to be canonized, Heaven’s full of some shady characters.”

Grady put his key in her hand before she left, very solemn.

“I’ll bring the key back this afternoon,” Tallulah promised with just as much sobriety.

“No, I know you will. I was just thinking… they might sell off all of Mistah Cuttah’s things. All the glasses. The silver. The booze.”
“The costumes. The curtains.”

“The piano.”

The whole damn building.”

They both felt a strange tension come over them. Tallulah had worked there for six years; Grady had grown up in the place. The idea of it being taken by someone else or being stripped bare and sold off piece by piece was horrifying in the most childish way, like walking by a house you’d moved out of as a toddler and being offended by someone else’s curtains in the window or flowers in the garden or bikes in the driveway. But they hadn’t moved out yet.

“If it comes to that,” Tallulah promised, “I’ll help you smuggle out everything behind the bar.”

“I’ll get you the mirrors.”

That was the best promise either of them made that day.

⚖️

The club was strange when empty. Tallulah walked through it, painfully aware of the hollow spaces and the sound of her heels on the floor, blind in the dark because she couldn’t bear to turn on the lights and see the place without anyone in it.

She got into the dressing room and suddenly the air was thick, viscous, with a melody that filled her with dread. She didn’t want to keep going. She didn’t want to be in there. She didn’t want to see her own space empty, to be trapped with that sallow bulb.

She unlocked the door with her own key and went inside. She pulled on the cord for the lightbulb, closed the door behind herself, sank onto one of the weathered cardboard boxes, started to cry. Next to her, folded neatly, was the dress Kara had worn before her last performance. Her jacket, her hat, even her gloves - like she’d turned invisible and wanted to move around unseen. Tallulah would have even taken her invisible, but she couldn’t take anything now, because Kara was dead and gone.

She found herself singing, “Think of me,” and she couldn’t breathe. “Think of me fondly, when we’ve said goodbye. Remember me, once in a while, please promise me you’ll try.”

There was a flash in the mirror, a glimmer of gold, like the dress covered in paillettes she’d so painstakingly sewn on was being worn again, right there with her, and Tallulah was on her feet.

“When you find that once again you long to take your heart back and be free - if you ever find a moment - spare a thought for me.”

Kara was in the mirror, or a pale imitation, but either way, she was there.

“We never said our love was evergreen,” she continued, offering Tallulah a hand. “Or as unchanging as the sea -”

Tallulah’s voice was far too steady as she pleaded, arms out, “But if you can still remember -”
“Stop and think of me,” Kara sang, stepping out of the frame. She took Tallulah’s hands, guided one up to her shoulder, and moved her own down to Tallulah’s waist, swaying gently at first. After a moment, she moved them into a languorous foxtrot, like they had all the time in the world, and sang into Tallulah’s ear, “Think of all the things we’ve shared and seen. Don’t think about the way things might have been.”

“Think of me.” Tallulah thought, maybe, she was arguing. She was also crying, but the fury, the pleading was at the forefront. “Think of me waiting, silent and resigned! Imagine me, trying too hard to put you from my mind!”

“Recall those days,” Kara urged, “look back on all those times -”

Tallulah’s forehead thudded down to rest on Kara’s collarbone. “Think of the things we’ll never do!”

Kara tipped her chin up, forced Tallulah to look her in the face, shook her head. She didn’t say a word.

“There will never be a day,” Tallulah managed, “when I won’t think of you.”

Kara kissed her, like she was saying goodbye - the ghost of a kiss - and then she was gone. Tallulah was still on that cardboard box, like she’d never moved. Had she ever moved?

It took her a while to be able to move. Once she could, it took her even longer to collect a few boxes’ worth of stuff and cram it all into a carpet bag and a trunk.

On some horrible self-flagellatory impulse, she folded Kara’s things into the carpet bag with an obscene level of tenderness. Then she fled, as if from the scene of a crime.

She couldn’t bear to be in, to think of, that place any longer.

⚖

RE:

Ronnie was tempted to run away from the break room just to avoid the fathead officers she had to share space with, coffee deprivation be damned. She was equally tempted to throw the coffee in their faces, and could somehow see herself trouncing them both in a very acrobatic manner.

One was self-injurious and the other impossible; Ronnie reached around McCann to get the pot and went, as usual, unnoticed.

“I don’t know. That idiot was begging off - ‘oh, some doll came and beat me up, tied me up, and left me for you to find!’”

“Well, was he beat up and tied up?” asked Stevens.

“I mean, yeah, on Birch, but ain’t no way some bird broke his nose and chained him to a fire hydrant before we got there.”

Ronnie snorted.
“Hey, you got somethin’ to say, Sorrel?”

Nonchalantly, she poured her coffee and said, “Well, were you actually trying to chase the guy?”

“What are you implying?”

“I’m not implying anything, Officer.” Ronnie looked up, a cool grin on her angular face. “Not a damned thing.” With that, she set the coffeepot back down, took a sip, and walked off.

_I don’t know why I gave that girl a scanner_, she thought, shaking her head and fighting a laugh, _but man alive, am I glad I did. She’s putting it to good use._

And so it went. Occasionally, there would be a call in - robbery, prowler, Peeping Tom - that didn’t take much manpower to handle and, as such, didn’t get much attention. And, occasionally, when an officer did arrive on the scene, there was a bagged and tagged crook insisting that a woman in black beat them up, tied them up, and left them for the cops. The Peeping Toms may have been a little blacker and bluer than the others, but who’s looking?

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**Kzzt…** <br>
10-31 on Walter and Grove. Kzzt… <br>
Dispatcher, 10-34?

“10-46, Kowalski, proceed. What’s your situation?”

Kzzt… juice joint… kzzt… kzzt…

“10-36: visible suspects?”

Kzzzt… 10-46, pursuing on foot… kzzt

Ronnie waited in silence, ready to send a few cars out at a moment’s notice.

Kzzt… kzzt… white male… average height, build… dark hair? hard to tell… exiting the building… going to approach… kzzt… kzzt…

“Okay, Kowalski.”

Kzzzt… kzzt… pop! pop! Oh god… Kzzt… kzzt… Fuck, 52! 52!

“Kowalski?”

Only a crackling sound came through, and popping - gunfire? Either way, Ronnie was on her feet, dialing the fire department, shouting out names, radioing officers close to the scene.

Kzzzt… kzzzt… Jeremy and Bartlett on the scene… speakeasy on fire… broken glass, windows appear to have broken… kzzt… kzzt…

Kzzzt… I see Kowalski! He’s clear, he’s unconscious and a little singed but he’s clear! Kzzt…

Kzzt… figures moving inside, repeat: figures moving inside…! Kzzt…
Thursday night - practically Friday morning - and sure enough, the last of Cutter Moran’s whiskey was being moved. Plumbers’ trucks with no plates were pulling up outside the warehouse brewery, one by one.

Tallulah was perched across the street when a car pulled up. She recognized that car from the police station - it never went well for cops going into a Moran play, which meant they never did. This guy was either optimistic enough to believe that gang activity had ended or stupid enough not to consider the issue at all.

Either way, he shouldn’t have been there.

The cop got out of his car a moment after a guy left the building, locking the door behind him, and Tallulah recognized him, too. It was Magnus King, one of Cutter’s foot soldiers, a greedy little prick with great hand-eye coordination, always reaching up-up-up. As the cop came up behind King, King wheeled and fired through one of the windows, and the building was lit from within by an orange glow. There was an explosion - whatever King had shot had gone boom in a big way - and then King wheeled on the cop and pistol-whipped him, leaving him right by the door as it was nipped at by flames.

Tallulah took off running across the street. King or cop? she fretted. King or cop?

She stooped and checked the cop - breathing, not bleeding, seems okay - then carefully moved him out of the way before approaching the door. She took a breath to steady herself and kicked, just above the locks. The door banged open, and Tallulah rushed inside.

There were two guards and one brewer dead on the floor, one bullet each between the eyes. Tallulah recognized the goons - Walt and Michaels.

_They weren’t nice guys, or good people, but they didn’t deserve to be murdered to cover King’s tail. They should have been brought to justice._

She pulled them out of the fire, even though it wouldn’t help them, then went back inside.

The dead brewer was a stranger, and he was slumped against a steel locker, holding the doors shut. Inside, someone was pounding their fists against the metal.

Tallulah bent and moved the body away, not out. The bullet had gone clean through his skull, and the door, which meant someone was bleeding in there.

Specifically, the bullet had gone through the latch, which meant it was warped. Stuck.

“Hey, I’m gonna get you out, okay?” Tallulah yelled.

A bottle popped; she jumped. Then another one and another one, little sprays of broken glass.

The person inside was hoarse when they shouted, “Hurry!”

Tallulah looked around for something immediately available for lock jimmying - there wasn’t much. What was there was consumed by fire.

“Fuck! Uh…” She turned back to the cabinet. “I’m gonna find something, but I gotta move away a
little. Keep talkin’ to me, okay? I’ll keep talkin’ back so you know I didn’t leave.”

“Okay.”

“Nice. So, uh…” Tallulah spotted a cigar cutter poking out of one of the tough’s suits and snatched it up, rushing to the cabinet. The cigar cutter didn’t fit into the crack, or the bullet hole, so she couldn’t pry the door open or fix the lock. *Shit.* “Um, you smoke?”

“Hah! Not after this, I won’t.”

“You and me both, mister.” Tallulah climbed on top of the distillery table and jumped for the light, thinking she could use the fixture’s metal structure. Then the bulb popped, metal glowing hot, glass shards flying past her face. “Fuck!”

“You okay?”

“I’m good. Oh, that’s excellent!”

From her higher vantage point, Tallulah could see a toolbox by the door. Toolboxes had tools. Tools could take off the hinges, which takes off the doors, which gets whoever’s trapped in there out.

“I found a toolbox!” she croaked joyously.

“Get over here with it, then!”

“It’s by the door. I gotta get to it, and then…” Tallulah surveyed the havoc around her and swallowed hard, throat scratchy.

“And then what?”

“You ever play ‘The Floor Is Lava’ as a kid?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s for real.”

The floor wasn’t all fire; there were some flame-free spots. But the toolbox was on top of another cabinet, which was surrounded by fire, which meant Tallulah had to go over on tables and furniture, which were sparse and also on fire.

“You know if the goons had guns on ‘em?”

“I don’t know.” Then: “You ain’t shooting me out! I don’t wanna get shot at again!”

“Sorry, Charlie,” Tallulah gritted out, and took a leap. “Oh!”

“What happened?”

“I made the first jump. Just a couple more to go.”

To be precise, two tables - one a long lab table covered in burning, molten distilling equipment, the other a tiny end table that had no business being in there. After that, there was a metal guardrail on the ramp by the loading door and a stool, flames licking up its legs.

“Three,” she breathed. “Three there, and four back.” The next jump went okay; she didn’t even wobble, letting out a, “Whoop!” when she landed. “Two down!”
“How many to go?”

Tallulah didn’t answer. She started sprinting down the table, trying to avoid broken glass and molten metal and great balls of fire, and when she had one step left, she took a flying leap instead.

“How many to go?”

“I’m almost at the cabinet,” Tallulah yelped. “Just a short walk and a jump and then I’m turning back for you, okay?”

“Okay!” Then: “Hurry up! I can’t breathe!”

“Me neither, pal, but at least you ain’t tightrope-walkin’ through fire!”

Indeed, Tallulah was doing exactly that. It would have been safer, under ordinary circumstances, to just scoot along on her ass, but the fire was licking her feet as it was with her upright, and she didn’t want to be on fire. Ever.

So she turned her feet out, with the rail at the arches, and started taking big, graceful steps, balancing as best she could. The stool was a step away, and almost all fire. It started crumbling beneath Tallulah when she landed on it, shrinking every second, and she had a sinking realization.

*I’m too short to reach it.*

“What’s taking you so long?”

“I’m gonna piss the fire out, real slow - whaddyou think? The fuckin’ place is on fire! I’m tryin’ *not* to die so’s I can get us *both* out.”

A moment of silence, save for the crackling of flames, and then, “Are you there yet?”

Tallulah groaned and did something she knew she’d regret: she jumped.

The stool crumbled a little; she’d only knocked the toolbox over. So she jumped again, caught the handle with her fingertips and didn’t grab it. She could feel the fire on her legs.

She jumped a third time, snatched the handle, and hit the floor.

Which was on fire.

“Yeah, I’ve got!” Tallulah grabbed the seat of the stool and set it on the railing, hopping onto it and letting it carry her down, slightly safer from the fire. Then she let the momentum of her slide downwards fling her onto the next table - “Steam heat!” - where she took off running.

It was somehow easier going back - maybe because she knew the terrain and knew she could traverse it? - but everything was even more conflagrated than before. The long table was almost all fire, except for some broken glass, which she stepped around almost rhythmically, singing, “I’ve got… steam heat! I’ve got… steam heat!” She managed to make it over to the cabinet relatively unscathed, and she opened the toolbox as fast as she could.

Whoever was inside the cabinet had been drumming along, and while she scrambled, he sang, “But I need your love! To keep away the cold.”

“I got…” Tallulah sang, gritting her teeth as she extracted a hammer and a wrench from the box - useless - and slammed them down onto the table one at a time. “Ugh! Steam heat! I got…” Another wrench, another hammer: slam! slam! “Ugh! Steam heat! I got…” She pounded the box on the table
twice while the cabinet’s hostage kicked, coughed wetly, and sang, “Steam heat!” in a voice too clean for all the smoke in the air.

“They told me throw some more coal in the boiler.” Tallulah began throwing aside anything she couldn’t use, coughing so hard she doubled over whenever she wasn’t singing. “They told me throw some more coal in the boiler.”

“They told me throw some more coal in the boiler,” her companion retorted. “They told me throw some more coal in the boiler.”

Tallulah dumped the whole box out and growled, “But that don’t do no good - oh!” A screwdriver appeared and she couldn’t help but say, “Gratias deus ex machina!”

“You speak French?”

“That was Latin.”

“You speak Latin?”

“…No.” Tallulah climbed on top of the table, and then on top of the cabinet, where she started unscrewing the top hinge. “The top’s coming off first,” she wheezed. “If you can push it open from there and climb out, we can topple the cabinet over and get some safe ground.”

“Okay.”

It took a moment, but then the top hinge fell into the flames below, and the door wilted open - just a little.

“Can you push it - ” Tallulah started coughing, so hard her head spun. “Can you push it open?”

“A little.”

The door opened a little more.

“I’m gonna try and kick it open, oka - ”

Tallulah kicked at the part of the door peeling down, coughing all the while, little spots in her eyes.

“You want a mask?” the guy asked.

“What?”

“A mask. A dust mask.”

“You didn’t fucking - ” After she caught her breath, Tallulah continued her tirade. “You coulda given me a mask, and you’re just now doin’ it?”

“Well, the only other masks are in the cabinet by the loading door.”

“I was over there!”

“You want one or not?”

Tallulah took the mask, put it on, and gave another kick. It opened the cabinet enough so that the guy inside could try to crawl out, but:
“I can’t!”

“I walked through fuckin’ fire to get you out, pal, I ain’t leavin’ you in here.”

“I got shot in the leg.”

Tallulah took a few cleaner breaths, then climbed down onto the table, pushed the door a little further down, and gave the guy her arms to pull him out.

“Oh, hell, you’re Mistah Cuttah’s kid.”

Tommy Moran, in the flesh, bleeding out from his upper thigh, said, “You knew my old man?”

“Didn’t everybody?” Tallulah said, dragging him onto the table. She tore off a strip of her skirt that wasn’t too badly singed and tied off a quick tourniquet. “Now, c’mon, we gotta go.”

“Right… right.” Tommy didn’t stand.

With an exasperated groan, Tallulah pushed the file cabinet down, and saw something in its shadow: the brewer who’d given his life to protect Tommy. She scampered over it and managed to get him over her shoulder, then looked at Tommy and said, “I can’t carry both of you out, so start limping.”

She gave him her other shoulder to lean on, and together, they started for the door.

Weakly, he sang, “They told me pour some more oil in the burner.”

“They told me pour some more oil in the burner… C’mon, you shit, we’re almost there.” Tallulah jostled Tommy when he started flagging, half-dragging him out, singing the next lines with him like she was checking he was still breathing: “They told me pour some more oil in the burner. They told me… pour some more oil in the burner…”

They got to the door and Tallulah somehow dragged it open with her foot, practically shouting: “But that don’t do no good!”

Outside, the cops were waiting - lights blazing, sirens blaring.

“I don’t wanna go with the cops,” Tommy muttered, all the strength seeping out of him.

Tallulah snorted weakly and said, “Me neither, you sorry sonovagun, but you’re the victim here, so they probably ain’t gonna lock you up, even if you deserve it. You just siddown right here…”

Tallulah grunted, sliding him down the wall, “Yup, there you go… and I’m goin’ on my merry way.”

“Wait,” he managed, grabbing her leg as she turned away to stop her from leaving.

Tallulah drove the toe of her other heel into his elbow, breaking his grip, then wheeled around and said, “Don’t you ever touch a girl who ain’t said you can.” He said nothing for a moment, so she hissed, “What?”

“Who are you?”

“Nunya fuckin’ business,” she spat, and then she started to run.
“So what’s the situation here?”

Ronnie huffed, arms crossed, and said, “I want you to find her,” slamming the newspaper down on the PI’s desk.

“Her?” The PI looked up and scoffed, taking a drag off her cigarette. “Sweetcheeks, everyone in town’s looking for her,” she said, picking the paper up and shaking her head. The headline, above a picture of a woman’s fleeing silhouette before a burning warehouse, read MYSTERY MAID MANHANDLES MORAN. “Some tweety bird runs into an illegal distillery, while it’s on fire, and drags out three dead bodies and Cutter Moran’s baby boy, to whom she’s given triage, and then runs off into the night before answering any questions, while on fire? Yeah, she’s hot stuff, Ronnie, and that’s why I’m not gonna look into her.”

“What,” Ronnie cooed, sitting on the edge of her desk, “too easy for you, Lou-Lou?”

“I’m not falling for that, Sorrel,” she laughed. “Tryna bait me, get me all riled up? Ain’t gonna work.”

Sighing, Ronnie took her hat off, running her fingers through her short bob. “I think I know who she is, El.”

Eloise leaned in, clearly intrigued even as she schooled her features. “Well, then, you don’t need me, do you?”

Ronnie grinned. After almost a year of working with Eloise Garcia, infamous investigator, she could tell when she’d caught her interest. “Aw, sweetcheeks, you know I’ll always need you.”

“Whaddya got, Sorrel?”

“Lady came into the station about a week ago. Her… ‘friend’ died in the Foss-Moran shootout in front of Moran’s club. She was real choked up. Covered in this girl’s blood, makeup a mess, lookin’ like a drowned rat, and she just about hauled off and socked Harlowe when he said there wasn’t going to be any investigation at all because it was too much work.”

Exasperatedly fond, Eloise gave her a look and said, “Get to the point.”

“I may have let her walk out with a police scanner.”

“Oh, baby, did you really?” laughed Eloise.

“My heart went out to the poor girl, what do you want from me?” Ronnie wrinkled her nose, squeezed Eloise’s hand. “She was real cut up about this girl, y’know?”

“Yeah,” she said, squeezing back. “I know.” Eloise let out a sigh, and, after a moment, said, “What else do you know about the kid?”

Ronnie reached into her double-breasted navy tweed jacket, crossing her legs, and pulled out a folded piece of paper. She set it down on Eloise’s blotter, eyes burning, and said, “This.”
As she unfolded the piece of paper, not letting go of Ronnie’s hand, Eloise wondered at how hard she’d fallen for the dispatcher, at how fast. She hadn’t been expecting it, but it was nice, having someone in her corner, having someone get how much she wanted to protect the little people and how little regard she had for the shadowy, corrupt police force. She found herself rubbing her thumb over the ridges of Ronnie’s bottom knuckles as she read.

“This is a police report,” she said.

“A *ditto* of a police report. About the shooting that night. One woman was alive out there when the coppers finally showed up, holdin’ some dead canary, right hand over a gunshot wound in her stomach.” Ronnie pointed at the name - Tallulah Lynch - and said, “Same as the girl I talked to. Blood on her right hand, stockings ripped through at the knee from hitting the asphalt, soaked to the bone from the rain. They gotta be the same.”

“And then, this dame the cops failed, cryin’ over some girl shot up by gangsters, gets a police scanner, and five days later, some yahoo in a smoke mask almost burns to death at a gangster’s distillery.”

“They gotta be connected, right?”

Eloise nodded slowly, then set the paper down and pulled out a file labeled *PD Blotter -March.*

“There was somethin’ in here… a-ha!”

“What is it?” Ronnie asked, peering down at the clipping Eloise pulled out.

“Cops see a suspicious character on Maple and 17th Sunday, three in the morning.”

“Only a couple hours after the shootout.”

“They pursue.”

“Slow as sorghum molasses.”

“*Sugar.*”

Ronnie shook her head, grinning.

“Anyways, the guy heads down 17th, turns off onto Bay. Cops lose sight for a minute, but when they get to him on the corner of Birch, someone had busted his nose, tied him to a fire hydrant, and left him for ‘em. His knife was five feet away. No prints but his.”

“Did the guy say anything about who took him out?”

“He said it was some piece with dark hair… and ripped stockings.”

Ronnie beamed, triumphant, and snatched Eloise’s cigarette, taking a slow, satisfying drag. “Tallulah Lynch had black hair.”

“Any of your files back at the precinct have her address?”

“No. And here’s somethin’ else weird - the dead kids? The one’s who ain’t gangsters? There’s nothin’ on ‘em.” Ronnie gestured, like *what the hell?*, and continued. “No prints, no social security numbers, no record of Kara Danvers or Barry Allen anywhere I could find. I went to the courthouse, I went to town hall, I called the census - no one with those names has ever existed.”

“Ever?”
“Fishy.” A sly gleam flickered to life in Ronnie’s eyes. “Guess what?”

“What?”

“Those two nameless kids are getting put six feet deep this afternoon.” She tapped the discarded police file where it poked out from underneath the blotters. “Whaddya wanna bet Miss Lynch is gonna be there?”

“I’d bet your very fine hat,” Eloise said, snatching the wide-brimmed blue fedora off her desk and placing it jauntily on her head.

“Hey!”

“And one drink.”

Ronnie slid off the table and leaned over it. She snatched her hat off Eloise’s head, replaced it on her own, and drawled, “You’re on.”

KT:

Ardor City had a problem with the unclaimed dead.

For decades, people died - in fires, in shootouts, in back alleys, in locked safes, in the harbor - and no one stepped forward to take care of the remains. No one could, more often than not, but it was just doing business.

Soon, the ACPD learned that burning the bodies was bad for business. There was a donation made, anonymously, that went to a municipal plot in a cemetery slap in the middle of town, and those bodies got shuffled off there with barely a byline to alert their cohorts.

Tallulah folded her copy of the obits up and tucked it into the inner breast pocket of her red polo coat, plastered to the fence surrounding the graveyard. She couldn’t bear to watch all those coffins get loaded into their holes, especially because she could tell who was who. There was an unofficially-official layout on gang grave grounds - Cutter on the left, Foss on the right, civilians on the bottom - and Cutter and Foss’ men had decent coffins.

The last two, however, were cheap, because the people in them weren’t foot soldiers or important to the surviving members, or even in the grand scheme of things. Kara and Barry, who didn’t officially exist, were lucky to be laid to rest on hallowed ground at all.

Some grunts were scattered around the empty graves, and after a cursory headcount, Tallulah realized that the three guys King shot at the distillery had to be buried there, too.

The dirt was still freshly overturned, rain softly pattering on the dark loam as she approached. She knelt down between the plots, scant bouquets pressed gently to her chest. According to little name plates, on her left laid Kara, on her right, Barry.

Tallulah put one on his plot, hand pressed into the dirt in a silent goodbye, but couldn’t quite bring herself to do the same to Kara’s. There was still too much ash in her throat to give her heart space. She stood, a melody filtering in between the raindrops, and followed it over to the rest of the visitors to gang grave grounds.
There were thugs, distributors, drivers, ‘chemists’ - even Tommy, leaning heavily on a crutch and on Millie’s shoulder - all softly humming the same tune. There were already flowers on Cutter’s grave, and on the Foss’, but Tallulah laid gladioluses across their plots anyways.

Iris stooped, touched the white carnations she’d placed between her fathers’ plots before addressing the shabby clutch of mourners. “We’re gonna open up the club. Tommy’s dad’s. Old times’ sake. You’re all welcome to come by for a drink.”

They started down the hill, and Tallulah rasped, “I’ll be there. I just gotta…”

There was a silent understanding passed between them all, and then Tallulah was alone by Kara’s grave once again.

She knelt and planted a fistful of seeds at the top of Kara’s plot. “When it warms up, you’re gonna be all colors, chickie.” Her eyes burned, and she reached up to wipe her face with one hand while laying down a little bundle of dahlias and violets and baby roses with the other. “I just… I know you ain’t gonna hear me, but I need to say it. Thank you for being in my life, even for a little while. Thank you for caring about me, for bein’ my friend, for bein’… Thank you for making me happy, for - for being happy because of me, I think. I hope I made you happy. And - and I’m gonna do right by you. I’m gonna shut all of this down.”

With that, Tallulah was on her feet and sprinting down the hill after them. The graveyard was only ten, fifteen blocks from Cutter’s club, so they walked. Some had umbrellas; some flipped their collars up; none really minded the rain.

About a block away, Iris stopped, squeezing Tommy’s hand. “There’s a grief that can’t be spoken,” she began, voice shaking, voice hard. “There’s a pain goes on and on.”

“Empty chairs at empty tables,” everyone empathized. “Now my friends are dead and gone.”

“Here they talked of revolution.” Tommy kissed Iris’ hair, trying to soothe her, but she was burning, her voice dragging his along. “Here it was they lit the flame.”

“Here they sang about tomorrow,” Tallulah choked, eyes caught on the spent shells still in the gutter.

“And tomorrow never came.” Grady, hiding in the collar of his trench coat, unlocked the front doors and, with great reverence, opened them. They all walked in with the same due respect, leaving their umbrellas in the corner and trickling in towards the bar.

Iris walked down the stairs to the little pit of tables before the stage, tugging off her gloves with her teeth, touching the bannister with a bare hand while the other helped Tommy to his feet. “At that table in the corner,” she sang, looking back to him for a moment before surveying the whole lush space, “the could see the world reborn! And they rose, with voices ringing!”

“And I can hear them now.” He leaned against the railing and shook his head. “The very words that they had sung became their last communion on this barricade at dawn.”

Every grunt fell in line, as naturally as if their bosses had ordered them to, pushing tables out of the way as Iris crossed the dining floor, lamenting, “Oh, my friends, my friends, forgive me that I live and you are gone. There’s a grief that can’t be spoken. There’s a pain goes on and on.”

Tallulah’s knuckles were white on the lip of the stage, and she hoisted herself onto the apron, arm flung out at center stage - two gold paillettes, from Kara’s dress, glimmered dully. “Phantom faces at the window!”
Pablo joined her, growing visibly stronger at center stage when the lights flickered on overhead, in singing, “Phantom shadows on the floor.”

Grady, pouring drinks behind the bar took a shot of his own, face buried in his hands. His fingers moved up, raking through his hair, and his voice shook. “Empty chairs at empty tables.”

Everyone harmonized, “Where my friends will meet no more.”

Tommy watched as Iris wheeled on him, both pleading and staunch: “Oh, my friends, my friends don’t ask me what your sacrifice was for!”

“Empty chairs at empty tables,” he retorted, grabbing her hand, “where my friends will meet no more.”

The music swelled, faded, and then the tables were back in their place, still disarrayed from the frantic escape of everyone inside when the gunfire stopped and the sirens started, linens stained with wine, sprinkled with ash, spattered with wax, and just a little dusty.

“So, uh, Tommy’s got somethin’ to say,” Millie sniffled, dabbing at her burning eyes, arms crossed tight over her chest.

“Right. That’s right. Um.” Tommy straightened up as best he could on his own. “Yesterday, I got shot tryna do my dad’s work.”

Everyone looked to his crutch, the bandage bulging through his trousers.

“I ain’t no hero. I ain’t stickin’ around where I’m in danger, and I ain’t lettin’ my Millie do it, neither.”

She shook her head. “You don’t pick for me, Tommy Moran.”

“You’re my moll, Mill, I’m lookin’ after you!”

“I’m mine, before anything else,” she spat. “Got it?”

“Mill -”

The crack of her hand on his cheek was operatic.

“Great acoustics,” Pablo sighed wistfully.

“What are you sayin’, Moran?” Tallulah asked, starting towards him.

“I sold the club. I sold - I sold all of it.” Tommy set his jaw. “Someone from out of town’s gonna be running things.”

“You’re bringin’ in an outsider?” Grady asked, coming out from behind the bar, incredulous. “What about us? No outsider’s gonna leave the old roots growin’, we’re gonna get thrown out on our ears!”

“Blackjack wants you to stay. Nothin’s gonna change but hands.” His own up, placating, Tommy said, “I promise.”

“Mistah Moran,” one of the goons asked, “why come you didn’t just give the seat to the next in line. Wasn’t that King?”

“King ain’t around,” Tommy said, lazy, lackadaisical. “If you got a problem, take it up with the new
Tallulah pushed past him and hissed, “You’re weak,” on her way, going after Millie.

She was leaned against the bricks, one leg cocked up on the wall behind her, halfway down a cig, ash fluttering just past her fur collar. Even like this, in mourning, betrayed, rain starting to wreck her eyeshadow, Millie Foss looked like a woman to never be trifled with.

“You’re not gonna let him make you leave,” Tallulah peeped, “are you, Miss Foss?”

“You’re his dad’s tailor, right?” Millie asked in lieu of answering.

“Costumes for his performers, mostly, but I did uniforms for the waitstaff, stitched up bullet holes and knife cuts - in people’s clothes!” Tallulah fished a matchbook and a cigarette out of her pocket and tried to light up so she could avoid looking at Millie. “Made some of Mistah Cuttah’s togs, some of Mistah Moran’s, too.”

“Oh, yeah? Gimme that.” Millie tossed Tallulah’s soaked cig and matches aside, pulled out one of her own and lit it before handing it over.

“Thanks, Miss Foss.”

“When you gotta smoke, you gotta smoke.” They took a synchronized drag, filling the rain-blue air with smoke-blue puffs. “Tommy hates me smokin’ now.”

“You can’t let him tell you what to do.”

“I’m not.”

“You’re hiding out here to smoke.”

“I’m gettin’ away from his ass so I can calm down before goin’ in there and finishing the conversation.” Millie sighed. “This was all a lot easier when it was just… runnin’ around, cheap apartments, makin’ time whenever and wherever.”

Tallulah cringed.

“It’s harder, when you’re in charge. You gotta look beyond yourself, do what the people around you need you to do, even if it ain’t what they want.”

“Can you do that?”

Millie scoffed, “You wanna be rude to the doll raised by two mobsters?” and hitched her skirt up, revealing a pearl-handled pistol.

“That’s my point,” Tallulah said. “You can do all of this. You’re quick and tough and smart. You could run this place. You could keep it calm.”

“My Daddy always said you can’t trust the police to police.”

Tallulah nodded. “You gotta take the law into their own hands sometimes. Be the law, if you can.” She flicked some ash off, then looked over at Millie. “Someone who knows this city’s gotta take care of it, and I know your pops’ didn’t keep you in on everything, but you look like a quick study.”

Millie was silent; her cigarette was next to nothing now, so she dropped it in a puddle and scuffed it out, just in case.
“I’m gonna head back in. I won’t bother you no more, Miss Foss.”

Tallulah went in, grabbed her coat, and was almost out the door when she stopped at the bar. Tommy was obviously deep in his cups, deeper than he had any right to be in the span of that conversation, so she sat down next to him, plucked an ice cube from his drink, and put it under his collar.

“Fuck!”

“Look at me, Moran.”

“Huh?”

Tallulah wrapped his tie around her fist and jerked him up so he had to look her in the face. “You survived that fire for a reason. Be a better man than you were when you went in, you shit. Treat Miss Foss right. Look after your father’s legacy. Get Pablo an act. Get King put away. Be decent to people.” She let go, and he slumped back onto the bar. “You coulda died, Tommy Moran, act like you’re glad you didn’t.”

Grady, from behind the bar, raised his eyebrows. “Good chat with Foss?”

“I sure as shit hope so,” she sighed. “I think two people are casing the joint. Saw a couple following us here, caught a glimpse of one of ‘em in the alley when I was talking to Millie. Take the long route home, alright? Keep your keys…” Tallulah quickly threaded hers through her fingers and clenched her fist, forming ersatz claws. “Like this.”

“Alright. Godspeed, Lynch.”

“Stay safe, Sidecar.”

Tallulah walked to the bus and stayed by the back door, watching two figures - one in trousers and a worn leather flight jacket, the other in a navy Mackintosh, hood up - board the bus. Neither of their faces were visible.

She waited until a busy stop, with lots of people getting off, to disembark, and started off towards the train. I get on the Yellow, take it to Forest and Prosper, transfer to the Blue and get home.

They got off with her, stayed just far enough behind that she couldn’t call them out on tailing her, and got into the station with her, one person behind her in line for a ticket.

Okay, she thought, to the Green, take it two stops, get off and take a bus to the nickelodeon on 13th, hide out in the crowd until it’s safe to walk home.

There was no crowd; it was a work day, a school day, just after noon. Tallulah took a quick glance around, saw that big brown fedora brim coming up the stairs, and handed over a dime.

That’s two ten minute pictures, she reassured herself. If you see them, duck in until they pass. Check after the first one’s up; if they’re gone, stay, if they’re there, give the second show to some kid, go out the back, down to the bus, and go to 20th and Maple, then walk up.

She slid into a narrow, splintery wooden booth, clutching her unused ticket tightly in one hand while she cranked the film with the other.

Tallulah deliberately picked a plotless silent feature - the view from the window of a train traversing the English countryside or something - so that nothing could distract her from peeking out of her little
box. Eight minutes later, the nickelodeon was over and she couldn’t see them, so she opened her door.

And immediately shut it. The two of them were getting into the booth next to her, so she watched and waited until their show started and then took off, very calmly, very quietly.

She turned the corner and saw them behind her and started running, barely making it into the bus and leaving her pursuers far, far behind. The whole ride, she was torn between relief and paranoia, but her pulse did slow and she stopped looking out every window, head bobbing like a caffeinated chicken’s.

She got off at Thorn, then walked two blocks down, apartment in sight. On the third and final block before Birch, she passed a subway station and heard two sets of even footsteps.

The street was empty. Tallulah cast a covert glance to the right and to the left and realized no one else could see or hear anything that happened.

*I got no rope, no element of surprise, and no muscle on ‘em. Oh, rats.*

She stopped short, hands on hips, and asked curtly, “What do you two think you’re doin’, followin’ me?”

---

Ronnie and Eloise shared a look.

“Tallulah Lynch?”

“As far as I know.”

“Can you turn around?”

Tallulah turned on her heel, a neat little pivot that left her in just about the perfect position to throw a killer left hook. “Hey! I know you! You’re Dispatcher - Dispatcher Sorrel!”

Ronnie took her hood down, smoothing her hand over her shingle bob in despair at static cling. “Veronica’s fine.”

“I don’t know them, though.”

Eloise took her hat off and smiled, perfunctory even with cute little dimples popping up on her under her high cheekbones. “Eloise Garcia.”

“Nice ta meetcha,” Tallulah scowled, “but I don’t give a flip. *Why are you following me?*”

Ronnie pulled a newspaper out from under her arm, shook it out, cleared her throat. “If I may… ‘Mystery Maid Manhandles Moran’ - this morning’s headline, referring to the events at a warehouse on Walter and Grove that took place last night.”

Eloise tagged in, pulling the pile of police blotters out of her jacket. “‘Sunday, 4.02a.m. Suspect sighted on Maple and 17th with a knife. Visual lost. Suspect sighted again, three minutes later, disarmed tied to a fire hydrant with his own tie.’ They couldn’t untie it,” she said. “Had to cut it off.”
The tendons in this Tallulah bird’s neck were popping out like tent stakes in a stiff wind. Her jaw was tight. “Did they?”

“Were you a girl scout or something?”

“Orphans can’t pay joiner’s dues. Or get uniforms.”

“Right - you’re a seamstress,” Eloise drawled, handing another blotter sheet to Ronnie. “Lots of knots there, too.”

Ronnie read: “‘Monday, midnight, police call from phone box. Woman, Charlotte Irvine, trapped inside with aggressive man, Gene Irvine, pounding on exterior, shouting obscenities.’”

“‘The pounding breaks pattern; the shouting stops. New voice, female, says, ‘You’re alright, c’mon, he ain’t gonna touch ya.’ Call ends.’” Eloise grinned, tapped the paper. “‘When officers arrive, an unconscious man is tied up by the phone cord and a woman calling herself Charlotte Irvine is drinking a hot coffee inside a 24hr diner across the intersection.’ Yowza. ‘This woman dispatched Mr. Irvine, bound him in the booth, and gave her a dime ‘so I could get something to calm my nerves,’ and sat with her until sirens were audible.’”

“Apparently, Eugene came home tight, found a new phone number written down on the notepad by the phone, and got bent at her.” Ronnie squinted theatrically at the paper, then looked up to meet Tallulah’s gaze head on. “Wanna know the best part? ‘When asked about the second voice, Mrs. Irvine described a woman of ‘above-average’ height and ‘good’ weight with black hair in ‘perfect little finger waves’ wearing a ‘conservative black shirtdress’ and ‘sensible heels.’ Hmm.”

“What did that man who got tied up say about the girl who beat him up, Ronnie?”

“He said… and I quote: ‘she was a ginch! ripped stockings, dark hair, [crude gesture indicating body shape]… if she wasn’t fucking bananas, I’d’a taken a bite of that slice’ - I assume he’s referencing slice of cheesecake, meaning…” The tilt of her head carried all the objectifying pinup implications quite clearly.

Tallulah, who had looked more than a little uncomfortable, was now outright scowling. “I shoulda broke a rib.”

“What was that?” Ronnie asked.

Tallulah retorted, “What was what?” and gave a very good impression of a very bad coverup.

Eloise rolled her eyes. “Miss Lynch, we can go all day, but we’re not doing it to hurt anyone.” When Tallulah shrunk, almost imperceptibly, picking at her fingers, Eloise reached out and separated her hands, stopping her. “This bit in black ain’t making headlines yet, but people are looking for her.”

“I know what it feels like, to have justice get passed over because it’s… easier than investigating,” Ronnie said softly, “and I know you do, too. Your friend - Kara?”

Tallulah nodded.

“She died in a gang shootout, right? My pops did, too. He was a pharmacist. There was a fire fight in the street in front of of his shop - in front of our apartment. He was just locking up.” Ronnie’s jaw was tight, her voice tighter. “It didn’t get investigated because Cutter Moran and the Fosses owned everything.”

“Not anymore,” Tallulah said. She took a breath and looked them both in the face. “You wanna
know? Come up. I’ll see if I got something for you to drink.”

Chapter End Notes

I didn't set out to write this, and then my brain was all, "Let's not keep working on Minerva McGonagall the lesbian spy, or Lena Luthor as a ******** ********! Let's just do this! 30s slang and suffering are fun, right?" so I wrote it. It's actually finished, now, which is insane, because I've never finished a multi-chap fic before, so good on me! I'm going back and editing a little, chapter by chapter, but that won't affect you. I'm going to try and update on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and maybe Saturdays, so keep an eye out, I guess.

Songs used in this chapter are:
Stay Awake - Mary Poppins
Think Of Me - Phantom of the Opera
Steam Heat - The Pajama Game
Empty Chairs At Empty Tables - Les Mis

What Tallulah (Lena) says in Latin means 'thank the god in the machine,' as a pun on the plot contrivance of the Deus Ex Machina, which is when something randomly arrives and makes your insurmountable obstacle easily defeated. A fiction-critiquing pun in Latin, in fiction within fiction-about-fiction was too tempting to pass up.
Chapter Summary

Alex and Maggie shop for wedding dresses with a strange sense of deja vu, Tallulah is shocked to see two familiar faces, and the whole team comes off their first mission with more questions than when they went in.

Chapter Notes

There is some violence, but no one gets killed. Also, there are kids being imperiled, but again, no one is killed, we don't see the harm, and everyone makes it out alive.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

AM:

“Hey, babe?”

“Mags?” Alex rolled over, groaned, sat up. “What’s going on?”

“Have you seen my jacket?”

“Your jacket?”

Maggie padded into their bedroom, twisting her hair band around her ponytail’s base for the last time. “Yeah. I’ve gotta go walk Gertie.”

Gertrude, the pit bull in question, whuffled and bonked into Maggie’s knees on her way over to lick Alex’s face.

“Hey, pretty girl,” Alex cooed, rubbing her neck. *Her scars are healing up pretty well,* she thought. *Good.*

“Alex?”

“Babe,” Alex teased, “it’s June, you don’t need your coat.”

Maggie blinked. “Shit.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Alex said, slipping out of bed. “Remember last week? I kept turning the key wrong, kept insisting the door was stuck?”

“Yeah, I remember. You were gonna kick it down.”

Alex walked over to her and, taking her face in her hands, kissed her forehead. “The past few
months have been really busy, and they’re even busier now, what with…”

Maggie, with her arms wrapped around Alex’s shoulders, looked at the simple silver engagement band glistening on her left ring finger, and felt a warm glow settle in her chest. “Planning?”

“Yeah.” Alex’s grin was soft, giddy, and she tucked a stray curl behind Maggie’s ear just because she could. “It’s no wonder we’re feeling a little bit scatterbrained. We’re just lucky there isn’t any weird intergalactic, interplanetary, interdimensional bullshit going on right now.”

Maggie laughed and rapped gently on the back of Alex’s head. “Knock on wood,” she murmured, fingers unspooling through Alex’s hair.

Alex rolled her eyes and pulled Maggie for a kiss that lingered a little too long for them to actually start doing what they needed to do that day. When she pulled back, their foreheads were still resting together, the tips of their noses still brushing.

“C’mon,” Maggie whispered, “let’s walk the dog.”

With a giggle and one last little line of kisses - lips, nose, bridge, brow - Alex left to shower, peeling off her t-shirt just slow enough along the way to make Maggie drop her keys.

“I love you!” she shouted over the roar of the shower.

“Love you, too, sugar!”

Gertrude, a buckskin pit bull pup and rescue from a fighting ring, was many things.

She was:

- a squishy ball of love who took up more space in bed than both of her moms combined
- a big fan of potato skin (not skins - skin)
- great with kids
- scared of small spaces and flashing lights
- very hard to tire out.

Which meant that taking Gertie on a walk usually ended up being a two hour sprint peppered with belly rubs at intersections when the lights on their path to the park were against them, stopping so little kids could say hi whenever she so chose, and being twin sweaty wrecks upon arrival at their apartment while Gertrude was utterly unruffled.

That was the case on that fine Saturday morning, when it took a dripping mess Alex ten minutes to actually unlock the door while Maggie slumped beside her, Gertrude in her lap, limply cheering her on.

“I swear to god,” Alex gasped, “it’s forty five degrees right, ninety left, one-eighty right and push.”

Maggie groaned and stumbled in after her. “Great stats, sugar, but you’re evidently wrong.”

They slid down the door, pushing it shut, while Gertrude padded over to the couch and flopped onto it, rolling around until she got comfy, panting calmly all the while.
“What - ugh, what time is it?”

“Ten, why?”

“We have wedding stuff at eleven.”

“Goddamnit.”

Thanks to Gertrude, who had to come with, they arrived at the bridal salon ten minutes late with wet hair and an overeager dog.

“Alex! Maggie! Gert!” Kara hugged her sister and soon-to-be sister-in-law hello, then dropped to pet Gertrude, who probably should have knocked her over with all the ferocity of her clamor into Kara’s lap to lick her face. “Hi, pretty baby, hi! What a good girl! Can you give me a high five? Huh?”

Gertrude proudly tapped her paw against Kara’s hand, looking expectantly up at her.

“Good girl! *Smart* girl!”

“Does our dog like your sister better than us?” Maggie whispered out of the corner of her mouth.

“Kara *can* warn her about the mailman in advance.”

Gertrude barked softly in Kara’s face and sat down on her bent knees, all sixty pounds of still-growing puppy.

“I’m just a really big chew toy,” Kara said, grinning, scratching Gert’s floppy ears. “You’re her favorites, don’t worry.”

“C’mon, Gertie, up.”

Gertrude stood and padded over to her moms, walking with them towards the couch that had Kara’s shoulder bag and Eliza’s purse.

“Is Mom being weird?” Alex asked, perching on the edge of the couch a little too precisely. “I mean, about wedding stuff?”

“I…” Kara gave in and nodded. “Yeah. But, like, normal Mom weird! Remember your junior prom?”

“Oh, god. That was hell. Well-meaning hell, but baby - ” Alex turned to Maggie, who was radiating incredulousness. “ - she put me in pastels.”

Maggie cackled. “Did you have the crunchy glittery hair, too?”

“No, don’t laugh, it was really bad!”

“Alex,” she said, cupping her cheeks, “that’s why I have to.”

“Oh! I think I have a picture!”

“Kara, no!” Alex was fighting a laugh, playfully reaching for Kara’s phone.

“Never mind,” Kara sighed. “It’s *senior* prom.”

Maggie leaned across Alex’s lap to take a peek. “Aw, Danvers, you were a babe!”
“Yup. I successfully pulled off the dress without a stomach because this one - ” Alex jerked a thumb Kara’s way. “ - played defense for me and got stuck in a big poofy monstrosity.”

“Big poofy monstrosity?”

Gertrude gave another gentle bark as Eliza walked over with a woman in a black pantsuit who soured visibly at the sight of her.

“Hi, Mom,” Alex sighed, standing up and hugging her.

“Hi, sweetie, I’m so glad you’re here.” Eliza turned and gave Maggie a hug, too, just as tight, just as warm.

“Hey, Eliza.” Maggie squeezed back, eyes shut.

The consultant seemed to be holding a staring contest with Gert, who was sitting perfectly still at their feet, tail wagging with delight at having been included. “Um.”

“The website said dogs were allowed,” Maggie said with a cool smile.

“Well, we usually mean lap dogs, or - or dogs who fit in purses, not that kind of…”

At the word lap, Gertrude climbed up and parked herself on Kara, who gave her a scritch and cooed good girl, appearing utterly unaffected. “She’s part of the procession.”

“Then I guess… that’s… alright.” The consultant turned away from Gertrude, who whuffled, tail wagging still, and looked towards Maggie and Alex. “You two are the brides?”

“Um, yes.” Alex reached over and grabbed Maggie’s hand, suddenly a little awestruck. “Yes, we are.”

“I’m Maggie, and she’s Alex.”

“So nice to meet you - I’m Zoe. Do you have anything in mind for your dresses? Silhouettes, colors, fabrics?”

“No, not really.”

“Wedding theme?”

“We were just thinking really, really simple.”

“Well, why don’t we go walk around and see what catches your eye?”

The building was a maze of white fabric, so densely packed together that each individual hue and texture was swallowed up and amalgamated into a monolithic capital-w White, and it took at least five minutes of wandering around with Zoe chattering efficiently ahead of them for Maggie and Alex to get their bearings.

“…easy enough to just slip into!”

Maggie looked up at Zoe and, then, just past her.

“See something you like?” she trilled.

“Uh… yeah. I think.”
Alex beamed at Maggie and gave her a gentle shove. She loved seeing Maggie all dressed up, be she in a suit and tie or a dress like the one she’d worn to infiltrate Roulette’s fight ring, and with how long Maggie’d held back from romantic trappings out of every kind of fear in the book, the thought of Maggie actually being the first of them to pick a dress made Alex happier than the thought of picking one for herself.

Maggie rolled her eyes, walking over to the rack anyway. There was just the side seam of a dress visible, patterned with lace, but she’d actually managed to pinpoint it out of the overwhelming ocean of bridal sundries, so it had to be worth a closer look.

She pulled the hanger free of the rack and inspected the dress. The neckline was high and wide, would sit right along her collarbone, and it looked flattering without being uncomfortable or overly structured. The lace was the weird part.

_Besides on date night bras, when have I ever liked wearing lace?_ she thought.

“It’s pretty,” she finally said.

“Your wedding dress shouldn’t be just _pretty_,” Zoe intoned, “it should be _breathtaking_, it should be _gorgeous_, it should be -”

“Whatever _you_ want it to be,” Alex cut in, wrapping an arm around Maggie’s shoulders and giving her a squeeze. “It’s gonna make _these_ look fantastic.”

“I do have great shoulders.” Maggie smiled and knocked her head onto Alex’s arm, resting there for a moment before saying, “Now we gotta get yours.”

“You’ve never steered me wrong on a dress, Mags - lead on.”

So Maggie led on, for about two more minutes, and then something caught the light. Specifically, intricate beading caught the light, even more so as Alex took it off the rack and laid it over her arms to properly inspect it. It took a moment for the pattern to reveal itself, and then she laughed.

The dress was bias-cut, and the seams under the bust were covered in rows of varying tiny star-shaped beads.

“I’m trying this on, just to see if I can make Kara snort laugh,” she whispered, and Maggie nodded, keeping her own laugh in.

“You’re first, Danvers.”

“Actually, there are multiple dressing rooms, if you’re done,” Zoe piped. “If you’ll just follow me..?”

They followed, got undressed as fast as was humanly possible.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Zoe called.

Alex, face in the neck of her inverted shirt, and Maggie, halfway out of her jeans, across the hall from each other, simultaneously rolled their eyes.

They finished scrambling into their dresses, for the most part, and left their changing rooms.

“Zip me up?” Maggie asked, turning around and starting to move her hair.

“Only if you return the favor.” Alex took over, fingers brushing the back of Maggie’s neck and lingering in her thick waves, then turned her attention to the zipper, which started so low it was a
wonder that anyone could get into it alone. She zipped it up, all the way to the small of Maggie’s back, and let her hands splay out on her fiancée’s waist, thumbs on bare skin, fingers on lace.

“Hey, turn around.”

They both did, and Maggie found that Alex’s dress didn’t have a zipper. The neckline was a long loop of satin that had to be pinned into place.

“Do you have the thing?”

“Um, yeah.” Alex went back to the garment bag and fished it out - one heraldic star, the bottom point longer than the others. After a brief moment spent inspecting it, she presented it to Maggie: “Here.”

Carefully, Maggie pinned Alex’s dress together, smoothing her fingers over the hanging loop of satin, knuckles brushing over her skin. “This is going to be fine, right?”

“Right.”

Maggie linked their arms; Alex laced their fingers together. They’d handled scarier; they’d handled worse.

They were going to be fine.

RE:

“Nice place you’ve got there.” Eloise took off her hat and hung it by the door, dark waves falling from her fedora and down her shoulders.

Watching her hair tumble distracted Ronnie for a longer moment than she’d admit, and it took a while for her to concur.

It was, somehow. It was bigger than it should have been on a seamstress’ salary, painted in soft colors and cozy upholstery, wood floors waxed to perfection, but it was a bit of a wreck. There were boxes full of sewing supplies everywhere, a little scattered, and at the core of it all was a regulation police scanner on a windowsill covered in coffee rings.

“Mistah Cuttah paid pretty good, but I… haven’t been in it much lately,” Tallulah said with an air of repressed sheepishness. “Can I getcha anything?”

“You got Scotch?”

“Probably.”

As Tallulah started looking, Eloise and Ronnie started looking around. There was a folding screen in the corner with a burnt and tattered black dress and matching stockings, and a pair of singed shoes covered in something disturbing poked out from behind it.

Ronnie ran a hand through her hair so she could hitch her thumb towards it without note, and Eloise gave a short nod before looking. Her eyes widened, sparkling, and little dimples popped out in her cheeks.

“I got Scotch.” Tallulah came out from the kitchen and set three glasses down on the coffee table, the
heavy rectangular bottle dangling from her other hand. She sat down in a pale green armchair, crossed her legs, and said, “I take it you’ve seen the wreckage?”

Eloise helped Ronnie out of her coat, between her and Tallulah when she said, “You didn’t do the best job of hiding it.”

Tallulah poured them each a finger and leaned back in her chair. “I wasn’t exactly expecting company.”

The detective and the dispatcher sat and took their drinks, time of day be damned.

“So,” Ronnie said after a sip. “You’ve been fighting crime.”

“Isn’t that what you wanted me to do?” Tallulah asked over the rim of her glass. She held eye contact, suddenly all indomitable angles, throat bobbing around a big swallow. “You gave me the opportunity to take the scanner. You said you understood feeling ignored by justice and by the justice system.”

“I needed to know it was you.” Ronnie set her tumbler down and leaned forward, elbows on her knees, hands clasped. “And I needed to know you were okay.”

Tallulah’s cheeks burned, and she took another sip.

“I’m just here on her behalf,” Eloise added.

“So you’re a dick?”

“I’m a PI, yeah.” Tipping her head, inspecting Tallulah, Eloise asked, “What’s your endgame? What’s your plan?”

“Right now? Handling the crimes I know the coppers won’t.” Tallulah stood and went behind the partition. When she came back out, she had a sort of diagram drawn out with methodic precision and a little notebook beat to hell and back in her hands. “But what I really wanna do is shut it all down. Every gang. Every mob. All of it.”

Ronnie looked at her for a moment, at the intricate chart and the pocket-creased cardboard, then said, “That’s a long game you’re playing. And a tough one to win.”

“I don’t play to lose.” Tallulah’s jaw was set tight. “I’m not losing one more time.”

“You’re outnumbered.” Eloise shrugged. “It’s true.”

“It is. But it’s also true that you -” and she looked to Ronnie “- have as much stake in this as I do, and that you -” and then to Eloise “- are in this with her.”

Eloise reared back a little, a strange look crossing her face as a strange thought crossed her mind: *Oh.*

“And you like interesting cases. You like helping people. Why else would you do what you do? Why else would you be a private detective?” With that, Tallulah sank back into her seat, satisfaction in the set of her lips, a tight anxiety streaked across her eyes.

“Are you asking us aboard?”

“Will you say yes?”

“Why the hell not!” Eloise said, reaching for the notebook. “Whaddya got?”
A warmth bloomed in Tallulah’s chest, and she started to lay out every detail she had. Hours passed that way - flying by like a bird or a plane - and they three were thoroughly absorbed until a knock came at the door.

Tallulah jerked, then hurried silently to the door, looking through the peephole for a good minute before her posture loosened and she opened the door - albeit narrowly. “Sidecar.”

“Lynch.” Grady frowned and tried to peer around her into her apartment. “You got guests or somethin’?”

“Whaddy’a want, Grady?”

“Firstly, I, uh, I been askin’ around - ”

Tallulah groaned, pinched the bridge of a nose. “You’re tryna kill me.”

“I’ve been very discreet! Loose lips, yadda yadda.” He rolled his eyes and pulled a folded-up sheaf of papers out of his tux; Lena wondered why he was wearing it. “You want ‘em or not?”

“…What’s the second thing?” Tallulah groused, snatching them up and tucking them away.

“The new owner’s comin’ in today - Blackjack, if you can believe it. Wants every employee, at the club, in an hour.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. So tell your guest he’s gotta hit the pike, alright?” Grady turned to leave, then stopped after a few steps. “And get a phone, huh? I had to dig through Mistah Cuttah’s files to find you.”

Tallulah nodded and said, “See you in an hour, Grady,” then ducked back inside. “I guess you heard?”

“Yep.”

“This Blackjack… has to be in it already. No way someone’s gonna buy Mistah Cuttah’s property, Mistah Cuttah’s business, without knowin’ what he did and knowin’ how to do it.”

“I’ll look through the files down at the precinct,” Ronnie said, getting up out of her chair, “see if anything sticks its head up.”

“I’m gonna go wander around. Maybe I’ll get a look at the mysterious Blackjack.”

Tallulah opened her mouth to protest, but Ronnie cut her off. “El’s good at her job. That’s why I asked her to help me find you.”

“That’s how I actually found you.”

With a sigh, Tallulah acquiesced. She put everything away, back behind the screen, then ran to change out of her vaguely funereal get up. There was no doubt in her mind that Blackjack, whoever the hell they were, wouldn’t want a vestige of their previous employer. They belonged to Blackjack’s family now. They had to look the part.

One green flowered shirtdress later, Tallulah came out of her room to an empty apartment that became even emptier when she ducked out.

Reluctant to pay for another ride on public transportation, she speed-walked through the city and
realized two things: the first being that it was dark, and the second being that she wasn’t afraid at all
to be out in it alone.

It seemed that beating on the criminal element had robbed her of her fear of them.

Stranger still was that the lights were on in Cutter’s club. Tallulah knew why, but the sight still didn’t
quite fit, and she walked into the building like she was trying not to get caught. Inside were
assembled all her coworkers, goons and gin slingers alike, and she melted into the crowd.

“Hey, Pablo,” she whispered, sidling up to him in the middle of the pack.

“Blackjack still ain’t come out yet,” he replied, matching her tone. “But someone’s movin’
backstage.”

Sure enough, Tallulah could hear faint clacking footsteps, and when Blackjack emerged from behind
the plush velvet curtains, she could barely contain her gasp.

I know her, she realized, recalling the girl who slept three beds down from her in the orphanage, who
was tall and terrifying and terrible to her because she could be, in an insidious way that made
Tallulah want to ingratiate herself, which only opened her up for more ridicule. That’s Marlene
St.Germaine.

She looked different, in tiny ways - adult, hard. Harder. Her blunt bangs and shingle bob had grown
out, and she’d twisted her dark hair up into an intricate style. She wore impossibly high heels and a
Slinky red evening gown with a low neckline and an even lower back, even though it was early
morning. A serpent was embroidered swirling up and around her body from hem to halter, and her
lips were as red as her dress. A dramatic black fur coat hung around her shoulders and a pearl collar
around her throat, and she looked down on her captive audience with a kind of cool disdain that was
all too familiar.

Tallulah’s hackles rose.

“I’m sure you’re all wondering what you’re doing here at this hour,” she said, grand, compelling.

There was an air of assent amongst the audience, so she continued.

“Tonight, you meet your new master.” Blackjack’s hands fell to her hips, all feline grace, and she
smiled - razor sharp. “And she has a grand plan for what your old master left behind.”

At mention of Cutter, everyone slumped a little.

“Fret not! I can lead you all to a brighter future.” Her smile sharpened, her words stropping it until it
couldn’t hurt, even when it slit your throat. “And I will. Because unlike the rest of the world, I care
about what happens to the little people. I care about what happens to you. See, FDR made a mistake.
The affluent chumps who have money enough to live lavishly, the politicians who could change
your lives for the better - those people out there don’t care what happens to you. They care what
happens to dogs.

“I know how to run a show like this. I know how to put your skills to their best use. I know how to
treat the people who serve me,” she cooed, striding towards the apron, “and with the posthumous
purchase of Mr. Moran’s properties, you now fall under my command - but you also fall under my
protection.

“You’re welcome to leave, if my leadership doesn’t suit you, but know this - my protection is
absolute and far-reaching. Walk away, prove your disloyalty, and you are subject to the cruelties of
the government and the gilded and I can offer you no help.

“But if you stay, I can offer you safety, security, and easily double your old pay. All I ask is your loyalty and your best work.” She crossed one leg before the other, lean lines pressing through satin skirts, and asked, “What do you say?”

RE:

“She’s who?” Eloise asked, brow furrowed, almost dropping her cigarette.

“Her real name is Marlene St.Germaine,” Tallulah said, rushing, “and she has everyone under her spell.”

“What’s she doing?”

“So far?” She sighed. “So far, nothing. People are getting work assignments later tonight. I got out sayin’ I was gonna get coffees and I’m callin’ from a little bakery on 9th and Bartlett.”

“I saw a black Daimler Double-Six pull up outside Moran’s about an hour ago.” Eloise took a drag, tapping ash off her cigarette so she could think. “You’re goin’ back.”

“Of course.”

“You knew her as a kid?”

“Same orphanage.”

Eloise nodded. She knew that life. She knew the strange, warped, frangible bond it built between kids who were abandoned or alone. “You think you can use that angle to get information?”

Tallulah gave a harsh laugh. “We hated each other. I used to try and tattle on her, and no one believed me, but she knew and she made my life hell for it. We weren’t allowed to smoke, and our beds had to be perfect, so she used to set fire to my bedsheets to get me in trouble. She got stronger girls to beat me up my first night there. My mother had just died and I was crying and she had a bunch of teenagers wale on me until I spat blood.” Another laugh. “I was four.”

“Yikes.” Eloise let out a plume of blue smoke and sank back in her chair. “I usedta get beat up, too. St. Margaret’s. Let’s just say they didn’t like me. I was fourteen when I got in, so I wasn’t there long, but shit.”

There was a moment of silence, and then: “Can’t believe you didn’t bust ‘em up back.”

“Oh, I did. Almost got kicked out for breakin’ a girl’s nose. She said somethin’ nasty so I headbutted her so hard I got a migraine.” Eloise stubbed out her cigarette butt and said, “You want me to walk by again?”

“Did she have some toughs with her?”

“Two. Double breasted suits with double shoulder holsters.”

“I don’t want you gettin’ hurt.” There was a jostling sound, and then Tallulah said, “I gotta go. Does Ronnie have a phone?”
"Yeah."

"I’ll call both of you if I get somethin’ more."

Eloise rattled off the number from memory and hoped Tallulah wouldn’t think anything of that, then said, “Go run your coffees back.”

"Yes, ma’am,” Tallulah said, with the mien of a salute in her voice, and hung up.

Two hours later, when Eloise is half-asleep, hat tipped over her face to block out the headlights and traffic lights shining through her office’s blinds, her phone rings.

“Mm… hello?”

“She’s got some sort of event planned for Friday night. Warehouse on Klein and Sherman; some sort of gambling shindig. Black tie. I’m fixin’ suits all goddamned week.”

“Alright. Call Ronnie. Can you make it to my office at 3.15?”

“If I hustle.”

“So hustle.”

⚖

“It’ll be easy enough to just slip into.” Ronnie said, perched on Eloise’s desk.

“I ain’t sayin’ it won’t be, I’m just sayin’ no one gets in without an invite and we don’t have ‘em.” Tallulah’s hands were fidgeting like hell and the sight made Ronnie wish she had handcuffs just so she could tie them down and make them stop.

“You could sneak us in.” Eloise crossed her legs, ankle over knee. “You’re gonna be there, right?”

“She wants all hands on deck,” Tallulah hedged.

“So we’ll stow away.” Eloise shrugged, blasé. “Warehouses have multiple doors. Case the joint beforehand, figure out which doors won’t be used by anyone. We go in there and melt into the crowd. Easy as pie.”

Tallulah sank into the wall behind her, biting her lip, weighing her options. “Fine. I’ll sneak you in. But it’s black tie, and I don’t think you can get away with trousers.”

Eloise sneered.

“I ain’t sayin’ they’re a bad look! I’d wear ‘em, too, if I could. But a tiny gal like you comin’ in a three piece suit is gonna attract attention, which none of us need.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Ronnie promised.

“If you need somethin’ made, I’ll put the time in and make it. Put all my damned fabric to use.”

“Thanks, Lynch.”
Tallulah frowned, then said, “Can I bum a smoke?”

Eloise offered one and asked, “Nervous?”

“Shit, yeah, I’m nervous.” Tallulah took it, lit it, and took a drag. “She’s got a history of havin’ people do me bodily harm, and now she has armed goons ready to take anyone - includin’ you - down like that.” She snapped, jaw tight, and took another drag.

“Don’t worry,” Eloise said. She pulled up the ankle of her trousers and revealed a knife tucked away, then put her interwoven hands behind her head, showing off her own double shoulder holster. “I don’t let my people get hit.”

Ronnie flushed a little at the idea of being Eloise’s people. “Don’t worry. I’m good at goin’ unnoticed, and I can handle myself in a fight.”

With a hesitant nod, the plan was set, and they went through the week running through every possible hitch, collecting everything they’d need, everything they could assemble. Eloise had little bullet bindles and the intention of hiding them in her bra, as well as a purse and two holsters that could be both easily concealed and retrieved, one of which she’d given to Ronnie. Ronnie had sanded the bottoms of everyone’s heels for silence and traction. Tallulah determined that the back exit, which opened into a hallway closed off by a door whose lock she practiced picking until she could do it in exactly three seconds and fed into the main room, and started in on her own dress.

KT:

It’s exciting, Tallulah thought, to sew something extravagant and stylish for myself, but it would be more exciting if I actually wanted to go to the party I was sewing it for.

The thing was green, to match her eyes, and more than a little dramatic, with a sheer capelet attached to the slim straps and ruched bands of fabric curling around the back of her skirt’s knees, as well as practical by way of the long gold sash wrapped endlessly around her waist that she could turn instantly into a clove hitch knot ersatz handcuff, and she was proud of it. It almost made her wish she’d gotten to make Eloise and Ronnie’s dresses, just for the exercise of it.

That thought made her realize there was one last thing she’d neglected to tell the latter: everyone was to wear a mask. Eloise might call her and tell her, but there was a chance she wouldn’t, and suddenly Tallulah was scrambling to her phone, which was still shiny-new. The only good thing about Marlene taking over was that Tallulah was getting a steady paycheck again.

“A… R… D… 215…” The phone rang for a moment, then got picked up, and Tallulah heaved a sigh of relief. “Ronnie! Thank shit! We need masks. You need a mask. I’ve made them, I’ll drop yours off with Eloise before I go to the warehouse, but I had to let you know. I meant to call earlier - ”

There was a little laugh, warm and somehow precious, and then someone spoke. “Ronnie’s in the shower. Said she had a hot date tonight.”

Tallulah blushed. Her whole face may as well have burst into flames; she could have made a pot of coffee off the radiant heat. “Can you - pass on the message?”

“Sure.”
After an awkward moment, Tallulah hung up and muttered, “Didn’t know she had a roommate.”

RE:

“Oh,” Ronnie breathed, “you clean up nice.”

Eloise did. Her black dress was all cling, like it had been designed to remind Ronnie just how strong and gorgeous the PI was, and there were little strips of lace over bare skin down the side where warm brown peeped through. Even her back was bare, the contours of her muscles visible before she turned to look at Ronnie.

“Not so bad yourself, Sorrel,” she replied, a teasing lilt to her voice.

This, too, was true. The deep blue of Ronnie’s dress set off her dark eyes and the pink in her lips and cheeks. The low V neckline was very distracting, as was the cascade of excess tie at the back of her neck, because all Eloise could think was shift aside, shift aside, I wanna see. There were little golden star beads under her bust and curving up her chest that perfectly matched the ones on her dress.

“You’ll be needing this.” She handed over a gold mask that would hook around her ears, not disturbing the wild, perfect curls she’d managed to mold out of her shingled bob. But rather than wait for Ronnie to put it on, Eloise did it for her, fingers brushing the sharp plane of her cheeks, soaking in her warm skin, the sweet scent of her perfume suddenly everything she could sense. “Perfect.”

Under Eloise’s hands, Ronnie’s cheeks burned. She wanted to hear her say that again and again, so, so badly.

The touch lingered longer than was necessary, but when she pulled her fingers away and slid on her own shimmering silver mask, and all that was visible of either of them were their eyes, it felt almost worth it.

“C’mon.” Eloise took Ronnie’s hand and led her towards the back door. “We got somewhere to be.”

Two sets of gun calluses in one pair of clasped hands made for an interesting experience.

Tallulah opened the door for them, inevitable anxious expression hidden behind a sheer green and gold full-face mask. She could see out, but no one could see in. “You’re late,” she hissed.

“We’re on time.”

“Early is on time, on time is late, and late means it ain’t worth showing up.” Tallulah was fidgeting like nobody’s business.

“Well, early would mean likelier bein’ caught. We goin’ in or what?”

Tallulah rolled her eyes, then: “I know a dark, secluded place… A place where no one knows your face. A glass of wine, a fast embrace.”

Eloise and Ronnie, with their burning cheeks, were both suddenly very thankful for their masks.

“It’s called Hernando’s Hideaway - Olé!”

With that, the door flew open, and they slipped in.
“And all you’ll see are silhouettes,” Eloise sang.

“And all you’ll hear are castanets!” Somehow, Ronnie’s quick-stepping heels mimicked their sound perfectly.

Tallulah, twisting to face them and hiss, “And no one cares how late it gets.”

Together, they turned a full 180, singing, “Not at Hernando’s Hideaway - ” Then, with a flourish and a low-angled fouette, they threw their heads back and their arms up to cry, “Olé!”

“At the Golden Fingerbowl, or any place you go,” Eloise warned, taking two slow steps towards Ronnie, “you will meet your Uncle Max, and everyone you know.”

“But if you’ll go to the spot that I am thinkin’ of…” Tallulah sang, draping herself backwards over the railing like a boxer on the ropes. As she did, Eloise took three more steps forwards - quick-quick, slow - and Ronnie took her hands, pulling her into position so they were flush from knee to neck.

“You will be free to gaze at me and talk of love,” she crooned, dipping Eloise low before swinging her back up, their noses touching.

“Just knock three times - ” and they tapped out those knocks with their legs sliding together “ - and whisper low that you and I were sent by Uncle Joe.”

This time, Eloise dipped Ronnie, and they both were looking dead at Tallulah, who crossed her legs and wiggled her fingers with flare.

With match suddenly appearing in her fingers, Eloise lit it, and, together, she and Ronnie sang, “Then strike a match, and you will know you’re in Hernando’s hideaway.”

Within one second, they were upright, spinning out and linked only by their hands. When they twirled back together, Eloise held Ronnie in her arms, pressed to her chest, and all three yelled, “Olé!”

“Just knock three times, and whisper low,” Tallulah reminded them, rapping her knuckles against the wall.

“That you - ”

“ - and I - ”

“ - were sent by Joe.”

Eloise twirled her smoldering match and together, sotto voce, they hushed, “Then strike a match and you will know…”

They boomed the last line: “You’re in Hernando’s hideaway!” and Tallulah pinched Eloise’s match out.

It was as if the song had never happened, the next second, and their heels were all silent - just as Ronnie had promised - and Tallulah took but three seconds to pick the lock and get them in - just as she’d promised.

The main room was a surprising mish-mash of elegant and unloved - the warehouse was rusty, dusty, and in need of some paint and attention, while the industrial lights had been replaced with gentler bulbs and waiters from Cutter’s club were floating around and handing out champagne flutes on
trays in white gloves.

“’I can’t stick with you,’’ Tallulah said. “’We should split up, cover more ground.’’

Ronnie and Elise nodded, and Tallulah melted into the crowd.

“So, who do you see?” Ronnie asked. This, amongst every other talent, was a fun skill of Eloise’s. She had an eye for detail, for faces and names, and since most of the people were wearing half-masks that only covered the skin between cheekbone and brow bone, it would be easy enough to pick out attendees.

“Ardor City’s gilded,” Eloise replied. “The head of a bank, hedge fund managers - one of whom’s cheating on the other and asked me to get the dirt - and a city councilman.”

“Cutter had his hands everywhere.”

A waiter with his chin-length long hair tucked neatly behind his ears offered them champagne, and they each took a flute and a little sip.

“They come from the darkest places,’’ a voice lilted. The lights had suddenly gone down, and one beam of gold came to rest on a tall, angular woman with dark hair in a scant red gown - sharp sweetheart neckline, impossibly low back, clinging bodice and slit translucent skirts - with an ornate and almost lifelike snake caressing the lines of her body, climbing up and up and up. She strutted down a catwalk suspended from the next floor up, sinuous and sinister as that snake. “They were alone. They came, here, for one reason and one reason only. To find work? No. To find family? Neither.

“They came,” she said, with a vicious red-lipped smile, “to entertain.”

A heavy iron cage was lowered from the ceiling, clanking ominously, and the sound as it hit the floor was like that of some Damoclean sword crashing down.

“Every fighter knows the risks, and they are here for you.”

Eloise whispered, “That can’t be good,” and Ronnie had to agree.

“Come on out, little ones!”

KT:

“They’re children.”

Tallulah thought she was going to be sick, thought she was alone in this throng of people in feeling so, but slightly closer to the catwalk, and far removed from the rest of the audience, was a tall woman in a purple silk charmuese dress with an x-strapped back, baring so much golden skin, with curly blonde hair. She looked like her shoulders were tensed so they didn’t slump forward and identify her as an outsider - an impostor.

“Tonight, it’s triple stakes,” Marlene continued. “Because tonight is our inaugural event, and because our best fighters are going toe to toe to amuse you.”

Tallulah wove through the crowd, closer to the woman in violet. She had to get closer. She had to
“So place your bets! The fight begins in ten minutes.”

Music bled out into the room, but the woman had taken no note, and was scribbling away in a little cardboard notepad while everyone cheered. Though Tallulah couldn’t see what she was writing, she could see that this woman was in terrible danger just by virtue of being there.

Silent, she came to her side and whispered, “You can’t be seen with that.”

The woman jumped, and looked at Tallulah through round black glasses. Her face was a dagger in Tallulah’s heart. “Kara?”

“Kit,” she corrected, a confused, bemused look on her face.

Tallulah persisted, fingers twisting behind her back. “No one is allowed without an invitation, and no press have been invited.”

The woman’s jaw flapped for a moment, and then she stammered, “My - my boss - was invited. She didn’t want to come. I - my sister - ”

Tallulah’s eyes widened. “You’re Ronnie’s sister.” She bit her lip, thoughts racing a million miles a minute. “Why did you come?”

“You sounded like it was somethin’ dangerous on the phone,” the second Sorrel sister said. “I ain’t gonna leave my sister in the lurch. We look out for each other, no matter what.”

Tallulah squeezed her eyes shut. “You have to go. You can’t be here. You can’t get hurt, or shot, or worse, because - Ronnie will kill me.”

Because I can’t bear to watch you die again.

“Well, I got no plans of dyin’ today,” Kit said, and the innocent determination in her voice was terrifying. She crossed her arms over her chest, and tossed her head back, defiant, but all Tallulah could think was that she needed to be protected.

This girl, in her floaty purple dress with its Art Deco embroidery and demure Grecian neckline, needed to be shuffled out of here before her plans were broken.

“Then put that away,” Tallulah whispered sharply. “Press gets pressed.”

Kit complied, eyes wide, and her ducking and turning dislodged a curl, letting it fall over her eye. Tallulah’s twisting, twitching fingers itched to tuck it back into place. She wondered, acutely aware of her pathetic state, if this girl’s skin, or her hair, would feel the same in her hands.

“See that door?”

Kit looked where Tallulah jerked her head and nodded.

“That’s unlocked. And no one but you, me, your sister, and her friend know that. So stay by that door, and when shit gets hairy, you get out, understood?”

“Understood.” Kit peered around Tallulah and said, “Everyone’s dancing.”

“And?”
“You ’n’ me, standin’ over here, not drinkin’, talkin’ quiet… It’s suspicious.”

“What are you saying?”

“Dance with me.” She offered her hands to Tallulah, like she was stepping out of the mirror in her closet, and Tallulah could not say no.

It was fluid, flawless, like they had done nothing but this for years. They executed the perfect foxtrot, throwing in tricks and more intricate steps within moments because somehow they could pull them off together.

Kit twirled Tallulah under her arm, and Tallulah hummed, a new melody choking out the old song, the band playing it as if they’d never played another tune.

“Heaven,” she sighed, “I’m in heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak, and I seem to find the happiness I seek when we’re out together, dancing cheek to cheek.”

“Heaven,” Kit sang, pulling her close. “I’m in heaven, and the cares that hang around me through the week seem to vanish like a gambler’s lucky streak when we’re out together, dancing cheek to cheek!”

“Oh, I love to climb a mountain,” Tallulah sang as Kit lifted her clean off the ground, “and to reach the highest peak.”

“But it doesn’t thrill me half as much as dancing cheek to cheek,” Kit finished, bringing her back down oh, so gently, holding her close for a moment before reeling her out and singing, “Oh! I love to go out fishing in a river or a creek.”

“But I don’t enjoy it half as much,” Tallulah crooned as she was reeled back in, wrapped in Kit’s arms, “as dancing cheek to cheek.” She looked up at Kit and grew quieter, more ferocious. “Dance with me. I want my arm around you.”

“The charm about you will carry me through to heaven.”

Tallulah closed her eyes, head resting on Kit’s shoulder. “I’m in heaven…”

“And my heart beats so that I can hardly speak,” Kit assured her.

The last two lines were sung together, in perfect, subtle harmonies that only they were meant to hear. “And I seem to find the happiness I seek when we’re out together, dancing cheek to cheek.”

A song ended - the one they’d sung to - and then the song they’d been dancing to was cut off.

“I hope you like your wagers,” Blackjack called from her catwalk, “because there’s no going back. Tonight, my best little brawlers are here to spar for your pleasure - the strongest, toughest, most ruthless boy and girl I have in stock.”

Though they’d fallen out of dancing position, Tallulah and Kit’s hands were still linked together, and they were white-knuckling each other’s palms.

“Ladies and gentlemen, tonight’s fighters.”

Then, Tallulah let go, slipped away.

She’d come to work in a new sort of costume - trousers like Eloise’s, with better range of movement than a dress, and a sturdy jacket that wouldn’t be so easily burnt through as her last attempt. Now,
she stripped out of her dress and folded it into her bag, simultaneously changing into her pants. The last thing she did was pull a black version of her mask over her head. She was utterly obscured and unidentifiable.

All the while, she could hear Roulette building the crowd’s excitement - hyping up two orphans beating each other for food and shelter.

*Some things you never outgrow*, she thought, coming off the stairs and rounding the landing towards the catwalk that she was soliloquizing from.

“Now, without further ado - ”

“There might be just a little.”

Blackjack turned towards the sound and saw Tallulah, clad in black from head to toe, in a classic boxer’s stance. “I think we have a new competitor!” she called, turning back towards the crowd and snapping her fingers.

Two goons came out of the shadows. Tallulah noted with relief that neither of them were carrying guns, although she noticed the line of a knife in the one on the right’s right leg. She dove to the floor with enough force to carry her by his ankle, and she pinched the knife - a clip point dagger - before skidding to a stop and popping up to her feet. She punched out the window behind her and threw the thing as far as she could before yelling, “There’s no need for more violence. There’s no need to incite child brutality. These kids could be helped! They could be housed! They could be cared for and loved! Everyone wants - ” Something hard and thick was in her throat, but she spoke around it with remarkable stability. “Everyone wants to be loved. Even you.”

One of the goons gripped her by the throat and slammed her into the wall.

“Bring her down to the cage,” Blackjack drawled. Then, louder, for her audience, “I’ll make a little wager of my own! My friends, if this masked woman can defeat my warriors, then she can have them and hold them and help them however she sees fit. Is that not fair?”

There was a great assenting roar; black spots were dancing through Tallulah’s vision.

“Is that not just?”

Another roar.

“Is that not right?”

“How ‘bout this?” Tallulah wheezed. “If I beat your boys, these kids go to an orphanage, a foster home - anywhere where they’re safe, where no one can touch ’em.”

Blackjack rolled her eyes. “If you fail, you fight in my ring, regardless of any injuries.”

“I’ll take that bet.”

“I only make easy bets, little girl,” Blackjack sighed. “And you are an easy bet.”

Tallulah rammed her heel into the goon’s diaphragm so he’d drop her and bend over. Then she took out a length of cord to tie him up, but as she moved to, the other goon approached her, fists up. He landed a solid blow to her stomach, then an uppercut to the chin.

Tallulah hit the floor, half strategy and half hit, and slid once again. He grabbed her by the wide leg
of her trousers, and it took a well-aimed kick that broke her shoe’s heel to loose his grip. From there, she popped up behind him and, jumping on his back, wrapped a cord around his neck. She held it there, shaking, blood in her mouth, until he slumped to the floor and she climbed out from under him. She tied both toughs together, then walked towards Blackjack.

“How’s that for easy?” she spat, red splashing on Blackjack’s skirt.

Blackjack’s jaw clenched.

“See, no one wins when they bet against me.”

With that, Tallulah whipped out another length of rope and swiftly, deftly, tied Blackjack up with one hand.

“You know this is a fruitless effort, don’t you?” she said, a laugh bubbling up under her words. “You can catch me, but you’ll never keep me.”

“So I’ll keep catchin’ you. Again and again and again and again. Because one day?” Tallulah leaned in close, whispering in her ear, “One day, it’ll stick.”

⚖

“That was real stupid,” Eloise said. “You coulda got hurt. There was a fuckin’ panic on the ground floor.”

“Did you see a girl in a purple dress? Did she get out okay?”

“See some random girl? Tweetie, I barely saw Ronnie gettin’ out of the stampede.” She sighed. “We were just supposed to take names, Lynch.”

Tallulah curled her knees up to her chest, holding a bag of frozen peas in place. Her hands had too much adrenaline to hold still. “I couldn’t let her hurt them. Did you see those two? She looked like a bag of plums, and the boy could barely stand.” She shook her head, staunch. “She ain’t hurtin’ another kid while I’m still breathin’.”

Eloise let out another sigh, like she couldn’t say a word because all her words would be agreement and she couldn’t afford that. Finally, she said, “You gonna heal up okay?”

“I don’t think I got a bruise on my neck, so that’s aces.” Tallulah prodded her throat, which hurt like hell, and swallowed hard just to test it. “I’m gonna be fine.”

“Good.” There was some clinking - ice in a glass. “Now go to bed.”

Tallulah scoffed. “Bed, bed! I couldn’t go to bed. My head’s too light to try to set it down!” She sat up straighter, eyes bright. “Sleep, sleep! I couldn’t sleep tonight, not for all the jewels in the crown!”

“Tallulah.”

It was too late. She’d leapt to her feet, frozen peas and why she needed them forgotten, and was currently balanced on the arms of her armchair. “I could have danced all night! I could have danced all night, and still have begged for more!”
“You’re fuckin’ bananas, Lynch.”

“I could have spread my wings,” she cried, leaping up onto the back of the chair, arms flung out. “And done a thousand things I’ve never done before!”

The chair tipped back with a bang, and Eloise yelled, startled, “Are you okay?”

“I’ll never know what made it so exciting,” Tallulah sang, phone in hand, climbing onto her windowsill and out onto the fire escape. “Why, all at once, my heart took flight!” She started waltzing, gleeful. “I only know when she began to dance with me, I could have danced, danced, danced all night!” With a blissful sigh, she fell back into her apartment, feet draped up the wall. “I could have danced all night!”

“You’re tired out,” Eloise argued, “you must be dead.”

“I could have danced all night!”

“Your face is drawn, your eyes are red.”

“And still have begged for more.”

“Now say goodnight, turn off the light!” Eloise let out a long-suffering groan. “Please, it’s really time for you to go to bed.”

Rolling upright, Tallulah executed a proper fouette, unlike the dramatically subdued versions earlier, and landed in a boxer’s stance. “I could have spread my wings,” she crooned, jabbing, ducking, leaping onto the back of her couch, “and done a thousand things, and still have begged for more!”

“So come along, do as you’re told,” Eloise warned, voice overlapping, “Veronica is apt to stir!”

And she did, piling on to Tallulah’s giddy babbling. “You’re up too late. Please! It sure is late.”

“Lynch, you coulda fuckin’ died!”

Since they were calling from Ronnie’s flat, they had company: Kit, in her flannel pajamas, scribbling furiously in her notebook.

She floated up from her seat and began pirouetting across the apartment, writing all the while. “I’ll never know what made it so exciting! Why, all at once, my heart took flight! I only know when she - ”

Ronnie set the phone down and strode over, grabbing Kit’s shoulders to stop her before beseeching her, “Put down your book, your work will keep.”

“ - began to dance with me - ”

“Now, settle down,” Ronnie said, trying for stern and failing, being swept up with her waltzing sister, “and go to sleep!”

“I could have danced, danced, danced,” Kit trilled, snatching her book out of Ronnie’s hand with an adorable, triumphant grin, “all night!”

Ronnie sighed, defeated, and sat back down by Eloise, who was made subject to Tallulah’s unbridled glee as much as Kit’s.

The two girls, not hearing each other and separated by miles, sang in tandem, danced in tandem - this
time a familiar foxtrot. “I could have danced all night, I could have danced all night, and still have begged for more! I could have spread my wings and done a thousand things I’ve never done before!”

“I’ll never know what made it so exciting,” Tallulah crooned.

“Why, all at once, my heart took flight!”

“I only know when she,” they sang together, “began to dance with me, I could have danced, danced, danced all night!”

With a gleeful noise, Tallulah jumped down on to the couch, laying her knees over the arm, and dragged her peas out from under the coffee table, throwing them onto her stomach. Across town, Kit flopped into bed, notebook and pencil clutched to her chest, beaming with brilliant eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Songs used are:

Hernando's Hideaway - The Pajama Game
Dancing Cheek To Cheek - Ella Fitzgerald
I Could Have Danced All Night - My Fair Lady (with minor modifications)

I'll try and update on Thursday, but if you guys liked it and comment, I'll cave to my eager little lizard brain and post early.
**Good Reporters Ask Questions**

Chapter Summary

Lines are blurring, only some actions have consequences, everyone is goo over their respective sweeties, and Kara Danvers isn't as oblivious as anticipated or hoped.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*KL:*

“You okay, Lena-Bean?” Kara asked, looking at her girlfriend across the table. She looked happy, her usual self, but she also looked a little tired, and she was curled up in her seat, sipping hot tea in the middle of summer.

“Hm? I’m fine.” Lena took another gulp and frowned. With great distaste, she said, “I think I’m getting sick.”

Kara scooted over and perched beside her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders, pressing her cheek against her forehead, both to comfort her and to check her temperature. “You don’t feel warm.”

“I don’t think I have a fever. I just have a sore throat.” Lena sank into Kara’s side, snuggling into her, resting her head on her shoulder. “And my stomach kind of hurts, but I was rolling all over the place last night. I probably just got into a weird position.”

Kara nodded, and kissed her temple. “Okay. Want me to get you some Advil?”

“No. I’m okay.” Lena closed her eyes and sighed, smiling. “You’re very comfortable to lean on.”

It was impossible to stop the grin on Kara’s face. “You’re very comfortable to cuddle.”

They sat like that, curled up into each other, AC blasting for a while, both of them dozing off and waking up sporadically. After a few hours, Lena’s stomach decided that its emptiness mattered more than its weird muscle ache, so she got up and wandered into the kitchen to make something.

“What do you want for dinner, my love?” she asked when Kara shifted.

“You feel okay cooking?”

“I like cooking.” She smiled over her shoulder as Kara came up behind her, hands on her hips, chin over her shoulder. “I like cooking in your apartment.”

“I see.” Kara pouted so hard Lena could hear her. “You only love me for my oven.”

“No. Your oven is just the frosting on the doughnut.” Lena wove her fingers into Kara’s and leaned back into her. “It’s a perk. It’s a perk of being your girlfriend - one among many, might I add.”
“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. Others include: you’re tall, so you can reach things on high shelves for me, which also means sometimes your shirt rides up and I get to see the cute dimples on your lower back; you’re warm, which will be fantastic in winter; you watch the same movies I do, so I don’t feel weird that I’m an adult who watches The Sound Of Music.”

“The Sound Of Music is a classic and a treasure.”

Lena grinned. “And you can pick me up and carry me around, which is very nice, and you laugh at my jokes and make me laugh with yours, and you’re very passionate about desserts, which is adorable. And you always believe me, and believe in me.” Lena turned her head so she could plant a kiss on Kara’s cheek, but only managed to reach her jaw. “You’re the best girlfriend ever.”

Kara planted a kiss on the exact same spot on Lena’s jaw, then wrapped her arms around her waist, spun her around, and picked her up. Kara had done this a million and a half times before, but somehow this time carried a hefty dose of deja vu.

Lena pushed it aside and wrapped her arms around Kara’s neck as she was lowered to the ground, kissing her with the utmost sweetness.

“I think your data’s off,” Kara murmured, their noses bumping together, their foreheads connected.

“My data is never off.”

“This time, yes, it is.” With an impish grin and a smooch to the tip of Lena’s nose, she said, “You forgot to include yourself in the sample pool.”

Lena scoffed and kissed her again.

“I could list reasons until the end of time, but right now, the preeminent reason is: you’re making dinner.”

“I can’t make dinner if I don’t know what you want to eat,” Lena teased.

After a moment’s consideration, Kara said, “Pasta. It’s fast, we’re hungry, your sauce is delicious.”

Lena beamed. “Alright then.”

They did the prep work together, side by side, bare feet brushing inescapably, while Kara’s iPod played in the background. One of the songs, playing over boiling pasta water, felt overwhelmingly familiar, and Lena put one hand on Kara’s shoulder and while the other took Kara’s hand - upright, fingers laced.

Kara put her free hand on Lena’s back - right under her shoulder blade, where it was meant to be - and they started dancing. Slowly at first, and then faster, fancier, until the timer went off.

Lena watched Kara handle hot metal with her bare hands, which would once have worried her a lot and now only bothered her at a knee-jerk, reflexive level. After draining off the pasta water, they tossed rotini into a simmering pot of sauce for the last minute or two of cooking, then served themselves straight out of the pan, munching away, Kara’s legs flopped over Lena’s lap.

They pulled out the tub of raspberry truffle ice cream and, with one spoon, sat down to watch a movie, Lena snuggled into Kara’s lap, arms around her waist. She was in charge of the spoon - the responsibility had just fallen to her and neither of them cared to change that status quo - and was a
fair and just decider in the distribution of desserts.

After washing the dishes, and turning off the TV, they went to bed, and though she didn’t need it, it made Lena smile to see a glass of water and a dose of Advil on her nightstand. She curled up to Kara’s back and kissed her bare shoulder, lips still on her skin when she whispered, “Love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Come morning, Lena had yet more aches and pains, and couldn’t shake the sensation of something being off. Her fingers were fidgety, like they were bored and had energy to burn, while the rest of her was exhausted. Her day at the office was boring. She wished for the weekend, and brunch with Kara’s sister and her fiancée, and hearing about wedding planning and seeing their dog and wearing something more comfortable than a pencil skirt. Lately, she’d had a strange reoccurring thought: can I run in this?

It wasn’t fear. It wasn’t an anxious thought. It felt like a practicality.

Perhaps because of the dreams she was having, the details of which were always blurry, but she seemed to be doing a lot of running in those dreams, and it always felt good. There was always a sense of melifluity, too, and a kind of glamor. Sometimes, she recognized the faces.

When she told Kara about them, Kara seemed interested from a narrative standpoint, as a girlfriend, and as an investigator. She’d bought books on dream symbol interpretation, but these dreams didn’t feel abstract enough to have symbolism.

What Kara had not told her was that Alex had had more than a few weird dreams lately. Hers were more stationary, but everything else seemed to line up.

It would have made Lena feel even weirder about the whole situation, knowing someone else was having strange dreams, and she would have started studying them and then probably would have built some sort of machine that played dreams like movies and picked them apart with an algorithm based on film theory and a million little statistics about a person, which would have gobbled her up for a few weeks and left her burnt out until the next project came along.

So, yeah, not telling her is definitely the best idea I have.
shifting her weight on top of it. “Some lady in black beat up Blackjack’s bodyguards and got all her fighters taken away. I was just checkin’ to see if they mentioned the boss lady by name. They didn’t.”

“And she’s gonna be back at six, so you better burn that or somethin’ so she don’t see you readin’ it.” Grady shifted, crossing his legs, then asked, “Where were you?”

“Where?”

“At the warehouse. I didn’t see you at all.”

“Well…” Tallulah coolly scrambled for an excuse for a minute, then decided on, “I don’t drink on the clock.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” he laughed.

“I didn’t go to the bar, is all I’m sayin’, and you were stuck behind it, weren’t you?”

He shrugged. “I may or may not have snuck out into the crowd. For giggles.”

“Oh, yeah? What’d you think of the show?”

“We didn’t get to see it, did we?” Grady looked relieved. “Interrupted by… ‘Lady Law?’ Nice name.”

“The Advisor seems to think so. They came up with it.” Tallulah squinted, then said, “Someone’s been cookin’ for you.”

“How the hell do you know?”

“You got a little….” She gestured with her hands, squishing them together. “I seen your groceries, Grady, I know what food you put in your poor mouth. Whoever you got’s feedin’ you people food.”

He scoffed, a happy little flush on his cheeks. “Well, you’re lookin’ happier lately.”

Tallulah let out a mock-offended gasp.

“Ain’t my fault I’m observant!”

“I just… like havin’ stability again.”

“Our boss gettin’ arrested is stability?”

“We got a boss, don’t we?”

Grady nodded, acquiescent.

“So, tell me about your girl!”

“Her name is Carol,” he gushed, sitting down next to her. “She’s a knockout, and she’s good to her kid brother, who’s a fuckin’ nightmare. Gettin’ into shit he shouldn’t be gettin’ into.”

Tallulah cocked an eyebrow: are we two to talk?

He shrugged - I know, I know, but still - and continued. “We go on double dates with these two cute kids - Johnny and Ilene - and we have a real good time, us four.”
“Good for you, Sidecar,” Tallulah said, patting him on the knee.

“Alright. Fair’s fair,” he said, crossing his legs up on another box. “What’s got you all dizzy?”

“I ain’t dizzy!” Tallulah protested stoutly. “I just… I made some friends. Nice group of girls. We spend time together. It’s like book club!”

“Is it book club.”

“It sure as shit ain’t book club.”

“So whaddya do?”

Another moment of inscrutable fumbling, then: “Complain about our nosy coworkers.”

Grady clapped a hand to his chest, right over his heart, and collapsed dramatically backwards. “I’m wounded, Lynch! You wound me!”

“You’re so wounded, how come you’re hollerin’ like a kid in a park, huh?”

Grady sat back up with a sigh. “Can’t get nothin’ by you, can I?”

“Only on Christmas.”

There were a few hours until Blackjack’d be back, and they spent it chattering about Grady’s beautiful blonde girlfriend and his new friend - the very picture of a man, apparently - and his gorgeous girlfriend, who’s a legal secretary and an absolute scream, and their game nights and their dinner dates.

If it were at all possible, Tallulah’d say Grady was in love with them, too.

While they talked, she kept her hands busy sewing up a tux just for Pablo, who she figured deserved to have one ready at a moment’s notice if Blackjack decided to do right by him. Besides, his uniform was uglier than sin.

Come six, they all hustled into the main room, where Blackjack, in another fabulous red frock fit for the darkest part of the evening, stood.

“I’m so glad to see all your faces welcoming me back,” she said, electric. “I am also glad to say that this little… incident won’t affect a thing. It has been expunged from the public record, and none of my security has been fired for letting ‘Lady Law’ into our little establishment because they will never let it happen again.”

Tallulah crossed her arms low enough to press on the bruises on her stomach. *Lady Law’s here in it right now, Marlene, she thought smugly, and you don’t even know.*

“Your loyalty is much appreciated. Please, now that I’m back, get back to work.”

With that, the crowd dissipated, but suddenly a goon with a rope of bruising around his neck was right behind Tallulah, saying, “The boss wants to see you.”

*Shit.*

Cutter’s office without Cutter felt wrong. Blackjack was perched behind his table, in total ownership, but it was like someone swapping out your shampoo or your toilet paper without telling you - it’s a little thing, but it throws everything off kilter.
“Miss Blackjack,” Tallulah said by way of greeting, “what can I do for you?”

“You know what happened last night,” was her ersatz reply. “You know what happened.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, that little twit…”

Tallulah knew the window to her left took her out into the alley, and that if she ran from their four blocks south, she could catch a bus home with time to collect her things and book it before they came and killed her.

“Got blood on my dress.”

Tallulah blinked. “What?”

“Unfortunate. But since you’re our resident fabric savant, I thought you might have some tips.”

“Oh. Yeah, yeah, I do. Salt, when it’s still wet, but that ain’t useful now. Cold water to rinse it out. Toothpaste - white. And baking soda. Tell ya what - why don’t I clean it up for you?”

With a curt nod and a Thank you, Tallulah was free and clear.

⚖

“So we ain’t ever gonna keep her in prison.”

Tallulah shook her head. “Nope. She gets out within twelve hours and her arrest records are destroyed.”

“Well, shit.”

Tallulah nodded and pulled out a cigarette case which was half cigs and half emergency sewing supplies, extracting a one and lighting it, taking a deep drag. “She’s bad news. I just… knowin’ what it’s like. How could she..?”

Ronnie shrugged. “Some people are just bad.”

Eloise blew smoke and shook her head. “We gotta keep digging. Anything new from your source?”

“Not yet, but I’ll check in. You picked out a few of her guests, didn’cha?”

“Yeah.” Eloise reached into her jacket and extracted a piece of folded yellow legal pad paper. “It’s not as thorough as it could be, what with the numbers and all, but it’s somethin’.”

Tallulah nodded and stashed it in the lining of her cigarette case, then snapped it shut. “I gotta think of a better costume,” she sighed after a moment. “Dress? Burned away. Then I thought, oh, trousers like Eloise’s, that’s good. But one of those big palookas grabbed me by the cuff and I broke my shoe gettin’ him off. I can’t afford to replace ‘em, and even if I could, I’d rather save the money. Or do somethin’ useful.”

“Buy a gun and a gun license,” both Eloise and Ronnie said.
“What?”

Ronnie opened her jacket and revealed a holster that kept her gun at the curve of her waist, where there was enough spare fabric to conceal her pistol, which was a hefty thing that could probably kill a guy if you hit him with it hard enough. “Guns. Almost everyone you’re gonna face is gonna be armed. You’re quick, but you ain’t bulletproof.”

Tallulah considered this, then said, “I’d rather be both.”

Ronnie snorted. “Unless you get your hands on some of that Army surplus, that ain’t happening.”

Tallulah frowned. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“As for the costume,” Eloise said, “if comic book superheroes can wear their underwear outside their clothes, why can’t you?”

Gawping, Tallulah sputtered for an answer.

“Freedom of movement, nothing to catch fire, nothing to grab onto.” She shrugged. “Think about it.”

That night, one of the trucks that now belonged to Blackjack was moving a shipment of one ounce Cadillac packets. Tallulah may or may not have drained the tank so they’d have to stop at the nearest gas station, where she would be waiting with rope and fist in her fucking step-in slip and the folded sheer fabric mask, Ronnie ready to dispatch a couple of coppers who actually cared.

Sure enough, there was an engine puttering to emptiness two blocks away from the pump right when Tallulah expected them. She waited out of the light until one showed up with his gas can. Tallulah came up behind him silently and threw his head into the pump, knocking him out. She tied his wrists, grabbed his can, and came down the street for his buddies - three of them.

“Hey, hot tomato,” one of them oozed, reaching out for her. “What’s the hurry?”

“I got shit to do,” was her reply, right before she kneed him in the nuts, headbutted him into the side of the van, then slipped a pre-made clove hitch around his wrists and tied him tight to a lamppost. One of the other two - Don? - grabbed her from behind, dragging her back along the concrete, and she squirmed, trying to bind his hands together without him noticing.

“Hey!”

The other tough came up to her, and she reared back and kicked him in the gut before jerking forward and slamming their heads together. Possibly-Don let go, and she tied their hands together before tying them to the lamppost, too.

She was actually satisfied, and started to walk away, whistling - doo-doo-doo doooooo doo-doo, doo-doo-doo doooooo doo-doo - when the door slammed shut and someone grabbed her by the collar, dragged her back towards the truck.

She craned her neck to see how she was being held and realized she could reach the back of his knee. She jammed her elbow into it, hard, and his leg buckled. From there, she grabbed the hand not in her collar, tied them together particularly tightly and then to a fire hydrant, and started off walking.

It took a moment to hear the footsteps behind her, and she turned off into an alley, hoping they’d follow and she could confront them.

They did, and she turned around to look at them and there it was, another knife in her chest.
“You shouldn’t be here,” she finally said. “You could have gotten hurt.”

“You did get hurt,” Kit retorted, gesturing at Tallulah’s legs.

Having been exposed, they were a raw, bloody mess.

“Shit,” she sighed. “This one’s a bust, too.”

“Can I ask you a question?” Kit asked.

“You just did, but I give permission for another.”

“Why do you do it?”

Tallulah blinked. Based off of what was in the news, no one seemed to care what her motivations were. They cared about the mystique, the violence, the sensationalism.

“Lady Law?”

Tallulah looked her dead in the face, looked straight into the face of the dead girl she could have loved, and said, “Justice. Someone needs to carry it out, and it might as well be me.”

“One more thing.”

Tallulah gave in. “Go ahead.”

“Why do you wear a mask?” Kit adjusted her glasses, a familiar and endearing nervous tic. “You’re doing a good thing. You’re helping people. You shouldn’t have to hide.”

“But I do.” With that, Tallulah picked up the cheap black coat she’d made for just this purpose, and walked off. “Stay safe, citizen.”

“Get some Neosporin on those pins!” Kit called after her. “It’d be criminal to get ‘em infected.”

Tallulah stopped off at a drugstore, mask on, bought some Neosporin, and went home. She doused her legs in peroxide, picked out the gravel, slathered them in it, bandaged them up, and tried to sleep.

She couldn’t.

*Kit looks like her. Just like her, exactly like her. How can that be?* she wondered, desperation coloring even her internal voice. *What if she keeps doing this? What if she gets hurt? What if she follows me to some crime scene and gets shot?*

*What if it’s my fault?*

*Please, god, I ain’t ever been a believer, but I will be if you keep her from getting shot.*

The next day, Tallulah dug up some stretchy red and black fabrics and, once she got home, she made a new costume. Short, comfy athletic dress in red, stretchy tights in black, and a little red capelet just for the aesthetic of it. She took a pair of long-forgotten saddle shoes, relics of orphanage times only physically comfortable, and carefully polished the white parts red. Then she started looking into gun permits.

She wasn’t getting a gun. She just needed to know that, in case of emergency, she wasn’t breaking the law when she fired one.
Two days later, a guy named Myron who wouldn’t pay his gambling debts to Blackjack was due to get a beating. Tallulah - Lady Law - was there, waiting.

The tough slammed Byron into a chainlink fence and started whaling on him, forearm pressed against his throat so he couldn’t move or run or breathe.

Tallulah leapt down off a low gutter and hit him square in the shoulder, fondly reminiscing about the first time she did this.

“Shoo,” she said, flapping her hand at Myron to get him to run off. Eagerly, he fled, and she turned to the man who’d been beating him up. “That guy’s a pencil neck. You coulda killed him.”

“He wouldn’t be a problem,” he snarled, starting to push up off the ground.

Tallulah kicked him in the chest and toppled him back onto the asphalt. “The only problem is bad things happening to people who don’t deserve it. Injustice is a problem. An idiot who’s obsessed with the thought of maybe, just maybe, winning? Coming out on top for once? That ain’t a problem, that’s just sad.”

He tried to sit up, and she planted her foot on his sternum - not enough pressure to harm, only enough to remind him who was in charge. Who was in control.

It seemed he didn’t quite get the message, because he reached up and grabbed her leg. Hard. Undeterred by the pain, Tallulah’s foot left the asphalt and nailed him in the ribs, while the one on his chest pushed a little harder and her hands bound his nice and tight, tying him to the fence he’d been pummeling Myron on.

“Cops are coming,” she said. “Toodle-oo!”

She cut out of the alley and down the street, past the back of a laundromat. The smell of clean laundry and the satisfaction of a successful night put a little spring in her step.

“Can I quote you on all that?”

Tallulah froze, then turned towards the noise.

Parked on a delivery box, in a cozy little cardigan and a sturdy-looking skirt, with two coffees in hand, was Kit Sorrel, back again. Blasé, she offered, “Cuppa joe?”

“I saw your piece in the Advisor,” Tallulah said, in lieu of an answer. “‘LADY LAW DECKS DOPE PEDDLERS.’”

“It’s the truth,” Kit said with a shrug. “I believe it should always be told. Truth and justice go hand in hand, doncha think?”

Tallulah took the coffee. “Miss Sorrel - ”

“Lady Law.” Kit’s eyes sparkled in the moonlight. “I see you like the name, judging by the embroidery on your new costume.”
“You need to stop doing this. It’s dangerous. You could be injured, or captured, or killed.” Tallulah squared her shoulders, like she could cow mortal peril into scuttling off, tail between its legs. “Think of your family.”

“Do you have a family?”

Another unexpected question. It caught Tallulah off guard, and she disguised wordlessness with a big, long series of sips.

“Lady Law?”

“I do not have a family.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked that.”

“No, it’s… it’s fine.” Another sip. “They’re all dead.”

*Why aren’t you dead?*

“Do you work alone?”

“I don’t have a… sidekick, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Kit shook her head, mussed blonde curls framing her determined expression. “No. I mean, you’re always waiting for the criminals. You know where they’re going to be before they’re even there. That speaks to inside information.”

“Don’t print that inference,” Tallulah said. Ordered.

*Oops.*

“So you do have an informant?”

“What I have is a very busy schedule, Miss Sorrel. Will you be able to get home safely?”

“I’ll be fine.” As Tallulah started to walk off, Kit asked, “Can I quote you? On what you said back there?”

“Yes. Not on this conversation.”

“Of course not!” Kit’s eyes widened. “I would never - if it makes you uncomfortable, I won’t ask these questions anymore.”

“No personal ones. My life outside this work is as a private citizen, and I’d like it to remain just that - private.”

Kit nodded, mouth a little rosebud of resilience and integrity.

“And that you can quote me on.”

The next time Tallulah saw Kit, she’d formed a sort of web knotting eighteen hired guns together; they’d had a drink at the club and spoken a little too loudly about going for another drink later, more than one of them intending to pick up an order.

“Where did you learn to tie knots like that?”
“The library. Education is important, especially if it’s practical or enjoyable.”

“Which is rope work for you?”

“Both.”

Then, at three’o’clock Monday morning, Tallulah shinnied down a drainpipe to kill two birds with one stone - to intercept a peddling pediatrician who was going by a school to make a delivery just so happened to also be carrying a missive from Blackjack to some high roller. She slid down to the spout and spun around backwards to kick the man in the back, right below his neck, sending him smearing into the bricks opposite. She jumped down and tied him to the pipe, then picked his pockets for the note, which she tucked into her bra.

As usual, there was Kit with a coffee and a question: “Does this work ever interfere with your day job?”

_She didn’t say ‘real job.’ Huh._

“Does my work ever interfere with yours?”

Kit blushed but did not break the best eye contact she could manage through Tallulah’s hood. “You are my work, Lady Law.”

Tallulah had no words for a solid minute. Once she had them back, she used them to say, “It does not.”

So it began. They each got one question a night; if a question could not be answered, a new one could be posited, or it could be left alone. Tallulah learned a great many things about Kit - she, too, was an orphan, with an adoptive family she loved dearly but could not reconcile with her dead; she had a deep, abiding sweet tooth; she wanted to be a journalist (not a reporter, a journalist) because she believed in truth and accessible information for all; she became a journalist because she had an exclusive story with the unpinnable Lady Law; she has no preference between cats and dogs; she liked that Lady Law didn’t kill and did pursue justice, unlike many cops in their town, and that she was going after gangs when no one else would.

After the latest article - **BLIND JUSTICE: DOCTOR BELLADONNA PUT AWAY BY LADY LAW** - Tallulah realized that she owed Ronnie at least a phone call’s worth of an explanation.

So, still fresh from a brawl, frozen peas on her face, she called her up.

“Whozzit?”

“Ronnie? It’s Tallulah.”

“Wussgoinon?”

“Your sister has been coming to my crime scenes. She’s never gotten hurt. I’ve been telling her to stop, but she’s…” Tallulah smiled. “She’s stubborn as all hell.”

“That’s Kit.” Ronnie took a breath. “I don’t like her being part of this.”

“You think I do? I couldn’t do it again. I couldn’t…”

“Couldn’t what?”

“I knew a girl who looked exactly like her. And she was good and kind and loving and noble and
she was shot in the street for trying to help. For being in the wrong place at just the write time.”

Ronnie’s eyes went soft. “The girl from the massacre.”

“Kara Danvers. She…” Tallulah shook her head, adjusted her peas. “They looked exactly the same. Identical. I don’t want to see it all over again. I don’t want her blood on my hands.”

“How many have you taken down?” asked Ronnie gently.

Tallulah shuffled around until she could survey their map, complete with the note she’d stolen at the top, addressed to the letter T, by Blackjack’s face. “Thirty.”

“Thirty!”

“Of over two hundred that we know of.”

“But thirty crooks and cons and killers off the street.”

“I'll sleep easier when it’s all two hundred and thirty four of ‘em behind bars. Including the mysterious T.”

“Well, you got time to sleep now anyway, so use it.” A pause, and then, “Did you get beat up?”

“It was strategic,” Tallulah groused. “He was bigger’n me. I had to tire ‘im out so I could get the drop on him.”

“No wonder my sister likes you so much,” Ronnie said, matching her tone and mood. “You’re both ridiculous about danger if it’s for the common good.”

Tallulah adjusted her peas to quell the burning in her cheeks. “You work weekends, don’cha? I’m gonna let you sleep.”

“I think I’m gonna stay up and talk to Kit when she gets back.”

RE:

Sure enough, ten minutes after the phone call ended, Kit was slipping through the window, shoes in hand, like she’d snuck out to talk to boys or something.

“Did you have a fun night?” Ronnie asked.

Kit looked a little sheepish, but showed no remorse. “I did. It was for work, but I had fun.”

“I haven’t been reading the paper these past few weeks.” Ronnie pulled the previous day’s issue out and hummed. “But I see by the bylines that you’ve been busy.”

“I’ve told you that I was going out for work!”

“You didn’t tell me you were hanging around some vigilante and a bunch of mobsters!” Ronnie crossed her arms, jaw tight. “You could get hurt, Kit. Hurt bad. Or… killed. Like Dad.”

Kit sort of hugged herself, big blue eyes glistening-wet. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to upset you.”
“I know. But I also know that you love what you do, and that your career probably hinges on this.” She sighed, eyes squeezed shut. “So I’m behind you on this.”

Kit bounced on her toes, beaming.

“But!”

Her bouncing did not stop, but it did slow.

“You stay far, far away from the crime scenes. I mean it. You wait, you hide, and when you see her come out, then you can talk to her about this stuff.”

“I do that already, Ronnie.” Kit smiled, then set her shoes down and bent to hug her sister. “Thank you for looking out for me.”

“I always will,” Ronnie murmured.

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AM:

Maggie jiggled her leg, fiddled with her pencil, yawned. Alex, bearing coffee, kissed her cheek and handed her a mug, looking just as wired and tired as she did.

“Did you have a…”?

She didn’t really need to ask.

“Can’t remember much. It was… remember Roulette?”

Alex nodded. “Me, too. I don’t know why she’d come up, but. I guess weird memory dreams make sense. Stress dredging up all kinds of weirdness. I have songs from Pajama Game stuck in my head. Do you wanna know when I last watched it? When I was fifteen, and Kara had just learned about musicals. I have not watched or listened to it since, and suddenly - Olé!”

“I’ve never seen that movie in my life.” Maggie’s brow furrowed, and she took a big swig of coffee, fingers drumming out a tango beat.

Alex leaned into her side and said, “Don’t let Kara hear you say that. She’ll insist that it’s Once A Year Day, and then you’ll find out what it’s a reference to, and… I just can’t get into musicals, Mags, I can’t. Is the singing normal in that world? Is it a weird hive mind thing? Is it all internal monologuing? Are they really just saying the lyrics, but we hear them as music? I don’t know! No one knows!”

Maggie rolled her eyes and raked her fingers through Alex’s hair, down her neck, over the soft, wrinkled fabric of her sleep shirt, humming, “Da-da, da-da, da-da-da-da…”

⚖

Out of kindness to Maggie, who was a vegan except when tiramisu was involved, and Lena, who
was a largely solid vegetarian, they ended up at a cozy-if-granola restaurant for brunch. Somehow, it had bacon and eggs and all the other meaty accoutrements the Danvers sisters had come to know and love throughout their lives, so with plates piled high, brunch began.

Alex noticed the subdermal concern on Kara’s face; Maggie noticed the familiar dark circles under Lena’s eyes. Both noticed her quietly drumming fingers, and it was clear she’d seen theirs.

“How did the dresses go?” Lena asked, setting down an empty coffee cup.

“Good,” Alex said. “Kara took pictures of us - I’m surprised you haven’t seen them yet.”

Kara, abashed and blushing, took out her phone and, after a few seconds of swiping, held it out to Lena, whose face was suddenly delighted and disturbed. She hid the latter well, and smiled at them across the table. “You two look absolutely stunning.”

“Thanks,” Maggie said, grinning.

“Is it bad,” Alex started, voice low, “that I kind of don’t give a crap about the wedding? I mean… I just can’t wait to be married. To you.”

Maggie leaned up and kissed her, locking their fingers together. “I would have eloped with you yesterday, but I had to wrestle some weird blue guy with antennae into cuffs.”

“Bryan!” Kara said, eyes lighting up. “I think you’ve met him before.”

“Oh, definitely.”

Lena took a big bite of cinnamon-raisin-flaxseed waffle, chewing ferociously. Meeting Maggie’s gaze, she said, “I like the hat.”

Maggie reached up, touched the brim. “We marathonned Agent Carter last week and I’m feeling the whole…” She gestured at her face, implying Peggy’s. “Y’know?”

The hat had not been bought last week, after seeing Peggy Carter wallop a guy with a suitcase. The hat had been bought almost immediately after the first foggy dream, some strange compulsion - like she’d already owned the hat and it had disappeared and needed replacing.

Alex was toying with the straw in her ice water, pinching it between fore- and ring fingers and tipping it back, as if to lift it to her lips, until it tapped the walls of the cup and she let it float down.

“How’s Gert?” Kara asked, slicing into her short stack.

“She’s great.” Alex, dropping her straw again, laughed softly. “We’ve been practicing the whole ring bearer thing, and she has demolished two pillows so far this week.”

Kara slapped the tabletop, leaning forward. “Two? Oh!”

Her water, much ignored ’til then, had toppled over in her excitement, splashing onto her jeans and rendering the hem of her shirt transparent.

“Thank Rao it didn’t hit higher! I’m gonna go take care of this,” she said, leaning over to kiss Lena’s cheek. “Don’t have too much fun without me!”

With that, she walked away to gently heat-vision herself dry in the bathroom. Alex tapped her straw against her glass; Maggie leaned back in her chair, ankle over knee, and put a steady hand on Alex’s thigh for both their sakes.
Lena dabbed her napkin at the water by Kara’s place, fingers twisting at a loose thread.

“You okay, Luthor?” asked Maggie.

“Do you have - ” She shook her head. “Stupid. Have you picked flowers yet? I’ve got a great florist.”

“You do tend to shower Kara in flowers,” Alex jibed.

“Do I have a what?” Maggie eyed her from under the brim of her hat. She felt like she knew the rest of the sentence, but it was just out of reach.

Dragging that loose thread out of its seam, Lena looked up at her and, with false levity, asked instead, “Did you ever smoke?”

Maggie, a bite of chocolate waffle in her mouth, swallowed and dragged her teeth along the tines of her fork. “In high school,” she finally said. “Like all the disaffected loners.”

Lena nodded and lifted her water glass for a drink. Finding only ice, she started crunching one of the cubes for want of something better to do with her mouth.

“I smoked in college,” Alex added. “Couldn’t at home; it was illegal, and Kara could smell it a mile away. It’s how I got through med school, though. How about you?”

Swallowing what had to be a mess of shards of ice, Lena replied. “College, too. But it wasn’t legal, since I was only fifteen when I started.”

“College or smoking?”

“Both.” Another ice cube died a violent death. “I quit five years ago. I don’t know why I thought of it.”

They all knew. Alex’s straw kept tapping, a slow metronome, and the gesture became memetic, all of them holding something in their fingers, flexing and curling, when Kara came back.

“What are you talking about?” she asked, parking herself in her chair and grinning expectantly.

“Flowers,” Lena blurted, smiling raggedly back. “I was wondering if they’d picked a florist.”

“Oh, they should use yours!”

“We just might.” Maggie smiled, gently squeezing Alex’s tensed and bouncing thigh.

“If you do,” Lena promised, “consider it my wedding gift - a wedding gift.”

Alex, out of nowhere and a sudden white trumpet behind her eyes, said, “Calla lilies.”
“She’s asking questions,” Ronnie said.

“Good morning to you, too.” Tallulah yawned, stretching, shoulders popping.

“Rough night?”

“Not all bad.”

“Well, my baby sister was there. She seemed under the impression that you’d clobbered two common criminals and one mob man, in three separate scrimmages, with the first one’s shillelagh.”

“Did she, now?”

“She also said,” and Ronnie’s voice dropped, cold and low, “that you made mention of my first name.”

A pause. “Did she, now?”

“And she noticed because - and this is bonkers - she didn’t tell you my name.” Ronnie crossed her arms, stone faced. Though they were on the phone and she couldn’t see Tallulah, she knew the desired effect was coming across. “Whaddya know about that?”

“I’m sorry?”

Ronnie cocked a disdainful brow.

“I am, squarely.”

“How did I even come up?”

“She asks me questions. We got an agreement! Some are for her articles, some… ain’t.”

“You’re talkin’ to her? Of course! You can’t run around talkin’ to her! She’s s’posed to go straight home after all your… vigilante… hijinks!”

“We made a deal, she ’n’ I!” Tallulah defended. “She gets to ask me a question - one question - every time we meet. I started askin’ ’em back.”

“And somehow, my name came up.”

“I asked if you gave her a police scanner.”

“‘Gave?’ Jesus Christ!”

“I truly am sorry. I didn’t think! She asked me how I knew where to go and when to get the cops on the horn, and I said I was listenin’ in on their radio, she said she had one, and I asked her if you gave it to her.”

“Except you used my name.” Then, before Tallulah could apologize again, Ronnie asked, “How is she finding you?”

“She built a scanner.”

“She built one?”

“It’s not that hard. I built one, too - smaller, so I could carry it around with me when I’m… y’know.”
“Out and about?”

“Out and about.”

Ronnie sighed, as the bathroom door opened. One pair of heels were crammed on, and then Kit was loping across the room, shrugging into her little brown plaid duffle coat. “Hiya, Ronnie,” she said, yawning.

“Hey, Kit.”

“Who ya talkin’ to?”

Ronnie watched her sister grabbing her bag, saw the notebook poking out of her pocket, and said, “My friend Tallulah.”


Ronnie covered the earpiece with her fingers while Kit grinned, chattering. “I didn’t know you had a friend called Tallulah. It was hinky enough, you comin’ home with Eloise in your back pocket, but now you got two friends!” She cuffed Ronnie on the shoulder and her smile stretched even wider. “Good for you!”

Ronnie rolled her eyes.

“She should come over some time,” Kit continued, and whatever noises Tallulah was making were no longer totally muffled by Ronnie’s hand, distressed frequencies pitching forth. “Both of ‘em!”

“Kitty-cat’s pajamas, Kit.” Ronnie spoke into the mouthpiece, chipper and even-keeled: “Catch all that, Tallulah?”

“You get cheesed at me for accidentally name-dropping you, but then you - what if she recognizes me?”

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

“I mean, she’s only seen me in a mask. At night. In the dark. In the costume.” Tallulah took a breath. “You’re allowed to be ticked off with me if I’m allowed to be a little ticked with you.”

“Agreed.” Satisfied her words had the intended impact, she said, “See ya… tomorrow night? When d’you get off work?”

“Marlene’s got me cleaning… my own blood off her dress. I ain’t sure if that’s funny- or sad-ironic, but it’s definitely dramatic irony first,” Tallulah sighed. “Pro’lly eight?”

“Can you be here by 8.15?”

“Sure can.”

“Promises, promises.”

Quietly, Tallulah said, “I’m keepin’ ‘em, I swear.”
“I’m gonna *fuckin’* die.”

Tallulah’s hands were shaking as she planted a cigarette between her teeth and struck a match off the bus stop signpost - the damned thing was two minutes late.

The match hissed and flared to life in her trembling grip, casting a short-range orange glow, and fizzled out under her heel - a heel just too high for a casual meeting of friends, just as her green frock was just too dramatic. The collar was high enough, but she’d cut out a clever little keyhole that made it essentially pointless, and with the soft trumpet skirt and careful seams, all three served the same purpose: make a good, and utterly unheroic, impression on Kit. All damsel, no derring-do.

She felt pathetic, doing it. This girl was in no way linked to Kara - she couldn’t be - but there she was, integrous and brave and smart and beautiful and alive, and Tallulah was weak in the face of it.

The bus came, at last, and Tallulah smoked out the window so she could see the sky and feel, perhaps, a little less nervous. When it was her stop, she clung to that shred of calm, stubbed out her cig, and marched towards the address she’d scribbled down the night before. She was careful of her grip, and before ringing the doorbell, she checked that her stockings were covering the few scrapes her legs still bore.

Then, she knocked.

“ Weird, seein’ you not all…”

Ronnie, in soft chambray that wasn’t uniform blue, made a face.

“Stop talking. Right. Sorry. Um.” Tallulah extended, as if an olive branch, a bouquet of flowers: “Calla lilies. Consider them my hostess gift.”

Ronnie made a different face, one Tallulah couldn’t identify.

“They mean new beginnings,” she continued, albeit haltingly, “and faith. I’m hoping you still have faith in me, after all of this, and we can start fresh without me messin’ up again.”

It took a moment for her to look up, but when she did, she was smiling, just a little, and she took the flowers. “They’re lovely, Tallulah. Get in here.”

She put a hand on Tallulah’s shoulder, ushering her in, and Tallulah was drowning in relief. “Thanks, Ronnie.”

“Take a load off.”

Ronnie closed the door behind them, and Tallulah took a look around. The place was sweet, cozy, and it would have been hard to reconcile with the severe-looking woman who’d broken into a speakeasy with a gun strapped to her thigh, if not for the dizzy look on Ronnie’s face whenever Eloise was nearby and how gentle she’d been the night Kara died. There were little touches of her, smatterings of her presence in condensation-ringed coasters and heavy books stacked on every flat surface, and others that had to come from Kit, a typewriter and a little cobbled-together radio sitting by a scaled-down toolbox.
Perched on the arm of a chair, thumbing through a battered pocket copy of *War of the Worlds*, Eloise looked up. “Hey, Lynch,” she said, dimpling, holding her place in the book with her forefinger. “Been a while, huh?”

Tallulah laughed, softly, and did not say that they’d seen each other the day before, exchanging information on a new target and compare notes on who was left to take down. “Ages and ages,” she sighed, shrugging out of her coat.

“Goin’ somewhere special?”

“No - oh.”

Across the living room, there were two doors. One had opened, revealing a hint of bedroom, and from it came Kit, in her sensible tweed and cloud of curls, adjusting a monk-strapped loafer. She righted herself and smiled, bright and warm, and Tallulah’s heart stopped so hard she was certain someone could hear it screeching.

“I take it you’re Tallulah,” she beamed, crossing the carpet with indomitable confidence and offering a hand. “I’m Kit.”

Ronnie widened her eyes in a silent, emphatic reprimand.

“Oh?” Kit fiddled with her glasses, cheeks rosy. Tallulah didn’t dare wonder if she was blushing. “She can be a real chatterbox when she wants to be.”

“Don’t I know it!” Tallulah shot a look right back at her, smiling all the while - *we’re in this boat together.*

“So, Tallulah,” Kit asked, pulling Tallulah down onto the couch, “what do you do?”

“What?”

“What’s your job?”

“Oh! Oh, I’m - I sew.” Tallulah smiled, emphatic, as she said, “It ain’t exciting or anything, but it pays okay and I like it well enough.”

“It explains the threads.” Kit touched the cuff of Tallulah’s sleeve, thumb grazing the skin of her wrist. “The factory stuff is nice and all, and it’s a good deal, but there’s somethin’ about doin’ it yourself that suits you.”

“Thank you.” Tallulah bit her lip. “Kit.”

The heft of secret-keeping managed not to ruin the night, though Tallulah was tense the whole time. Everything she said and did was first processed through a screen of *separate yourself from Lady Law; don’t put Ronnie on the block; remember she’s Kit, not Kara.*

The last one was difficult, because in so many ways, they were practically identical. They were both intelligent, both kind, both funny, both curious, both warm. They laughed the same; their eyes shone the same; their lips smiled the same through different shades of lipstick.
And what wonderful smiles, Tallulah sighed, are they.

“I gotta get goin’,” Eloise said some time after eleven. “I guess that means you do, too, huh, Lynch?”

Tallulah stood, reluctant, and said, “It was really nice to meet you.”

Kit did the same and wrapped her in a perfect hug. “I hope Ronnie brings you around again.”

Eloise and Tallulah made their excuses and went downstairs together. They walked along the curb for a minute or two before Eloise came to a stop. “This one’s mine,” she said.

_This one_ was a beast of a bike with a sidecar hitch.

“No wonder you wear pants.”

Eloise snorted. “I _was_ gonna ask if you needed a ride…”

“I’m aces hoofing it.” Tallulah smiled - or, rather, her smile altered to fit the situation. She was still grinning-giddy. “Thanks, though.”

“You sure?”

“I been out later with worse.”

With a roll of the eyes and a droll smile, Eloise tipped her head towards the bike. “Unless you’re on a call, you don’t hafta be. Get on.”

Tallulah got on, and Eloise took off. They roared through the city, street lamps an orange blur, until Tallulah’s apartment pulled into view.

“Thank you.”

“Anytime.” As Tallulah disembarked, Eloise reached back and touched her elbow, stopping her in her tracks to say, “So, little Sorrel, huh?”

“I got no clue what you’re talkin’ about.”

“Yeah, yeah, moon eyes.”

Tallulah got the rest of the way off, cheeks burning. “Absolutely not.”

“You sure?” She grinned, and her dimples were definitely mocking Tallulah. “No shame in it; those girls have good genes. Separate pools, but good genes.”

“So you and Ronnie?”

Eloise shrugged, smile shifting, and shooed her off. “Get inside, Lynch.”

“Drive safe.”

Chapter End Notes

I hadn't realized there wasn't a single musical number in this chapter. My God, I Have
Failed You. Still, I hope all of you enjoy it just the same.
In

Chapter Summary

Tallulah bugs Blackjack's office, to promising results; we meet Grady's dates, and a date between Kit and Tallulah has some unfortunate consequences; Alex, Maggie, and Lena handle the wedding flowers and have a conversation; a new player enters the game.

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: human trafficking, imperiled children, and one (1) gunshot wound.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

KT:

Time enough had passed, evidently.

“Miss Blackjack would like to know when her dress will be returned.”

This particular jack-boot had a patch over one eye, iridescent in the sallow light of her workspace, and a grim set to his mouth.

“I’ll drop it off in one hour,” Tallulah said with a tight, sweet smile, green spearmint gum peeing out of her premolar grip. “Tell the boss lady I’m real sorry for keeping her waiting.”

With a silent nod, he was gone, but Tallulah waited a few minutes, until his heavy footsteps were long gone, before popping open a panel in the floor and pulling out a garment-bagged red gown.

“Still laundry fresh.”

With an hour to spare, she gave the thing a chance to air out, freeing it from the plasticky smell and wafting some vaguely minty steam its way, and carefully stitched together a plan.

Bringing the thing by early gave her a chance to listen in on Marlene, but that wouldn’t be enough. With her hands steamy-hot, she found herself crossing the room to grab an old radio.

She’d repaired it more times than she could count, and its insides were deeply familiar. Tallulah had owned this thing since her first paycheck.

It was a worthy sacrifice, and she cannibalized the thing with no small degree of respect. Within the hour, she had built a perfectly serviceable bug that fit in the pocket of her dress, and the rest of the radio became a perfect little receiver.

So, bug completed and tucked into her pocket, Tallulah carefully collected Blackjack’s dress and set out to deliver.
Marlene had taken over Cutter’s office, and she’d changed everything about it in tiny, insidious ways. Even the door was different - Boston-cut burnished mahogany, the same as a roulette wheel - but it still sat at a wonky angle, complete with a tidy alcove that fit her quite neatly.

She knocked, a polite 4/4 beat, and waited, fingers to lips.

“Miss Lynch.”

In she went, stuffing an anxious hand in her pocket. “Sorry for the wait, Miss Blackjack. With you puttin’ business back to rights, I had a lot of stuff to fix.”

Blackjack’s long legs crossed up onto her desk, winding into a lean helical spiral, heels dully thudding on her blotter. “Quite alright. Good work won’t be rushed.”

Tallulah nodded and offered a little smile. “I did two minor repairs. The seams on the bust had pulled loose, and there was some snagging on the left knee’s embroidery.”

“Hm.” Marlene eyed both the girl and the gown.

Tallulah set the thing down next to Blackjack’s calves, the other hand gripping the edge of the desk, and swallowed.

Inspecting it, Blackjack hummed, “Neat handiwork.”

“Good thing I didn’t rush.” She smiled again, this time surer - cocky, even. “The - old management. I served as a personal tailor. If you want, I’d be happy to perform the same function.”

Blackjack regarded her, dark eyes contemplative - scrutinizing.

“Gals and ladies wear better threads,” Tallulah said with a shrug.

With that, she shooed Tallulah off, and Tallulah ran back to her closet. In there, the receiver was quietly buzzing with in-between-station static, and she wiped her fingers free of spearmint stickiness before adjusting the frequency.

Kzzzt... kzzt... I do appreciate handmade.

⚖

“Can I leave this here?”

Eloise flicked her lighter shut. “What is it?”

“Receiver. I bugged Blackjack’s office, and I need somewhere safe to stash it.”

“How the hell’d you buy a bug?” she asked, impressed.

“Built it. Stuck it to her desk with gum; there’s a divot Grady and Tommy carved out of the bottom as kids that was just big enough.” Tallulah shrugged and set the device down on her desk. “Can I?”

“Sorry, Lynch. I’m in and out of this place - you’re lucky you caught me.”
Tallulah sighed. “I can’t leave it with Ronnie - she’s got an office job and a kid sister.” That it was too risky to monitor herself went unsaid - if someone walked in with a bust seam or a popped button to find her covertly listening to their boss, she was six feet deep. “Maybe I should get headphones.”

“But what about when you can’t listen?”

True - no matter what incriminating dirt Marlene dished, there was no way to use it unless she was able to keep record, and there was no way to keep record if she was out waling on bad guys, or sleeping, or dealing with people in her workspace. If she wasn’t awake and alone, the endeavor was useless.

Defeated, Tallulah went to wait for the bus, hiding under a wet newspaper. As she waited, she ended up finishing the pocket project she kept on hand - a little crest for herself, a stylized double L woven into the scales of justice, ready to be patched onto her costume - and resorted to reading the rag.

Well - not rag. The Ardor Advisor just so happened to employ the brilliant and beautiful Kit Sorrel, whose article about Tallulah’s most recent exploits was glowing. It was very hard not to turn to mush when she read the kind words Kit had written - In a world of crooked characters, the deft hand of Lady Law surpasses necessity. It is the drive of the common person to do good, to be brave, to fight back that will ultimately prevail, and in no person is that drive more ferocious than in our lionhearted local - and she did not manage that feat.

Tallulah’s cheeks burned as she carefully cut the article free and tucked it into the lining of her jacket, right over her heart. Behind that article, the bottom third of an ad, blurred by rainfall, read DICTAPHONE PRICES DECIMATED!

Tallulah turned the page and read on.

Old audio devices on sale, down up to 90% Perfect for making secretarial duties - taking messages, dictating letters, making phone records - efficient and convenient!

Convenient, indeed.

Tallulah got off the bus ten stops after her apartment and spent half an hour rummaging carefully through wrecked recording devices, and another half hour waiting for Grady to show up after she’d dropped $20 on the thing.

“What the hell d’ya need this hunk of junk for?” he asked upon arrival, hiding under an umbrella, collar turned up.

“What the hell d’ya need to flap your lip for?” she retorted. “You’re the only jack I know with a hand truck.”

“Well, I didn’t bring it!”

Tallulah glared.

“I’m on a date, Lynch, whaddya want from me?”

Tallulah looked across the street, where two women - a porcelain blonde and a brunette with wide, perceptive eyes - and a tall man with a camera bag were waiting under an awning, sharing an umbrella. “Oh, fuck.”

“Hey!”
“The blonde’s Carol?”

A dopey haze came over Grady’s eyes. “Yeah.”

“And they’re Ilene and Johnny.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m sorry for interrupting date night.” Tallulah shifted the cardboard box in her arms, sheepish. “Tell you what; I’m buyin’ dinner, or cab fare - lemme make it up to you.”

“It’s fine! We went to the movies in Ilene’s car. Besides,” Grady ribbed, “that thing prob’ly wiped you out.”

“Cheaper than it coulda been.” Tallulah shrugged, balancing the box on her knee and squirming out of her coat to drape it over the machine and reach into her pockets. “Seriously, what do I owe you?”

“A ride.”

So Tallulah ended up in Grady’s pal’s dame’s car, squished into the backseat with the boys.

“I’m Johnny.” The man on her left extended his hand, around the bulk of the box, to shake hers.

“Nice to meet you.”

“Tallulah. Likewise. Grady’s told me lots about you - all three of you.”

Johnny cocked an eyebrow, rendering Grady a stammering mess.

“All good, all good. Don’t worry.” She took her hand back, splaying it over the box, and said, “Thanks for the ride, Ilene.”

“Thanks for gas.” Ilene smiled at her in the rearview mirror, eyes flashing in the lights of the approaching gas station, then asked, “So, what’s in the box?”


“Why do you need a Dictaphone for, Lynch?”

“…It was gonna be a surprise, you twit.” Tallulah swatted Grady upside the head. “For you, and Pablo, and all the other canaries.”

“Woah, woah, I ain’t no canary - ”

“Except in the shower,” Carol teased, leaning over the head rest.

Johnny draped an arm around the back of the seat, fingers brushing Grady’s jaw. “And in the car.”

“And whenever the radio’s on.” Ilene was in on it, too, her friendly barb as precise as her parallel park by the pump.

“And at work. You sing with the acts’ practices while you - ” Tallulah mimed playing piano, fingers drumming on the cardboard. “ - tickle the ivories.”

Johnny’s grin widened, and he shook Grady by the shoulder, saying, “No use fighting it, buddy.”

The radio crackled, though no one had touched the knob and they were all piling out, Johnny lifting
Ilene clean out of her seat once she’d gotten gas money and twirling away from the car, her pretty floral skirts flaring with the peeping melody. Carol pecked her boyfriend on the nose, stole his hat, and proved her voice to be as musical as her name.

“Let’s all sing like the birdies sing,” she trilled, plopping it jauntily on her head, “tweet, tweet, tweet, tweet, tweet!”

“Let’s all sing like the birdies sing - sweet, sweet-sweet, sweet, sweet!” Ilene sang, pumping gas as if to keep time.

“Let’s all warble like nightingales!” Johnny leaned over Grady, chucking him under the chin. “Give your throat a treat!”

Then, all three of them chimed in together, lovingly mocking him: “Take your time from the birds; now you know all the words! Tweet, tweet-tweet, tweet, tweet!”

Grady, pleasantly flustered, pushed them off, and dragged his feet together. When his heels collided, they sent up a splash from the puddle they’d unfortunately landed in, but neither he nor his dates seemed to mind. In fact, they were all rather amused, watching him dance with goofy, easy grace, faces lighting up as the melody changed again.

“I’m singin’ in the rain,” he sang, bringing up his umbrella. “Just singin’ in the rain! What a glorious feelin’, I’m happy again!”

The wind came, stealing the umbrella away, and Carol tossed his hat to him.

“I’m laughing at clouds,” Grady continued, snatching it out of the air directly above his head, “so dark up above. The sun’s in my heart and I’m ready for love!”

Johnny, laughing, soft-shoed to his side and looped an arm around his shoulders. “Let the stormy clouds chase everyone from the place!”

“Come on with the rain, I’ve a smile on my face!”

And he did - they both did. They all did.

Ilene finished with the gas and paid up, linking arms with Carol, chassé-ing towards them in perfect sync. “I walk down the lane, with a happy refrain - just singin’, singin’ in the rain!”

“Dancin’ in the rain!” With that, the couples split, spinning from one partner to the next, all careless, giddy grace. They hummed through their gleeful grins, then broke out singing: “I’m happy again! I’m singin’ and dancin’ in the rain! I’m dancin’ and singin’ in the rain…”

And just like that, they were all back in the car, dripping wet, boys up front this time.

“Some weather, huh?” Grady said, with thunder crackling through the dusty purple sky.

“Some weather.”

With her bugging setup completely set up, Tallulah didn’t see a problem with handling a robbery.
only five minutes from her house if she sprinted, rain be damned. Besides, she reasoned, it’s a good test. Marlene’s not in her office.

So she ran, saddle shoes splashing through ankle-deep drainage, and managed to tie two guys to a lamppost, goodie bags still in hand, before the cops showed up or before her mascara started to run.

“Slick moves,” Kit said, offering her umbrella, the cuffs of her trousers dragging. “Can I take a quote?”

“On what?” Tallulah fell into step beside her and appreciated, properly, the difference in height between them - a solid three inches in flat feet. “Tonight wasn’t anything stupendous.”

“On what you eat for breakfast.”

Tallulah stopped short, eyes wide. “What?”

“C’mon. It’s four in the morning! Either you ain’t sleepin’, or you ain’t sleepin’ enough, and either way, you’ll need something.”

*The Dictaphone’s on,* Tallulah reminded herself. *Breakfast should be fine.*

Except she got swarmed - as much as one can be swarmed before sun-up - as soon as they walked into a 24/7 diner, by a couple of kids who’d clearly been out drinking, and she’d had to handle them both while trying not to laugh, which was especially difficult because Kit was laughing, and it was a glorious, gorgeous giggle, chin tucked into her neck, hand clapped over her face. Tallulah had retaliated by stealing her pen to sign clippings books and taking the side of the booth not under an air vent.

Kit did the same, sliding in next to her, warm and still beaming as she flapped open a laminated menu. “So, what’ll it be?”

*KL:

Kara woke to the smell of smoke and flew to the source of it to find Lena, sleeping where she stood, burnt cinnamon toast in the oven.

“Lena?” Kara pulled the toast out, trashed it, and ran the pan under cold water. “Lena!”

Lena stirred, leaning on Kara’s shoulder. “Where’s my toast?”

Kara gestured towards the garbage.

“Ordered toast, like, twenty minutes ago,” she continued to mumble, rolling so her face was buried in Kara’s neck. “You have bad taste in diners.”

“Sweetheart, we’re not at a diner.” Kara cupped the back of her neck, thumb slipping between strands of silky black hair. “You were dreaming.”

“Ugh.” Lena wrapped her arms around Kara’s waist and swayed into her. “Is it early?”

“It’s dark out.”
“Okay. More sleep, then.”
Lena did not move.

“Want me to carry you, sleepy?”

“Mm. I can walk.”
She did not.

After a minute, Kara just laid back and floated them both to bed, Lena plastered to her chest like a pat of butter melting on pancakes.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, sheets poofing up around them.

Lena squirmed a little, nestling into a comfier position. “Tired.” Her stomach grumbled. “Shut up, stomach.”

“Wanna sit up and not burn some toast together?”

Lena shook her head, cheek bumping into the heel of Kara’s hand as she stroked her hair. “I can’t sleep on a full stomach. Don’t know why I was trying to cook.”

“Because you were hungry?”

Lena pressed a kiss to the crest of Kara’s shoulder, then her inner wrist, then fell asleep. Kara followed soon after, but the space between sleep and waking was filled with the conversation she’d maybe-not-unintentionally overheard at brunch.

*Smoking. Why did that come up? What did Lena want to ask Maggie?*

*Why did they lie about it?*

*AM:*

“Did you know -” Maggie huffed, ponytail bouncing furiously as she jogged in place at the red light “- that you can turn a radio into a bug?”

“Like - like iconically, so it looks like one?”

Maggie eyed Alex, dimpling.

“I’ve never done it. Not a mechanical engineer. Makes sense, though.” The light changed; they sprinted off. Gertrude barked at a leaf. Alex side-eyed her and asked, “Are you planning on bugging me in more ways than one?”

Maggie laughed, a bright, husky sound, and they turned a corner. “Yeah, babe. I’m gonna put a homemade bug in your lunch box and spy on you at your Dumb Enormous Office.”

Now it was Alex’s turn to laugh, this one an ugly snort, and she pivoted on the ball of her foot so she could look at her fiancée haloed, askew, by the sun.
“So, we have the flowers thing with Lena later.”

Alex nodded, jogging elliptically around Maggie, passing through the vegetal rosebud funk of her organic shampoo with a smile. “Calla lilies. Right.”

“We drop the baby off with Kara in - ”

Alex ducked her head to peer at Maggie’s watch. “Two hours.”

“And then we can just make out on the couch while pretending to watch Predator.”

“God, I love you.”

They completed their run, having lapped about ten percent of the city, fumbled with the lock, and took a joint shower - definitely to save time and water - before handing Gertie over.

“Hi, baby!”

Maggie crossed the apartment, tugging her shirt on, and opened the door. “She doesn’t have super hearing, you know.”

Gertrude bounded into Kara’s arms, licking her chin.

“Awww, she’s fine!” Kara yawned.

“Late night, little Danvers?”

Kara nodded. “Lena had a weird dream. Another one.” She looked up at Maggie, scratching Gertrude behind the ears. “She ended up burning toast while sleepwalking.”

“Is that a euphemism?”

Kara wrinkled her nose. “No! I mean, literally. She was making cinnamon toast in the oven and it practically went up in flames.”

“Butter has a pretty low smoke point,” Alex offered, tugging her pants up by the belt loops. “Makes sense as an accelerant, if the fire is really, really small.”

“Toast.”

“Yep, that’ll do it.”

Kara stood, Gert draped over her shoulder, and beamed. “Have fun with the flowers - Lena’s the best with this stuff. It’s gonna be great.”

“Yeah. We’ll say hi to your girlfriend for you.”

Kara’s grin widened, and she leaned in to hug her sister and sister-in-law-to-be. “You better.”

With that, they were gone, walking through the balmy afternoon air towards what was a deceptively tiny flower shop in a neighborhood that looked like someone had put it in the dryer on tumble and forgotten about it for a decade and a half.

Outside, Lena was waiting, spine straight as they weren’t, chewing what smelled to be spearmint gum like her life depended on it. “Alex! Maggie!”
Alex wondered if those audible exclamation marks were communicable to everyone who knew Kara. “Hey, Lena.”

“Little Luthor.”

Hugs were exchanged, and they went inside.

The place looked like the awkward afternoon tea from *The Great Gatsby*, massive conglomerated blooms covering every available surface, and was tended to by someone who could easily have been Daisy Buchanan, had she existed along with the linear flow of time.

“Nirir,” Lena said warmly, giving the frangible-looking old lady a careful hug. “It’s so good to see you.”

“You saw me two days ago, getting flax blossoms and primrose.” Nirir arched her eyebrows meaningfully. “For your sweetie.”

Lena blushed. “This is Maggie, and this is Alex.”

“Her sweetie’s big sister,” Alex stage-whispered.

“They’re getting married.”

Nirir clasped her papery hands together and glowed - literally. “Oh, wonderful! I love weddings.”

Maggie grinned. “I’m pretty sure the only one I’ll like is this one.”

“Well, if that’s the case, I’ll just have to play my part in making it the best it can be!” Nirir started bustling off, and the plants all listed her way.

“Musa?”

“Their pheromones speed photosynthesis and optimize metabolic activity in plants,” Alex relayed, grinning. “And the women tend to be mildly telekinetic.”

“Cool.”

Lena grinned like she’d gotten a pat on the head, then headed off after Nirir, with them on her heels moments after.

“Lena mentioned on the phone that you’d expressed an interest in calla lilies,” Nirir said, opening a particle board door to reveal an impossibly large greenhouse that definitely couldn’t exist within the space of the building.

“That’s right, yeah.”

Nirir’s arm floated up, fingers unfurling and curling back into her palm, summoning a floating planter devoid of all but dirt. When it came near, green shoots burst forth and blossomed into the teardrop-faced trumpets, hyperrealistic. “These are quite popular in cascades,” she said, flicking her wrist and plucking the lilies. They soared together into a bundle, and then smaller white climbing blossoms joined the fray, appropriately cascading down below the lilies, swaying towards Maggie and Alex.

“It’s - they’re lovely.”

“These,” Lena piped, touching the little flowers, “mean devotion and good luck for new spouses. They’re wisteria blossoms.”
“I like that,” Maggie said, plucking one of them and tucking it into Alex’s humidity-wavy hair. Her fingers traced down the curve of Alex’s jaw. “What do the lilies mean?”

“Faith. New beginnings.”

Alex smiled, shaking off a weird déjà vu. “I like them.”

“What colors are you using?”

They looked sheepishly towards each other. They hadn’t exactly gotten that far.

Alex, being as Type A as she was, had done enough research to crash her computer twice, but she had the boon of a background in - admittedly lackluster - straight girl wedding dreams. Maggie itched through the planning stage, up to her scalp in unfamiliar waters, and trying to pin everything down in that nebulous theoretical space usually ended up in her willfully distracting the two of them by plopping into Alex’s lap with Scotch and bare legs. They’d gotten through the majority of an online checklist over the course of a week, during which Alex had cried twice (once for each computer crash), Maggie had blacked out half-buried beneath the couch, and someone had brought a pack of Marlboro Lights home on the third day.

Suffice it to say, they had not picked colors.

“Um.”

“Well, you can keep your bouquet all white if that’s still up in the air. That’s quite common, don’t you worry.” Nirir smiled a sweet granny smile, fingers aflutter. “It’s also common to include some greenery in your bouquets, and they’re pretty neutral, in case you add color later.”

“Ferns. Why not.”

Maidenheads made their way in - Maggie made a note to ask Lena what those meant later - and jasmine, too, and then it actually looked complete. They agreed on smaller nosegays for the bridesmaids, just the callas and the jasmine, and Nirir and Lena signed all the financial nonsense while Maggie and Alex escaped to finish the pack.

When the front door opened, they coughed, startled, and tucked the butts behind their back, turning to face Lena.

She sighed, fingers fidgeting with her skirt. “Now that that’s done with, do you want to get drunk?”

“They let you take your drinks outside at the bar,” Maggie said, relieved.

So, they went to the bar, Scotches all around, smoke lingering around them in a way that wasn’t out of place in a dive bar that catered to off worlders who could set things on fire with their fingertips - or spit.

(Not a fun first date.)

Alex wrapped an arm around her shoulder, and laid her head over Maggie’s, slumping into her.

“Thank you, Lena. For the flowers.”

“Anything I can do,” she replied, beaming. “I mean that. I jus’ want to help.”

Alex blinked. “Huh - yeah. Thanks.”

“So, maidenheads - which, gross name.” Maggie took a sip. “Patriarchal to the nth.”
Lena smiled into her glass. “The secret bond of love.”

“Sap.”

“Says the affianced.”

Maggie’s nose wrinkled, and Alex turned, burying her face in her hair. Her voice was muffled when she said, “Getting married is really hard.”

“I can tell. By the whole.” Lena gestured vaguely. “Nicotine.”

“Worth it, though.” Maggie let out a breath. “I love you.”

“You, too, babe.”

There was a lull, in which a collective six fingers of whiskey disappeared, before Lena slumped into the wall, feet poking out of the booth, heels dangling off her toes. A piece of thread she’d been twiddling with popped off her hem and became a clove hitch knot in a flash.

“Whatcha doin’?”

Lena blinked, startled, eyes glassy. “I - don’t super know. I’ve been tying knots… a lot lately.”

“Have you?”

Another round arrived, and they drank.

“I don’t know, I’ve been having dreams with - with rope. In them. The dreams.”

Seeing Lena tipsy would have been more entertaining if she hadn’t mentioned dreams.

Maggie leaned forward on her elbows and said, “Sounds fun.”

“Maggie!”

“What?”

Still, Alex had assumed much the same interrogatorily casual posture, chin in hand. “So, whatcha been dreaming about?”

“Besides rope.” Maggie wriggled her pointer and ring fingers into the loops of the knot. “Tied into decent impromptu handcuffs.”

“I never really remember much. I think Kara’s making me watch too many musicals.”

“She does that,” Alex hedged.

“Can’t complain. I love them.” Lena sighed. “I love her.”

“Exhibit B.”

“So, have you been having weird dreams? Or are you just questioning me because it’s fun?”

“Smart when drinking. I knew I liked you, little Luthor.” Maggie patted her hand with the two bound fingers and did not answer.

“Did you know,” Alex said, gesturing with her glass, “that you can make a bug with a battery and a
radio?”

Lena stilled, eyes wide. “I did, in fact, know that.”

“Huh.”

“RE:

“So,” Ronnie asked, “did it work?”

“Did what work?”

She looked at a clearly sleepless, and inexplicably flustered, Tallulah and cocked a brow.

“Oh! Oh. The.” Tallulah indicated with her fingertips about the size and shape of the bug, then nodded. “Yeah, like a dream. I tested it out last night. Even stopped off to get a secondhand Dictaphone. It’s chuggin’ away right now.”

“Anythin’ come up?”

Tallulah shook her head. “Last night, she wasn’t in the office, so I heard nothin’ but the wind and the radiator.”

Ronnie pursed her lips, stirring her coffee. “Could you make more receivers?”

“Yeah. The first was easy enough.”

“You oughta make a pair.” She took a sip, then continued, steamrolling on. “One for me, one for El. That way someone’s always in on it, someone’s always waiting for news.” She shrugged. “Better response time.”

This, perhaps, was one amongst many complaints she had of her coworkers. Even when they weren’t actively trying to do poorly, they took way too long to get where they needed to be.

“Sure. I just wanna help.”

Ronnie smiled and clapped her on the shoulder. “I know. You ’n’ me, both.”

“You ’n’ me ’n’ she, three,” Tallulah riffed, perking up. “But, speakin’ of she, you sure she’s gonna want in on that? She told me she’s never in her office, and listenin’ to the, er, radio while out and about isn’t a wise idea.”

They shared a communal wince in memory of Tallulah’s mild probable concussion when she’d gotten clocked with her own scanner by an escaping armed robber. There was still a dent on her scalp where she’d been hit.

“She’s in there enough. Besides, she can’t resist that much fun.”
And she couldn’t. With half her lunch break remaining, Ronnie paid for her meal and headed over to the public park where Eloise would be spying. She’d been enlisted to discern the after-hours activities of an accountant whose wife didn’t trust him as far as she could spit - and ladies don’t spit.

Cool as could be, coat collar hiked up to her ears, Ronnie perched next to her on a bench and crossed her legs, the rounded toe of her shoe doggedly not touching Eloise’s calf.

“Black coffee, sesame bagel - dry, double toasted.” She restrained herself from pulling a face as she passed over the cup and a brown paper bag, radiating heat. “So, is he havin’ a nooner or what?”

“In his office, no less.” Eloise took the lunch delivery and smiled. “Filthy animal.”

Ronnie pulled out and lit a cigarette, propping her elbow up on the backrest. “Speaking of offices…”

“What, you needta borrow mine?”

“What? No!” Ronnie’s cheeks flushed. “I talked Lynch into building two more, and I can get you a pair of headphones from my office.”

“I’m never in it!”

“You’re never anywhere.”

Eloise rolled her eyes. “I get busy.”

“Keep it in your apartment, for when you eventually go to sleep.” Ronnie let out a plume of smoke and smiled at Eloise out of the corner of her eyes. “Y’know, if you do sleep.”

“I sleep.” Eloise took a sip, hissed - slightly burnt. “At my desk. Like a sane person.”

“Sane person, my ass.” Now, Ronnie’s toe did brush Eloise’s leg, tracing up the line of her shin. “C’mon. You’re in this as much as we are, and I know how much you appreciate solid dirt, straight from the self-incriminating source.”

Eloise’s breath hitched, and she almost spat her coffee across the path. There was a tentative tension in Ronnie, like she wasn’t quite sure she should have committed to the gesture, but the commitment was there, and so was the trail of goosebumps up Eloise’s leg in its wake.

Ronnie, beside her, was once again fastidiously not looking her way, eyes bright, cheeks burning.

“Is she done buildin’ ‘em?” Eloise asked, finally, a hair too smooth.

“No. I just convinced her when I was pickin’ up your nasty, pasty bagel.”

“My bagel is beautiful.”

The two of them, sat shoulder to elbow, perfectly ignored each other until Ronnie’s lunch break was over, utterly aglow all the while.

KT:

There was a great deal of excitement in walking through a building you’d bugged, Tallulah found.
She wasn’t in range of the thing, and she wasn’t half so stupid as to put herself in range just for the thrill, but just knowing that in the westernmost corner and up three flights of stairs laid perhaps her greatest creation was thrilling.

So, rather than dare to tempt herself, Tallulah sat in her closet, skirt hitched up high enough that she could cross her legs like a kindergartener, and hid radio parts in her lap under the inside-out silk wool of yet another tuxedo. She sewed like a woman possessed, cranking out a frankly improbable amount of work - French nuns be damned - in an equally unlikely amount of time.

Still, it wasn’t a whole day’s work. In her pockets, she had more patches for her uniform which she couldn’t work on for fear of being seen, and she had a book to read that just couldn’t seem to hold her interest. Ultimately, she doodled - sketched.

It was the gold gown, time and time again, unfortunately, but with every iteration, something changed. It went from paillettes to satin, gold to brilliant sunny yellow, and then again to a muted sateen in deep, rich blue with a wide, round neckline and princess, rather than bias, seams. The thing was totally different to anything she’d seen Kit or Kara wear, yet she felt as if she had, as if she intimately knew the shape of the journalist’s arms through dark blue fabric, the shape of her hips in a loose skirt, fists jauntily perched upon them.

Tallulah found herself sighing, smoking, sketching through the day. She was looking forward to her nightly exploits, for more than her mission statement. She knew Kit better as the Vixen Vigilante, had excuse to see her as the Crimson Crusader, had cause to be nearby as a hero. Speaking to her as just Tallulah had been strange and uncomfortable and dishonest in a way her mask prohibited.

Even with all that aside, she thought, outside my uniform, I am not only thoroughly uninteresting, but actively repellant. I’m a criminal, technically! My only jobs have been mob related. Kit’s a good person.

She should be with good people.

It was that thought process that plagued her while she punched her way through a lull in Blackjack’s activity, a robbery, a peeping tom, and two muggings.

One of which, she’d just sort of stumbled into, giving her the perfect chance to realize that she needed to start wearing something easier to change out of.

“You’ve been busy.”

Helpless, Tallulah smiled beneath her mask. “I hope you weren’t too tired today, Miss Sorrel.”

“Truth never sleeps,” Kit intoned, smiling back and offering a coffee. “I was alright. How were you? I take it the bossman didn’t take too kindly to you falling asleep at your desk..?”

Tallulah laughed. “I thought we agreed, no private life.”

“I know.” Kit had fallen in beside her, rueful. “I had a theory, is all.”

“And your theory was secretary?”

“You never fight crime during the day, so a job you couldn’t wiggle out of from nine to five makes sense.” Kit nudged her. “And what’s so bad about being a secretary? I was a secretary - well, an assistant.”

“Nothin’! Wish I was a secretary.” Tallulah rolled up her mask and swallowed a mouthful of coffee.
“I could live in an office.”

Kit laughed, a hand suddenly gripping Tallulah’s shoulder, wide-fingered warmth breaching the thick, stretchy fabric of her costume. “I can’t - ‘m sorry, I can’t picture you behind a desk!”

Cheeks heating, Tallulah defended herself. “Why not? Think I don’t know my way around a Dictaphone?”

“No, not that, it’s just.” Kit smiled down at her and touched her glasses, nudging them up her nose fruitlessly. “You’d be bored. Sitting still. Wouldn’t you?”

“…Probably.” Tallulah swigged again and sighed. “What do you think I do now?”

“Hm.” Kit grabbed her free hand - again, warm-fingered - and turned it over gently, inspecting knuckles and palm.

Tallulah’s heart stuttered in her chest like a broken stoplight.

“You work with these,” she finally decided. “Even beyond the bruised knuckles, there’s wear and tear and good, honest work in ‘em - but you’re not a mechanic, even though you know your way around an engine. Too clean.”


“What? Why are you laughing at me?”

“I’m not - I ain’t laughin’.” Tallulah tried for a sip, to give her stupid mouth an excuse not to invite her foot into it, and found her cup not only empty but slamming into her nose. She did her best to brush it off and tossed it into the trash before rolling her mask back down.

Kit’s face fell, just a half-step.

“Honest, I wasn’t - ”

“No, it’s not that. I believe you.” Kit smiled. “It’s just a treat, seeing some part of you not hidden behind that thing. It feels like I really know you.”

Tallulah bit her lip, cheeks flushing. “You do know me. Better ’n most.” She slid her fingers around Kit’s, reorienting her grip, cradling her hand. “I want you to know me, but you might not like me if you did.”

“You’re funny.” Moonlight and the orange glow of street lamps caught on her glasses and reflected in the blue of her eyes. “I trust you, Lady Law. There ain’t nothin’ you could do to shake me off your tail.”

Around the sudden knot in her throat, Tallulah managed, “So I’ve noticed.”

“It’s a very ancient saying, but a true and honest thought, that if you become a teacher, by your pupils you’ll be taught. As a teacher, I’ve been learning - you’ll forgive me if I boast - and now I’ve become an expert on the subject,” Kit crooned, tapping the tip of her nose, “I like most.”

Tallulah’s burning cheeks had reached a magnitude that Smoky the Bear would warn children about as Kit took her other hand, thumb caressing a swollen knuckle, then twirled out, skirts and curls flying.

“Getting to know you! Getting to know you, getting to know all about you,” she trilled, spinning
back into Tallulah’s space. “Getting to like you, getting to hope you like me.”

Tallulah’s chest was full of tiny, imprudent, impudent bubbles; it was a wonder Kit couldn’t feel them popping where her back was pressed into it.

“Getting to know you, putting it my way - but nicely! You are precisely my cup of tea.” She downed the last of her cup, which was suddenly somehow in her hand again, and tossed it aside.

It seemed to disappear into the ether, a marvel that Tallulah had no time to contemplate.

“Getting to know you, getting to know all about you! Getting to like you, getting to hope you like me. Getting to know you, putting it my way - but nicely! You are precisely my cup of tea.” And then Tallulah was turning, spun like a top under Kit’s arm, catching fleeting glimpses of her golden glow as she repeated that saccharine refrain one more time.

The bubbles in her chest burst into song. “Getting to know you,” Tallulah sang, “getting to know all about you. Getting to like you, getting to feel free and easy. When I am with you, getting to know what to say. Haven’t you noticed, suddenly I’m bright and breezy?”

“Because of all the beautiful and new things I’m learning about you, day by day!”

The melody died, cut off like the tail of a knot, and Tallulah was wrapped up in Kit’s arms, pressed against her soft cardigan and the unexpected muscle of her chest. Her heart roared its approval and exhilaration, and her fingers tightened in the worn wool stretched over her shoulders, clinging.

Something in Kit’s eyes burned Tallulah up inside, left her hollow and hungry, so naturally, she pulled back. Thankfully, her mask hid her florid face, but it couldn’t hide the way Kit’s had fallen.

“I’d hate to keep you up tonight, too, Miss Sorrel,” she blurted.

Kit protested, “It’s not that late,” but it was - Tallulah had disappeared into the darkness.

Back at her apartment, she poured herself a Scotch and sprawled out in her bathtub, which was full to the brim with ice. Her sprained ankle’s protest was token at best, and her bruised ribs sighed with relief at the cold.

Here’s hoping I don’t bruise was Tallulah’s only thought, submerging her face as long as she could over and over and over again.

She did, but only a little - nothing some cloying foundation couldn’t spirit away in the morning - probably because she didn’t keep her face under enough. Most of her soak was spent listening to the Dictaphone recordings.

There was plenty of interesting information, and she’d kept her hands dry to the detriment of her split knuckles so she could write it all down, but the most promising piece was from Marlene on the phone with someone, affirming an out-of-state meeting scheduled for that night with an urgency unparalleled in all her other recordings.

Preparations were both hectic and peaceful. She called Eloise and gave her the rundown, then did the same for Ronnie once she knew Kit would have left for work, getting them both up to speed on this officially federal crime spree. After that, their timeline hammered out and pinned down, she smeared herself with concealer, got dressed, and went to her own day job.

Sitting it out in a crime lord’s den when you’re about to ruin them is a heady rush. Tallulah blazed through all her busy work - this split seam, that ripped pocket, this knife-gouged jacket - in record
time with nervous energy to spare and ended up pacing around her closet.

“You okay, Lynch?”

She jumped. “Grady! Jesus, you scared the shit outta me!”

“Doesn’t look that hard today, what with the frantic pacing and bad makeup.”

Fingers flying to her face, Tallulah glanced at herself in the mirror. “Oh, god, is it that bad?”

“What the hell happened?”

“Um.” Lie. Lie, lie, lie! “I got mugged.”

“Christ!” Grady tripped in to look her over more closely, concern smeared across his face with as heavy a hand as her foundation. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. I only had some pocket change, and they didn’t have a knife or nothin’. Glib and grim, she thought, just a Colt 19. “I threw my coin purse, started runnin’, tripped, fell, and sprained my ankle.”

“Jesus, ‘Lula,” he sighed, “you’re a fuckin’ mess. You know that?”

“Boy, do I.”

 Ardor City sat only a hundred and twenty miles from Massachusetts state lines as the crow flies, but Blackjack had picked a twistier back road for its Escher-esque navigability, which meant three things.

Thing the first: it would be impossible to follow her without catching notice.

Thing the second: she would be passing through Dora, Connecticut, the only town with anything resembling the drop point referenced in her missive along that route - where all packages go at some point in their journey.

Thing the third: she’d be traveling in a small escort, just her car and the package, which meant she’d be easy enough to intercept and dispatch.

Having left one hour before Marlene planned to, Tallulah made it across the border as night fell, lying in wait. She stood in the far mouth of a covered bridge, cloaked in shadow, and when the wide, eye-like headlights of Blackjack’s Daimler Double-Six faded into view on the horizon, she readied herself.

It rolled up to the tunnel, and Tallulah wound up and swung a long rope tipped by two nails, puncturing both front tires with a flick of her wrist and sending the car swinging sideways.

In the back, the delivery truck was about five minutes away - plenty of time, Tallulah thought.

She retracted the rope, tires deflating with a satisfying hiss, and strode up to the car. As she arrived at the long-nosed hood, the driver was just pulling the door open for Marlene, and Tallulah grabbed
him by the collar, slamming him into the door, and knocked him out. It was with practiced ease that she bound him to the grille, out of the way, and with the same casual confidence, she leaned on the roof, one hand on another length of rope - rough enough to mitigate the slipperiness of Blackjack’s satin gloves.

“Lady Law,” she drawled through the open window. “We meet again.”

“I told you we would. Just for fun, d’ya wanna spill the beans on what’s in that van comin’ up the hill?”

“That would be telling, darling.”

“And you’d know all about telling.” Tallulah smiled. “Wouldn’t you, Marlene?”

Blackjack’s champagne flute was near empty, but she didn’t bother draining the dregs before smashing it jagged and cavalierly thrusting it at Tallulah’s throat. Tallulah responded with a timely dodge, yanking the door open, hoping she’d tumble out.

Instead, she rippled out like silk in the wind and tossed the flute aside. “My, my, someone’s done their homework.”

Tallulah shrugged, snagging her wrist. With a smart jerk, she had it folded behind her back, and quickly knotted it to the other one with such intricacy she was certain it’d have to be cut off for the Feds. “Hmm... ‘If it’s worth doin’, it’s worth doin’ well,’ right?”

“I strike a little close to home, do I?” Marlene laughed. “St. Clair’s Children’s Home?”

Tallulah said nothing, frog-marching her to the grille and tying her in place next to her unconscious henchman.

“I’ve got you all figured out.”

“Have you?”

“Like anyone but an orphan cares that much about them.”

Tallulah stood back, admiring her handiwork, hands on her hips. “You don’t seem to care that much about ‘em at all, Ms. St.Germaine, and yet you’re one of ‘em.”

“I grew out of it, my Lady.” Blackjack’s eyes flashed, gleeful. “It seems you have yet to do the same.”

“Y’know, I’m a big believer in free speech, and I’d hate to muss your makeup, but you gotta shut your goddamn gob or I’ll perform a civil service and shut it for you.”

“I read the papers, Ms. Law. You don’t silence your captives.”

“Maybe you’re just special.”

With that, Marlene St.Germaine was all tied up and a milk truck was approaching the mouth of the bridge. Tallulah climbed onto the hood of the car, jumped onto the roof, and whipped out the front wheels. It skidded, screeching to a halt, and she ran down the length of the Daimler, vaulting off the boot and throwing the passengers’ side door wide open.

“Hey, fella,” she crooned, cocking her fist. “You mind steppin’ out of the vehicle?”
The driver lunged.

She slammed the door in his face.

Before she could climb in and tie him to the truck, another door slammed, and she heard footsteps. The back of the truck.

Tallulah took two long, heavy steps, heart pounding, and then it stopped. Or ripped out of her throat.

“What in the Sam hell?”

The truck was full of children - scared, battered, hungry-shiny-eyed - and one woman helping them out of it.

Her glasses were askew, and her blonde curls were braided back and tied up, and she was hoisting a ten-year-old onto the blacktop with surprising strength.

“Miss Sorrel, you need to get out of here.”

“Looks like you handled everything already,” Kit said with a smile. “I’m sure we’re all safe and sound.”

“I wouldn’t be.”

Kit’s eyes widened; Tallulah turned on her heel. The truck driver’s nose was broken, and there was a stripe of blood up and down the center of his face, but he was upright and operational and holding a gun.

“Put the kids back in the truck, and I’ll shoot you quick.”

Tallulah looked over her shoulder at Kit and the kids. She’d shifted her body so it was between the goon and the kid she was holding, set her down, squeezed her hand reassuringly.

“How ’bout you drop the gun,” Tallulah countered, “and you and me, we handle this like grownups?”

“You don’t wanna do this,” Kit said. She took a step forward, too goddamn brave, and that little girl stared after her with moonstruck eyes. “C’mon. It’s just a bunch of kids!”

The tough cracked his neck, cocked his gun.

“Kit, get back.” Tallulah shifted her weight onto the balls of her feet, ready to pounce, wrestle the gun out of his hands - except her eyes kept flicking over to Kit, staunch and golden. “All of you, get back. Get in the truck. It’s gonna be fine.”

The kids, slowly, climbed back in.

Kit, however, did not, and took another step forward.

“You ain’t bulletproof, bitch,” the goon spat, and fired.

Tallulah took a half-step to her left, staggering herself in front of Kit. She had one thought, nonsense - why is she always golden when she dies? - drowned out by a bang, and felt something punch into her shoulder.

It hurt, but it was background noise, radio static between channels, and she launched herself at him,
grabbing his wrist and twisting so it was pointed at the ground. Another twist, breaking his grip, and then she had the gun. She emptied the chamber, bullets clattering to the asphalt, and tossed the gun under the truck with one hand while the opposite elbow rammed into his throat.

Tallulah got behind him, pinning his arm to his back, and knocked his knees out from under him. As she tried to tie him up, her left hand was clumsy, fingers thick and sticky and slow, but she managed it after a minute, and only then did she notice the hot wetness soaking through her sleeve.

“Lady Law!” Kit pressed a hand to her shoulder, and Tallulah flinched. “Sorry! Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, chickie.” Tallulah laughed. “I’m just glad you ain’t dead.”

Kit pulled the scarf out of her hair, curls tumbling down, and tied it around Tallulah’s shoulder like the strap of a holster, tight enough to stem the bleeding. “Glad I ain’t dead?”

“Only hit me in the shoulder.” Kit’s hand was warm on Tallulah’s neck, cupping the bare skin, faintly sticky with blood. “You’re taller ’n me. Woulda hit you somewhere important.”

Kit let out a relieved breath.

“What the hell were you even doin’ out here?” Tallulah asked.

“Followin’ your story.”

“How did you know I’d be here?”

They leaned against the white metal, shoulder to shoulder, Kit’s arms around Tallulah. “I’ve done a lot,” she began. Her hand laid over Tallulah’s, stacked on top of the sluggish bullet wound in a comforting weight. “God knows I’ve tried to find the truth - I’ve even lied - but all I know is, down inside, I’m…”

“Bleeding.” Tallulah’s head knocked into Kit’s, and she closed her eyes. “And superheroes come to feast, to taste the flesh not yet deceased.”

Behind her, two unconscious drivers and one ringmaster, tightly bound, awaited arrest.

“And all I know is, still,” she sang, “the beast is feeding.”

Sharp footsteps - high-heeled - came out of the shadows, and both women turned to look to the source of the sound. It was a woman, just shorter than Tallulah in bare feet, with crisp blonde curls and a wide, sharp mouth half-hidden by the brim of her hat. Her suit was some dark, nebulous color, skirt long enough to swish somehow threateningly.

“And crawling on the planet’s face,” she crooned, stopping before them, ankles crossed, “some insects called the human race - lost in time, and lost in space, and meaning…”

“Meaning…”

Tallulah pushed to her feet, shoulders square despite the searing pain finally asserting itself, and Kit wasn’t far behind.

“I believe this,” the woman said, gesturing with gloved hands towards the disabled vehicles and battered criminals, “is for me.”

She touched her lapel, extracting a card with, strangely, ten digits - no party code.
“Leonida Boon,” Kit said, taking it in her fingers and turning it over in her hands. “FBI.”

“You’ll want to vacate the area,” Agent Boon blazed on, as if Kit hadn’t even spoken. “Unless you want to be questioned about all of this, and judging by that mask, I’m sure you don’t.”

“The kids - ”

“Will be fine.” A funny look crossed Leonida’s face. “Now, you and your little friend should really skedaddle.” She tilted her head back, and her brown eyes glowed amber under the distant lights. “Run along.”

They ran, hard-pressed to do anything else, until they found themselves a mile and a half back towards Ardor City, walking up to a familiar motorcycle.

“Borrowed my sister’s friend’s,” Kit explained, parking herself behind the handlebars. “Hop on.”

Tallulah shook her head. “I’ll get blood on you.”

Kit gave her a look, and Tallulah supposed the adrenaline gave her the strength to resist its power.

“Fine, you can drive, but you better not pass out on me.”

She didn’t; they made it back within city limits before midnight, and Kit - golden Kit - bore no bloody marks.

“How are you gettin’ home?” she asked, disembarking.

“Hm?”

“You goin’ to the hospital for that?”

“Flesh wound,” Tallulah scoffed, swinging off the bike. “I’ll sew myself up at home.”

“Yeah, but how are you getting there?”

Tallulah lacked an answer.

“No way in hell you’re taking public transportation when you’re plugged like a socket,” Kit decreed. “Or walking.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“You can sew yourself up at my place.”

Tallulah shook her head hard. “Your sister.”

“So I’ll drive you to yours.”

Gaping, Tallulah was, once again, wordless.

Kit sat back down and looked up at Tallulah expectantly. “I sure as shit don’t know your address, Lady Law.”

Tallulah got back on and took off, grounded by Kit’s hands on her waist, warm and sure. She made it back to her apartment fine, then took Kit up the back steps. She may have been bleeding, she may have been shot, but she wasn’t stupid.
“Nice place you got here,” Kit said, adjusting her glasses and turning slowly to take the place in.

Tallulah emptied her pockets - out went her pocket scanner, her pocket change, her keys, a knife, etcetera - and laid down her ropes, tucking everything into its box and hiding it away. Then she pulled out her pidgin First Aid kit and reached for her shoulder, realizing a moment too soon that Kit was still there.

“I got home safe,” she said, voice hoarse. “You don’t gotta stick around.”

Kit gently touched her shoulder, fingers skirting bare skin. “Too bad. You got shot protectin’ me. Least I can do is help patch you up.”

Tallulah had no rebuttal. She turned, back to Kit, and allowed herself to be unzipped.

She didn’t die, she sighed to herself. She didn’t die. I saved her. She’s alive, and those are her hands, and that is her heartbeat. She’s alive.

Her costume fell to the floor, and she stepped out of it, letting Kit push her into the couch.

“You got anything to sterilize this with?” she asked, voice low.

“Fire or booze?”

“I like both.” After a search, Kit straddled her lap and pulled her bra strap aside. “You want a shot first?”

Tallulah nodded. Kit rolled up the bottom of her mask, fitted the mouth of the bottle to her lip. Tallulah took a swig, tongue flicking out to catch a dribble of whiskey, then wiped her mouth with the back of her wrist and squared her shoulders. “Let’s do it.”

Kit set the bottle down and quickly threaded a needle, then picked up a pair of tweezers. “Gonna smart like hell.”

“Prob’ly no worse comin’ out than goin’ in.”

Kit struck a match and held it between her teeth, sterilized the tweezers, and dug in.

It did, in fact, smart like hell. Tallulah squeezed her eyes shut, head falling back, and bit her lip to trap an ugly groan. There was a wet sound, a slick tug, and then the spent slug clattered into an ash tray. Kit splashed some whiskey on the bullet hole, ran the needle through the match’s flame, and handed it over.

“I’m pants at this,” she said, voice a little shaky.

“I was planning on it anyway.”

With that, Tallulah set to sewing, watching her hand’s reflection in Kit’s glasses. After a stitch or two, she was done, and Kit tied the thread off for her, cutting it with a pocketknife and tossing both excess and blade aside.

“Better?”

“Better.”

“Good,” Kit said, and kissed her.
Her hands cupped, consumed, Tallulah’s face - so careful - and her lips were soft and hot and seeking. Her knees, braced on either side of Tallulah’s hips, squeezed ever-so-gently as she rocked up.

The kiss broke like a wave, and Kit rolled Tallulah’s mask back down all the way, smiling through swollen lips. “I’ve been wantin’ to do that.”

“Have you now?” Tallulah managed, voice hoarse.

“Mm-hm.” Kit’s hands grazed the line of Tallulah’s chest, settled on the flat front of her ribs, where her heart thudded in her diaphragm, made it leap like the skin of a drum. “Was that not okay?”

“That was… more than okay.” Tallulah reached up, shoulder aching, and straightened Kit’s foggy glasses, thumb stroking the curve of her cheek. “But it’s still not okay, what you did tonight. I didn’t even know what the transaction was - how did you get caught up in it? How did you get in the van?”

“I’m a reporter! I’m good at finding out all the little bitty details of something bigger.”

“You coulda got killed.”

“But I didn’t. You saved me.”

“I…” Yeah. I did. “This time.” Tallulah sighed, head tipping forward, knocking into Kit’s collarbone. “But I can’t guarantee I can pull it off again. So you need to be safer.”

“You need to be safer.”

“We need to be safer.” Tallulah reached up and brushed an errant curl off Kit’s forehead, fingertip grazing the little scar over her left eyebrow. “Both of us. And that includes with your sister. She’ll be worried. You should get home.”

Kit pouted, kissed her on the forehead. “Goodnight, Lady Law.”

“Goodnight, Miss Sorrel.”

“Kit.”

Tallulah smiled. “Kit.”

Chapter End Notes

I guess I made up for the lack of numbers in Chapter 3; I hope you like all of these. (I was tempted to have a Touch-a Touch-a Touch Me moment in here, but there’s no way Kit would’ve gone any further with Tallulah injured, and there’s no way Tallulah could have taken the sight of Kit bloodied up, even if it was only secondhand. Which is too bad, because I really wanted that song.)

Songs used in this chapter:

Let’s All Sing Like The Birdies Sing - Let’s All Sing Like The Birdies Sing
Singin' In The Rain - Singin' In The Rain
Getting To Know You - The King And I
Superheroes - Rocky Horror Picture Show
Summary: Emotions run high, but despite some heavy weather, Ronnie, Eloise, Kit, and Tallulah have a gay old time.

Chapter Notes

Thank you LolaMcGee and . for commenting! It really made my day and gave me further inspiration and motivation, so thank you very much!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

KT:

Sling hidden under a makeshift cloak, Tallulah approached Cutter’s club, once again shrouded in strange loss.

With Blackjack gone, as far as anyone knew, there was no boss, which meant no income. There was a faint whiff of panic, highlighted by the sudden day drinking epidemic, and Tallulah sat down at the bar with everyone else.

Grady looked up at her, eyes tight, and smiled as best he could. “Think I can open up my own dinner club?” he asked. He sounded tired. “Only place I can sling gin - only job I know how to do.”

Tallulah reached out and stayed his hand over a glass, gave it a reassuring squeeze. “Two changes in hands in, what, two months? You could buy this place.”

One of the heavies laughed, rough and dirty. “With what money? The paychecks stop now.”

“Shit.” Tallulah gripped her upper arm, a nervous tic, and immediately regretted it as pain lanced through her.

“You okay, Lynch?”

“As good as I can be right now.” She let out a steadying breath, waiting out the excruciating flare. “I don’t think Blackjack was in it alone.”

“‘Course not,” Grady said, eyeing her. “She had all her employees.”

“No. No, I - when I was dropping off her dress, she was on the phone with someone. Sounded like a partner.”

The fog lifted.
“So - so we’re not out?”

“So - so we’re not out?”

“I don’t think so. I think this organization still has a leg to stand on.”

Someone let out a whoop, and Grady finished pouring her a sidecar - his favorite drink to make - before gently knocking her bum shoulder with the edge of his fist. “Well, thank fuck!”

“Just - try and get something,” Tallulah whispered, voice urgent. “If this silent partner is real, they don’t show their face. It might be a while until there’s new management. Keep yourself afloat.” She smirked. “Y’never know - they might end Prohibition.”

Grady laughed, then tapped his glass to hers. “Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

When the goon wandered off to yell with his buddies, Grady leaned over the bar and whispered, “How’d you really get that information?”

“I told you, I overheard a phone call.”

He squinted at her, scrutinized, wiping down the spillover of a toast. “Hm.” Then, he tossed his rag over his shoulder and asked, “What happened to your shoulder?”

“I got mugged.”

“You get mugged a lot, Lynch. You ever think of gettin’ somethin’ to defend yourself? Learn how to box or somethin’? Johnny knows how to box, I could ask him.”

Tallulah shook her head. “No, I’m good. I’m probably gonna hafta move out of my place, so that should cut down the risk some.”

“Well, you ever change your mind…”

“You’re the first person I’ll call.”

Tallulah tapped the bartop and ducked out. In the fist hidden beneath black wool, she clutched a piece of paper. The note, addressed to T, was the only information she had on the shadow partner for now, but she’d get more.

She was going to end this, once and for all.

KL:

“Morning, Lena-Bean.”

Lena grumbled, rolling onto her left side. A bright bolt of pain shot through her and she cried out, jerking upright.

Kara, eyes wide, grabbed onto her - gentle - and took off her glasses to look Lena over.

“Miss Danvers,” Lena cracked, “are you looking through my clothes?”
“And your skin. Muscle. Bone.” Kara looked back up and met her gaze, shaking her head. “There’s nothing wrong. No inflammation, no tearing, no fracture - no sign of injury.”

Lena frowned, reaching up to touch her shoulder. At the feather-light brush of her fingertips, she winced, hissed in pain. “Fuck.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Kara cupped the back of her neck, kissed her forehead. Lena’s eyes fluttered shut at the gesture, and the fingers of her right hand curled into the skin of Kara’s bare thigh. Pulling her gingerly into a hug, Kara murmured, “Did anything weird happen? Did you sleep on it funny?”

Lena shook her head, pressing into the crook of Kara’s neck. “No, nothing like that. I - I had a weird dream.”

Kara’s eyes flew open. Careful to keep her voice neutral, she asked, “What did you dream about?”

“Um - you. And Veronica - Roulette. Cat Grant, too.” Lena laughed, soft. “I swear, no one was naked.”

“I believe you.” Kara kissed her temple, her hair, hugged her a little tighter. “What happened in the dream?”

“I was protecting you. Someone pulled a gun on you, and it would have pierced your heart, so I stepped in the way.”

“I’m bulletproof.”

“You weren’t then. You were just as fragile as me.” With a sigh, Lena straightened her neck so she could look at Kara properly, reached up and cupped her cheek, brushed hair behind her ear. “I couldn’t watch you die.”

“You won’t, Lena. I promise, you won’t.”

“I know.” Planting a peck on her lips, Lena allowed herself to cling to Kara - just a little - before climbing out of bed. “I’m going to shower.”

“If your arm’s really bothering you,” Kara offered, “I can wash your hair.”

Lena cocked an eyebrow, then tipped her head towards the bathroom door - an invitation Kara could never decline.

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RE:

“There was a fed?”

“She was waiting for you?”

Tallulah frowned. “I thought you - one of you - called her.”
Ronnie shook her head. “No. How would we have a direct line to a fed?”

“I don’t know!” Tallulah slumped onto Ronnie’s couch, tucked her feet up under her. Draped in a sheet of black wool big enough to be a blanket, with shadows under her eyes and her injured arm cradled to her chest like a stuffed animal, she looked like a little kid. “But she took Marlene in. She wasn’t back at the club this morning, which means it’s gonna stick.”

Eloise looked at Ronnie through the steam of her coffee. “What are we gonna do? What’s our next move?”

“T. We find T.” Ronnie slurped her own coffee and looked at Tallulah. “We need to break into Blackjack’s office. We need to take everything - her notes, her day book, her fuckin’ wallet if it’s in there. Anything that might have information.”

“Okay. I can try to get you into the building, but there’s no way you’re getting out the front with her papers.”

“I don’t think we’ll need any doors. Just get in there, crack a window, and dangle a rope.” Ronnie leaned back, grinning. “Leave the rest to me.”

“To us.” Eloise put a hand on Ronnie’s knee, tentative, but when Ronnie shifted into the contact, she gave a squeeze, a promise. “You’re gonna need a getaway driver.”

Tallulah asked, “Did you get your motorcycle back?” and Ronnie frowned.

“Oh, yeah, Kit - it! It got dropped off last night.”

Ronnie turned on Eloise. “Did my sister borrow your motorcycle to follow a dangerous gangster who was carting humans to be sold off around in the dead of night?”

“Um. Yes.”

She pointed a finger in Eloise’s face, shaking with fury, but whipped around to face Tallulah before she could say anything. “And you! She was following you!”

“I didn’t tell her to be there! I tried to get her to leave!” Tallulah, beseeching, asked in a trembling voice, “Do you really think I wanted her to run that risk?”

“You got shot. People were shooting at you.”

Tallulah cringed.

“Not at you?”

She shook her head.

“Did you take a bullet for my baby sister?”

“I may have.” When Ronnie gave her the stare, Tallulah’s head drooped. “Yeah.”

“I would hug you, but your shoulder’s fucked up.” Ronnie turned back to Eloise. “And as for you -”

“If she hadn’t given Kit her chopper, it woulda gone a lot worse.”

Ronnie huffed, spluttered, before finally chugging the last of her coffee. She slammed the cup down. “Fine. Goddamn vigilante hijinks, Jesus shit.”
“Cussing before noon? What’s wrong?”

Three heads turned sharply to see Kit by the door, hanging up her coat and kicking off her shoes.

“Nothin’! Nothin’.” Ronnie stood up to greet her with a hug, too tight and too desperate to be anything but a thank god you’re not dead, you dummy, then said, “I gotta talk to you about something.”

“Oh.” A newspaper - the Ardor Advisor - poked out of Kit’s coat pocket, and she quickly flipped the coat so it was hidden in the folds. “What’s goin’ on?”

“Can you two - ?”

Tallulah scrambled to her feet, and so did Eloise; together, they booked it onto the front stoop, where Tallulah took off her cloak and spread it out for them to sit on.

“Thanks for defending me, I guess,” Eloise said, voice light.

“Thanks for helping her.”

Inside, the Sorrel sisters quarreled as only sisters can.

“You almost got shot last night?”

“What? No! I’m - I’m fine!”

“Yeah, because some… vigilante has a crush on you!”

Kit spluttered, cheeks pink from more than just the outside air. “She - no! I mean - it’s not - ”

Ronnie reached out and gripped Kit’s shoulders, fingers firm on the curve of her muscle. “You don’t get to put yourself in harm’s way. I don’t care that she was there to protect you, because she won’t always be there! I won’t always be there!”

“I don’t need to be protected!”

“What part of you almost got shot and killed isn’t crystal clear to you?”

“The part where it matters!” With a groan, Kit pulled away and started counting on her fingers. “I didn’t get hurt, I didn’t die, the kids - kids, by the way, captive kids! - are safe, and Lady Law is alive! I wish - ” Her eyes misted over. “I wish she hadn’t gotten hurt. I hate that she got hurt because of me. But I was there, when she stitched herself up, I made sure she was okay. She’s - she’s my friend. I care about her. And I’m going to make sure people understand the good she’s doing.”

“I know she’s doing good! Why do you think I’m helping her?”

“Why don’t I get to help her, too?”

“Because - because - ugh!”

“Eloise does the exact same thing as Lady Law - she’s a private citizen solving crimes. And you get to help them both. Why, Can’t. I.”

“Because neither of us could live with ourselves if you died because we couldn’t save you!”

Kit swiped furiously at her eyes, watching as her sister just let the tears fall, protective rage magnified
by them. Ronnie didn’t care that she was crying; she just cared that her stupid little sister was safe.

Which is why her heart broke when Kit said, “I’m moving out.”

“What?”

“You don’t trust me to do my job. My salary’s better since I started writing about the Lady, so I can afford my own place.” Kit started towards the door, threw her coat on, stomped into her shoes.

“Maybe Eloise can move in with you. You can start looking out for someone who wants you to coddle them.”

With that, she slammed the door and marched out, storming right between Eloise and Tallulah, who had definitely heard everything.

“Hey, little Sorrel - ”

Kit wheeled around and gave Eloise a glare almost as hard as the ones Ronnie could muster up. “There’s a vacancy opening up in there. Maybe you should look into it.”

Eloise watched her thunder away for only a moment before Tallulah chased after her and she went inside to Ronnie.

“Ron? You okay?”

She wasn’t. She was slumped on the floor, knees to her chest, that day’s edition of the *Ardor City Advisor* crumpled in her fist, openly sobbing.

Eloise sat down beside her. “I don’t think I’ve seen you cry before.”

“Well, don’t get used to it,” she spat. Her prickly posture softened, and she leaned helplessly into Eloise’s side, breaths ragged and wet. “I’m a horrible sister. I can’t keep her safe. I was supposed to keep her safe.”

“She’s a big girl, sugar.” On impulse, Eloise planted a kiss on Ronnie’s temple, wrapped her arms around her heaving ribs, “And she’s tough. I know it ain’t easy, watching someone you love put themselves in danger, but she can handle it. And if she ever can’t, you know Tallulah will cover her ass. And I will. And you will. Too many people love that girl for her to ever be without defenders.”

“What do you know about watching the people you care about be fuckin’ idiots with no sense of self-preservation?”

Eloise laughed, husky, dry. “Because I’ve gone into the field with you.”

“Oh.”

*KT:*

“Kit! Kit, wait!”

Kit didn’t stop, and Tallulah was sure she just imagined her slowing her stride. Still, she managed to catch up to her, heart throbbing in her shoulder.
Kit looked down to see her clutching it, as subtly as she could manage, and came to a standstill. “I’m not stupid.”

Tallulah blinked. “I know you’re not.”

“I didn’t mean for her to get hurt.”

“I know. And she knows, too.”

“How?”

“I - I can infer. You’re so good.” Tallulah took a shaky breath. “I’ve read your articles. The way you talk about her, the way you write - I don’t believe you could deliberately hurt her. And I do believe that she’d do it all again, over and over, to save you.”

Kit sniffled, and Tallulah pulled out a handkerchief, offering it to her in a shaking hand. Kit took it, wiped her eyes, blew her nose.

“C’mon. Let me buy you breakfast.”

“What?”

“C’mon. I know a great little German bakery a few blocks away that has these, um, schnecken - sticky buns. You’ll love ‘em.”

So Tallulah bought Kit breakfast. They wandered through the park, caramel gluing their fingers together, and talked. Tallulah held back all the little things she’d learned from behind a mask, and found that it was just as easy to fall for Kit the second time, to learn her anew.

She was considerate, conscientious, stopping to let Tallulah rest whenever she felt even the slightest wear on her arm.

She was funny, cracking jokes about Clipper, her boss, and his hatred for any and everything but cheese danishes and total silence that left Tallulah breathless with laughter.

She was gentle by day in a way she couldn’t quite let herself be at night, at crime scenes, and Tallulah wondered if she was afraid of Lady Law at all.

She was staunchly protective, defending Tallulah to herself, saying Lady Law is too good for me to ever fear her. She’s my friend. I - care about her.

She was proud, firm in her refusal to stay with Alex - at least, not for now.

“I’m gonna need a roommate, though,” she sighed, sucking caramel off her thumb. “My pay’s better, but not by much.”

Tallulah, an idiot, said, “I’m actually lookin’ for a new place. My day job’s in limbo right now, so I gotta downsize.”

“Why don’t we move in together?”

Tallulah froze, ticking over.

“I mean, we haven’t known each other that long, but I feel like I can trust you. And we can get to know each other even better!” Her eyes were wide and bright and brilliantly, sparkingly blue. “Whaddya say?”
“That sounds incredible.”

“That was incredible!” Kit draped her arm over Tallulah’s shoulders, careful of her left, and crowed, “This is the beginning of something beautiful!”

“You loved your apartment,” Grady sighed, shaking his head. “I can’t believe you’re moving.”

“Well, until the mysterious boss makes themselves known, I’m gonna save as much money as I can, and that means a roommate, and since I can’t sublet here, I’m moving out.” Tallulah regarded her apartment for the last time - the dent in her freezer door, the couch she’d fallen asleep on with a project in hand countless times, the high ceilings, the creaking floors - and didn’t feel sad. “I’m sure I’ll love living with Kit just as much.”

“Is Kit your boyfriend, or..?”

Tallulah snorted. “No. No, she’s just a friend.”

“Does she know about your little hobby?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Sure, okay.” He hefted a box a little higher, then asked, “So, when are we canaries getting a crack at that toy you bought us?”

“Oh. Oh! Um, it - it didn’t work. I guess that’s why it was so cheap.”

“Well, shit.”

“Sorry, Charlie.”

The apartment Kit had found for them was pretty high up, but the building itself was only about fifteen blocks from the place Tallulah was leaving, so the walk wouldn’t be too bad, especially since she’d given Grady the heavy load.

Really, he’d insisted. Even though her shoulder was mostly healed - slower than it should have been, because she kept sneaking out at night to punch people - some vestige of gallantry stonewalled him from allowing her to exacerbate her injury further. Tallulah couldn’t bring herself to mind too much; he had her sewing machine and Dictaphone in a heavy duty cardboard box, while she was just carrying her meagre worldly goods in a single suitcase.

“Nice place,” commented Grady as they came up on the building.

“Yeah. She’s got taste.”

“In housing and in company.”

Rolling her eyes, Tallulah pressed the doorbell, and Kit was bounding down the stairs what felt like seconds later.

“Lula!”
She wrapped her arms around Tallulah in a comfortably crushing hug, and Tallulah set her luggage down just to hug her back.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Grady mouthing *Lula?*, bouncing his eyebrows suggestively, but she didn’t care.

“Oh.” Kit pulled back, hug apparently over, and eyed him. “Who’re you?”

“I’m just the muscle. Grady. We work together.”

“I didn’t know there were many male seamstresses. Seamsters?” She shrugged, suspicion no longer clouding her sunny glow, and grabbed Tallulah’s suitcase off the ground. “You take the key. I got some spares upstairs. C’mon up!”

They came on up. The apartment was lively, bright, lived in - even though no one had lived there in months, according to the landlord. Kit had unpacked a little, and Tallulah recognized a few pillows from the place she’d shared with her sister. An afghan had made the trip, too, and a rag rug and some lamps. Tallulah felt a wave of insecurity at the realization that she had nothing to contribute to the homeliness of their new home.

“Where do you want these?” Grady asked.

“Um, which room is yours?”

“I’m on the left. Unless you want the left!”

“No! No, I’m fine on the right.”

“Great!”

Both of them, blushing, scuttled off into Tallulah’s room, Grady on their heels. He set the box down, and was about to open it, so in a panic, Tallulah launched herself onto it, parking her ass so the box’s contents could not be bared to the light of day.

“You want help unpacking?” Kit asked.

“No, not - not yet. I make a mess when I’m packin’ - or, or unpackin’ - so I’ll just wait until you go to work.”

Kit nodded, sitting on the foot of Tallulah’s bed.

She was on Tallulah’s bed.

*Kit is on my goddamn bed.*

Tallulah bit her lip.

“Um.” Grady hitched his thumb towards the door. “I’m gonna go.”

“You sure? You can hang around if you want to. I’m making hot cocoa.”

“No, that’s fine. I’m hunting for a job today - have you been lookin’, Lynch?”

“I’m making repairs for people. And clothes.” Tallulah nodded. “Easy work.”

“Easy work.”
She stood to give Grady a hug goodbye, and when he left, sat down on her bed. There was only a few inches between her hip and Kit’s, but only one between the hand leaning into her mattress.

“So.”

“So.”

They flopped back onto the mattress together, heads tipped to the side, cheeks on sheets, just looking at each other.

“Hey, Lula, you got a boyfriend?”

Tallulah’s cheeks burned.

“I - I don’t mean to pry, I just -”

“No! No, you’re not prying, and no, I ain’t dating anyone.”

“Oh. Okay, good.” Now Kit was blushing. “I mean, good, I didn’t pry. I don’t wanna make you uncomfortable, and I ask questions for a living, and…”

Tallulah reached over and squeezed her hand. “No blood, no foul.”

Kit smiled, uncertainty fading, and pressed back into Tallulah’s palm. For a moment, they just laid there, holding hands, gazing into each other’s eyes, and then there was a teakettle’s shrill shrieking whistle, and Kit bolted upright.

“Our cocoa!”

She ran into the kitchen, took the teapot off heat, and poured hot milk into two mugs of chocolate powder. Tallulah followed behind, more slowly, as faint strains of music bled into the air.

They sat, sipping, blowing away steam, until Kit saw the clock above the stove and sighed. “I gotta go to the office,” she grumbled. “If you need help unpacking later, I don’t mind mess.”

“Thanks, Kit.”

“Any time, Lula.”

With that, she pounded the last of her cocoa, threw on her coat, and made tracks, leaving Tallulah alone in their - their! - apartment.

“She’s definitely not flirting with you,” she said aloud in their empty kitchen. “She kissed Lady Law, not Tallulah Lynch. She barely even knows Tallulah Lynch.”

Still, it felt like home, to wander around in this place filled with Kit’s mementos, the smell of her perfume in the air. Her stocking feet slid languorously over the floors and she sipped her cocoa at a leisurely pace, because she had all the time in the world.

Still, time seemed to move quickly as the music became stronger and louder, until it was finally theatre audience close.

“I have often walked down this street before,” she trilled to her luggage, stowing her actual clothes away in the battered armoire sitting in her new room. She picked up her costume, hidden in the lining, and was suddenly wearing it, lip split, approaching her fire escape.
“But the pavement’s always stayed beneath my feet before.” She grabbed hold, climbed up, sang into the sky, “All at once am I several stories high, knowing I’m on the street where you live!”

She was setting out an empty glass bottle, full of enough water to sustain the flowers fitted through the neck: “Are there lilac trees in the heart of town?” Over her shoulder, Kit was singing to the radio, blissful, but somehow silent beneath Tallulah’s own voice: “Can you hear a lark in any other part of town?”

She was walking Kit home at three in the morning, wearing her too-long coat, and when they came to their apartment, Kit rolled up her mask, grabbed her by the lapels, and kissed her against their front door.

“Does enchantment pour,” she belted as she was dragged inside, “out of every door? No, it’s just on the street where you live.”

Exhausted, Tallulah had fallen asleep on the couch, and Kit pulled the crocheted blanket draped over the back of the couch over her, smoothing a strand of hair off her cheek, hand lingering, and though Tallulah wasn’t singing, her voice hung in the air like Christmas lights: “Oh, that towering feeling, just to know, somehow, you are near!”

Then, she was kissing Kit goodnight, in costume, at the front door, before scrambling up into the building on the fire escape, throwing on pajamas, and meeting her when she walked into the apartment: “That overpowering feeling, that any second you may suddenly appear!”

“People stop and stare, but they don’t bother me,” she crooned, arm in arm with Kit, snuggled into her side with sticky buns and coffee, maybe just a little too close. When someone shot them a funny look, she shot a hard one right back before turning to Kit, hanging off her every inaudible word. “For there’s nowhere else on earth that I would rather be.”

Days passed, doing people’s mending and making party dresses; afternoons, listening to the radio together, making dinner, sitting close; nights, too, fighting crime with Kit at a safe distance.

Kit, now, was asleep at the kitchen counter after a long night with Lady Law, and as she half-carried, half-dragged her to bed, Tallulah’s voice was infinitely soft and tender as she hummed, “Let the time go by, I don’t care if I can be here on the street where you live.”

“What’s that?”

Tallulah looked up from the puddle of crimson velvet in her lap. “Oh. It was a dress I got hired to make for, um, this woman who canceled the order after I was almost done. She actually was about your size.”

Kit beamed and perched on the coffee table opposite her, elbows on knees jacked almost to her chin. “Yeah?”

“I just wanted to see it finished - do you want to try it on?”

“Sure. If that’s okay.”
Kit went towards the screen in Tallulah’s corner, and there was a momentary panic - did I put my suit away? - that spurred her into motion. Tallulah threw herself across the room to pull the screen aside for her, snatching up her costume where it hung, and giving a big obfuscatory grin.

Kit didn’t seem to notice her strange behavior, or at least didn’t react except to smile back.

As she changed into the red dress, Tallulah threw her costume under the mattress and sat forcefully down on top of its hiding spot, heart pounding. When her heart had finally slowed, Kit stepped back out, and it was right back to Mach 5.

By trade, Blackjack tended towards skimpier, more scandalous gowns. Kit tended to be practical in her clothes - sturdy fabrics, full coverage, ease of movement.

So, to see blonde curls still twisted up from a day at the Advisor, nimble fingers fussing with wire glasses, and clinging red velvet cut close to her body and low on her chest, waist emphasized by the straps that tied her in - it was a shock to the system.

“How do I look?” Kit asked. She fumbled her glasses off, blinked as her eyes adjusted.

“Wow.” Tallulah was, for some unknown reason, standing. “You look - wow.”

“Yeah? It’s not somethin’ I’d usually wear…”

“You look fantastic.”

“It’s all in your work.”

“No, it’s really…” Tallulah swallowed hard, bit her lip. “It’s all you, toots.”

Kit’s cheeks burned bright red, brighter for all the red around them, and she rose onto the balls of her feet in an elegant little pencil turn. Her skirt flared out like a flower.

Tallulah blurted, “We should go out,” and immediately regretted it. “I mean, we should go somewhere. So you can have a place to wear that dress. You’ll knock the socks off anyone in the joint.”

“I wouldn’t know where to start, with somethin’ like that.”

“I know a guy.”

Ten minutes and a blue evening dress later, they were walking through the warming air towards Grady’s new job.

He was still bartending, but this speakeasy was a mom and pop shop, not a mob property, so if the enigmatic T ever did appear, he probably wouldn’t die.

“Lynch! Lookit you!”

“And you!” Grady was practically glowing. “Good to see you behind bars.”


“Lula did all the hard work,” she said, flustered. “I’m just the mannequin.”

“You’re much more than that,” insisted Tallulah, taking her hand.
“You made the dress?” With a more discerning eye, Grady did a flash inspection, and then it dawned on him. “For - ?”

“She ain’t gonna use it now, is she?”

“I sure as shit hope not.”

Kit, left out of the loop, watched the conversation like a tennis match, thumb working an anxious circuit over Tallulah’s knuckles.

“Um, Grady, how ‘bout a drink?”

“That sounds nice. You got club soda back there?”

Grady laughed, then just as suddenly stopped. “She serious? Are you serious?”

“What?”

“He’s a bartender, Kit,” Tallulah whispered. “He tends to serve stuff that’d start, rather than put out, a fire.”

Kit’s eyes widened comically to the size of hubcaps. “You mean - ?”

“Uh-huh.”

“That’s illegal!”

“Only until they abolish Prohibition - which, I hear is happening any day now.”

Tallulah squeezed Kit’s hand and reassured her, “You don’t have to drink if you don’t want to.”

“No,” Kit replied, jaw set, lips defiantly and adorably pursed. “I’ll drink.”

“Go easy on her.”

“Don’t go easy on me! Whatever Lula gets, I’ll have the same.”

Grady patted her on the shoulder and shook his head. “Okay. If you insist.”

“I insist.”

They wandered around with whiskey sours for a while, listening to the music. Kit looked rosy, happy. She lingered in her touches.

It was glorious.

Which made is exponentially harder for Tallulah to cut out.

“I just gotta go talk to Grady for a second.”

“Is it about the woman who ordered this dress?”

“No.” Tallulah clasped Kit’s hand between both of hers and kissed her on the cheek. “I promise. And I promise I’ll be right back.”

Kit smiled, and when Tallulah let her hands go, one came up to touch her cheek.
“So, your roommate, huh?”

“I know you dig on blondes, Grady, but you got a gal and she ain’t interested.”

Spluttering for a moment, Grady gestured vaguely before putting his palms on the bartop. “Okay. What is it?”

“You know Mistah Cuttah’s army buddy?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I need him to get me some ballistic nylon.”

Grady sighed, eyes pinched shut. “Christ, Lynch.”

“I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

“I mean, of course it’s important - fuck!” He flapped a hand at her left shoulder, and she hunched it away. “No, I - I’ll see what I can do. Red and black, right?”

Somehow wry and sheepish, Tallulah said, “If you can swing it.”

He nodded, and she kissed him on the cheek before sprinting off to find Kit again. As she ran, he called after her, “Just don’t get shot again!”

Tallulah hoped she could keep that promise.

“Hey!”

“Hey!” Kit threw her arms around Tallulah and kissed her cheek, exuberant, lingering, a hair’s breadth from the corner of her mouth. “You wanna dance with me?”

“I - I would love to. I want nothing more than to dance with you again. You almost kissed me, yes, I’ll take any excuse to have your hands on me. What do I look like, a crazy person? Fuck, yes, I’ll dance with you. “Yeah! That sounds like fun.”

Kit grabbed her hand, extravagant, and dragged her out onto the floor.

The song playing was bright, fast Breakaway music, and they danced real close, legs narrowly avoiding tangling disastrously together. The next song blurred into the first, Breakaway into waltz, waltz into foxtrot, bright and fast and bubbly.

When the music changed next, so did the lights, from the warm yellow glow of gas lamps to a pink so pale it would have been white, if not for the glow it painted in Kit’s hair and on her eyelashes. Flutes trickled into the air, despite there being no flutes in the band at that club, and neither of them were wearing the dresses they’d walked in with. Instead, they were in two piece outfits - red and gold on Kit, blue and silver of Tallulah - that were more fringe than fabric.

“Days can be sunny,” she crooned, wrapping a little chain of perfect turns around Tallulah, “with never a sigh. Don’t need what money can buy.”

As she flung herself into an axel turn, then landed like some sort of comic book hero, fist, knee, and foot on the floor with the other arm flung back, all Tallulah could think was What.

Then she looked up, blue eyes glowing under the stage lights, and offered Tallulah her hand - “Birds in the trees sing their day full of songs.”
She took it, warm even through two pairs of silky opera gloves, and found herself tilted about a hundred and twenty degrees back in Kit’s arms. Kit pulled her back up, and they were chest to chest, noses brushing as she sang, “Why shouldn’t we sing along?”

Tallulah spun out, and found that her shoes were much noisier than usual, fitted with steel taps, and then found just as suddenly that she knew how to use them.

In perfect synchronicity, they brushed their toes over the floor, then smacked them down with a clack; next, right heel hit the floor, then left heel brushed back. Right heel, left toe, right heel again, and they repeated the pattern like they’d never known anything else as Kit continued to sing: “I’m chipper all the day, happy with my lot.”

She never, not once, lost control of her voice in a crisp barrel turn, voice never jumping with the impacts of her foot on the floor, one-two three. Shuffle-tapping in place, she rested her chin on her knuckles, the very picture of contemplation, and sang, “How do I get that way? Look at what I’ve got!”

She flew through the air, back leg bent, spinning like a top, before she landed on bended knee and flung her arms towards Tallulah, hands a-waving.

When she didn’t immediately start to join in, Kit covered her. “I’ve got rhythm -” heel-toe, jump up “ - I’ve got music -” her foot brushed back, toe tapping into a preparatory position before launching her into a pirouette that seemed to last forever “ - I’ve got my gal!”

“How could ask for anything more?” Tallulah sang, laughing as Kit lifted her up to sit on her left shoulder. She didn’t linger, fun as it was; she hopped down, shuffling over to pluck a flower from the vase on the piano, and back to tuck it behind Kit’s ear. “I’ve got daisies in green pastures. I’ve got my gal - who could ask for anything more?”

Her hands slid down, cupping Kit’s cheeks, holding her hands, and after a complicated series of cross-armed turns, her arms were back around Kit’s neck. Only for a moment, and then she Buffalo scuffled away, grinning as Kit gave chase. “Old Man Trouble, I don’t mind him,” she crooned, catching her, scooping her up in her arms and spinning in place, making them both the best kind of dizzy. “You won’t find him ‘round my door.”

Tallulah, flying out of her arms, landed on the top of the piano and saw that it was Grady accompanying them. “Huh. Anyway, I’ve got starlight!”

Above her, the chandelier seemed to twinkle in agreement. She sighed, “I’ve got sweet dreams,” and fired off a solo barrel turn, resting her cheek on her hands when she was done, eyes exaggeratedly fluttering shut. One foot shuffled forward - tap! tap! - punctuating the first two beats of “I’ve got my gal!” Her hands, one pointing to Kit at a time, opened, pulling her up on top of the piano, too, and they were kiss close when she was singing, “Who could ask for anything more?”

When the beat ticked up and the piano played jazzier, they responded in kind, somehow not knocking their knees into each other as they danced the Charleston, harmonizing: “Old Man Trouble, I don’t mind him. You won’t find him ‘round my door!”

Tallulah spun away, rapping twice on Grady’s hat before outright snatching it off his head. She tossed it, caught it, and jauntily set it on her own. “I’ve got starlight!”

“I’ve got sweet dreams,” Kit replied, both feet tapping towards the edge together until she just
hopped backwards off the piano.

Tallulah followed suit, matching her step until she was falling off into Kit’s arms. “I’ve got my gal -”

Fingers in her hair, palm on her cheek, Kit sang, “Who could ask for anything more?” before giddily kicking Grady’s hat up into the air from where she’d knocked it off, catching it, and gently setting her down. Toe-heel, tap - “I’ve got rhythm!” Her arms spread wide as her left foot slid up to catch her right.

Not to be beaten, now it was Tallulah who gave chase - toe-toe-heel-heel, loud and fast and having far too much fun - until she was close enough to grab Kit’s left hand, serenading her with, “I’ve got music,” kissing her way up Kit’s arm as she reeled her in close.

“I’ve got daisies,” she crooned, swaying out. The hat in her hand replaced the flower behind her ear, and she twirled it by the stem, beaming.

“In green pastures!”

As she sang, “I’ve got starlight!” Kit turned another barrel roll, hat glimmering in front of her chest, reflecting little spots of light onto Tallulah’s face when she caught her.

“I’ve got sweet dreams,” she grinned, tapping along, “and I’ve got my gal!”

Together, they finished the song, spinning and spinning until Kit was against Tallulah’s chest, arms braided together over her waist, singing, “Who could ask for anything more?”

Breathless, giddy, and back in their actual clothes, Tallulah murmured, “You wanna get out of here?”

“I’d like nothin’ better.”

Kit squeezed her hand, and they ran, barely sparing Grady a wave goodbye.

⚖

AM:

Maybe picking Kara’s lock wasn’t the brightest idea.

Alex would admit it. Maggie would admit it.

They would temper it, though, by saying, “At least we didn’t kick it down.”

Alex woke up one morning with a familiar icy weight in her chest, bolted upright gasping.

“Hey, hey, Alex, what’s wrong?”

“Kara and I -” Alex took a deep breath, wrangling this sudden crushing anxiety back under control.
“Kara and you what, sugar?”

“We - I don’t know. She’s in trouble. Something’s wrong.”

Maggie was already pulling on pants. “You wanna go check on her?”

“Yeah.”

So, ten minutes later, they were taking Gertrude on the run of her life, and she was loving every minute of it. When they got to Kara’s apartment, Alex rang the doorbell and she didn’t answer.

“Is she home?”

“Oh, god, what if she’s so mad at me she moved out of the city?”

“We’re gonna find out.”

Maggie knew what Alex was feeling - not just because she loved her, because holy shit, did she love her, but because she had the same sinking feeling. She vaguely remembered a blowup, and tried to recall whether they’d all gotten drunk, because that would explain the weird memory and Alex and Kara fighting, because they never fought, and they were in a really good place right now, so getting totally plastered was the only logical catalyst.

All this was blasting through her head as she picked the lock, and all if it fell away when she opened the door.

There, hovering over the kitchen island, was Kara Danvers, sporting an excellent case of bedhead, with Lena Luthor doing things no big sister should see done to their little sister.

Maggie slapped her hand over Alex’s eyes, hoping she wasn’t too late.

Gertrude barked - hello, favorite human! - and Kara let out a yelp, dropping out of the air, skimming the edge of the island, and crashing into the oven, Lena safely shielded in her lap.

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been having them, too -”

“Kara!”

“What? Sweetie, it’s true. Last week, she woke up like she’d been shot, her shoulder was killing her, but there was no injury. Then there was the time before that, when you made toast in your sleep and you thought we’d gone to a diner -”

Lena’s cheeks were bright red and her eyes were hard. “Kara, stop.”

Clasping a hand to her mouth, she did. “Oh, god, I’m sorry -”

Maggie looked over at Lena with interest. So she had been having weird dreams, about more than just the Boy Scouts’ knotting manual, which meant that her dreams, and Alex’s, weren’t isolated incidents.

She could tell from the way Alex’s grip had tightened that she’d come to the same realization.

“I mean, what with the Daxamite invasion and your mom… No wonder you’ve been having stress dreams,” Alex said, offering her an out on a silver platter.

“The Board is a nightmare. There are the members from Lex’s day that stuck it out now pushing for more anti-alien tech, the new ones I’ve been bringing on have started jumping ship. Some investors have pulled out, but military investors are suddenly piling up, and I have projects I actually want to work on that might help people that I can’t touch.” Lena offered Alex a tight, watery smile. “It’s been a lot.”

“Oh, Lena.” Kara swooped in and wrapped her up in a tight hug, and Alex watched Lena melt into her little sister’s shoulder. “I should have been there for you, I should’ve been trying to help more.”

“No, it’s okay. I didn’t want you to be stressed about all this… mess, too.”

“Now that Cat’s transitioning back into her old role, working at CatCo has been a much smoother ride, so if there’s anything I can do. Anything.” Kara looked up at Maggie and Alex, too damned earnest, and said, “For any of you. I want to be there. I want to help you and support you. You’re my family. I love you guys.”

“Aww, little Danvers, you’re such a pile of mush,” Maggie teased.

“Get over here. It’s hug time.”

As they walked over, Alex squeezed a very quick message into Maggie’s palm: she doesn’t get any more.

Maggie squeezed back a yes.

Lena, however, would be another story.

⚖️

Lena sat down with their plates - a slab of tiramisu, a glass dish of gelato, and a bombolone glistening with marmalade - and immediately picked up her coffee cup, fidgeting with it. “You look
nice, Alex,” she said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in a dress.”

Alex looked down and realized she’d actually worn a sundress, with little flowers printed on it. She’d been doing that a lot lately, wearing things she thought she’d seen before, thought she’d worn before, only to leave the apartment and realize she had no pockets, no freedom of movement, and couldn’t wear a thigh holster without wrecking the lines of the dress she’d put on. Or the skirt.

She hadn’t worn a skirt since before she’d found her calling at the D.E.O., and now these weird dreams had wrecked her streak.

“Thanks.”

Lena nodded and sipped her coffee. They sat in relative silence for about eighty seconds before Maggie set down her spoon and said, “You got shot in your dream and it hurt in real life.”

“I - ”

“Thing is, I remember you with a bandage. I remember you complaining about it hurting. I remember you asking me to teach you to use a gun - which is funny, because according to Alex, you’re already a crack shot.”

Lena’s head hung on her neck. “I remember it, too. Vaguely, but… it’s all there.”

“I remember Kara moving in with you,” Alex offered, “but not how she really did. We got in - in a fight, because she was putting herself in danger, working with a costumed hero, not being one, and she decided to move out, and she ended up moving in with you.” She swallowed a mouthful of gelato, mouth tight. “And you were the hero she was being stupid about, and you got shot -”

“- protecting her.” Lena picked a piece of syrupy orange peel off her doughnut and popped it into her mouth, scraping sugar off her thumb with her teeth. “Do you remember..?”

She drummed on the table, manicured nails quietly tapping out a rhythm, and Alex murmured, “It’s called… Hernando’s Hideaway.”

“Olé.” Maggie licked her spoon, then pointed it at Lena. “Kara knows?”

“I’m trying to keep it from her. It’s - embarrassing. And all she wants is to help, but - ” Lena swallowed a mouthful of coffee, too big not to hurt going down. “I think it’s because of her.”

“What?”

“Remember the Music Meister?”

Alex scoffed, eyes dark. “How could I not? My sister was comatose in another dimension and all I could do was watch as her - her brain started to die.”

“Well, she said there was a person - a character, in the Music Meister’s bubble dimension, that looked like me. Basically was me, if I’d been tailored to the setting, the genre…” Lena shook her head. “Anyway, the first dream I had was of Kara dying in my arms, the same way she looked when you went in and saved her.”

“Gold dress, slug to the gut.”

“Yes. And that has to be where it all started.”

“So, what, you think your character came to life in that dream?”
Lena nodded, eyes burning. “He was a multi-dimensional creature, right? They’re almost like magic. What if the magic that copied us from Kara’s memories made them real? Like communicable consciousness. So Kara needed someone who looked like me in her story so she’d learn the lesson he wanted her to, but in using my memory as a prop, instead of just a totally fictional construct, he made a semi-sentient being, and when Kara got out, there was a gap in the narrative, and now fake me has to learn the same lesson.”

“And then you met me.” Alex’s eyes widened. “Fake me, I mean, right after Kara died. So your doppelgänger caught Real Girl Syndrome from Kara, and mine caught it from yours, and Maggie, yours caught it from mine.”

“Wait, what about everyone else in there?” Lena asked. “Winn, James, Lyra, even Lucy Lane - I’ve met characters based off of all of them, and Winn, James, and Lyra haven’t mentioned anything, shown any signs.”

“What are they doing, in the dream?” Maggie leaned on her elbows. “I mean, what are their jobs? What are their lives like?”

“I don’t know. James is a photographer, I think for the newspaper fake Kara works at. Winn worked with me under a series of mob bosses. He tends bar, plays piano. He and fake Lyra are sickeningly sweet - all four of them are. They go on double dates.” Lena’s eyes widened, and a grin crept onto her lips. “Not double dates. Oh, they’re all together. Good for them.”

“So if they’re in a happy relationship, or relationships, they’re safe.” Maggie frowned. “That doesn’t make sense, though, because you and I were dating when the Music Meister came.”

“No. No, we weren’t.” Alex turned, squeezing Maggie’s hands. “I got scared about Kara and we had that awful fight and I told you to leave.”

“So, what, Kara heard that in her coma and… incorporated it?”

“I guess so.”

“Or it’s drawing from our minds, our memories, now, too.” Lena was practically vibrating. “Think about it - it’s giving us the memories, the physical sensations, of our doppelgängers. You’ve wanted to smoke, you’re wearing dresses, I’m sewing. What if it’s feeding on our memories, too? Our hopes, our fears?”

Guilt washed over Alex like high tide. She lifted Maggie’s hand to her lips and pressed little kisses on the ridges of her knuckles, insisting at a murmur, “I’m not throwing you out, okay? Never. I love you.”

“I know. I know that.” Maggie kissed her hair, draped an arm around her shoulders. “I know you wouldn’t.”

“You helped me past that. Past thinking I was selfish for having my own life, thinking I deserved to be punished whenever something happened to Kara.” Alex knocked her forehead into Maggie’s cheekbone, and she could feel the furrows of her brow there. “You made me stronger, Maggie Sawyer, and I love you so much.”

Maggie sniffed - not sniffled; she definitely wasn’t crying - and said, “C’mon, Danvers, don’t be such a gooball. You did the work; I just handed out the assignment.”

Alex pulled upright and kissed Maggie properly, then wrapped her in a deep hug.
“I love you, too,” she murmured into Alex’s hair. “You’re it for me.”

When they pulled apart and saw Lena very carefully looking anywhere but at them, Alex snorted. “PG rating is back,” she teased.

Lena stammered, “I didn’t want to intrude.”

“You’re fine, little Luthor. PDA has a P for a reason.”

Alex rolled her eyes and socked Maggie in the shoulder before snuggling against it. “Do you think that’s going to stop the dreams?” she asked, raking her fingers through Maggie’s hair. “Us, talking it out?”

“We’ll just have to wait and see.” Lena went for another sip of coffee and found her cup empty. She gestured to the waiter, who was being squabbled at by another table, and yawned. “I should not be so tired, for all the sleep I’m getting.”

“Or not getting,” Maggie cracked.

Lena went fluorescent red, and Alex yelped, “Maggie!”

“I covered your eyes, Danvers, you can’t be that traumatized.”

“Did you cover yours?”

“Of course! I’m a gentleman.” Maggie grinned. “Zero Gs, huh?”

Lena groaned, head thudding against the table and not coming up until she had a fresh cup of coffee to chug.

“So, tonight, you’re gonna have some big emotional heart-to-heart with Kara.” Alex took another bite of her gelato, now mostly melted.

“I don’t know what I’m going to talk to her about, though.” Lena frowned. “The only secret I’m keeping from her is this.”

“Insecurities,” Maggie corrected, “not secrets. Dating a Danvers is tough.”

“Hey!”

“No, you’re wonderful, but you come with this incredible family that’s already so closely knit, and it’s hard to impress them. It’s hard to make a niche.” Maggie eyed Lena, watching every microexpression, every tell. “I mean, I only had to impress Supergirl to get in, but you? You got the shovel talk from Alex Danvers.”

Alex laughed.

“Are you kidding? I wanted to put that speech in as a form letter for my Legal department.” Lena tilted her once again empty cup towards Alex, a nod to a toast, and an inscrutable expression settled on her face. “First thing when we wake up, we get in touch. If any of us had a dream, we change the strategy.”

“I don’t want to dream about anything on my wedding night but you,” Maggie cooed.

Alex wrinkled her nose, grinning. “Now who’s a gooball?”
“Hey, how was it?” Kara asked as Lena walked in the door, beaming over her shoulder at her. She’d been good; she hadn’t eavesdropped, even though she’d been tempted.

“Great!” Lena stepped out of her shoes and padded over to Kara’s side, setting a bakery box down on the island and kissing her on the cheek. “I brought you struffoli.”

“You’re the best, and I love you.” Kara dried her hands, set down the skillet she’d been pre-scrubbing, and cradling Lena’s jaw with them, stooping to kiss her properly.

“Maggie’s got great taste in bakeries.” Lena melted a little in Kara’s hands before reminding herself she had work to do. “I’ll wash, you dry.”

“It’s only fair, since I can reach the cabinets.”

Lena grinned and knocked her hip into Kara’s. “Five foot five is above the national average, I’ll have you know!”

“Okay, sweetie, I believe you.”

“No, really, let me prove it.” Lena grabbed her phone and quickly Googled, only to find: “Oh. There was a new study.”

“What did it say?”

“The national mean has gone up one inch, making me average.”

“Not short, though.” Kara kissed her gently and smiled. “C’mon. We’ve got dishes to do an excellent job of cleaning.”

In companionable quiet, they handled the dishes they really should have done the night before, and Lena found herself humming - do do-doo-doo do-do-do doo.

Just because your girlfriend is perfect and wonderful and very distracting, doesn’t mean you can just avoid doing this! she chided herself. Once this is done, the dreams should be gone, and everything will be fine.

But she did allow herself to be distracted, to avoid it, because Maggie had been right about something. It was hard to feel like she belonged in the Danvers clan and their extended family of friends. It was hard to sit there, knowing they mattered to Kara, knowing that, at one point or another, they all hadn’t trusted her. It was hard to feel like she could measure up - could be as noble as J’onn, as kind as Eliza, as dedicated as James, as clever as Winn, as determined as Maggie, as strong as Alex, as perfect as Kara - because Lena was not perfect. She could try every day to be noble and kind and dedicated and clever and determined and strong, but she still wouldn’t be perfect. She was perpetually average, which was at least better than below, but when everyone else around you is stellar, standard doesn’t quite cut it.

Frankly, she thought, standard sucks.
She cooked dinner, because she felt like cooking dinner, because it was something that she could get right. She had made fresh pasta a million and one times, made the trout a million and two times, and the gremolata so many times she’d lost count.

She insisted on doing the dishes afterwards alone, because she’d cooked for Kara, it wasn’t right to make her clean up after something nice done for her.

She ended up deep-cleaning the broiler drawer, jaw so tight it cracked when she finally opened it to ask, “Sorry, what did you say?”

“I asked if you were okay, sweetie,” Kara said, kneeling down beside her, “because it kind of looks like you’re not.”

“We, um.” Lena took off her gloves and closed the drawer. “Maggie and Alex and I.”

“Oh-huh?”

*She’s going to tell me what’s going on! What’s up with those dreams? I don’t know! But I’m about to find out!*

“We sort of talked about relationships.”

“Oh.” Kara shook her head. “I mean, oh? How’d that come up?”

“Maggie mentioned that she sometimes felt like she didn’t quite fit into the whole ecosystem of people the Danvers’ care about, because everyone was already so close, it was intimidating. Especially getting your approval, especially in the beginning, after she and Alex fought.”

Kara frowned, wrapping an arm around Lena’s shoulders, giving her an invitation to snuggle into her shoulder. “I didn’t know she felt that way.”

“She doesn’t now. Not so much, anyway. She knows everyone likes her, and she feels secure with Alex, and Alex feels stronger when she’s with her, and they’re - ” Lena’s eyes welled up. “They’re good.”

“Lena?” Kara asked, heart in her throat. “Are we… not good?”

“No!” Lena scrambled back, just so she could look Kara in the eye. “No, no, we are so good, you are perfect!”

“I can hear that but coming.”

“But I’m not.” Lena couldn’t hold eye contact any longer and slumped back against the cabinets under the island. “I’m not perfect. I’m not good enough. I’m just… average.”

“Oh, sweetie, the height thing doesn’t matter,” Kara soothed, leaning over to stroke a lock of Lena’s hair behind her ear. “I like you just how you are. I think you’re perfect.”

“It’s not about the height. The word just… reminded me.” Lena drew up her knees and took a shaky breath. “It’s about you being an actual goddess from a planet millions of years more advanced than mine, and I’m not even good enough to have your friends think of me as more than where I was - where I was - transplanted to after my family died. When yours died, you got this loving home with people who wanted to understand and love you, and I’m jealous, and I hate that I’m jealous, because you’ve had it so much worse than I have and you’re so strong through it and I’m a mess who can’t even keep her company afloat or protect her girlfriend or - ”
“Lena, stop.”

Lena sniffled, and saw that Kara was holding both her wrists in the span of one hand’s fingers. The other reached over and the pad of a too-smooth thumb wiped away the overflow under her eyes. “This wasn’t how I thought tonight was going to go,” she finally said, voice thick.

“Me, neither.” Kara scooped Lena up and dragged her into her lap, wrapping her in a big hug. “I’m sorry, if I ever made you feel less than adequate. I should have defended you better.”

“No, you were perfect. You haven’t done anything wrong.” Lena sighed. “This is me, and my own weird brain, being obnoxious.”

“Lena…” Kara hooked her chin over the top of Lena’s head. “I’m not perfect.”

“I didn’t mean - ”

“No, it’s okay. I try to be perfect, because I love the way you look at me when I succeed at it, but I’m just as much of a mess as you.” Kara threaded her fingers through Lena’s like the teeth of a cog. “When I first came to Earth, Kal didn’t want to take care of me. He was twenty four and he didn’t think he could handle it. He could save the whole world, but a thirteen-year-old girl who’d just watched her planet burn with her parents still on it, that was too much.” She sighed. “And I get it. He didn’t remember Krypton, and I did, so me being there would be like asking to absorb this trauma he only just managed to escape.

“But when he left me with the Danvers, this real family that had nothing to do with mine except it looked so, so similar… A just mother, a clever father, a teenage daughter just waiting for the world to be hers. I hated it. It was like looking into a mirror of what I could have had, especially when Eliza was kind to me, or Jeremiah tried to help me understand and control my powers.

“Alex didn’t want me at first. I was weird and awkward and I didn’t know what birds were and I got in the way of her normal high school experience - I was a burden, especially when Jeremiah told her she had to look out for me right before he disappeared, when Eliza reminded her of that promise every day of her life. She protected me so hard and so well that she had no life outside of me. And when she started to get one, I was jealous. I didn’t like her dating Maggie - in part, because Maggie had hurt her - but also because that meant I got to have less of her time, less of her attention, less of her affection.”

“Oh, Kara.”

Kara laughed, wet. “I know that’s not how it works, but that’s how it felt.” Her head tipped back into the cabinets as Lena pressed a feather-light kiss to her collarbone. “I’m jealous. And possessive. And I’m set in my ways, and I’m dramatic, and selfish, and too willing to throw myself in harm’s way to protect others because protecting was the promise I made my parents before they burned. And I don’t address my feelings, because that means I have to acknowledge that I’m sad or scared or angry, and that means I have to feel all those things before I can let them go.”

“But you love so freely,” Lena murmured, thumb rubbing against the sleeve of Kara’s sweater. “And you want people to love the people you love, and you were the first one to accept that, maybe, I wasn’t evil. And you’re so selfless, Kara, all the time, you give and give and give like you’re infinite even though you’re not, and you put yourself in harm’s way more than anyone wants you to, but you always trust that the people who love you will pull you back from the edge and keep you safe.” She pulled back, sat up so she could take Kara’s glasses off and wipe her eyes and cup her cheeks, so she could really look at her and watch her understand. “And I know you hate doing it, because I hate doing it too, but you’re addressing your feelings right now, and I’m so, so proud of you, and I love
you so much.”

She stretched up and kissed Kara, soft and sweet as powdered sugar, before sinking back onto her thighs, hands smoothing down over her shoulders.

“Lena, you see all these beautiful things in me because you love me,” Kara started, settling her hands on Lena’s waist. “That’s how it is when I look at you. I don’t see your jealousy, your loathing, your weakness - I see the brave, kind, brilliant woman willing to push herself to be kind to those who won’t reciprocate it, to help those who can’t help themselves, to make the world that doesn’t trust her a better place without asking for reward or recognition. And that woman inspires me to be better every day. You inspire me, Lena. I fight, every day, against every evil and injustice I can lay my hands on, for you.”

“Kara…”

“You once told me I was your hero,” Kara said, quiet, voice shaking. “Well, you’re mine.”

For a long, long time, they stayed curled up on the kitchen floor, awash in everything they’d just aired out, but eventually, they got up, fell onto the couch, and picked through the struffoli like popcorn while watching The Wizard of Oz, and if Lena asked Kara to fast forward through the songs, then Kara would understand.

Chapter End Notes

Songs used in this chapter

On The Street Where You Live - My Fair Lady
I Got Rhythm - Ella Fitzgerald

Thank you again, commenters! I'm trying to stick to a strict updating schedule (Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays), but I'm really anxious for feedback and I really do like yours. I hope you guys in turn enjoyed this chapter, and if there was anything in particular you liked or that stood out to you, please let me know so I can try and include that more in later stories.

Okay. Babbling. Good morning, in technicality, all!
Chapter Summary

Summary: It’s probably not a threesome if two of the participants are the same person; the Dream Team comes to a frustrating realization.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has some violence in it (don't they all?), as well as references to child mortality, child abuse (very vague), and a scene that, in most movie musicals, would have ended with a tasteful pan to the moon or something. But writing [pan to moon] is weird in prose and this was more fun, so I hope you like it. Thanks to LolaMcGee for giving me the push/excuse to actually put it in, and thanks to Mo for being so excited about chapter 5! It's one of my favorites, and it means a lot to see someone enjoy it so much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

KT:

Maybe making a little transceiver set for just the people who worked with Lady Law was a bad idea, because now, Kit was calling for her while lying in the room next door.

They hadn’t done anything. Something had stopped Kit - something she had to take care of, she said, something she had to think about - and she’d given Lula the briefest, sweetest kiss a girl could have before kicking her out of her room.

So now, with her Kit Call beeping beside her, Lula had to scramble into her costume, climb out of her window and down the building in total silence, and climb back up to Kit’s room with enough noise to announce her arrival without waking the neighbors.

She’d do it, too.

“You came,” Kit gasped, sitting up and twisting to face her, silhouetted in the window. Long legs bared by baby blue shorts and draped sheer red robe, it was clear she’d gotten ready for this, too.

Tallulah had to wonder if this was it. Kit liked Lady Law better - and who wouldn’t? - but that meant she was being given the kiss-off for herself, which was weird, to say the least.

In an even voice, she said, “You called,” and hopped down into the room, landing on a rag rug thick enough to mute her landing.

“I just.” Kit fiddled with her fingers, a nervous tic she had both day and night, and Tallulah stepped in, taking her hands, making her stop. “Oh!”
“Whatever you need to say, Kit, you can say it.” Tallulah smiled. “I trust you.”

“Oh, gosh.” Kit blushed, ducking her head so she could nudge her glasses further up her nose. “I - well, Lady Law, I like you an awful lot.”

“I like you, too.”

Kit snort-giggled, then just as quick stopped, eyes wide. “Well. Um. My roommate, see, she - I like her, too. And tonight, I kinda kicked her out, because, well…” She bit her lip, and Tallulah had to let go of her hands just to keep herself upright. “Because, well, I like you, too, but we’ve kinda been…"

Making out after I finish slugging bad guys and you’ve finished drafting the write-up of my derring-do? Often up against your front door? Or occasionally in alleyways because you kinda just jump on me and like hell am I sayin’ no to that offer?

She finally settled on, “Involved. For a while now.”

“Sounds right.”

“Well, I know we ain’t exactly the dating paradigm most folks try to emulate, what with you bein’ - ”

“A vigilante?”

Kit’s brow furrowed. “No. A girl.”

“Oh.”

“And me bein’ one, too. And I ain’t never had a problem with it! I like girls and I’m okay with that, and you, bein’ a paragon of justice and whatnot, are a pretty okay girl to lo - to like!” Kit tucked a curl behind her ear and shifted maybe an inch closer to Tallulah where she sat on the bed. “But, y’see, the thing is, Lula’s kind, and smart, and fierce, and proud, and brave, and beautiful - so beautiful.”

Tallulah’s heart fluttered. “So - so what’s your plan?”

“Well, the paradigm most folks go for is, so long as you ain’t gettin’ married, you can see who you like…” Kit shrugged her shoulders up; they never dropped, and neither did her palm-up hand or her hopeful, sheepish smile. “I was just wonderin’ if that was okay with you.”

“It is!” Tallulah cleared her throat. “I - I mean, that sounds just fine. I just want you happy and safe, and if this… Lula can give you that, I’m all for it.”

“Gosh!” Kit grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. “Then - would it be weird, you two meeting?”

“I - uh - ”

“Pro’lly, huh.” Kit frowned, thinking for a moment, and Tallulah panicked.

Strapped to her hip was her miniature scanner, so with her free hand, she fiddled with the dials until it started to hiss and said, “Duty calls.”

“What.
“That gang, run by the woman in red, in that black car - Marlene St.Germaine?” Kit let go of her hand, lifted her mattress up, and pulled out a notepad. “I heard you use her name that night under the bridge. And she mentioned St.Clair’s Children’s Home, so I been lookin’ into them, too.”

WHAT.

“I mean, you can kinda tell you went there, too, but I ain’t lookin’ for you - just any dirt I can dig up on her, any connections she might have, because her circuit’s still runnin’, y’know? Which means she’s got a partner out there, pulling the strings from the shadows.” Kit’s voice dropped as she put almost everything back into its hiding place. “And Lula… I don’t think she knows, but I think she might be in danger, because look!”

There, before Tallulah’s very eyes, was the house picture they took her first year at St.Clair’s - her, in her little pinafore, all scuffed up and bloodied, with the immaculate Marlene standing a few feet away.

“There she is. You two coulda known each other, if you knew Marlene, and if she mighta known Marlene way back when, then the shadow partner might be comin’ after her.” Kit stuffed the photograph away, too, and Tallulah clasped her hands behind her back to hide them shaking. “Might be comin’ after all the kids in that picture. Maybe for dirt on her, since she’s locked up now and she’ll hafta testify, somethin’ to keep her from squealin’. I dunno.”

“You’ve been investigating her?”

“Of course! Her goon shot you and she was gonna sell kids! What else was I gonna do, eat a bagel and take a nap?”

“Kit…” For lack of a better way to express the maelstrom in her head, Tallulah rolled her mask up halfway and kissed her. “You’re the greatest.”

Kit laughed behind the fingers pressed to her reddened lips, eyes wide. “Wow.”

“I gotta go, but, um…” As she clamored out, Tallulah nearly lost her grip, so distracted was she by the past five minutes - Kit likes both of me equally! Kit’s been working the case! Kit might find out who I am! Oh shit! - but she made it down safely, Kit watching her to make sure.

Then, once Kit had ducked back inside and closed her window, Tallulah started back inside. When she made it back into her room, Kit was knocking, so she just took off her tights and put on her bathrobe, which was thankfully big and dense enough to conceal the lines of her suit. “Um. Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Sorry it took me so long to get to the door - ”

“I thought maybe you were mad - ”

“I could never be mad - ”

After tripping over each other’s sentences became too much for Kit to bear, she grabbed the lapels of Tallulah’s robe and pulled her into the kind of kiss they couldn’t put in studio movies.

“Oh, wow.”

“Was that okay?”
Kit’s face was full of high color, her lips swollen and pink, her eyes blown out. The hall light lit her from behind, turning her mussed curls into a halo of gold that felt incredible between Tallulah’s fingers.

“Yes,” she said, and pulled Kit down into a second kiss, only slightly more appropriate than its predecessor. “You, um, you look real nice.”

“Thanks.”

“What’d you hafta think about?”

“I hadta talk to Lady Law. About you.”

Tallulah swallowed a nervous, incredulous giggle. “Does she approve?”

“She does.”

“Lucky me,” Tallulah said, and kissed her again, all senseless sensation. She only came back to her senses when Kit’s hands reached for the knot holding her robe shut. “Ah - um - !”

Kit pulled back, just enough to look at her, and asked, “Too much?”

“Just for tonight,” she promised, taking Kit’s hands in her own. “Tomorrow, okay?”


RE:

The police scanner sitting on Ronnie’s windowsill was quiet, and instead, the crackly strains of midnight radio filled the air. Ronnie was sprawled out in bed with Eloise’s cheek on her chest, playing absentmindedly with her hair.

“Is it bad,” she said suddenly, “that I’m not heartbroken Kit’s not here?”

Eloise sat up, palm splayed over her ribs in a steadying weight. “Ron?”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Ronnie continued. “I’m not happy about us fighting, or about her running around putting herself in danger, or about how we ended off the last time. But I know she’s safe, and I know she needs time - I know I need time.” She smiled and sat up, running her fingers through Eloise’s hair. “And I’m okay with that, and I’m okay because of you, so thanks a lot.”

Eloise kissed the skin of her inner wrist and smiled. “Anytime.”

Then someone was knocking at their window, very briefly, before letting out a yelp. One thud, an Ow, and a very disgruntled alleycat later, Ronnie and Eloise were at the window, throwing it open to see Tallulah sprawled on the ground, rubbing the back of her head.

“You’re lucky we only live on the second floor,” Ronnie grumbled, and Eloise lit up, just a little.

We! We live on the second floor! Together!

“I closed my eyes an’ lost my grip. Sorry, I just…” Tallulah sat up. “I got news!”
Eloise hoisted her up through the room and sat down on the bed next to Ronnie and her first aid kit. “You said you got news, so tweet, canary, tweet!”

“Okay, um, so don’t be mad or nothin’, because I didn’t know about this at all until she told me…”

She. Ronnie’s heart pounded. “Is my sister okay?”

“She’s great.” Tallulah sighed, leaning against the wall. “She’s the greatest.”

“Okay, we get it, Kit finally kissed you, keep it goin’.” Eloise winked, mouthed congratulations.

“But she’s been investigating Marlene - um, Blackjack - and she thinks there might be a link! St.Clair’s Children’s Home!”

“Wait, you kissed my sister?”

“She’s pro’lly gonna call you about it within the hour,” Tallulah said breezily.

“Oh, good. Wait, she’s been investigating a violent gangster on her own? Without your protection?”

“I woulda been cheesed off, too, if I wasn’t kind of distracted by her holding the first ever picture of me sayin’ she thought I’d be in danger.”

“You?”

“I’m only human, y’know.”

Ronnie rolled her eyes. “Eloise taught you to shoot, you already knew how to fight. My sister cries at stray kittens.”

“She’s investigating as a journalist, not as a vigilante.” Tallulah sat down on the windowsill, gesticulating wildly. “She figures the silent partner’s gonna be knocking on doors to find any dirt on St.Germaine they can, and that means going through her whole life, which starts at that orphanage. Anyone who knew her there could have dirt that could make her shut her piehole and not testify against ‘em!”

“That’s brilliant.”

“Your sister’s a genius.”

Ronnie stood up. “Wait. If they go looking, the legwork can stop right now, because they’ll come find you! If anyone comes around your place, askin’ about Miss Marlene St.Germaine, you turn on your Dictaphone and get everything - names, business cards, maybe even the list.”

“What if they don’t come lookin’?”

“We’ll take matters into our own hands.” Before she could elaborate, Ronnie’s phone started to ring, and she launched herself halfway across the apartment to answer it. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Kit replied.

*Upwards inflection - uncertainty, she thinks I’m mad at her; hope, she has good news she wants me to be excited for, too.*

“It’s good to hear from you, kiddo.” Kit laughed like a soap bubble popping, and the tension melted out of Ronnie’s body. She flopped back onto the couch and let out a sigh. “So, what’s up?”
“I, um, don’t be mad at either of them…”

“Hold on a second,” Ronnie said, sitting up and eyeing a red-faced Tallulah with a cocked brow. “either of them?”

“Well, it’s not like I’m gettin’ married, right? And plenty of people have two sweeties - or three, or four!”

“Please tell me you aren’t gonna find two more sweeties to bring around for dinner.”

“Gosh, no! They’re enough. Lula and Lady Law.” Kit giggled. “Sounds good together, huh?”

“Sounds great, kiddo. I’m real happy for you.”

“And me, for you and Eloise.”

Ronnie blushed. “What? Um. No? I mean.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “We haven’t talked about it or nothin’.”

“If I can tell my roommate and a costumed hero I’m interested in datin’ ‘em both, you can tell one girl who likes you a whole helluva lot that you wanna be her girlfriend!”

“Ah, shaddup.” Ronnie flopped back, grinning. “It’s really good to hear from you, Kit.”

“I love you, Ronnie.”

“Love you, too. Now get some sleep! You got an office job.”

“You got an office job! The hell are you doin’ up so late.”

Whispering inhumanly low, Ronnie retorted, “Eloise,” and hung up to Kit’s giddy squeal.

“So?”

“So my sister has two girlfriends and they’re the same person.” Ronnie stood, cracking her shoulders, and padded back towards her bedroom. “Also, she’s probably gonna wanna talk to you, soon, so get going.”

Tallulah stood and let out a heart groan. “Ugh. I hafta walk all that distance? Again?”

“She’ll hear my bike.” Eloise shrugged. “Sorry, little Lynch.”

Tallulah sighed and dropped out the window, only to whisper back up to them, “Congratulations, by the way! I swear I didn’t see nothin’!”

Alone again, Eloise looked over at Ronnie where she leaned against the bedroom door. She looked so happy just to have heard her sister’s voice, but Eloise couldn’t quite feel the same way.

She only had a place because Kit had vacated it, so if they were reconciled, and Kit wanted to come back…

“Get in here,” Ronnie said, throwing herself back onto the bed, arms out and ready to wrap around Eloise again.

“Okay.”
Eloise snuggled into Ronnie and closed her eyes, focusing on the fact that, at least for now, she got to be there. She got to be part of the *we* that lived in that apartment, used that fritzy coffee pot, listened to that radio.

“Why so glum, chum?” Ronnie joked, kissing her hair. “What’s gotcha thinkin’?”

“Gotta find out whether or not my old place is still open.”

“What?” Ronnie rolled over, straddling Eloise, hands caging her face on the pillow. “Doncha wanna stay with me?”

“Oh, god, Ron -”

“I mean, I know we ain’t girlfriends or nothin’, but I - I like you, Eloise. I like livin’ with you.”

“I thought - with Kit -”

“You thought I was gonna throw you out?” Ronnie’s eyes were wide, shining. “Oh, baby, I’d never throw you out. I’m sorry if I did anything to make you feel like that.”

“No. You’re okay.” Eloise smiled, kissed her. “And you take whatever time you gotta take to say what you wanna say. I’m with you until you say go.”

“I’m never saying go.”

⚖

*AM:*

When she woke, it was from a good dream. Cozy. Domestic. Kara was being a dope about her and Maggie; Kara was being a dope about her girlfriends.

*Wait.* Alex sat up. *Girlfriends?*

She turned to look at Maggie, stirring on her pillow, long lashes casting feathery shadows on her cheek, and hated to wake her.

Weird interdimensional dream link, though, took precedence.

“Maggie.”

“Mm.”

“Baby, wake up.”

“Guh.”

“Maggie, wake up!”

“M up!” And she was, jerking upright so fast she got head rush. “Ugh. Did you?”
“Yeah. Fake me is still an idiot about taking that last step out of the closet, fake you is an angel, and fake Lena is dating fake Kara, who thinks fake Lena is two people, because people in movies are idiots!” Alex let out a rough sigh, exasperation feeding into anger. “We learned our lessons! We opened our hearts! Did we - did we open our hearts?”

Maggie nodded and leaned into the headboard. “I love you, Alex, but maybe your theory was wrong.”

“Maybe that wasn’t the problem.” Alex fumbled for her phone and called Lena, who picked up half asleep.

“Did you..?”

“Yeah.”

“Me, too. It wasn’t enough.” Lena sighed. “We don’t know enough about the Music Meister’s world.”

“We can’t exactly ask Barry about it.” Alex let Maggie lean on her shoulder, stroking her hair. “Or the Music Meister himself.”

“Which means we need to ask Kara.”

“Speakerphone, babe.”

Alex turned speakerphone on and tossed the phone onto the mattress. “Lena, Maggie’s up, too.”

“Hi, Maggie.”

“Hey. What’s happening on your end?”

“Um, one second.” It was more like sixty, complete with quietly opened and closed doors and bare feet on concrete stairs. “Okay, so, not-Kara was investigating. She had been ever since I - fake me - got shot protecting her. But she also…”

“Wanted to date both parts of you?”

“Yeah. The part I liked and the part I didn’t.” Lena let out a breath. “I talked to her last night.”

“Okay.”

“It was… it was big. We needed to have that talk, but it didn’t get rid of the dream, all it did was show up in it.”

Maggie frowned. “Fake Alex told me she’d never throw me out for Kara.”

“The doppelgängers.” Alex smacked Maggie’s arm, eyes wide.

“Ow, what?”

“Maggie,” Alex crowed, planting a kiss on her brutalized shoulder, “the doppelgängers are people now! They’re gaining sentience, remember? Communicable consciousness! We don’t need to learn those lessons - or, we did, but that’s not how to end the story - they do! Fake me needs to commit to fake you…”

“Fake me needs to stop being afraid of being left behind…”
“And fake me needs to tell fake Kara who I am and stop being afraid she’ll abandon me.”

Maggie and Alex looked at each other and grimaced. “If they’re anything like us,” Alex groaned.

“It’s going to take a miracle.”

“Or an act of science!”

“Lena, I can hear the exclamation marks. Keep calm.”

“Okay, so, yesterday, we had big emotional confrontations, conversations, whatever, and then last night, they showed up in our dreams. Kara accepted me and opened up about something that I didn’t see about her, something that we have in common. Alex promised to never abandon Maggie.” Lena sucked in a deep breath, then hissed, “They’re living out the talking points of our catharsis!”

“We have some element of control over them,” Maggie said, slapping Alex’s thigh. “Ooh!”

“Ow, what?”

“Sorry, babe.” Maggie bent down and smooched the red spot she’d left behind. “But if we can control them, we can be the act of science! We can push them into the right scenarios by enacting them ourselves!”

“Babe, I’m already committed to you - oh.” Alex looked her dead in the face. “The wedding. Me, promising to love you forever in the biggest legal commitment a person can make. You, wearing my ring, accepting that commitment as fact, trusting me to uphold it.”

“So we’re stuck like this until the wedding?”

“But now we have an expiration date.” Alex cupped Maggie’s chin in her hand and grinned at her. “Married life in, interdimensional dream demon out.”

“You are so beautiful when you talk about matrimony defeating superhuman chaotic neutral,” Maggie murmured, pushing forward and kissing her fiancée hard enough to topple them back onto the mattress.

“That won’t work,” Lena said.

They ignored her.

“That won’t - I said it won’t work! You guys?” A beat, and then, “Dream me saw you both naked!”

“What?”

“She didn’t want to make you uncomfortable, but I need to make you listen to me.” Lena sighed. “Fake me needs to not hold back from fake Kara, right? Tell her the truth?”

“Yeah?”

“This is the only secret I’m keeping from her.”

Maggie groaned. “If we tell her, she’ll start investigating, the D.E.O. will get involved…”

“She’s going to be mad.” Alex’s head thudded against Maggie’s shoulder and she sighed. “That we waited so long to tell her.”
Collectively, they mournfully said, “Shit.”

“Do we all need to get out at once?” Maggie asked after a moment. “I mean, no offense, Lena, but…”

“None taken, but I started the dreams first, remember? For me, they started almost right away. Well, almost. There was a gap, but - ”

“And then it took me a few days after you.”

“And me a week after you. Fuck!”

“Last night, I told Kara how I felt hours after you two had your conversation, but in the dream, I had time to leave our apartment, walk to yours, have a chat, and leave before you had the chance to address the issue.” Lena sighed. “Real world time doesn’t matter, only the procession.”

“So it has to happen in order.” Alex’s jaw tightened. “Lena brought us in, so she’s first in metaphysical line.”

“I’m sorry.” Lena sounded like she was sliding down a wall, sitting on the floor. “Maybe they’re only like that when they’re linked? When we all do something.”

“So, what,” Maggie said, leaning onto Alex’s shoulder, “Alex and I elope?”

“My mom would kill me. Even if it did work, I would wake up in Vegas from a dream-free night and she would be there to kill me.”

“No! Not yet, anyway.” Lena’s fingers started drumming. “We should test it again on a smaller scale. Ever since I’ve started having these weird dreams, Kara’s been trying to help - researching everything from lucid dreaming, which didn’t work, to the actual neurological activity of a dream.”

“Point?”

“Sorry. There was a lot of research and she worked really hard. The point is, we dream about what we thought of last before sleep. I thought about the conversation, about what Kara told me, about how she sees the good in me even when no one else does, about how she trusted me and opened up to me and how bad I felt for not giving her the same. So, in the dream, she tells me she’s been doing something to protect me, to avenge me, to do common good, and that she loves and accepts me, and I still don’t tell her my secret. What did you think of before bed?”

“What we talked about.” Alex took Maggie’s hand and squeezed it. “Keeping my promise.”

“Being left behind for Kara, and how it wasn’t going to happen anymore.”

“And you dreamed about not abandoning Maggie, and not being abandoned for Kara.” Lena’s drumming went faster. “So, we don’t have to actually do it, maybe? We just have to focus on it.”

“Oh, boy.” Maggie groaned. “ Fuck, I have work.”

“Fuck, me, too.”

“Oh, hey, Kara!” Lena’s voice was too high, strained. “Maggie, Alex, Kara just walked in!”

“More like out. Into the stairwell. Two floors below us.”

“Well, you were still sleeping, and I didn’t want to wake you, so…”
Wow, Alex thought, *she’s worse at lying to Kara than me.*

“My considerate Lena-Bean!”

Maggie clapped a hand over her mouth and hid her face in Alex’s throat, which was flexing to contain the absolute cackle born in that very moment.

“The shower’s heating up, if you want one before work.”

“Okaygottagobye!”

Lena hung up, and Maggie and Alex let loose their laughter. Once it died down - which took a few solid minutes - Alex sighed, “Work.”

“Work.”

They went to work.

⚖

KT:

“You need to get your hands on her research,” Eloise said, thumping her hand on the table. “I mean, it shouldn’t be too hard, you live with the girl!”

“I can’t break her trust like that!”

“She’s gonna find out about you,” hissed Ronnie. She reached over and squeezed Tallulah’s arm. “I don’t like lying to her any more than you do, but she’s gonna find out that you’re the same person - people - y’know? She’s got all the pieces, and she’s smart.”

Tallulah sighed, cheek smushed into her fist. “So smart.”

“Hey! We get it, the Sorrel girls are fantastic, but you can’t let how great your girl is get you stupid. Don’t lose your edge.”

With that, and a meaningful look from Eloise, Tallulah was back in shape, nodding crisply. “Right. Besides, if she looks into this stuff, she’s gonna get the silent partner’s attention. It’s bad enough, her living with me when they come around, but then she’d just be a face. If she’s digging, she’s gonna get noticed.”

“And you can’t tell her to stop looking,” Ronnie sighed.

“’Cause she’ll just look harder.” Tallulah groaned and pushed up from the table, rolling her mask down her face. “Shipment heading to 83rd and Schmidt. Can I borrow your bike?”

Eloise groaned, shaking her head. “Just get your own.”

“I’m effectively unemployed, how’m I gonna buy a damn bike?”
“Same way you bought the Dictaphone: secondhand.”

Hiding out in the back of a bus, hoping not to be recognized, Tallulah considered actually taking her advice. She liked riding; she liked the rumbling engine and the smell of hot metal, the power, the speed.

*When I find the silent partner,* she bargained, *I’ll get a motorcycle.*

She got off ten blocks from the drop spot, hid in an alley three blocks away with two minutes to spare.

In those two minutes, she checked her supplies - the ropes tied around her waist with quick-releasing knots, the knives tucked up her sleeves, the Enfield No. 2 Grady had ordered for her alongside the ballistic nylon her new uniform was made up of.

Hiding it from Kit had been hell, but it had been worth it to have a costume that wouldn’t give so easily to a bullet, and because it was so heavy-duty, it held up against the weight of her Army standard pistol better than anything else she’d tried.

Six rounds.

She hoped she wouldn’t need to use a single one.

The car - a Ford Model 18 painted like a taxi - finally pulled up on the barbed wire and the front tires popped, the back wheels skidding and screeching futilely before finally tipping onto its side. Its bounty - a heap of paper packages that split on impact - spilled across the street, and the driver grunted. There was an obvious struggle, and then a spray of Tommy rounds that broke the top window. Whoever was inside chucked their gun to the left and hefted themselves out; while they climbed, Tallulah dashed over and picked it up, slinging it over her shoulder.

“Nice night, ain’t it?” she called as the driver dropped to the pavement and started to scramble.

“Hey!” The driver floundered. “You bitch!”

“That’s me, Jack, now play nice.”

He blinked. “How’d you know my name was Jack?”

Tallulah cocked her head. “Huh. Who’d’ve thunk?” Grasping the tail of one rope, Tallulah flicked the whole thing out of its coil. She caught the loose end in her other hand and snapped it between her hands, starting towards Jack, apparently. “I’m serious, buddy, step offa the car.”

Jack took two steps away, hands going behind his back.

“Nuh-uh! I know you got a gun back there, and I ain’t lettin’ you use it.”

Jack fired, bullet glancing off the stop sign behind her head.

“Hey! You almost hit me, y’asshole!”

Another shot, clipping her ear, and Tallulah scowled. Ducking a third shot, she dropped to her knees, sliding on two larger chunks of plate glass until she was right up under him, slugging him square in the gut.

Jack crumpled forwards and she tossed the loop of rope between her hands around his wrists. She slid all the way up to the car, dragging him to the pavement, and kicked off of it to her feet. She
stood up between his legs and quickly tied his wrists together, knotting the tail of that rope to the steering wheel inside the car. She was about to stand, but there was a sudden rattattattattattattattat! and holes were being punched through the steel roof, streetlamplight filtering through.

She hit the decks, waited for the belts to run out. When they did, she swung up out of the car and rushed the two gunmen. She grabbed hold of the barrels and used them to cantilever herself up, slamming her bony shins squarely between both of their legs'.

All three of them hit the street, Tallulah pinned beneath them. She jabbed the butts of their tommy guns into their ribs, shunting them off to the side, and then whapped them in the chest hard enough to knock the wind out of them. She tied them together, picked them over for weaponry, and did a lap of the blocks, checking for another set of goons.

No set to be found; just one heavy with his sleeves rolled up.

“My luck’s not good enough for your name to be Jack, too, is it?” she quipped, and immediately ducked a punch. “Guess not.”

Another punch grazed her bloodied ear, and she rammed the point of her elbow into the bend of his. When he swung again with his other fist, she was reaching for the pistol between her inner thighs. As she drew it from its holster, she elbowed his arm away and aimed.

He broke her grip on the gun, knocking it to the ground and forcing her to her knees. She scrawled in the glass for it, finally gripping it by the barrel.

“Safety on,” she grunted, and pistol-whipped him into a lamp post. He slumped to the ground, unconscious, and she quickly tied him up before taking a step back.

“You okay?” Kit called from the shadows.

“I’m good, baby.”

Kit beamed, planted a kiss on her cheek - and Tallulah could actually feel it, her lips on her skin.

The bullet had torn her mask.

Kit would know.

Kit would know she was a liar and Kit would hate her and Kit would see her for all the bad she’d been a part of and -

“I gotta go,” she said, and tried to pull away.

“Hey, no, you’re okay.” Kit smiled, reassuring, and gave her shoulder a squeeze before starting down the street. “C’mon. Walk me home.”

How could Tallulah resist?

The subdued crime scene behind them faded back as faint tinkling music followed Kit and Tallulah down the street. As they turned the corner, Kit took Tallulah’s hand, locking their fingers together as she stopped dead, sighing, “I was feeling done in…”

Tallulah took an extra step, swinging back when she met Kit’s resistance until she was snugly settled against her chest, nose to nose, lips almost brushing, eyes dark and locked and blown-out. She tore herself away at the last possible moment to breathe, “Couldn’t win.”
Kit tucked a finger under her chin, dragged her back, and this time their lips did brush through the fabric of Tallulah’s mask as they harmonized: “I’ve only ever kissed before.”

“I thought there’s no use getting - ” And suddenly Tallulah’s hand was on Kit’s waist, somehow too low and too high, and she gasped, “into heavy petting.”

There was the telltale screech of a public bus, and somehow they had boarded the utterly uninhabited vehicle, with no memory in Tallulah’s head of getting from point A to point B.

Lula’s hand slid down into her back pocket and gave the faintest of squeezes as she purred, “It only leads to trouble…”

Kit twirled onto a singleton and pushed Tallulah down into it, sinking to straddle her lap as she crooned, “And seat wetting.”

Tallulah laughed, a tiny, nervous thing that was all flushed cheeks and pounding heart, as Kit nosed at her throat - the bottom of her mask.

“Now all I want to know,” she sang, teeth dragging it up, baring Lula’s lips, stopping only when Tallulah reached up and touched her cheek, “is how to go. I’ve tasted blood and I want more.”

Kit’s teeth along the edge of her jaw, Tallulah moaned, “More, more, more,” and found herself pinned to their front door as it slammed shut behind them. She had no time to ponder the strange and impossible transition, because Kit was unzipping her costume achingly slow. Her fists curled into the wood and she arched into Kit’s hands, into her lips on her neck, promising, “I’ll put up no resistance, I want to stay the distance.”

“I’ve got an itch to scratch.” Kit kissed down the exposed skin of her back, sinking down behind her. Then she slid back up, her thigh firmly planted between Tallulah’s, and sighed, “I need assistance.”

Tallulah reached back and raked her fingers through Kit’s hair, dislodging the pencil holding it in place and anchoring her fingers at the root, knees weak when Kit bit down on her exposed shoulder, voice shaking as she sang, “Touch-a touch-a touch-a touch me, I wanna be dirty!”

“Thrill me, chill me, fulfill me, creature of the night!” Kit rasped, pressing flush against Tallulah’s back, one hand creeping around and under her skirt. Her fist wound in the waist of Tallulah’s barely bulletproofed tights, and then she was sinking lower and lower, dragging them with her, crooning, “And if anything grows while you pose, I’ll oil you up and rub you down…”

“Down, down, down!” Tallulah punctuated each word with a shoe being kicked away, then her stockings, until she was bare-legged and pivoting to look her girlfriend dead in the blown-out eye. She peeled off her sleeves, and eventually her dress, baring more and more skin. “And that’s just one small fraction of the main attraction. You need a friendly hand,” she crooned, fingers making quick work of the buttons on Kit’s blouse before shoving it and her jacket to the floor, “and I need action!”

“Oh, touch-a touch-a touch-a touch me!” Kit grabbed Tallulah’s hand, guided it to her breast, coaxed her into giving a little squeeze through the flimsy white fabric of her bra. “I wanna be dirty! Thrill me, chill me, fulfill me - ”

Tallulah’s free hand set about undoing Kit’s belt and opening her painfully sensible trousers. Kit reached for Tallulah’s mask, fingers ghosting over her cheek, and rather than take her hands away from the miles and miles of unblemished golden skin, Tallulah just kissed the tip of Kit’s thumb.
before sucking it into her mouth.

In response, Kit lifted her clean off the floor, voice thick against her neck as she murmured, "Creature of the night." Then her lips were gone from Tallulah’s skin, and so were her hands, because in an impressive feat of coordination, she just tossed Tallulah down onto one of their beds like she weighed nothing before shucking her pants and climbing down on top of her.

Tallulah watched, lip caught between her teeth, before reaching up to cup Kit’s cheek, grip her hips with her knees, and roll them over, straddling her to beg, "Touch-a touch-a touch-a touch me,” before kissing her way down Kit’s chest, her stomach, with singleminded determination that took her directly to the waist of Kit’s decidedly nonutilitarian ruffly white panties.

(Not that she was complaining. Who would?)

“I wanna be dirty!” Kit’s breath hitched mid-word, and she dragged Tallulah back up so fast the waist of her panties snapped against her skin, flipping them over once again so she was on top.

“Thrill me - ”

“Chill me - ”

“Fulfill me,” they sighed into each other’s mouths, fingers tangled in blonde curls or digging into pale shoulders, careful of bullet scars.

So careful, so reverent, was Kit that she stopped to press a gentle kiss to the silvery pucker, murmuring, “Creature of the night, creature of the night,” as she pinned Tallulah’s wrists above her head in one hand.

Tallulah’s heart stuttered. “Creature of the night?”

“Creature of the night,” Kit cooed, nipping at the jut of her collarbone in affirmation.

The next lyric came out of Tallulah in a pitchy moan - “Creature of the night!” - that hitched when Kit wrapped a free arm around her waist and lifted her up off the mattress, and she instinctively wrapped her legs around Kit’s waist.

“Creature of the night…” Kit purred. The hand caging Tallulah’s wrists now slipped between them, down and down.

Tallulah’s voice broke as Kit’s fingers hooked into the leg of her panties, hips canting up into her touch. “Creature of the night..!”

In unison, they sang, “Creature of the night!” with a dramatic throb in the music that somehow made the sound of Kit actually ripping Tallulah’s panties clean off seem even louder.

Tallulah’s heart may have stopped for a second or two.

“Whoops..?”

“Don’t even think about apologizing,” Tallulah growled, nipping at Kit’s bottom lip. “I’m gonna have that stuck in my head forever and it’s gonna be the best thing in there.”

“Well, if that’s the end of the night…” Kit drawled, making as if to pull away.

“Where do you think you’re going?”
Tallulah kissed Kit properly, rough and hungry, fingers raking over her scalp, and Kit lowered them both to the mattress, aligning their bodies just right to send them both down a very slippery slope that ended in some, outlandishly, blissful screaming.

Afterwards, Kit offered her a chance at the shower, but Tallulah declined, even with the sweat on her skin and the dried blood in her hair. When the water turned on, she collected her clothes and fled. She climbed out the window, down the building, and waited until the lights were all out and she knew Kit was asleep. Even so, she climbed up the fire escape, not the actual stairs, and peered carefully about her room before even opening the window. She stripped out of her costume, shook out all the clinging shards of glass into the toilet and flushed them away, then took a shower, rinsing out the tiny cuts on her palms, her shins, her shoulders. Shampoo stung the cut on her ear, which wouldn’t need stitches but would require her to wear her hair over it, and she found herself sighing into the spray.

*Can’t tell her. Can never tell her. Once T is gone and the gang is dissolved, I’ll tell her I’m moving to the next big mess and I love her but she can’t come, and I’ll comfort her when Lady Law is gone and she misses her, and she’ll get over it. Her. Me. I’ll be enough. She’ll be okay.*

*Or will she?*

*Lady Law is the best I’ve ever been, she’s trying every day to make the world better instead of just sitting in a swirling sea of bad people hoping none of it touches her.*

The prospect of running and hiding and lying forever to the woman she loved was horrible, but no way in hell was Tallulah giving up a plan that proved successful for even a moment’s peace, if peace meant losing Kit.

Finally, the shower ran cooler, and Tallulah hopped out, trying not to slip on the tile. She stole a page from Kit’s book and curled her hair in strips cut from the slip she’d torn early in her moonlit career, then wrapped a towel around her head, threw on flannel pajamas that covered the scabbing mess of her shins, and threw herself into bed just as Kit opened her door.

“Hey, sweetie?” she whispered, knocking on Tallulah’s wall. “I’m home?”

“Huh?” Putting on a spectacular show of sleepiness, Tallulah sat back up and rubbed her eyes. “Hey, toots. You been havin’ fun?”

“Yeah. L busted up a dope driver, two Tommy-toting toughs, and a heavy with fists like hams.” Kit smiled softly, twirling over to Tallulah’s bed and coming to a stop with her back to her, sitting down at her side and knocking into her shoulder. Her hair was wet, a few stray curls clinging to her neck, and she smelled *clean.*

Tallulah sighed, forehead coming to nestle into the crook of Kit’s shoulder, and let her eyes fall shut.

“What’s goin’ on?” she asked, reaching back and wrapping Tallulah’s arms around her waist, fingers laced together over her bare skin.

“Nothin’, I’m just tired.”

At the rasp of bandages, Kit let out a soft gasp and pulled Tallulah’s hands forward to inspect her palms. “You’re hurt!”

“No! No, I just did a lot today, poked myself a couple’a times, got a little stiff. I read in some magazine this is supposed to help. Compression, or somethin’.”
Kit twisted in Tallulah’s arms, looping them around her neck before her own hands came to settle on Tallulah’s flannel hips. “Okay.”

“O-Okay?”

“Yeah, okay.” Kit grinned, smooshed her on the nose. “What, you think I’m gonna give you the third degree about ’em? I trust you, Lula.”

*Kill me.*

In the morning, Kit wanted to kiss her goodbye before going off to work, and when she raked her fingers through Tallulah’s hair to do it, the heel of her hand grazed the fragile clot on her ear, and she hissed at the flare of pain.

“What did I do? Are you okay?”

“I’m swell, I just…” Gesturing helplessly, Tallulah caught the light glancing off her needle and said, “Stabbed myself. Wasn’t payin’ attention.”

“Yeah?”

“Because you… are so… distracting.”

Kit grinned and kissed her, a little deeper than she might have, and when she pulled away, Tallulah grabbed her by the wrists and kissed her open palms, hoping Kit didn’t notice the flicker of tongue over her right hand as it cleared away a smear of coppery blood.

She didn’t. Eyes dark, she bit her lip, then planted another kiss - this one deliberately chaste - to Tallulah’s forehead.

“Bye, Lula.”

“Bye,” she croaked, and the door closed behind Kit with a bang. “Oh, my god, I can’t do this.”

She resumed stitching, furiously, at a mechanical pace.

“I have to do this,” she reminded herself. “She can’t know. Not now, it’s been too long. The window of amnesty’s closed, or somethin’.”

She turned the jacket rightside out and shook it, jaw tight. The lines were perfect.

“She’s my girlfriend.” Even amidst the turmoil, just those two words made her giddy. “My girlfriend. She cares about me and she deserves the truth.”

Tallulah folded up the jacket, careful, and laid it in the box it’d been delivered to her with, swapping it out for the matching trousers with the split inseam, muttering, “She ain’t gonna believe you, anyway. Who’s gonna think anything special about you?” She sighed through her nose and began to viciously unspool her thread. “Besides, it’s too late. Tell her now, she ain’t your girlfriend no more.”

With the first few stitches, the faintest, briefest of reprises filtered in: *I’ve got my gal, who could ask for anything more?*

*RE:*
“This was everything?”

Tallulah nodded, handing the envelope over. “It’s all there. Copied it out myself, except the photos. Used the ditto machine at the library for that. Cost me a pretty penny, too, but it’ll be worth it when it’s over.”

Eloise opened the envelope, leafing through it, but she stopped to look up at her, gobsmacked, and she knew Ronnie had the same expression on her face. “You left it with her?”

“She’s gonna keep looking!”

“Whaddya want from me? You want I should trash my own damn apartment so she doesn’t know I stole from her?”

“I want you to keep your promise. I want you to protect her!”

“I can’t lie to her!” Tallulah’s voice broke like bone. “I can’t.”

“I know.” Ronnie reached out and took her hand. “Trust me, I know it’s hard, but you can’t tell her. Not now. Not with T still out there, not with all of us at risk.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Tallulah jerked her wrist away, cradling it like it had been scalded. “What if somethin’ happens to her? What if lyin’ to her is what puts her in danger?”

“Then we protect her before danger lays a fuckin’ finger.” Ronnie put her hands down, where everyone could see them and they served no threat, on top of the envelope. “I swear, Lula, it’s gonna be okay. We’re gonna get through this.”

“Together,” Eloise promised, laying a hand over Ronnie’s and giving a gentle squeeze. After a moment’s hesitation, Tallulah tentatively put hers on top of Eloise’s and said, “Together.”

As Eloise rifled through the envelope, she passed its contents around, and they all scoured the information Kit had collected for something new. There was more than any of them would have liked to admit, and they scratched it all down in their own notes, comparing along the way any new connections.

“This stuff…” Eloise flicked the house photo with Marlene triumphant and Tallulah bloodied. “We coulda got it ourselves. Coulda got more of it. Especially since we know what we’re looking for.”

“We do?”

Eloise grinned, moving her finger towards the text and tapping it with her blunt fingernail. “The letter T.”

Tallulah wanted to wait in the car, and Eloise convinced Ronnie it wasn’t worth the fight. No one could’ve made her go back to St.Marge’s for neither love nor money, and she got not wanting to go poking at the icky bruises on your heart that never quite healed.
Still, it would’ve been a lot faster if someone who knew the place was taking them around.

“This place is like the wreck of the Hesperus,” she hissed into the walkie talkie. “I think it’s abandoned.”

Tallulah’s scoffed, “Fitting,” came crackling over the co-opted police radios Ronnie had acquired for them.

Eloise snorted and flicked her flashlight over the doorway of a dorm, rows of empty iron cots covered in dust, but Ronnie wasn’t amused.

“In and out,” she hissed, “Remember?”

“Sorry.”

“Where’s the office?”

“Top of the building. I remember feelin’ like I was scalin’ Everest when I came there the first time. The door sticks, you might hafta apply force.”

“Got it.” Ronnie bounded up the stairs on somehow silent feet and came to a splintery wood door that was not only stuck, but locked. Behind her, Eloise got out her trusty lock pick, but Ronnie had no patience. She kicked the damn thing down, then smoothed her skirt over her hips and pivoted sideways, gesturing at the empty doorway. “After you.”

Eloise looked her over with wide, dark eyes and hissed, “Jesus H. Christ, sugar, you got moves.”

Ronnie grinned, standing a little taller. “Thank you.”

“Stop flirting and find the fuckin’ files!”

“Sorry.”

Eloise knocked the back of her fingers into Ronnie’s shoulder and shook her head. “This ain’t easy,” she whispered. “Not for any of us. But this was her home, this is her lie, her girlfriend.”

“This is my sister, and my lie, too.”

“I know, but she’s living in hers all the time, and now, she’s sitting outside fourteen years of hell trying to bring it all shut, so if she’s a little crabby, I get it.” Eloise cupped the curve of Ronnie’s neck, thumb stretching up her cheek. “Besides, she won’t be any help if she spooks, so be nice.”

Ronnie nodded, huffing a laugh. “Ain’t it usually me tellin’ you that?”

“How’s it feel?”

“Take it or leave it.” Ronnie lifted her radio and kissed Eloise’s hand. “What’s the file cabinet look like?”

“I don’t know, uh… big armoire, maybe? Marlene stole wine out of it once, bragged about it for weeks.”

In the corner, there was an old pine armoire with one door ripped off its hinges. Inside, as expected, there were a few dusty old bottles, but no papers. Ronnie dropped to check the indubitably empty drawers while Eloise said, “No dice, Lynch. Anything else?”
“Her desk?”

The desk was shattered on the floor, big shards of jagged wood barely adjacent to each other.

“Guess again.”

Tallulah sighed. “I’m comin’ in.”

“Wait just a sec - Ron, I’m goin’ down to get her. Stay right here, okay?”

Ronnie smiled, eyes tight, and nodded. “Where am I goin’, exactly, on a vacation?”

“When this is all done? Hell, yes.”

Outside, Tallulah had her hand on the car door like she was about to open it and climb out, but couldn’t quite manage it.

“Budge up,” Eloise said, hopping in and closing the door behind herself with a satisfying thunk.

“I can do it.”

“I know you can. You’re tough as shit.” Eloise nudged Tallulah with her elbow and managed to eke out a half-smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “But it sucks eggs you hafta.”

“It’s for her, you know? I started out, and this was for Kara. For Barry. And then it was about justice in general, but now?” Tallulah’s eyes fell shut, casting shadows across her bruised cheek. “I’m fighting for her. I’m doin’ it all for her. Once this mess is over, once these streets are clean, she’ll be safe, and there’s no more need for Lady Law.” She sniffled, wiping her face with the back of her wrist. “When I’m done, she ain’t gonna want me no more - but that’s okay! Y’know? She’s mine right now. She cares about me right now. And I’ll still have that when she’s through with me.”

Eloise swallowed the lump in her throat and handed Tallulah her hankie, patted her on the back. “Listen, kid, I know what it’s like, right? Carrying around being left behind. Getting ditched leaves a hole in you you can’t ever fill up or sew shut, and everyone who leaves after that first time just digs a new one, until you start seein’ holes that ain’t even there, might never be there.

“I got thrown out by my old man when I was fourteen because he caught me kissing Katie Killian out behind our barn. And Katie didn’t stay, or the next girl, or the next. Lotsa holes. So when Ronnie and me got together, I wanted to make sure she didn’t have any holes like mine. And I’m doin’ everything I can to do just that, but protecting her heart won’t fill mine in. I’m still missing pieces, and I’m still afraid of losin’ more of ‘em.” Eloise sighed, leaning back against the seat. “I’m still afraid she’s gonna realize she didn’t want this, me, after all, or that she’ll get scared and run.

“I’m afraid I won’t be good enough to make her happy, to keep her whole, because you can dig holes in yourself, too, and those are the ones get big enough to be buried in.”

Tallulah blew her nose and drew her knees up, looking for all the world like the lost little girl in the photograph under Kit’s bed. “She loves you too damn much to ditch your punk ass.”

Eloise snorted. “Yeah, but she needs some time to be alright recognizing that, and I’m okay with it. Really, I am. We both got work to do before we’re aces, and I’m happy just to have a crack at it with her.”

“It’s worth it, then. The…” Tallulah waved a hand at her face - battle-worn, tear-streaked, makeup running. “Hiding? Secrets?”
“Yeah, it is. If you love her, it’s worth waiting until things are right.”

“What if… they’re never right?”

“They will be,” Eloise promised, and then she had a lapful of tightly hugging twenty-something. “Hey, woah, we’re both taken, spider monkey!”

“Sorry.” Tallulah pulled back, a rueful half-smile actually reaching her eyes as she opened the door. “You comin’ or what?”

Eloise piled out of the car after her and clapped her on the shoulder. “Attagirl.”

KT:

If this is having sisters, Tallulah thought as she climbed the stairs with Eloise at her side, I hope I ain’t an only child.

The creaking wood and warped walls, the peeling paper and the smell of must - it was all gut-wrenchingly familiar. Tallulah was lucky her gloves weren’t easily pierced by splinters, because the way she was gripping the bannister, she was just asking for new, infected holes in her palm.

“Hey,” Ronnie whispered, rifling through the rubble of Mrs. Ross’ desk.

“Hey.” Before she started scanning the room, Tallulah looked Ronnie in the eye and said, “Sorry for snapping earlier.”

“Sorry for dawdling. This is tough on all of us, not just me.”

“Not just me, either. We all got skin in this.” Tallulah nodded sharply. “The box. It’s gotta be that.”

“What box?”

Rather than explain, Tallulah crossed the room in a few short strides and peeled the sticker off a tall pine box, revealing it to be not a clock, but a:

“Coffin.”

Ronnie gagged.

“Oh,” Eloise hissed, “that’s fucked up.”

“It’s empty.” Tallulah pulled out the knife stuffed up her sleeve and stabbed the lock, easily puncturing the soft wood, pulling the door wide open. “See?”

Only papers sat inside.

“She usedta buy coffins on the cheap so if one of us died, she didn’t hafta wait around for one to be made.” Tallulah smiled grimly. “Never got to use the big ones - the healthy ones got adopted, the unhealthy ones died before they hit five foot two - so they became storage.”

Tallulah looked around, listened to the building creak, and shook her head. “I’m a chicken. I’m sorry.”

“It’s - hey, it’s okay.” Ronnie reached out and took her hand, applying reassuring pressure with her delicate fingers. “We take it out to the car, how ’bout that?”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

They collected all the papers and left. Tallulah closed her eyes, couldn’t bear to see the place, but realizing that six years away wasn’t enough to erase the floor plan from her memory was even worse, so they flew open again almost immediately. Once they were outside, she practically threw herself into the backseat and begged, “Drive.”

They drove; Ronnie was a hardcore lead foot, and even though they were miles outside of Ardor City, they made it back to Eloise and Ronnie’s flat in less than half an hour. She dumped her files in Eloise’s arms and unlocked the front door - forty five right, ninety left, one-eighty right - and not ten minutes later, they were perched around a fully-loaded coffee table, digging and digging.

“Look! St.Germain, comma, Marlene.” Eloise slapped the file down between them all, jabbing her finger at it. “Says here, she was left on the local firehouse doorstep in a basket as a baby, paperwork pinned to her chest in ’05. Never adopted.”

“No wonder she acted so big,” Tallulah murmured. “She didn’t have nothin’ else to stand on but self-importance.”

“Any mention of T in there?” Ronnie asked, picking through the papers. When she found nothing, her face fell. “Shoulda known this wouldn’t be the easy part.”

“Is any part of this gonna be the easy part? ‘Cause I vote to skip to it.”

They went back to digging. Three pots of coffee later, Tallulah shifted her weight, and pulled a slim folder out from under herself.

“You been holdin’ out on us, Lynch?” Eloise joked.

“It’s mine. This file… it’s everything Mrs. Ross kept from my life. My birth certificate, all my papers.” Tallulah sucked in a breath. “Pictures of my parents, if there are any.”

Ronnie reached for her. “Oh, honey…”

Shaking her head, Tallulah allowed herself to be held - just this once. “It’s okay. I gotta find out someday, right? Who left me?”

When she opened the folder, there was nothing inside but a yellowed index card paperclipped to the back.

“Guess today’s not that day.”

As Tallulah set it down and sank back, head lolling onto the seat of the couch, Eloise took the card and read it aloud. “Listen. ‘Adopted, age seventeen, Merle ‘Cutter’ Moran. All papers in his possession.’”

“So?”
“So? A) now we know what happened to all these apparently empty folders, which means we have
the adoptive addresses of twenty kids who might be T, be related to T, might be hunted by T. And
B).” Eloise grinned, gently socking Tallulah in the knee. “We can find your papers licketty-split
because you already got an in where they’re being kept.”

“Marlene might not’ve kept Cutter’s papers. Mighta burned ‘em all when she took over.”

Ronnie shook her head. “You really think the woman who hated you woulda thrown out leverage on
you?”

Tallulah laughed. “No way in Hell.”

“And you, kid, you got us in there two weeks ago, remember?”

“Which means,” Ronnie grunted, scrambling to her feet, “they are right here in this very apartment.”

Chapter End Notes

Only two chapters left! Thanks again to everyone who commented; I'm probably going
to finish posting this this weekend, so either Saturday/Sunday or Friday/Sunday, you'll
get to see how it all ends. I hope you like it, and have a good rest of the week! See you
soon!
Cliffhanger

Chapter Summary

Stakes get higher as Kara finds out exactly what's been going on.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is set entirely in the real world, so there aren’t any real musical numbers, but I did sort of come up with a Kryptonian lullaby, so…

Up Above - “Krypton”

I used the Kryptonese dictionary on this site; it also has tons of information about Kryptonian culture and language throughout the different adaptations of Superman/Supergirl canon, and you should definitely check it out if you’re interested in more.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

AM:

“I’m not going to tell her, I swear.”

According to Maggie’s phone, it was 4.07a.m., a.k.a. the asscrack of dawn, which meant Lena had no business being on it.

“Lena, I swear to god, I will steal Alex’s alien gun and use you to do demolition on our new house.”

“When did you buy a house?”

Maggie’s mouth snapped shut with a click. They hadn’t; she just really wanted to build a four seasons porch with her beautiful wife once they were wives and extenuating circumstances didn’t drive Lena Luthor to call her in a panic at the asscrack of dawn.

“Also, why are you answering Alex’s phone?”

Maggie looked at the phone again, and yep, it was Alex’s.

“None of your business, that’s why, now who are you not telling what?”

“I’m not going to tell - ugh!” And then Lena was tapping out Morse code - which, of course Lena knew it, so now she and Alex had to find a new covert language to talk in around people - spelling K… A… R… A… “Okay? She - I - she really wants to, and they - you - those guys are suspicious.”

“Did you just wake up?”
“No, I did some light yoga and made a relaxing bowl of steel-cut oats - yes, I just woke up! It’s four in the goddamned morning, Maggie, and I woke up at four in the goddamned morning to the POVs shot memory of your fiancée, only not, running off to tell me who my family is and who this silent partner to the woman who has traumatized me in every dimension I’ve seen so far - granted, two for two isn’t the longest streak, but it’s still a 100% batting average - is!” Lena let out an angry-sounding sigh that faded into a yawn. “This is worse than season finales with obnoxious lead-ins to the next season when the next season is five months away.”

“Go get some more sleep.”

“I can’t. I can’t stop thinking about it!”

Clearly, Lena was pacing, her bare feet furiously striking the floor - concrete, in the stairwell? - at an ever increasing clip.

“And I’m outside on the goddamn sidewalk at four in the goddamn morning so I don’t wake my goddamn beautiful, understanding girlfriend, at four in the goddamn morning, by rambling about this goddamn secret I don’t want to keep! Which is evident! Because before I went to bed, all I could think about was not telling her, and then hello! That’s what’s happening! And fake you guys didn’t trust me to keep the secret, that much was painfully obvious, which means real you guys probably don’t, either, and fake Alex was mad? For most of it. And then she wasn’t, and fake you was so nice to me, even though neither of you looked like you wanted to trust me any further than you could throw me and women didn’t exactly power lift in 1932, and I almost had - she almost had - we almost had answers!”

“And we will get them,” Maggie promised, voice sleepy-thick, “if you just let me go to sleep. I guarantee, I’ll dream about it. You will, too, if you go the fuck to sleep.”

“If Samuel L. Jackson can’t pull that off, neither can you.”

“Well, Alex is still sleeping, so -”

Alex groaned, patting Maggie’s hip. “What time is it?”

“Fuck. It’s, like, four in the morning, babe, go back to sleep.”

Too late; Alex was sitting. It took a moment for her head to clear, but then she pinched the bridge of her nose and curled into Maggie’s shoulder, letting out an even more pitiful groan. “We almost had answers!”

“I know!”

“Sugar, I’m putting Lena on speakerphone. Lena, don’t swear at my semi-conscious fiancée.”

Alex sighed and straightened up, rubbing her eyes. “Hey, Lena.”

“Hi, Alex. Now that eighty percent of my vocabulary is stricken from the thesaurus -”

“How is swearing half your vocabulary? There can’t be that many, pre-conjugation, although with conjugation, they’re essentially unlimited - okay, I get it.”

“It is before sunrise and I am very stressed out.” Lena huffed. “Anyway, now that eighty percent of my vocabulary is stricken from the thesaurus, I don’t know how I’m going to communicate effectively, but I’m d - ugh, darn well going to try.”
Maggie grinned, stroking Alex’s mussed hair. “Thank you, Lena.”

“You’re frigging welcome. Okay, so, the paperwork - ”

“Oh, my god, the paperwork.” Alex punched the mattress and leaned heavily onto Maggie. “I mean, continue, but what the fuck?”

“If she’s awake enough to curse, can I curse?”

“It’s too early for this shit,” Maggie grumbled, flopping onto her pillow and closing her eyes. “Eff and jeff away, I don’t give a fuck.”

“Love you, Maggie,” Alex cooed, planting a kiss on her temple before launching into a high-speed ramble with Lena and padding out of the room. “So, any theories?”

“I mean, of course! We’re watching a movie, right?”

“No matter how clever the Music Meister thinks he is, everyone falls for the same plot contrivances.” Yawning, Alex started a pot of coffee and slumped over the counter, cheek smushed into granite. “Him being clever-ish once doesn’t mean he’s an enigma.”

“Exactly! So, T has to be - ”

There was a clang - something hitting metal, metal skidding, hitting something else - and a thud. Heavy.

Person heavy.

“Lena?”

Nothing.

“Lena!”

Alex pushed off of the countertop, head fizzing, and stumbled back towards her bed. She fell to her knees, chin glancing off the mattress, and pawed at Maggie’s hip through the comforter.

“Huh?”

“Maggie - !”

Her vision was still clearing from the twenty second catnap she’d managed to snag, which was why it took her so long to realize that her fiancée had slumped, boneless - not lifeless, never lifeless, oh, god - to the floor and started to twitch.

She only had a second of clear vision before she went limp, too, and everything turned to black. As the curtains closed, all she could think was If Alex is dead, I’m going Poltergeist on that interdimensional asshole and I’m gonna find out what color he bleeds.

KL:

Kara woke to the muted sound of Gertrude howling.
Which made no sense, because Gertrude wasn’t staying with them tonight - she was with Alex and Maggie.

She bolted upright. “Alex and Maggie.”

So, yeah, she’d been worrying. Alex and Maggie were part of whatever weirdness was happening in Lena’s sleep, and that meant they were definitely having those dreams, too. Three of the most important people in her life, all suffering some strange way, all refusing to talk to her? It stung, and it scared her, so it naturally occupied every single thought in her head.

With barely the capacity to remember pants, Kara crashed through the window and started soaring towards Alex and Maggie’s apartment. She soared past her building, only to be struck still in the air.

There, lying on the concrete, was her girlfriend. Not just lying there, either; it looked like she was having a full-blown seizure.

Kara dropped out of the air like a stoned pigeon, cracking the pavement with the force of her landing, and carefully tilted Lena onto her side so she wouldn’t choke.

Beside her on the ground was her now-cracked phone, mid-call to Alex.

Oh, no.

Kara’s hands shook as she speed-dialed, as she held her own phone to her cheek, too afraid to end Lena’s call, because what if Alex and Maggie stopped breathing and she couldn’t hear them?

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“My - my girlfriend, my sister, her fiancée… They’re all having seizures.”

“Together? Ma’am, back away from them, there may be something in the air - ”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Ma’am - ”

“I said I’m fine! They were on the phone. Halfway across the city, it wasn’t some sort of neurotoxin or gas or attack. Not unless it was some sort of targeted audio frequency…”

“Ma’am? Ma’am!”

“What?”

“Where are you, and where are they?”

Kara rattled off Alex’s address and her own too fast for the operator to catch, had to be prompted to repeat herself four times before it finally came through clear.

Lena’d stopped spasming by the time the EMTs arrived, but Kara didn’t stop worrying. Her heart was slow, lazy. If she’d been awake, Lena would have offered *half-hearted*, and Kara would have laughed too loud and too long and hugged her too hard because she would have been okay enough to make that dumb a joke.

Boggled, one of the EMTs asked the other, “Is she, like..?”

*Lena Luthor?*
“She’s a patient,” Kara snarled, “and she needs immediate treatment. What part of goddamn seizure don’t you understand?”

“Right. Right, sorry.”

Lena was hoisted into the ambulance on a stretcher and strapped into place and Kara was crying, silent and harsh and horrible, sobs clawing at the lining of her throat with sharp talons. When the EMTs tried to close the doors, she pushed past them fast and hard enough that they were going to bruise - a handprint on their chests, the line of the doorway and hinge on their backs - but she couldn’t care.

She didn’t care if she hurt these tiny, ambivalent humans because the big, brilliant, important humans sounded like they were dying and that was where her caring stopped. The world had narrowed down to her girlfriend, her sister, her sister-in-law, and anything beyond that margin had simply ceased to be.

“You’re fast.”

“This ambulance better be faster.”

It couldn’t be, of course, but Kara had to pretend. She had to pretend that calling 911 was the smartest thing to do - that Lena wouldn’t be upset by the news coverage, that Alex wouldn’t be upset by the loss of agency, that Maggie wouldn’t be upset by the cold lights and antiseptic smell, that she couldn’t have gotten them to the D.E.O. med bay faster and safer.

*I thought I was lucky to have seen a second star that made me strong, but to have known your light has made me more than strong. It has made me whole. And the absence of your light will do more than make me powerless, more than make me weak.*

*I will kill me.*

*Without you, I am hollowed out, gone dark inside. I have made your strength my own, and I have tried to offer the same, but now I make the trade in earnest: Alex, Lena, Maggie, I am so strong because of you and the home you built around me with your kindness and acceptance of me and of each other and of yourselves. Let me give that strength back.*

*Take whatever you need from me, anything, anything, anything - just come back.*

*Just don’t die.*

Kara’s eyes burned, and she thudded her head against Lena’s shoulder - right, not left, because her left was still sore sometimes, like it hadn’t healed right - to let out a sob.

“Is she praying?”

Barely taking stock of her position, hands clasped, head bowed, Kara realized it probably looked that way and thought, *Might as well give it a shot.*

*O Rao, bringer of light and warmth and life, you brought me to my family. You gave me these loving people. I see in them everything you stand for, everything you bring into the world with such joy, and I love them. I love them, and I love you for bringing us together, but it’s not time for them to become stars. It’s not time for them to meet you. You have lived forever, and you will live forever more, and I know they’re wonderful, but if you’re going to live that long, you have to be patient enough to let them grow old, first.*
I don’t talk to the Old Gods much anymore, and I’m sorry about that, but if Rao’s real, you must be, too.

Nightwing, Flamebird - your love is eternal, and it always finds a way. Even when attacked, even when parted, even when lost, you always come together again, stronger than ever, but you understand how much it hurts. Don’t let us be parted from each other. Don’t make me lose them.

Vohc - you used to build the most beautiful things. Jealousy made you cold, jealousy broke you, but I know you remember what love feels like, because if you’d forgotten, it wouldn’t hurt, and you’d stop destroying. But please. Flamebird burnt your creations so you could try again, make things better, and there is nothing better or more beautiful than my sister in love, than her fiancée smiling at her first thing in the morning and touching her because they know it’s okay to, than my girlfriend. These things, these people, cannot be made any more beautiful, any more whole, so don’t destroy them. You’ve finally made your best creations, so you can stop. You can rest. Let us rest, too.

Aethyr, I’ve lived in The Oversoul. I know the Phantom Zone. It is beautiful and it is cold and it is lonely. These women are beautiful, and their lives are beautiful, but they are warm and giving and growing. They don’t belong with you, and you know it. Don’t take them away.

And you. Cythonna. You’re cold, you’re dead inside, you’ve lost the love of your life. Lena is the love of mine, and I will be cold and dead without her. Anything you want, you can have, just let me have them. Let us be happy. Let Maggie have a wedding ring to turn around on her finger when she goes to work to protect the stone and the chance for the other cops to rib her about the honeymoon and an actual honeymoon because I know she’s wanted to go to Treviso; let Alex be able to say the word wife like it’s a surprise over and over again until the surprise stops, because the surprise is that she’s happy, and I want her to get used to being happy, and loved; let Lena wake up to find that all of Earth has been waiting with bated breath to see her healed, to respect her, to trust her, and to see me by her side, waiting for her to wake up. Let them all wake up to see me waiting for them.

It must be lonely, being Death. I know loneliness. Not like yours, but I know it. Which is why I will do anything not to feel that way again.

Please, all of you, one of you - whatever I must do, I will. Give me a sign. Give me a command. Second star to the right and straight on ’til morning? I will fly all night.

"Is that Hebrew or something?"

They weren’t that observant, but oh, my god. How I forget that, too?

She opened her mouth to speak, giving actual volume to a language that belonged on Earth, but before a single syllable could be freed from her throat, the ambulance screeched to a stop.

“We’re here. You’re gonna need to get out.”

Kara wiped her eyes and did, bare feet on blacktop, Lena’s phone and her own clutched in her fists. She followed the EMTs inside and waited with her. It took a while, some bleak and indeterminable stretch of castille soap-scented time, but then Alex and Maggie were wheeled in, too.

Through luck or bullying, Kara didn’t care which, her people ended up in the same area, side by side by side, which meant she could sit and wait at the feet of all three of their beds without ever having to move away.

Around nine, a nurse came by with a cup of peppermint tea and the assurance that We’re doing all we can, but you won’t make them better with sleep deprivation.
Kara crushed the styrofoam cup to paste. Not angry, not posturing, no - she just didn’t have it in her to pretend.

When Rhea had come and threatened the world and Kara had gone off to fight, Kal had told her that he always fought for Lois, that he didn’t know what he would do without her.

Kara got that, now. She thought she’d understood when he’d said it, but now, the risk of being without these women was more than a heavy thought. It was eighty times the most weight she could bear poured inside of her like wet cement, caustic and dense and malleable enough to fill every capillary, even the ones in her eyes. She was all weight, all waiting.

At ten, someone brought her coffee.

At noon, a sandwich - turkey, red grapes, brie, and arugula, because this is California, goddamnit, and even our hospital food will make you feel inferior.

They brought her a phone charger at two, and she had to call the precinct and tell them what was happening and feel that clawing in her throat again because the people Maggie worked with weren’t huge in her life but, by god, they gave a shit about her.

Next was Jess, for Lena, and she actually cried, and promised she’d handle everything, and asked if there was anything she needed brought over or anything that might indicate a specialist, because she could get a dozen who thought Lena was the coolest thing and would give their left leg to see her better. Kara wished Lena could have heard that, and when she said so, Jess let out a keening cry and apologized for her unprofessional behavior, and Kara had to try not to cry while comforting her, because that would just make things worse and Lena actually liked Jess.

Finally, she called J’onn.

“Kara? Why do you have Alex’s phone?”

The clawing won out, and she choked on a sob. “I can’t - just read it, I can’t - !”

“Kara, you know I can’t read Kryptonian minds.” J’onn’s voice dropped lower, soothing, coaxing.

“Alex, Maggie, Lena..!”

“What’s wrong with them?”

“They won’t wake up. Oh, Rao, J’onn, they won’t wake up!”

“I’m on my way.” There was a whoosh - he’d started flying - but Kara could still hear his question: “Have you called Eliza yet?”

Kara hiccuped so hard it hurt and shook her head, forgetting for a moment that he couldn’t see her. “No, I - I had to handle Maggie and Lena’s calls, and then - what if they die?”

“They’re made of sterner stuff than that.”

“Everyone’s stronger than death until they’re not.”

“El mayarah, Kara. I’ll call your mother.”
Eliza arrived not two hours later and immediately wrapped Kara up in the tightest hug she’d felt since she landed on Earth. “Oh, sweetheart,” she murmured, and Kara started crying again.

“Don’t be nice,” she warned, voice shaking, “or I’m just gonna cry forever and I’ll be no help at all.”

“I’m not being nice, I’m being your mom.” Eliza tucked a lock of hair behind Kara’s ear and looked her over. “Have you eaten?”

“A sandwich, I’m fine, I’m not the one - ” Her heart lurched into her throat. “The one - ”

“You’re trying to be strong, Kara, and that’s a good thing, but you can’t be strong if you don’t keep up your strength.” With a stern expression, she pointed towards the hall. “Go to the cafeteria. It’s dinner, I’m sure the food won’t be horrifying.”

“The food here’s terrifying. It’s like they want you to enjoy yourself.”

“I’m scared witless,” said Eliza dryly. “Go get yourself some food. Now.”

“Mom…” Kara raked her fingers through her hair and shook her head. “Mom, I can’t leave them. I can’t.

Okay.” Eliza took her hands and gave them a squeeze. “Go sit down, take a breath. I’ll be back in ten minutes.”

Kara sat, for want of something else to do, and gripped the footrails of Alex’s bed. She remembered, suddenly, one of her first nights with the Danvers’. She’d crawled out of her window and just floated there, in the still night, and began to sing a lullaby she’d learned as a baby, one she’d wanted to teach to Kal-El.

“Fish rahn-kryp nahn iahr, iahr ehl, fish rahn-kryp nahn kyts. Fish rahn-kryp nahn - ”

Alex had poked her head out the window and said, “Why are you singing about fish?”

Furious, Kara had wheeled around in midair and zoomed forty feet back, arms crossed.

“Wait, don’t leave! Mom’ll yell if you fly off! I’m supposed to look after you, you dummy!”

Look after… Kara knew what that meant, knew that promise well, so she flew back, because someone should get to keep their promise. “I am sorry for leaving. I won’t do it again.”

“Oh. Here it’s an animal. And a food. And a pet. Did you have pets? Did you eat animals? Vicki doesn’t eat animals, she’s a vegetarian.”

“We had pets. And we ate animals. Not all of us, but most.”

“Good to know.” Alex hummed the melody for a moment, then reached the end of the phrase, where she’d cut Kara off, and asked, “How does the rest of it go?”

Kara only needed a moment to translate, mumbling in Kryptonese to process before singing aloud in
Alex, to her surprise, repeated the Kryptonese back to her perfectly, then given her the biggest shit-eating grin and said, “Wanna go grab the hidden Oreos and watch a movie in the basement?”

Kara, thankful she hadn’t mentioned the open rivers of tears flowing down her cheeks, just sniffled and nodded.

“C’mon. I’ll even let you pick.”

They pigged out on Double Stuf Oreos and watched The Wizard of Oz and fell asleep in a heap. That night, Kara felt like she maybe had a sister, which was easy, because it was new. It was okay to love Alex, who snored just a little and liked the cookie better than the cream and pretended she didn’t know all the words to *We’re Off To See The Wizard*, because no one was being replaced.

That night was why she loved musicals, why that movie was her happy movie.

Voice thick and shaking, Kara whispered, “*Up above is the red, red sun. Up above are the moons. Up above are a million stars. Our family will be together soon.*”

Alex’s foot shifted a hair, and Kara crashed into the ceiling, she was so surprised.

“Alex? Alex!”

She didn’t move. Maybe she never had.

Slowly, Kara sank back into her chair, eyes squeezed shut. “*Sokao, not in the stars,*” she pleaded.

“Together here, together alive.”

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Old faces showing up out of nowhere had a habit of being really, really bad for Kara. Beloved aunt? Wants to kill everyone. Adopted father? Working with anti-alien terrorists. Baby cousin? Hallucinating his arch nemesis, who is actually you.

Not fun.

Still, under the pale fluorescent lights, Susan Vasquez’s determined jaw and the casual ease with which Lucy Lane parted even the most minimal of crowds was welcome. The situation could only get so much worse, and they both were really good at making things better.

“What are you doing here?” Kara gasped. She didn’t even have to stand before Lucy had tackle hugged her, squeezing tight, tight, tight.

“We were allocated to the desert base -”

“Meaning she put us both there,” Vasquez interjected.

“And there’s all kinds of bullshit out in the desert. Area 51 kinds of bullshit.” Lucy pulled back, smiling softly, and kissed Kara’s forehead. “It’s been forever and a half. I wish we could’ve reconnected under better circumstances.”
“Yeah,” Kara murmured, looking over to the pale, drawn faces sitting immobile on wrinkly pillowcases. “Me, too.”

“Is J’onn here? I’ve been meaning to talk to my co-director about better intra-office cooperation, and this is the perfect place to start.”

“Uh, yeah, he’s with Eliza and Maggie’s aunt.”

Lucy started marching off, and Vasquez grabbed her hand. “Not - not now.”

“Gotcha.”

Kara scooted onto the foot of Lena’s bed, grateful for the opportunity, and laid a hand on her bony shin. More times than could be counted, she’d gotten nailed with one of them so hard she would’ve bone-bruised if she was human, and now, all she wanted was another swift, sleepy kick.

“So, this is the girlfriend, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“I always liked how politely she told the military to go fuck themselves after her brother went bananas,” Lucy hummed, sweeping her arm at the empty chair.

Vasquez sat and said, “You’re the military, Luce.”

“I know. That’s why it was so great.”

“You said now was the perfect time to improve intra-office cooperation,” Kara interjected, fists tight in the machine-crocheted white blanket. “What did you mean?”

“Well, between us, we have two resident tech geniuses,” Lucy began, reaching out to ruffle Vasquez’s hair, “records of every bit of interstellar nonsense they’ve come into contact with in the past year, a mind reader who’s pretty much imprinted on you ducklings, and you, Kara. You know their lives better than any of us. If something triggered this, if something attacked them, you’re our best shot at figuring out what, when, why, and how.”

Kara sobbed, folding into her knees like a wad of scratch paper being crumpled up.

“Oh, god, what did I say? I’ve been living in a cave for fifteen months and all my social skills died in the last sandstorm.”

“No, it’s - it’s not you, Lucy.” Finding a tissue box in Vasquez’ hand extended in front of her, Kara took three, dabbed her eyes, blew her nose, and started talking. “They’ve been keeping something from me.”

“All three of them?”

“Yes! Some weird dreams.”

“They’ve all been having weird dreams?” Vasquez asked. “The same dreams?”

“I don’t know if they were the same, but they might’ve been connected.”

“ Sounds like some sort of psychic attack - ”

“Which means we need a brain scan - ”
“Or, even faster -”

“Luce, you’re a gentlewoman and a scholar.” Vasquez set the tissue box down, gave Lucy an apparently expected crisp high five, and pointed to Kara. “You. Stop with the worrying. We’re gonna have answers and solutions inside of five minutes or Lucy gets to make me eat things which lie about being tacos.”

“Tacos al pastor are definitely tacos, but I believe in you, so I will make that bet another day.”

Vasquez dashed off and very professionally interrupted J’onn’s conversation, dragging him back to their little curtained-off area. “Sorry for the intrusion - and it’s really good to see you again, sir.”

“Likewise, Agent Vasquez. Who am I scanning first?”

Kara floundered.

“Alphabetically,” Lucy picked for her, “which means A. Danvers is up.”

J’onn slipped between her bed and Lena’s, pausing only momentarily to lay a comforting hand on Kara’s shoulder before touching Alex’s forehead. His own brow furrowed. “Huh.”

“Huh? What’s that? What does huh mean?”

“I don’t…” J’onn twisted, leaning over Lena, and tried it on her. “That’s odd.”

“J’onn, what’s going on?”

He’d floated over to Maggie and was trying her, but after a moment, he stopped - gave up. “Their minds aren’t in there.”

“Are they dead?”

“No.” J’onn reached over and touched her back, his hand a steadying weight at the top of her spine. “Their minds are alive and well, but not in this physical location, like they’re being drawn away from their bodies.”

“Someone’s stealing their brains?” Lucy sighed. “That’s gonna need a new protocol.”

“Stealing?” Kara stood. “As in, present tense, currently happening, not yet entirely stolen, stealing?”

J’onn nodded.

“Can you see where their minds are going?”

He made a valiant attempt, effort written on his face like graffiti, but in the end, he gave up. “After a certain point, I’m blocked, like I’m running into a wall.”

“So we break the wall down.”

“Susan…”

“No,” Lucy said, “she’s right. This is some sort of psychic wall, yeah, so incorporeal, but psychic constructs have physical representations. If something’s blocking your powers, J’onn, then we find away around the block. Kara!”

“Yes.”
“What else do you know about these dreams?”

“Well…”

“What?”

“Lena stopped taking sleeping pills after the invasion,” Kara said slowly. “She’d been having a hard time sleeping but at the start of the summer, she ran out, she stopped taking them.”

“When did she start taking them?”

“She was having nightmares about… about watching me die.”

“You can’t die, though,” Vasquez said, “that’s the whole point.”

“Suze, dreams are irrational and ridiculous. Come on.”

“If the dreams are what’s stealing their minds, let’s stop them dreaming,” J’onn said. “Kara, what was she taking?”

“I - I don’t know. Oh, god, I’m a horrible girlfriend. I have to call Lena’s secretary.”

The phone didn’t even ring once before Jess picked up. “Is she okay? Is she awake? I can be there in fourteen and a half minutes if I take the helicopter.”

“No, um, no change yet.”

“Oh.”

“But there’s something.”

“Of course! What is it?”

“Lena’s sleeping pill prescription, what was it?”

“One… second… Trazodone, 40mg, prescribed 21st of March.”

“Thank you, Jess.”

“Will that be all?”

“Yes. I’ll call you if anything happens.”

“Thank you.”

Kara hung up, cradling Lena’s phone to her chest, and said, “40mg of Trazodone. That’s what she took. Every night at 10.45.”

“Alright, then.”

Lucy marched off to boss some doctors around and, after less than six seconds of conversing, Eliza was by her side being just as intimidating. Susan made a vending machine run, smacking J’onn on the trapezius with a package of Chocos, and sat back down in the empty chair.

“Maggie’s gonna make such fun of me,” Kara laughed wetly, “when she finds out I called her aunt out here a month and a half early for a problem that could have been fixed by Lena giving more of a crap about taking her meds.”
Vasquez nudged her knee with the tip of her sneaker. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. And Alex is going to make that dumb moony look she always makes when Maggie laughs, and Lena’s going to hide under the covers because people are looking at her but she’ll still poke a hand out so I can hold it, and I’ll have been worrying for nothing, which is great, because once this is over, I’m gonna have the best excuse to bogart their couch and play with - ohmygodGertrude!”

“Don’t worry about Gertrude,” J’onn said, eyes lit up. “M’gann is with her right now, but as soon as James is free from CatCo, he’ll relieve her, and M’gann will come here. If things go as well as Major Lane seems to think they will, James has enough time to stroll over here with Gert so they show up just as our girls open their eyes.”

Kara’s own eyes were welling up with tears, and she launched herself across the gap between Lena and Alex’s beds to hug him. “Thank you, J’onn. For everything.”

“Of course, Kara. We’re family.”

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Manufacturing a Trazodone solution took almost as much time as realizing it wasn’t working. The barrier wasn’t fading, their brains didn’t stop moving away or start to come back.

“This was stupid,” Kara muttered. “This was a horrible idea, and we don’t have any better ones, and this is all my fault. If I’d just pushed, if I’d made Lena tell me what was going on, I could have seen this coming and I could have stopped it.”

“How?” Lucy knocked into her shoulder and plopped a cellophane packet of doughnuts in her lap. “They didn’t have any raspberry glazed; is coconut okay? But, anyway, your powers are physical. If something incorporeal is reaching out and stealing their brainwaves, unless you could track their brain activity through space and time so you could track the ass down and punch him, this is out of your powerful, yet delicate, hands.”

Kara sat, frozen, for a good fifteen seconds before ripping the package open and popping two tiny doughnuts into her mouth at once, chewing like she was working a stress ball.

“I mean - you, personally. You could’ve got J’onn, yeah, but there’s no guarantee the wall wouldn’t already have been in place. This is probably how things would have turned out, but we have the best people possible working on it, which means how things are turning out is going to be good.”

“Luce,” Vasquez whispered, “I think you’re making it worse.”

“Sandstorm, manners - fuck, Kara, I’m so sorry.”

Kara swallowed, mouth powdered sugar-dry, and shook her head. “It’s okay. If this is going to be a mess, you’re the people I’d want in it with me.”

“Um, guys?”

There, looking harried, was Winn, James and M’gann laughing a few feet behind him, being dragged along by:
“Gert!” Kara let herself be toppled over and loved on by that beautiful bull puppy - at least until she remembered where she was and what she was doing. “Listen, baby,” she murmured, very serious. “I promise I won’t let anything worse happen to your mommies, okay? And if something does, I’ll take really good care of you. We can see who eats more food in a day, huh? That’ll be fun.”

“Kara,” Winn said, plopping on the floor at the feet of the beds, legs stretching along the aisle between two of them, “I have a plan? Ish? First I need my lungs back. We used a CatCo car, and traffic was awful - lots of reporters - so we had to book it - oh god my lungs - ”

“Or you need to start running with me,” James teased, digging the toe of his shoe into Winn’s ribs gently.

“Stop it, I’m not meant for the outdoors,” he whined.

“Agent Schott,” J’onn prodded, “I believe you had a plan?”

“Okay. Whoo! Yeah. So sometimes Lena lets me dick around in the LCorp servers - free beta testing for security measures and whatnot - and she started a project a couple of months ago that might be useful.”

Vasquez eyed him. “So you’re the me within city limits, huh?”

“Oh, shit, it’s you! Hi, wow, Winn Schott.” He stuck out a sweaty hand, eyes fanboy fluorescent. “Your code on the circular air purifier is artistic. And the lockdown commands?”

“Hey, buddy, she’s spoken for.” Lucy wrinkled her nose at him. “Strictly desert office.”

“Strictly your office?” James cocked an eyebrow.

For a moment, the sparsest sliver of a second, Kara was afraid they’d be weird. Tense. But they weren’t. Lucy just let out a cackle and flexed her ankles, popping them both at once. “Yeah. I’m pretty territorial.”

“It’s fun being your territory.”

“I know.”

“She does it on purpose,” Vasquez mock-whispered. “Vasquez-comma-Susan: current territory.”

“Olsen-comma-James: prior territory.”

Kara would normally have loved their levity, their ease, but on that particular day, her eyes sizzled at it. Before she could say or so anything, before anyone else could notice, she zoomed off.

Kara landed in a shielded corner of the hospital parking lot, movie poster three-point-posed, to pace and not burn medical equipment with her eyes in peace and privacy.

Somehow, there was neither.

“Ms. Grant!”

“Hello, Kara.” She smiled, shifting her round sunglasses off her face.

“How did you know where I was?”

“Well, when you don’t call in sick, but you’re not at work, and Supergirl’s not off saving the city,
and your two crime-fighting cohorts flee like their khaki-clad butts are on fire, it’s only logical to conclude that you’re in trouble. Not Kara the superhero, but Kara the person who neglects her own emotional needs.” Cat shrugged one elegant shoulder. “Company cars have GPS.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I got rid of the paparazzi,” she continued. “It’s the least I can do.”

“Thank you, Ms. Grant.”

“Cat, Kara, you’ve known me well enough for that.”

“Cat.” Kara wrapped her arms around herself. “You can come inside with me, if you want. Meet everyone. See the… mess.”

Cat shook her head. “Hospitals. I don’t like them. It’s like privatized germ warfare, and all the matcha and açai in the world can’t protect you from casualties.”

Kara nodded.

“Besides, I’m not exactly supposed to know that your sister is employed by a shadowy government organization, alongside your dear friend Mr. Schott, run by an alien in disguise, dating another alien in disguise. Or that you’re Supergirl.” Cat arched a perfect eyebrow. “I trust there’s good reason for that, by the way.”

“Of course you knew.”

“Of course I knew.” Cat reached up and tucked Kara’s hair behind her ear. “So I will be nearby to terrify those camera-carrying gadflies away from you and yours, while you go inside to handle the situation with tact and precision, as I know you can.”

Kara’s eyes burned, but not with heat vision and impotence, and she wiped them with her sleeve.

“And take these.” Cat reached into her impressively huge purse and revealed a shirt, a belt, a pair of slacks Kara had never thought she’d see again. “You leave them lying around like CatCo is a college laundry.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

“I assumed you’d want to change clothes.” Cat indicated downwards, the slope of her arm terminating at the ripped-through knee of Kara’s sweats. “You’re not sitting shiva, so even if this hospital lacks a dress code, ripped clothing is unacceptable.”

Kara flung herself at Cat, wrapping her in a tight hug, eyes squeezed shut. “Thank you.”

“Of course, Kara.” Cat’s hand was light on the back of her head, a faint pressure through her thick hair. “Now go. Get back in there for your girls.”

Back inside, the chatter had stopped; everyone looked when she walked back in.

“Sorry,” she said, chin jutting as hard as she could make it. “I needed some air.”

“No problem.”

“Just glad you’re back.”
Things became just a little more okay.

Winn passed around his tablet, which finally held the specs for something Lena’d been working on.

Incredulous, M’gann said, “Helmets?”

“After the transmatter portal issue, Lena got really into transport, but her first prototype that wouldn’t fuck up the brain chemistry of an otherwise peaceful species ended up not moving matter from, say, point A to point B, but from point A to point A’s cousin on the other side of space-time.”

“I don’t see how dimensional travel is going to help us right now, Winn,” Lucy said, frowning.

“Okay, but when was the last time we saw someone go into a coma, seize, and have weird dreams?” he asked, expectant. “Huh? Well, not you, Kara, because you were the one in a coma, seizing, and having the weird dream, but it wasn’t a weird dream, it was - ”

“Another dimension! A pocket dimension built of my mind, and Barry’s, to fit the narrative the Music Meister needed to teach his weird little lesson - oh, the Music Meister!” Kara’s eyes fizzled.

“You think we can hunt him down so I can beat him up?”

“Oh, no, bad idea.”

“If his powers are what’s keeping Maggie, Alex, and Lena unconscious, pissing him off sounds like a dangerously bad idea.” James leaned against the foot of Maggie’s bed and crossed his arms. “This is different, though, right?”

“It is. Last time, you only started seizing after you were fatally wounded in that dimension. When the body created from your mind’s projected image was injured, your brain suffered the trauma.” J’onn’s eyes flicked over the monitors and he shook his head. “They seized, stopped on their own, and aren’t dead.”

“Well, good.” Kara smooched the top of Gertrude’s head and nodded, once, sharply. “So we get Lena’s interdimensional whatever, go in, grab them, and get them out. Easy-peasy.”

“Okay, but one problem?” Winn winced. “She was kind of theorizing this application. Travel between worlds has been on her docket since Valentine’s day, but using it in people’s heads? That came up later. One month and eight days later, to be precise.”

“March twenty-second?”

“Yep.”

“That’s the day after I got back from the Music Meister’s world. The day we got together.” Kara took a breath, closed her eyes, hooked her chin over Gertrude’s fuzzy, warm head. “She had a nightmare that night. After I told her everything, she said she had a dream - the dream. She dreamed of me in that world, from the point of view of - well, the her that was in it. She watched me die.”

“And it was bad enough to see firsthand that she got a prescription to avoid it.”

“Suppressing the dreams.”

“And when she stopped taking them in May, after the invasion, the dreams started up again, somehow not bad enough to want them to go away.”

“And she stopped working on it. It’s incomplete.”
“But how are they continuing?” J’onn asked. “That dimension was built around you and Mr. Allen’s minds, tailored to your preferences, your tastes, your needs. With the two of you having fulfilled its purpose, it should have collapsed. All the props, all the familiar faces - they should be gone, too.”

Kara closed her eyes tight enough to see spots. “Oh, my god. Oh, Rao, I’m stupid.”

“No, you’re not.”

“No, I mean. She seemed so real.” Kara looked up, blinking away blobs of color. “She seemed like a real person.”

“What.” Lucy said, poking her head back in through the curtains, “in the little fantasy thing? Of course she did. Who wants to fall in love with a puppet?”

Kara spluttered, “I didn’t - !” but cut herself off before finishing that sentence. “I mean. She was Lena. She looked like her, she acted like her - not one hundred percent, but close enough. Her, if she existed then. I didn’t love her, I love Lena. She was - she was a prop, like J’onn said!”

Vasquez’s eyes widened. “Pygmalion.”

“What?”

“Pygmalion.” Vasquez repeated. “It’s the Greek myth that inspired the play that My Fair Lady was based on.”

“Oh, that was Alex’s favorite when she was little,” Eliza sighed. “Probably more for Audrey Hepburn than I’d originally anticipated.”

“Who doesn’t watch that movie for Audrey Hepburn, though?” Lucy said. “Like, in all honesty?”

“In the myth, this sculptor hates women, right? Hates ‘em. Women are the worst, he’ll never settle down, yadda yadda yadda.” Vasquez rolled her eyes. “I know. Toxic Masculinity 101. But he gets lonely, so he decides to create a woman without any flaws. He carves her out of marble, falls in love with her - silent, still, perfect - and names her Galatea, prays to Aphrodite to bring her to life. He loved her - or he thought he loved her, loved what she represented - so much that she came to life. So much that she loved him back.”

“So I My Fair Lady’d an interdimensional trickster’s puppet?”

Winn smacked the floor. “Communicable consciousness! I heard her say it once in passing, but I never really payed attention to it. Bad habit. You made her real by bringing her into the narrative; with you gone, now she’s the main character, trying to fulfill the same quest.”

“And she brings in Alex and Maggie by dragging them into her narrative,” James mulled. “But it doesn’t make sense. Your story was built around you. A real person. If there’s no real person to draw from, how does the fiction sustain itself?”

“By feeding on the people the characters were based on,” M’gann said, eyes dark. “The story is consuming their minds, making itself real. It has to teach a real person a lesson, and for lack of one, it’ll make one.”

“Or three.”

“According to the Music Meister…” Kara stood, started to pace. “Either you followed the story to the conclusion - completed the plot, learned the lesson - or you died trying.”
“That sounds easy enough,” Eliza said encouragingly. “They’re smart girls, they can figure it out.”

“Barry’s a doctor, and I’m an alien from a race of hyperintellectual sophists and scientists. We got out because you guys interfered.” Kara was pacing faster, lifting onto the balls of her feet. “It’s harder than you think, Mom.”

“Kara, honey…”

“We should start working on those helmets. We don’t have the time to just sit here and do nothing. I mean, how much time do we have until their brains are totally absorbed?”

“Kara!”

“What?”

Eliza hissed, “Sweetheart, you’re floating.”

And whoops! She was.

Carefully, Kara lowered herself to the floor, sheepish.

“The metro office is closer,” Lucy offered. “And all the desert dwellers you need are right here.”

“Kara, you, J’on, and I can fly them over,” M’gann offered. “Two hands per passenger.”

“Sounds good.” Lucy stood, suddenly all business and crisp lines. “Dr. Danvers, I know astrobiology is your field of expertise, but we’re going to need you for this.”

“Anything for my daughters.”

“Winn, Suze, head back to the D.E.O. with Dr. Danvers, start figuring this shit out. Jimbo, you and me are gonna walk the dog.” No one moved for a second, and Lucy arched one perfect eyebrow and said, “Dismissed!”

They dismissed. A little shadowy government agency badge-flashing got Alex, Maggie, and Lena out of there probably a little too fast, and the whole team was at the D.E.O. within half an hour, working furiously, the paparazzi suddenly gone.

Kara helped where she could - rearranging the med bay so there was space for the half-built array of dimension-hopping headgear, decoding Lena’s weird protective jargon, using her heat vision and ice breath to weld and temper on command - but for much of the time, she felt useless.

She, James, and Lucy ended up parked by the door, out of the way, sharing the candy they’d stolen out of Winn’s desk and quietly chatting. She suspected part of it was them being good friends and trying to distract her, but it was also the two of them catching up and ribbing each other and genuinely enjoying each other’s company.

“So, Vasquez, huh?”

“So, Schott, huh?”

“Huh.” Kara grinned. “I was right about that, at least.”

James’ eyes were wide enough you could change time zones from one tear duct to the next. “Are you kidding me? You never said anything!”
“Please! I’m a very respectful person.” Kara bit into a Tootsie Pop and chewed on the cracking candy coating. “But I’m pretty sure everyone knows. You’re not very subtle.”

“We are so subtle.”

“He came in wearing your belt the other day. It did not fit him.”

“What about Lyra?”

“Oh, Jimmy,” Lucy cooed, patting his cheek. “Starhaven is notoriously polyamorous. And Winn posted a picture of the three of you hanging out the other day where both of them had stolen one of your t-shirts. I’ve worn those shirts, and I know when and why they’re worn. You’re not good at secrets.”

“Miss Grant knew he was Guardian right away. Right through the slit in his mask!”

“He has such pretty eyes! Of course she recognized them.” Lucy laughed, twirling a wrapper between her forefinger and thumb. “Remember when you thought you were being sneaky, so my dad didn’t find out we were dating?”

“…I wasn’t being sneaky, was I?”

“Honey, no.”

“Who are we making fun of?” Winn called, checking that Lena’s code was operational.

“Hint,” Lucy hollered back. “He gave you a hickey!”

Winn yelped and clapped a hand over his neck like he’d felt a mosquito. “You - are mean people!”

“You love it!”

Finally, the helmets were complete, and carefully, they put them on.

“Thank god we don’t have to shave anyone,” Kara murmured. “Lena used to want to shave her head, but not anymore, and Maggie and Alex would kill me if Maggie lost her hair.”

“How are they?” Lucy asked.

M’gann took one aisle and J’onn the other, both scanning two patients at the same time. “They’re fading fast,” she said, eyes flying open. “We need to move now, or their whole minds will have passed from this dimension and we won’t be able to see them.”

“Okay. Flip the switch!”

They stood, stiff, as Vasquez flipped the switch. There was a blossoming of light, but nothing happened - no portals, no doorways, no nothing.

“Did - did you flip it?”

“I flipped it.”

“Well, flip it again!”

“And turn it off?”
Kara groaned, bordering on a scream, and shot up off the floor. “How long do we have?” When no one answered, her throat tightened. “Until they’re gone for good, how long do we have?”

Chapter End Notes

Only one chapter left! I hope a 100% real world chapter wasn't too out of left field; this was just sort of how the story ended up being. Next chapter has plenty of music, and one last big reveal, but before then, just for fun: try and guess who T, the silent partner, is.

Thank you, Mo, , and Lola_McGee for your lovely comments! (and also, go read everything by Lola_McGee; she writes such wonderful SuperCorp fic and it deserves all the attention.)
Chapter Summary

It all comes crumbling down.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

KT:

Nothing.

There was nothing in the files from Cutter’s office.

“So she destroyed it,” Tallulah said softly.

“Or she kept it.” Ronnie stood, triumphant. “Yes! That’s it! Why would she leave her dirt lyin’ around where you could sweep it up?”

“So it’s in evidence,” sighed Eloise, “where we can’t get to it.”

“Where you can’t get into it.” Ronnie grinned. “I’m PD, baby, evidence is my domain.”

“PD, not FBI.”

“Ugh.”

“Sorry.”

Tallulah frowned, heaved a sigh. “I know her.”

“Yeah, that’s why we’re in this mess.”

“No, I mean, I know her. Marlene might want to see me. I can get in, talk to her. Get her to spill.” Tallulah nodded slowly, resolve building brick by brick, second by second. “Yeah, she’ll talk to me. She hates me, she probably knows who I am - she’ll want to lord it over me. And if she’s gloating, she’ll spill like tea.”

Eloise asked, “You sure you want to do this?” and Tallulah nodded.

“I need to. Talking to her puts me one step closer to ending all of it.”

“Then let’s go.”

The drive took a few hours, but they made it to the nearest federal prison before dawn, running on fumes and burnt coffee. Tallulah had had the presence of mind to change out of her Lady Law uniform and into something less conspicuous, a bias cut gunmetal grey day dress with a bow at the collar and a her beloved red coat. She looked like an ordinary person stopping in to speak to a crook,
and she got showed straight in.

“Is this a conjugal visit?” Marlene purred, eyes flinty.

“God, no.”

“Well, you’ve already fucked me over, my Lady.”

So she did know.

“I mean, you knew too much about my past. And I recognized your stitches. Your knots.”

“Nothin’ you can do about it from behind bars, Mar.”

Marlene leaned forward, sinuous as a snake, and cooed, “I can expose you. I can tell the whole city that you, my own employee, a mob woman since a month before your seventeenth birthday, has been running around getting people thrown out. They’ll see you for a fraud, Tallulah. They’ll think you were climbing the ladder, not cutting it down. No one will trust you. No one will respect you. You’ll be an ungrateful, criminal, traitorous bitch.” She laughed, rich and rough. “I mean bastard.”

*Illegitimate, then.* “Oh, yeah? And how would you know?”

“Please. I went to St.Clair’s. I know everything. I know who your mommy is. I know why she left you behind. I know just how little she cares that you’re still living. I know she *wanted* you to die when she left you in that gutter while you slept, after you conked out in your dead daddy’s bed.”

Marlene grinned deeper, touching the glass between them, caressing it. “Did you think you could still smell his cologne? Did you think, if you laid where he laid, you could get close enough he wasn’t lost?”

Tallulah swallowed hard and pretended it didn’t matter. She’d seen the cruelty coming, steeled herself for it. Behind glass, chained up, Marlene had no power over her.

“To think, a Thorul threw away like so much trash! She owns everything in this city, Tallulah, and she dropped you in the gutter like trash because you are trash, my Lady. You’re garbage. You’re worse than garbage. You’re nothing.” Marlene’s voice was climbing louder, clawing out of her like a rabid thing. “You’re a traitor! You’re a bastard! I own you, Lynch! You’re never getting free of me! I will never let you live a day in your life without fear, do you understand me? Never!”

Marlene pounded on the glass, rattling it in its frame, and Tallulah scrambled back, knocking her chair over.

“Never! Never! Never!”


⚖️

“Public record has plenty of mentions of the Thorul family,” Eloise said, slamming the stack of newspapers down on her desk. “Thaddeus, Thomas, and Thelma.”

“Alliterative.”
“Yeah. So if a Thorul knew your mom well enough to cover up her abandoning you…” Ronnie’s brow furrowed over wide eyes. “You’ve been in this from the start. It’s a wonder she hasn’t come knocking by now.”

“Marlene said she. So it’s Thelma. She knew my mother and she made me disappear. If she’s powerful enough to own the whole city, she has the connections, and with connections like that, it makes perfect sense for her to be the silent partner.”

“So we find her.” Eloise split the stack into three, releasing puffs of must into the air. “We have property holdings, we have tax returns, we have goddamn dental records.”

“That doesn’t sound like public information.”

“…I collected it in a public place.”

“We burn this after we’re done?”

“Agreed.”

They leafed through the stacks, finding that Marlene hadn’t lied - Thelma Thorul had inherited her husband’s empire and indeed owned everything. Directly or by shell holding, Ardor City belonged to TT.

“This is weird,” Ronnie said.

“What?”

“She owns a mountain in the Berkshires, fifteen miles outside city limits - through Dora, Connecticut.”

*The drop point.*

“That’s insane. Who buys a mountain?”

“Someone who gets zoning permits to hollow it out and build a bunker,” murmured Eloise, waving the paperwork, “that’s who.”

“She’s living out there? Hardly the lap of luxury.”

“But it’s private. Privacy’s important when you rule the world.”

Tallulah jumped up, body buzzing with new energy. “Let’s go. Let’s get her.”

“Tallulah, we need to prepare for this. We need an arsenal, we need transportation - we need a plan.”

“So let’s make one. Right now.” Tallulah began to pace madly, practically burning a hole in the carpet. “Transportation? Motorcycles.”

“Mine only holds two if we ride in packing.”

“I’ll get one. I’ll ride up on my own bike, you come up together. The mountain ain’t that steep; with the right tires, we’ll make it up no problem.”

“Okay, but bikes are expensive.”

“Not if you buy ‘em parts up.”
“You’re going to build a bike,” Eloise said, eyebrows high, “in a day.”

“In less than a day. We end this tonight.”

“Okay. We trust you.”

“I’ll get the tires, too, cover all of us. I’ll get some more rope, too. They’re gonna see justice in a courtroom, and I’m gonna watch ‘em crumble.”

“Weapons.”

“You got connections, El. And you, too, Ronnie.”

“I’m not stealing from the precinct.”

“I don’t have time to rough up some bad guys and take their guns, so we make do with what we’ve got. I got my Enfield, I got bullets for days. Ronnie, I know you have guns to spare, and El, you walk around with your shoulder holster more comfortably than you do a bra. We’re armed to the teeth, goddamnit, and I’m not waiting a second longer than we hafta.”

“Okay.” Ronnie gave a tight-lipped smile. “Okay. We’re doing this, but we gotta be level-headed when we go in. You get emotional holding a gun and something’s bound to go wrong.”

“We’re gonna be fine, Lynch,” soothed Elise. “Now park your ass, and we can iron out the details.”

They ironed like they worked at a dry cleaner’s. With the plan set in stone, Tallulah went out to buy a motorcycle in pieces and built it up from bones on her front stoop. She was screwing the engine into place when Kit walked up.

“Hey, sweetie.” She stooped to kiss Tallulah on the forehead. “What’s this?”

“Project.”

“Motorcycle?”

“Uh-huh.”

Kit sat down beside her and handed her the next piece to attach. “Eloise got you into riding, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Not feeling too chatty tonight?”

“Had a day.”

“What can I do?” Kit asked, draping her arm over Tallulah’s shoulders.

Tallulah laughed, hollow, heart in her throat. “Promise you’ll still like me in the morning.”

Kit nodded. “I’ll always like you, Lula.”

“Thanks,” Tallulah said, not believing a word. “Are you tired?”

“I can stay up.”

“You don’t hafta. Go get some sleep, toots.”
Kit kissed her cheek, lingering with her nose pressed into the curve of her zygomatic arch for a long moment, fingers tangled in her hair. When she pulled back, she’d left warm fingerprints on Tallulah’s scalp.

Tallulah turned back to her work, fixing on the off road tires. She gave it a final check and deemed it satisfactory. Just for kicks, as a final goodbye, she whipped out a sheet of paper and a can of spray paint. She covered her mouth and nose with her handkerchief, and started to spray. When she was finished, the capsule around the engine was shiny red with the Art Deco set of scales and stacked capital Ls peeking out in slick black, and she realized that the handkerchief was Kit’s, embroidered with her initials in sloppy script.

“Shit,” she hissed, folding it into her sternum. “After tonight, it’s over. This is gonna be finished.”

She tucked the motorcycle into the alley beside their apartment, chaining it too tight to a rack out there, and climbed back up to her apartment. Inside, Kit was on her bed and appeared to be asleep, so Tallulah crept past her and behind the screen to change into her costume. On her way back out, she kissed Kit’s cheek, matching the length of time spent just absorbing her skin in case she never could touch her again.

“Hey,” she mumbled, halfway to waking.

“Go back to sleep, toots.”

“Why’re you here?”

“I’m just sayin’ goodbye.”

Kit bolted upright, bleary eyes deer in headlights wide. “Goodbye? What the hell?”

“Tonight’s gonna be tough, and if this is the last time I see you - ”

Kit grabbed her, kissed her hard. When she pulled back, she was breathing as heavily as a bull about to charge, but there was no anger in her eyes, or in her quiet soprano. “No more talk of darkness; forget these wide-eyed fears. I’m here, nothing can harm you. My words will warm and calm you.”

When Tallulah pulled away, Kit’s hand gripped her wrist too gently to break away from, but she couldn’t turn towards her, either.

“Let me be your freedom,” Kit beseeched, “let daylight dry your tears. I’m here, with you, beside you, to guard you and to guide you.”

“Say you love me every waking moment. Turn my head with talk of summertime. Say you need me with you now and always - ” Tallulah choked a moment, eyes burning wet, but she soldiered on in her desperate, quiet plea. “Promise me that all you say is true. That’s all I ask of you.”

“Let me be your shelter. Let me be your light!”

“You’re safe,” Kit crooned, touching the back of her neck with feather-light fingertips, “no one will find you. Your fears are far behind you.”

“All I want is freedom, a world with no more night and you, always beside me,” sighed Tallulah, “to hold me and to hide me.”

Kit’s arm slid down around Tallulah’s chest, pulled her in close, pulled her into her lap. “Then say you’ll share with me one love, one lifetime. Let me lead you from your solitude.”
Her fingers crept up to the hem of Tallulah’s mask, seeking skin, but they stopped when she turned away, ghosting over her hidden, working jaw as she sang, “Say you need me with you, here beside you.”

“Anywhere you go, let me go, too!” Kit’s hand fell away, wrapped around her shoulder. “Lula, that’s all I ask of you.”

“Say you’ll share with me one love - ”

“ - one lifetime. Say the word - ”

“ - and I will follow you. Share each day with me - ”

“ - each night, each morning.” Kit pushed Tallulah’s hair aside, kissed the slope of her neck, held her tighter.

“Say you love me,” Tallulah begged, going limp, eyes fluttering shut.

“You know I do.” Kit, somehow, managed to lift Tallulah up and turn her around so she was straddling her lap, rather than perching in it, and cupped her cheeks, bringing their foreheads to rest against each other. “Anywhere you go, let me go, too.”

Reaching for her, one hand’s fingers tangling in her hair, Tallulah peeled up her mask with the other and crooned, “Love me - that’s all I ask of you.”

Someone moved first, or they moved together; either way, they crashed together like tectonic plates, inevitable and burning, lips fusing desperately. When they parted, both were breathless.

“Don’t come tonight,” Tallulah rasped. “Promise me.”

“I swear. Just be safe, okay? Come home to me. I don’t want to be without you.” With tender fingers, Kit rolled Tallulah’s mask back down. She kissed her on the forehead, then let go of her. “Go on. You got work to do.”

Tallulah went. Was it strange, ringing hollow, that Kit put up no protest? Yes. But the promise of her safety outweighed any logic or suspicion housed in Tallulah’s heart. She could not watch Kit die a second time.

Outside, she checked her gun, her spare bullets, her holster, her knives, her knots. Her motorcycle was full of gas. She was ready to go.

With the engine snarling beneath her, she set off the signal that told Ronnie and Eloise it was go time and took off. They merged together on the highway, riding abreast, and as they split from the smooth pavement onto a rough side road, they just looked at each other.

This was it. This was the do or die moment, the final battle before the curtain fell.

Save for one small stop at a phone booth, where Tallulah stared at a bloodied business card for a long, long time before dialing, they rode three hours straight until they reached the Berkshires.

KL:
“Not long,” J’onn murmured, stumbling back under the force of her flinging herself into his arms, face hidden in his shoulder. “The block - the dimension shift. It’s growing more solid. Whatever’s beyond it is stronger now than what’s on our side of the boundary.”

Kara squeezed her eyes shut against the sizzle of heat that threatened to burn everything. “There’s something. There has to be something!”

“Maybe it’s not travel,” Winn said slowly. “I mean, these panels - they’re not pressure-sensitive, they’re not control mods.”

“They’re screens?” Lucy’s incredulity was big enough to see from space. “Why screens?”

“The first night I was back, I dreamed about the dream. She actually dreamed it. Mine was - was better than hers, I said I wished she could have seen it.” Kara flew to the machine, zoomed around it. “She was barely awake. I can’t believe she remembered, let alone built - ”

“Of course she would.” James laid a hand on her shoulder, heavy and comforting. “She hangs off every word you say. Building something that can claw apart dimensions and turn brainwaves into video footage is the Easy Button on the list of things she’d do for you.”

Vasquez rummaged through the bin of bolts and wires before triumphantly flinging a fist into the air. “AV jacks, assholes, let’s get this going.”

“If we can see what’s happening, maybe we can use it,” M’gann offered. “We can influence the part of them still with us, in turn influencing them in the other world.”

“Suze - ?”

“Done and dusted, Director.” Vasquez finished fitting in the last wire, and the screens flickered to life on a long shot of a back road at night, a mountain range swelling into view.

“What the hell?”

“I know that mountain.” Kara pointed at the screen, eyes huge. “Why do I know that mountain?”

“You rescued Lena from Metallo’s exploding synthetic Kryptonite core from that mountain,” J’onn said. “I was there. We barely made it out.”

“Why are Alex and Maggie going in there? Why is Lena letting them? She almost died!”

“Because it’s the third act,” Winn said. “It was a movie, right? A movie musical?”

“Yeah.”

“This is the third act, the big finale. There’s going to be - ”

“The reveal, the twist, the red herring.”

“I was gonna say final battle.”

Kara clenched her fists. “Is that why the score is so damn stressful? Movie musicals aren’t supposed to sound like that.”

“If this world is adapting to their minds, it’s not just going to be your baseline anymore.” M’gann shrugged. “Their taste in fiction will creep in.”
“Alex’s film noir phase,” Eliza murmured, eyes wide. “Those awful action movies that used to give you nightmares.”

“Action movies gave you nightmares?”

“Explosions.”

“Oh.”

Kara crossed her arms, took a breath. “Maggie’s not even that into movies, she gets antsy sitting around for too long.”

“And Lena?”

“She liked horror, cheap sci-fi, but then it started being real life and lost the escapist thrill, so she just watched rom-coms and musicals with me.” Kara groaned. “She’s been asking me to skip the numbers in musicals for weeks, and I never made the connection, I just thought she was bored!”

“There’s no way you could’ve known,” said J’onn. “As little as they like to do it, the three of them are excellent at keeping secrets.”

“Why would they keep secrets from me? I’m Lena’s girlfriend, Maggie’s going to be my literal legal family in three weeks, and Alex…” Kara clamped her eyes shut again, but the heat glowed through her eyelids. “She always keeps things from me - to protect me, to protect herself, fine - but she promised she wouldn’t do that anymore!”

“Kara, sweetheart,” Eliza said, voice deliberate and calm, “you need to keep calm.”

“I was in a classic movie musical, Mom, the genre with the statistically lowest body count, and I still got shot in the stomach. They’re riding up Death fucking Mountain in a world now full of C4 and shootouts and dead people. Oh, my god, they kill lesbians in all of those genres! Film noir - they’re the bad guy! Action?”

“Cannon fodder after some gross male gaze-y sex scene!” Vasquez’s eyes flew wide open. “Horror, sci-fi, exactly the same!”

“And lesbians in rom-coms are either side characters who don’t matter, which won’t work because they’re all the main character by Music Meister Mandate,” Lucy groaned, “which means they have a one in three shot of dying right off the bat! There’s the dead ex, the main, and the new girlfriend - and even the last two might die, if it’s not actually a gay movie!”

“I feel like I’m watching movies wrong,” Winn whispered.

“We probably are,” James hissed back.

“See? I have every reason to be flying off the goddamn handle!” Kara’s voice was ragged, raw. “There’s no way they’re walking out alive, so how are you so calm?”

“I’m calm because I know how many movies your sister has watched, and I trust her to pick up on all the little plot contrivances that might trip her up, and because I know that getting upset will only make this worse - and I’m not liable to burn the building down if I let it get too far!”

Beams of heat shot out through Kara’s lashes, singeing the floor - too much to contain - and evaporating the wet streaks on her cheeks, but just as fast, they were gone, trapped behind her hand with her welling-over eyes.
“Someone has been stealing my girlfriend’s mind for three months in her sleep. We moved in together four months ago! I have been lying next to her all this time and I haven’t noticed a thing. I could have stopped this. I could have saved her!” Kara’s voice broke, steam slipping out of the seal of her fingers as she shouted, “I could have saved them all!”

“Kara - ” Winn’s hands were up, supplicatory, surrendering, inoffensive even though she couldn’t see the effort. “They’re all tough as nails, I think they’re gonna get through this.”

“They shouldn’t have to.”

“But they do.” Lucy reached over and grabbed her elbow, far enough from the heat not to hurt, and squeezed. “And they will. But for now, all we have to go off of is your dreamboat’s dream boat, so I’m gonna need you to cool it on the dragon eyeballs so we can do what she wanted you to do, which is watch.”

Kara’s jaw clenched as she fought the fire back.

“She wouldn’t want you angry, Kara. She’d want you hopeful. She’d want you to trust her.”

Finally, her hand fell away. “I do trust her,” she whispered. “I trust all of them, I trust all of you. But I don’t trust that world, and I don’t trust myself to - to watch if it takes them all away.”

RE:

Noise be damned, they drove up the side of Thorul Peak, parking just outside a massive set of steel doors. Eloise hopped off her bike and walked up to the lock, picking it in seconds. She swung the doors open and cocked a gun over the opposite wrist, slowly making her way inside. Ronnie followed suit, pace measured, but Tallulah had twice their fury and none of their patience. This woman had disposed of her, had killed Kara, had put Kit in danger.

That was what they’d planned for. Tallulah, in her silent shoes, peeled off her civilian dress for the uniform underneath and advanced quick enough to sink into the shadows before the goons came out to party. Slipping a rope off her waist, she flicked it out around a grunt and yanked, catching him around the middle and throwing him to the floor hard enough to put him out.

Across the room, Ronnie knocked a fella down with a swift sweep of the leg, then smashed her heel into his face hard enough to knock him out and bloody his nose. With another kick, she sent him sliding towards another heavy, knocking his feet out from under him and sending him sprawling to the floor with a sick thud. Eloise cold-cocked someone with the butt of her pistol, then elbowed a second tough in the temple on the recoil, felling them both and stepping over their unconscious bodies.

Two more phalanxes of double-breasted muscle monkeys started forward, and Ronnie waved Tallulah off.

“Head on back,” she barked. “Get to TT!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Tallulah ran, skidding on her knees behind an iron safe, totally invisible but able to see almost everything. From that vantage point, she could see her partners in crime-fighting cut through swathes
of foot soldiers, spilling no more blood than came from a split lip or a busted nose.

One nailed Eloise in the solar plexus with his boot, pressed her to the ground. “You really think a tiny dame’s got a chance in here?”

“I mean,” she wheezed, looking past him with fuzzy eyes, “yeah. But two got the deck stacked.”

Ronnie crackled with unholy fury, launching herself off a wall and into his chest, her own shoes crashing sickly into his ribs and smashing him to the ground. “Nobody hurts my goddamn girlfriend without payin’ the price,” she spat.

Eloise’s voice was thin, hoarse, shaky when she repeated, “Girlfriend?”

“Well,” Ronnie said, suddenly lacking all her brazenness as she jerked her fist back at the elbow, knocking a goon flat on his back before he could throw a punch, “if you want.”

Eloise got up and ran Ronnie’s way, leapt into her arms, swinging around her shoulders to kick a heavy in the throat and another in the jaw. When she came full circle, her eyes were bright and dark and her hands were tangled in Ronnie’s short hair. “Oh, sugar, do I want.”

She stretched up and kissed her, hard and hard-earned, before grabbing her gun out of her hand and firing over her shoulder, kneecapping a grunt, without ever breaking away.

When she did, breathless, she pressed the Glock back into Ronnie’s hand. “I’m gonna be borrowing your clothes, too.”

Ronnie’s eyes lit up, and she took Eloise’s hand. Then, her eyes hardened, and she whipped Eloise around behind her, aiming four distinct shots at the caged lights above - at the suspension cables holding them up. The cage crashed down, bulbs shattering, and pinned five grunts to the floor. She looked back at her girlfriend, eyes soft and glowy, and said, “Like I ain’t already seen you in my pajamas.”

It took them no time at all to reload, and then they were back in the fray. Ronnie threw Eloise up on top of her shoulders and they charged the throng like a gun-toting totem pole, shooting faster and sharper than the most mythical of gunslingers.

KL:

“You can tell it’s them dreaming this up,” J’onn said, halfway between grin and not, amusement and fear. “People actually have to stop and reload.”

Vasquez snorted. “A cute girl riding her around and gun safety? Alex Danvers couldn’t ask for better.”

“That’s ballistic nylon.” Winn drummed aggressively on Kara’s bouncing knee. “That’s WW1 era bulletproof armor!”

“Was it actually bulletproof?” Eliza asked, and Kara’s heart screeched to a stop at the audible anxiety in her voice.

“…on small rounds?”
Kara asked, “Are they using small rounds?” and grabbed her mother’s hand, letting her squeeze as hard as she needed.

Collectively, every D.E.O. agent in the room said, “Yes.”

Only Lucy spoke after that, to say, “For now,” and James reached around to flick her on the shoulder for it. “What?”

“Ot-nay elping-hay.”

KT:

With the mob distracted, Tallulah could move deeper into the bunker with ease, and she did exactly that.

The next chamber was full of plain old bombshells - heavy duty and stupid huge - and not much else. She moved on; nothing for her here.

The room after that, she wasted all her loaded rounds on scaring a goon out the door, wincing in sympathy when she clipped his shoulder, and hoping not to miss and hit a grenade. She barricaded the door shut behind her and skedaddled to the next one, reloading with clumsy, confident fingers and kicking the next door wide.

KL:

“Those aren’t small arms. Those are a fuckboy gun show.”

“But they’re in storage, they’re not being used.”

“Yeah, and she’s not picking any up, so she should be fine. I am loving the historical accuracy in props.”

“You just like all the shiny pointy weapons.”

“We all like the shiny pointy weapons.”

“Oh, shit, shut up. I smell final boss.”

KT:

An empty display case, lit from within, stood cracked open, too. Careful, Tallulah stepped forwards, crossing into its glow, peering around for something - someone.

Someone came in the form of a man - blue eyes, bald head, purple and green armor that glimmered like a beetle’s carapace - wrapped in an X made of a Tommy gun and a belt of the grenades, knives strapped to his thighs, jumping down on top of the case.
“Hello, little girl,” he oozed, slinging his gun around to aim right between Tallulah’s eyes.

KL:

“So, what I said about small rounds?”

“Uh-huh.”

“He’s not using them.”

Kara took a deep, meditative breath. “He’s Lena’s brother. That’s his war suit.”

“She doesn’t recognize him?”

“That’s not Lena.” Kara took a deeper breath; they weren’t working. “That’s her doppelgänger. That’s who becomes real if Lena’s mind doesn’t learn the Music Meister’s lesson. She doesn’t know anything.”

KT:

“You don’t hafta do this.” Tallulah grabbed a rope and put her hands up in a soft surrender. “Thelma Thorul - she’s bad candy, but you can choose to put her back in the jar and walk away. This doesn’t have to be how your story ends.”

The armored, armed man cackled. “In every job that must be done, there is an element of fun. You find the fun, and snap!” He cocked the gun. “The job’s a game. And every task you undertake becomes a piece of cake - a lark! a spree! It’s very clear to see - ”

Vibrato and rapid gunshot sound an awful lot alike.

Tallulah threw herself away from the hail of bullets, into the display case. She closed the door behind her and waited as the man jumped down and continued to fire. Her eyes squeezed shut involuntarily, like she could avoid death by not seeing it come, but then it didn’t come. The glass was bulletproof.

And then the bullets stopped.

The man tossed his gun aside, and Tallulah kicked the door open, sharp corner nailing him in the gut. As he stumbled back, she scrambled out of the box and up on top of it, taking high ground. “A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down!” With a flick of her wrist, she caught his arm with a twist of rope - “The medicine go down!” - and wrapped it around her own arm for leverage before pulling and hopping off the back, throwing him into the box: “The medicine go down!” From there, she dashed around it, wrapping it shut from the outside and tying a firm knot.

“If you play nice,” she promised, “I’ll let you out later.”

She walked off, whistling, but then there was a too-loud, too-close metal scrape. A pin being pulled.

The grenades.

In a shower of shards of glass and a great belch of fire, the box was destroyed, but the man inside
stood, unharmed thanks to his war suit.

“Just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down,” he snarled, rising from the blast, “in the most delightful way.”

KL:

“I can never watch Mary Poppins again,” Eliza whispered.

Kara started biting her cuticles, cracking the floor with the force of her bouncing foot. “Me, neither.”

KT:

“A robin feathering his nest,” Tallulah trilled, freeing a length of manila rope from her waist and cracking it like a whip, knocking his helmet away, “has very little time to rest.”

“While gathering his bits of twine and twig.” The man grabbed her rope, knife out, and grinned, dragging her in by it and slicing it short - no more defense. “Though quite intent in his pursuit -”

“He has a merry tune to toot!” Tallulah kneed him in the crotch, to no effect but a florid bruise for her. “He knows -” She ducked a knife, broke his grip of it and kicked it away. “ - a song -” She took a fist to the face, nose crunching, her own fingers wrapped around his grenade belt. “Will move the job along!”

Triumphant, she ripped one bomb away and bashed him in the face with it.

“What?”

“For a spoon - ” bash “ - full - ” bash “ - of sugar - ” bash “ - helps the medicine - ” fist cocked “ - go down!” Tallulah landed a loaded uppercut that didn’t seem to faze him.

Instead, he grabbed her arm and held her in place while he headbutted her - “The medicine go down!” - helmet and all, her blood streaking the retracted face plate. He did it again - “the medicine go down!” - and Tallulah went limp.

Deliberately, punctuatively singing, “Just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down!”

Throwing her weight to the floor, she managed to send him flying over her head, crashing into the concrete hard, helmet clanking shut. She climbed to her feet and nudged him onto his stomach, grabbing at the split rope - now the perfect length for really thorough handcuffs - but as she started to tie, he rammed his elbows into her throat and knocked her back, loomed over her: “In the most delightful way.”

The music continued, an instrumental interlude dripping through the air like blood from both their faces, too cheerful to feel safe.
“Imagine Roulette’s cage matches like this,” M’gann said, somewhere between horrified and humor-struck. “Think she could’ve upped the ticket price?”

J’onn’s arm around her tightened, and so did the steel bands around Kara’s heart. Lena was seeing, feeling, at least part of that fight - the torn skin, the battered windpipe, the fear - and she could do nothing about it.

“This is my story,” he snarled, tipping the face guard back up over his helmet and grabbing a grenade. “This is my ending. We will triumph, and you will fall like a pawn to the queen of the board.”

“Here’s the thing about pawns,” Tallulah snipped, dodging a grenade, ducking from a blast. “If you’re smart, they turn into queens. And I got three in my corner.”

By her count, there had been ten grenades on his belt when she walked in - one for every two years she’d been an orphan. Now, only eight remained.

“You’re adorable.” He threw another grenade, and she beat it out of the way with a heavy manila rope, sending it crashing into the far wall where it exploded, cracking the bunker. “You’ll never win. You’re not smart, you’re not strong, you’re not special. You’re nothing.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I ain’t nothin’.” Tallulah batted away another grenade, arcing it over this nut’s head and into the corner. “Not without my people. But with ‘em?” A fifth grenade soared at her and then, whap!, into the battered concrete wall. “I’m better than I was, and I’ll keep - getting - better!”

Three more grenades gone, making marble bedrock dust sprinkle down onto their heads. Tallulah decided not to give this guy the chance to toss another one and started using her last rope as a whip, cracking at his feet to make him step back, his hands to stop him grabbing a weapon. It worked for a few yards, but then he grabbed his knives and started slicing off sections of rope like he was slicing bread.

In seconds, she was down to nothing but a few stray fibers and he was upon her with his hunting daggers, slicing through the air, blades flashing ever closer. She could only dodge so long, and she knew that, so she stopped dodging.

He stabbed down at her, blade hooking towards the space between her collarbone and her ribs, and she slammed the back of her wrist into the inside of his, knocking the knife out of his hand. She kicked it away, then kicked him in the ribs, her entire foot lighting up with pain.

“Metal fuckin’ suit,” she groaned, and ducked the other dagger. It sank into the soft wood of the crates she’d been backed up against, and she snatched it out, throwing it the same direction as its twin. Then she grabbed a grenade off his belt, pulled the pin, and threw it towards his discarded daggers, blowing them to kingdom come.

That was ten, right? Nine or ten?
Tallulah grabbed his arms and used them to hoist herself up and swing, ramming her heels into his armored chest. He stumbled back under the blunt force of the blow, and she took that opportunity to scramble away, drawing her own knife and throwing it.

It managed to graze his cheek, tearing a clean line across his zygomatic arch, but he didn’t seem fazed. Instead, he reached for his grenade belt.

There was one left.

He pulled the pin and threw it.

By some small miracle, Tallulah snatched it out of the air, holding down the lug in a white knuckled grip.

“Maybe you aren’t worthless,” the man breathed, eyes fever-bright, long lashes dripping red. “Nice catch, little girl.”

Tallulah’s heart pounded in her chest and she ran at him, fist cocked. When she got close, she launched herself into the air and slammed the grenade into his cheek, knocking him to the ground.

She stood over him, triumphant, catching her breath. “Thanks.”

Before she could celebrate, or move past that room to the next, the man grabbed her by the ankle and pulled her feet out from under her. Her head cracked against the cold concrete floor, and the world fuzzed out for a moment.

When everything settled, she had a split second to realize she wasn’t holding the grenade anymore before something went boom.

Tallulah scrambled to her feet, head still spinning, and found a hand on her throat. The armor-clad man bashed her into the wall, black washing in and out of the edges of her vision like the tide.

“The Thorul name will go down in history,” he grunted, “as pioneers of a new order. Of a new era of control and command.”

“And - murder - !” croaked Tallulah, legs kicking fruitlessly.

“What’s a few lives for progress’ sake?”

The music swelled, calling for participation, and he was only too eager to respond. “The honeybees that fetch the nectar from the flowers to the comb never tire of buzzing to and fro - ” to and fro, side to side her head slammed into the wall both ways “ - because they take a little nip - ” slam “ - from every flower that they sip - ” slam “ - and hence - ” slam “ - they find - ”

Tallulah kicked, fought. She managed to claw his helmet off in the scuffle, but the darkness on the edges of her vision was relentless in its inward creep, and she didn’t have much time. Dimly, she realized something was weighing on her thigh, and she scrabbled for it.

Her gun.

Only six shots.

The first made him step back, made his grip loosen enough for her to draw breath. Still, he hadn’t set her down, so she fired again.

And again, and again.
Every slug pushed him back, gave her more oxygen, more control. Her aching arms hefted the gun just a few inches higher, and she fired the last shot.

There was a slick, sick whistle as he tried to breathe around the hole in his throat. He dropped her, staggering, and scrabbled for something behind his back, utterly null with the moon at his back.

A three-pronged dagger clattered to the floor as he lost his footing, eyes dull and dark, and fell slackly through the grenade-wrought hole in the wall. His arm was up; he’d wanted to stab her. Kill her, too.

He fell without a sound, too far for the noise of his impact to reach her. Still, she peered out and watched him drop, only looking away just before he hit, stomach lurching.

She swallowed hard and picked up the knife, staggering onwards. The adrenaline and oxygen starvation had her numb and buzzing, but she’d probably broken a few toes, at least.

“Stick to the mission, Lynch,” she rasped, voice thick and clotting, throat a raw mess. “Thelma Thorul. Ending this is what matters. You had to kill him.”

There were no doors out of that room, only a steel wire staircase leading up through the cracked ceiling, so Tallulah tucked her gun away and climbed, wiping her eyes with her gun hand while the other clung to the railing so she didn’t fall away like that man.

KL:

No one could hear the score over Kara’s jackhammer leg. It had now dug three feet into the floor and showed no signs of stopping.

“She made it through that,” James said. “And she made it through that here, too, and she survived, which means she’ll survive in there.”

“Lex never tried to choke her to death.”

“He never succeeded.”

The hole was now at three feet.

“She’s a total badass, though,” Lucy offered. “That bullwhip bullshit was fantastic. And when she started hammering on him with a live grenade? The coolest shit I’ve ever seen since that fake-Sanvers battle stack.”

“Yeah, but what’s happening with them? Are they okay?”

“Triumphant badass music playing when we saw them last.” Vasquez gave her still knee a squeeze. “They’re going to be okay.”

“But - ”

“Just watch.”
Up, and up, and up. When she reached the next chamber, the air was thin and sour. A woman stood there. She looked unassuming, almost - grey wool suit, peachy silk blouse, sedate heels, perfect pearls - but everything about her was too crisp, too lush, to be properly ignored. Her celadon eyes were cold and cruel and calculating as she watched Tallulah limp her way, starting across the woven wire catwalk.

“So you’re Lady Law,” she drawled.

“According to the papers.”

“Marlene warned me about you.” Thelma Thorul huffed a laugh through her nose. “You’re nowhere near as impressive as she promised.”

“Well, Thelma, I hafta say, I feel the same way about you.”

“Unarmed and broken… You stand no chance.”

“You have ruined lives, Thelma Thorul. You’ve trafficked children. You’ve killed people - Ronnie’s dad, Mistah Cuttah, Barry Allen - ” Tallulah’s voice cut off like someone had jammed a knife into it. “You killed Kara Danvers!”

KL:

“Oh, shit.”

“Winn!”

“Is that Lillian Luthor?”

KT:

“I swore I’d be better than the people like you, who think lives can be taken for somethin’ bigger! I never wanted to be this way. But I just took a life. I broke the one promise I thought I could actually keep, which means there is nothing left to keep me good. I’m as dirty and rotten as you are, which means I can and will choke the life out of you with my bare hands if I have to to do what I came here for.”

Thelma laughed, head thrown back. “Oh, that’s precious. You’re weak, Tallulah. You’re weak to the root, to the core, to your very cells. You don’t have the gumption to do anything outside of self defense, and even that’s made you cry like a child.”

Tallulah swiped at her cheeks and found her mask wet. She gave up. There was nothing left, no reason to hide, so she tore away her mask and let it drop. “Getting rid of you is doing good. I’ll live
with that stain if it makes the world cleaner.”

“Then come try it, Lady Law! Come try to kill me. It’ll be fun to watch you fail.”

So she tried. Tallulah ran at her, all brute force and shaking hands, and threw a punch. Thelma dodged it expertly, no effort at all, and grabbed her by the cape.

“So impractical,” she sighed.

“My girlfriend thinks it’s just swell,” gritted Tallulah, twisting free and retrieving the knife she’d stolen from the man downstairs, aiming it at her throat. “And I think your last line of defense would approve of how I use this, if not who I use it on.”

KL:

“Oh, shit!”

“Winn!”

KT:

Thelma’s cool was gone. Her eyes were all hollow rage. “Where did you get that? What did you do to him?”

“Your last tough. I took him out.” Tallulah’s hands shook, Tallulah’s voice shook, but her resolve did not, and she held her ground. “I shot him in the throat and he fell off the mountainside.”

“Oh,” Thelma whimpered, “my beautiful boy. My poor Thomas, my sweet son!”

Tallulah’s heart ached in spite of herself. “Why would you put your own family in this position?”

“Why would you kill your own brother?”

KL:

“Are you actually - come on, Lena, you’re smarter than that!”

“That’s not Lena. She’s the same mind, the same heart, the same body, but a different world. She doesn’t know any of this.” Kara hissed, tasting blood where she’d ripped off a hangnail. “And this is the worst way to find any of it out.”

KT:
“No. No, that’s not - ”

Reaching into her coat, Thelma retrieved a thin stack of papers and jammed them roughly on the prongs of her stolen blade. “I’m sure someone taught you something resembling literacy at some point in your worthless life.”

“No.” Tallulah threw the knife down, its prongs jamming through the weave of the catwalk, then pulled out her gun. “I won’t let you trick me, distract me. You’re gonna join your son in Hell tonight, Dr. Thorul.”

Thelma spread her arms wide, looking down her nose at Tallulah, and cocked an eyebrow. “Do it. Kill me.”

Tallulah fired.

The bullet clipped a support cable, her hands shaking too horribly to aim or even hold the gun, and it hit the catwalk, skittering off the edge and falling away. She dropped to her knees and let out a wretched gasping sob.

“Read the file, you stupid girl.”

She did.

Exhibit A: a newspaper article that narrated itself to the two of them, mocking her.

“Mystery after gala night,” Thelma crooned coolly, “it says, ‘mystery of the daughter’s flight.’ ‘Mystified,’ all the papers say, ‘we are mystified; we suspect foul play. Bad news on the Thorul scene, patriarch died, child unseen. Still, at least the empire holds; gossip’s worth it’s weight in gold.’”

Tallulah’s eyes widened, and she looked up at Thelma, heart in her throat. “What are you saying?”

“What a way to lead a family. Spare me these unending trials! Raising a bastard child? Throw her to the wild - an orphanage! To hell with his mistake, I won’t take this lying down or in denial!”

Knuckles white in her gloves, Tallulah managed, “You’re my mother?”

“Oh, heavens, no! My dear Thaddeus… he had a wandering eye after poor Timothy was born. Your mother was some ill-begotten stain, just like you. Once he died, how was I supposed to keep you, feed you, care for you? When you were just his ugliest mistakes made manifest? What woman wouldn’t cast you out.”

Tallulah crumpled up the rest of the papers in one fist and tucked them into her pocket, freeing up the knife. She stood, drew back, took aim, and sank the knife into Thelma’s shoulder.

“Why couldn’t your big brother have finished you off?” Thelma tutted. “He would have been so much more… efficient.”

With a soft grunt, she pulled the knife out of her arm and advanced on Tallulah, totally calm.

“I have an empire to run, Tallulah, I don’t have all day to clean up this mess. Now hold still.”
“Oh, my god. Oh, my god, it’s happening. What’s happening? I don’t know!”

“Shut. Up.” Kara’s fingers pulled through solid steel like softened butter. She couldn’t sit and watch; she couldn’t walk away. It hurt to see but it would hurt worse to be with her if - when - something went wrong. “She’s beaten her mother. She’s beaten an alien invasion.”

“She’s saved all of our lives at least once.”

“And she can clearly hold her own, even against giants and gods and monsters.”

“I just want to see what’s happening with Alex and Maggie. CUT TO: come on.” Kara wrapped her arms around herself, locking her hands away from anything else they could inadvertently destroy. “They’re winning, right? They were winning. Let me watch them win.”

“Bad writing and bad editing to cut away from this fraught confrontation.”

Even as her mother towered over her, Tallulah wasn’t afraid.

Or, rather, she was, but it didn’t matter.

In her pocket, her two-way radio hissed: kzzt... backup heading your way... kzzt.

Ronnie and Eloise were okay. They were coming to help. She wasn’t alone.

Tallulah reached up and caught Thelma’s wrists, grappling the blade away from her, fighting as dirty as she could.

“I will never let you beat me,” she spat. “I will never be like you. I will be good enough for the people who love me. For my real family.”

“You have no family, Tallulah, not anymore. It’s just you and me.” Thelma threw her back against the guardrail, catwalk rocking dangerously. “And soon, you won’t be part of the equation anymore, either, murdered like your brother and your father.”

Tallulah kneed her in the diaphragm, hard, but not hard enough to break her grip. “You killed your own husband?”

“He had it comin’. He had it comin’. He only had himself to blame. If you’d’ve been there, if you’d’ve seen it, I bet that you would have done the - ”

There was a zip, a crack, and then there was a body falling over the railing, bullet wound in its head.

KL:
“What the fuck?”

Eliza, who had been punching the air since she first heard her daughter’s voice, froze.

“Who the hell just shot her? When did they get a sniper?”

Kara had no answer. All she had was Lena’s mind, all her thoughts and feelings, insisting that she was good and worthy and loved, that she wasn’t alone.

“I believe we’re about to find out,” J’onn rumbled, “if everyone will be quiet enough for us to pay attention.”

KT:

Tallulah looked up, following the line of the bullet back to its shooter, and saw none other than Leonida Boon, FBI, on the catwalk framing the other edge of the room.

KL:

“WHAT THE FUCK?”

KT:

“Thank you for coming,” Tallulah managed.

“Thanks for inviting me.” The agent strode over like she was taking a leisurely walk in the park, and Tallulah realized she wasn’t holding the gun.

The tall woman behind her was.

The tall, broad-shouldered, blue-eyed blonde, to be precise, with the scar above her eyebrow.

“How are you in there?”

“Kit?”

KL:

“How are you in there?”

“The Music Meister made characters based off people we knew. Similar, but not the same, so we
could apply what we’d learned.”

“So Lena’s mind decided on you flying in and saving her from her mother?”

“On my image. On… Kit.”

“So, if Kit’s not you, am I allowed to say Kit’s smokin’?”

Vasquez elbowed Lucy in the ribs.

“Most of us are thinking it, and everyone else is her parent, so it’s fine.”

M’gann sighed. “If anything, I’m her cool aunt who lets her sneak beers at Thanksgiving.”

\[KT:\]

“Sorry I didn’t stay home,” Kit quipped across empty space, shouldering her rifle and stepping around Agent Boon before breaking into a full sprint.

Tallulah wiped her face, blood, sweat, and tears coming away on her sleeve. “Sorry I didn’t tell you everything. I really wanted to.”

And then they were in each other’s arms, tight and perfect. Kit hugged harder, now that she knew, now that she’d almost died, and it was glorious.

“This is all, I’m sure, very cathartic and well-earned, but your compatriots are waiting for you outside and I’m sure your broken foot won’t be quick like a bunny on all those stairs.” Even dry, Agent Boon’s eyes were warm. “Sorrel - ”

\[KL:\]

“Zor-El?”

“Sorrel. It’s a kind of plant.” Kara’s eyes widened. “Rao. A plant that sounds like my name.”

“Lena couldn’t exist in a world without you in it,” James teased, nudging her now-still knee with his shoulder.

\[KT:\]

“- see her out, won’t you? And supervise. Those two are pushing the Hays Code to its breaking point down there.”

“Yes, Agent Boon.” Kit nodded crisply and presented her boss with her rifle. “Get a straggler for me.”
“I make you no promises.”

Tallulah made it to the ground floor before she couldn’t breeze past the shattered bones in her foot. Kit scooped her up, bridal style, and carried her through to the entrance, where Eloise and Ronnie were canoodling on their motorcycle by a parked black van.

“Thought you’d never get out of there,” Eloise called, cheeks pink and dimpling.

“Yeah,” Tallulah drawled, “you look real worried. What happened to you comin’ up to have my back?”

“Thought you’d wanna see your girlfriend,” Eloise teased.

“You wanna talk girlfriends?” Tallulah wiggled her eyebrows, and they both giggled.

“We knew the FBI could handle it.” Ronnie wrinkled her nose. “Didn’t know their hiring standards were so low, though.”

“Low enough you got a job offer,” was Kit’s retort, complete with a stuck-out tongue. Ronnie laughed, head thrown back, leaning into Eloise’s side, and somehow, the residue of death and detonation didn’t cling like it once had. The moonlight was gentle; they all glowed.

“What about all the people Thorul employed?” Tallulah asked. Kit sat down, her still in her lap, and started patching her up, but she couldn’t sit still. “The good people, the ones who ain’t hurtin’ anybody. Grady, Pablo, the showgirls, the drivers.”

The van swung open, and two long legs unspooled, crossing. “That’s my business.”

“Miss Foss?”

“Foss-Moran, but after all this cockamamie shit, you can call me Millie.”

“Millie.”

“There, was that so tough?” She grinned. “I’m keepin’ em. Same guns, different target. People lose their jobs, they gotta find work somewhere, and somewhere ain’t always above board. So I’m keepin’ the families runnin’, makin’ ‘em one family, but no more shady shit. Privatized pro-bono protection for the public.”

“Working with the FBI,” Kit said, finishing up a roll of gauze.

“Which we’re gonna be doin’, too!” Ronnie hissed, grinning. “I get to carry a gun.”

“Sugar, you already carry a gun.”

“Yeah, but I’m gettin’ paid.”

“Good.” Eloise raked her fingers through Ronnie’s hair, pulling her in close. “I ain’t dating an unemployed slacker.”

“Do you wanna join up, Lula?” Kit kissed her dried-bloody temple, rubbed her shoulder. When she gave no answer, Kit pressed only this: “You don’t hafta say yes.”

“I like protecting people,” Tallulah murmured. “Federal sounds too far up for that. Best part about this was so early. That one woman in the phone booth. I saved her. But if Millie’s cutting the crime rate like grass, then I guess I ain’t gettin’ many chances.”
“Protect me.” Millie leaned back, grinning coyly. “What? I can handle myself, but the stragglers who don’t think peace will pan out are scared stupid by Lady Law. Every once in a while, just put on the costume, scowl at some deliverymen, and pay rent on yous two’s apartment.”

“If you got the Moran family, too… What happened to Tommy?”

“Oh, that chickenshit?” Millie scoffed. “I came back to save what my fathers built. He ran away so he didn’t have to remember what he’d done or who he’d been. I’m keepin’ the hyphenate because I’m keepin’ his house, but other than that, he’s written off.”

“Good. He’s…”

“Gross. I know. He’s fun until you got work to do, and then? Dead weight.” Millie shook her head. “So, will ya do it?”

Tallulah looked over at the women she’d worked so closely with, finally at peace, and at the woman she loved so dearly, who trusted her, who saved her.

Suddenly, she was in the graveyard, gangsters’ corner, standing over a patch of all colors.

“Started it for you,” Tallulah murmured, “ended it for me.”

“She brought us together.” To her right stood Ronnie and Eloise, sunshine glowing on their windswept hair. “Gave us a purpose.”

“Gave us a family.” Eloise smiled, squeezed their hands.

Gently, Tallulah pulled her hand free to place a single yellow rose - for friendship - against the headstone. “Thank you, Kara Danvers,” she murmured, “but now it’s time to go.”

As she stood, and they all walked back towards their motorcycles and Kit, munching on a doughnut and patiently waiting. “You okay, sweetie?” she asked, kissing Tallulah gently hello.

“Yeah. I’m good.”

“See you both for dinner,” Ronnie said, I’m-watching-you fingers swinging at them both. “Okay? Eight o’clock.”

“You might get to meet the dog.” Eloise grinned. “If we can actually pick one.”

“They’re too cute, I’m sorry.”

“One of us in this relationship has to be the impulse control around dogs, Sorrel, and it ain’t gonna be me.”

“This relationship?”

“Yeah. I love this relationship.”

Ronnie ducked down and kissed Eloise, longer than daylight permitted, and murmured, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

They split, Ronnie behind the handlebars, leaving Kit and Tallulah alone together.

“Time to go,” Tallulah murmured, voice suddenly wildly different - not hers.
“I know. I love you.”

Her voice was back to normal, and she didn’t even remember the split, when she said, “I love you, Kit.”

“Love you back.”

Tallulah straddled her motorcycle, Kit behind her, and took off.

A soft refrain hid itself in the wind:

*Put a little love in your heart.*

---

*AM:*

“There’s mascarpone on your nose,” Maggie grinned.

“That’s mascarpone Swiss meringue, and it wouldn’t be there if you hadn’t smashed tiramisu cake into my face.” Alex grinned, wrapping her arms around Maggie’s neck, and nuzzled their noses together, smearing it off on her’s. “There! That’s better.”

“What?”

Alex tilted her head and kissed the tip of Maggie's nose, coming back with frosting on her lip. “I’m being a good wife,” she protested coyly, twirling her fingers in Maggie’s hair. “Through thick and through thin, right?”

“You just wanted an excuse to lick my face,” accused Maggie, dragging Alex into her lap. “Which you, as my wife, do not need.”

Alex giggled. “You're my wife,” she whispered. “Uh-huh.”

“I'm married.”

“Yeah, I know, I was there.”

“You were! Because you were getting married, too!”

Maggie licked frosting off Alex’s nose, then kissed her, fingers digging into her bare back. “I never wanted to get married before,” she murmured, “but now all I want to do is be married. And I did it! I’m married! I can’t wait until the next time we order takeout, and I get to say, ‘My wife wants the kung pao shrimp, extra spicy, no cabbage,’ because you’re my wife!”

“Next concert we go to,” Alex murmured, “I’m going to get lost at some point and start yelling, ‘Have you seen my wife?’”
Maggie laughed.

“No, seriously, ‘Have you seen my wife? She’s tiny and beautiful and she could break you in half and I love her forever and we’re wearing matching wedding rings because we’re married because she’s my wife!’” Alex wiggled her fingers, watching the light glimmer off her ring - because I have a ring, and it’s a wedding ring, and I picked it out with my wife when she was my fiancée, but she’s not my fiancée anymore, she’s my wife, because we got married so she could be my wife, and now she’s my wife! Wife! Maggie is my wife! - and felt at peace. She was deep water, calm and containing multitudes.

“I take umbrage at tiny, but as my wife, I will allow it.” Maggie wrinkled her nose, grinning. “Just this once.”

“I’m gonna go get my wife a whiskey.” Alex laughed. “A whiskey for my wife. Some liquor for my lady. Does my wife want it rocks or neat?”

Maggie smooched the scar on her shoulder and hummed.

“Am I saying wife too much?”

“Not even a little bit.” She sat back and shook her head, eyes wide. “You might not even be saying it enough.”

“Wife,” Alex purred, standing up. “Wife.” She pulled Maggie to her feet. “Wife, wife, wife, wife - ”

Maggie stretched, pulled her down, kissed her hard, and sighed, “Wife,” when they pulled back.

“Wise.”

Together, they skirted the dance floor, and made their way over to the drinks table.

“Christ, I was going to be cute and kiss you while I poured, but this is expensive shit,” Alex hissed, gesturing at the bottle.

“Wedding gift! I’m allowed to spend stupid amounts of money.”

Maggie didn’t even need to look to see Lena, Kara’s lipstick poorly hidden on her jaw when she’d taken her hair down, in her bridesmaid dress, hands on her hips. “Hey, little Luthor.”

“Hey.” Lena reached over and, without even looking, poured them each two fingers of college tuition. “Thanks again for using me as a seat filler.”

“Funny. You know you’re an official party member, Lena, we made you come on our joint bachelorette party.”

Lena wrinkled her nose. “You two split an hour in and ended up going home, eating ice cream sandwiches, and watching Carmilla at three in the morning. We were in drunk crisis mode, and Kara only calmed down when you called me to tell me that Elise Bauman’s arms were ‘a gift from God, who is a beautiful gay lady that hates being given beards in official art.’ Then you two laughed about that pun for exactly three and a half minutes before you started making out.”

“Exactly.” Alex clapped Lena on the shoulder and grinned. “If you hear her unzip pants with her teeth, you get to be Maggie’s bridesmaid. We don’t make the rules.”
“Ugh.” Lena poured herself a drink. “You two are adorable. Stop it.”

“No.” Maggie clinked her glass against her wife’s - wife! - and her sort of sister-in-law’s. “Go tell the Party Pack Polygon to stop it. Winn can’t dance and his dates can, so he looks like an awkward, lovestruck dumpling mooning from the sidelines. There is room for but one of those tonight, and Kara ate it three hours ago.”

Both statements were true:

- James and Lyra were both naturally graceful people, and they spent so much time being careful and precise with their bodies that dancing was easy. Winn, however, stressed about it, Googled himself into a hole so deep that he was learning about folk dances from villages in the Balkans with a population in the single digits, and ended up just staring after them with hearts for eyes.
- Kara had found tiny dumpling hors-d’oeuvres an hour into the reception. An hour and five minutes into the reception, there were no dumplings left. This was all planned for, quite deliberately, and turned out in everyone’s favor.

“Nah. I’m convinced that Lyra’s going to pick him up in six minutes and start carrying him around.” Lena tipped her glass their way and took a sip, indicating Lyra and James’ furtive whispering and calculating glances their moony boyfriend’s way. “We don’t want to miss that.”

“Ooh, I have to tell Vasquez in advance so she can record it.” Alex craned her neck, peering about for her friend. “She wants as much dirt on her city limits counterpart as she can get.”

“Can’t believe Kara once thought Lucy and James were getting back together,” Maggie tutted.

“She doesn’t know what flirting looks like, or where it’s going, half the time. Both of them were flirting with her, she thought they were flirting with each other.” Lena sighed. “She’s so cute.”

“You think you’ve seen cute,” Alex hissed, “but have you seen my wife?”

Maggie kissed her, a brief peck, then said, “My wife’s the cutest.”

“Danvers girls.” Lena shook her head. “What would we do without them?”

“Well, apparently you’d be a brokenhearted vigilante…”

Lena cringed. “Ugh, I was so Gotham. Every time I got hit in the throat and got all raspy, I swear to lesbian God with a sense of humor, I thought I was going to start naming my equipment.”

“Law’s Lasso… No, sounds too Wonder Woman.”

Lena took a sharp breath, all excited angles. “Did I tell you Kara introduced us?”

“Yes.”

Maggie sipped her drink, murmuring into her cup, “Didn’t tell us you cried.”

“You’re the worst sisters,” Lena groaned, “and I hate you.”

“Love you, too, kiddo.”

“They were both in costume! With - with the boots! On my balcony!”

“Lena, you have a problem with boot-wearing bisexual women.” Alex patted her on the shoulder.
“And the first step to getting help is admitting that you need it.”

“Alex, you vandalized history textbooks to get a copy of the one photograph of her that existed before the internet was a thing.” Maggie grinned. “My wife’s not allowed to judge you for your weird sex stuff.”

Both Lena and Alex sputtered, but Alex recovered first. “Our weird sex stuff, babe. We’re married. Happy wife, happy life, so get out the Lasso of Truth.”

“Lena,” Maggie asked, voice very urgent, “how do you tie a lasso?”

“I don’t know, give me a second.” Lena fished her phone out of her dress and started typing, only to stop. A grin spread across her face. “I don’t know how to tie a lasso. I don’t remember how.”

“Okay, good for you, but this is a burning question, Luthor.”

“Yeah, yeah, burning in your loins - here you go.”

Maggie looked over the diagram, committing it to memory, and handed it back before turning to Alex and saying, “Strap in, Danvers - ”

“Danvers-Sawyer.”

Maggie squeaked like one of Gertrude’s toys - hyphenate! wife! - but got it together enough to say, “Suffering Sappho, I love you.”

She may or may not have semi-successfully climbed her wife; Alex may or may not have lifted her up so they were on even footing, because neither of them had worn heels to do away with.

KL:

Lena slipped away and flung herself into Kara’s lap next to Lucy and Winn. “Where’s Susan?”

“She’s getting the portable charger from the car.” Lucy sipped her drink and sighed, cracking, then crossing, her ankles. “She’s gotten so much blackmail material.”

“Oh, um.” Lena pointed at Winn as subtly as she could and mouthed four minutes. “So. You know.”

“Oh-huh. So, tell me, were you always prone to exposit on the value of love and found family while standing up to literal monsters, or was that a Kara thing?”

“Hey!”

“I didn’t talk enough to exposit before meeting Kara.” Lena shrugged. “I had no one to talk to.”

“Well, I caught it from her. And Churchill over there.”

“I do not exposit,” Winn insisted. “I overshare. There’s a difference.”

“Just because we’ve both seen him naked, doesn’t mean we need to know what each other did with him while he was naked.”
“I haven’t seen James naked and I opt out of the play-by-play.” Lena sipped her whiskey and sighed, side-eyeing Winn for a moment before nudging his knee. “I do want to hear all about your non-R rated shenanigans, though. I can’t believe it took you finding out I knew through an interdimensional acid trip for you to tell me you and Lyra were dating other people!”

“Well, that sounds like we’re breaking up - ”

“And, Winn. As a unit.”

Winn sank into the chair, beaming. “They can both pick me up. Like, individually. And she can pick both of us up. Strong girls are the best.”

Lena and Lucy sighed: “Yeah.”

Kara flexed her thighs under Lena, and Lena blushed, kissing her knuckles and leaning back onto her shoulder. “So, my gorgeous girlfriend, what’s the status update?”

“They’re calling each other wife more times per minute than a semi-automatic fires.” Lena paused. “And I know that from basic engineering specs, not - ”

“I know.” Kara kissed her hair. “What do you want to bet they ditch out on the reception within the next ten minutes?”

“You say that every ten minutes, babe.” Lena looked out and saw Alex and Maggie, wrapped around each other, swaying to the music. “I don’t think they’re walking out of the blast radius. This is ground zero of the matrimony epidemic, and they’re under quarantine.”

Lucy snorted. “Expositing.”

“Jokes aren’t exposition!”

“If they contain world building, characterization, or backstory information, they are,” Winn sing-songed.

“Everything you say is exposition, Winn, don’t try to deny it.”

“Rude. I’m wounded, Kara.”

“Am I rude, Lena? Are you hearing this?”

Lena giggled, twisting to kiss Kara’s grinning cheek. “You’re the greatest. You should be meaner to him. Maybe his girlfriend will come rescue him.”

Lucy checked the time - one minute - then sighed, “Where is my girlfriend?”

“Right here, you whiner.” Vasquez padded up, sandals in one hand and charger in the other. “Move your drink or become my chair.”

Looking her dead in the eyes, Lucy picked up her wine and moved it - one inch to the left.

Vasquez sat in her lap, equally deadpan, and stole her wine. “Ugh. You know I hate merlot.”

“These are not rosé and Blue is the Warmest Color lesbians, my love. These are Scotch and The Sound of Music lesbians.”

Kara trilled, quietly enough, “The hills are alive...”
Lena’s throat caught, her heart skipped. When Lyra came up, hoisting Winn into the air with one hand, it was a welcomed distraction.

“Hello, sweetie, what are you - oh!”

“You’re going to dance. And you’re going to like it.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Draped over her shoulder, he shot his seated friends a thumbs’ up. After a brief resituating, he was firmly seated and: “Oh, hey! I’m taller than James!”

“With a booster seat,” James retorted.

“Hey, guys! I’m taller than James Olsen!”

The moment passed, and Lena laughed, not drawing comparison to the battle stack, because that was over, and this was much more fun.

“We are not playing chicken,” Vasquez said.

“Definitely not.” Lucy shook her head.

“We’re grown ass women.”

“We’re secret agents.”

“You’re the director of a black ops government agency.”

“You’re a certified genius with actual off-world experience.”

“You graduated summa cum laude from Harvard Law.”

“This is a wedding. It would be inappropriate.”

Lucy tossed back the rest of her wine, scowling, and they both looked very dignified and intimidating before challenging a vigilante, an alien, and their certified genius boyfriend who was just happy to be included.

“They don’t know how to psych themselves down from something,” Lena mused, “do they?”

Kara laughed, but it was fleeting, and the way she shifted her arms around Lena’s waist meant Serious Business. “Are you okay?”

“I’m good.”

“I mean - the singing.”

“No. It’s just.” Lena shook her head. “I was listening for accompaniment.”

“And?”

“And no accompaniment. All clear.”

“Good.”

The song changed, and Lena slid out of Kara’s lap to drag her off.

“Who’s leading tonight?”
“Think of a number. Odd is leader, even follows.”

Kara pecked her on the forehead. “Guess you’re leading.”

Lena had grown up in galas and opera houses and private boxes at the ballet. She started ballroom lessons before she’d started kindergarten. Kara had seen dance as a way to control her strength, her speed, her reflexes; she’d taught herself to be bad before she let herself be good. Together, all practice and unfair advantages, they could show off and not feel bad about it.

“Do I have a thing about women in boots?”

“Gee, I don’t know.” Kara swished her leg, hitching up her floor-length skirt to reveal:

Lena definitely didn’t wheeze. “Did you borrow Diana of Themyscira’s boots?”

“Yes.” Kara dropped her skirt and twirled under Lena’s arm, coming to rest against her shoulder. “To both.”

The music changed again, and it was Lena’s turn to follow. She knew the song from countless repetitions on Kara’s couch - how could she not remember the first song from her girlfriend’s happy movie? - and decided to run a little test.

“Somewhere, over the rainbow - ”

Kara snorted.

“What?”

“Oh, sweetie, you can’t sing for shit.”

Lena pulled back, grinning. “Promise?”

“Cross my heart!” Kara kissed her, just swaying.

After a moment, Lena pulled back and asked, “Are we floating?”

_Skies are blue…_

“Um, yeah. Just about four feet.”

“That’s a good height. Careful when you put us down, though. Bastian’s running around with Gertrude and they are not careful of falling objects.”

“Good to know.”

_Someday I’ll wish upon a star…_

“Hey!”

Kara turned to look and fought a giggle. Alex and Maggie, holding hands and pointing accusatorially at her, yelled, “No upstaging my wife!” and burst out laughing.

“Can we handle more passengers?” she murmured to Lena.

“I don’t see why not.”

Kara zoomed over and scooped her sister and sister-in-law up, too, soaring up off the roof, spiraling
away from Judy Garland's melting lemon drops and faraway troubles.

There were no troubles - none immediate, anyway. Some would, doubtlessly, be coming at some point soon, but for now, they could float and be happy, and that was more than enough.

Chapter End Notes

Suffering Sappho! was actually an OG Wonder Woman expletive. Sappho was a famously gay lady poet. Wonder Woman’s creator was a polyamorous bisexual man. I firmly believe this is the right thing to do.

Songs used in this chapter

All I Ask Of You - Phantom Of The Opera  
Spoonful Of Sugar - Mary Poppins  
Notes - Phantom Of The Opera (somewhat adapted)  
Cell Block Tango - Chicago  
Put A Little Love In Your Heart - the Music Meister  
Somewhere Over The Rainbow - The Wizard Of Oz

Thank you all so much for reading and commenting and being so, so, so, so, so wonderful! I'm going to either post the first chapter of my longer WIP, with its truly *stellar* Lena, or come up with another one shot. The one shot will be Rocky-related, but probably not in the same universe as this. Maybe, but probably not. Feel free to tell me which you would prefer in the comments!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!