Event Horizons

by Fangirlinit

Summary

For Astra, banishment isn’t as it seems. After crossing vast lengths of time and space, she finds herself on a strange world. When faced with a chance to be reunited with her family, it comes at great cost. For Alex, making life bearable again is a struggle. She may have the support of friends and family, but will they ever be enough to replace the love she keeps losing?

Notes

I’m terribly sorry for the LONG wait! It was rude of me to leave you hanging on that cliff. Despite this series being a huge undertaking, I’ve received some wonderfully introspective reviews along the way that have made it worth it. You all deserve my best effort, so I’m going to try my darnedest to update regularly. If I don’t, I give you permission to yell at me.

I hope you enjoy this piece. The finality involved in writing it was bittersweet for me (lots of caffeine and Kleenex involved!). So without further ado, I give you the conclusion to this odyssey…
She belonged to a different age, but being so entire, so complete, would always stand up on the horizon, stone-white, eminent, like a lighthouse marking some past stage on this adventurous, long, long voyage, this interminable - this interminable life.

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

The corner of John and Nassau had since been vacated of pedestrians. An hour ago it was swarming with co-eds and fraternity boys. The streets of Princeton, New Jersey were never livelier than on Thursday nights when whoops and hollers rose above the music, undigested appetizers spewed into gutters, and grown men jumped on each other to ‘piggy back’ through traffic. To the humans, this would be considered some of the greatest years of their life.

During these late Thursdays, it was socially acceptable to carry one’s revelry with them. The students called it ‘bar crawling,’ though this was a confusing concept for a foreigner. One did not actually crawl on their bellies but dance and stumble their way from one establishment to the next. There was no limit to how many stops could be made in a night just like there was no limit to the number of hip hop songs one could flub at the top of their lungs.

But like all lesser races, they had their limits. Even the strongest of stomachs needed reprieve. When these men and women finally called it a night, they departed the scene of celebration in rather ordinary condition. Amid the vacant streets and darkened signage, the only evidence of carousing could be sensed by the nose. A faint odor of liquor and sweat permeated the air.

On early Friday morning, 2:25 to be exact, students were returning to their residences or shuffling into the nearest open diner. The light from streetlamps reflected in establishment windows, fooling the eye into believing they were open for business. Shadows were deceptive. The moon waned behind thick cloud cover. The wind blew strong, carrying the fetid marks of merriment. No one was seen at the corner of John and Nassau that night. None seen by human eyes.

Astra’s ears perked to the noise of laughter and shrunk deeper into the alcove. Her hand touched the brick, fingers curling around the corner. It’s course nature did not distract her from the voices in her ears. With practiced concentration, she separated each voice according to their unique features. Mankind possessed a complex yet inferior physiological makeup than most species. Their manner of speech depended on the size of their vocal chords. Shape of the neck, position of the tongue, and tightness of muscles were all factors in setting one voice apart from another.

One as gifted as Astra could easily distinguish between genders and weights. The humans at the far end of her position were definitely students based on their youthful timbres. Each voice had a distinct quality but a few were closely alike. Four women and three men. She pinpointed their location before they appeared down the street.

The three men in their group led the way while the women lagged behind. Snorts and laughter erupted as their heels scuffed the concrete sidewalk. Someone was gossiping about a professor and his new beau of the month. Astra took no amusement in the tale, however the others did with roaring laughter. One of them lost her balance and stumbled into the street.

A crack split the air. The brick under Astra’s grip crumbled. She didn’t pay any attention to the chunk her reflex had taken out of the wall. Instead of fleeing the scene of damage, she dug her heels in and homed in on the girl being picked up.
She was a spirited young woman. The moment her friends helped her upright, she smiled and chuckled up to the dark blue sky. Her sequined t-shirt sparkled in the light from streetlamps. The ground did not seem to appeal to her sense of balance for she wobbled precariously on high heels. Like the others, she had indulged that night, but unlike them, she could not scrounge the dignity to walk on her own two feet.

This was not the first time Astra had done this. The students of Princeton campus frequented these streets day and night. At times, their activities put themselves and others at risk, especially when alcohol was involved. In her time patrolling from the shadows, she had heard a gunshot once, some screams, and glass breaking. So far Astra had not been disposed to intervene thanks to campus police. And yet she continued to keep watch, silent as the Nightwing and vigilant as Rao himself. If anyone required a silent guardian, it was the one in Astra’s sights.

Her eyes tracked the woman in long brown hair as she babbled on. Her body weaved and bumped into her friends but they hardly seemed to mind. She was more inebriated than usual. Pity dragged Astra’s mouth down at its corners.

At that moment, the young student flung herself on the older man leading them. Her arms caught him round the neck and she sagged on his shoulder. As Astra’s vision narrowed, a few of her eyebrow hairs became singed.

Before he could react, one of his friends took her around the waist and lifted her off, hiking up her shirt in the process. Her abdomen glowed pale in the light. She squealed and kicked her heels in the air.

Concrete split beneath Astra’s heel. A faint trail of bitterness rolled off her tongue and stained her teeth red.

A few of the girls pushed the hooligan, whining in slurs to put their friend down. He finally let go and the young woman dropped to her bottom in a fit of laughter.

No one seems to care and Astra was just a little miffed. The group and their young, drunk friend moved on, their outlines fading in the distance but their voices clear and crisp in her ears. She purposely lost count how many times she’d seen this happen. She would always keep a close eye. For as tempting as it was to draw near, it boded well for everyone’s safety for her to remain undetected in the shadows.

Sometimes, when her guard was dangerously low, she would enter one of the establishments and blend in by ordering a drink. As a general rule, though, she kept outside. A few feet of brick and glass could not keep out a Kryptonian. She could see perfectly well from a distance. Astra had never been too close not because it would reveal herself but because the urge was so strong. So strong it frightened her.

“Do you have a job? Or is watching co-eds make fools of themselves a new career I’ve never heard of?”

Astra didn’t turn around. She already felt the presence arrive several seconds ago. Her heart skipped in her chest as she focused her vision. The view ahead failed to enlighten her. She strained to latch on to a sign, any familiar pitch in laughter or scrap of heels. It was a long street and the man behind her was pressing the question with a folding of his arms. The voices were fading and so was she.

Astra gave up with a sigh and turned around. She made sure to block the damage done to the brick wall. ‘I do not know my own strength’ didn’t cut it as justification anymore.
The man standing before her flashed his half grin. Something in his crystal blue eyes told her he knew everything: the wall, the young woman, Astra’s inability to balance emotions and reactions. Of course he knew.

Her eyes drew down the crisp blue button down and jeans to the worn sneakers. She rolled her eyes at the new meaning of ‘down to earth.’ How pedestrian.

“Coming, son of El?”

Before he could reply, she launched into the clouds like a bullet from a gun.

* * *

The perpetual motion ornament sat on a stack of books. Its orbital rings flashed silver under the glow of lamp light. Though it would continue to gyrate without interference, Astra flicked at one of the spheres fused to the outer disc. She sighed at its predictable orbit and lay her chin in her hand.

By the time Kal-El showed up, Astra had counted the threads in her sofa and determined the smell coming from her neighbor’s cat.

She withdrew from her hand. “It took you long enough.”

He shrugged, sliding shut the porch screen door behind him. “I’ve been changing up my routine. Walking is good for the soul.”

Astra made a sardonic face. “If you are human.”

“I happen to enjoy the feel of the earth beneath my feet.”

“Are you so ashamed of your own kind?”

“You know it’s not like that. I’m trying to balance my life. Between work and Lois and being Superman, I’ve got to keep my feet on solid ground every once and a while to remind me of my responsibilities.”

Astra’s eyes snapped up and narrowed.

He raised his palms. “No disrespect. Come on, you’re every single person’s hero. Unattached, no strings…” He put his hands on his hips like it suited him and took in the apartment. “And a bachelor pad... Hell, do you even have a phone number?”

“I threw away the device it was connected to.”

Kal raised his brows expectantly. When he failed to receive the details, he cringed in realization. “Not the ocean, Astra.”

“The Indian Ocean to be exact. It is warmer and there are sharks.”

“Do you hate your callers that much?”

Well, not all of them. Astra had met a few humans who managed to exceed her expectations. Finding the perfect ratio of brains to wit proved a near impossibility – and Astra had traveled a few continents. Even if the dimensions were agreeable and the intellect sufficient, no one accomplished the feat of seeing her apartment a second time. Astra’s heart clenched. No one could ever make a permanent place in her life. They came and went like Earth seasons. Nothing stayed but her guilt.
Astra rolled her head as if she had a kink in her neck. “My callers? They make yellow faces at me. It is most disruptive to my mood.”

He sucked in his lip and threw up his hands at his fortune. “There’s a bright side here and it seems like I’m the only one who sees it.”

“I have done as you advise. I have blended in, acquired a profession and a place of habitation.” Her skin crinkled at the corners of her tightening eyes. “What more does the boy from Kansas require of me?”

“Being human isn’t just about doing human things. It’s a state of mind.”

Astra’s eyes nearly rolled back into their sockets. Her tongue held back spite. She may not have to take this attitude, but Kal-El had done a great deal to ensure her continued safety on Earth. There were very few people who would have given an alien from a parallel universe the benefit of the doubt. She had her options but Kal was the safe choice and it benefited her in the long run.

Astra turned from the arrogant face and his perfect hair to study the apartment. Most of her possessions, including the studio itself, was charity on behalf of Kal. He secured her an identity and a passport, passed along tricks of the Kryptonian trade, and advised in a few other areas (most of which he had no experience in). Kal may have grown up on Earth but he didn’t fit in as seamlessly as he nor the Kents hoped. He had done so much running in his young adulthood, meeting like characters and learning from their mistakes. He learned a few of his own as well, one of which was thinking he could run from a very angry Kryptonian just grasping her powers.

But Kal’s time spent on the planet lent him more experience and aptitude than Astra. He knew how to disappear, to blend in. He’d taught her everything he learned on the run, including how to master her Sol-given powers. That was before he knew who she was and where she came from.

When Astra revealed her story, she did so as payment. After everything he’d done for her, it was only fair to honor his kindness with a bit of honesty. As unbelievable as it sounded (even to her ears), Kal had taken it in stride. He fell silent for a while, quite a long while actually, and Astra never did figure out why. To her surprise, he responded by offering emotional support. Besides his cousin Kara, he hadn’t met any other Kryptonians and rejoiced in having someone of similar origins to befriend.

One rule became imperative: they could not drag Kara into this. Whatever risks threatening them, the timeline would have to remain untainted. She must never discover her aunt’s existence on Earth until 2015 when General Astra laid her trap.

Four years was a long time to wait for nothing. So many times Astra pictured how it would play out – the near plane crash and Supergirl’s subsequent debut, Myriad’s short-lived reign, the natural catastrophes headed for them in 2017. Astra only had the generalities but there was no need for pictures to accompany the carnage. The imagination alone was a scary thing.

In due time, Astra would be forced to watch those events unfold on her television screen like every other human. Like every living species on Earth she would suffer the consequences of General Astra’s new powers and die with the rest of them. She would sometimes lay awake at night, staring through her ceiling at the stars, and wonder how it would happen. Death by drowning? By magma flows? Or would she be crushed to death as was Supergirl’s fate?

Astra never asked Kal to check up on her, nor did she give the impression that she required emotional support. But every once and a while, rain or shine, he stopped by with his blue eyes and “what’s up?” and a puzzling conversation about the compositional make up of her apartment.
ceiling would ensue. He reminded her of home, of the Dandahu surf, and of family, and she couldn’t be more appreciative if the words found a means of slipping off her tongue.

She was hesitant to place all her trust in this one person, but she could not depend on anyone else. Kal was from Krypton so he knew, to a certain extent, what it felt like to be a displaced alien on a strange planet.

Astra didn’t pay attention to Kal’s silence. She let him stand there looking as awkward as a farmer’s son in New York City. She turned her smile away. The small efficiency apartment was something to get her started. Human essentials like a television, computer, and fire extinguisher were more staged items than necessities for Astra.

There were things, though, that were missing. Things that she had grown used to seeing in her house on Krypton. As her time on Earth wore on, so did her habits. While her dreams were still heavily influenced by the past, she no longer lingered in the children’s book section. The sight of mothers pushing strollers didn’t shake her anymore and neither did passing a toy store on her way to work. At the reminder of how full her home used to be, she would close her hand over the shoulder strap of her purse and feel the material tear under her nails.

After all Kal had done for her, she intended to reimburse him down to the penny. Sooner or later the funds would accumulate. She took odd jobs that were not as high profile as a reporter for the Daily Planet. Integration into society did not come without its monotonous trades. Kal didn’t seem to heed such wisdom and neither did his celebrity alter ego.

Kal-El (or Clark, as he went by sans cape) appeared to be a changed man since they first met. Newly engaged and with a promotion on the horizon, Kal had certainly proved that an alien from small town USA could balance every aspect of life. Astra sometimes wondered if he would still be hacking logs if she hadn’t shown up. She, too, seemed to have distanced herself from the exiled woman who couldn’t control her heat vision or stop crashing into barn roofs. Her circumstances would have been very different if Kal hadn’t extended his hand in friendship.

Astra could feel his eyes on her as she jumped from one insignificant possession to the next. Save for the wall of books, her effects were no more personal than an IKEA staged bedroom set. Rao, did she hate department stores.

The hardwood beneath Kal’s sneakers creaked. His head dropped to examine how his shifting weight stressed the floor. No one could make a study of one’s shoes look so thorough. “How long have you been at this?” He lifted his thought provoking expression up and met Astra’s eyes. “Flying casual and patrolling from dark alleys? It’s enough to attract attention.”

That brought a bemused curl to her lips. She tilted her head. “Protecting me from the DEO now?”

“I’m not worried about them and you know it. Someone’s bound to notice your haunts.” After a moment’s consideration, suspicion struck him. “Have often have you been flying to Princeton and National City?”

She cocked her head back, offense crinkling her brow. “What business is it of yours? Where and how I spend my nights is not up for discussion.”

He cautioned her with a patting of hands to air. “I’m not discouraging you. Really, I’m not. It’s just concerning to see you like this.”

“Like what?” She scrunched her face, fighting the instinct to give herself a once over.
His chin dimpled under the grin. “You look like Kara when she beholds her morning cinnamon rolls.”

“How dare you compare her to baked goods.” Astra’s nostrils flared. “Alexandra is not a cinnamon roll.”

“Well…”

“If this is another colloquialism perpetuated by youth culture, I really do not want another lesson. I could fly several million revolutions around the planet before you get to the point.”

“Alright, fair enough.” His rolling eyes landed on Astra and focused with gravity. “How long will it take for you to get the courage to walk into the light and talk to her?”

Despite the hope rising within, she held back. “What happened to abiding by the laws of relativity? This universe is Alexandra’s past – your Alexandra’s present. If I intervene, Kara will know that I live and their futures are forever altered.”

“I said you shouldn’t mess with the future. I didn’t say you had to do it as Astra In-Ze, displaced Kryptonian. Alex doesn’t even know what Kara’s aunt looks like. You don’t have to give her your life story. Just strike up a conversation. I know you want to. The possibilities have been eating you up.”

She delivered a level glare. “I have been eaten by nothing and no one.”

He simply smiled in that relaxed manner that settled human nerves. Even if it didn’t work on Astra, he never stopped trying. “Time works in mysterious ways. What if your pod was meant to crash here in 2011? What if you were always meant to be with this Alex? How will you ever know if you never venture to find out?”

“Those are quite a lot of hypotheticals.” Astra allowed herself to consider it for a moment before images of torn earth and spewing lava abounded. She set her jaw. “I cannot take the risk.”

“It’s not a risk if you’re careful.”

“I can’t believe you’re suggesting this. Have you ingested some kind of mind altering substance? Has Mr. Luthor enslaved you to his machinations?” She stood up, fists clenching at her sides. “Do I have to beat it out of you? Because there is no humor in your proposition. This is not a game.”

The carefree expression wilted from Kal’s face. “Astra, I know this isn’t a game. It’s been two years since you came to me. In that time you’ve harnessed your powers far better and faster than I have in ten years. You have a steady job, an apartment, and you haven’t ruffled the feathers of a single government organization. You’ve laid low and haven’t attracted any unnecessary attention, but for what? What does any of it mean if you’re not living? How long does it take until you toe outside the line and take a chance on something that could make you happy?”

Astra’s shoulders tensed further. Against her better judgment, she diverted her eyes to the floor like foul prey. She didn’t appreciate the interrogation. Especially at the ends of an El. They were all high-born, self-important fools no matter where they called home. Astra had held her own at many a dinner party attended by Zor and his equally absentminded brother.

A few snappy retorts were poised on the tip of her tongue, but she found herself hesitating. Kal would never understand. Accepting a story was not the same as living one. Astra’s sufferings were hers alone to shoulder.
There was an obvious reason why she couldn’t reveal herself to Alex. Any intervention on her part, whether intended or not, could pose disastrous consequences. Alex might not join the DEO and Kara would miss her chance to become Supergirl. National City would not get the hero they deserved.

But Astra had a chance to be reunited with her family. She could be with her loved ones. She could make Alex laugh and hold her hand and speak in earnest. She could have her life back and Earth would never have to perish.

The possibilities did not explain, however, General Astra or Myriad or any number of events that were destined to occur. Astra shut her eyes and pressed her fingertips to her forehead. A migraine was flaring inside her skull. She wanted to lunge for the light switch.

“You’re wrong,” she said, turning from the lamp’s blinding glow. “I’m not supposed to be here. This is not my planet and I have no right to disrupt Alexandra’s or Kara’s lives. They are not… my family.” Astra inhaled and swallowed the acid creeping at the back of her throat. “They are not mine.”

Kal’s eyes darted to the sofa, the oscillating cosmos, the stuffed bookshelves, the kitchen counter organized with a Bialetti, a bowl of fruit, and salt and pepper shakers, anywhere and anything but Astra where pity was bound to land. He cleared his throat.

“Look,” he said, “I’m not telling you to go up to Alex and tell her everything, but you need to do something. You’re going to be here for a while. You could have spent the rest of your years in the Phantom Zone, but instead you’ve been given a second chance. Maybe it’s time to start living it.”

She raised her chin and looked out at her porch stoop. “Duly noted.”

Kal took the hint and shuffled for the exit. His hand caught the sliding door handle and pulled it open with ease. A cool breeze swept over him and whistled through the apartment. Before stepping out, he glanced back.

“I’m not forcing you to act against your principles. Just think about what I said.”

The chill still pervaded after the door closed. Astra hugged her elbows, chin falling to her chest. It didn’t take long for her mind to wander back to the corner of John and Nassau. She began asking herself whether Alex made it home alright. Had her friends given her sustenance and coffee? Astra had read that caffeine helped flush the toxins and expedite the sobering process. Had Alex fallen asleep on her side? Would she wake up with bruises on her knees and gravel lodged in the heels of her hands?

She could keep wondering until she was blue in the face. What-ifs and unanswered prayers did not soothe the distressed soul. Nothing helped to answer the mounting questions except…

She raised her head, heart hammering in her chest.

Astra’s imminent thought process would prove how a simple suggestion and a little worrying turned into a bold decision.

* * *

Wednesday morning at Lewis Science Library proved to be a pleasant time for study and work. The carrels shined as if recently buffed, ledges were scarcely occupied by a single mislaid book, and staff were poised to assist any and all requests. Not a whisper could be heard in its cavernous hall.
Astra frequented the libraries on Princeton’s campus, so she knew the opportune times to visit. After 10:20 am lectures, for instance, the main floors would become flooded with students, and seeking quick aid at the reference desk depended on how many cordons were needed to corral the waiting line. Navigating aisles was like dodging traffic in Kryptonopolis. Astra hadn’t acquired many hobbies since arriving on Earth, but she preferred not to rub shoulders with humans when she perused the shelves.

The reflective clean doors parted automatically for Astra. The tote slung on her shoulder bumped heavily against her side with every step. She passed through the security checkpoint and spotted the pony-tailed female behind Circulation. The nails of her fingers were tipped pomegranate red and made a clacking sound with every keystroke.

Astra adjusted the glasses on her nose. “Good morning.”

The woman looked up from her computer screen and offered a smile of recognition. “Hey, there. Nice to see you again, Arya.”

The force of Astra’s smile made her cheeks ache. After two years she still hadn’t gotten used to the name. Kal-El may have obtained her social security information, but he couldn’t have come up with a name more… traditional? Or common? Something told her she had some cultural fab of 2011 to blame. That or Kal’s new television obsession.

She picked up her pace and headed for the back without locking eyes with any passersby. Thankfully, it was early enough that the main floor was vacant of students. When she accessed the maintenance room, a cluster of carts was awaiting her against the wall. She chose an empty one with well-oiled wheels and started transferring the books from her bag onto the cart’s slanted shelves.

The special requests being loaded were to be returned to their original holdings. Apart from delivering the cargo, she was not responsible for what happened after it was in the possession of the library. That day, however, she would break routine. After all, there was nothing wrong with going above and beyond expectations.

Keeping her head low, Astra drove the cart of books through the library. A spirit of nonchalance accompanied her as she navigated around empty carrels and down isolated aisles. She had nothing to be nervous about. A white strand loosened from her hair tie and she quickly tucked it behind her ear. With eyes dancing about, she patted the knotted bun and drove on. No, not anxious at all.

It was a beautiful Wednesday morning, the decadent aroma of her favorite coffee shop across the street had just bubbled through the percolator, and the sun was warming her back through the high windows. At the moment, it was nothing to prickle her conscience.

Passing group study rooms off to her left and a circle of arm chairs to her right, Astra finally reached the elevator. It was a metallic, boxy little thing that filled her ears with the sound of rickety cables when in motion. Not at all like the lifts on Krypton. Krypton’s turbolifts were transportation at its finest. She missed their drifting motion and seamless quality – how natural light reflected off its transparent curvature, the feel of anti-grav technology droning beneath her feet, its timeliness, and its consistency in never requiring upkeep.

A demure chime signaled Astra at her floor and she shook her head of its thoughts. Her belly swelled with homesickness. For as easily as a Kryptonian could manipulate Earth’s gravity, Astra always sensed a disturbing force keeping her on Earth. Flying never did cure the feeling of captivity.
The first two volumes on her cart were easy enough to place. Astra had already come across the authors before in a labor of pure curiosity. Max Planck and Hermann Minkowski, two brilliant scholars who made the study of space-time’s curvature a life-long career. They were found in the astrophysics collection which consisted of six sprawling aisles smelling of leather and biblichor.

The third book’s origins proved to be a more challenging hunt. T.H. Huxley did not sound like he belonged in the astrophysics section. Astra steered the cart down the main thoroughfare towards Biology.

Though Astra had grown quickly exasperated by some of the sexist, tyrannical drivel she found in these books, she did appreciate learning new things about humanity’s fumbling at science. The sheer number of accidents that become Nobel Prize winning insights. She shook her head, mystified. The subjects she had brushed up on in the past two years only added to her sufficient knowledge of Earth.

Astra passed aisle after aisle, eyes darting from one call number to the next. Despite the confounding nature of her search, she was glad to have the floor to herself. At least she thought she had it to herself. The sounds of a creaking step ladder and voices echoed not far. Several aisles back, a young man in a brown sweatshirt stepped out of the chiming elevator. Astra’s shoulders fell.

She always preferred to come when the library opened its doors, before students came in bearing caffeine potent beverages and destroyed her concentration with their slurping. The one place, though, she could not admit to knowing her way around was the Lewis Science Library. Even at odd hours she refused to set foot on the grounds. It had nothing to do with noisy elevator cables or the overly friendly staff. When asked to deliver special requests to Lewis Library, she would promptly pass along the task to a colleague with better nerves and who was less prone to crush the cart handle at every sight of brown hair.

Astra was rolling her cart of books past the chemistry collections when something solid bumped into her.

“Jesus,” gasped the student. His wispy bangs were brushed out of his stricken gaze. “Can you please? Not before I’ve had my third coffee, man.”

Astra rolled her eyes after the trudging man-child. College students and their coffee. As guilty at her belly full of espresso, at least she had the metabolism to avoid crankiness.

“Fucker!”

The growl and subsequent groan spun Astra around to realize she had pushed her cart directly in the path of someone’s size seven and a half sneakers. Her eyes dragged up black and white Chuck Taylor’s, blue skinny jeans, pilling flannel, wavy brown hair hanging limp around the shoulders. With the soft chin and pale pink lips the full picture was enough to resemble a ghost.

Astra’s heart arrested for 3.207 seconds. The cart handle squealed under her grip.

Her victim’s eyes and nose crinkled in pain. She planted a hand to the end bookcase for support.

“Oh, dear —” Astra locked her jaw and swallowed over the last syllable. This was not her dearest Alexandra. For as familiar as those beats, that heart did not belong to her. How could she not have heard it in this cavernous hall?

“God,” Alex squinted through watery eyes at the source of her pain, “what’s that thing made of?
Pure steel?”

The cart’s handle felt like softened butter. “My sincerest apologies. Shall I call for medical attention?”

“What?” The pain abated and Alex blinked up at her. “No, I don’t need medical attention.” Though her eyes were clearly locked with Astra, the cranky attitude seemed to be directed inward. “It’s my own damn fault. Can’t find this stupid book to save my life.”

“Are you sure you are alright?”

Alex wiggled her foot around before putting weight on it. She grinned tightly. “Yeah, I’m awesome.”

Astra nodded. Against every logical bone in her body, she allowed herself to feel more than the sum of her Sol-given powers. Within its cage, a dusty organ beat a rhythm of haste. Her body was thrumming in recognition. Her fingers tingled in anticipation to draw through short brown hair like her lips parted to taste perfume on its pulsing terrain.

She looked at Alex as she had looked at her for those three years. Her knees weakened as if the ground was not made from earth and the sun emit a reddish hue. She had tunnel vision for this woman and they had only exchanged a few words.

Alex unwrapped the slip from her previously clenched fist. She read the penciled call numbers with a forlorn sign and looked about the nearby section.

“What book are you looking for?”

Alex’s search rounded back to Astra and the innocent request. “New Concepts in RNA Protein Synthesis by Kathryn Sandberg,” she said. The nerve in her forehead pulsed in frustration. “Someone is always checking it out before I can get my hands on it. That or it has legs and a bad sense of humor.”

“One moment,” Astra said as she began sifting through her cart. She came up with a book that had seen a few water stains and trips down the stairs. Its Plascoat protected dust jacket gave the cover a glossy finish that left fingerprints. “This should help you.” Astra turned it over to eager hands before drying her own down the sides of her pants.

Alex gripped the book with both hands for a moment. When the astonishment faded, she began flipping through the first pages in verification. She glanced up distractedly. “Where did you get this?”

“New York Public Library. I am here returning interlibrary loans.”

Alex gave the navy blue blazer, white slimming jeans, and trendy wedge sandals a once over. “You’re a librarian?”

“Y-es,” It did not sound nearly as smooth as she planned. She plucked the shirt under her blazer self-consciously. The studious eyes burned through her, asking something of her she couldn’t quite discern. When her brain cells finally aligned, she fumbled with the badge hanging around her neck and raised it for emphasis. “Yes. I am a librarian.”

Alex’s eyes caught the light reflecting off the laminated card. “Huh.”

Astra frowned, unsure where Alex’s indifference lay. “Is this not the right book? I can put in a
request for a different title if you would like.”

“No, this is exactly what I’m looking for.” With a faint smile, Alex raised her brows expectantly. “Thank you…”

If Astra’s blood wasn’t running so hot, her sigh would have turned Alex to ice. “Astra.” She then froze, her entire body seizing like it had ingested a lethal dose of neurotoxin.

When Alex’s mouth parted it did not speak slander or shock, but widened to a smile and emit a pleasant laugh. “Astra,” she said, nodding firmly to commit it to memory. “I’m Alex. I’d shake your hand but I can’t see it.”

The perspiration collecting on Astra’s forehead paled in comparison to the palms of her hands tightening reflexively behind her back. She bit her tongue. What in Rao’s name was wrong with her? She gave them a subtle brush against her blazer before extending one hand forward.

Alex said, “My dad always taught me it was polite to shake hands with new acquaintances. I’ve never been able to shake the habit.”

Astra smiled at the hand freely encasing hers. “Not many people these days shake hands upon introduction. Yours is a charming habit.” She looked up take in the flushed cheeks and spoke softly, “Your father sounds like a good man.”

“Mm-hm.” Their brightly lit surroundings captivated Alex. She swept her gaze over the increasing number of students occupying the floor. She let go of Astra’s hand and joined it with the other clasping the book’s binding. She pressed it to her chest like carefully pined-after treasure.

“May I ask…” Astra swallowed before she choked on her audacity. “May I ask what you are studying?”

“I’m with the biology department. Going for a master’s in microbiology with an emphasis in evolutionary science.” Alex shook her head flippantly and said, “It’s my second year, but my thesis has been slowing me down lately.”

“Evolutionary science,” Astra echoed, feigning surprise. She probably knew more about Alex’s academic career than Alex. The perpetual ache in her heart spread. The irony of Alex’s chosen subject was never lost on Astra. “As in phenotypic mutations… Lamarck’s theories of genetic inheritance…”

Alex narrowed her eyes. “… Yeeah.”

Astra raised her brow. “This is a controversial area of study.”

“Tell me about it. My advisor tried bribing me out of the idea, but I can’t seem to say no to anything resembling risk.”

“Most contemporary biologists embrace concepts from both Darwinism and mutationism, believing each brings their own role to the evolutionary process.” Astra shifted her weight, wondering if she’d said too much.

“Wow, I’m… really impressed. Not many librarians on staff here can pronounce these titles. It takes a typed 20-point font for them to understand my requests.”

Inside, Astra beamed with the light of a thousand suns. “The subject is provocative yet bold. You are very brave to take on the challenge.”
“Thanks,” Alex said with a brief chuckle. “That’s more support than I get from my professors.”

A sense of business accompanied Astra’s nod and kept her mouth from disclosing her satisfaction in a smile. Whatever formalities she could force into her bearing and expression would benefit them in the long run. No matter how right it felt to see Alex again, this could not lead to anything. She didn’t wish to be rude, but sooner or later her resolve would go to pieces and Alex would be caught in its debris. They could not see each other again. Surely her stiff posture and single-minded gaze delivered the message.

“Hey,” Alex said, “I know this is really forward of me, seeing as we just met, but would you like to meet for coffee some time? I’d love to hear more about what you have to say.” Alex then blinked, adding swiftly, “For purposes of science.”

“For science, I see.” Astra dropped her gaze and swept it anxiously about. This was too soon. Their first meeting wasn’t supposed to develop so fast. Not that Astra drafted an agenda. She barely gave it a thought before her cart crashed into Alex. Once her courage set in, she met Alex with a crinkle of her eye. “I am not sure. My schedule is quite inflexible.”

“That’s okay. I understand.”

The awkwardness with which Alex concealed her disappointment only made her frown deepen. Something in Astra crumbled at the sight. She had once promised to keep that face from despair. Someone special once told her the promise alone accomplished the job.

Astra spoke before she could think it over. “If you have a phone number where I could reach you, I can contact you when I am free.”


Taking a pencil from her pocket, Alex scribbled a few digits onto the piece of paper already in her hand. She tore off the corner, separating her phone number from her thesis titles. She offered the former with a tentativeness that made her all the more attractive in Astra’s eyes.

“Well,” Astra took the slip gently but not too gently as a historian would handle a rare document, “it was a pleasure meeting you, Alex.”

“Likewise.” Alex’s cheeks warmed when she smiled. Steadily withdrawing, she raised a hand in farewell, turned, and disappeared between the stacks.

Astra’s gaze left the empty aisle to the piece of paper in her hand. She thought of the ghost who had given it to her. Two years without her smile. Twenty-four months waking up next to a pillow instead of snarly hair and endearing little snores. One hundred and four weeks spent picking out her own groceries without having to justify its sensitivity to human stomachs. Seven hundred and thirty days fearing she would spend the rest of her life on Earth never kissing her beloved hello. And 17,520 hours wondering if she would ever find the courage to walk up to a girl, hold out her hand, and introduce herself as only one person on Earth would have her.

Astra’s index finger rang along the edge of the slip and read the numbers as if they weren’t already inscribed into her memory. Two years adrift and now she had this phone number. The gift was enough to make her smile.
Careless Stranger

It had been a simple thing to place herself in Alex’s path. Having tracked her movements more closely in the recent months, she could predict Alex’s whims and routines. She knew her haunts and the location of her apartment. Her roommates left every morning like diligent graduate students while Alex was usually the last to leave, a protein bar hanging from her mouth and her shoelaces flying.

Astra’s duplicitous actions had been troubling her since the moment she clapped eyes on Alex. No matter the excuses, whether it be for protection or the assurance of an unbroken future, it was wrong to know so much about Alex when Alex knew nothing of her. To Alex, Astra did not exist any more than her name and face sparked recognition.

It felt shameful to follow her like that without showing herself. Actions of that sort were reserved for predators and those who took advantage of the weak and helpless. Astra could not stomach the idea of being called any number of names that symbolized depravity. She may not be a superhero of the likes whom served Metropolis or Gotham City, but she possessed a conscience. Her loneliness just had a tendency to prioritize.

Being honorable in Alex’s eyes, no matter the universe or time, meant everything to Astra. It was not about being recognized. She could be Arya Summers, foremost replacer of special requests, human but extraordinary in her bookish pursuits. Alex would be impressed, and Astra satisfied.

But it hadn’t happened like that. Not at all. Astra broke every facet of her plan in going to the library that day. Not only had she revealed her true name, but she allowed a connection to be made. Why on Krypton’s red earth did she have to break character?

Astra knew why, but the answer still eluded her better judgment. She had been so desperate to see her. She couldn’t stop the allure of a wicked tongue and timid hands. It was not within her ability to keep away, not after a cart mistakenly rolled over a foot. Though she had mastered her powers, the draw to Alex was outside her control. Her mind did not form cohesive analyses. Her heart could not separate one brown haired attraction from the other. She missed Alex so much it was as if she had forgotten that her body was galvanized by the sun. Alex made her feel like a clumsy human. The pink cheeks, the strong handshake, a most lyrical laugh… Astra didn’t have a chance.

A fender bender two blocks south jerked Astra out of her reverie. Across the table, Alex tipped forward in concern.

“You okay?”

“Yes,” Astra said, blinking. She cleared her throat and adjusted her leg over a knee. “You were saying?”

“I was just mentioning what a great place this is. I don’t come up here often. The city may only be a train ride away, but Princeton has so many diversions.” After a second’s consideration, she added cheekily, “Some of them academic.”

Astra nodded vaguely. The alfresco cafe did not provide the most ideal atmosphere for talk. She should have chosen a location that did not accompany the distractions of lively traffic and bees. The small garden out front attracted a swarm of the buzzing things. Thankfully, their corner table sat in a somewhat shady area.
When Astra finally purchased a new cell phone to replace the one at the bottom of the Indian Ocean, a cordial five minute chat led to the question of where to meet. She knew the weekend would be brimming with sunshine and fine temperatures. The outdoor café happened to be the first thing that popped into her head, and there was no going back when Alex’s voice exuded such poorly restrained anticipation.

She had been to this café many times. She liked its ornament and its appeal to all walks of life. The place was decked with chalkboard walls and copper fixtures hanging from sun-toasted beams. Table tops were crafted from mosaics. Each brightly colored tile glinted in the light like a rare gem. The surfaces of rubies, emeralds, ambers, and amethysts gave the place a valued charm not usually seen in the high design coffee bars of the financial district nor the commercial chains.

The outdoor café had a rustic Byzantine look to it and was made more eclectic by its clientele of business suits and flannel. The heels of Astra’s boots knocked the stressed, beechwood floor; despite the groans it did not fall out from under them.

There was a mix of high tables and stools and low seated areas where Astra found Alex waiting for her that morning. Each table held a napkin holder, salt and pepper shakers, and a mason jar stuffed with fresh silverware.

Astra spared a glance at the sidewalk where commuters walked to their destinations at a frenetic pace. And behind them, a flood of ticking cabs, buses puffing toxins, and the dissonance of car horns and impatience.

She turned back with a sedate look. “New York is a great metropolis of human ingenuity.” But they could certainly do better, she thought.

Alex laughed.

A thousand nerves went off. Astra’s spine straightened. Though she knew that particular laugh, she did not appreciate its brazen quality being directed at her. “Is something funny?”

When Alex regained her composure, she offered a grin of assurance. “No, it’s not like that. You’re just not like other people.”

Indeed, Astra thought as she studied the woman across from her. Alex sat comfortably in denim capris and a white shirt. Her long, crimped hair was tied back at the sides, a style that could grow on Astra. Worn sandals tapped idly on beechwood. A half-hour spent chatting under spotty shade brightened her sleeveless arms. The twitching muscles of those arms Astra had spotted upon first seeing her that day revealed her occasional tendency towards weight training. Her elbows rested on the rainbow mosaic while her chin sat atop laced hands. Paired with the youthful, beaming expression, Alex looked like she belonged there.

Astra restrained the urge to wet her lips and reminded herself that she had an untouched beverage sitting right in front of her. She fiddled with the cup on its saucer, each revolution making a sound that grated in her ears.

She tilted her head. “Who are ‘other people’?”

“I don’t know… the general public? It’s just an observation. Reading body language, listening to speech patterns, picking up on stressors are all part of compiling a profile.” She shrugged, lifting her mug to her lips. “I’m a scientist, you know, so it’s in my nature.”

“You said I am not like other people. What about your first impressions of me lead you to that
The fingers hooked through Alex’s mug handle drummed before slipping out. Whatever diverted her gaze, it was not the mug’s dimensions. She ran her finger along the smooth lip, round and round with an ease of a lazy noon weekend.

Astra watched the wisps of steam sliding through Alex’s fingers. Her own coffee had since lost its heat in the dollops of furiously beaten cream and nervously clutching hands. The small con panna wilted over her espresso, its glass demitasse vehicle looking small in her full, near crushing grasp.

“You say things as if no one’s said them before. They’re clichés but you give the words new meaning.”

“I am not from here.” Astra dwelled on the lightyears it had taken to arrive on Earth and the subsequent locales her flying abilities had taken her to. “New York is merely a resting stop, if you will. I consider myself to be a visitor anywhere I live.”

“So you’re a traveler,” Alex gathered with a knit of her brow. She slid forward on her seat, seemingly interested in the origins of one such stranger such as Astra.

Astra held her gaze a moment longer before darting to the petunias. “I could not help it: the restlessness was in my nature; it agitated me to pain sometimes.” At Alex’s expectant look, she cited her source. “Charlotte Brontë.”

“Ah, that’s right. You’re quite the bibliophile.”

“I am a librarian.” Astra paired a smirk with her shrug. “I do read occasionally.”

“Which brings me to my reason for asking you to coffee in the first place.” Alex leaned forward, hands cupping her mug snugly. “What is it about evolutionary biology that has attracted your interest? Back at the library you seemed rather well-read. Something tells me you know more than you’re letting on.”

Astra pursed her lips over the smile. “Perhaps I shouldn’t be speaking such things to a second-year graduate student.”

Her barely veiled pride brought a chuckle from Alex. “Please. Don’t worry about showing me up. Just think of me as one of your library patrons.” She sank comfortably back in her chair and prompted Astra with a toss of her hand. “Wow me with your science.”

Astra spared a cursory sweep of their surroundings. Once assured that the other customers were absorbed by their own conversations, she proceeded to exhibit a seasoned knowledge of Alex’s research topic.

Dipping into the pool of molecular biology’s central paradigm did not come without its hesitations. As part of her cover, Astra could not show more than a passing interest. She had been impressed upon by a certain overbearing Kryptonian to play a specific role. That role, by and large, happened to be a bachelor’s degree holding human being who had spent her 35 or so years on planet Earth. For as desperate as Astra was to ‘wow’ Alex, she had to walk a very fine line.

On Earth, alone and at the mercy of a knowable future, Astra had spent a lot of time reading. While cultural diversions such as Twitter and HBO brought her into the 21st century, books sent her back to countless periods of scientific discovery. Armed with limitless resources, Astra soon came toe-to-toe with an unsolvable drawback. She had a mind packed with humanity’s history of technology
and medicine and no one to share it with, no one to argue calculations and propose new questions. The loneliness was tormenting. She had a voice and a will but no place to apply them. Kal hardly indulged her interests. He was too busy covering current events to slow down and measure out a millennia worth of scientific achievement.

She missed the days when she could gather the team in a meeting of the minds and collaborate ideas that would solve the perturbations of science. She missed the nights when after leaving work she could come home to a warm sofa and a human pillow and discuss her insights.

After two years without it, a few minutes with a twenty-six-year-old master’s student brought a whole new relief to Astra. The fact that she had the mind and body of Alex Danvers was a bonus akin to heart flutters.

By the time Astra had finished her second long-winded argument on orthogenesis, she had left Alex in a most conflicted state. A furrow had developed between her brows and her lips were twitching. The smile would have been readily accepted even if Alex gave it half an effort. Astra did so miss it.

Alex seemed intellectually equipped and physically charged to dispute Astra’s points but held back by some bothersome curiosity.

Leaning forward once again, Alex opened up to Astra with a baffled look. “How long have you been working as a librarian?”

“I have worked many odd jobs over the years. Currently, I attend the reference desk at New York Public Library. On the weekends I am a rock wall attendant.”

“A rock wall attendant,” Alex repeated flatly. “On the weekend. You’re kidding. That’s seriously outside the norm. I would never have guessed.” Her eyes betrayed her by glazing over Astra’s arms. “But, I mean, I could see it.”

The corner of Astra’s mouth curled up. “What did you think I do for employment?”

“Well, don’t take this the wrong way, but I thought you were in corporate. People who live in New York City do not make their living working as a librarian by day and a rock wall attendant by night, not unless they have something to hide.”

Astra’s brow furrowed. While she may have been honest about her work experience, she failed to reveal the few small-scale investments made over her two years on Earth. All green companies and clean energy institutions. Also, a promising company called Space X.

Astra did not like lying to Alex. It was for her protection, obviously, but it twisted her stomach. Unfortunately, she did not conceal her sickness fast enough.

“I’m sorry.” Alex’s hands dropped to her lap where they wrung under the table. Her mouth twisted at the corner and she said, “I didn’t mean to offend you. That’s not how I meant for it to come out.”

Nearly choking on the lump in her throat, Astra shook her head. “I am not offended. My occupations would not be classified as part of the norm. Especially around here.” She smiled softly, easing the distress she put on the face across from her. “I suppose it is a surprise that you continue to sit here, listening to me talk of topics outside my field of experience.”

“Hey, you don’t have to be a Nobel laureate to speak on whatever peaks your interest. Degrees aren’t everything. To be honest, I just want to work up to a PhD so people will call me Doctor
Danvers.”

The look on Alex’s face, both adorable and duplicitous, made Astra laugh. “You are being facetious,” she said, squinting knowingly. “Titles matter little to you.”

Alex chuckled along. “Okay, yeah. It’s a joke.” Her amusement faded and she panned down to her coffee. “I do like hearing you talk – advanced degree or not. Your appreciation for science, whether it’s a passing curiosity or it turns into a formal academic study… it shows a lot of initiative. And passion.”

“I can say the same of you.” Astra inclined her head to stress her sincerity. “The tenacity with which you approach your thesis is impressive. I can’t fathom why your advisor does not encourage you more. What was it titled again?”

“You know very well what it’s called. I droned on about it for practically an hour.”

“Perhaps, but you express it with more integrity.” Astra tucked her chin down and waited in challenge.

Rolling her eyes, Alex said, “Assessing Gene Regulation and Evolution Through Computational Study.” She shook her head at the sound of it before scrunching her nose. “I don’t like it. I think I’m going to change it.”

“I may not be your advisor, but I strongly recommend against it. Considering the time you’ve already put in, the change would make you look weak and noncommittal. Two things which you are not.”

“It sounds weird, though, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, dear.” Astra slumped back in her seat. “Now I fear I’ve opened a can of olives. Truly, it is fine as it is.”

Somehow glossing over the corrupted turn of phrase, Alex raised a brow and said, “I didn’t hear the integrity you speak of.”

“Well, I happen to have superior hearing.”

“Don’t hold back on the self-flattery.”

A swell of gravity flipped Astra’s stomach. She placed her hand on the table, halfway between their drinks. Her forefinger scratched a blue tile, emphasizing the yearning to inch closer. “Please, don’t change the title.”

“Okay.” Alex conceded with a sigh. “Because you asked so nicely.”

The hand curled back to its owner, safe and sound. Astra smiled over her coffee and sipped from its silken topping. The cup’s smooth ceramic mouth cooled her lips and yet it hardly quelled the affection stirring in her chest for this young woman. Despite the long hair, she looked similar to her future counterpart. And frighteningly so. Her age hardly deterred Astra. Alex had been thirty-two when they last saw each other and she rarely blushed unless provoked. This Alex was different. If anything, the occasional naïveté turned Astra on in a way she couldn’t quite temper.

Alex was shaking her head in amusement. She mulled in silence while examining Astra’s exposed guard. “It’s nice to be reminded that there are respectable people in the world.” Whatever conclusions drawn from the study had her tilting her head. Even in the shade, her face glowed in
contentment.

Astra frowned. A serious tone followed. “There are no respectable people in Princeton?”

“Sometimes I feel like I’m living in a bubble with rude, irresponsible children who all think they’re the next Albert Einstein.”

“Or Alberta Einstein.”

Smiling, Alex raised her hand for a high five. “Nice one.”

Astra met her open palm as she had seen done between people of like opinions. A petite fête as she came to call it (French being a personal favorite of her adventures in Earth languages). Though she didn’t understand its appeal, she felt proud to be a part of this high five.

Alex said, “Now all you have to do is give a lecture on the evolution of feminism and I’ll be floored.”

“Well, I have read a bit of Margaret Atwood.”

“Alright, that deserves another high five. Yes. Hey, if there’s talk of gender equality and reproductive rights on the horizon, we’re going to need another round.” Alex rose from her chair. “You want another espresso?”

“No, actually I’ll have an iced tea. But allow me...” Astra turned to rummage inside her purse but a voice halted her.

Alex flashed a provocative smirk. “Hell no. This one’s on me.” Before getting far, she turned around to point at Astra. “Oh, and if the next thing you admit to fangirling over is Ani DiFranco, we need to take this to a bar so I can buy you a beer.”

Astra furrowed her brow but smiled anyway. She had yet to come across the term ‘fangirling’ in her popular culture research or this Ani DiFranco. That didn’t mean she couldn’t enjoy the moment. The sudden spark of aggressiveness in Alex was most welcome.

When Alex returned with their drinks they didn’t waste any time. For the next hour they discussed topics in feminism, what drew them to certain political opinions, and the personal experiences that empowered them to seek change. Almost everyone who studied feminism represented one of the four waves and, like most modern-day women, she and Alex tended towards third wave feminism with a few additions.

It became clear very quickly that they had more in common than an interest in science. Astra was indulging far more of herself than planned and Alex just kept leaning forward in anticipation. But before any further connections could be unearthed, they were interrupted.

“Alex!” A blonde carrying a tall to-go cup came over to the table and smiled widely. “Fancy seeing you here. I thought you only left Princeton to see your sister.”

“Well, you know I need to let myself out of the cage every once and a while,” Alex said jokingly. “Kim, this is Astra. Astra, this is an old friend from undergrad. We spent our final exams studying on rice crackers and Red Bull.”

“God, don’t remind me. I can’t even look at the Quaker brand without getting queasy.”

“But you still drink Red Bull?”
Kim flapped a hand. “Oh, of course. Though not today. I’ve got to run sober for this lecture today. I’m TA and my boss just called in sick.”

“Bummer.”

Astra cast a puzzled look between them. “I did not think Red Bull was an alcoholic beverage.”

Kim practically roared with laughter. “Wow, oh, I like you. Alex, where did you find her?” Before Alex could respond, Kim slapped her watch. “Dang, look at the time! Hey, before I go, I should let you know there’s a party going on at Mindy’s. Remember Mindy Jenkins? Anyway, she’s throwing this kegger tomorrow night. All our people from Biology will be there and it’s going to be a huge catching up. I think you should come. It’ll be like having the old gang back! Oh, and bring your friend, too.”

“Astra,” Astra supplied demurely before catching Alex’s amused eye.

Kim panned between them, finger tapping the lid of her beverage. “So, will I see you there?”

Alex’s gaze tore away to meet her friend with a squint. “Maybe,” she said, while her body clearly said “no.”

“Aw, well think about it. I’d love to see you there. Now, I really have to go!”

They exchanged goodbyes as Astra sat back in her chair. Kim No Surname vanished in the distant sea of pedestrians. Alex was looking into her coffee and, upon finding it empty, diverted her attention elsewhere.

She rubbed the nape of her neck and grinned back as if her friend hadn’t alienated Astra out of the conversation. Kim obviously didn’t want to invite a mature, older woman to a kegger, and something about that put Alex on edge. Not necessarily embarrassed on edge, but nearing the territory of ‘Why am I hanging out with a 35-year-old woman?’

Astra read the insecurity in Alex’s posture. “You do not have to decline on my account.”

“No, it’s fine.” The smile on Alex looked as awkward as it probably felt. She touched her twitching mouth briefly before pulling her hands into a bundle on her lap.

Astra cocked her head. “You are under no obligation to entertain me.”

Alex nibbled at her lip. “You wouldn’t want to go, would you?”

“Will you be there?”

A slow smile spread before Alex stifled it. Her eyes took over, gleaming. “I might.”

Astra waffled around by sliding her glass of iced tea between her hands. “Tomorrow is Sunday and my shift doesn’t start until the afternoon. I am assuming this campus party takes place very late?”

The insecurity of a moment ago disappeared and was replaced by a sly half grin. “That’s the only campus party there is.”

* * *

A cloud much like smog hung in the air. The blue haze carried traces of sweat, alcohol, tobacco, and illicit substances – the spices of youth. It clung to the skin and clothes, tickled the nostrils and scratched the back of the throat. It was a contaminated environment unfit for habitation. The fact
that humans considered it appropriate for celebration deeply troubled Astra. Though of all her people, Axel would have been most likely to take to these festivities like a fish to water.

She waved the stale, musty smoke out of her face. Having no other option, she walked across the room to the stuck window. After watching several passersby fail to jimmy it free, she tired of feeling her hopes sink. She grasped under the lower rail with both hands, giving it a jostle. It made no difference. Astra then peaked over her shoulder and, upon spotting no onlookers, pried back on the rail with a quarter of her strength. It popped free with a crack and she shoved up.

A great draft wafted in. She breathed deeply and sighed out in the crisp breeze. “Humans,” she muttered.

The house party was located on the edge of campus. When Astra arrived, she had not been greeted by the hostess. Whoever this Mindy Jenkins claimed to be, Astra hoped she was not in the hospitality business. The only thing she had been welcomed by were an odious smog and a sea of nonentities.

The two floors were populated by students. Not a single attendee over the age of 30 could be seen on the grounds, which would have made Astra stand out were it not for their complete lack of interest. Everyone seemed more invested in how much they could ingest be it alcohol, food, or ill-advised folly.

Astra left the window and returned to her haven. The dining room was the least occupied area of the house and it did not upset her senses. Folding her arms, she settled back against the wall and continued her search. Unfortunately, all her eyes met was immaturity and unattractively hung trousers. The muscles in her jaw twitched.

A stereo pumped music into the living room. Its thunderous volume shook the foundations, sending picture frames rattling and the water in mislaid cups rippling. Astra’s brow ached from the constant wincing. It wasn’t just the volume that bothered her but its hopping audience. They all punched the air as one, screaming about crashing cars into bridges and loving it. Astra was starting to think these humans were as hopeless with their metaphors as they were with their sense of modesty.

She would have stepped outside to enjoy the stars but the smoking grill surely would have ruined that for her too. Stargazing required an untainted atmosphere and the least amount of light. Out there, however, posed the most outrageous conditions. The grill was being manned by a male fingering a rolled paper bundle. He was joined by a cluster of others carrying similar piping substances. The skinny brown rolls smelled sweet and turned Astra’s stomach sour. Their puffing produced a dense cloud that seemed to stick in the air itself. Even with her vision she wouldn’t be able to see past the thermosphere.

These people were killing their environment with chemicals. Did they not care about their air and water? Did they look forward to the days when they would be breathing through a mask? Then again... according to fate, Earth would perish before then, so what was the point?

From what Astra gathered, the guests consisted of graduate students who belonged to the biology department at one time or another. The sole exception being a young history student whose mingling skills far outranked those of Astra’s. In the few minutes since she arrived, she barely had time to scope about for Alex before she was pulled into a debate regarding noncovalent interactions. Astra wanted to give a good impression, so she scrounged up the care to make an effort.

Since then, she had managed to engage in about one and a half conversations. The first took place
with a rapidly speaking biology student who wanted to know her relationship to Alex. Astra remained vague and said that they just met a few days ago. Her answer had been taken with equally faint interest.

The other dialogue followed with the aforementioned history student started out promising until he stumbled away looking for somewhere to empty the contents of his stomach. She couldn’t blame him amid the pungent odor of what the humans called grass. Or was it weeds?

The kitchen was populated by bottles and towers of red cups. Soda lay nestled in a cooler while the beer keg stood mounted on two stools. Astra didn’t touch anything for fear she would be challenged to some outrageous stunt. Two students had nearly choked upside down in front of her and it took joyful encouragement from the audience to realize this was their rite of acceptance.

Sufficed to say, Astra did not require anyone’s good opinion but the woman whom she was supposed to meet. A woman she could not find despite possessing superior vision. She was starting to believe the hallucinogens crowding the air were affecting her abilities.

Astra kept the same strict no-interest policy with the food as well. For as peckish as she felt after three cobb salads, the bowls of potato chips hardly appealed to her appetite. Even the meat being cooked outside failed to stir interest. The appointed griller seemed more engrossed in smoking his cannabis than the burgers.

She didn’t want to eat. She didn’t want to talk to anyone. She just wanted Alex. Though what she would do when she found her was not as clear. Considering this Alex (like her future self) brought out the anemic, fidgety mortal in Astra, it boded well to come up with a plan before Alex’s wiles took over. Dancing didn’t agree with her feet. Her singing voice had only ever pleased the ears of a toddler, though she had the sneaking suspicion Alex used to linger in the doorway. Apart from finding a quiet corner to engage in a dialogue, Astra couldn’t come up with a single idea.

She hadn’t seen Alex yet and her absence made the nuisance in Astra’s stomach grow to a peach-sized pit. Since their coffee meeting, Alex had texted her the address and a “Hope to see you there!” Astra had no expectations about the night, but she had thought (dare she admit, hoped) that they could spend time together. ‘Hang out’ as humans called it.

Having not spotted Alex within the hour, Astra toiled in wait, her mind driven to hasty conclusions. Had Alex forgotten and not shown up? Was she avoiding her? Was Astra too much of an embarrassment to be seen with? Had she been duped? A prickling madness clung to her and tested her faith. Madness and futility. What business was it of Astra’s if Alex wanted nothing to do with her? She should not have nursed her hopes in the first place. She shouldn’t have come. It was a mistake.

Not entertaining another thought, Astra pushed off the wall and marched out of the dining room. Leaving that house felt like tearing out a piece of herself so deeply lodged it took Kryptonian strength to achieve the momentum. Longing, yearning, missing… she wanted nothing to do with those words or the torment they inflicted. It would benefit everyone that she turn her back. Kal would be disappointed, but she would be free of doubt.

She didn’t need guilt or fear or any number of shameful regrets to survive. She didn’t require a warm body to keep her warm through the night. Astra just needed to get through the next three years. She would gladly be put out of her misery at the moment, but it seemed she had a long wait ahead of her. And how would she accomplish such a feat? Perhaps there was something to the general’s detachment, her dark anticipation. Astra could wait in solitude too. And she could do it without a heart.
The bodies in her path were easily dodged. Astra tucked her chin down and weaved a careful route through the frivolity. Whines of “ouch” and “hey” followed the stumbles but she was gone before they ever spotted her steel shoulder.

Out of the living room and down the hallway to the front entrance Astra marched. Halfway to her goal, she stopped dead in her tracks. A circle of people congregated under the stairwell. They were hovering around a small round table decked with cards, a pair of socks, a bra, and a stash of twenty dollar bills. Another table hosted bottles, some empty and others filled with rusty-colored liquid. That table was attended by some very imbalanced guests – Alex being one of them.

Hands hung loose but nimble at her sides, Astra stood watching the movement of an ungainly young woman. Alex was far past woozy. She was positively irrigated with Rao knew what kind of intoxicants. She could barely keep her eyes on the card game without tipping.

Sure enough, Alex stumbled over her feet and sailed head first into the table of empty shot glasses and whisky bottles. Astra didn’t blink. She sped forward, arms outstretched, and caught her just in time. A second later, the holler of a winning hand spun her head round. The others were glued to the game, too baked to notice her superhuman reflexes or their friend’s near accident.

Astra bristled.

“Urph…” came the muffled voice against her shirt sleeve.

She looked down to the face buried in her shoulder. A swell of compassion inspired her to cup the elbows of Alex’s arms and ease her back. Whatever ran through Alex’s mind, it could not have been dignity. Seeing Alex like this, while not a novel thing in the weeks she spent watching over her from a distance, did not resemble the behavior of which Astra bestowed so much acclaim. Remembrance warred with present circumstances, shaking the mentions of a fine mother and invested companion from their home in her memory.

When Alex’s eyes finally landed on Astra, they blew wide. She grabbed for Astra’s shoulders and shook. “Oh! Hey, hi! I’ve been looking for you! There you are!”

Astra ignored the sweetness in the voice to hook an arm under the sagging body. She pushed a shoulder up under Alex to alleviate the dizziness. Gravity and liquor were no friends to humans.

Fighting the urge to inhale anywhere but near Alex’s breath, Astra gave the impression that she was struggling under the weight. “At this juncture, it would be advisable to go home now.”

“Wait!” Alex pouted. “Just a few more minutes? You want to dance? I’m a terrible dancer. You wanna see? No, maybe you shouldn’t.”

The slurring paired with her glazed over eyes was growing worrisome. Astra loathed seeing her like this. It did terrible things to her chest, pressing on the breast bone over her heart and all. “Alexandra, please?”

The long-winded sigh had her slumping further onto Astra. “God, why do you have to say it like that?” She let out another rank sigh. “Okay. Let’s go home.”

If only she knew how badly Astra wanted to go home.

* * *

Astra woke on a lumpy, worn sofa. Though her body didn’t suffer the aches and pains a human would from sleeping upright, she could certainly understand why.
Lifting her head off the sofa, she waited until her vision cleared to take in her surroundings. It couldn’t have been past five in the morning. The blue hour of twilight looked fuzzy between the window blinds. Astra rubbed her eyes. A reasonably uncluttered apartment greeted her.

She remembered entering through here just a few hours ago, but nothing of its décor or detail stirred a memory. She hadn’t thought it appropriate to snoop at the time, even if it only took a glance towards the photographs.

Astra’s eyes flicked toward the mantle before a twinge forced her to look away. She was not there to explore. This was not her property. Technically, she hadn’t asked permission to pass its threshold. But just a few hours previous, Alex did not have the mindset or the physical capabilities to stand upright let alone slip a key through her door’s key hole. Astra stayed to ensure Alex was alright. Safety trumped manners, surely.

Finally alert, Astra tilted forward on the sofa and squinted at the closed bedroom door. Once satisfied that Alex continued resting, heart beating normally, she let go of the breath she’d been holding. Astra ducked her head and closed her eyes to the feeling of her fingers running through her hair. The previous night had been interminably long and upsetting. Her nerves still thrummed despite proof. Alex may be alive and unhurt, but that didn’t mean Astra had gone unscathed.

The cut deepened with every passing minute. It felt like someone’s hands were gripping the sides and pulling it wide. Like a scientist, they exposed the systems and pointed at the imprudence with incredulity. They would ask, “How could such a sad thing put herself through it?” As if she weren’t there. As if she screwed herself over for nothing.

How she had been able to fall asleep in this condition, on a couch unlike her own, disturbed Astra. Her nails dragged against her scalp as they combed free of her hair. She raised her head and put it out of her mind before it sent her spiraling into self-pity.

Not a sound disrupted the still apartment. The doors to the other rooms were open to silence. Dawn had yet to break and the other tenants had not shown up yet. At the risk of running into Alex’s friends and having to explain the situation, Astra decided to stay a little while longer.

A steady drum sang in her ear. She checked the clock on the television cable box. Still just after five o’clock. Time was all that mattered. Astra attended to the beats with a just cause as if it was her only purpose. She decided it was not enough. The cut bit deep and she spread it wider in recollection...

“You ever do something really, really stupid?”

Alex sagged heavily into Astra and neither of them seemed bothered by how her arm wound around Astra’s waist. The close proximity benefited Alex’s mumbled delivery

A wrist brushed at the naked flesh of Astra’s waist. “How do you mean?” she asked.

“Like break the law or do something really, really…” Alex giggled, “… inadvisable.”

Astra thought about it. “I broke into my father’s things to try on his military uniform. It was a very long time ago.”

“It couldn’t have been that long ago.” Alex turned her head, nose brushing Astra’s curls as she looked closely. “You’re not that old.”

For a moment, Astra thought Alex was sober enough to see right through her. The flesh of a warm thumb grazed under her loose-fitting shirt. She failed to stifle the flinch and looked away.
“Did it fit?”

Astra’s attention pulled out of dreary clouds. “Did what fit?”

“Your dad’s uniform.”

“No, it didn’t. I hardly ever fit into anything of his.”

Alex remained silent to let that sink in before speaking. “I once pranked my dad by putting a water balloon in his briefcase. Only the balloon wasn’t filled with water. It…” Alex ducked her head sneakily, grinning from ear to ear, “… it was filled with Kool-Aid.”

The laughter made her unstable and Astra struggled. “Alright, come along.”

When they reached the door, Alex didn’t say anything. She dropped her keys and promptly passed out in Astra’s arms. Whoever Alex shared the apartment with was not around, so it was a simple thing to get her inside without raising eyebrows.

Astra had no choice. She couldn’t leave Alex to sleep in her shoes and without the covers pulled gently over her any more than she could abandon her out in the hallway. There was no alternative but a mountain of rationalizations. Astra couldn’t leave Alex in an inebriated state – rationale number one. Who was going to douse the flames when a spontaneous fire erupted in the apartment? – rationale number 65.

Safety first. Ask permission later. It wasn’t Astra’s most chivalrous deed in two hundred years, but it certainly wasn’t on par with her irrational stunts of youth. Unwilling to infringe any further on Alex’s privacy, Astra reserved her place on the sofa outside the bedroom, close enough to aid when called but far enough to afford space.

The steady drumming in Astra’s ear picked up. Its pace skyrocketed and was subsequently followed by a gasp. Astra rose to her feet in a flash but kept herself rooted. Like a shadow, she kept still in wait, senses tuned to the nearest bedroom.

Alex soon calmed upon realizing where she was. The bed creaked as she rose up and took in deep breathes. Her dry lips smacked for moisture. The rustle of cotton clothes being changed followed.

Astra diverted her gaze to the frayed rug beneath her feet. She nibbled at the inside of her lip, realizing that Alex’s memory of the previous night would return at any second. She should leave. Her shift didn’t start until noon, but she should really leave. Shouldn’t she?

A rattling sound like pills in a bottle brought her attention up in time to see Alex washing down aspirin with a glass of water. Maybe she wouldn’t remember. Maybe it would be best if they parted ways now before it all fell apart. As much as Astra valued Alex’s happiness, she had to think of her own as well. If two years in a friendship with Kal-El had taught her anything, it was that even the foolhardy deserved peace. So far, the stuff eluded her, but one thing remained clear: wherever this peace was, she would not find it in Princeton.

“Astra?”

The sleepy tone cut through the silence. Astra’s hand halted on the doorknob fogged with her body heat. For a Kryptonian, she did not utilize speed to her advantage. Steeling herself, she drew her hands behind her in the turn and reserved all emotion when meeting Alex’s eyes.

“I see you are feeling better.”
Alex nodded. A pair of yoga pants hung low on her hips. The new t-shirt was made of satin and glinted in the spare light. She brought her fist down from her eyes and blinked with a tilt of her head. “Hey, um… did you drop me off last night?”

“Yes.” Astra fought the wave of sentiment that last night drudged up. She also urged her gaze from the heavy swells beneath Alex’s shirt. She shook her head in wonder as to how humans divested the bra so effortlessly. “You gave me directions to the apartment. It was less than five blocks from the house.”

“The last thing I remember was reaching for my keys.” Her face suddenly winced in recollection. “Shit, did I pass out on you? Jesus, I’m sorry. You could have just left me on the couch or something. You didn’t have to go to the trouble.”

“It was nothing. I should be going now.”

Alex was looking around and, upon finding no one else in the apartment, rounded back to Astra. She furrowed her brow. “Did you leave the aspirin on my night stand?”

A shock of impatience burned through Astra. Her hand slipped from the doorknob she had grabbed again. She turned as if hidden by whistle. “It was sitting on the bathroom counter when I arrived. I thought it would alleviate the effects of your night out. I expect you enjoyed yourself.”

A rather blasé attitude followed Alex’s gaze about the apartment. She shrugged as if speaking were too much of an inconvenience.

“I see,” Astra said.

She saw and it only made her condition worsen. What ailed Astra persisted longer than any hangover. What in Rao’s name had Kal been thinking? Encouraging this social interaction like it afforded her a second chance?

Astra’s spine stiffened. She thrust her shoulders back and dipped her chin in farewell. “If there is nothing else you require of me… I am late for a previous engagement.” She had a Kryptonian to throttle.

“Wait.” Alex’s footsteps followed the urgency in her voice. “Just wait. I –“

“Yes?” The snap couldn’t have come from her. It sounded too wounded, angry, self-pitied and yet her lips tasted the bitter recoil. Her hair flew in the spin. She no more possessed the patience to explain the white strand than she had to scold herself for letting it down earlier. “You what?”

The lines in Alex’s forehead deepened. Her confusion mixed in the lethargy, making her look as vulnerable as a feather. But those were surface reactions. So much raw determination lied within. Muscle and bone made for the stresses of training. A body and mind prepared for survival. So much lied in wait to be tested, strengthened, molded to textbook perfection. So much more than she knew.

“Why did you stay?” Alex asked, voice enamored with the question.

Astra spoke before her thoughts caught up with her. “Because it was the honorable thing to do.”

“Honor?”

“You look confused.”
The furrows hardened and no longer did Alex appear confused. “Ah… yeah. I’m confused.” She shifted her weight and brought a hand to her hip. The resistance traveled to the muscles around her eyes, tightening them like knife points. “It’s ironic, this talk of honor, when you tried as hard as you could to avoid my friends last night. Yeah, I know what happened. Everyone was having a good time while you isolated yourself. What about that was honorable?”

Astra couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Despite her superior abilities, she couldn’t process a single thought amid the nonsense. The air was congealing in it. “I did not accept an invitation to entertain a house full of adolescents. I came without any intention but to enjoy myself.”

“How?” bawked Alex. “You were like wallpaper – no one hardly noticed you were there.”

“Unlike some people, I do not require the attentions of others to have a good time.”

Astra’s breath steamed in the air. She barely had the patience to govern her reflexes. The knuckles of her right hand cracked. Her face felt engulfed by fire. She paused in the dawn of a miserable revelation. She wouldn’t have had to restrain herself on Krypton. Even if the Council of Law and Behavior disallowed certain freedoms, the freedom to express oneself in private to another individual tasted sweet. Sweeter than what Earth had to offer. Sweet like morning kisses and holding hands above the table.

Astra stared straight into the eyes of her once lover and friend. Thoughts overheated within her skull, thoughts damning Alex for rousing the ache. Damning herself for allowing it to happen. How could such a sad thing put herself through it?

“You accuse me of isolating myself,” Astra said over grinding teeth, “when you were the one ignoring me to get intoxicated. The world has better things to do than watch you spiral out of control.”

Alex’s eyebrows nearly touched her hairline. “Are you calling me self-absorbed?”

“You were the one who invited me. I spent an hour and a half waiting for you to show up when you were there the whole time, hiding under the stairwell being foolish.”

“Come on,” Alex puffed. She crossed her arms more for resentment’s sake than to cover the indignity peaking beneath her thin shirt. “You can’t expect me to hold your hand. You’re what, thirty-five? Grow up.”

Astra bit back a remark. It lingered, stinging on her tongue, aching to find a place in the room. If only Alex knew how much older she was and how far her experience had taken her. Far enough to see her rot on planet Earth, alone and forgotten.

If by some chance Alex knew – her age, her origins, the circumstances that brought her here – she would throw her out. Dishonesty ranked very high on Alex’s list of injustices and there was no excuse in the galaxy that Astra could use to justify her actions. She deserved to be punished for her lies. For however much it hurt to stand there and take such indifference, Alex was not some insignificant human being. She would become hers in another world. Astra owed it to Alex’s future self to respect this impetuous, passionate, intolerable young woman.

Astra’s fingers released from their fist ed confines. She exhaled a quieting breath, taking heart in the damage she was about to avoid. Damage her actions would have caused were she not to take the high road.

“I am sorry if I offended you. It wasn’t my intention. Goodbye.”
The words fell from her lips like sap, raw and stubborn yet necessary as gravity. To her, they did not sound like bristles sweeping an inconvenience into a dustpan, but to Alex, maybe it sounded exactly like that.

Astra had the knob at the edge of her fingertips and the door open a foot when it was slammed shut in her face. She stared, aghast at the hand planted to the door. The hair at the back of her neck prickled in the heat of close quarters. She turned just as Alex stepped back.

“What the hell is your problem?” asked Alex. Her entire body tensed from conflicting emotions – anger, confusion, and something else Astra couldn’t define. “You wanted to go to that party.”

“To be with you,” Astra shot back. Her cheeks flamed and she couldn’t see straight. “I thought I made that clear.”

“Well, you didn’t. You should have said something.”

“I am saying it now.”

The air became thick and unbearable in their lungs, rendering them speechless. They looked at one another, chests heaving from exertion and unwilling to ask why it took so much out of them. If willing to lend it some thought, they would realize how absurd their resistance.

“I won’t apologize.”

Astra shook her head, eyes constant with the single-minded insolence. “I never wanted you to.”

Not a second after it left her lips, Alex threw herself forward. In three strides her fists were clutching Astra’s shirt and bringing their mouths together. She pressed into Astra until their chests were flush. Momentum didn’t deter Astra. Hard muscle stopped Alex in her tracks while yielding breasts and lips cushioned the impact. She stood resolute like a lighthouse guiding home a lost ship. She took the brunt of frustration and secretly watered Alex’s flowering marvel.

The shock left Astra breathless and discouraged. She could not admit to being attacked so thoughtlessly and being defeated in the span of a kiss. The simplicity of it stole her breath. Its ambiguity shocking soul where she thought none remained. It was everything a first kiss had to offer. Even if the roles were reversed in Astra’s memory, it still reduced her thoughts to clouds.

Though caught off guard, Astra recovered just in time to feel the body stiffen against her. Fingers uncurled from their casualty. Her skin tingled beneath the stifling shirt. She had half a mind to rip it off.

Alex froze, mouth slightly parted against Astra’s. Her lips twitched and her eyelashes fluttered. Second-guessed oneself should not come with so much contact, yet there Alex was, hands spread atop Astra’s wrinkled shirt and unable to break free.

Astra heard the unspoken request and answered by taking hips and braced Alex hard against her. She kissed those lips before taking a cautionary breath, figuring she had already damned herself and everyone else just by being there, just by looking at her.

Her mouth groaned of its own free will as she fell deeper and deeper. She allowed herself to be hurt by this woman and now she was making it worse by consuming the mouth that spat obscenities at her expense. But she didn’t give a damn and, judging by the eager moan, neither did Alex.

They parted only to gain a better hold. Alex’s hands sank into Astra’s curls, exploring their texture
and seizing tufts by the nape. Her head tilted and her mouth parted wider to take the kiss to a far
dereper level. Astra took her by the waist and lifted her just enough for her toes to drag across the
floor. She pressed her full weight upon Alex, the door rattling on its hinges to the blow. A sharp
reaction drew blood from Alex’s bottom lip. Astra would have sacrificed her own but she hardly
felt pain anymore. The air was thin up where her brain cells were dissipating like mist. No pain, no
cause. Just the beginning of something she started. Much like a timeline with an unwritten ending.

She seized the back of Alex’s neck and brought her hard against her lips, tongue chasing the warm
trickle to Alex’s tongue. She moaned, beside herself with desire. Yes, she thought with a mind half
crazed. Yes, she answered several seconds behind the hip grasping hands. This was right. It was
absolutely okay. Okay… okay… She loved that word as much as she loved to hear it from those
lips.

Almost dizzy beyond restraint, Astra scrounged the last dregs of common sense to leave the
vulnerable flesh of Alex’s waist. The slap of hands planting themselves to the door made Alex
jump. A puff of air washed over them, tingling across their cheeks and cooling the perspiration
already gathering on their necks. It was almost like a sign to stop. It could have had the power to
part their bodies and make them look at the unwise state their actions caused.

But passion did not wait for reason and neither did Alex’s audacity. She recovered by asserting
herself into the space between them. The second Astra felt it she thrust forward. Her moan became
muffled by Alex’s waiting kiss. She rocked on the offered thigh, the air in her lungs burning in
deception. She felt the hands on her hips, guiding her in, and she sobbed out in relief.

“Alexandra…”

Alex took her cheek in one hand while the other remained digging roughly into denim. She kissed
Astra’s lips as she had the first time, hard and displaced of sense. Their noses pressed side by side
until they weren’t and Alex was drawing back.

Astra opened her eyes and blessed her powers of invincibility. If she were human, she wouldn’t
have been able to remain on her own two feet in the glow before her. Alex possessed a wild look in
her eyes that approached within a knife’s edge of wanton. She was flushed, panting, and
determined.

“You want to stay?” Alex asked. Her eyes dropped to parted lips. If her nails were biting denim in
intimidation, the fingers on Astra’s cheek stroked in wonder. “Is that what you want?”

Astra’s tongue felt heavy in her mouth. She felt abandoned from all rational motives. Why exactly
had she forbidden this? What harm could it cause to act in her nature? Her body still remembered
how it felt to be with Alex. It would be different from the last time, but in no way could it outrank
the distractions Astra bed in recent times.

Her instincts took over, scooping up the base needs at her core and ignoring suggestions like
temporal paradox and slamming doors. None of it slowed the thickening in her blood. She felt like
any one of Shade Canyon’s dominant predators, chasing anything with the right pulse until it lay
panting in her grasp. Want… desire… those were the only words that occupied Astra’s mind.
Savage, vulgar initiative swelled up and seized her bones.

She took the hand on her cheek and brought it down to her side. She nodded.

Alex led her into the bedroom. Even in haste, the open door remained as unbroken as a bad habit.
Patience unheeded, she pushed Astra back on the bed and straddled her lap. A surge of exuberance
came over Alex as she striped off her shirt and brought their mouths clashing together. The kiss
was hard and unrelenting. It gave no courtesy to oxygen. Hands groped over clothing, demanding them off in fits of pulls and jerks. Aimless but exacting. Persistent but daunted by intermittent tremors.

Astra submit to the treatment even as her hands wrenched the body against her. Their gestures were just scratching the surface of rough. She sensed the wandering desperation in Alex and tried to temper her with hands to her cheeks. She kissed between her framed hands and roving thumbs, her tongue undeterred by morning after sourness. She tried to be gentle, forthcoming, honorable, but her body would not cooperate. Her hands slipped over earthly flesh. Her mouth devoured in a rage. No part of her stopped to think how this would affect them. As self-absorbed as the college grad who stood her up, it hadn’t occurred to her just what this meant to Alex.

The pounding beneath her hand was what finally knocked sense into her. Astra broke free from Alex’s groaning mouth and looked down to the breast cradled in her hand, where beyond flesh and bone a heart was trembling like that of petrified game. Her eyes slipped closed of their own accord. An earth shattering beat throbbed.

The groaning springs sounded like a crying flame dragon. Astra’s eyes blinked open and focused on Alex. She was beautiful. So heartbreakingly beautiful. Her heaving chest blossomed to a rare pink. It reminded Astra of a Kryptonian sunrise and waking up to a sure thing.

Amid her body’s preoccupation with pleasure, a bit of restraint overwhelmed. Astra took Alex gently by the hips, steadying their earnestness. “Do you…”

Her breath caught and she cursed at her own incompetence. Where was her willpower at a time like this? Swallowing, she drew back from the lips she had been idly drawn to. A shiver ran through her and at the back of her mind she knew Alex could feel it. Maybe that’s why she smirked. The nervousness was being concealed with lust – Astra recognized the signs immediately. Much like the first time Alex shared her bed on Krypton, this Alex wanted to be good for her. She wanted to show how well she could keep up despite her inexperience. Separate emotion from the physical act, cock a brow, and it was easy enough to fall into a rhythm.

Astra knew her caution would be met with hostility. An ego that size wouldn’t want to be underestimated or coddled. With that thought in mind, she masked her caution with respect.

The arch of Alex’s brow rose higher in anticipation. Astra smiled kindly and pulled her closer so the whisper could be heard. “Have you done this before?”

"What? Fucked a beautiful woman?" Alex flashed a smile dripping in bravado. "Of course I have."

Astra’s face betrayed surprise. If this was the same Alex from her past, she was lying. Astra knew because she had slept with this woman for two and half years, three months, and seven days; she knew her body and it was not responding with experience.

It wasn’t long before the look vanished and she saw fit to turn the tables. By the time she had Alex pinned to the bed, Astra was the one smirking.
Overcoming Gravity

Krypton, Four Years Ago…

Astra had slept in late which meant two things. One, Alex was to blame and two, lab trials would have to wait. In the past few weeks since her bedroom became their bedroom, nothing much had changed. Normally, Astra woke up long before anyone else, and on work days she was usually on her way out by the time Alex and Jeremiah were rubbing the grogginess from their eyes. On occasion, Alex would spring awake and convince her to stay in. She and her hands were very convincing.

The rewards kept coming even after Astra managed to peel herself from the bed. Waking Jeremiah to the living brought back fond memories of when it had been just the two of them. The mornings used to be their time. She’d give him a bath, brush his hair, clothe him, and feed him breakfast. It may take Jeremiah a while to yawn back to his usual babbling self, but she treasured him in any state, even with a little yogurt on his chin.

Though it was precious time taken for granted, Astra had no desire to turn back the clock. With Alex there, she had an extra pair of hands around the house and at the lab. Unlike Non, Alex proved herself to be so much more committed to Jeremiah’s care. She made the apartment her home by deckling it according to her own touches of color and taste. Astra had never seen more of someone else in her own house. Between the bland, human sensitive food in her fridge and the odorous running shoes left haphazard in the foyer, she knew Alex had chosen to stay. If Astra had to give up a few mornings with her son so that she could provide for her family than it was worth it. Alex, in all her peculiar human ways, was worth it.

That morning, Astra decided to postpone Jeremiah’s bath, which he was all too agreeable to. Breakfast with Alex and their son was too good to pass up. Work could wait and so could a bath. A warmth settled in her chest. She happened to like the matted hair look anyway.

She headed out of living quarters with Jeremiah dallying behind. His socks flopped on the hardwood floor as her feet tread soundlessly. The living room carried a slight chill even with the red dawn streaming in. Soon enough the makings of breakfast would heat them through.

In the kitchen, Jeremiah stood clutching his Karhu to his chest and clocking her every move. A faint growl came from his stomach and he clutched the bear tighter. “Can we have sausages?” he asked, voice thick with sleep.

“Hm,” she hedged in the midst of cookware, “can we? Yes, I should think so. Sausages are a digestible food and we are creatures who require sustenance.” She turned around, mouth tucked to a corner in amusement. “Or did you mean it a different way? I cannot tell by your manner.”

Jeremiah’s face scrunched in frustration as if they had been through this before. “May we have sausages…” he paused to make sure it came out precise, “please?”

She smiled and clicked on the cooking unit. “I don’t see why not.”

While Jeremiah went to climb into his high chair, bravely unassisted, Astra prepared to make the kitchen sing with the sizzle and pop of sausages.

“Don’t you go work, Mama?”

Work always came second to family. Ever since Jeremiah.
“Not this morning, dearest.” Astra resurfaced from the refrigerator, feeling an effervescence fill her. She floated to his chair, carrying a light smile and a glass of juice. She swept back the curls from his forehead. Their kinked, stubborn nature didn’t like that. “Today we are going to have breakfast together.”

Jeremiah cheeks puffed around his smile and he took his juice in both hands.

By the time the rich aroma of breakfast was watering their palates, they were joined by the final member of their trio.

Alex padded in on bare feet, looking smart in her work uniform. The shower left her cheeks pink and her hair darkened damp. Jeremiah stirred in his high chair at once. She kissed his cheek, pinching the hair at his nape affectionately. When she got to Astra she propped herself back on the counter and folded her arms.

“Good morning,” Alex said.

Astra detected the cheeky smile in Alex’s tone and grinned. “Again,” she supplied. A hum started at the back of her throat. A good morning indeed. She used her unoccupied hand to cross over and cover the hand on her hip.

Alex must have stirred something in her because Astra had never cooked a more decadent spread. The sausages glittered in grease but were full in flavor. Her taste buds tickled for more sweet rolls even as they dribbled over in sticky, calorie laden icing. While Alex hovered over her plate of perfectly spiced eggs, Jeremiah paid homage to his favorite meat by letting slip a <wowee> from his buttery lips. They saved their conversation to savor every bite. It was family time at its finest.

Astra didn’t know how she would manage getting to work with such a belly full of food. She was weighed down by the protein rich meal and filled with such sighs at the contented faces in her midst. Astra’s gaze caught Alex from over the table, their eyes as glazed over as the sweet rolls. Oh, wouldn’t she love to go back to bed.

“Mama,” said Jeremiah later as he watched them clean up, “why do you and Laylee hold hands?”

At the sink, Astra handed a scrubbed plate to Alex for drying. They exchanged a look. Since Alex had moved into her bedroom, Jeremiah had yet to be apprised of the arrangement. He must have noticed how close his mothers had become as they quite literally gravitated toward each other. Especially in the privacy of their own home, Astra didn’t feel the need to restrain herself like she did in front of her team or in public. The subject of when to tell Jeremiah and what to say hadn’t been discussed yet.

Alex looked to her. Save for the darting eyes, she didn’t appear terribly daunted.

Astra cleared her throat and half turned to Jeremiah. “To show affection,” she said. Her voice sounded as diplomatic as her answer. Alex made a noise at the back of her throat but Astra pressed on. “Your mother and I hold hands to show affection.”

After a pause, Jeremiah spoke again. “Mama, why do you and Laylee kiss?”

This time, Alex’s lips spread wide in amusement. Astra could feel the jittering shoulder bump hers and she glared at the feeble attempt at maturity.

When Alex received the message, she put down her towel, brow raised with all the superiority of a scientist, and faced Jeremiah. Mouth still curled, she said, “Because sometimes your mom needs to be put in her place.”
Whatever Astra was expecting, it was not that. Her expression churned between outrage and titillation. “Is that so?”

Alex’s gaze never left Jeremiah, though, her smile grew wider. “A kiss expresses many things, most of which are feelings. It’s somewhat similar to when we kiss you goodnight or when you do something that makes us proud. We want you to know we love you. And when your mom and I kiss, it is for the same reason. There is no shame in that.”

The tension in Astra’s face released as she gazed admiringly at her chosen companion. It was a rather well articulated answer. More poised than she would have come up with on the fly. Alex must have quite a bit of field mitigation experience from her time in the DEO.

Assuming Q&A was done for the day, Astra returned to the dirty dishes swimming in wait.

The sound of heels tapping the high chair legs lasted only a moment. “Mommies, why do you make noises in bed?”

The military hardened nerves in Alex finally broke. Whatever she planned to say tumbled out in a disorderly puff of air and alarm.

Under different circumstances, Astra would have been gratified by her choked response. While Alex was picking her jaw off the floor, Astra’s hands were sweating in cold water. This would have been so much more comical if their two-year-old son had not just asked about their sex life.

Jeremiah continued to swing his legs, blissfully unaware of how on edge he put his parents.

Instead of appeasing his curiosity, Alex whirled on Astra. “I told you to keep your voice down,” she hissed.

“Me?” Astra’s hands slipped out of the water and rested on her hips. She hardly cared that they were soaking through her pajamas. “You are the one cussing up a tempest.”

“I can’t help it being surrounded by people who throw around ‘Rao this’ and ‘Rao that.’” Alex frowned deeply, her hands resorting to a similar pose as Astra. “And you’re seriously taking issue with my cussing? Miss Screams at the Top of Her Lungs?”

Sighing, Astra flicked her hands out and dried them unnecessarily on her shirt. “I need to take my shower and go to work. We will discuss this later.” On her way out, she bent down to kiss Jeremiah’s wrinkled forehead. “Do not bother your mother with more questions, Misha.” Her strides were quick, but her ears picked up on the indignant puff from afar.

“He was asking you, too!”

Astra smiled and chuckled her way into the shower.

* * *

Earth, ‘Present’ Day…

If Astra had known what awaited her, she would have woken much sooner. Fortunately, they still had the apartment to themselves and Alex had yet to stir, so she could lay in bed gazing to her heart’s content.

Astra rose from where her arm pillowed her head and read the alarm clock. A glass of water blocked the last digit, but it still read something along the lines of seven o’clock. Alex hadn’t
mentioned that she was enrolled in Monday courses and even if she did have some lecture to attend, Astra had a feeling it wouldn’t matter. Alex would miss class for a toothache, and although Astra may care how she tended to her studies, she wasn’t her mother. Thank Rao for that.

Satisfied that time meant little at the moment, she lay back on her side without disturbing her bedmate. Alex was lying on her stomach, hands stuffed under the pillow and head tucked near her shoulder. Contentment lingered at the corners of her mouth in such a way that inspired Astra to smile. The ease of watching her sleep, knowing Alex invited her here and had spread open for her benefit, staggered her poise. Her chest prickled with happiness. She had forgotten how wonderful the feeling of waking up next to someone she belonged to. It didn’t matter that Alex didn’t know. Astra was hers regardless of distance or time.

She looked to the smooth track of flesh and followed its planes to the linen sheet. It covered their waists and any desire still waiting to be quenched. Astra wouldn’t ask because she knew Alex was too tired from the night before. Her hangover left her listless and unable to finish a third time, so Astra had covered them in a sheet to keep in the warmth made by their hurried lust.

In no other human had she found this feebleness attractive. She always admired Alex’s physicality and her maddening drive to complete a task, but idleness could be equally endearing. Caring for Alex when she was ill, downcast, or just too weak to lift a finger filled Astra with purpose. Alex trusted her and that spoke volumes to her heart. Being needed without having to ask emphasized the depth of their relationship and how much effort they put in seeing it through two and a half years against the grain.

Trust went a long way to mending future quarrels. Astra wouldn’t worry over it at the moment. She drifted in the sound of gentle beats and to the memory of having given release so impulsively in Alex’s arms not long ago. The lethargy of a quiet Monday morning threatened to pull her under. To keep awake, she focused on the magnanimity behind closed lids, eager to watch those eyes flutter open.

Astra’s hand molded itself to the creased sheets between them. She could not bring herself to leave. She had already been through goodbye; the thought of parting from Alex again brought her to tears. She studied Alex’s sleeping state and the young, untested mettle beneath. She’d been without her for two agonizing years. The memories of her were both tormenting and fulfilling. They were flashes of a time she thought could never end. How could it all be lost to her? And how could she be laying with Alex like this, against all odds? She should feel blessed, but the truth was starting to bend her stomach in shameful knots.

When Alex finally roused, she drew back in surprise. It wasn’t necessarily a recoil. Astra would have felt the sting like a prick to her heart if it was. Though no sting came, Alex took a moment to collect her thoughts and connect the dots that had led them there.

Astra rose up on her elbow, waiting with bated breath. An icy warning slithered up her spine. Could Alex have had no memory of what transpired? Did she forget the whole thing?

Soon enough, recognition stared back with darkened eyes. Alex’s mouth quirked up and her cheeks colored.

Astra fought the urge to fall back to bed with a gusty sigh. A thousand blessings unto Rao. She was not the only one to remember how satisfying it felt to test the bed’s integrity.

Their eyes locked for the time it took for the significance to sink in. Alex broke first by diverting her attention to the sheet and nipping her bottom lip over and over again. An awkward hush fell between them.
“You know.” Alex’s eyes darted between Astra and the pillow. “Don’t you?”

Of course Astra knew. How could she not? It wasn’t like she was going to call Alex out on it. If anyone should be held responsible for lying it was Astra.

“I’m sorry I lied,” Alex said, head hung. She threw up a hand. “It’s not like… I don’t know why I’m even telling you this. I don’t normally do this.”

“I understand.” Astra ducked her head. “And your apology isn’t necessary.” She watched her fingers lace and unlace, wondering if the anxiety had merit. “I am not overly experienced myself.”

“But you’re so…” Alex blushed and looked to the ceiling first before committing to the words. “I enjoyed being with you,” she said upon exhale, her whole body relaxing at the admission.

A similar smile surfaced to Astra’s lips. “You were enjoyable as well.” Even if Alex’s responding suspicion was for joking’s sake, Astra saw fit to reassure the squint. “Truly. I do not regret staying.”

“Good because I can’t wind back the clock.”

Satisfied with herself, Alex plopped back to bed. Fully awake and open to staying that way, she supported her head up on her hand. The subconscious habit to cover her nakedness brought the sheet up to her clavicle. Her thumb rested against the notch and its circular motion drew Astra’s stare, unbidden.

“So you’re not turned off?”

Astra’s thoughts, which were turning sluggish as molasses, snapped taut. Her eyes flicked up. “Pardon? Turned off by what?”

“By the fact that a few hours ago I was – for lack of a better term – a virgin when it came to women. It doesn’t bother you that I’ve never slept with women before you?”

“I am astonished that you think so lowly of me. Although, I must admit that your lack of discretion debases me at the moment.”

Alex’s brow arched mischievously. “Damn, I thought my head was constantly in the gutter. Should I put something on?”

“That’s not necessary.”

The haste trickling from her own tongue made Astra squirm. Alex’s smug expression seemed to inspire a sudden bout of claustrophobia as well. Astra curled her legs under her and leaned back against the headboard. If a bit of exposed flesh distracted her, it was only fair that Alex receive the same challenge. The light spilling between the blinds made the air warm and the linens stifling by extension. She left the sheet pooling around her hips as she would in the comfort of her own bed.

Alex’s nostrils flared upon inhaling. “You know, when I said I don’t normally do this… that’s not exactly true.”

“You have engaged in one night affairs,” Astra gathered. “Or should I say morning affairs?”

“Yeah, a few. Though they’ve never led into a conversation like this. You should count yourself lucky that you already have my phone number. It’s usually the last thing I give anyone. And
sometimes it doesn’t even come to that.”

Astra didn’t want to admit how that statement made her chest ache. Why had Alex put herself through meaningless trysts only to come home to an empty bed? For what purpose did the disconnect serve? Unable to comprehend the answers, Astra fought the urge to rub the burning itch climbing up her esophagus.

“Is it preferable to share yourself with someone without obligation?”

“I don’t know,” Alex said. “It’s been a while since I slept with someone I already had feelings for.” When the connotation caught up to her, Alex went still. “I – I mean… friend feelings. Because we’re friends. Anyway, as you probably can tell I don’t connect well with people on an intimate level. Not that it hasn’t happened with someone – anyone. I just… it’s hard to talk about, you know?”

Astra paused in consideration of her own experience. The transformation from a loveless marriage to a supportive partnership had not been without its obstacles. She and Alex had to overcome so many insecurities about personal boundaries. The fact that they shared a child between them put more pressure on their struggle to make it. Even after years of hard work, they still hadn’t figured it all out. Keeping each other afloat was always a work in progress. The level of intimacy they managed to build took heaps of cooperation, oaths, and arguments. The make-up sex (among many other joys) certainly made the effort worth it.

Astra’s musings alleviated the weight on her chest. “It is difficult, compromising one’s individuality for another human being. It is much like leaping into the ocean without a tether.”

Relieved, Alex closed her eyes and sighed. “Yeah. It’s daunting to think about. Although, the more I say it out loud and admit how terrified it makes me… the less daunting it actually seems.” Her nose wrinkled at the absurdity. “Does that make sense?”

“Giving voice to one’s uncertainties is an empowering feeling,” Astra said. “When we learn to acknowledge a predicament, it no longer holds sway over us. Self-determination and a tough hide. My uncle once told me they are what make lions of lambs.”

To be perfectly frank, that was not how the maxim went, but Astra could not very well address Alex as a yagrum who matured from a Kandorian hen.

“Astra,” Alex said slowly, eyes drawing up from her hands to latch onto the eyes staring heartily back, “are you seeing anyone?”

It took a moment for the meaning to dawn. When it did, Astra couldn’t help but melt at the courage on display. Alex’s frail human heart agonized in wait and pumped the blood through her veins like a rushing tide. She fought a war to keep her eyes from straying. These were not the reactions that corresponded to a casual affair. Astra knew the signals. She also knew what it sounded like when someone wanted her to stay.

Astra stared back, smiling to the quickening breath. “No, I am not seeing anyone at the moment.”

Alex tried and failed to stifle the grin. She shifted up in bed so they were eye-to-eye. A laidback expression loosened the muscles in her face. “You don’t have to hang around if you don’t want to. I know you’re an adult with a respectable job – jobs.”

Astra frowned. “Do you wish me to leave?”

“I have a meeting with my advisor in three hours.” Alex shrugged. The gesture would have
suggested indifference were it not for her attentive squint. “Do you want to get something to eat?”

The reminder startled Astra to devastation. She was unable to hold back the groan. “Oh, please.”

Alex’s laugh blossomed in the air.

* * *

In the days that followed, Astra divided her time between New York and Princeton. With Alex, no other destination beckoned Astra. She would not stray for all the palaces in the world. Her New York apartment was her place of habitation, but her home had always been Alex since a little boy went tumbling into a tower of foam blocks.

Nothing else served as distraction, not even her Earthside niece. At least, only on occasion. It had been a while since she flew to the west coast. The last time Astra walked the grounds of National City University, dusk blanketed the sidewalk and she was touching the paper-like feel of a phone number in her pocket. Kara was always in her thoughts whether or not they were in the same city. She carried her niece wherever her feet touched land just as her son was always in her heart. Whatever air she breathed, they were a part of her like cells populating her body. Even if this Kara had thoughts only for a disgraced general, Astra had faith that their differences did not include how much love she still reserved for her aunt.

It took a while to get used to this world’s Kara. It brought Astra to despair whenever she saw her beauty being concealed by silly spectacles. She also wondered why Kara would take up the press badge and not a paint brush. If this planet’s journalism was anything like Krypton’s, her niece would be in for a world of ethical dilemmas.

Of the many differences between her nieces, one in particular continued to linger in Astra’s thoughts. The title El had no significance on Earth. Though she reserved little affection for the El sons, there was one child whom she loved above all others of that house. She cared how the name followed her niece around the NCU campus. Yet it troubled her when she discovered the surname had no place here.

Kara took her foster father’s name, Danvers, and if it had been any other family, Astra would not have been so accepting. On Krypton, one’s house was more than a name. It took generations to reach high caste status, and it required uncompromising dedication to solidify its place in society. Uncompromising. Astra’s father taught her the meaning of their family crest and that if she ever disgraced it, she would have to live with the consequences.

Astra had no doubt that her forefathers were looking down on her from Rao’s light with disgust. She had chosen a human and a ‘half breed’ over her family’s honor. She could have continued the Ze line with any Kryptonian, male or female, and her child would have been accepted by all. But that was not the fate she chose for herself. The shame of falling from grace alienated her from high society and disavowed any communication between her and her parents. She had been all but disowned. Though a small mercy, it was one her remaining family on Krypton would profit from.

“What are you thinking about?”

Astra’s thoughts dissipated in the heat of a summer’s days. Beside her, Alex was squinting behind her sunglasses. After meeting for breakfast that morning, they had escaped the subway bustle to go window shopping. Alex loved the diner nook with its simple menu and unassuming atmosphere. It was the ideal place for two people who hadn’t decided what they were to each other.

The question had not been raised and Astra wouldn’t draw attention to something that would lead
her to spill sore truths. She made a pact with herself when Alex’s kiss greeted her that morning. She decided that she would not lie. She would reveal her origins and her carelessness, if asked. Lying by omission hardly improved one’s image, but Astra was too faint from a human-sized meal to press the issue.

As they walked the sidewalk of a small New York village, Astra rounded back to the question posed to her. “I was thinking of my father.”

Alex put her hands in the pockets of her shorts. Save for the occasional hand brush, neither of them ascribed meaning to an affair that had carried on for a solid two weeks. They passed the window of a novelty shop. Alex leaned in slightly to catch sight of the dream catchers. She receded from where their shoulders touched, wholly unaware how the contact made gooseflesh of Astra’s arm.

“Your father,” Alex said in a thoughtful voice. “A sore subject for some people. Should I inquire?”

“There is not much to say. I did not live up to his expectations.” Her eyes held steady with the bobbing horizon of heads. Without sunglasses, she persisted in the sunshine like she was numb to its intensity. “It is common, is it not? Children unable to honor their parent’s plans for them, despite great effort.”

“I suppose our parents like to think it doesn’t take fighting a war to please them. When it absolutely does from our standpoint. I think for some, parents can’t see beyond their own failures. They ran out of time to achieve their goals and now they look to their kids to do it for them.”

“My parents serve in the armed forces. Their whole decision-making paradigm proceeds according to schedule.”

“What are they like?” asked Alex. “Outside their schedule.”

“People say they are an ideal match.”

A brow rose from behind Alex’s aviators. “That’s it?”

“There is not much more to account for other than their strict behavior. They live to uphold our way of life. Rules reinforce one’s character, their integrity. Rules are not made to be broken unlike my constant drive to achieve the alternative.”

“You were a rebel? That shocks me. A woman like yourself choses a career in book handling and that’s not enough for your family? I mean, apart from the rock wall gym, you couldn't have a safer occupation. How could your father not be satisfied?”

“It’s more than that. I have made many decisions over the course of my adulthood that have not measured up to the norm. Where I come from, family honor is precious. Sons and daughters show their appreciation by continuing their parent’s work. Independence is not a privilege but a commodity to be bought and sold. My family’s name is respected in the military community and my decisions have a tendency to threaten them.”

Alex’s pace had slowed, though her gaping stare had not torn from Astra. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but that sounds like a terrible way of life. I’m glad you got out of there when you did.”

Astra swallowed over the tightening in her throat. “It was not all terrible.”

“Well, my dad left me with my mother and I’ll never forgive him for that.” Alex hastened to catch the traffic light before it changed. They bridged the crosswalk easily. She didn’t slow her pace. “He’s not around anymore.”
The afterthought sounded as rushed as her pace. Astra looked down to the fist in Alex’s pocket. “He is unreachable?” she asked gently. Her eyes tracked the subtle changes in Alex’s features but the well-crafted mask gave up nothing.

“Pretty much. As much of a pain and the ass my mom is, I don’t think I have the heart to hate him. It slips away a little bit each year. Like he does.”

“I don’t believe that. Wherever he is or has ended up, you carry him with you.” As Astra carried the memories of Kara and Jeremiah. “I do not wish my father ill and yet I do not believe the feeling is mutual. You seem close to your father. From what I imagine.”

“We were close,” Alex said. Her voice remained unchanged, though the strides of her sneakers slapping the concrete slowed to a thoughtful quality. “In our way.”

If there was any life Astra knew better than Alexandra Danvers it was that of her father. Without him, Misha would not have come into her life and she may never have met Alex. The thought of her home without her beautiful son tore her heart to shreds. Before Misha came along, so little managed to fill meaning into her world. He always kept her good and he always kept her feet on the ground. She owed her happiness to Jeremiah Danvers.

They continued down the rows of shops. For sale items beamed behind waxed windows, but Astra could not admit to the draw of their displays. Most doors were kept open both in invitation and to cool the indoor humidity. The wares of antique shops and used book stores gave off a sentimental smell that swept out onto the sidewalk. If anything, Astra did appreciate the scent of printing ink.

Ahead, a commotion lured their attention. A boy and his mother stood outside a toy store. The pedestrians seemed to have all agreed that they would not give them their eyes. They passed the wriggling battle like it was an everyday spectacle.

Astra watched the boy blubbering for his train set and clinging to the shop door by his fingernails. The mother, agitated till she was purple in the face, struggled to pry him away. The blood curdling screams nearly caused Astra to flinch. The boy’s fussing was on an entirely different level from what she had seen at the San Diego Zoo. One time she had found herself flying over and caught sight of two hyenas fighting over a ragged toy.

“Jesus,” Alex muttered as they passed. Her shoulders rolled as if resisting a spine-tingling sensation. “I can’t imagine having kids these days. The whole thing looks embarrassing.”

The bawling faded behind them but for Astra it continued to resonant in her skull. “I have a son.”

Alex chuckled like she had just heard the punch line of a joke. Then it dawned on her. “... What?”

Without changing her pace, Astra continued to peer ahead. “I have a child,” she said, throat growing dry as a desert cavern. “A son.”

Alex didn’t respond right away. Her gaze shifted from Astra to an indeterminable distance ahead. She voiced her puzzlement. “Where is he?”

The color drained from Astra’s face. “Very far away.”

The sun baked the concrete and the concrete reflected its heat to such a degree that made humans perspire. A beaded sheen broke out across Astra’s forehead but not for lack of an incompetent cooling system. She was burning up. A fever seized her insides, chilling them to ice and leaving her skin to prickle over in sweat. She felt ill from wails of “Don’t go, Mama!” in her head and the ghost-like vice of arms around her neck. Her feet kept her going even though she was still dizzy
from the three measly eggs digesting around the pit in her stomach.

Astra didn’t know how long she could bear it without him. Not seeing his face every day, her own eyes and Alex’s chin and his very own essence of being threatened to wrench every cell from her body. Every day without him took a piece of her. She felt as if the distance between them was growing wider, filling with missed birthdays and pivotal moments she would never have the occasion to embarrass him over.

She felt sick with guilt over leaving him. He didn’t deserve to be abandoned by two mothers, the first because she didn’t fit in the pod and the second because she didn’t have the will to fight. She betrayed her son and it was only occurring to her now. The dismay manifested on her face like paint on a canvas.

“Can’t you contact him?” Alex asked.

When Astra shook her head, her vision scattered. She closed her eyes to the nausea bubbling up. “It is complicated.” The words came up short like they were freshly cut by a scalpel. “It is not within my power to reach him.”

They were walking on a crowded street of bystanders: homeless beggars, suits of arrogance and prejudice, walking social injustice disciplines, and crazies from every end of the political spectrum.

Alex took her hand and squeezed it. The gesture may have drawn an eye, but in the dissonance of traffic and through the feeling inspired by the squeeze, Astra wasn’t concerning herself over what other people were seeing. She was seeing Alex.

“I’m so sorry,” said Alex.

Astra was back on the beach, curls fanned out on the sand, the Dandahu surf fizzing under her toes. Rao was looking down on her and smiling with its blood orange rays.

The sickness abated like the tide and it did not return. Astra took a deep breath, feeling her ribs ache and closing her eyes to the feeling. No ghosting numbness. Just tears at the back of her eyes and her heart’s want looking at her like that day on the beach when she told Alex she couldn’t have children. Long ago, the birthing matrix had rejected her genetic material. Being less of a woman than her twin was what always came between her and Alura. A bitter resentment that lasted for decades.

Her hand squeezed reflexively in Alex’s. “Would you like something to drink?”

A food truck awaited them not far ahead. Its awning cast an inviting shadow on the sidewalk. Orders were being shouted from within its steel body.

Astra ignored the pleadings from her stomach and turned to Alex. “I’ve eaten here before. They’re known for their fruit smoothies.”

Alex wasn’t looking at the truck. “Okay. Sure.”

Astra went headlong towards the truck before any questions could be asked about her mood. She was fine. Why wouldn’t she be?

No matter how much she prayed for delay, the waiting line dwindled fast. The breeze under the awning cooled her brow and blew the stray hairs out of her knot. Astra tucked a strand behind her ear, wetting the salt from her upper lip and hoping Alex’s thoughts weren’t aimed in her direction. She hated the weight of a pitiful gaze, even if it’s origins came from a tender heart.
When Astra returned, her hands didn’t shake and her eyes were dry. She offered the thickly whipped smoothie. The outside of the cup was already beaded over in condensation and her hand came away damp.

“Thanks. It’s really hot out today.” Alex pinched the long red straw and brought it to her mouth. “Oooh my god this is pure sunshine.”

Astra smiled. “Your cheeks are pink.” She brought the backs of her fingers to the rosy flesh. Alex hummed to the cool moisture left behind. “Perhaps we should leave the sunlight for somewhere cooler.”

“Not until I finish this delicacy.” Alex’s eyes widened to the bits of fruit she was sucking up through the straw. “What in god’s name is in this?”

“Do you always take the lord’s name in vain?”

“Do you always avoid my dire questions about food?”

Astra’s smile widened. “Peaches,” she said. Her voice became thick like reduced simple syrup and it could not be blamed on the heat. “And mango with milk and a touch of honey.”

Alex fell quiet. Something made her blood quiver. Astra could feel it in the air and at the prickling edge of her ears.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea.” Alex pulled her close, around the waist. A timid smile surfaced. “How about we head back to your place?”

* * *

The perpetual drone of the air conditioning unit filled the apartment. It was on full blast and so too was the oscillating fan. The heat was unbearable and not much else could be done. The window blinds were turned up to block out the harsh sunlight and painting the ceiling in streaks of gold.

The air grew more humid with every breath. Alex turned away to press her cheek into the pillow. The bed dipped, swayed, and she cried out.

The shivering beneath Astra soon ebbed. She kissed Alex’s neck and relaxed beside her, listening to their heartbeats slow. A layer of sweat blanketed her skin. She could feel it tingle in the breeze of the fan. Her brow was heavy with moisture, there and places she couldn’t say out loud. It didn’t make her feel dirty. Far from it. She liked spending her energy for Alex. Even if it produced the slightest ache, it was worth this view.

She would have given anything to feel as Alex felt now, taxed beyond relief and with a body so heavy she could slip into unconsciousness. It was well within her ability to try. She could overextend her powers as Kal had cautioned against on a thousand occasions. The consequences would reduce her physical state to that of a human who was able to bleed, break, and tire.

Alex rolled over and looked at her from under heavy lashes. A light smile broke out. A relief of coolness and satisfaction smoothed the creases which her face had been fraught with not long ago. She lay her hand on Astra’s chest and drew the backs of her fingers between two shapely breasts. A trail of perspiration tickled the skin.

Astra stroked Alex’s head and drew the damp tangles from her forehead. She never wished to feel so fragile for any other person. She wanted fragile and so much more than Krypton allowed her. On Earth, she could be mother to her niece. She could love Alex and not have to apologize for it.
Alex kissed her softly, slowly. She banished Astra’s thoughts on sweaty sheets and in the stale air. Her mouth breathed new opportunities, most of which Astra’s foreign mind couldn’t comprehend. As Astra sighed, Alex’s hands explored the muscles in her back. The aching need to kiss Alex overwhelmed her patience so she leaned in, pursuing the decadent pink lips until they were back where they started.

The novelty of pressing into each other with all its discoveries for Alex and nuances for Astra made it so much more enjoyable. Astra liked Alex’s inexperience because for once in their very long, complicated relationship, she wasn’t the one being taught. Though her education had never been as pleasurable than at the hands of Alex, Astra was not one to lay back and let someone else do the work.

Alex pushed up so their breasts were touching. She tried to kiss Astra’s mouth but it receded. The stubborn knot in her brow brought Astra to laugh. Anger came so easy to this future DEO agent. Her petulance rivaled that of a three-year-old both in the puckering expression, the flushed cheeks, and simpering pulse. But she could also leave the bed, pull on her clothes, and never come back. Astra didn’t want that for all of the riches in the galaxy, so she bent down and placed her mouth square upon Alex’s.

Alex’s frown melted. The muscles in her brow loosened, amply pleased that reason found Astra. Her hand left an arching back to cover Astra’s breast. The point, hard as the tip of her finger, came in contact with her clammy palm. The sensation warmed Astra all over. She breathed a sigh into her mouth and sank between spread legs. Alex moaned to the weight pressing down and clutched at Astra’s back.

She was tense and excited. Astra could hear the heartbeats thundering in her ears. Combined with the bold moves, Alex’s nerves brought her so close to the edge. In the sweltering atmosphere, she could tell where she was most wet, and if relief didn’t come soon she would have to seize it by her own hand.

The space between them filled with shallow breathes. Alex cupped Astra’s sex. “Is this okay?”

Astra combated the shudder with a nod. Their foreheads slid against one another. To be this near in body and so far away in spirit threatened to tear her away. Astra started to wonder if it came this easily to the general. Deception made her skin itch. It wasn’t the sweat that made her feel dirty but the lies. Had General Astra felt this when she first touched Alex? Like stroking fingers, did the kindness mask true malice?

Arousal exploded within her and she jerked her hips forward, chasing the caressing fingers. She whimpered and shook in her own pitiful state. It should delight her to have Alex touching her like this. She was getting cocky by the smile on her face and the eagerness thrumming through her veins. Astra was only growing closer as the fingers of Alex’s hand slid through her, parting her and reaching depths that made her breath hitch.

Rao, what was she doing? Her entire existence felt like a contradiction. She felt bad one moment and then good the next. Very good. Alex’s lips sealed over her groan. She rocked harder against the fingers, telling herself this was a part of being lost. She would always scramble for an excuse to be with Alex. Hurting her was never an option but neither was abandoning her without explanation. They were together now whether or not they slapped a label on it.

She could have done any number of things to prevent it. She could have ignored Alex’s existence and pushed her memory away to the dark recesses of her mind. She didn’t have to accept the phone number or even dial it. Her feet could have kept moving past the drunk grad students and left behind a young woman bleeding out in a pool of whiskey and broken glass. She could have stolen a
shard of kryptonite, cut out her heart, and watch it die before ever giving it to Alex. Dramatics aside, Astra had all the power to stop herself but it didn’t matter. She was a villain in any scenario.

“Astra,” Alex said and kissed the crinkled eyebrow. She lay a hand on Astra cheek as the other slowed to a tender pace between her legs. “It’s okay.”

Hearing those words, Astra let go. The sensation crashing through her was unlike any other. For a moment, she could almost smell the prickly flowers in their vase. She should have reminded Alex to water them because Tuesday was her day and the apartment carried a subtle scent of death. Yet for however dehydrated those flowers Alex always had a fresh batch by the end of the day and plenty of ideas as to how to make it up to her. Astra shuddered to the last, her heart opened and spread out for Alex. She lay against her, panting into the crook of her neck and straining to hear the human condition over the thudding in her ears.

“Is something wrong?”

Astra didn’t react in the embrace. “No.”

“Did I do something wrong?”

Holding Alex felt like holding a smooth marble statue. The stiffness under Astra caused her to lift her head. Shocked, she said, “Of course not.” Her fingers drifted through Alex’s long hair. “You did everything right.”

“Then how come it feels like you’re not here?” The windows emanated a peaking afternoon heat, but Alex’s face reserved a pallor that did not belong between the throes of passion. Her legs shifted as if suddenly aware of the weight. Though she did not slide out from under Astra, she did shoot her a look of bitter indecision. “If you’re going to think about someone else, I don’t have to be here for that. Just tell me and I’ll go.”

Astra shook her head and continued to comb through the stringy, damp locks. “It’s not that. I’m not thinking of anyone else but you. Believe me.”

“I want to. It’s just… Why would someone like you hang out with me? You’re gorgeous and so mature. I’m so…”

“You are not,” Astra cut her off with a kiss. “You are wise beyond your years. Your head is filled with such wonderful ideas,” she smirked, “not the least of which was your most recent.”

An odd spike of self-consciousness spread in Alex’s cheeks. Her eyes danced in the soft glow of sunlight. “You liked it?”

Astra smiled. “So very much,” she said and kissed her thoroughly. “I just have a lot on my mind. Some thoughts do not leave as easily as others.”

Alex’s eyes softened. “Your son.”

Earth’s gravity never bothered her until now. It crushed down on the planes of her back and shoulders, demanding submission on its turf. Astra should be angry. She should want to fight for her right to live here. Gravity reminded her that this earth would never welcome her feet any more than it did any other Kryptonian. She was as stuck on Earth as the rest of them.

Sighing, Astra lay back down and curled into Alex's side.

“Do you want to talk about him?”
Astra’s heart clenched. She closed her eyes. “What do you want to know?”

The blades of the fan thwacked over the air conditioner. Together, they filled the apartment with their lulling music.

“What is his name?” Alex finally asked.

“Misha. After his great uncle.”

“That’s nice.” Alex’s lips spread wide against Astra’s forehead. “A nice name for a boy. Does he look like you or…”

“He looks like his mother.”

“He must be very beautiful then.”

Astra blindly searched for the delicate curve and pressed the bridge of her nose against Alex’s neck. “Yes.”

Her throat constricted and she could say no more. If she had the strength, she would have demonstrated just how beautiful his mother was. She would have expressed her kind, thoughtful ways and how much faith she had in her ability to raise their son. Astra was not able to imagine the challenges Alex was facing on Krypton as head of their family. The Danvers name held no weight in Argo.

Judging by Astra’s own experience that first year as a single mother (amid Non’s occasional participation), she knew it would take all the support from Alura and her family to bolster Alex’s courage. Astra had no doubts that Alex would succeed. No other companion could have surpassed her expectations. She had chosen well.

The minutes passed on like the rolling summer clouds. They dozed on and off but never strayed far from each other. Alex’s next seminar didn’t start until later and Astra had been unable to leave the bed since Alex pounced with peach flavored lips. This feisty, small human pounced on her and Astra took it gleefully.

She looked down to the human draped on her stomach and drew a wistful look. This body had yet to experience the rigors of DEO training. It had no battle scars save for the one on her knee. A childhood wound. It was the same size and shape her finger had traced all those times so very long ago. It was how she knew this was still her Alex.

There were moments Astra doubted herself. Out of all the parallel worlds in the universe, a wormhole slingshot her pod to the very past that belonged to Alex. What were the chances? For her to end up on the same planet at a most convenient time seemed outrageous. Fate either had a sick sense of humor and wanted her to suffer in an existential crisis of her own making or it simply made a mistake.

Astra didn’t like to pay it much thought for it had a tendency to provoke a bodily reaction. She didn’t want to upset Alex or invite more doubts. Her hand rested on Alex’s knee and she brushed over the indentation with her thumb.

A hum slipped from Alex as she roused. She reached over, sliding up Astra’s thigh to lay a hand on her hip, verifying that she hadn’t left her side. “Mm, what time is it?”

Without getting up, Astra turned to the nightstand. Its bare surface brought her eyes to squint. Ah, she thought as the reason dawned on her. Alarm clocks did not stay in one place when knocked.
Astra had herself to blame. This attraction to a young, achingly naïve Alex frustrated her so damn much she let her passion get the best of her.

“I don’t have the time,” Astra said. “My phone is in my purse and yours is in the back pocket of your jeans… which are somewhere in my apartment. I don’t know where.”

Alex chuckled. “Don’t sound so cross. You were the one who almost tore my pants.”

“Ahh, yes. I am sorry about the button.”

“No, you’re not.”

Astra smiled. “Not entirely.”

“Next time, I’m taking off my own clothes.” Alex grinned as if she won the war and squirmed back so her back pressed into Astra’s front. “You can watch.”

Delighted by that image, Astra nudged the back of Alex’s head as a way of accepting the challenge. She stayed there, breathing in contentment. The fading scent of shampoo tickled her nose. Its citrus scent was like that of the shampoo waiting in her shower. The soap, too, stirred recollection.

Astra pressed a kiss to her shoulder, the tip of her tongue lingering. She closed her eyes, relishing the salty perspiration and the cucumber and green tea soap.

A sound emitted from the back of Alex’s throat. She squirmed again, every movement of hips bringing her in contact with a small tuft of curls.

The intoxicating graze baited the lust between Astra’s legs. She ran her teeth across the back of Alex’s shoulder, raising the skin to gooseflesh. “Alexandra, why do you not go back to your place?” She nipped the skin quite unconsciously before pressing her lips hard to the spot. “Does it not worry your roommates when you do not return home at night?”

"I live in an apartment with two other girls. They're too busy notice."

"There is no urgency in my asking. You are not beholden to tell them your whereabouts. I don't mind."

Alex turned around. Her eyes divulged their smirking intent. "That's because you like being my secret."

Astra smiled. "What I mean is there are no expectations here. You may..." How did the saying go? "... You may come out when you are ready. I'm not here to make you feel shame."

Alex's face became thoughtful. Her brow knit softly. "Thank you for saying that. Anyway, I don't care what my roommates think. The only person whose opinion that matters is my sister's. No offense."

"I take none." Astra caressed Alex's cheek. The soft skin had welcomed her lips on multiple occasions, always beckoning her love and never her outrage, not for all the arguments. She curled a brown strand around her finger, delighting in its glossy texture. "A sister's love is a precious thing."

"I love mine so much it's annoying sometimes."

Astra smiled under the vibrations from Alex's chuckle and held her tighter. "What else do you
love?” It didn’t occur to her that after two weeks, she would have the audacity to ask.

Yet that didn’t seem to stop Alex from answering. She hummed thoughtfully while circling her arms around Astra’s waist and guiding her on top. “What do I love…” she echoed. “I love the ocean, music, coffee when its hot. I love the color black. It doesn’t get enough love, black.” Her neck arched to the meandering kisses. She moaned softly and when she spoke, her voice carried an edge of mischief. “I love your mouth.”

Astra smirked against rosy flesh. “Is that so?” she said, sucking idly just north of a chilled breast.

The hands on Astra’s hips flexed on instinct, their fingertips pressing hard enough to leave a mark. She took Alex in her mouth and swirled around the hard peak. Whatever shockwaves running through Alex, Astra felt they were nothing compared to her own dizzying trance. She kissed the side of Alex’s breast and moved to the other where she smothered it with fondness.

“How?” Astra said, waiting for confirmation by kissing down Alex’s stomach. The pitching hips didn’t throw her off no matter how insistent they may be. She reined in her own hunger by finding soft places and praising them with her mouth and fingers. She reached down to massage the aches in Alex’s calf (a consequence of her morning 5K). She rose up to kiss the inside of a knee and atop the half moon scar.

“Ocean,” she said smilingly, “music, hot coffee, the color black.” Her kiss found the inside of Alex’s thigh. She closed her eyes to better appreciate the tremble. “My mouth?” she baited, inching closer. She ran her hand down the underside of Alex’s thigh, chasing the quaking muscles. Though she already knew what her eyes would find, she looked up anyway.

Alex’s eyes were shut so tight there were crinkles at their corners. “Sometimes I love it more when it’s not talking.” Alex’s breath caught and her hips rose to meet the puffing breathes.

With Alex writhing in impatience and bucking in want, Astra parted her thighs. The trust demonstrated between them began early on and had not failed since. They both lay blindly open to each other, fingers tangling and pulses racing. Before Alex, she never understood how trust could make the heat surge in her belly. Nothing else felt like it.

She began to press her open mouth to the desire between Alex’s legs. She was warm and wet and Astra thought of nothing but how best to devour her. They moved together, building passion on a foundation of consent and mutual attraction. While Alex loved her mouth, Astra loved nothing more than the “yes’s” and “please’s” that fell from Alex’s.

“Yes,” hissed Alex. She seized a handful of curls and planted the other beneath her for leverage.

Astra smiled and gave more of her tongue. The shaking thighs pressed against her ears could not blot out the feel of Alex’s heart. It pulsed against her mouth and panted at a frenzied pace. Astra swept through her, groaning in remembrance and taking what was no longer out of her reach. Consuming the willingly offered felt like accepting a gift from Rao. Alex fell from the stars, after all. How could she not have been deliberately placed in her path as Astra had crashed into her past?

The chance to start over and make something of her exile drove Astra further from sense into the dark waters of oblivion. Her pace quickened as did her passion for Alex. The groans fell shallow and high of pitch, reaching Astra’s ears like sweet praise. All that befell her was this outstanding need to prove her quality. She loved Alex. She loved her deeply. Nothing else rivaled such an outrageous, heart pounding, sweet feeling. Her entire body groaned with abandon and the result of her efforts flowed past her tongue like nectar.
After Alex came, Astra returned to her. She lay wide awake, her hands idly stroking the arms and legs curling around her. This was a body that had felt her maddening love. It responded to her in ways she could not explain; its meaning found a place not on any earthly plane but in the space between them. Though Alex lay catching her breath, Astra felt at her mercy. Her chest swelled with gratitude for the woman who would give her everything in a few years’ time and who, at the moment, was granting the small mercy of allowing her to believe this could last.

Astra breathed a blissful sigh. It felt like she had come back from a long voyage or opened a door after it had been closed for an excruciatingly lonely time. It was like recuperating in Earth’s light or drying on a beach after a bathe in the Dandahu. It was as if nothing had changed, not the color of her eyes, the timbre of her voice, or the tenderness in her heart.

Astra closed her eyes to the fingers running over her ribs and the notion caressing in its wake. She’d never felt more at home in a very long time.

Alex moved beside her. The sheets crinkled and the pillow wheezed. Astra kissed the mouth searching for her. “You taste good,” she said. When the purr reached her ears, she did not flinch at its sentimental ring.

Alex opened her eyes and stared deeply into Astra. Her hand came up to push back the white strand. “Mm?”

“Like sunshine.”

The vibrations of Alex’s chortle sent shockwaves across Astra’s skin. She would not hold back her own amusement for one moment. Her lips parted against Alex and she poured laughter and all her love in.
It was Saturday, cloudy, and not too windy or damp. The peak conditions for flying. Astra’s Saturday, however, was proving to be a rotten excuse for a weekend. She woke up later than usual and was unable to chug down more than a half gallon of milk and cram in two handfuls of Mini-Wheats (the human equivalent meal of a saltine cracker and a sip of water) before rocketing off to the gym.

In her haste, she forgot to tie back her hair. The wind tousled waves drew wide-eyed stares from her co-workers. Astra kept strict appearances when in public which included unassuming clothes, a simple, hasty walking pace that blended in with every other New Yorker, and most importantly a hairstyle that did not draw a crowd.

The surprise change in style raised a few brows. Astra recovered quickly by ducking into the locker room and flinging her hair into a sloppy knot. She almost gave herself whiplash in the process. And that was just the start of her bad day. Not long after she punched in, she nearly walked through a wall because she caught sight of long brown hair. Fortunately, no one noticed the crack her forehead made in the glass.

To top that, she had to decline her favorite chore – spotting climbers – due to her insufficient food intake. Manning the ropes took quick reflexes and a sharp eye. A spotter (or belayer) was tasked with the most important job of feeding rope to the climber when they ask for it and anchoring the rope as a means of securing the climber if they lose a handhold. Even for a Kryptonian, an empty stomach could make one feel as weak as a human. Astra didn’t take any chances. She assigned herself to clean up duty and waited till break to sate her hunger.

Astra had her work cut out for her that day. While many New Yorkers were enjoying their weekend out on the town, she spent it cleaning up after a team building exercise. The staff of a social media marketing company had arrived that morning on the dime of their CEO. Other than water and sports drinks, food and beverages were restricted in the climbing zones. The company must have paid a pretty penny to convince her manager that Doritos, popcorn, and soda were within health and safety guidelines. Thankfully, Astra wasn’t scheduled to work during their ‘dine and climb’ but she did get the honor of cleaning up after their royal mess.

She was sweeping the last buttery kernel off the crash pad when the sound of familiar sneakers beckoned. The squeaking strolled across the foyer and made its leisurely way over to the gym’s pathetic sixty-foot boulder (pathetic to a Kryptonian, of course).

She beamed despite herself and, with her back turned, she said, “Alexandra.”

“How do you do that?” Alex drew a perplexed look, but Astra's keen sense of hearing hardly deterred her. She continued on over the mat until they were face to face. She smiled and said, “Hey.”

A thrill went through Astra. She couldn’t fight the smile if she wanted to. “This is a lovely surprise.”

Alex shrugged. “I was in the neighborhood.” Though they both knew that wasn’t true, neither of them were willing to correct it. “I meant to ask you out to lunch but it looks like you’re occupied.”

Astra followed her gaze to the various classes going on around them. The rock caves attracted a crowd of giggling children while the more intricate bulwarks were reserved for adults. At the
“This place is swamped,” Alex said and rounded back to Astra. “Is it usually like this?”

“We’re closing down on Sunday for renovations, so that explains our full capacity.” Astra hedged around with her broom. The bristles tapped intermittently on the mat. Her hand slipped down the handle with her hopes for the day. She glanced at the nearest clock. “I wouldn’t want to cause you delay. I’m afraid my shift doesn’t end until two.”

“Oh.” Alex’s expression collapsed only long enough for an idea to take shape. “I did have a late breakfast, so I could wait.” She swung her body idly, guile inspiring a smirk. “Care to give a girl a lesson?”

Rich amusement rolled in Astra’s chest. She kind of liked that Alex was willing to engage in a physically challenging activity. Even if it did pose danger. It reminded her of the woman who pestered her for two solid weeks about getting instruction in Kryptonian weaponry. Alex was displaying that same bright eyed, heart racing eagerness and Astra liked how that made her feel. An exquisite pull came from deep in her belly. She liked it a lot.

The cavernous gym echoed with gleeful claps, shouts, and the commands of expert climbers. Astra brought her hand to her hip, quite sure as to how her question would be taken. “You are not afraid of heights?”

“Psh, no. Just strap me in and watch me go.”

Astra took the flair of confidence with a raise of her brow. The weekend was a busy day for the gym, however there was always one or two rooms reserved for private sessions. “Well, I am a certified instructor.”

“Is that a yes?”

The sneakers squeaked to rising hopes. Alex’s growing smile got a laugh out of Astra. She shook her head amusingly and pursed her lips around her delight. “Follow me.”

While Astra’s head spun in dizzying circles over how quickly her day was improving, Alex skipped to catch up to her.

“Jackson?”

Astra approached the rental counter which, on a slow day, was stocked with harnesses for all ages. Its attendant was a muscular man with a smooth head, red beard and thick rimmed glasses. Behind him hung a display of chalk, chalk bags, carabiners, and flexible grip sole shoes. Due to the bustle of day, most of the equipment had been checked out.

Jack bent over the counter to clasp his hands comfortably. “What’s up?” He glanced at Alex behind her. “Private lesson?”

“Yes. I’m going to take Room D. Do you have a size 6 harness in the back?”

“You’re in luck.” He ducked to rummage in a cabinet below the counter. Within seconds, shoes, chalk bag, a padded harness, a helmet, and a keylock carabiner lay in a pile on the counter. As Alex went to take the equipment, he nodded and said, “You’re in good hands. Arya here is our best spotter. She’s got hands of steel this one.”

Giving Astra a side-long glance, Alex bit back a smirk. “Mm-hm.”
Astra ignored her to pin Jackson with a look. “We’re going solo, so a belayer isn’t necessary.”

Catching on to the message, Jackson gave her a salute. “Sure thing.” He smiled in Alex’s direction. “Have fun.”

When they arrived at Room D, Alex asked, “Why did he call you Arya?”

“Oh…” Astra tilted her head as if she were distracted. She glanced around before proceeding into the room and closing it behind them. Despite the glass walls, it felt safe to continue the conversation. “It is a nickname of sorts.”

“Are you a Game of Thrones fan?”

Astra scrunched her face, genuinely stumped. “I don’t know.”

“That’s weird. Okay, first thing we do when we get back to your place is watch some Game of Thrones. You need to get educated.”

“This coming from a student.”

“Of science,” Alex pointed out with a waggle of her head.

“Yes, well, in this room I am the teacher, and you will take everything I say to heart. Rock climbing is a serious sport. The rules are not to be taken as suggestions. Is that understood?”

“I thought you were a rule breaker.”

“Alexandra.”

“Yeah, I understand. Let’s get climbing.”

Much to Alex’s dismay, the actual climbing came after a half hour safety seminar complete with severe eye contact, precise hand gestures, and no humor whatsoever. Before slipping into their harnesses, Astra started with a lesson on ropes and how to tie knots. Alex rolled her eyes, claiming she grew up on a beach and knew several nautical knots. Climbing knots couldn’t be any more difficult than boat knots. Surely, Alex had droned.

The arrogance was taken with a sharp tone that startled Alex back a step. Astra had to deal with novice smart alecks before but this was different. It infuriated her that Alex would not take her own safety seriously. During her stint as a spotter, she’d seen broken arms, dislocated shoulders, and one plummet that sent its victim to the emergency room. Even the most fearless lost their cool at the top. The last thing she wanted was for Alex to get injured because of her own ego.

Astra’s face became hot and her throat constricted over the end of her rant. Alex must have taken the hint because she didn’t interrupt her again.

When Alex had been adequately advised on proper knot technique, she was acquainted with the basic commands used between climbers. Rock climbing safety not only included the how to’s of the climb but the terms as well. Communication was paramount whether one climbed outdoors or in a climate controlled gym.

Astra also instructed her in proper body position, footholds, handholds, and how to plan a route. All good tactics to impress upon seeing as this Alex had yet to master her balance in every day situations. Then again, Astra shouldn’t point fingers after her wall smacking incident.
At the end of the lecture, Alex nodded and expressed her understanding in a clear, confident (though not too confident) voice. Astra helped her into her harness and included a sleight of hand graze for luck. By the time they were half-way up the wall, Alex’s smile was taking the lead.

It didn’t take a degree in body language to conclude that Alex was enjoying herself. Her pony tail tossed happily as she gained another handhold and grunted to pull herself up. It may have required more energy than expected, but it posed an adventurous challenge.

A swell of warmth came over Astra and she smiled. She liked experiencing Alex in her youth. For so long she wanted to know what Alex would have been like on Earth. With no pictures, the likelihood of ever cherishing the evidence had been low. Now, the opportunity presented itself to her everyday whether by text, phone call, or face-to-face in her bed. She would not waste these moments for anything, no matter how many time divergences her actions begot.

Astra gave Alex’s confidence room to grow but kept to her flank like a shadow. The boulder had been designed for intermediate level climbers who were familiar with its tricky placing of ledges. Despite its challenges, she had faith. Alex showed good judgment and rarely required guidance in navigating the outcroppings. Until she got cocky.

An outcropping to their left jut out a foot from where they were. Alex had her eyes on the textured handholds and before giving the signal, she threw herself at it. Tethered to the wall’s topmost anchor, Alex swung like a weight on a pendulum.

Astra’s powers of levitation kicked in on instinct even as Alex landed remarkably safe on the outcropping. She gawked across the rock face at the reckless monkey of a human.

In her shock, she could only choke out, “Careful!”

“Astra, relax. I’m strapped in a harness, for god’s sake.”

Astra gripped her rope to remind herself that she had not the makings of a superhero. <Rao> she muttered under her breath. She tip-toed across the wall to join Alex. The ledges were course and easily grabbed. When her weight settled on the footholds, she took Alex by the back of the harness. Her white knuckles nearly cracked in indignation. She couldn’t stop coming up with reprimands to adequately express what a dodgy, disrespectful, bovine-headed thing Alex had done. Her anger was short-lived.

She swept her gaze up the smooth, unblemished flesh of an arm to the cheeks flushed from toil and elation. A surge of affection came over Astra. She calmed herself with a deep breath.

“Please, take it easy,” Astra said, voice softening. “You do not have to act like an imbecile to get my attention.”

The deeper meaning must have been lost on Alex for her head shot forward on her neck. She frowned so deeply within her helmet it looked painful. “Are you calling me an idiot?”

Astra chuckled.

“Don’t laugh. And don’t call me an idiot.”

“Whatever you say, dearest.”

Alex found her current position difficult to hang her head, so she sighed at the wall instead. Her hand rose up to catch the next ledge and she hauled herself upward. “You can shadow me all you like, but it’s not going to help me learn independence. Isn’t that why you broke family tradition and
paved your own trail? Freedom of choice and all that? Well, I’m not going to be coddled. I can go
my own way without your —“

The sole of Alex’s shoe misjudged the surface of the foothold and slipped clean off the wall face.
Too dazed by the weightlessness to grab hold of the rope, Alex fell.

A great gasp caught in Astra’s throat. She didn’t have time to blink much less shout. The wind
whipped curls free of its tie and cooled the beads of sweat on her brow. She crashed into Alex’s
back, seizing her around the middle with both arms. By the time the air was done whistling past her
ears, she had Alex pinned to the wall and they were both panting.

A rope appeared out of the corner of her eye. She recognized it as her own and grabbed it as an
afterthought. She eased down until her feet were firmly placed on two footholds. “Grab your line.”
Her voice was firm. She didn’t care to find out how else it would have come out if her wits weren’t
still subsisting. “Grab it. Good. Now put your arm around my neck.” Astra slid her hand down to
hook around the waist now pressing into her. “Both arms. Don’t let go. I’m going to give your rope
more tension so it supports your weight. Keep your feet on mine.” Astra fought hard to keep the
emotions at bay. This was business, her job. Tenderness had no place here, not thirty feet above the
ground with some idiot’s heart down her throat. Because she was the idiot and the heart was her
own trembling thing. She should have kept her head on her shoulders and not frolicking in the
clouds like a dumbstruck fool.

The slack from Astra’s line hanging below tapped against her thigh as if reminding her that, Hey,
you’re supposed to be human. You should act like you need me at the moment. Alex didn’t seem to
notice. Her only priority was clinging as hard as possible to her safety net.

With one hand on her own line and the other on her partner’s, Astra finished and transferred Alex’s
weight back onto her rope. She took in the crinkled face and trained her vision in search for broken
bones. “Are you injured?”

When Alex finally opened her eyes, they latched onto Astra in a widening embrace before
dimming. Slowly but surely, her pulse rate took a vacation from its panicked heights. She shook her
head. “No.”

Astra could feel the nerves undulating through the t-shirt. The feeling was mutual. “You’re
shaking.” It sounded foolishly obvious to her ears. She scolded herself. Before she could breathe
another word, Alex was nodding.

“Yeah.” Alex swallowed, eyes darting everywhere but precarious depths. “Maybe we should call it
a day.”

When they reached the cushioning pad below, Astra eased the loops of the harness down Alex’s
body. She went gently and as swift as her hands were able to weave around wobbly knees. Once
the ropes were shed, Astra rose to meet her with a questioning look.

“Sorry.” Alex’s hands left the strong shoulders. All her anxiety drained to her hands. She dried
them on her shorts and fiddled with the hem of her top. “It’s not really the height that bothers me.”

The strange voice brought Astra to frown. When the reason dawned her, she told herself that the
stinging sensation came from simple hunger pains. “I would never let you fall.”

The tight smile convinced no one. Outside the room, passing customers drew Alex’s frazzled gaze.
“Hey, how about we get out of here? Your shift is over, right? Let’s get some lunch. I’m starved.
You hungry?”
Astra turned her head a little, wondering what was coming over Alex besides an excess of adrenaline. The possibility of burgeoning trust issues made her stomach twist like a Euro death knot.

“That sounds lovely.” The measured syllables dragged off her tongue. Hopefully, her suspicion did not reveal itself on her face. “How about take out?” She nudge a chin towards the mass influx of climbers and staff. “I’ve had enough of crowds for one day.”

Alex’s lips twitched and she nodded.

* * *

They sat on the floor against the sofa with Game of Thrones on the television. A picnic of take out containers spread around their feet. The apartment became filled with the scent of barbecued pork, steamed vegetables, and sticky rice. It was probably more than two ‘humans’ needed, but they had no other engagements that day and it was relaxing just to graze through the feast.

Astra didn’t pay any mind to the clash of steel echoing from the television. She looked at her cutlets of pork swimming in a glaze of brown sugar and some ketchup nonsense. The tinny sound of a soda can emphasized the effervescent pops as Alex tilted it back to her mouth. Instead of watching her, Astra focused on her stomach’s ravenous pleadings.

Since arriving at her apartment, nothing more than a few unpretentious comments had been exchanged between them. A foreboding worry pestered Astra and she had no idea what it meant. Alex didn’t seem to be angry with her. She wasn’t shying away; when they sat down to eat, she felt no discomfort in rubbing knees. Alex showed no outward signs of distress, yet she’d been unusually contemplative – silent for the most part. Astra didn’t know what to make of it.

A litter of wolf cubs tottered across the television screen and it was almost enough to draw Astra’s eye. Chewing idly, she found her mind wandering from unity and family to that of her own. She wondered where lunch would lead them. What would occur after tonight? Tomorrow? Would Alex finish school and earn her degree? Would J’onn step out of the shadows and offer her a position in the most dangerous career a human didn’t know about until they were bribed into it? Would Alex ever tire of her?

Astra didn’t have plans for the future any more than Alex did. At twenty-six and in an arduous period of her education, Alex was a young woman who had no idea what destiny had in store for her. She hadn’t always been like this. She used to be cautious, decisive, and highly aware of how her actions affected others, especially family. But somewhere along the way she lost herself. She swam in whiskey, not the ocean. Her resentments were stacked high and shoved to some corner of a forgettable city. She didn’t speak to her mother, Kara barely saw her once a month, but a long string of acquaintances had always managed to get a piece of her, if only for a few hours at a club. Her father’s death still chased her, asking retribution over pale moon mist. Alex didn’t know what she wanted any more than she knew what her purpose in life was.

Since they had began their complicated affair, Astra noted subtle changes in Alex. Slowly but surely she was becoming someone different. This wasn’t the girl before Princeton. This was a new Alex, ready to take on the trials of womanhood and those of a soldier who would see her through countless battles.

Astra should stop. She hoped Kal would never come back because she feared he would discern the look on her face and know the crisis tearing her apart. She couldn’t help how she felt. Surely, Superman could sympathize; inexplicable danger followed him around like a magnet and yet he never could learn to stop the attraction between him and the love of his life. It would have been a
simple solution were Astra to marry Alex and create a balance out of their life as Kal and Lois had. If only it were as simple as that. If only the El boy didn’t have to make it look so effortless.

A poor, pitiful cloud hung over Astra as she stabbed into her white rice. She intervened into Alex’s haphazard lifestyle, trying to rekindle what they had on Krypton. All the little accidents from a book recommendation to an instructor’s lingering hand had selfish undertones - if one were to squint. In three weeks, they went from hurried groping to making love. It should have raised someone’s brow, but Astra took pains to keep hers firmly in place.

Selfish though it seemed, Astra couldn’t squash the yearning. If she wanted to court Alex properly, she would have pulled out all the stops. She would have taken her to dinner and a Broadway show or suggested hiking to the tallest mount where they could watch the hang gliders. She would have purchased tickets to the planetarium and sat in the back row so they could hold hands and whisper what systems they think would make good colonies for sustainable living. In the mornings, the sun would peek through the blinds and she would tell Alex to cancel her advisor meeting so they could spend the rest of the day in bed being foolish. Whether they were cross with each other or deliriously happy, she would have written notes and left them where only Alex could find them.

So many places. So many ideas. So little time. This was a different universe with a younger Alex. Astra couldn’t pick up where they left off no matter how tempting the thought. So instead of making plans and portraying the chivalrous gentlewoman, she simply existed in Alex’s orbit. It felt as natural as breathing.

A loading page attracted Astra’s attention. After the credits had rolled, the television began playing the next episode. She sighed, fingering her chopsticks. Perhaps she should say something – comment on the food or the weather? Those were safe subjects that did not inspire the kind of petrification that had stared back at her on the cushioning mat.

Astra shifted on the floor so she could better discern the response. Before a word fell from her lips, someone beat her to it.

“Astra…” Alex cleared her throat and refocused her gaze. “Astra, where are you from?”

“I don’t understand the question.” Astra felt cornered by the stare. The longer she hedged, the more worrisome Alex’s face grew. Astra scraped the side of her chopsticks against the carton, a few grains of rice tumbling back in with her remaining meal. “You look pale, Alexandra. Is something wrong?”

“No one would evade a question like ‘where are you from?’ unless they had something to hide. So I ask again, where are you from?”

Rice stuck to the roof of her mouth. She swallowed it down by force. A threat loomed on the horizon, one that made her stomach churn. If successful, it could destroy all she had built with Alex on Earth.

Astra watched the tips of her utensils tap the bottom of the container. The hollow sound competed with the ringing in her ears. “My origins are not local.”

“How far from local are we talking here?” Alex lowered her carton to her lap. While Astra continued hedging, she pressed flatly. “You’re not human, are you?”

That encouraged Astra’s head to snap up. “Excuse me? Not human?”

“I’m not naïve, Astra. Please stop the act.”
The look on Alex’s face certainly didn’t look naïve. Her cocked head seemed to exhibit more common sense judgment than Astra could admit to on the whole of two years. A sudden urge to cower came over her. “This does not sound like a joke.”

“Way to go.” Alex’s tone left no room for humor. “You get points for astuteness. Now stop evading the question.”

Astra ran her teeth along her bottom lip. The carton felt like tissue paper, so she set it aside before it exploded in her hands. “I am…” her eyes flicked up to Alex’s and for a moment she would have been lost in them were it not for guilt, “… as you say I am. How did you figure it out? If I may ask?”

No response of shock or awe followed. Alex didn’t waver before the discomfited confession.

“You bumping into me at the library was a fluke. Then, at the party, you kept me from falling into glass. Yeah, I remember – I wasn’t that drunk. But that stunt at the gym? You practically floated off the wall trying to catch me. No human has reflexes like that.”

Astra worried at the inside of her cheek. “Is that all?”

“Well, no.” Alex’s mouth twisted. “I sort of figured it out before today. Our… you know… last time in bed.” At Astra’s quizzical frown, Alex explained. “Maybe you’re just getting sloppy and forgetting to hide it, but, I mean, I’ve been with men who are not as well-built as you.”

“I am unsure whether or not to take that as a compliment.”

Alex drew a half smile. “It’s a compliment. Believe me.”

Astra drew in a deep breath to calm her nerves. This was not going like she thought, which meant she had no idea where it would take them. “You are taking this rather well. Better than the average human. You act as if I am not the first alien to walk – or fly – into your life.”

“I haven’t met as many as you think. One in particular made a good impression on me.” Her rushed manner emphasized her anxiety. She combed through her hair until it lay over her shoulder and down her back. “Where is home for you?” she asked conversationally.

A dozen worlds popped into Astra’s head, all of them civilized and technologically advanced. She swallowed. “Krypton.”

“You’re Kryptonian?” Alex’s astounded gaze broke to dart over the spread of half-eaten Chinese food. Her brow puckered in consternation and she began mumbling under her breath. “How could I not have seen it?” Her hands came to scrub over her face. When some of the shock passed, she scrutinized Astra, seeing her as if for the first time. “So you have x-ray vision and everything?”

“Yes. That I know of.”

“That’s incredible. You can fly anywhere. Do you like it? Flying, I mean.”

“It has its advantages.” Admitting such things made Astra's head swim. It felt like old times, talking without a filter and knowing she had Alex’s support no matter how embarrassing the details. “Although flying is not beneficial to someone seeking confidentiality. Unlike another of my kinfolk.”

“Superman,” said Alex. Her face subsequently fell and she touched Astra’s knee. “Oh my god. I’m so sorry. I’ve been going on about your abilities when… I’m sorry about Krypton.” When she
spoke again, her voice sounding peculiar. “Do you have any friends or family here on Earth?”

“You know much about my people.” Astra feigned ignorance with a turn of her head. “I wonder how you have come across this information.”

“Not from the news, that’s for sure.” Alex’s fingers locked together and toiled. Somewhere in that head of hers the consequences were being turned over for inspection. She had never looked so introspective… and haunted. Unsolicited responsibility hung over her like a storm cloud. “I, um. I know a Kryptonian. Or two.”

Astra’s eyes narrowed. “You are protecting them. I understand.” Her gentle voice slowed Alex’s heart from its thunderous pace. “You are not obligated to say any more. I would not have you breach someone’s trust. Frankly, I am the last person who should be advising you on matters of confidence. There is more to me than you realize.”

Though Alex didn’t withdraw, a state of imminent vulnerability stiffened her. “What are you saying?”

The foreboding sense bothering Astra earlier diffused into the air, charging it with tension. The knots were tied. The pledge, though unspoken, had already been solidified through spur-of-the-moment gestures. Astra had all but shackled herself to Alex. She had nowhere else to go. No sky would have her when her compass always pointed to Alex. She’d made her bed and present turn of events now compelled her lay in it.

“What I say now I say to you. There is no one I trust more. And I stand to profit little in revealing things that I have kept from you since we met.”

Alex shook her head, puzzled. “If this is about the alien thing, you don’t have to be ashamed. I get why you were hiding. I get the dangers of exhibiting your powers in public. It’s okay to be scared.” She leaned forward to take Astra’s cheek. Her thumb stroked like it knew every contour. No trepidation sullied the gesture. She was fearless. “It’s okay to fear disappointment, revulsion, imprisonment. Those are rational fears for people like you who are forced into hiding. But I would never do any of those things. You’re special, Astra and I don’t want you to hide from me.”

“Alexandra…”

Astra took the hand down from her cheek. Fumbling for grace, she clasped it in both her hands and pressed a kiss into the palm. Fingertips stroked her cheek as she moved her mouth against the palm. She closed her eyes, surrendering to the kindness. It was home, fragile and small like a seedling, and now she had to destroy it. This hand did not belong to her. It never fought for her like it did for others, not really.

Seeing no other way around it, Astra steeled her courage. She brought the hand down, self-consciously holding it in her lap when it should have been returned. “There have been many cruelties and injustices done to us,” she said. “I don’t mean as sentient beings of the galaxy but you and I. Without question, if catastrophe comes, I am to blame. It could have been prevented. I could have condemned myself before going through with it. But my vices seem to have overpowered me.”

“You’re not making any sense.” Alex squeezed the hands in hers. “What harm could you have caused?”

“I am not who I say I am. There is more than one Krypton. I belong to a living planet – a younger version of Krypton whose core has yet to be afflicted. There laws are unlike those you have
probably heard of. I broke one of them, a redundancy to my luck, and they punished me with exile.”

Alex raised a brow. “Okay, that’s not exactly what I expected but go on.”

“I was exiled from the future. Your future. We have met before, Alexandra. Under very different circumstances.”

“So…” Eyes closed to better picture the likelihood, Alex gesticulated with her free hand. “You’re saying that you came from a parallel universe where you met me. On Krypton.”

Astra had a feeling like Alex was humoring her. She released her impatience with a sigh and said, “It is very complicated. I should not tell you or else it will displace future events.”

“I think an explanation is overdue, don’t you think? You can’t just tell me you’re from the future and *that I’m going to live on Krypton* and expect me to accept it without question. I don’t give a shit about screwing up some timeline or creating a paradox.” She poured more gravity into the stare, unwilling to let Astra off the hook. “Tell me the truth.”

The fact that Alex hadn’t pulled away felt like a last remaining hope. It hung by a thread while Astra watched and waited for it to snap. She released one of her hands to pinch the bridge of her nose. Her eyes saw inevitability behind their lids. “Alright, I will be honest with you. This will come as a shock.”

“I’m all ears.”

“We met in the future. On Krypton. Which means I know your family – their names, their history.” The receptive nod felt like temptation. Astra smoothed her thumb over Alex’s knuckles, telling herself this was not about holding on but letting go. “But my knowledge of them is based on more than my affiliation to you. I am Astra, daughter of In-Ze, sister to Alura and blood relative to her daughter, Kara Zor-El.”

Alex’s hand slipped out of hers. A pale ghost replaced the understanding once written so heartily on her face. “How could you know about Kara?”

Astra deflated at the coolness of her hand. “I know her because we are family. On my world, Kara is but sixteen. When we met, you told me stories of your foster sister whom I have never met but have loved as I do my Kara. I know she means the world to you.”

“You’re Kara’s *aunt*?!”

The shout brought Astra to wince. “I am not the aunt your sister said goodbye to on Krypton. I am not General Astra, nor have I been convicted of terrorist activity.”

The betrayal started to seep into Alex by way of a hardened gaze. “But you were exiled.”

“For an entirely different crime.”

“If you’re not a general, who are you?”

“I worked in a lab. My specialty was neuroscience.” In retrospect, Astra should have put it a bit more slowly to her. With humility and deprived of a proud chin.

Alex turned red. “You must think I’m really stupid. All this time you made me think you were some librarian with a basic curiosity in science.” Without another word, she shot to her feet and put
distance between them.

The sudden outrage sparking before Astra caused her to frown. She rose to her feet and kept herself rooted. “I don’t understand,” she said, following the ruthless pacing behind the sofa. “You take issue with my expertise but do not feel embittered over my having known you in a parallel universe.”

“You lied, Astra. You fabricated a person, put yourself in their shoes, and tried to pass that off to me. I don’t know how long you thought it through but that cover story happened to be good enough to convince me. Do you know how that makes me feel? Is this a joke to you?” Alex ground to a halt and placed her hands on her hips to provide them a distraction from Astra’s long, appealing neck. “Is it? Because it must have nearly killed you trying to contain your amusement… listening to me going on about genetic evolution when you’re a fucking product of superior breeding!”

“It was not my intention to fool you. I did what I could to keep you from the truth, not because I didn’t think you could take it but because it endangered you. The risk of changing your future and the person you will become…I should have been more careful but I… I missed you.”

A precarious silence fell between them.

The muscles in Alex’s jaw twitched. When she spoke, her voice sounded removed from emotion. “Why were you exiled? What law did you break?”

“That is…” Astra warred over her bottom lip, “that is very difficult to explain.”

“Try.”

In no other situation were desperate measures more appropriate. Alex looked as lost as ever and spinning down a wormhole with no escape route, no light to guide her home. She might have been angry, but she was asking for help. The only one who had the power to give it was the person responsible for crashing into her haphazard life. Astra upset the foundations of Alex’s existence, putting her in a situation that confounded her value, her purpose, which would inevitably hurl her towards existential dread. Alex needed more than vague notions to slow her fall. If Astra had to cause a paradox or give birth to a new universe to save the petrified look on Alex’s face then so be it.

So Astra told her – everything. She began with General Astra’s first death, her mysterious reappearance, the experiments, the relentless magnetism, the consequences that tore Earth apart. As Astra spoke, it occurred to her how farfetched it all sounded. Alex’s face morphed through a multitude of colors and at one moment she looked nauseous. One reaction that endured through it all: devastation.

When Astra’s account reached the last days on Krypton, the words fell short. No one should have to express what it felt like to bid farewell to their family. On the whole, it was inexplicable on the tongue and in the darkest of times the mind rejected any mere possibility of it transpiring. She would not wish it on any enemy, foreign or domestic. Fortunately, it did not come to that. Alex appeared too overwhelmed to take anything other than a strict account, so Astra kept her feelings out of it.

*I turned myself in.*

*They gave me three days.*
“I said my goodbyes. I did not pack.”

There was no dodging the question. That was what happened. End of chapter.

“As hard as it was, it was the right thing to do.”

Alex’s fingers curled into the back of the sofa. Her eyes roved the cushions in search for a hole, a stain, a reason. She inhaled sharply and stood straight, arms hanging loosely at her sides. “How is your being here now any more righteous? You just told me about my future. You intervened in my life.” Her eyes sizzled in rage. She was working her jaw in what could have been contemplation or pure, senseless hatred. “What the hell is going to happen now that you screwed with my life?”

Though hurt by the accusation, Astra realized the logic in Alex’s words. She did intervene. She disrupted Alex’s life, thereby rewriting history. By changing her past, her future remained uncertain. How could she be sure Alex would be recruited by the DEO now? Would Kara become Supergirl? Would her other self on Earth succeed through Myriad? More importantly, would she have met Alex?

“If I am to believe this,” Alex said slowly, “you’re saying you left him behind. Just like that?”

The muscles around Astra’s mouth twitched. Her grim line of a mouth allowed no utterance. She wanted to answer but her body betrayed her at the most critical moment. Astra closed her hands and pressed the firsts hard against her thighs – hard enough to bruise the skin and feel it the next morning.

She choked out what she could as the last image of her son smoked in her vision like a burning photograph. “I h-had no other ch-choice.”

A wave of vertigo came over her. Wobbling to the right, her heel knocked into one of the coffee table legs and she plopped down on it like a deflated balloon. As she recovered in the palms of her hands, weeping remorseful tears, the floorboards creaked underfoot.

“You chose to abandon him.”

The notion had Astra hiccupping in dispute. She raised her head to find Alex a sofa length and a broken heart away from beating her senseless. “They would have sent you away if I had not stepped in. I took your place so you and Misha could be together. He couldn’t lose –“

“You left us behind.”

It was not a question, and Alex left no room for argument. “Yes.” It barely reached Astra’s own ears. “I left you and our son.”

“But he’s not really yours, is he?”

The sneer emphasized no comparison to memory whatsoever. Astra had already been made to read the headlines declaring Jeremiah an aberration and a scar on Krypton’s genome, but to be told that her sweet boy was not hers? And to hear it from Alex’s own lips?

Astra bit back a whimper and fastened her mouth with a hand shaking so uncontrollably it could not have been her own. She grew hollow like a concave, ever-expanding universe. “Please,” she whispered, the corrupted nature of her hide withering to ash, “don’t…”

Alex’s eyes flared too hotly to perceive its effect. “He’s General Astra’s child. Kara’s aunt. A criminal. Someone I’ve never even met and I…”
Alex braced her face with her hands. When they fell away, she turned and walked for the only room in the apartment. Her brisk pace took her there in no time at all. She stepped into the bathroom and slammed the door shut.

The apartment waned to Astra’s gasps. It all fell away down to the last art deco piece and insignificant kitchen tool. None of it mattered. Amid the void, she salvaged every breath with inhales that made her chest shudder and feel on the verve of being crushed. The entirety of Earth’s gravity set itself upon her in a painful I told you so. She should have been able to combat it. The sun afforded her enough competence to shuck off the petty forces, pull her fists to her hips, and glare valiantly back.

At the moment, Astra felt far from heroic. She was not supposed to be here. She was not supposed to give herself away again. Second chances were given to the decorated veterans and humble seekers of forgiveness. Astra had done nothing to earn a second chance.

Petty delusions spurned her to rise up. She breathed in and out. The apartment wasn’t spinning but inside she was and probably Alex too in that shabby excuse for a bathroom.

When she reached the door, she placed her hands on the frame before she lost the will to stand unassisted. “Alexandra,” she choked out. Tears blurred her vision. “What are you doing? Please say something.”

No noise resounded from the other side. Astra couldn’t make out a sound over the thudding in her ears. What could Alex be possibly doing in there? Between her fuzzy head and hollow gut, the likelihood that either one would come up with a solid answer seemed improbable. Astra could trust nothing to ease her worry but a voice from beyond the divide.

The thin quality of the door met her hand. She could push it off its hinges if she wanted to. Instead, she beckoned with a soft scratch of her nail against the wood. She scratched once, twice, three times, before giving up. As her hand fell to her side, a brass knob handle jittered. She didn’t swallow the lump in her throat. It was better this way. The stone kept her from speaking injurious words.

Alex opened the door and revealed herself. Though her eyes were red and swollen, she showed no sorrow. She looked particularly fresh, clean, as if a splash of water was all that was needed to restore her strength and peace of mind. In the time it took Astra to grovel like spineless scum of the Earth, Alex had discovered her wits.

Standing dumbstruck, Astra floundered for a thought.

A growl stirred deep within Alex’s chest. “Get out of my way.”

“Yes you well?” The words sounded horrifically ill-advised. Mortified, Astra’s eyes fell closed and she shook her head. “Do you need me to call someone?” Oh, so much better.

Alex barked out a laugh, eyes rolling up and away. “This is why I left National City. Everyone has let me down. My father… my mother…” She turned back on Astra with a vindictive glare and spat, “You. The only one who hasn’t given up on me is Kara.”

“I am sorry. I realize the humiliation you must feel and that is my fault. However, as much as going to Kara will ease your mind, I must strongly advise against it. She cannot know I am here. You cannot tell her I am alive because it will put her in danger. General Astra is out there, mustering an army for her global coup. She is not like me. Isolation and betrayal have twisted her, and it will be some time before she achieves redemption. Her crimes on Earth have not yet come to
Without thinking, Astra took a step. At Alex’s automatic backpedal, she reassured her by extending a palm and patting the wall that had sprung up between them. “There is only so much I can do, Alexandra. My knowledge of the future is fixed: I do not know what will happen if what has been said here leaves this room. Any number of events could result and I may be powerless to stop them. More importantly, I may be unable to protect you.”

“Stay the fuck away from me! I don’t need your protection. I’ve been taking care of myself long before you showed up.” Alex seized a step forward, eyes tightening in the wake of Astra’s withdrawal. “If I so much as hear you breathe, I’ll go to Kara and blow your cover to pieces. So back off if you know what’s good for you.”

Before Astra could concede, Alex shoved past her.

Her feet retreated from the blow. It felt like crashing into her first shed – a hazard reaped by most untrained Kryptonians when testing their new powers. This blow, however, left a stinging reprisal not easily healed by the sun. It spread from her shoulder to her chest were it pressed with incomparable vengeance. It was agony.

Watching Alex leave, fury in tow, stabbed deep like no goodbye. Considering the explosive event and inevitable fallout, Astra figured this might one day lead to being impaled by kryptonite, and she imagined it would hardly reach the level of pain wracking through her body at the moment. What made it worse was how preventable it all could have been.

* * *

It had been two weeks. The grass grew. The sky was blue. Earth, for better or worse, thrived alongside an unchanged timeline. It could mean only one thing.

Astra didn’t know what was worse: the buckling of the universe or its continued existence. Because for Earth to continue on its present course, her secret had to remain hidden and Alex would have to keep it.

That Kara or the DEO hadn’t arrived at Astra’s door should relieve her. After spending two years safeguarding the future, it only took one day of honesty to put it all in jeopardy.

Astra didn’t care anymore. She was sitting on the ledge of her apartment rooftop not caring. She wiled away the dusk loving, too, and missing, hurting, until the faint memory of a door slamming reminded her that no amount of self-torture changed anything.

The two weeks passed as uneventfully as they had before that day she took a chance and walked into Lewis Library. Unlike her previous routine, this time she did not take spontaneous excursions to National City or Princeton. New York hardly enticed her with its noise and all around lack of manners, but she pretended like everyone else. She woke up, ate breakfast, went to work, and returned to her apartment to spin her wheels until dinner and bed. It proved tiresome, those interminable hours, and she did the whole thing over again the next day.

The street lamps made the road gleam in the darkness. Astra bent forward to look past her dangling feet at a couple walking hand-in-hand. They looked safe and happy. Astra blocked out their soft-spoken exchange to hear the wind. It whistled past her ears, whipping about her hair. It didn’t bother her. She spent most of her day listening to the concerns of a 68-year-old-woman who thought her house was haunted and wanted book recommendations. Through the insipid, one-way discussion, Astra had been fighting the urge to massage where her tight bun pulled at the hairline.
That and the urge to ban the woman from the library.

Astra craned her neck up to the sky, wondering where one brown-eyed human was on this starless night. She didn’t like the idea of Alex having no one to run to. Not even her sister. Yet she had given her no other option.

For as long as Astra had been watching, not one star twinkled back. They didn’t offer the reprieve or clarity those above Krypton used to. Now, nothing and no one acknowledged her presence. Astra sighed, watching as a breeze stole her breath. How heartless could one get when their life shattered in their hands? Pretty Rao damned heartless if she thought about it.

It had been two weeks and Astra hadn’t heard from Alex. The days were so dull now without her. What was she supposed to do now? Should she stay away like she should have? Or had the damage been done? On the other hand, she could be worrying for nothing. Why not try to restore a cracked bridge and begin again? There was a chance Alex might forgive her, and that might lead to an actual life together. But could she really just start over with Alex from scratch? She already had her great love with Alex on Krypton. They had a son together for Rao’s sake. Nothing could replace that.

With a heavy heart, Astra realized that this was the exact same dilemma Alex had been faced with when she arrived on Krypton. And what had she done? She realized the futility in wallowing in what-ifs and started rebuilding her life.

But this was a slightly different situation. This was not her Alex. This was her past and she had a destiny with another Astra, the original as it were. There was no chance with her biology that they could conceive a son. It had to be the original Astra or no one. As torn as Astra felt, it didn’t matter. Alex left. She would not come back. It was better this way.

Midnight approached and with it a chill. Soon, something changed in the air. A flapping in the wind spurred Astra to turn around and see Kal-El landing gently on the rooftop. Her eyes widened a bit at the unmistakable “S” and long red cape. Kal rarely checked up on her in uniform. In fact, the only occasion she could admit to meeting “Superman” was in Pakistan when he barked at her to go home and stay out of sight. The memory of helpless screams over the roaring avalanche brought the nerve at her temple to twitch.

He walked over to her, flashing one of his shy half smiles. “Long time, no see.” He turned and leaned back against the ledge, arms folded over his prominent chest. “You ever think about visiting me for a change?”

Astra looked down to find that the human couple had moved on. “What will Lois think?” she asked dryly.

Kal chortled. “She’s as busy as I am – if not more so. Have you read her recent article on the Clean Water Act?”

“I cannot say that I have.”

“You should. I think you’d like it.”

“I’ll make sure to give it a glance and then send Lois an anonymous thank you note.” Astra shot him a sardonic look. “I would not want to make a liar out of you.”

All the while his eyes held hers, the wind blew, the clouds grew, and they both knew it. “That’s not fair.”
“I know more of her than she does of me. How is that fair? You are her husband and you are misleading her.” Astra slid back on the ledge and angled herself to give him her full attention (if only to scrutinize him better). She narrowed her eyes. “Where does she think you are right now?”

Teeth gritting, Kal cast his wince off to the side. “Ah, I got called out on business?”

“Hm, undercover or the kind of business that attracts headlines? Because if I know Lois Lane, she will check into every one of her sources if you are but five minutes late.”

“Listen,” he cocked his head, “I get that this is your way of showing that you care about me, but you don’t have to give me the third degree. I’ve been doing this longer than you have.”

“And what is it that we are doing? Hiding or being dishonest with those we love?”

“You’re not the only one I’ve had this conversation with,” Kal said. With an embittered smile, he shook his head. “I’ve given my life to protect people like you. It’s not just Metropolis and the civilians of the world. Everyone, including those too scared to show themselves on the street, are looking for someone to give them support whether its provisions, encouragement, or a roadmap.”

If Astra didn’t know any better, she’d think he was radiating self-righteousness. She did know him very well, but that didn’t excuse his oversights.

“Tell me,” she said, “do you care for all your wards as you did Kara? I can only imagine how she felt when her cousin – the first person to see her since the loss of her planet – left her with strangers.”

“She is lucky to have the Danverses.” He pushed off the ledge, walked a bit before returning with a firmer jaw. “There are countless more like her out there who have far less. Some of them don’t have a prayer. The DEO is hunting aliens and calling it their duty to society, but all they’re doing is fanning the flames. It’s a sport to them. I bet you that half of their prisoners are innocent. Unlike you, they had no one to teach them how to control their powers.”

With an annoyed flinch, Astra waved her hand. “Spare me your diatribes.”

“You know I’m not perfect. I help the helpless and sometimes I end up making it worse. The only reason why I’m still standing, why I’m still trying, is because of Lois.” After a moment’s consideration, he glanced from under he lashes, suspicious of a violent response. “And you. Not many of the people I find can say the same.”

“They didn’t ask you to make them your responsibility.”

“No, but you did.” A break in the wind reduced Kal’s cape to a flickering waterfall. He seemed to chew over a past that demanded more of him than he was willing to give. Stripped of pride, he looked like a young man in a god’s mantle.

“Before I came back to Metropolis,” he said, “before marrying Lois, I was running like the rest of them. I wanted no part in how the world saw me. They asked too much without ever really giving the impression that it was changing them. I couldn’t carry them all, knowing this was all I was every going to do with my life, knowing it was always going to be about me and not the lives I saved. I didn’t realize there was an alternative until you showed up in that lumber yard.” He tilted his head, bestowing gratitude with his deep, boyish eyes. “You started all of this.”

Astra huffed. Of course, she did. She gave him a purpose beyond that symbol on his chest. Reminding him that a superhero did not always have to be as good as the people they saved inspired Kal to open his eyes and look beyond burning buildings and psychotic threats of world
domination. He began spending his time under rocks, behind sheds, in the filth of bunkers, and around the most sordid and loneliest places on Earth. All because Astra met a blue-eyed, scruffy El boy running from the bright lights and asked him for help.

She rubbed the ache between her brows. “Lois is one of the brightest of her sex. She is not easily fooled. More importantly, she knows you. She will eventually figure it out.” Astra turned into the wind, letting it take her curls sailing. “If she hasn’t already.”

The suspicion only affected Kal for a moment. It soon rolled off his back for a different kind of wariness. “Has Alex?”

Astra frowned and looked at her swaying feet with a sigh. “You don’t waste any time.”

“Well, I can’t help it. I find you brooding on the rooftop with your heart all a mess, so what else am I to do?”

A surly flush surfaced to her cheeks. “Keep your ears to yourself.”

“Easier said than done,” Kal said with a chuckle. “I can push, but that won’t please the superintendent of this building.”

“I am not going to fight you, Kal,” Astra said evenly, though the itch did arise. They’d had it out a few times, mostly to burn stress while other occasions found Astra aiming for his no-good fetching mouth. No matter the cause of their confrontations, they always reaped damage in the short-term or otherwise.

“She knows,” Astra said, head rising from its hung state. “I told Alexandra everything.”

Kal’s lips parted in surprise. His gaze swept the ledge, searching for words lost in translation, but he came up empty. English was his native language, after all, and he probably always knew it would come to this. “You were always going to tell her,” Kal said under his breath. His eyes flicked up to her. “Did you know you were always going to tell her?”

Exasperated by his grating curiosity, Astra rolled her eyes. “I don’t know. Hindsight is what, 10/20?”

“20/20,” he corrected on autopilot. “Which is ironic seeing as you know exactly what’s going to happen.” His expression morphed to growing concern. “So you told her where you’re from? What’s going to happen to her and everyone else?”

“I said I told her everything. What else do you think that means?”

Kal, shaking his head, locked his fingers behind his neck and emit a long sigh. In full red and blue regalia, the pose did not give the impression of a self-assured caped crusader. “Well,” he said offhandedly, “this is disappointing.”

A dose of hostility shot through Astra and compelled her to hop off the ledge. “Oh, take your leave!” The gruff tone tickled the back of her throat. Glaring, she only poured more animosity into her words. “I don’t have to listen to this.”

He gained on her in three quick strides and persisted at her side whether she permitted it or not. “What is it going to take for you to realize this isn’t some life restart? We’ve talked about this, Astra.” The uttering of her name ground her progress. Kal rounded to face her. “This is a… a difficult position you’re in. I get it. But have you ever thought what I have to deal with if either one of them see you? Do you realize the dodging I’d have to do just to keep your secret safe? I’d be
lying to my family, something I swore never to do again.”

Astra’s mouth dropped open. The fact that he didn’t hide the arbitrary nature of his argument made her burn in rage. “You were the one who made the suggestion!”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have! Maybe I shouldn’t have let you talk me into helping you in the first place!” The muscles in his neck stretched to the shouts. He paused, catching his breath. “I’m sorry,” he puffed, shoulders sinking. “I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry, Astra. What do you want me to say? I screwed up too. I shouldn’t have pushed you towards Alex, but you were inconsolable. I’ve tried. We’ve both tried.” His eyes were wide and pleading with her. His hands were carrying an invisible burden and throwing it down each time his conscience assailed him. “How could I just stand there and watch you fade away like no one would have noticed?”

“You don’t have to do this,” Astra said in retreat. “You don’t have to say these things. I am the only one to blame for this. I chose to intervene in Alexandra’s life. We didn’t have to grow as close as we did, and I could have stopped it before…”

She shook her head, repelled by foregone chances. This was not how she imagined spending her night – or her life for that matter. The only thing that consoled her was the thought of laying her head in Alex’s lap and drifting off to the fingers stroking her hair.

Astra’s voice, clogged by the chill and the absence, spoke a thick fog. “I can’t stay here anymore, Kal. I cannot be on the same forsaken planet as her.”

Kal looked Astra over. “What are you saying?”

A hundred questions sped through her mind. Questions of celestial intervention, of portals and destiny, and of love. Rao, would they ever stop? Astra framed her face with pressing hands. “I don’t know how, but I have to find a way out. There is nothing that can explain my ending up here. I only know it is not just – to anyone. I must go back.”

Devastation shadowed Kal’s face. He removed himself from the debilitating sensation produced by Astra’s suggestion. Only empathy succeeded in snapping him out of it. “To Krypton?” he asked. “Will they even let you return? The minute they discover that you bypassed the Phantom Zone, they’ll ship you right back. And they’ll make sure to succeed.”

“It is a risk.”

The hem of his cape trembled in the wind. He jerked his head back before funneling confusion into something that would provoke a reaction – any reaction. “You would rather spend your years rotting in that prison than here with us?”

Instead of the tranquil blue Dandahu, a pair of choppy flames glared back. Despite having never seen him so furious, Astra didn’t cower. “At least it is a guarantee I will not hurt anyone else. This is my decision.”

“You are…” He shook his head, biting into his lower lip in vengeance. “You are something else. After everything we’ve accomplished, you want to throw it away. I know it wasn’t much, but come on. It was something. And now you’re gambling your freedom because you can’t stand to be in the same universe as her.”

“Kal…”

“No.” He stopped them both cold. His eyes bore into her, anger no longer directed at her but through her. The world and any high power with an interfering hand had his all-consuming hatred.
“You want to leave? Fine. There’s bound to be a time lord around here somewhere and they just might have a solution. I’m going to look into it, but don’t get your hopes up, you hear? If this is really what you want, I’ll find a way. Because you’re going to find a means of getting off Earth with or without my help and I’ll be damned if you destroy yourself in the process.”

Astra closed her eyes, relieved, and bowed her head. “Thank you.”

His eyes darted away, distracted by things to come. “Don’t thank me yet.”

“All the same. I am grateful to have you on my side.”

“Astra…” His gaze scoured the sky for a moment before glancing back at her. “This is not going to proceed the way you think. It never does.”

She watched him fly away. The remorseful fragment lodged in her chest spread such an ache. No amount of massaging or sun bathing would mend it. Kal spoke a truth she was too weak to admit. She could not do this without him. She never could.

Astra turned and headed for the roof’s ledge.

If only it didn’t have to come to this. She wished she was strong enough to put her heart second. She succeeded for two agonizing years. It worked… until it didn’t. No manner of diversions truly achieved the sating of her desire for Alex’s warm mouth and dauntless spirit. She just wanted to be close to her beating heart, and, apparently, she would throw the future into crisis just to have it.

Astra had a responsibility to her family in both universes. Jeremiah’s future had to be protected. Kara must grow into her own and make her mother proud. Astra wanted that for her niece. She also wanted Alex to find her calling, and if that meant putting her life on the line as a DEO agent then so be it. Alex would soon learn that being born a fighter didn’t mean she had to carry a weapon. She was destined to protect the lives of those she loved as a sister, a daughter, a friend, and a lover. In the near future, she would take on her most important role as mother to a miraculous boy. She was made for it like the stars were made for the heavens.

None of it would come to pass if Astra didn’t leave. Otherwise what was her sacrifice all for?
What to Do with the Time That Is Given to Us

“This is not going to proceed the way you think. It never does.”

The words churned like a dust storm in her head, distorting her hopes and never settling long enough to grasp. For the first time in the twenty-five months Astra had been living on planet Earth, she had no idea what would happen next. The path used to be so clear. Now it fell out at her toes, giving her no more road to walk. This crisis of altered paths was not just about the Earth of this universe, or Alex, or Kara. This was about Astra’s future and how murky her actions had made it.

It wasn’t Kal’s intention to be difficult. As her only confidant, he made it his duty to consider the hard truths. And he was right; the chance that Krypton would expel her again was very high. She might not even make it into orbit. What she had been put through since her banishment seemed so absurd. Her entire journey from landing on Earth to finding Alex again would only lead her to her rightful destination. The idea of serving time in the Phantom Zone had never sat well with Astra, but she made her peace with it a long time ago.

Astra couldn’t admit to having many friends. She missed the old ones, and even they were not treated by her as they should have been. Despite the personal clutter between her and Kal, she knew he had her back.

Standing on the rooftop and hugging her arms, Astra looked to the blue horizon. It was getting late and she had a long day tomorrow supervising the new library interns. Whether or not she found a means of leaving, the world would go on as usual and so would she.

Astra shook off the foreboding and took a hop over the roof ledge. The fire escape rattled to her landing. After sparing a glance around the still neighborhood, she ducked into her open window. The door knocked. Whoever approached was beckoning with a heavy hand.

The rapping startled Astra so thoroughly she forgot to use her x-ray vision. When the voice spoke from the other side, she froze in the middle of her living room.

“Astra, I know you’re in there. I heard you… arrive.”

Astra’s organs felt turned to ice. Her eyes darted in the vague spot of her area rug. A thousand and one questions sparked to mind like fire crackers but only one mattered.

“Astra! Come on!”

The sharp command snapped Astra out of her thoughts. She tread over her living room rug to the front door, slid off the latch, flicked the lock, and opened the door.

“Alexandra.”

The name sounded faint in her ears and for a moment Astra wondered if this was what humans called a ‘black out.’ Her equilibrium felt far from centered, but there was no unequal weight distribution which further perturbed Astra. Alex looked like she couldn’t care less just like she didn’t mind that her shoe laces were dragging, her zippered hoodie had slipped off a shoulder revealing a damp tank top, and her hair looked greasy in its shabby pony tail. The only piece of her ensemble that looked well-adjusted was the pair of sweat pants. Still, Astra would bet her face glowed beautifully in the starlight.
“This is a surprise,” Astra said, nodding to herself. “Were you out for a run?”

“Where the hell were you?” Alex’s face flushed and crinkled to timeworn frustration. The cuff of her sleeve was bunched in her fist and swinging down at a specific place on the floor. “I’ve been waiting outside your door for an hour!”

The verbal barrage hit Astra like plasma from a ray gun. Taking a step back, she followed the arm to the worn carpet outside her threshold and crinkled her brow.

“Hey, look at me.” The testiness in Alex’s voice was nothing spiteful. It had a special quality only expressed when Astra was acting a little too awkward and Alex had to snap her out of it. Maybe if she had known just how far the peculiarities went, she would have cut Astra more slack. Or not. “Where were you?” she asked, the rigidity in her expression was replaced with something near concern. “Don’t answer that. Can I please come in?”

The circling sleeve-fists drew Astra’s attention. The anxiety knotting up in Alex was on a whole new level than she had seen before. On Krypton, Alex rarely evaded personal troubles. She’d tell Astra directly that she didn’t want to talk about it and go about her business or they’d sit down after Jeremiah had gone to bed and discuss it in slow, mild voices.

This younger Alex seemed to lack authority over her own body’s responses to stress. On the one hand it was borderline adorable, but on the other hand it disturbed Astra. Alex could be a very influential woman when confident. This Alex didn’t possess that strength and may never due to Astra’s intervention.

The mindless turning continued. Her thumbs were going to poke holes in the jacket. Astra’s chest swelled with fondness.

Alex tilted forward, peaking in on the empty apartment. “Can I come in?” she asked again.

Blinking, Astra stepped aside. “Certainly.” She closed the door behind Alex, mentally berating herself. They were going to argue again and here Astra was thinking about kissing Alex’s hands.

Alex stood in the center of the efficiency, turning in place as her eyes swept every corner. Nothing about the apartment was out of place. Astra hadn’t purchased any new possessions or décor lately that would inspire such an investigation.

“So something wrong?” Astra asked.

“I’m just wondering if that noise I heard was you landing on your fire escape or some guest you threw out your window.”

“I would not ignore you, Alexandra. I was on the roof.”

“Alone, huh?”

After studying the expression, Astra decided that it benefited her not to see jealousy. She turned into the kitchen where her eyes could roam. “Kal-El visits occasionally.” She angled her toaster with a touch of her finger. A weary traveller stared back in its reflective surface. “He sponsored my assimilation into human society and has been assisting me since I arrived two years ago.”

“Clark?”

“That is his Earth name, yes.”
The line of spices caught Astra’s eye. With her finger, she nudged the cayenne pepper back with the others. Cumin and cinnamon were backward, so she turned them until their labels showed.

Alex pulled her hands behind her back and rocked on her feet. “You guys are friends?”

“More or less.” After the last item had been adjusted, Astra raised her head and tilted it carefully. “I am happy to answer your questions, but is this heading for an explanation as to why you are here?”

The fisted sleeves found a place in the pockets of Alex’s cotton jacket. She took in a deep breath and answered upon exhale. “I just have one question for you,” she said. “If I had not figured out your abilities and if our conversation that day about you being Kryptonian hadn’t led to the truth, would you have told me? Were you ever going to tell me the truth?”

Alex was staring back almost pleadingly. Her face showed no traces of anger or betrayal. Occasionally there would be a flicker of when they had been together, happy and attentive, and she didn’t so much as flinch at the memory. But a deep-set longing for reality threatened to overshadow what they had shared. She was as lost as when Astra found her and she was asking for the truth.

The air inhaled by Astra’s lungs left her faint. The apartment spun in her periphery and the floor felt like a quaking jigsaw puzzle. It didn’t matter where she fell because she was broken already. She took in a shuddering breath and said, “I honestly don’t know.”

Alex nodded wordlessly. Her eyes dropped and searched the scuffed hardwood. “It’s been two weeks. You stayed away.”

“It is what you requested of me.”

“I didn’t get a call or a text.”

The distance had rendered Astra too delicate to puzzle over Alex’s train of thought. “Not because I did not want to. I thought it impolite to intrude on your privacy. Reflection is best done without distractions.” She swallowed the urge to ask a question that had been on her mind and in her dreams and written into her skin since that door slammed. Astra didn’t think about how long it took someone to expunge a figure out of their life forever, but Alex was here and the need to ask made her skin tingle.

The flexible tread of Alex’s running shoes squeaked to her shifting weight. “Yeah, I had some time to think and…” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “I’m not any less mad that you lied to me. I understand the pressure you’ve been under, but if you were going to take the chance of corrupting everyone’s fate then you should have done me the courtesy of trusting my reaction. I wouldn’t have freaked out about you being an alien. I didn’t when you fessed up after a month.”

Astra folded her arms and tucked in her chin. She traded a look with the reflection in her toaster. “It has become apparent to me that I did not think it through. There was no… plot or scheme that you might denounce as convenience. I allowed the memory of us to cloud my judgment. You could say I was emotionally compromised, but that would assume I have influence over your choices.”

“That’s a bit presumptuous.”

“If you decide to change your life because of me, I’d imagine it would throw this universe off course. That is not presumption, that is a danger.”

“And what about the dangers Kara will face? Would it be horrible if she doesn’t become Supergirl? The world already has Superman and a dozen other superior beings saving it. Would it
really be such a bad thing if my son didn’t exist? No offense to his memory, but I never really wanted to be a mother. I didn’t grow up with the greatest example.”

“Neither did I, and I thought we gave him a sufficient life.” Astra bit into her cheek to stem the distress wringing her heart as if it were a blood-soaked rag.

“If he has to suffer the loss of you twice then maybe he’s better off without this screwed up world. I was fourteen when I lost my parent. It would be cruel to put a child through that.”

Astra turned away, gulping for air that wouldn’t slow her heart and tilted her head back in such a way that wouldn’t dry the tears. “Then why are you here? If you are still angry with me, why come back?”

Alex walked around the counter and stopped at Astra’s elbow. Close enough to see the regret swimming in her eyes. “I know where I’m headed. General Astra is going to try to enslave the planet and I’m supposed to kill her. I’ve never even punched anyone, Astra. Then I have to find some way of saving her from herself. It’s all going to happen to me and… you say I get through it but it doesn’t seem that way. I don’t know who else to talk to about this. How can I go on doing those things when you’re here?”

Though Alex didn’t admit it, an abundance of fear welled up in her. It stripped her voice down to an unbecoming quality. If she had the nerve to see beyond it, she’d realize how embarrassed it made her and that Astra didn’t mind the burned cheeks.

Astra shrugged inside the shelter her folded arms had made. “I am very sorry I laid this burden on you. You were never meant for it.”

She waited for a time, hoping the warmth would steal away and stop giving her such lovely, delirious thoughts. Astra preferred going delirious in the clouds, nearest to the sun where she couldn’t hurt anyone.

But Alex refused to depart as if this made her argument stronger. The warmth tickled across Astra’s skin, the perfume driving her mad, and why in Rao’s name wasn’t Alex leaving? What possible reason kept her here after all the lies and deception?

Alex swallowed audibly. “How am I supposed to be with her when I had you?”

Unwilling to let it sink too deep and water roots of hope, Astra bit the top of her lip before letting it go. She breathed deeply and started anew. “There are marked dissonances between all universes. That you and I are aware of these worlds makes it much harder to believe. There is a saying of your people I like: ignorance is bliss. That and the one about the grass being greener from the other side.”

Alex ground her foot into the floor. “Please speak plainly.”

Astra grinned softly and met her eyes. “General Astra will not always be your enemy. It would be easy to treat her as such, knowing the crimes she will commit, but there is much more to her than martial stratagems. These things take time - as ironic as that sounds.”

Even amid her twitching mouth, Alex kept her gaze steadfast. Seeing the stubbornness persisting, Astra tilted her head. “You may be repelled by the thought of her, but she gave her life so you could be with your son, and you loved her even up to the moment I left Krypton.”

Eyes diverting, Alex swallowed the lump in her throat. “I don’t love her.”
“You will.”

“Self-deprecation doesn’t suit you,” Alex said, turning her feverish eyes back in a glare. “You expect me to believe you’re just going to step aside? I don’t care what happens in two years or three. I’m standing here in your apartment in the year 2013, June of…” The rest eluded her and she growled, “I don’t even know the day because you’ve weaseled into my head.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re in my head. Do you know what that means? Do you even know what you’re doing to me?”

Nodding, Astra bowed her head. “I misled you, underestimated your intelligence and your tolerance…”

Alex’s fingers pressed to her crinkling forehead. Her patience was hanging by a thread. “That’s not what I mean,” she said. She released a rough, heated sigh and faced Astra. She raised her hands and tried to grasp the meaning on Astra’s behalf. “Don’t you feel anything?”

The gall had Astra gaping at Alex from head to toe. “Of course I do. I love you.”

“There.” Alex seized the front of Astra’s blouse as if the entire building were on fire and physical contact was the only means to knock sense into her. “Why can’t you just say that instead of acting like a god damned bleeding heart? I can’t read you – you have so much self-control. That’s a human quality, you know. I’ve never seen it done better.”

“I am unsure as to the connotations of that statement.” Astra lowered her chin, curious as a neuroscientist studying a conundrum of baffling proportion. “Is that an insult?”

Alex took her cheeks and brought her into a furious kiss.

The shock of it rendered Astra frozen. She kept her hands out at her sides as Alex pressed into her. It was far easier to let it happen than to push away the advance. Every molecule in her body wanted to lose herself in those soft lips pressing against hers and yet… so many arguments sprung to mind. At the end of the day, reason and destiny aside, Astra just wanted to do right by Alex.

When a hand stroked down her white strand of hair, Astra fought a universal war to keep from opening her mouth. The gentleness being showed to her made her feel so worthy. It was as if she had done the world no wrong and whatever ripples threatening the future were due to fate’s abuse of power rather than her own. She was but a casualty in the feud being played out between higher dimensional beings.

And yet Astra still played a part. Even pawns, the weakest pieces of the game, contributed an outcome by their every move. General Astra would understand the strength of infantry. If this kiss was a test, it succeeded in tempting her most fundamental principles to defect.

Alex receded with a furrow in her brow. Her eyes gaged Astra like her life depended on it. “Can you just lose your composure for like a minute and kiss me?”

“It will not solve anything.” Anticipation burned Astra lungs and bated her breath. Her gaze dropped to Alex’s mouth. “You know that.”

Sighing, Alex looked away where the spices were lined and stacked in rows and the toaster showed a few dents of incompetence. She gave no indication of what these things impressed upon her. Perhaps she escaped to them because the alternative was just too impenetrable. Possessions always
said more about people than they themselves expressed. Astra’s kitchen items should have spoken volumes.

It always brought warm feelings to Astra when watching Alex in an oblivious state. Despite the uncertainty tangled in the idea of proving herself, she had so much glowing potential already. The things she surrendered when she thought Astra wasn’t looking sprouted mountains of affection over a range of repressed content.

“Do you love me,” Alex spoke to the counter, “or the me three years from now?”

Astra took Alex gently by the chin and turned her. Caution dangled somewhere in a breezy corner of the apartment as she fastened her mouth over Alex’s. And she kissed her deeply with as much feeling as her body owned.

Even as Alex moved against her, an undercurrent of disparity ran through it. Their previous displays of affection could be defined by a lust that behaved unreasonably to the natural order of things. Back then they were a combustion of lighter fluid and matches.

This felt faithful. This was Astra being truthful and Alex reciprocating. It built a foundation for a relationship that might never lift off the ground but Astra would be damned if there weren’t clouds under her feet. Conviction and compromise fueled the kiss to such an extent that it couldn’t burn out. It was a controlled fire and Astra had never felt so whole, even on Krypton in the arms of her love.

When Astra ended the kiss, she felt the warmth of lingering. Like Alex, she savored the closeness they had gone without for two torturous weeks.

Smiling softly, Alex said, “You sound sure of yourself.”

Astra didn’t speak until she successfully coaxed brown eyes open. Her thumb swiped back and forth over Alex’s cheekbone. “I am,” she said, heart blossoming as wide as her smile.

The contentment written in Alex’s expression faded. No longer transfixed by a kiss but by something far more elusive, she lowered her gaze to the hands that had released Astra. “I think I might be falling in love with you,” she said, her entire body going taut as a bow.

Astra’s touch ran down Alex’s arms and took the hands in hers. “We shouldn’t.” She frowned at the delicate, long fingers that did a far better job than her own comb. Astra’s eyes fell closed to the feeling of how they ran along her scalp, banishing every worry and lulling her back to dream. “I should let you go.”

“It’s too late for that.”

Arms found a place around Astra’s waist as a head lay on her shoulder. The single-mindedness behind it almost brought her to choke over the heart in her throat. Astra hated thinking about time – how much or how little. What did all those hours mean when she could share space with this human? It would have been a lovely idea to measure one’s life by the moments rather than the years. Astra’s life in particular could have been a lot less complicated if one didn’t factor in time spent. Amid all her accomplishments seized, it was not Project Valor that she felt most proud of but her ability to open up to another being as she had with Alex on Krypton. Its success was not a matter of time but of the lengths taken to bring them within an improbable intimacy.

Buried in willing arms, Alex asked, “What do we do now?”

The cotton of Alex’s jacket felt soft to touch. Astra pulled the trembling body closer so her own
could act as a buffer against the unknowable. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe this is not the same Earth. Maybe you don’t have to stay away. I could live here with you and we could make our own destiny.” After a pause, Alex chortled. “That didn’t sound as corny in my head.”

Astra smiled into her hair. “It sounds ideal. I would love to make this place home with you. Anywhere, really, as I am not particularly attached to this small hovel. Anywhere as long as it is with you.” She closed her eyes and sighed. “It is awfully tempting, but we can’t take the chance. Fate may deal many good fortunes but there is no escaping its cruelty.”

“Where is fate?” Alex muttered into the shoulder. “Because I’d like to drag it by the ankles into an alley and kick its ass.”

Astra took her by the face and kissed her. <Rao preserve me> she mumbled before opening her eyes to the image that crowded her stomach with flutters. “I love you.”

Wordlessly, Alex accepted it and glowed in the veracity beaming back.

Astra said, “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to say those words again. I cannot begin to explain the longing inside this body. I’ve missed you so much it’s left me numb. As pitiful as it sounds, I feel nothing without you.”

Alex shook her head and kissed back. “You’re not pitiful. Don’t say that. You’re wonderful, and you may have flaws but who doesn’t? I’ve made some awful mistakes in the past – one of them being my walking away from you.” She looked away at the discomfort prickling her conscience. “I needed time to overcome the shock of everything you said. While I admit that I’m still processing this supposed future of mine, knowing is way too much for one person to carry. I can’t blame you for wanting to live in a fantasy, considering everything you’ve been through. I just don’t want you to carry this alone.”

“You say that now, but this has been with me for a long time. Two years may sound paltry. It is not.” Astra hands slipped from Alex’s cheeks to take her hands. Her gaze dropped to their threaded fingers. “I confess that there may be a means of returning to my planet. Kal has been informed of my wishes and he is seeking a solution.”

Eyes rounder than before, Alex chewed on her bottom lip. “Is that what you want? Because if it is… I will support you.”

Astra’s heart melted to the show of loyalty. It looked so lovely on her. With grateful thumbs, she caressed the fingers in hers. “There is no guarantee that my people will accept me. To them, I broke a fundamental law that cannot be undone through time served. My son’s very existence is a threat to Kryptonian society and they hold me responsible. I may never be able to return home.”

Alex’s grip tightened and her brows pinched in outrage. “Why are you bending to them? Everything you’ve told me leads me to believe that you don’t kowtow to bureaucracy. Is your honor really more important than seeing your family again? Krypton may have banished you, but you might have a chance to redeem yourself and what are you doing? You’re agreeing with them.”

A fiery tremble ran up Astra’s spine. She frowned, puzzling over where her anger was directed. “I am not agreeing with them,” she said, leveling her chin with gravity. “I have actively opposed the reigning council since I first learned of their corruption. However, I have learned since my banishment that these… disagreements have cost me a great deal. As heartily as I still believe in my principles, they have reaped consequences that have not only affected my welfare but that of
my loved ones. You, Misha, and my sister… they are all paying for my willful behavior.” Astra recovered from the rant with a blustery sigh. “So if I am able to reach Krypton and they do not see reason to grant my pardon, I will comply with the judgment they have charged me with.”

Instead of retorting, Alex fell silent, though not for lack of resolve. Argument simmered beneath as her eyes sought the evidence to back it up. When she found it, the tension loosened in her jaw and the crinkles around her eyes smoothed out. Tempered of anger, she offered Astra a surprising dose of compassion.

“They broke your spirit, didn’t they?” Her soft, meticulous voice emphasized the realization developing in her mind. “Krypton. You don’t want to crawl back home with the reality that you chose to abandon your family for a life sentence.” Alex turned her head, eyeing her in challenge. “You could have stayed and fought but you didn’t. We may forgive you for leaving, but you can’t take that on your conscience. So your solution is to surrender.”

Astra grasped the hands in hers and held Alex’s gaze with heart stopping conviction. “I swear on our son’s life that I will return any way I can with or without my honor intact. From my triumphs to my credibility as a scientist, they all pale in comparison to the want of being with you again. If that makes me pathetic then so be it. There is no molecule in this body that would dare cause you more pain.”

“Your allegiance to family is commendable,” Alex said, her mouth tilting into a smile, “and familiar. If there’s a chance you can be reunited with us on Krypton, I’m not going to get in your way. Don’t think about how disgraceful it would be to go back because I won’t stand for it and the me living on Krypton won’t either. In a few years I’m going to be that person waiting for you to come home. For however much I’d miss you, she’s missing you more.”

The unsteadiness in her voice encouraged Astra to take steps. She never wanted to see another tear slip down Alex’s cheek nor feel a solitary tremble that wasn’t caused by pleasure or unbridled happiness. It just wouldn’t do.

Without betraying another second, Astra brought Alex close enough to kiss her quaking lips and bring relief to her spiraling nerves. She kissed away the regret as it tingled salty on her tongue. Her heart beat faster and quite erratically compared to the human heart roaring against her breast.

She held Alex and Alex held her and for a brief moment in time nothing else mattered.

* * *

That night proved too late for any further reconciliation. Alex had to work on her thesis research and Astra was off to work an arduous shift at the library. By the end of the next day, they reconvened where they left off and sat on Astra’s sofa talking over dinner and topping off their glasses with cheap wine.

They finally said what needed to be said, doubts about the future and all. Although looking towards the forthcoming days was like peering through dense fog, they drew comfort from the honesty shared between them. For Astra, it was difficult to pretend that this would last when Alex knew the truth, but living honestly made her feel so much lighter.

The night after Alex returned, it dawned on Astra that every night might be their last. It pained her deeply to think she had taken this time for granted. There was so much she hadn’t shown Alex and it occurred to her that there were things they could share on Earth that would never be possible elsewhere.
Their dinner had been adequately digested, the weather was mild, and she could not think of a better time. Astra could thank her job for many literary insights, one of which happened to originate from the Latin aphorism, *Carpe diem*.

“When was the last time you flew with Kara?”

Alex had a suspicious knot in her brow when she turned to Astra. “Back during high school. Why?”

Leaning back, Astra propped her elbow on the back of the sofa where Alex’s arm rested. “If you are willing to accommodate close quarters, I would not resist taking you up the coast.”

“You make it sound like I’m asking. Is this some sort of Kryptonian reverse psychology?”

Astra grinned, oblivious to her fingers trailing the inside of Alex’s arm. “Is it working?”

“You know I like the beach. Oh, alright. Twist my arm.”

“I would never.”

Tugging Astra up by the hand, Alex dragged her to the door. “Astra, it’s a joke.”

When airborne, Astra kept a mindful hold on Alex while maintaining a safe velocity and altitude. Alex had a thick enough skin that she wouldn’t mind being flown a bit faster but she left the call up to Astra. It was rewarding enough to watch the rippling sea beneath them.

At this time of night, the beach was deserted and populated only by the tide. Low altitude flying never really attracted Astra who preferred a height at which to look down on skyscrapers and feel a sense of vigilance. Humans couldn’t survive at extreme altitudes of over 8,000 feet without oxygen or suffering edema from long-term exposure. Astra had no plans to endanger her passenger within a mile of the minimum standard.

The waves lapped upon shore and produced a spray that caught on the wind. The air currents were pleasant and cool; they swept through like silk around their bodies. Astra looked down to see Alex licking her upper lip.

Astra asked over the breeze, “Is this too low?”

Alex tightened her arms around Astra’s neck, though not for fear of falling. Her heart announced a thrilling pattern but her pupils were not dilated in panic. After savoring the salt on her lips, she returned her gaze to the sea and the sand. “No,” she said, grinning nostalgic. “It’s perfect.”

The beach raced past like a belt of living splendor. Every once and a while their view would be interspersed by piers, surf shacks, and seafood dives. On one occasion, Astra spotted a small, private cottage and thought what it would be like to vacation with Alex. It brought pleasant questions to mind. How would they spend their week off? Would they play the perfect tourists who sight see and take pictures? Would they spend their time reading on lounge chairs, dipping their toes in the sea, and soaking in the sunlight? Or were they the active vacationing type who went scuba diving and biking and hiking? Astra liked to think they would do all of the above in addition to spending an exorbitant amount of time making use of the cottage amenities. As appealing as being outside was, there was something to be said for creature comforts.

Even as the cottage disappeared behind them, Astra could not banish the thought. Even while the sand and surf raced under her, her mind became preoccupied by crisp summer mornings, Alex laying naked across a canopy bed with her arm across her eyes, making love on that canopy bed in
the morning, the afternoon, and the evening and doing it all over again the next day, drinking fresh orange juice from crystal glasses and the blackest coffee east of the Mississippi River, and eating nothing but breakfast food from sunrise to sunset.

It wasn’t long before Astra’s appeal shifted from an ideal fantasy to the genuine article cradled in her arms. With her twinkling eyes and wind burned cheeks, Alex looked like that beachside cottage. Alex was standing propped against the patio frame, wrapped in a kimono, and cradling a cup of coffee between her hands. She was smiling gently, her brown eyes reflecting only the best rays of the sun. Astra knew they would never get to have that vacation, but the very sight of Alex in this moment was the closest they would get.

Upon returning to the apartment, Astra found it fascinating when the arms didn’t loosen from around her neck. Alex’s fingers were still threaded in her hair, idly twirling a strand at the nape. She stared with an attentive gaze and said in a barely audible tone, “Thank you for that.”

“I am as grateful to you for giving me this gift.” Astra’s tender voice unrivalled the fists grabbing bunches of cotton. Her arms were around Alex and for some reason her hands wanted ownership over the small of Alex’s back (the shirt becoming a barrier and eventual casualty). “We cannot fly in such a manner on Krypton. I am glad to have done so with you.”

Alex tilted her head, a fond smile drawing across her lips. “Flying relaxes you.” She combed down a few strands upset by the wind. “I could tell.”

The tending care brought Astra’s eyes to close. “I have flown many miles during my time here and, I confess, not a single moment compares to how I felt flying tonight.” She drew forward, nuzzling the air in search for Alex. “You make me more graceful.”

The blind attempt to find Alex incited her to chuckle. “God, you’re such a hopeless romantic,” she said and ended Astra’s fretful search by a press of her mouth. “It must be the sea air making you giddy.”

Astra shook her head without pause. “No, it must be you. I am sure of it.”

“Stop that,” Alex said, muffling her giggles against Astra’s mouth. “You’ve already persuaded me into your bed tonight. Any more poetry is overkill.” She drew her nails lightly against Astra’s scalp in suggestion and used her kisses to entice sighs from obstinacy. “And a waste of time that could be better spent.”

Alex dropped a barrage of kisses to Astra’s lips, cheek, jaw, and chin until Astra’s mouth finally sought hers. The taste of salt and fermented grapes drove Astra to an edge she rarely traversed. Being mad for Alex tended to bring out the rougher side of her passion, something that she could have easily maintained under a red sun, but not under a yellow one.

At the first nip to her bottom lip, Astra’s senses became overwhelmed. A slippery tension slid down her back and crowded in a fiery blaze at the base of her spine. She was beside herself with arousal. Alex’s mouth opened and their tongues met and moved in restless tandem. As a moan slipped past her lips, Astra wondered if there was a limit to how much she could demonstrate her fidelity. Her fists squeezed more of Alex’s shirt, demanding it off in brute proposal.

All the while they kissed and fought with material matters, Astra’s body ignited. Her heart thudded audibly alongside Alex’s. Pure anticipation flooded her veins and pushed her blood where she sought release. She knew through word of mouth that her brain was teeming with neurons firing off signals like fireworks on the Fourth of July. It was unlike anything she had ever felt. Being on Earth and in the arms of someone who loved her for who she was only intensified the experience.
She had been careful before when Alex had no knowledge of how deep their connection ran. Back then it had been as easy as fisting the sheets, but now that Alex knew the truth – and was consenting with exhilaration – Astra didn’t want to seize anything but the opportunity to ravish her. Now that Alex was aware of the powers at her disposal, this had all the makings of a first night. The anxiety of “firsts” and the thrill of not hiding her nature spawned icicles at the back of her neck and an enthralling heat in her belly.

When they finally reached the bed, Alex made certain requests, all of which could not be denied. Astra fulfilled every one of them in a hot swell of affection that was egged on by Alex. Alex, who could smile sweetly one moment and run her hands all over Astra like a devouring fire the next, begging her to “please, please don’t hold back.”

In the beginning, Astra had a terrible time restraining herself. She could not forget how little effort it took to draw blood or break bones. Though that line had never been crossed before, there was always the possibility of drawing too close to pleasure and allowing it to consume her judgment. The fear of hurting Alex tempered her strength, but it was her love for Alex that accommodated both passion and sense.

Letting go felt like being taken out to sea where the current was even keel one moment and tempestuous the next. There was a fluidness to their lovemaking. Raw, tangible emotion filled in the cracks caused by misunderstanding and made their ties stronger through trust. Alex wanted to feel all of Astra from lips to toes and heart to head. And Astra… she wanted to give Alex something she had never had, something deep and meaningful no one had offered before. They were kind and whole and accepting of who they were as people, not who they were in the past or who they would become. The momentary bliss within the hours was as critical as the future.

Whether it was momentary or not, they fell into each other without boundaries, restraints, or expectations. For lack of a better term, it was what the kids called “mind blowing.”

By the time their stamina ran out, Astra lay panting on her back. She’d never known exhaustion like this. Rao, if only she could harness this moment and never let it slip away.

When her strength returned, she opened her eyes. In her search for broken furniture she caught the riveting sight of Alex. She was collapsed on her back and accosted by more fatigue than Astra. Her eyes were shut so tight crinkles developed at the corners of her eyes.

Astra lifted her head to assess. “Are you alright?”

“Fuck… I’m good… I mean… you’re good… So fucking good…”

The breathless ravings dragged off as Alex brought her arm across her forehead. The air had a humid quality to it that stuck to the sheets, but Astra didn’t complain. Alex’s skin blazed in the light from the living room and brought out the blemishes that resulted from uninhibited zeal. They marked her neck, above her breast, and the inside of a thigh, and it gave Astra great satisfaction to know Alex let her be possessed in such a fashion.

Astra slid her arm under her pillow and scooted closer. She slid her fingers over the back of Alex’s hand and threaded through the limp, clammy fingers. “Sex is always good with someone you love.”

Still too exhausted to notice the love-struck gaze, Alex spoke between gasps. “That is… literally… the corniest line… I’ve ever heard. But I’m still… so turned on right now… I’ll take it.”

Astra pressed her lips to Alex’s shoulder before drawing back. She would have liked to have
responded with so much more, but knowing from experience that the human body responded adversely to overstimulation, she reined in her desires for later.

When fully recovered, Alex turned her head to find observant eyes staring back. She gave a half smile and curled up on her side. “Have you seen Kara since arriving on Earth?”

“From a distance,” Astra said. Her chest tightened to wistful thoughts. “She is different from the Kara I knew. There is a distinct human quality that I find troubling at times, nevertheless I know it is for the sake of blending in. Her smile though… it is as familiar to me as Krypton’s ever-changing sky.”

Alex smiled in rapt fascination. “I wish she could see you. It’s been so long since she’s spoken of you. Well, not you per se. I guess I mean General Astra. They did not part on good terms and I think she feels responsible for her aunt’s fate.”

“She will see me again – a version of me – in time.”

“I’m glad. As proud as I am to support my sister, she needs her own kind. Acclimating to human society has become easier for her over the years, but that’s only because I was there. Clark comes and goes. He never stays long enough. I know Superman has other responsibilities, but Kara deserves better. And if you say General Astra will eventually come home to her, as family and not as the enemy, then that is something about the future that I look forward to.”

Astra released a sigh that had her sinking further into her pillow. She felt lighter in the company of someone who shared similar connections. Alex had known Kara since she was fourteen and since then their affection for one another only grew. They were as loyal as any two sisters, perhaps more so. Despite the imbalance of biological advantage, they always treated each other as equals. The tradition of Kryptonian blood bonds could not compare.

A stroking sensation broke Astra out of her thoughts. She blinked awake to the fingertip tracing her eyebrow.

“Sorry.” Alex froze, expression open in petrification as she recognized the lapse. “You just looked so beautiful. What were you thinking about?”

Astra grasped the receded hand and gave it a squeeze. It comforted her to know Alex didn’t mind the small gestures. It took time for them to get there. When they first met, this younger Alex seemed ill at ease when it came to intimacy, but her bravery at times exceeded her apprehension.

“Don’t apologize,” she said and brought their hands down between them. “And to answer your question, I was thinking about you and Kara. Your relationship with her, rough patches and all, is inspiring.”

Alex relaxed in the hand encasing hers. None of her biological systems reacted negatively to the act. “How so?”

A queasy sensation churned Astra’s stomach. The suddenness of it caught her off guard. “It seems as though I underestimated the feelings I have for my sister,” she said in a slow manner of awareness. Slow like Rao’s rising on the pink vista of morning. “I miss her. I miss arguing with her as absurd as that sounds.”

Alex grinned and shook her head against the pillow. “It’s not absurd.”

Moisture collected at the corner of her eye. “On Krypton…” Astra cleared the thick coating of sadness from her throat and went on. “On Krypton, Alura and I were not as kind as you and Kara
are to each other. The closest we ever came to what you share with Kara was…” Astra’s eyes
widened and she swallowed over the lump in her throat. The pillow became damp under her cheek.
“It was the day I left Krypton. Something happened between us that has stayed with me in the
darkest, most isolated moments spent here on Earth. It was only made possible through your
intervention.”

“Me?” Alex cocked her head back. “What did I do?”

“You saw the strained ties between my sister and I and pestered me constantly to settle our
differences. As I said time and again, two hundred years of rivalry could not be abolished over tea
and cookies. You once tried that tactic.”

“What tactic?”

Astra rolled her eyes at the memory. It was actually quite humorous how angry she had been at the
time. “You invited Alura over without telling me in the hopes that she and I would sit at the dinner
table and mend our troubles. You baked cookies.”

Huffing, Alex flopped on her back and side-eyed Astra. “You must be thinking of someone else.
I’m a fire hazard around the kitchen.”

“Zor gives you free cooking lessons. Though his familial and professional ties are irksome, I
cannot deny his gastronomic brilliance.” Astra chuckled in recollection. “And he was certainly able
to reform your dangerous culinary ways so…”

Mouth twisting, Alex threw her a baleful look.

“In any case…” Astra gazed down at her unoccupied hand and lay it palm down. “It was the love
you have for your sister that encouraged you to push me towards Alura. Were it not for you and
Kara, I fear Alura and I would never have reconciled. Thank you.”

“But I didn’t do anything yet.”

“I suppose I’m saying it now on faith that you will remember when the time comes. Though it is
not clear what events will be affected because of my presence here, I hope you know how grateful I
am. You’ve changed my life in so many ways. From Misha to Alura, there is no end to the gifts I
am indebted to you for.” Astra paused, lips parting for words and finding none. She warred with
herself to scrounge the nerve. Her fingers pressed together on the bed for lack of any other
grounding focus. “And what you do for me now… I cannot put it into words.”

Alex held the gaze a while longer before turning back on her side and slipping her hand under
Astra’s. She grinned, thumb running over each knuckle with the upmost care.

Though Astra was smiling on the outside, inside her body winced. On Krypton, Alex had seen how
her and Alura’s broken relationship was hurting her and she would not stand idly by. Alex tried to
get through to her the importance of resolving things by emphasizing her own trials with Kara. The
tension between the sisters had been palatable during Earth’s final weeks, so much in fact that
General Astra tried and failed to convince either of them of the problem. Kara died before they
could understand what they were fighting about in the first place. Hints of jealousy be damned, it
was worth working out, but in the end they hadn’t reconciled.

The final days were a bit different in Astra’s case. Her time with her sister ended on an odd yet
favorable note. Unlike Alex and Kara, she and Alura managed to mend the betrayal and the distrust
that kept them apart. The fact that Kara died too soon for Alex to grasp that opportunity not only
maintained her grief but multiplied it. Alex had lost everything: her parents, Kara, General Astra, Earth, and now another version of her beloved. Astra didn’t want her to suffer any more. It may not have amounted to much in the short-term, but at least Alex had Jeremiah and young Kara and Alura. Krypton might never fully embrace her as a citizen, but she still had family.

“Can I ask you something?” Alex said. “It’s about my future – or whatever is left of it.”

The wording struck Astra as discouraging. She didn’t like that Alex felt her sense of freedom slipping, which made their being together so complicated. “What is it?”

“After my – our – son is born, do Kara and I stay as close as we were?”

Though Astra appreciated the pronoun, her eyes became downcast. “I wish I could tell you what you want to hear. When we meet on Krypton, you speak so highly of your relationship with Kara. There is ample affection in your voice, but it wasn’t long before I noted the underlying sadness. It wasn’t only that you had to leave her and the rest of your family behind.” Astra paused and closed her eyes. She wished she could explain it better. Alex still didn’t know that Supergirl would perish in the cataclysmic days of Earth. Astra couldn’t bear to shatter her heart. With a deep breath, she started anew. “An infant requires constant, special attention. You had said it was difficult even with the help of General Astra and your mother. When Misha was born he depended on you to keep him safe. There was little time for outside activities but you managed. Both you and Kara had your separate responsibilities at the time and you managed.”

“That’s a very vague answer.”

Astra returned the frown with a pointed look. “You asked a very difficult question. I am afraid that vague answers must suffice.” Frustration reddened Alex’s ears. Astra rose up on her elbow and reached out to pinch the lobe gently, teasingly. Its warmth exceeded that of the sheets and it took great resolve for her to keep from touching her lips to the spot. “There is little to be understood from the future. Striving to grasp answers will only make your head spin.”

“It’s not that I’m taking the present for granted. I just want to be prepared. You talk about this heroic life I lead and it just doesn’t sound like me.”

Astra squeezed courage into the hand. “It is not all battles and hardship, Alexandra. Whatever happens, there will always be good days.”

A clouded expression overcame Alex. Her gaze lowered and danced for a while over their joined hands before wandering the apartment. Astra didn’t know what she was looking for whether it was a particular household item or something more elusive. Deep down, she knew it wasn’t due to curiosity.

By the time Alex’s eyes rounded back, she wore a relaxed expression. “What are good days for you?” Her thumb resumed its motion atop Astra’s knuckles. She seemed open to interpret whatever Astra had to say.

Astra responded without contemplation. “Being in someone’s heart and on their mind without them ever speaking a word.”

Despite her best efforts, Alex mouth cracked open to a smile. “As overly sentimental as that sounds, I believe you.” She cocked her head. “Though it does seem presumptuous that you would think you’re on my mind all the time.”

Astra chuckled. “I did not say all the time. But considering our recent…” she raised an eyebrow at
the disheveled sheets, “… activates? You were most definitely thinking of me tonight.”

A weighty sigh gusted from Alex. “You got me there,“ she said and in one smooth motion she mounted Astra’s hips and captured her mouth in a kiss.

* * *

Two Years Ago…

Astra trailed up the stairway one decided step at time. The lift would have been more convenient but she was content to climb. It cleared her head, but her heart? There was nothing in the world that could abate its weight. It would not still for anyone. It had reached an abnormal rhythm ever since she left home. Alex and Jeremiah were still asleep in their beds, horribly oblivious to her absence.

Alura would scold her for it. Astra prepared to take the heat despite how easy it would be to tear her plan asunder. No one would blame her. Relationships, when wounded, took time to heal. Alura would have understood the prioritization of bonds more delicate and essential than theirs.

Astra hadn’t forgotten how they left things. The last time they spoke, Alura called to confirm that Alex would not be held accountable and that the council was following through on exiling Astra. It was easy to walk away – for both of them it seemed. The last three years delivered patience to Alura. She didn’t push forgiveness nor show any pleading in her demeanor. She was a sharp instrument waiting to strike. Astra knew it to be true even if Alex smacked her shoulder for it.

A mask of pleasant detachment had concealed whatever Alura was feeling or thinking. Astra knew her sister to be anything but cold but she was calculating. She utilized tact whenever she visited, performing her duties as aunt and nothing more. Anywhere else whether it be at her house or her office, Alura cautioned herself from sensitive issues and navigating around Astra’s dogmas like an ace pilot. Alura knew her triggers like the back of her hand.

But she could not engage in these strange yet useful tactics on her own. Alex had to have a hand in Alura’s behavior if their constant musterings were anything to go by. Rao only knew what they discussed over tea and cookies.

Even in the remaining days, Alura kept her distance. It seemed that the only person to bridge it would be Astra.

She arrived at the door but failed to bring her finger to the call button. Her arms felt heavy and her feet were rooted. A pang struck Astra at the sight of the apartment’s plated number. It wasn’t as if she wanted her sister to call. They had been through far too many arguments to make amends on the eleventh hour. The Ze twins were as unyielding as their near indestructible body tissue.

Her finger pressed the doorbell and she stepped back. The air was thin and thick at the same time. With an aching chest and her forehead breaking a sweat, she struggled to compose herself.

The door hissed open much too soon. Astra’s head snapped up as she gasped sharply.

Alura stood there in her night robe. She squinted against the hallway light. “Astra? It is three hours till the launch. What are you doing here?”

“May I come in?”

Even if Alura did not require an explanation, her frown deepened. “Yes.” She stepped aside and sealed the door behind Astra. With a roll of the switch, she filled the circular foyer with a gentle light. Her hand came up to scrub the fatigue from her face. “Though I am happy to see you, sister,
you should be with Alexandra.”

“I did not wish to delay,” Astra said. Her hands hung at her sides and she swept her gaze through the foyer, ears open to the slightest pin drop. “Kara and Zor are asleep?”

“They are,” Alura answered dismissively. She tilted her head to catch the darting eyes. “You did not want to give her wishful thoughts.”

The floor moved beneath Astra’s boots. When she realized she was pacing, she decided it didn’t hurt to get the blood flowing. In three hours time she would be sitting in a cockpit surrounded by cold, dead space.

Astra inhaled deeply. “It shouldn’t matter.”

“She loves you. Of course it matters. How you leave things will stay with her for the rest of her life.”

“Sometimes I think it fortunate that we are not bound in ceremony.” She ignored Alura’s distraught reaction and pressed on. “I would never dream of leaving her a widow, and divorce alone is a messy affair. Alexandra deserves better than either of those fates. Yet…” Astra swallowed the lump in her throat. Fresh tears sprung hot behind her eyes. “… Yet as her wife I would have been able to bequeath all my assets, my property. She could have had the protection of my house. How will she prosper, Alura? She has no other kin.”

“You know I will make sure that she has everything she needs.” She crossed her arms as if to ward off a chill. Her chin lowered as her brows tucked together. “How did you leave things, if may I ask?”

“She was… she was strong, composed but prepared to argue at a moment’s notice.” Astra’s teeth clenched behind her paling lips. Lips that still carried the ghosting warmth of Alex’s forehead. “She should not have to be brave for me. I am more than capable of carrying my own discomfort.”

“You do not intend for her to see you off, do you?” A shadowed dawn awakened Alura’s features. “You would leave her without saying goodbye? Astra… to what end will you make her suffer?”

The accusation caught Astra unexpectedly. They were such hypocritical words after the lies Alura spun. Suffering a childhood of intimidation and spending countless sacrifices to make Alura feel comfortable in light of their unalterable DNA… If any of them were liable in imposing the most harm it was not Astra. If this was a competition, the odds were against her twelve minutes older sister.

But it didn’t bother Astra as it should have. She squared her jaw even if it lacked true animosity. “There is no point in subjecting Alexandra to the spectacle. This is not the first time. She should not be made to experience it again.”

Astra diverted her gaze to the enamel floor. The natural cracks and stressed grooves were for decoration – a pitiful investment when she could have done the same with several Caprani ales and a blunt instrument.

The inside of her cheek took the brunt of self-doubt. “We said our goodbyes.”

Goodbye prospered fresh in mind. Times like this, Astra wished for human vulnerability. Alex would carry the prints of their lovemaking. A delicious ache would spread through her in remembrance. All Astra would take away from that night was unblemished skin and tantalizing memory.
“I have been thinking…”

The rasping voice caught Astra’s attention. She studied the crevasses in Alura’s forehead and the frown lines enclosing her mouth. A weariness seeped from her every pore and bound her limbs to stiff resistance. It gave away her struggle despite the long enduring tactics in staying emotionally detached. Astra wondered if she had slept at all. She herself knew fatigue in the days leading up to her exile. Looking at Alura was like facing her own reflection in a mirror.

Alura picked her chin up, renewed of confidence. “I have been having second thoughts, most of which are unlawful. There is one alternative that could pose a delay in your banishment. It might quell the outcry and afford us time to prepare a firm defense.”

Astra frowned. The considerations storming through Alura’s mind took root in her gut. She felt sick, tired, and livid. “You cannot be serious. After what I put my son through? I was finally able to get him to sleep last night and you want me to return like some coward? I will not dishonor my family for a few hours of freedom. And I will not become a fugitive.”

“Calm yourself, Astra. There is plenty of time to discuss this.”

“Do not speak to me of time. You do not know the meaning until you are made to spend your last hours on Krypton. When I left Alexandra this morning she was sleeping with a peaceful brow. You try leaving Zor like that, knowing you will never see him again. I did not want my last moments with her to be marked by tears.”

“What if I could convince the council to overturn the charge? They may be willing to alter the punishment. Even if it grants you just a few more days, isn’t that worth seeing her again?”

“You couldn’t convince them before. What makes you think you can do so now? Their minds are made up and nothing will shake their determination.”

“But –“

“Stop this, Alura.” Astra’s throat itched and she hadn’t yet reached maximum volume. Her cheeks flamed and her neck prickled. Little else occupied her resolve besides making sure Alex slept through the next three hours. “I’ll be damned if you give her false hope.”

Undeterred by the danger stirring in her midst, Alura struck in appall. “Even a day? Would you deprive them of a few hours?”

A simmering pressure built within Astra’s skull. The more suggestions Alura spun, the further at war she was with herself. Her hands flew to her head, nails digging into her scalp to distract from the white hot conflict. She let go, thrashing her hands down in anger.

“No.” Her voice rang uncomfortably still, unshaken by fate or possibility. “This is not why I came. I will be gone from this world in under three hours and Rao knows what will happen to my family then. I will not be here to protect them. My family needs to be taken care of.”

Alura froze, unable to reply with all the crisp sincerity of a judge. Her brows crinkled to the words. “Please,” her breath trembled, “think better of me, Astra. If you pardon not my misdeeds, see reason to trust that I will guard Alexandra and Misha with my life. Zor, too, has promised –“

“I do not care about Zor. No one will bear this responsibility but you. You know her. You care for her.” Astra turned her head away until her chin met her shoulder. The truth kept her eyes from holding steady to their mark. “She is a far better sister to you than I ever was.”
Alura could look no more devastated if every last star fell out of the sky. She wavered and plummeted with the stone in her gut. She shuffled forward. Her pinched lips made her chin tremble all the more. “Astra… no.” She stretched her arms out, ready to encompass the fragile figure, but at the last second she hesitated. “Let us not lay blame.” Her hands fell lifeless to her sides while a look of surrender pulled at her pale features. “I do not want to fight, Astra. Please don’t fight me. Can’t we…”

Astra flung herself forward. It all came out like an onrushing tide and she was powerless to stop it. She embraced Alura like they were the last two people on Krypton. For all intents and purposes, Alura would be the last person her body felt before it was thrown to the furthest remote sector in the galaxy.

Dismayed by her own vulnerability, Astra choked on nerve and sagged in finality. “You were always in my heart. Even when we said awful things.”

Alura burst at the seams and unleashed a torrent upon Astra’s shoulder. “I will always be with you.”

Astra marveled at the ease of letting a decades perfected rivalry go. It slipped off her fingers like droplets of water. It almost disturbed her how many superfluous judgments could fill an ocean. For as long as they allowed their differences to separate them, it took an alarmingly short moment to remember where they came from. They were more similar in principles than they liked to admit and more unique than any two Kryptonians. Their fight was the same, their family unbroken by space or bloodlines. No mere appearances connected them quite as close as their promise to one other. They would not cling to each other as they were at present if it wasn’t the end and if a remedy improved the approaching horizon.

When they parted, they did so as sisters. With shirts dampened by tears and commitment beating a steady tempo, their eyes met.

“I trust you to see your oath through,” Astra said. She removed her hands from Alura’s slight shoulders. “I know you will not disappoint me, sister.”

Alura sighed in relief. Instead of matching its usual contempt, the moniker of “sister” carried a guaranteed affection that soothed her spirit.

The air no longer felt as heavy as before. Astra did not detect a debilitating force on her chest. She breathed much easier despite her fate. Laying common ground had a way of boosting one’s confidence.

A robe flapped to movement. Alura was leaving the foyer. It caused Astra to seize up.

She swallowed and perked a brow in innocence. “Where are you going?”

Alura paused and spoke in a palpable tone. “I am not setting foot on a military landing pad in this robe.” She sensed the dispute before it set in. She tilted her head, mouth set in a firm line. “Your pride is misleading. It does not make you look superior. Please, let me come with you. Just to see you off.”

Astra sighed. She should have seen this coming. Her head shook and she crossed her arms decidedly. “No, I must do this alone.”

“And I must disagree. Alexandra will have my head if I do not see you off safely. Now come help me with my wardrobe.”
“Alura.”

“Bear it, Astra.” She turned away, eyes holding at the last second to seal her warning. “You cannot stop me.”
The Ghost and the Chasm

It was a clear, crisp night. From Astra’s view above, the city sparkled with the mirth of starlight. The rendezvous point appeared ahead with its prominent spire piercing the air. It almost reminded Astra of an Argo City skyscraper. She circled the tower a few times before its innocuousness convinced her.

She landed on the observation deck. It was after hours and all tourists had been vacated from the premises. Not even a security guard patrolled the area. Astra headed in the direction of a red cape.

“This had better be important,” she said. “I left Alexandra in the middle of season one.”

Kal drew an amused grin. “Ah, Game of Thrones? You’ve finally decided to take someone’s word for it.”

“She is very persuasive.”

“I don’t need the details,” he said, combating her wily aura with a waving hand. His expression sobered quickly. “Did you tell her?”

“Of course.”

Astra felt her stomach twist. Though she had told Alex about Kal’s summons and it had been taken without suspicion, it didn’t feel right leaving her. It wasn’t just the interruption in their television marathon that bothered her or the ice cream probably being scraped clean despite Astra’s explicit instructions to save it for her.

It never felt right to leave Alex, no matter her intentions to return. Something about this rendezvous seemed different. The late hour of Kal’s call and his vagueness pressed on her since she left Alex snuggled on the sofa. Astra revealed nothing of her suspicions though it seemed clear from the kiss Alex had given her before leaving that she wanted Astra to go with some sort of assurance that there was something nice for her to come home to.

“Now, are you going to explain why we are meeting here?” asked Astra. “Isn’t the Empire State Building a bit conspicuous?”

“Not at this height. I needed it to be private for what we’re about to discuss.”

Astra scrutinized the dark corners. “There are cameras.”

“Not a problem anymore.”

The voice did not belong to Kal but the shadows. Its pitch and tenor were unremarkable. The male’s heartbeat had a peculiar composure, steady and unconcerned, considering it was a felony to trespass.

On guard, Astra balled her fists and examined the silhouette looming. The outline was that of a man in jeans and a long gray trench coat. He wore sneakers, a Hamilton t-shirt, and a black nondescript baseball cap. Based on his off-kilter fashion sense, he was definitely not the authorities. As he approached, his three day scruff glinted silver in the overhead lights.

He gave an informal salute. “Hiya, Kal.”
Kal gave a grimacing eye roll. “It’s Superman when the uniform is on.”

“Right.”

Despite the rapport between them, Astra angled her body away in a defensive manner. She gave him another once over and concluded that the stranger was indeed human and in his mid-40s. Upon closer scrutiny, she found his torso bony and cheeks sunken. He had straw blonde hair judging by the wisps sticking out from under the cap. He was also chewing on a toothpick with such meticulousness that drew on annoyance.

Astra narrowed her gaze. “Who are you and how did you get up here? The elevator does not operate after hours.”

The man dropped his hands into his coat pockets. He flashed her a self-satisfied grin. “That’s classified.”

“Kal, who is this human and why is he not answering my questions?”

Unruffled by the interrogation, the stranger just grinned and chewed between Astra and Kal.

“Astra,” said Kal, “I’d like you to meet Rex Higgins.”

Rex rocked on his feet, tugging the bill of his cap in her direction. “Nice to meetcha.”

“Astra.”

He dunked his head again. “Yes, ma’am.”

Kal sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “He grows on you. Anyway…” His head rose and he pulled his hands to his hips over the business at hand. “I’ve found a solution to your problem. Actually, Rex has the solution. I’m just the guy in the background, here to settle things if it gets rough.”

“Imagine that,” Astra smirked, “Superman being demoted to mediator.”

He threw her a sulking look.

Astra turned to Rex. “Do you know anything about parallel dimensions?”

“I’m a friend of Rip Hunter’s. Maybe you’ve heard of him?”

“I’m afraid that’s classified as well, miss.”

“Astra.”

He dunked his head again. “Yes, ma’am.”

Kal sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “He grows on you. Anyway…” His head rose and he pulled his hands to his hips over the business at hand. “I’ve found a solution to your problem. Actually, Rex has the solution. I’m just the guy in the background, here to settle things if it gets rough.”

“Astra.”

She stared, unimpressed.

“I used to work for the Time Masters,” he said, bobbing up on the squeaky soles of his sneakers. “It was a short-lived employment. I did a lot of experimentation with portal jumping and they didn’t like that. Since they gave me the boot I’ve been on Wayne Enterprises’ payroll. Off the books, of course, so don’t go spreading it around. I like to live long enough to see one of my inventions succeed.”
Astra frowned deeply. “Your experiments have not been proven successful?”

The toothpick nearly broke to Rex’s scowl. “It’s a prototype.”

Kal held up his hands. “I can assure you, he can be trusted. Rex is highly proficient in universe constructs, especially when it comes to traversing them. He doesn’t like me spreading it around but…” He turned his head from Rex and whispered out of the corner of his mouth, “He worked at Cambridge for fifteen years. They loved him. He got bored with string theory. Quit before they could bribe him with tenure.”

“Not speaking highly of me, are ya Kal?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. And it’s Superman.”

“Right.”

Kal rounded back to Astra. “The point is, he knows his astrophysics.”

Suspicion arched her brow. “That has yet to be established.”

Wordlessly, Rex studied her from beneath the cap. The toothpick rolled between his teeth. “Ever hear of the Schrödinger cat paradox?” he asked with a tilt of his head. “There’s a cat sealed in a box containing bottled poison gas. No one can predict whether or not the poison will decay and kill the cat. Until we open the box, the cat can be thought of in two states: dead and alive. From the moment that door closed, another universe was born, one in which the cat died by poison while in the original universe the cat survived.”

He discerned Astra’s thoughtful expression and said, “Good. Looks like I haven’t lost you. All the paradox means is that multiple universes can exist simultaneously. For instance, there are two Kryptons and two Earths. But that’s just the broad strokes. The multiverse is a complex beast. Freedom of choice is the hallmark of every civilization’s philosophy, right? Every individual makes decisions about their path in life and every choice branches a new version of their world. Think of how many universes have been created since the fall of the Roman Empire, the Industrial Revolution, World War II. There are an infinite number of parallel worlds out there going about their business thinking they’re special, one of a kind. Now, when it comes to traveling between universes - You’ve done that, right?”

Astra folded her arms and shrugged. “I do not remember the details but yes. I was told a wormhole is responsible.”

“Indeed.” Rex steepled his fingers and went on. “A wormhole is a passageway between two universes. Your mainstream astrophysicists will admit to not knowing if a person can pass through a wormhole because no one’s tried it. And no one’s keen on testing that theory without some assurances. As far as they know, a wormhole could become too unstable for safe travel or the traveler could die a thousand different deaths in the attempt. Of course, those scientists haven’t studied under the Time Masters. There is a safe way as your presence here confirms it.”

The information dump had her side-eying Kal before turning back on Rex. “Alright. You know theory, but what of practical application? If I want to travel between universes via wormhole, how do you propose I find one?”

Rex shrugged. “Like you did the last time. In a space pod.”

Astra’s eyes widened. She darted to a flushed Kal and glared in retaliation. “What else did you tell him?”
“He told me what I need to know to do my job,” Rex said. He took the toothpick from his mouth and gestured to her with it. “And if you want to get to your Krypton in one piece, you’ll be begging to give me your life story. Time portals are a dangerous business. It’s gotten a few of my own friends killed. Unfortunately, it’s not an exact science.”

“I thought you said he was ‘highly proficient’?”

Kal gave her a pointed look. “Astra, just hear him out.”

“It’s nothing to get touchy over.” Rex plucked off his cap to sweep a hand through his matted blonde hair. He replaced the hat snuggly over his head. “I don’t work for the Time Masters anymore. Or Cambridge. There’s no government conspiracy or higher power scrutiny going on here. This stays between us. We’re completely under the radar. Not even Wayne knows what fresh hell I’m up to.”

Mention of the billionaire playboy didn’t assuage Astra’s concerns. “There is as much risk involved in building the technology. What do you hope to gain?”

“Call it cashing in a favor.” He looked to Kal pointedly. “After this, we’re even. Right, pal?”

The reminder made Kal shift his weight. Favors with superheroes never ended well for the humans. Astra knew he didn’t take these chances lightly.

Kal eyed Rex as his thumbs tapped an anxious rhythm on his arms. “If you help Astra get home then we’re even, Rex. That’s a promise.”

Rex took it with a satisfactory nod and stuck the toothpick back between his lips. He then addressed Astra. “Kal tells me you already have an operating vehicle. That will go a long way to helping you get to where you need to be. By combining Kryptonian technology with my own, there is a high probability that you will bridge universes with minimal failure.” He nodded, saying to himself, “I have a good feeling about this.”

The murmur did not go unnoticed. “I do not,” Astra said, eyes angling up.

“You don’t have to go through with it,” Kal said. “We can find another way. Or you could stay.”

Astra hung her head, thinking of Alex waiting for her back at the apartment. It also occurred to her where Alex should be. “We’ve had this discussion. I cannot stay.” Before Kal could retort, she turned to Rex. “My pod was not damaged too badly when I arrived on Earth. When can we expect its renovation to be complete?”

Rex chewed it over for a moment. “I’d have to do some preliminary tests, but if it’s in as good a condition as you say, I’d expect an estimated time of departure between seven and ten days.”

A sudden spike of unease overcame Astra. Seven to ten days was much sooner than expected. She felt her face blanching in the humid breeze. How was she going to tell Alex?

“So,” Rex tossed his toothpick away and stuffed his hands back in his pockets, “are we a go or do you want some time to think about it?”

From her periphery, Astra spotted Kal’s stolen glance. He couldn’t conceal his sympathy if he tried. For a man carrying a world of secrets, he was far too forthcoming.

She nibbled at her lip, turning over the decision to study its every angle. It would be best to get it over with sooner rather than later. There was no point in delaying the inevitable. Alex did not
deserve to be kept in the dark any more than her future deserved postponement. There were so many lives depending on what happened there on that observation deck.

Without further delay, Astra stepped forward and stretched out her hand. “We will proceed with your plan. You have my cooperation, Rex Higgins.”

Rex took her hand without pause and shook it. “I will do whatever I can. It’s a pleasure to be working with another Kryptonian, if I may say.”

“You may. I will admit, your knowledge of space-time disparities is most impressive. So too your understanding of quantum theory and how it pertains to the multiverse. These qualifications have put my suspicions to rest.”

Kal scratched the back of his neck. “This is going better than I ever expected. You two want me to leave this science convention?”

“Would love to stay and chat some more,” Rex shrugged, “but not tonight. I gotta send a lady into a parallel universe. Time’s a wastin’.” He gave a wave before retreating back to the shadows whence he came.

The wind whistled through the fence ringing around the observation deck, droning out the squeak of sneakers. Rex’s outline bled around the corner, leaving Kal and Astra to stare into moving shadows. The vacant premises suddenly did not inspire an eerie tremor. It felt peaceful being so high above the city in the company of a friend. If Astra held onto the feeling long enough, the burden of goodbye would not press so hard on her chest.

For however peaceful it may be to breathe in the crisp air, Astra couldn’t delay. She had someone waiting on her sofa, tangled in a blanket and eating her last pint of ice cream. Focusing on instant gratifications proved easier than the doom of subsequent tomorrows.

Her eyes danced languidly at the darkness. “That is not his real name.”

“No,” Kal chuckled, “but it’s catchy, isn’t it?”

Astra gave a sardonic roll of her eyes. “If you like show tunes,” she said and blasted off without preamble.

* * *

On Astra’s last night on Earth, she sat cuddled with Alex on the sofa in the glow of a reluctant obsession. In the days since the observation deck summit, they carried on as usual: Astra abiding by her responsibilities at the library and the gym and Alex writing her thesis and attending seminars.

At the end of the day, they met at Astra’s apartment to resume their marathon. They were nearing the most recent season and the closer they approached, the more anxious Alex was to share new episodes with Astra. All the while, she had been gaging Astra’s reaction to the series, hoping she would make it through without a puff of exasperation or a testy rejection. Alex was passionate about her likes and dislikes – so much so that it encouraged Astra to try no matter how vexing she thought of current popular culture.

Astra didn’t make a fuss about their last night together. If she did, the reality would display on her face and in her voice and she could not worry Alex because Alex could not know. To keep from fidgeting, Astra kept her hands busy in Alex’s hair, under her shirt, massaging along her spine as they made out on the sofa. She lost herself without plan or premeditation because somewhere at
the back of her mind she hoped to forget where she needed to be come sunrise and that they could go on living in this box of an apartment like Schrödinger cats. In order to go through with it, Astra needed to believe that staying was as possible as leaving. Freedom of choice held that an individual decided their own fate regardless of outside intervention. So she stayed and pretended it was forever.

Astra glanced from the television to the sleeping figure leaning into her side. She lowered her head to peek at the soft lashes of a slumbering young woman. “I wish I could finish it with you,” she whispered. The pinned arm behind Alex wiggled free for her to push the strands off the cheek.

Part of her wanted to wake Alex up. A kiss on her forehead, a stroking to her arm, anything that would rouse her from this deep sleep. Leaving without seeing her eyes again, that liquid brown that kept her so close to the ground, threatened Astra’s resolve. She would love nothing more than to kiss those eyelids awake and tell her how loved she was and how whole she had made someone. She wanted to tell Alex how much she had to offer the world and how that strength and intelligence couldn’t be reserved for one universe.

These blissful two months on Earth changed Astra in indescribable ways. They made her humble, more willing to let things fall where they may. It was a lesson she thought she had learned upon departing Krypton. The elusive qualities Astra had picked up since then made her feel ever more superfluous as if she were an ethereal spirit in a world that hadn’t the power to see her.

It only occurred to Astra in the final moments that she would have to share Alex with everyone else. Alex Danvers was an amazing woman who had the force of mind to do amazing things, and Astra wouldn’t love her so much if she didn’t achieve them. It was time to let her go.

The sheer curtains fluttered. The air conditioner and oscillating fan wheezed in an off-beat key. Some cities on Earth came alive at the stroke of eleven o’clock. Bars ran tides of frothy beverages while friends gathered and people danced how they felt. Superheroes perched on moonlit ramparts and somewhere in the world at the precise time of eleven o’clock a woman’s heart was breaking.

Astra brought the backs of her fingers down Alex’s cheek. The soft skin frustrated her senses like the shampoo they shared tantalized her lungs. She dropped her lips to the top of Alex’s head and closed her eyes, memorizing every second before pressing her cheek atop the crown.

“I’ll see you soon, Alexandra.”

By the time she had made it out on the fire escape, the moon had reached its highest point in the sky. Its beams glinted off Kal’s cape like a slow-moving river. He had his arms folded tightly across his chest and his chin set firmly.

Astra griped the railing with one hand, not for support but for the shock of cold that seeped into her skin. “If you dare to ask if I am ready…”

Kal pacified her with a raise of his palms. “I’d rather live to see tomorrow, if you don’t mind.” He dropped his hands and looked over the dark body suit she had wore when they first met. “You’re not taking anything with you?”

Material possessions and keepsakes were nothing but inessential cargo – the first sacrifices in the case of misadventure. Astra harbored no connection to much of anything but the beat of her own heart and who kept it so.

“I already have everything I need,” she said. Her skin thickened to the cold traveling through her like a quake. She pulled her chin down and directed a grave look at Kal. “If events progress in the
fashion I described, do you know what to do?”

“Yes, and I promise not to interfere until such time comes.”

“You will be the only one from this time who knows not only about my alternate world but of Earth’s imminent destruction. You may be protector of mankind, Kal-El, but you do not have the power to prevent these measures. I do not want your death on my conscience because you had to be a hero.”

Kal bit into his cheek before sweeping his hardened gaze across the brick and steel of human initiative. “This is an impossible task, Astra. You’re asking me to stand by and watch the world burn. Watch as my friends fall.”

“If I could change it myself, I would. We are not gods no matter how fast we heal or how high we fly. Some things are out of our control.” She tilted her head, imploring with every square inch of her expression. “I am depending on you.”

His brows thickened under the crumpled forehead. The smile barely reached his eyes. “It’s a good thing I know you. I already made time for it to sink in.”

“Thank you.” The sigh did little to loosen the tension building in her shoulders. It had been there since Astra made her final decision. The idea was like a wedge lodged between her ribs and now she would drive it home. “There is one more favor I request.”

“I’m all ears.”

The rusting metal felt rough under her palm. She looked down to where her thumb nail was scraping the corroding rail. “I remember from our lessons that you mentioned something about possessing the minor ability of hypnotism. At the time, you had not honed the power to its full capacity.” Her eyes met his swimming blue. “Has that changed?”

Kal’s mouth opened and closed. He took the request with a frown, fighting the logic and the heart behind it with a crossing of his arms. “She will have no memory of you,” he said, pushing his head forward to emphasize the weight of his words. “It will be like you never existed.”

Astra wet her bottom lip before clutching it between her teeth. The overwhelming need to catch a glimpse of the sofa and its sleeping occupant overruled her sense of self-preservation. “I know.” The sight of Alex so oblivious of this conversation, the choice being torn from her, sanded Astra’s voice down to the bone. “That is how it must be.”

“Are you sure?”

Astra couldn’t tear her eyes away because this was her punishment. Her chest constricted and for a moment she thought she was having what humans call an attack on the heart. The name for the self-inflicting distress sounded so apropos. Astra bore it with a flare of her nostrils. Breathing became such a torment that she clutched the thick material above her heart. When the twinge passed, she released her suit and saw beyond her clouding vision.

“Before I came along she was lost,” Astra said. “Skipping classes, drinking, carousing recklessly… She doesn’t deserve that life, but it is what has to happen. As content as she is now, she can never truly find happiness unless she goes through the trials.”

Kal had the sense not to respond right away. In the silence, he cast a look between the living room and the suffering figure in black.
“I’m sorry, Astra. I’d like to tell you to ignore the consequences and stay with her but…”

“That would be selfish.”

He nodded down at his boots. “Hey…” His mouth worked up the courage even if his glossy hair and silk cape looked up to sniff. Kal, ever the superhero, prepared such conviction on his person whether it came in the form of grace, brute force, or an aesthetically stunning appearance, yet so few knew what battles were fought beneath the symbol of hope. His head cocked when he found the means. “I know you don’t want me asking you, but if you care to stay a little longer and –”

“No, I cannot watch.” Astra caught one last glimpse of Alex as she dreamed serenely in the flickering glow of *Game of Thrones*. The urge to join the dream came over her like a seismic wave. She nearly crumbled right there on the fire escape. “It is best that I not be here when she wakes. Please take her home.”

Astra didn’t know there were tears in her eyes until Kal’s arms were loosening like those of a raggedy doll. She sucked in a breath, wincing at her gutlessness.

She didn’t realize until her vision cleared that Kal had it no better. The crestfallen expression on his face brought out the days of sleep he had skipped and several meals lacking in the average Kryptonian diet. It stung Astra to see him like this, knowing she made him this way. The Man of Steel never looked so pale and withdrawn and she was to blame.

Wordlessly, Astra stepped into his space, lay a hand on his house’s emblem and the other on his cheek. His muscles loosened under the heel of her hand. She closed her eyes to the kindness cupping her elbow and the regret settling on her hip. When she opened her eyes, it wasn’t the Superman looking back at her with eyes racing to solve the crisis but dear Kal who was trying to find a way not to lose another piece of his world.

His hard-headed spirit amidst the sorrow brought the corner of her mouth to curl up. “I am grateful for all that you have done. For the others, but mostly for me.” She moved her thumb gently. <Love to you, Kal.>

With a bitter fog looming, she rose up on her toes and kissed his bristly cheek. She lingered, cheek to his cheek before slipping from his arms and stepping towards the railing.

A sudden thought occurred to her and before taking off, she turned around. "You were right."

He looked back, eyebrows perked expectantly. "About what?"

"I was meant to come here and be with her. Alexandra was meant to find me. But she was always meant to forget."

He contemplated on the gloomy platform with his chin to his chest. When he finally raised his head, his eyes swam for her like they did on that day in the Canadian forest. They were as blue as the beautiful Dandahu. “Goodbye, Astra In-Ze.”

She gave him a soft smile before launching into the clouds.

* * *

Thirteen miles outside Gotham City the land was densely blanketed in foliage and wood. The tree trunks were too tough to be cut down by mortal blade and this mystery kept the area safe from deforestation. Though the forest thrived without industrial intervention, its thick canopy became a haven for fugitives and refugees with gifts too inconvenient to be considered an aid to society.
Most of these forest dwellers kept to themselves, hacking out their solitary existence in caves and eerie cabins. Astra had heard rumors of this place in addition to its local celebrities, most of whom consisted of the retired who were too battered by war and the spotlight to continue life in Gotham or Metropolis. She wondered if she had stayed on Earth long enough that this forest would have eventually become her home.

High above the tree tops, Astra looked out for a wide clearing. The night was dark enough to conceal her flight pattern. She liked slipping into the cold air and feeling its stream wash over her body. It was one of the few things about Earth she would miss. Not many of her Kryptonian powers managed to fascinate her like flying had. There were few adrenaline inducing activities on her home planet that reminded her of this. Flying had always been an adventure. Knowing she had to give up the peaceful pastime wrought a deep sadness in her.

Peering through her honed vision, Astra finally found the clearing and rode her last swell on the way down. Her boots sank into soft earth and needles. The scent of pine was everywhere.

“Right on time.”

Rex popped his head up from behind a tail wing. The space pod looked as if it had been sitting in the clearing for a week.

The heavily trampled area circling the pod drew Astra’s gaze. “I would ask how you found the means to transport my pod, but I’m sure you would stress its classified nature.”

Chuckling, Rex pulled a curious looking screw driver from where he had been working. “For a super being, you’re pretty funny. A dry wit but a funny one.”

Astra frowned. “I have been called many things. Witty is not one of them.”

His worn boots squelched on the ground. “Well, you’re a natural.”

Unsure whether or not to accept it as a compliment, she shook it off and examined the pod. From afar, it looked as it had when she last left it in an Iowa field. But as she neared the cockpit, she realized several modifications had been made to the control panel.

“As you can see,” Rex pointed to the cockpit, “I’ve ripped out a few assemblies and replaced them with some of my own. If you look behind the seat, I’ve carved out the fuselage to fit the negative energy propulsion system that will help get you to the wormhole. Now, it’s important that you think of this space pod as a forward running time machine and nothing more. It can jump into the future but not back. It’s much easier to predict the time and location of a wormhole than to jump to the past where we may have a record of one occurring. Unless you care to stick around for the next three hours, don’t ask me why.”

He turned from the pod and emphasized with a wave of his fancy screw driver. “Now, I found you a nice stable wormhole from 2023. The date and time are already programmed into your flight computer. All you have to do is press a button, the pod arrives in 2023, engage the hyperdrive, and the pod should get you to that wormhole.”

“And if it should not?”

He shrugged. “Look me up. Hopefully I’m still alive and kicking by then.”

Astra diverted her gaze to the dead grass trampled underfoot. “You do not inspire confidence.”

“Listen, it seems to me that you don’t want much attention, and asking around for a second opinion...”
is likely to attract some unwanted eyes, not the least of which are the folks from Cadmus. Bunch of sons of bitches,” he muttered with a shake of his head. “Hate to give myself much credit, but I’m your only hope, your Obi-Wan. You want to get home? This is your only option. Krypton may be no moon but it’s not a big enough target for me to just sling shot you the hell over there. This is complex science, and it takes more than some grease and a battery to see it through. You understand?”

Furrowing her brow, Astra was still working through where she met an Obi-Wan before. The name sounded familiar. “To a degree, yes.”

“If you’re going to do this, we have to launch today or the fuel I outfitted this pod with will deteriorate and leave you stranded near Jupiter.” He gave her a once over, scratching his grizzly chin as he did so. “And if you’re going to bridge universes, I could think of a better outfit.”

“This is standard uniform for all science personnel on Krypton.” Astra bristled. She didn’t like what he was insinuating about her fashion sense. What claptrap coming from a human in coveralls.

“Fair enough.” He pocketed his screw driver before wiping his hands on the front of his clothing. “I’ve been around, so I can say with brutal honesty that I’ve seen much worse.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“If you don’t mind me asking… Who exactly are you running from?” Rex turned his head and peered with a one-eyed squint. He must have detected her agitation for he gave her a knowing look Astra had only seen on her Uncle Misha. “It’s in the shoulders,” he said, pointing with a grease-stained finger. “You’ve got the devil behind you and he’s gainin’. Hell, he might as well be Father Time himself.” He held her gaze a moment longer before shrugged. “But what do I know? I’m running like the rest of these forest dwellers. Haven’t seen one yet, but I feel ‘em. They’re out there.”

Astra watched him sweep a sympathetic gaze through the wood. It was too dark to see anything but that didn’t stop Rex. She shook her head. “It’s not who I’m running from. It’s who I’m running to.”

Rex hummed thoughtfully before nodding. “Well, I hope you find ‘em. That’s me being sensitive. I got no time to be mushy when my head’s all full of vibrating strings.”

Astra grinned at his choice of words. “I understand.”

He chuckled. “You’d be the first woman to say that.”

Prepping the pod for launch became a matter of safety and common sense. Rex gave her basic instructions for how to power up the systems, run diagnostics, and engage an evac (or the lack of one). The rest of the pod’s features hinged on Kryptonian technology Astra was already familiar with. By the time she had been briefed, Rex gave her the thumb’s up.

Before lowering herself into the cockpit, Astra paused. She gaged Rex carefully, hoping to appeal to his occasional sympathy. “I meant to tell you when I arrived, but I suppose it slipped my mind. Ironically.”

“Happens to the best of us. Go ahead.”

“There’s been a change in plans,” she said. “I need you to set my arrival to a specific date and location.”

He stuffed his hands in his pockets where clinking tools met his fingers. “I made all the
arrangements for you to proceed to the wormhole’s time.” His frown drew heavily on misunderstanding. “I thought you wanted to get home.”

“Home is the only place I’ve ever wanted to be. There is one stop, however, I have to make before I go.”

“I suppose that’s doable.” He cocked his head. “Can I ask what’s changed?”

“Someone needs closure. And I’m afraid I’m the only one who can give it.”

* * *

An array of oranges and yellows lit the sky like a cascading fire. It would have been tranquil were it not for the slithering coil of magnetospheric plasma striking through the colors, making them bleed behind the emerald aurora. It was far from the usual sunsets Astra had experienced in the past. The heavy clouds were like ashes hanging in the sky and even they were not her main concern.

She eyed the shimmering aurora warily. It was a sight she had only seen in the upper hemisphere where temperatures reached well below zero. Those northern lights were a result of mild solar wind disturbance. The ionization of particles was what gave the sky its moving bands of color. And they were beautiful.

These lights were different. They had a foreboding beauty to them as they hung above every citizen of the world, lowering bit by bit in a slow-motion boom. The eerie green aurora was produced not by one stream of solar wind but a salvo of solar storms.

It was the end of the Earth – or one of them at least. In a few hours, everything humans and nonhumans knew about their planet would be obliterated by a massive solar flare and themselves along with it.

Astra had no time to take in the sights. She turned her gaze downward where the rooftops raced past. A squeamish feeling assaulted her gut. She had some misgivings about this alteration in the plan. Rex had stressed the importance of fuel decay and if Astra missed her launch by a minute, her pod would essentially be worthless and she would be stuck in an Earthless universe.

There was a great deal on the line even before she made her detour. Now the pressure was on, and Astra had under two hours to finalize matters. The opportunity to back out narrowed the closer she flew to her destination. When it appeared in the distance, Astra exhaled a breath she didn’t know she had been holding. Instead of turning back, she headed onward.

“I am this far already,” Astra said to herself and swooped down.

The building’s ledges were steep but stable. She landed soundlessly on the brick precipice where the sun’s rays were still warming. The roof was as sparse as the others in the city. On her way there, she glimpsed at a handful of strays spread out on their lonesome paths. Any other survivors were probably indoors, waiting.

All but one.

Fine gravel crunched under Astra’s boot heels. She walked the length of the building towards the setting sun. Needless though it was, her hand came up to shield the light. They were vengeful rays, perhaps too healthy for a Kryptonian’s own good.

A hint of sulfur carried on the wind. Astra didn’t pay it any mind, though she accepted the burden
of guilt it brought. She stopped within ten feet of the far side of the building. Savage remorse swelled up in her at the outline cut into the sunset. Astra had no guarantee that she would find what she was looking for. Hunches boded little confidence unless one possessed evidence to support them. The only proof at Astra’s disposal were moist brown eyes, a choked narrative, and a traitorous heartbeat.

Astra lowered her hand from the blazing sunset. She drew in a breath to speak but someone beat her to it.

“Leave or you shall face the consequences.”

Astra should have complied. The average individual facing the end of their time might have preferred to spend their last moments alone in their head. Whether that led to a critique of past decisions or the what could-have-beens of the future, alone with the scent of brimstone and a wrathful sky seemed like the best option available.

Instead of caving to the threat, Astra rooted her heels in the gravel. She squinted into the sun and felt the stone yielding to her boot. It made a grinding sound that sounded like crying seagulls in her ears.

A sigh gusted out at Astra’s fidgeting and the outline turned. A blood orange halo framed her head and shoulders. The breeze tossed her curls which looked to have received little care in recent days. Astra felt compelled to meet her eyes and when she did, she fought the urge to shrink back. They were pale – the eyes. Astra never knew they could cloud in such a way. They were like a sea storm fog. Standing on the sun beaten rooftop, Astra suddenly felt very cold. She could not tear away from those eyes nor their red rimmed quality.

The unpolished look reinforced the subsequent reaction. Taken by surprise for only a few seconds, she recovered like any self-respecting military officer. “J’onn.” She ground her teeth. A nerve pulsed at her temple. “I told you never to come back. What are you trying to prove, coming here in my flesh?”

It felt like looking in the mirror of her elder self. At once, Astra began to feel the war-trodden muscles and joints, the restlessness, the striving for acceptance in intolerant places. She may not understand the extent of those trials, but she did recognize the heart in her.


The wheels were turning fast. She had always been exceedingly bright in physics. She rose from the ledge, sobering quickly. “That is impossible.”

“You will soon learn that a great many things are possible. We have much to discuss.”

* * *

When the last anecdote had been spoken and the story came full circle, Astra realized how winded it had made her. And tense. She took a deep breath and felt her body relax upon exhale. The lowering sun sputtered in her periphery. She gaged the general who seemed to be taking everything in stride. At least, judging by her silence and ironclad poker face.

“Were you praying when I arrived?” asked Astra.

She grinned as if Astra divulged the secret to global supremacy. Her lips pursed to curb the reaction but it couldn’t stop the chuckle.
Astra tilted her head. “Is something funny?”

She shook her head, smiling in the face of her imminent demise. “I have not prayed to the gods for some time.”

“Not even Rao?”

“Especially not Rao. I was undeserving of his light before. What makes you think this will be any different?” Her smile faded with the dwindling sun. “It took decades for me to realize the fallacy in my justice. I failed so many people – including myself. Even after I made restitution for my crimes, I reaped the worst charges against my own family.”

“I do not believe that our morality should be measured by the wrongs done to others but the good we have done to make amends for them.”

General Astra brought her hands to her hips and gave Astra a once over. She raised her brow, unimpressed by the rumpled uniform and garish white trim (garish, no doubt, from the perspective of an ex-military officer). “You expect me to believe that you are a parallel version of me, sent here as a courier from the past?” Her head cocked. “Or is it the future?”

The sarcasm wasn’t lost on Astra. “You know very well what the stakes are. We may belong to different Kryptons, but neither of us are narrow-minded enough to dismiss empirical evidence. I do not have to give you a lesson in general relativity to understand the magnitude of this.”

“How do I know you are not a shape shifter sent here to break my spirit? After all, the end of the world is the perfect time to risk it all. I have many enemies, and I did not leave my army on amicable terms.”

“Everything I have said is true. I am no shape shifter.” Astra couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Alex spoke so highly of this woman’s grasp over the scientific. Time travel and parallel worlds couldn’t have flown that far over her head. Astra balled her fists in frustration. “I did not come here to defend myself and, frankly, some of what your sister said about you is true. Your lack of faith in people is self-sabotaging behavior. I know who I am. My name is Astra In-Ze, and I know more about your family – about your son – than even you.” She winced inwardly. It wasn’t the best tactic to earn trust. Considering the circumstances, she should have employed a bit more sensitivity.

Though General Astra seemed collected on the outside, her narrowed gaze gave away her boiling true feelings underneath. “If you know so much, why are you here? What is keeping you from a safe journey home?”

Astra’s shoulders sagged. Despite having been raised in a predominantly military house, the grilling hit her like a plasma bolt. “I… I thought it was the right thing to do.”

“We are nothing alike if you think it makes this…” she threw her hands up at the burning sky, “…bearable. You come here in your patronizing manner, speaking of Alex’s happiness and how much my son has grown… It does not make me happy.” She stepped forward, finger leading and teeth grinding. “It makes me angry. I am no saint. I should be with them but I am not. That is my fault.” She huffed, turning her back but then thinking better of it. “Do you know what I was doing when you showed up? Look around you. Have you not seen a more empty world? One could think about all the missed opportunities in this despicable silence, but I? I was watching my last sunset, prepared to die with the thought that I mattered to someone.” She choked out a humorless cackle. At a loss for how else to react, she threw up her hands and said, “Everything else in my life has vanished. Why not my final moments?”
A weighty sensation dropped to the bottom of her stomach. Astra’s head fell. She touched her forehead, sighing shallowly and cursing the rising temperature. “Perhaps I failed in my purpose in coming here.” The admission was meant for herself, but it somehow found a place on her tongue. She raised her head, remorse following closely behind. “Contrary to what you have gleaned from my account, Alexandra is not happy. I am sorry for misleading you, however unintentionally. It saddens me to tell you so plainly: I do not think she has ever been truly content since the day she left her planet.”

“I should kill you and take your place.”

The menace in her voice astonished Astra. Like a cold razor, it struck trepidation by mere suggestion. She stepped back, conflicted between pity for this wretched woman and outrage. “You wouldn’t,” she said, her confidence draining with the color in her face.

General Astra wasn’t deterred and her bearing did not diminish from its lethal conviction. Rigid but set on the balls of her feet, she looked heartily prepared to curl her fingers around pulsing flesh and squeeze. “Wouldn’t you?” she said, eyes round and more certain of anything. “For the woman you love?”

Instead of arguing the lunacy, Astra’s eyes glinted knowingly. “I can see why she fell in love with you. Staunch conviction only takes us so far before it turns on us. You never stopped there, though, did you? When your powers brought the world to its knees, you let it destroy you. You have died for her and you claim that it doesn’t stop at murder. To what end?”

The taught muscles in General Astra’s jaw loosened. “You called my bluff. Perhaps we are more alike than I thought.”

“You honestly want me to believe that you were bluffing? You did not shake when I heard the threat on my life.”

“I could not look my son in the eyes and Alex would never forgive me. Of course I do not want to kill you.” A deviant smirk graced her lips as she drifted into contemplation. “Though it had crossed my mind.”

Astra should have appreciated the gallows humor at a moment like this, but her pod’s fuel was precious and time was of the essence. What was she even doing there? The general was clearly out of her mind, talking about murder one minute and then asserting it was a joke the next.

“So you took her place.” General Astra’s voice hung stagnant in the muggy air. She stared, yielding to the curiosity eating away at her. “An honorable sacrifice. It could not have been easy.”

“I had to leave my family without the promise of ever returning. It was far from easy.”

“Actually, I was referring to the task of convincing Alex.” Her eyes searched Astra. “But, yes, I imagine it was difficult saying goodbye to them. You risk much in going back. Do you really think the High Council will grant you amnesty? If they are anything like the council from my universe, its members do not forgive and forget easily.”

“You said it yourself, the end of the world is no better time to risk it all.”

General Astra frowned. “But you could have stayed in the past. At least there you had Alex. It was certain. Yet if you take your space pod, you may never see another Earth or Krypton again. Wormholes are unpredictable. There is no guarantee you will arrive at the precise destination.”

“I could not stay in Alexandra’s past. She is meant for a different purpose, one that does not require
my involvement. As painful as it is to admit, I do not belong to this world whether she is in it or not.”

General Astra did not speak. A silence fell between them that did not deter her contemplation. She let the words sink in as her observation of Astra stayed truth. A rare breeze swept over the roof and tossed her curls. Her white strand of hair obstructed her view for moment but she didn’t seem bothered by it.

When she finally put her thoughts to words, they were uttered so softly Astra had to hone all her power into catching them. And she was almost sorry she had because the voice was stripped of bravado and contempt and left nothing behind but the dregs of awe.

“Here I thought I had done everything imaginable to be worthy of her. Congratulations. It seems you have proven me inadequate.”

The lack of spite in those words confused Astra. “It was not my intention to belittle your value. I did not come here in challenge.”

“You misunderstand.” General Astra cast a glance at the blushing pink horizon. “I have fought countless battles and there is no grounds for one here. I am coming to the conclusion that you have my family’s best interests at heart.” A glum look passed over her face. Her hand came up to rub at her forehead as she muttered, “I hope you are not as unscrupulous and integrity-challenged as I. Alex may be capable of taking care of herself, but becoming a mother has challenged her in ways she never expected. And Jeremiah was so small the last time I saw him… I do not know how he will overcome the repercussions of his birthright. They are depending on someone to lead them through Krypton’s age of intolerance. If I cannot be there then the responsibility should be placed in the hands of someone who is already carrying it.”

Astra paused, waiting for the other boot to drop. “You are not angry that I have taken your place? Nothing of what has been said of your impulsiveness encourages me to believe this…” she shook her head in search of the right word, “… this defeatism. Why are you not fighting me?”

An upsurge of frustration beckoned General Astra. She spun on her heel, hair flying, and pinned Astra with an expression of terror and pleading. “Because I will be gone, and I need to know they will be taken care of! I will grovel if I have to. They are all I have left.” She inhaled sharply. A gleaming quality filled her eyes and her chest heaved. “My planet is destroyed. Any hope of salvaging a relationship with Alura is dust swirling around a black hole. And my niece is dead. Alex and Jeremiah are my world and I cannot suffer the thought of another dying because I didn’t have the courage to trust one person.”

The band of shimmering emerald slithered above them. It grew denser in response to the relentless Sol winds attacking the magnetosphere’s integrity. Astra could not bear to watch it. She hadn’t the will to meet the general’s earnestness even if it touched her in the deepest place of her heart.

General Astra had been mourning for days and, judging by her rail thin figure and sallow complexion, she had not eaten or slept in some time. Ever since Alex and Jeremiah left, she had been waiting for an afterlife she believed unfit for Rao’s light. It was hardly pitiful. On the contrary, Astra recognized the same heroism she loathed to admit whenever Superman rehabilitated another displaced alien. Keeping faith did not require glorified acts caught on camera nor speeches pitched across the globe on newsprint. Sometimes it was as simple as sitting on a roof ledge bathed in sunlight and trusting in one’s heart.

After the argument on the grounds of her family’s safety, it dawned on Astra that the ruthlessly efficient and dedicated part of the general was what first attracted Alex. She could not deny it any
more than Alex could in the aftermath of all those personal battles fought on her behalf and Kara’s. They shared a bond and a past. Astra realized the struggle Alex had been trying to overcome even after three years spent on Krypton, though she had been brave enough to adapt. Those skills came from somewhere – or someone. Memory was her motivation. Both the mental and physical scars served as a reminder of the adversary who once spoke in awe of her bravery.

Astra lowered her gaze to the fine gravel rooftop. Her breath came shallow and her ribs ached to some unseen culprit. Being away from Alex shook her sense of identity. Who wouldn’t feel less of a person without their companion? Like a singularity tearing into the fabric of space/time, Alex’s absence created a hole in her life, and it would never be filled until their hearts beat in the same vicinity and she could wrap her arms about that fragile, defiant, and achingly astonishing human.

She clasped her hands and took out her dwindling disquiet on the inside of her cheek. “My pod is equipped with coordinates to the wormhole. Before that voyage, however, it will require a time jump to 2023. The date and year where the portal can be found has already been programmed into the navigation computer. As you mentioned earlier, there is no guarantee the wormhole will lead to the precise time or place. However, the opportunity to see Alexandra and Misha again outweigh the dangers.”

The despondent expression dropped. General Astra surrendered to confusion with a crinkling brow. “Why are you telling me this?”

Astra’s hands wrung silently in front of her. The gravel reflected the tragic though beautiful colors of extinction. Crimson, coral, magenta, and so much green – they rippled below her feet like the surface of a deep, wind-licked ocean.

“My uncle once expressed to me the importance of debts,” said Astra. “He was a warrior like your Uncle Misha, so I hope you can appreciate the parallel. As part of the guild’s front line infantry, he was thrown across the galaxy to... in those days they called it ‘resolve’... unstable governments and turn the tide in war-torn sectors. He conquered many rivals and lost just as many friends in the process. As debilitating as it was to suffer casualties and watch the most hardened soldiers of his unit cave under pressure, he continued to fight. And he did not do it for Krypton or our people. He fought because he owed the man who saved his leg from being sacrificed to a mine on Khera. In the aftermath of a colossal defeat, my uncle shouldered his weapon on an arm that wouldn’t have been there if it were not for his lieutenant. Countless others who protected his life and limbs became his will to fight. He returned the favor every time with ammo, a starfighter, a few fingers, and an ear. He took it as far as turning in his life for a family who was harboring a fugitive.”

Astra raised her eyes to reveal their misty substance. “I may not be a warrior, but I have always strived to live up to his example. I owe you my gratitude.” She followed the testimony with an unmistakably sincere bow of her head. “My... biology for lack of a better term prevented me from having children. What you and Alexandra have given me is nothing short of a miracle. I treated him as if he was my own son. Like Alexandra, Misha brought the stars back to my sky and showed me how rewarding vulnerability could be. I chose to be vulnerable with them and they gave me a lifetime of happiness. Three years is a lifetime that I do not take for granted.”

Astra tilted her head, fighting back the tremendous sorrow welling up. “You have given me Alexandra and Misha. I wish to do the same for you.” She shook her head to the opposition boring back, not the tears pouring down her cheeks in rivulets. “Do not take this opportunity for granted. You may not believe in a hereafter, but somewhere, sometime you will regret it.”

General Astra looked to be in a state of shock. “You would give up a chance to be with them…” her jaw slackened to the folly she was trying to wrap her head around, “… in payment for an
incidental favor?

“You may not have foreseen their paths crossing mine, but you sacrificed everything for their future.” Astra released the bit of flesh between her teeth and fumed in irritation. “This is not a… Rao, what do the humans call it? A walk in the park,” she emphasized with stern clarity. “I took care of Misha when you could not. Now you have the chance. Go to him. Do your duty. He is waiting for you to become the mother you should have been.”

“And what about you? You will resign yourself to eradication all in the name of debt? Honor? You speak with a false tongue. I would never believe such nonsense. No one simply chooses death over life.”

“Someone has to go,” Astra said. “Someone has to be with her and be that person. I wanted it to be me. I wanted it to be me so very much. But I think I’ve known all along that it is not possible. I cannot go home to her because it is not me that she wants. It is not me she has pined for and mourned all these years.”

“This is not fair,” General Astra insisted with a worried brow. “I had my chance with her and I failed. There is not a bone in my body that doesn’t want to see her again, but our history is a sordid one. I have hurt her in ways that do not result in mortal offenses. Even my promises have failed. Those are the wounds that endure. She hasn’t forgotten. She will never forget. Alex is good – wiser and with more mettle than the soldiers I have fought alongside. She deserves someone without blood on their hands.”

Astra shook her head even as she was shaking on the inside. “I had three years with her. Go to your family.”

“Our family.” The emphasis tore down her mask. General Astra heaved out a breath that broke her resolve. Not knowing where else to turn, her crazed eyes darted across the ground, in the distance, and at the looming blaze above them. When she finally met Astra, her mouth opened and closed at a loss for further excuses. She seized up against the wave of tremors produced by a possibility. “How can she look at me knowing you stayed behind?”

Astra sympathized with the panic on display. “Because you stayed behind before and she never stopped loving you.” General Astra’s expression wavered and so too her posture. Astra knew she was nearly convinced. “It is not only Alexandra and your son waiting. What about Alura? It is never too late to start anew. And Kara is alive. I know she will take you into her heart as she has done with me. Don’t you want to see them again?”

The general choked back a sob. She clapped a hand over her mouth. Tears ran over her fingers and soaked her shirt. The alarmingly human fashion of plaid and jeans did her justice, though Astra wasn’t so sure how well it would go over on Krypton. It wasn’t worth worrying about. Alura would fight for her freedom just as Alex would help her adapt to an altered Krypton.

Astra closed in and lay a gentle hand on her shoulder. The touch encouraged the eyes to wrench open. “You are not taking my place. That is impossible. You already have a home with them and it has never been replaced.”

“How can I accept?”

“Words are unnecessary. Just… please, take care of them.”

“I’m so sorry.”
“Do not apologize for wanting to live.”

“I should fight you.” Her shoulders stiffened under the hand but she didn’t recede. “My uncle taught me a few lessons as well, one of which was the importance of refusing concessions. He never backed down and I dishonor him by doing so now.” She clenched and released her jaw in tormented repetition. “I should fight you.”

“And what would that achieve?”

Astra suddenly felt so much older. She had already learned her lessons in patience, when to strike and when to concede to aid. It was reason enough to step aside and let the undisciplined, though no less impassioned, candidate have their shot. General Astra certainly had a lot of catching up to do. At least she would have family at her side. It was the truest form of loyalty.

Astra sighed and looked about their ever-changing surroundings. “It is still light out. My pod is waiting in the forest outside of Gotham. You cannot miss it. There is not much time. You can escape this inferno if you hurry.”

General Astra swallowed, caving without any sign that it benefited her. Her face still carried a sickly complexion and it was growing paler by the second. Gratitude was visibly lodged in her throat. “I wish there was more time to…” She searched the ground for the appropriate phrase.

Astra took pity on her. “It seems neither one of us enjoys finales. Let us part without farewells. Rao knows we have experienced our fair share of them.”

General Astra sucked in a breath and nodded upon exhale. Without further ado, she marched to the roof’s edge, mounted its ledge and paused. Her head bowed and turned to the side – a silent acknowledgement that was more than Astra could ask for. She then looked out across the expanding city, calm and prepared, before launching forth.

Astra craned her neck, following the blur race into the distance with unimaginable speed. When the black dot vanished, everything became clear. From the silence accompanying her on the rooftop to the roiling sky above, Astra knew what she had done. The awful weight of consequence bore down on her shoulders – the burden and sadness it entailed. The only thing that kept her on her feet was the knowledge that she had done it for a valuable reason.

Subtle tremors swept across the Earth. The cries of birds echoed in the distance as they flocked in black clouded disarray. Astra felt the shockwaves through her feet and heard the first sounds of brick and mortar grinding to a pulp. Instead of thinking about how the solar flare would evaporate everything in its path, Astra had other plans.

She turned towards the sunset, the origins of her powers, and took a deep breath. The precipice offered such a pleasant heat when she sat down. She ignored the flashing from above and the buckling crust behind her. The lower atmosphere was starting to glow blue on the verge of twilight. It was the slowest sunset in recorded history. It was the last thing she wanted to see, the great golden sun, before closing her eyes. Because behind her lids the faces of Alex and Jeremiah were still so fresh.

And close them she had. Her lips smiled and her heart skipped. They were so close it was as if she could hear them calling her home.
A Single Candle Burning

Six months had passed. In that time, Krypton’s waters had reached record heights, the Flying Jen-Sui’s welcomed a new addition to their celebrated troupe, and the High Council underwent an historic overhaul in leadership. Much had changed for the planet over the past few months, though no one breathing on Krypton went through as much as Alex Danvers and her son.

Alex had not taken the separation well. She didn’t want to go into work. Project Valor didn’t inspire her as it had when its founder spearheaded the way. She couldn’t run loops around the campus without collapsing into the crimson grass after a paltry two miles. Sunny days made her moody and yet the torrential rain season failed to put the drive in her step.

Her surrogate family suffocated her with home cooked meals, conversation, spontaneous visits, and physical contact. Her friends at the lab were more accommodating in their distance. The press unofficially declared Alex and Jeremiah no longer newsworthy, a decision that may or may not have been a result of a rather compelling cease and desist letter for harassment. Alura might have approached Alex with too many hugs but she did serve in other ways.

No tears, however, fell in the presence of others. Only when her bedroom door was shut and Jeremiah had long gone to sleep did grief overcome her. She still slept in the bed they shared for three years, pawing at the vacant pillow, and praying for the impossible. Everything from the décor to the clothes hanging opposite Alex’s side of the closet stayed the same. Nothing was removed just like nothing was added. The bedroom served as her limbo, the only place she could be honest with herself and not have to adopt a mask.

It became a little easier every day. Assuming responsibility over her own research gave her purpose. The needs of a four-year-old boy kept her attention polished. Unfortunately, no amount of distraction could keep the ghosts at bay.

For as much as the loss pained Alex, the effects were just as hard on Jeremiah. As an adult, she had the ability not only to understand the politics behind Astra’s banishment but to cope with the emotional recoil. A child did not have the capacity to grasp complex cause and effect relationships including the conflict between traditional Kryptonians and a new push for social reform. His youth (and Alex’s enforced television restrictions) kept him from the outrage over his mixed blood.

Being a single mother brought new challenges. Alex tried her hardest to soothe his nightmares, but she was suffering as well. It was a lot of pressure to take care of them both. They were in the same boat of mourning, roughing the seas without Astra, her wit, her smiles, or her hugs. She wasn’t around, and if the Phantom Zone had her then she might never find her way back home.

The sound of footsteps tore Alex from her thoughts. Axel’s heavy strides echoed in the space of their new laboratory. At the moment, the place was relatively quiet though filled with a prevalent frosty light. Compared to their previous accommodations at the Institute, this lab shined like brand new.

Axel arrived at her workstation and drummed his fingers against the edge of the smooth black table in a jovial ba-dum-dum. “Hey, you have those samples for me?”

Alex looked around her table as if she had only arrived. Lately, her thoughts had a tendency to lock her in a specific time and place, making the return to the present a bit of a rattling experience. Shaking it off, she focused on work.
Her table spread out before her like a scientist’s dream buffet. The funds from their new benefactor allowed for larger stations and the capacity for sophisticated tech. Currently in her midst sat a blue glowing stasis beam and a multi-spectrum visor that could allow viewing through several layers of dermis. If the new tech hadn’t increased their work output, it certainly made Alex feel like a kid on Christmas morning.

When she spotted the samples in their holder, she grabbed them, being careful not to spill the contents despite their capped vessels. She handed them over with a tight smile.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks, Alex.”

She watched him walk back to his workstation with a conflicted heart. Though she appreciated what they were doing for her, sometimes she felt guilty for the walls built to keep them out. They didn’t seem to resent her for it. After all, she wasn’t the only one who lost Astra. They continued to invite her to lunch and after-work-socials even if her declining response was predictable as always. The job kept her moving and they hadn’t failed in treating her as one of the team.

Alex swept her gaze around the lab. The others had their noses to the grindstone. The samples she had given Axel were being fed into a machine while he sat typing notes into his computer. Lucya was coaching Irina on their new holographic software. They could not be sitting any closer to each other if they tried. Off in a quiet corner sat Lev. He was currently pioneering a noninvasive method of dissection and muttering under his breath as he went about splicing.

For as noticeable as Astra’s absence felt in the lab, they wouldn’t have persevered were it not for their new boss. Before leaving, Astra handed over leadership to her friend and second-in-command, Soren. He was well suited to the task, having already carried out some of the managerial duties Astra preferred to skip. Their trials had run smoothly and results were looking good.

So far, news of Astra’s banishment hadn’t affected Project Valor in a negative way. If anything, the media coverage cast their project in a good light. Several private foundations had expressed their interest in backing them. Any one of those deals would have resulted in an even more spacious laboratory, higher security, and money for additional staff. The thought of working independently from the Science Council was tempting. The project already had funding from two separate foundations and all they needed to work completely out from under the government’s thumb was one more endowment. Soren had been hedging around for the past few weeks, unsure about cutting ties to the Institute. The decision would test his leadership; he only wanted the best for his friends and co-workers and if that meant leaving familiar territory then he would have to get used to the idea.

The team, though, hadn’t asked for such a boon. If they had a choice, they would trade in all the good publicity in the world just to have their old boss back. Astra had a way of pushing people beyond their own expectations. Every one of them had been changed by the project, so they owed a great deal to her.

Alex’s communication device suddenly vibrated in her pocket. She shifted her weight to reach in and withdraw it. The caller ID hovering in three-dimensional space above the screen caused her to frown. Alex decided that she didn’t want to answer it in the middle of the lab, so she took it out into the hallway.

Outside, silence prevailed in the hall. Alex checked both ways and, once assured that she was out of earshot, she thumbed the device on. Instantly, the face of her caller appeared like a hovering apparition.
“Hey, Alura.”

“Alexandra.” The name came like a relieved sigh from Alura. “I apologize for contacting you during lab hours, but this cannot wait. Are you able to leave early? I need to see you.”

“Yeah, it’s no problem. Can I ask why?”

“It is best if you come directly. I would rather not discuss it over the channel.”

Something about Alura’s voice disturbed Alex. They had known each other for over three years and she liked to think of Alura as a sister. There had always been a warm honesty to their relationship. Which was why the hollowness in Alura’s words put Alex ill at ease.

Alex followed Alura’s glance over her shoulder. Nothing and no one greeted them but an empty, lit corridor.

Unsure why Alura was so concerned about privacy, Alex tilted her head and asked, “Is everything alright at the office? At home? You look a little pale.”

Alura’s urgency transformed her expression to pleading. “Yes, I’m fine. Is Misha at Oda’s?”

“He’s with her till I finish up here. Alura, are you sure everything’s okay?”

“I promise to explain when you arrive.”

The transmission ended before Alex could get another word in. She gave the device a quizzical look before pocketing it. Whatever Alura had to discuss, it better be good. If Alex had to miss an entire afternoon of lab work, she would have one hell of a weekend of catching up to do.

* * *

On any normal day Alex would have been greeted by Kara’s enthusiastic hug. Alura always offered refreshments during Zor’s incessant questions regarding Alex’s pet research project. Once the pleasantries were finished, they would gather in the living room to unwind and chat casually about their weekend plans. Kara would have Jeremiah in her lap as he played with her long golden hair. Alura and Zor would sit close together, he with his hand on her back and she leaning warmly into him. Alex would smile on the outside and feel crushed by what she was missing.

Whenever she visited, it was always like heading into a very cordial war zone. She had to be on her game otherwise her grief would manifest in a deplorable fashion. Alura typically drove the conversation to good-humored subjects and Alex simply went along with her lead. It was always nice to see them, even if they reminded her of Astra. Stopping buy for lunch, dinner, or simple conversation served to benefit her son more than anything. Jeremiah loved visiting Kara about as much as he loved playing in her paint kit.

Unfortunately, it was a school day and a work day, so Alex could not look forward to the usual reception. When she arrived, the door tone wasn’t even necessary. Alura released the door hatch before Alex could raise a finger.

Alex passed over the threshold with a skin crawling feeling. Something about Alura… and the apartment… didn’t feel right. It sounded quiet. Too quiet, and Alex couldn’t put her finger on why.

“Alura…?”

The deep blue robes clinging to Alura’s figure fluttered to her haste. She led Alex down the
corridor and down the steps into the living room. A beautiful cityscape greeted them beyond the window. The divans and table furniture hadn’t been rearranged. Everything about the living room looked the same, which didn’t exactly explain the ominous sensation continuing to bother Alex.

Alura turned to face Alex. She stood silent and wringing her hands.

“Allura, what’s going on? You sounded spooked over the channel.”

A mixture of tension and impatience contorted Alura’s expression. Hesitating, she wet her lips before speaking, “It is difficult to explain.”

Alex’s spine tingled and she reacted on impulse. “Is it Kara? Did something happen? Oh my god, did she get in an accident?”

“Allura, no.”

Alura assured her with a brush of hands down her arms. The gesture soothed Alex somewhat and didn’t fail to inspire a sense of pride.

When they first met, Alura shied from physical contact. Like her people, she had not seen a point to affection with people who were not her child. Generations of Kryptonians were ingrained with isolated tendencies that counteracted the need for physical or emotional comfort. Even for Alex, the sterile behavior of Krypton was unsettling. Her time spent on the planet had been as supremely educational for her as it was for Alura and her family. They were all evolving in new, surprising ways and Alex could only hope they perceived these changes as beneficial. Judging by the reflexive gesture from Alura, her hopes were being fulfilled.

Alex fought the urge to stomp her foot. “Then what is it?”

“How are you?” Alura’s eyes darted furtively to the corridor and back. “Are you well? And Misha?”

The grip on her arms tightened. Alex cast a glance at the fingers that did not so much hurt as they did beg for explanation. Alura was acting strange and it was starting to worry Alex. Of all the people she expected to suffer from a mid-life crisis, Alura came dead last on that list. Did Kryptonians even have mid-life crises?

Alex tried her best not to fidget, but this mirage wasn’t returning to its former grace. She shuffled forward, ducking her head down to catch the ghost in Alura’s eyes. “Jeremiah and I are fine.” She peered closely, ignoring the catch in her breath at how those gray eyes provoked memory. The tension in Alura’s fingers, voice, face, and posture all needed reassurance. “Really, we’re managing alright. Now talk to me,” she said gently. “What is going on?”

Alura began to reply but something drew her eye. Footsteps scratched the silica stairway. It couldn’t have been Zor or Kara. Unless Alura called them home?

Thinking nothing amiss, Alex turned around and came face to face with a sight that made her vision distort. A large, pulsing knob akin to a heart leapt up into her throat and choked her response. She now knew that this was the real mirage. This was her brain playing tricks on her. This was Alex’s mid-life crisis and she hadn’t yet reached 33.

A comforting heat closed in behind her. “I thought I said –“

“You took too long.”
The curt tone was unmistakable. So too were the frown lines around her mouth and the warmer skin tone from a main sequence yellow star. But the eyes… they defined her without any help from the rest of her stunning features. Alex stared into the eyes that had seen atrocities and miracles alike and covered her gasp.

The smile surfaced hesitantly across Astra’s mouth. She walked slow and deliberate as she seemed to calculate every change in the air around her. Long, wavy brown hair curled away from her cheeks as if she had been standing on one of Argo City’s windy platforms, enraptured by the landscape and all the bountiful purity it had to offer.

Astra’s eyes implored like round pools of ocean water churning in a tempest. “Alex.”

The single utterance struck Alex with enough force to uproot her heels from the carpet. Her lungs didn’t process air until she stood buried in Astra’s embrace, and when they expanded to nourishment it tasted like her first breath since that day in the DEO hanger bay.

Alex didn’t care that the arms were a hairsbreadth from crushing her body. She gasped into the shoulder, hungry for more of that sweet, buoyant air and digging her nails into the strong back for a truer grip. The brand new polyester clung differently on this body. It reminded her of rifle kickback and scraped knees. It unsettled her stomach and stroked her cheek in bewilderment.

It still didn’t keep Alex from taking Astra’s face in her hands. Her thumbs swept under eyes too stoic to shed their contents. The skin was warm, wholesome, and unblemished by destruction. The grip on her hips flexed between mindfulness and desperation spurned by interminable cold hours spent alone in a space craft.

Alex was caught between bewilderment and elation. Something still niggled at the back of her mind but she loathed to jump to conclusions. She wanted to secure every ounce of joy before another calamity tore Astra from her.

But the years were weighing upon her in heavy reminder. So much time had gone by without them seeing each other, speaking, breathing on the same planet. Now there she stood as beautiful as the day their son lay flushed and whimpering in her arms. Just the sight of her rendered Alex tongue-tied and incompetent. It was almost as if she had forgotten how to touch her.

Her fingers fluttered until they had a cheek cradled in her clammy palm. Her eyes crowded with tears and she smiled. "I know you."

With hands gently squeezing Alex’s hips, Astra smiled back. "We've met before."

Disbelief made Alex’s tongue leaden. “H-hold on.”

She withdrew like she had been burned. It may not be a figment of her imagination but whoever this person was it couldn’t be Astra. Crinkling her brow, she looked over the imposter for any discernable clues, which incidentally included weaponry. She examined until her eyes went cross-eyed despite knowing in her gut that this was Astra.

“How are you here?” she asked. “Earth was destroyed. No one could have survived – not even a Kryptonian.”

Something changed in the air. Astra lowered her gaze to her shifting feet. She was tentative, cautious, almost uncomfortable being there. She bit her bottom lip, staring at the hands she longed to take, ashamed to even lay eyes on her.

“Astra has come from your Earth.”
Alex, nearly forgetting that Alura was still in their midst, turned and fixed her with a helpless look. “I don’t understand.”

“Her transport tripped our orbital detectors. As I seem to be the first call regarding unidentified flying space pods, I was requested to the scene. She only just arrived today.”

“But from Earth? Even if… the wormhole…” She grasped her shaking head for answers. “This isn’t possible.”

“I had help.”

The meager voice spurred Alex to turn. “You had help.”

“From Kal-El. And an undisclosed contractor from Bruce Wayne’s enterprise. Also…” Astra’s head rose but her eyes didn’t meet Alex. They landed on Alura. “… Her sister.”

Before Alex could commit a response, movement came out of the corner of her eye. It was Alura, and haste propelled her feet towards the corridor.

“If neither of you mind,” Alura said, head bowed, “I think I will retire to my home office. Word will eventually spread of Astra’s return and I need to draft an appeal for her amnesty.”

Alex gazed after Alura’s retreating form. The pain-laced goodbye stayed with her, imprisoning her voice. All she could do was pin Astra down with stubborn, questioning silence.

“I owe you an explanation.” Astra finally had the temerity to look at the person she was addressing. Something was definitely off about her and it couldn’t be blamed on jet lag. Her hands hung loosely at her sides, shoulders slumped, and a furrow developed between her eyebrows. She couldn’t look any less like a general or any more distraught by her own chilly feet. “You must be wondering why I am here and she is not.”

Alex couldn’t respond if she tried. Her throat felt as dry as the brittle, sunbaked surface of Shade Canyon. The will to say anything was as lost to her as the woman she devoted three loving years to.

When Astra told her everything – the other Astra’s intercept with Earth, her meeting Alex in 2013, the memory wipe – it sent Alex reeling. She backpedaled into the furniture, blindly reaching out to steady herself before plopping down on the divan back. She cupped her face with both hands, trying to wrap her head around all the pieces falling into place.

“She was there,” Alex whispered. Her vision blurred and the floor swam like running paint. Even as she closed her eyes the memories came flooding back, memories she had attributed to vivid dreams. Each one displayed from the back of her lids like a documentary of someone’s life. But this wasn’t someone else’s life. This was Alex’s: Game of Thrones marathon on a cheap sofa… whiskey bottles whose shards might have been imbedded in her skull were it not for quick reflexes… books and books… climbing rocks… falling…

“It was true. Oh, god…”

“Kal-El’s abilities were well-developed. They were meant to block the most ardent of memories. You couldn’t have known.”

Alex clutched her chest, unable to forgive herself for such an oversight. “I should have. I may not have been a trained agent, but I should have realized. She was…” Oh, god. She loved Astra. She had loved her even then.
Opening her eyes, Alex searched frantically for someplace to focus. Anywhere but that dark figure with the single white strand. Anywhere but there.

In desperation, Alex settled on the giant sea conch standing on display. Its golden spiral shape reminded her of family vacations to Naples Pier, shell collecting along pristine white beaches, Kara splashing in turquois waters, and (oddly enough) cinnamon rolls. Christ, did she miss cinnamon rolls.

Distraction settled on Alex like a warm blanket. The deep breathes calmed her racing heart and brought clarity back to her mind. She told herself she’d get through this. She had been through worse. The number of casualties taken greatly exceeded unbelievable revelations. Just stay focused on the cinnamon roll.

Despite the illuminating report, none of it explained Astra’s survival. “So you met her on my rooftop the day I left,” Alex said, her voice sounding like something from another room. “Why that date? Did her navigation system get damaged? Was she stuck there?”

“She came to me,” Astra said. “Her initial objective was to assure me of your survival and Jeremiah’s good health. She wanted me to know that you were both safe and that you had friends here – a life. Once the details were delivered, I asked for her promise. I needed to be convinced of her intentions. Then, she must have changed her plans.”

“Changed her plans? What do you mean she just changed her plans? She was supposed to drive the pod back home. What could have possibly kept her from her family?”

The responding blinks stopped Alex short. This was why she had to be in the right mindset to visit friends and family. The grief took hold with a vice grip and overwhelmed her better judgment. She could be so moody and negligent of others’ feelings, sometimes in the presence of her own son.

Alex rubbed her forehead. Guilt twisted her insides, inciting her to speak. “I didn’t mean for it to come out like that. I’m sorry for snapping.”

Astra pulled her hands behind her back to conceal their fidgeting. She rarely exhibited anxiety in bodily form and it dawned on her paling face. “The craft was built to occupy one passenger. Someone had to go. She felt it necessary that I be that person despite my fervent disagreement.”

“That’s it? She just gave up her seat without a fight?”

“You were the one meant to take care of our family. She seemed to think you were not happy, not entirely whole.” Astra’s hands unclasped from behind her and flexed between fists and open palms, grasping for the strength to justify the unjustifiable. “I did not want it to be true. After what I caused on Earth, it didn’t seem fair to burden another world with my existence. And I couldn’t put you through any more pain. You have forgiven me for so much already.” She tilted her head, swallowing with difficulty. “It is not that I don’t wish to be here. There is so much…”

The crystal clear response forced Astra gaze down where she searched the floor in a frantic daze. “I am afraid of disappointing everyone I love. Again. Understand that this is not self-pity. I am being rational. She may have given her life to offer me a second chance, but in all my years I have never felt so unqualified. This Alura is so… obliging and yet at times she looks as fragile as I feel. I do not know how to act around her. I do not know what to tell Kara when she asks me where her real aunt is. And the thought of seeing Jeremiah again…” Astra shuddered around the sigh as tears
spilled over. “I am not the mother he knows. What if he doesn’t recognize me? What if…”

Alex couldn’t hear any more. She physically couldn’t take it. Wordlessly, she caught the hands in midair and reduced their trembling with a squeeze. “Astra, stop.” She went to press some sense into the shoulders while Astra gasped for air. “It’s okay. I’m not… mad at you.” Was she? Alex shook her head. “I don’t blame you.” Did she? Her hands squeezed harder to convince them both. “Just breathe. It’s going to be fine.”

The struggle to ground oneself on a new world took more than hushed promises and arm rubs. Adapting to Krypton would not be an overnight endeavor. Alex sympathized with Astra’s vertigo. She remembered her mind’s rejection of the nightmare like it was yesterday. She remembered the way her throat burned to the retching that first morning she woke to a ruddy sun and flying cars outside her window.

It hadn’t occurred to her how much more difficult this would be for Astra. Krypton had been her home for nearly two hundred years. She witnessed the environment’s decline and saw as negligence snowballed into egotism. It took a breach of sacred law to prove her loyalty to science, home, and her niece’s future children, and for that she was banished. Astra suffered greater consequences due to her people’s ignorance because were it not for their blind ambition she would not have resorted to such extremes. For however many ghosts occupying Alex’s dreams, Astra had a planet full of them.

The air went in and out of Astra like one of Jeremiah’s wheezing hover locomotives. She grasped Alex’s elbows and pleaded in wide eyes and a distraught voice. “She loved you very much. She wanted the best for you even if I argued against her. I am so sorry. Please forgive me.”

“Astra, you need to sit down. Come on. Over here.”

When she had Astra on the sofa, Alex went to the beverage cart and prepared a glass of water. She needed to keep busy otherwise the implications of Astra’s news would sink in. The glass carafe felt cool under her grip. She set it back down on the tray and peeled her hand off the handle.

Astra took the glass and drank half of it. She used the sleeve of her borrowed shirt to dry her upper lip, ignoring the beads accumulating at her temples and on the back of her neck. With a rattling sigh, she fell into her hand and closed her eyes.

After a few minutes of concentrated breathing, Astra’s shoulders slowed.

“Feel better?” Alex asked.

It took a moment before Astra responded. Her fingers combed once through her hair, disregarding the snarls to maintain the smallest semblance of sanity. She had her bottom lip between her teeth as she nodded. When her eyes finally met Alex, they were the dimmest thing in the sun splashed living room. “As redundant as it sounds, I am truly sorry. She told me that you lived together. Three years is a lifetime compared to fourteen months fighting over nursery gifts and trying to forgive past transgressions. I am glad she was here for you and Jeremiah. There was no other person better suited to the task.”

“She was your parallel, Astra, so I hardly think there’s much of a difference.” A sudden wave of guilt came over Alex and she diverted her eyes to her lap. “It’s not like I forgot about you. I would never have moved on if it weren’t for the similarities between the both of you. She cared so much for Jeremiah, and when she smiled at him I couldn’t not see you.”

“But there are divergences between universes,” Astra pointed out. The words hung thick enough to
taste the sour reality in the air. “This Krypton is unlike my home world just as its Astra possessed a
different history, strings of behavior, hopes, fears, and dreams than mine.”

Alex knew Astra was fishing for agreement but she couldn’t will her head to nod. The prickling
worry that she experienced when arriving returned in full force. It slithered up her spine and coiled
round her throat, constricting the promises she wanted to give. Astra was looking so defeated and
lost like driftwood after a storm. All Alex wanted to do was give her relief from the tidal forces that
kept them apart for so long. But her body wouldn’t respond and her mind still crowded with
memories of another woman.

“I’m trying to take all of this in stride,” Alex said. Her hands circled and gestured and wrung like
unbridled extensions of herself. “I thought you were dead. I thought she was never going to come
back. Now you’re here and she’s… gone… and I honestly don’t know what to feel.”

“I don’t expect you to forget all that you shared together. I don’t want you to.”

“Then let’s just…” Alex grasped for the nearest half-baked idea and didn’t look back. “Let’s just
put this on hold.”

Astra’s gaze fell to the hand gesturing between them. It was a crude gesture, one that belittled
everything they had achieved and fought through. It stung Alex even as her idiotic hand kept it up
and she wondered if Astra felt it too. If Alex had met her lover’s new partner and discovered how
prosperous their life had been, she might not feel much of anything for a while.

“We’ve been through hell lately and you’re on Krypton. This is going to take some getting used to.
The less pressure the better, right?”

Save for the crinkled brow, Astra seemed to concede to the proposal. “That sounds fair.” She
articulated the words as if it was her first time speaking English.

The sting of reducing their past to “this” didn’t quite reach the aching regret sweeping through
Alex. She didn’t mean to shut Astra down, especially when she bridged the universal divide for
her. Astra could have died in the attempt, yet she willingly risked her life to come back to her
family. She came looking for acceptance and a fresh start. And what did Alex do? She snubbed her
in the face.

Alex couldn’t find the words to explain herself. Astra’s unflinching gaze held her like she expected
the contract to include one hopeful clause for their future.

But false hope couldn’t solve whatever this problem was. Alex hadn’t a clue as to what she wanted
and making a split-second decision wouldn’t benefit either of them. Alex rolled her shoulder,
mentally brushing off the icky feeling. It wasn’t like she was saying no. She just needed time.
Right? How else could she respond? Welcome Astra with open arms and act as if she only left
Earth yesterday? Alex was three years older, wiser, and far removed from the hot headed, trigger
happy DEO agent Astra knew on Earth. Hell, the body underneath her clothes looked different. As
a scientist, she spent more time sitting at her workstation than sparing with aliens and beating her
person best at push ups. Although, Jeremiah certainly gave her a workout chasing after his naked
fanny as he screamed, “No pajamas weekend!” loud enough to wake the neighbors. He said he
loved her but one day he would be her undoing.

Alex raised her wrist to check the time. She didn’t realize how long they had been talking. Or not
talking. “I have to go pick Jeremiah up soon.”

The mention of him made Astra go stiff. Her eyes shifted from the watch face to Alex. “Oh, I see.”
“I’ll drop you off at home before getting him. He’ll need to be prepared. It hasn’t been easy for him. He was very close with her.”

Instead of hanging her head in despair, she held fast to Alex’s gaze and accepted the small gift with gratitude. “I understand.”

Astra sounded secure in her words, giving Alex the assurance she needed to go through with the rest. “You should know something before seeing him.”

The worst possible thought a mother could conceive spurred Astra’s fingers to uncurl. Her expression unraveled from composure to one of terror. “What is it? Is he ill?”

“Not in the traditional sense.” Alex subsequently winced at the wording. She steeled her courage and came out with it. “Jeremiah seems to have a problem controlling his Kryptonian abilities. It’s not as you would think though. This is Krypton and although the gravity here is slightly different from that of your home planet, it shouldn’t affect the abilities of its inhabitants. I mean, you feel fine, right?”

“Yes, I am fine. Now what is wrong with Jeremiah?”

“Well, he’s only half-Kryptonian. His nervous system can’t seem to reconcile both human and Kryptonian genetics. One minute he can lift the end table and the next he can’t make it budge. I have several broken chairs and had to replace his game tablet twice. I’m hoping he’ll learn to control it as time goes on, but that’s not the only issue.”

Astra’s frown grew deeper by the second. “What is?”

“His hearing.” A burden the size of Texas dropped on top of Alex, pushing the sigh out of her in a gust. She rubbed the knot forming at the center of her forehead and continued. “He’s been suffering from what we humans call tinnitus. It’s a ringing in the ears and it has no external source. The phantom noise comes and goes. In his case, though, it’s a bit more severe. He’ll get it twice a week if he’s lucky but the second it crops up he’s incapacitated. He says it’s not painful but the look on his face…”

Her fingers traveled to the pulsing nerves at her temples, massaging them to distraction. She closed her eyes and put herself in the DEO debrief room. She could smell the acrid coffee coming from the corner coffee pot. J’onn’s voice, smooth as her father’s vermouth, told her to take it slow. The walls were stone gray and the darkened two-way mirror reflected the cool brow of Agent Danvers.

After taking a steadying breath, she went on. “He’s in a lot of discomfort and he can barely concentrate on voices. It lasts for minutes, but it feels like hours. Once it passes, he goes down for a nap because it takes so much out of him. I’ve taken him to specialists – the ones who can bear to look at him – and they can’t arrive at a diagnosis. And no diagnosis means no treatment.”

Alex dropped her hands and looked for solace in a familiar place. Astra’s eyes were just as grounding as they had been on Earth. She remembered their staying power when they went toe-to-toe over who would save Kara from the Black Mercy. Astra had such a convincing influence and she didn’t have to lift a finger. It was what made her such a successful leader and general. Sometimes Alex wondered how different things would have been if Astra had used that power through more diplomatic means.

“I know drudging up the past doesn’t really suit you,” Alex said, ”but I have to ask. Did you ever have these symptoms back on Earth?”
Disappointed, Astra admitted, “When I first arrived on Earth with the other Fort Rozz prisoners we did not have auditory complications. Not as you describe.”

“Neither did Kara. I’ve tried a few tactics my dad taught her but nothing helps Jeremiah long-term.”

Astra rose from the couch and walked to the window. She pulled her hands to her hips, remaining silent and watchful over the view of Argo City.

Standing, Alex cringed inwardly. “You’re not going to freak out in front of him, are you? Because I try to keep from losing it until I’m shut up in my bedroom and he’s sound asleep.”

That caused Astra to turn. She furrowed her brow. “Why would his sleep schedule matter? I thought you said his powers were unpredictable.”

“Would you risk his super hearing kicking in during a sob fest?”

Astra’s face crumbled. “Alex—“

“His symptoms started after she left.” Alex combated the sympathy with a folding of her arms. “I think its stress induced.”

“That seems likely.”

Alex nodded. Her hands fidgeted over whether or not the discussion had come to a close. Deep down she knew they weren’t done by a long shot. It took more than whatever just occurred to heal from a near four year absence. Alex still felt so shaken up that she figured by the time she left Alura’s this whole meeting would escape her memory. They did seem to be on the same page about Jeremiah and that was Alex’s number one priority.

“Are you ready to see him?” she asked. “Or is today too soon?”

“It cannot come soon enough.”

Astra strode past her without another word. The silence settled in the stretching distance and for a fleeting second Alex felt her slipping away again. Astra sped off like she was about to see her estranged son for the first time in years. The reality of it felt as real as the cold seeping into Alex’s bones and the haste clapping the staircase. Of course, Astra had little time for pleasantries. Alex had been the one to set the tone after all.

She shook off the unnerving chill and stuck to the plan. No pressure. They’re on hold like a cable TV customer waiting for customer service. She cringed. Or something like that.

* * *

Five Months Ago…

Alura didn’t think anything amiss until Alex stopped returning her calls. Of the two of them, she never expected Alex to break last.

In the weeks since Astra’s departure, Alura had struggled to get out of bed every morning. She hated going to work amongst people who were responsible for banishing her sister. The only reason why she still kept it up was for posterity’s sake. Someone had to watch the councilmembers and what plots they had up their sleeves. If something were to occur that would bring ruin or glory to Krypton, one would hear whispers of it in the halls of Council of Law and Behavior.
When she finally managed to scrounge the motivation to leave the house, Alura did her fair share of dodging. She could take the stares from co-workers, but the comments behind her back? Though Alura did not enter the justice system to make friends, it stung to hear the most abhorrent criticisms from people whom she had attended dinner parties with and collaborated with on cases.

It took every ounce of modesty to keep from poking the eyes out of those naysayers. Frankly, her reputation was fair game but Astra’s? Her sister deserved better than the fate dealt to her. Sacrifice should not be rewarded with condemnation.

While Alura struggled, Alex carried herself rather admirably in the weeks since Astra’s exile. Her routine never waivered, which could only help the smallest victim, her little boy. She kept busy at the lab furthering Project Valor’s success and making a name for herself within the scientific community. According to Jeremiah, Alex spent her weekends in her private lab at home. Though she always had her nose down a scope, she spared a few hours a day with her son, bestowing treats or new toys. Such rich intel was granted to Alura over a bribe of cookies and blue milk. She wondered how Alex set aside time to sleep amid all that lab work and playing with Jeremiah.

It proved worrisome. The mannerly behavior would lead anyone to believe she was not taking the situation well. Even for Kryptonians it was socially acceptable to show emotion when a companion passed (though their reaction usually came in the form of reflection). But Alex had yet to show any trace of grief. Of course, she had lost loved ones in the past. If anyone knew the signs it was Alex.

Alura trusted her to take heed when the heavy hand of mourning knocked at her door. She forced herself to be supportive of the emotionally complacent attitude. She reminded herself that Alex was human and that their species mourned on their own schedule.

Then, without warning, she stopped receiving messages. Alex didn’t come visit her for lunch anymore. Despite Alex’s strength, Alura knew she would crack eventually. She did not think, however, that it would come in the form of isolation.

The apartment door in front of Alura appeared as nondescript as the last time she stopped by. Previously, she arrived with baked goods for Jeremiah and nothing but a smile for Alex. From experience, she learned that a roll of the eyes meant not to come bearing an arm-full of casseroles when a significant other passed; she sometimes forgot there was only one Kryptonian living there. Last time, Alex had answered after one ring of the doorbell. She welcomed Alura in with a sedate smile and hosted lunch with the precision of an android. That was two weeks ago. Alura had given Alex two weeks and now it was time to push. And she came with backup.

“Maybe you should ring again.”

Alura glanced at the girl beside her. Kara seemed to have grown without her knowing because she was nearly as tall as her and already touring guild universities. Her sixteen-year-old daughter would have to stop getting older or they would have words.

Kara’s suggestion brought Alura’s mouth to twist in uncertainty. She reached out and pressed the button once again. Not a minute later, the locks clicked and the door slid open. Alura’s eyes dropped to the silk curls and the near identical eyes of her twin sister.

“Misha.” Alura’s greeting fell flat in light of the empty foyer behind him. No boy of his age should be answering the door alone, especially a boy of his notoriety. “Where is your mother?”

Jeremiah turned on his heel and scurried away. A meager noise akin to a whimper echoed from the living room.
She and Kara exchanged a look. Whatever occurred since last speaking to Alex clearly upset the boy. He was fine last time they saw him. If he refused to answer a simple question, Alura couldn’t image how Alex’s behavior would present.

“Mom,” Kara’s warming voice carried a trace of caution, “are you sure this is wise?”

“I made a promise to Astra. I intend on keeping it.”

Without another word, Alura entered the apartment. Everything looked as it should until she arrived in the kitchen. The floor and counter were stacked with storage containers. The back of her neck prickled. Something wasn’t right. The cabinets and drawers were closed but Alura had the feeling that if she were to open them, they would only reveal their empty contents.

“Mom…”

Alura’s eyes lingered on the boxes a moment longer before tearing away. She found Kara standing in the living room.

“Did she say anything to you?” Kara asked. Her eyes jumped from one container to the next, eyes growing rounder in worry as it dawned on her. “Why wouldn’t she tell us?”

Alura forced herself not to count the boxes. Jeremiah sat on the sofa, legs curled under him, and glowering from over his stuffed bear. The subject of such surly focus sat perched on the coffee table and came with the handwritten description of ‘breakables.’ He kept up the glare as if he was waiting for them to ask.

Alura sat down beside him. “Misha?”

He squeezed his bear tighter to disguise his anxiety. Since Astra left, he refused to be coddled. He even squirmed away from his cousin who took it with a drop of her shoulders. It couldn’t have been healthy for a boy of his age. Then again, Alura didn’t know how he reacted to Alex’s consolation when it was just the two of them. If he opened up to someone, it had to be his own mother.

“Is your mother in her room?” she asked.

Chin dimpling against a whimper, he nodded.

“What’s happened, Misha?”

His breath hitched. “I don’t wanna go! I don’t!”

“Alright, alright.” If she couldn’t rub his back or squeeze his foot as she had when he was a baby toddling on her couch, she could soothe with her voice. “I’m going to talk to your mother. Kara will stay and play a game with you. How does that sound?”

He paused a moment before lifting his head. Alura released a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding. The last thing she wanted was for Jeremiah to fear her resemblance. He certainly knew the difference, but even adults allowed grief to twist their sense of reality.

His small pink lips, though pinned shut, spread in a meager sign of acceptance.

Offering a grin in return, Alura stood and nodded to Kara. Her daughter, duty bound before ever stepping out of the house that morning, took up beside Misha. As Alura made her way towards the hallway to living quarters, she heard a box being slid out of sight. The trills and bells of a hologame
rang out over Kara’s voice and a giggle from Jeremiah.

A bit of tension left the muscles in Alura’s shoulders. Assured that her nephew would be occupied, she headed for the bedroom at the end of the corridor. When she arrived, the door was open. Her heart thudded in her chest. She hoped to Rao this wasn’t as it looked and Alex was simply doing a bit of whole-house organizing.

Snagging her bottom lip between her teeth, she struck her knuckles on the doorframe and entered. The light coming in from the panoramic window shed a kind afternoon glow. For a weekend, the bedroom appeared overly lived-in. She would have expected Alex and Jeremiah to take advantage of the spectacular weather outdoors. Instead, she saw Alex hovering over her bed.

“Sorry I didn’t answer the door,” Alex said. She sounded occupied and undeterred. “I’m kind of busy, as you can see.”

Alura’s breath left her in a thin wisp. She blinked at the luggage and shook her head. “You’re leaving?”

Alex glanced over her shoulder. “Don’t look at me like that.” She snagged a pair of sweatpants from the bed, folded them twice, and placed it inside the suitcase. The methodical movements didn’t seem to trouble Alex like it did Alura. “I’m not mental. I’m doing this for his benefit.”

Alura couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Had Alex not seen the state of her son? “Misha wants to stay,” she said. “This is his home.”

“He’s four. One minute he wants juice and the next he wants milk. He doesn’t know what he wants or what’s best for him. This is the right decision for everyone.” She stopped packing to focus on the veracity of her next statement. “It’s the only way.”

She had a white-knuckled grip on the edges of the suitcase and it only grew wilder. The material crinkled, taking the brunt of her thoughts be they encouraged by anger, sorrow, or self-pity. Alura hadn’t a clue what Alex was feeling at that moment and it frightened her, not only for Jeremiah’s sake but for Alex’s. How many times had she promised Astra that she would take care? In their two hundred years as sisters, amid dozens of misunderstandings and of heartfelt words left unsaid, only one promise counted. Only one made up for a lifetime of frailty, of inability to step up and become the eldest sister.

A tremble swept from the clutches up through the arms and the shoulders where Alex struggled to keep her head. What cost would Alura pay if she failed? She didn’t care as much about herself as how the consequences would affect the others. If she gave it half a thought, it would have occurred to her how that selflessness resembled the principles of a superlative girl from a distant universe.

Alura did not entertain such a thought. She was no Supergirl. And she was not that little girl who let her sister take the fall for her own misdeeds. Times changed and so did people’s tolerance for truth. Her choices were no more perfect than her mettle.

Alura’s hands came to clasp before her, her own knuckles alike to those taxing over a suitcase. She opened her mouth but nothing came out.

“We can start somewhere new.” A gruff voice accompanied Alex’s handling of the zipper as it made a ripping sound along the teeth. “Somewhere nice. It’s my decision and everyone is just going to have to go along with it.”

Alura dropped her hands and sighed carelessly. “You are only thinking of yourself, Alexandra. I
am no fool. Do me the courtesy of looking at me when you speak falsehoods.”

Alex shoved her suitcase down to the bed and whirled around. “I can’t stay here anymore! I’m dying in this place!” Her face cast a glow from the indecision warring beneath. A flood of grief welled in her eyes. She breathed fire and water. “It’s too much. I can’t be where… she’s everywhere.”

She covered her face and bowed her head. Nothing appealed to her view, not the photographs remaining on the bookshelf nor the smiling gray eyes within their frames.

Alura struggled to retain a sense of pride. Someone had to. Her posture ached to sag and fall into a bed and never leave. But someone had to be brave. Alura couldn’t let weakness overcome when Alex was breaking before her eyes.

Alura was unable to sympathize with Alex’s level of loss. Astra was her sister, not her companion. Though she wouldn’t admit it, Astra’s devotion to Alex came with a sting not easily assuaged. Alura already knew from experience that Astra was a very committed woman and to be in her heart was a very special place to be. Alura remembered how safe she felt when they were children. They used to protect each other against any foe be they giggling pranksters, bullies, or a stewing parent. Alex was very lucky to have been on the receiving end of Astra’s love. Alura realized a little bit each day how much she took her sister for granted.

Without overthinking it, Alura strode forward. “Come,” she said, drawing a hand down Alex’s arm. “Sit down.”

They sat side by side on the bed, shoulders brushing. Alex sighed at the contact. It only occurred to Alura in that moment how long it had been since Alex allowed herself to relax and take comfort. Like Jeremiah, she refused hugs. It was a stark difference from the force of change that swept into Alura’s life and showed her the meaning of affection. This reticent version of Alex was hard to accept, especially for Kara who had received those hugs and forehead kisses as often as a war-kite flaps its wings.

“It hasn’t been easy without her,” said Alex. She swallowed with care. She kept her gaze low and concentrated on things that did not smile and remind her of long nights spent in a cabin by a mountain. “I didn’t realize how she made life so bearable. Astra built a wall around us to keep conflict out. She’s gone now and I’m here on this strange planet amongst people who distrust me.”

Alex bit her bottom lip hard enough to leave an indentation. “The Kryptonians will never accept Jeremiah. Now that word has spread of Astra’s crime – a crime she didn’t commit – everyone will remember him as the son of a traitor, an adulteress who conceived an abomination.”

Alex turned to meet Alura with a hearty glare. “She sacrificed herself for nothing. We’re not any safer than before she left.”

“That’s not true.” Alura emphasized it with a gravity that pressed on her chest. “Legally speaking, you and Jeremiah are at no risk. As far as public opinion… not even a blessing from Rao could persuade some minds. Time is our ally. I already sense the winds of change. Every day more people are supporting the reformists. Sooner or later they will overturn rule within the guilds and infuse new blood into the High Council.”

“At the end of the day, it’s all talk. The only thing that’s certain is my hand in Astra’s fate. I made a choice. I refused to be an outsider. None of this would ever have happened if I had just accepted dishonor.”

“But if you had, you would have given up legal claim on Misha. He would have been considered
illegitimate.” Alura shook her head in disbelief. Alex never stood a chance of coming out of that ultimatum unscathed. The High Council had trapped her and her family in an impossible situation. “You were thinking of his honor, not your own.”

“I’ve lost so much.” Alex sighed, trembling in dread. “I can’t lose him too.”

Alura bit her cheek until a bitter tang wet her tongue. “You have me and Zor. Kara loves you like a sister. I have never seen her take to anyone the way she does to you. You are not alone, Alexandra. We are your family and you will not lose us.”

“I know that and I’m very appreciative to you all. But you have to understand that sooner or later I have to act as head of my own family. Astra is depending on me to make decisions on her behalf, not yours or Kara’s or Zor’s. Jeremiah is my son. He’s my responsibility.”

Alura examined the certainty on display. It should have put her at ease, yet there still remained a trace of foolery in Alex’s words. “Where are you planning on moving to?”

“Irina offered her apartment. She’s been living with Lucya, so it’s relatively available.”

Alura searched her memory and subsequently scrunched her face. “Her place is a one bedroom.”

Alex threw up her hands. “Well, what other options do I have? There aren’t many people around here who will rent out their space to a human. A convicted felon, no less.”

“An acquitted human, and you should have no concerns about finding a new place to live. If you want to follow through on this, I will help secure a safe, equitable apartment. One that has more than a bedroom and half a bath.”

Alex sighed. “I’m not moving,” she said with a note of finality. Her eyes darted to the boxes overflowing with books and collectibles. She frowned so deeply her eyebrows clashed together. “How could I think this was the right thing to do? I’m supposed to be caring for my son and instead I thought ripping him from the only home he’s ever known was a healthy means of coping. I’m such an idiot.”

“We are allowed to make mistakes. Even when it comes to our children.”

“If you’re trying to cheer me up, you’re seriously failing. I don’t want to make any mistakes with Jeremiah. He’s too precious to me. I love him so much and just the thought of my actions hurting him makes me sick.”

“As long as you hold on to that love, I think you will do fine. Misha is just a boy. He doesn’t understand what his family is going through. More importantly, he doesn’t understand the trials you are putting yourself through to keep him safe.” Alura leaned back to take in the unwinding afternoon. A crimson-turmeric light bled from the horizon. “Kara and I have had our fair share of arguments. They do not forgive you overnight, but they cannot hold a grudge forever.” Alura smiled and nudged her shoulder into Alex as had become habit in their exchanges. “Not when we are the ones who put dinner on the table.”

Alex’s sulking demeanor didn’t take the bait. She shook her head in utter defeat. “Jeremiah hates me. Astra’s gone and I’m here, so who do you think he blames?”

“He doesn’t know where to direct his anger, so he’s taking it out on the one person he knows will take it. You can take it, Alexandra. For his sake and for Astra’s. Running is not an option. Of the disputes between you and your parents, how many created rifts?”
Alex raised a brow. “Quite a few, actually.”

Alura took it with a sardonic twist of her mouth. “I mean as a four-year-old child.”

“Fine. Not many. Hardly at all.”

“And how would you feel if you were forced to relocate in a time of great sorrow?”

The tender reminder had Alex worrying at the inside of her cheek. After a moment of quiet, self-castigation, she connected the dots with a drop of her shoulders. “It would make me very angry,” she said, eyelashes fluttering at the hands in her lap. “And sad.”

“You mother never took you girls from home.” Alura’s voice cascaded over Alex’s head, stirring the strands as they danced nimbly in the air. As Alex sank further into the past, Alura held watch as loyal and reassuring as a sister. “Did she ever remove his memories from the house?”

“No,” Alex mumbled. “No, she never did.”

“It couldn’t have been easy. Living in that house with him and having to remind yourself that he is gone.” Alura frowned at the words. She half turned, jaw stiff in dismay. “That was insensitive of me. Please –“

“It was hard but I got used to it.” Alex didn’t meet the apology in Alura’s eyes. She continued to wallow in the stream of consciousness pouring from her lips. “I soon realized it was better to keep his memories alive than put them all in a box. We had his things, his clothes and other possessions. I kept his tools, the ones he taught me to use on the truck. But there were no remains to bury. We had a grave made up, but it felt so pointless knowing he wasn’t there. I was fifteen. I never lost anyone. How does a fifteen-year-old learn how to cope? I tried to ignore him and it only drove me to…” Alex cleared the thick mucus of humiliation from her throat. She waggled her head in an odd shake. “… Just a bad place.”

“I’m sorry that I do not know what it is like to lose a parent. I wish I could offer more in the way of words.”

Alex’s stare never wavered from her hands. She was locked into the past with all its surety. All those years were laid out like a novel of lines written from her own experiences and with every page representing an event whether beloved or reviled. Living in the present meant facing the consequences of past actions and to concern oneself with the future. At the moment, Alex wanted nothing to do with the present.

“Jeremiah will be alright, Alexandra.”

Two round drops fell from Alex’s blinking eyes. She swallowed audibly and nodded to keep her faith alive. “I hope so.”
The Unnatural Order of Things

I knew that I couldn’t lie beside her, without wanting to touch her. I couldn’t have felt her breath upon my mouth, without wanting to kiss her. And I couldn’t have kissed her, without wanting to save her.

Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith*

Astra stood in the living room where Alex had left her twenty minutes ago. The apartment’s size rivaled that of their one bedroom apartment in National City. The curved, panoramic wall let in a plethora of natural sunlight. Though she restrained herself from snooping, she did note the décor on display and the random toy peeking out from under the sofa. It was larger, brighter, and had more charm than any of the military housing units Astra had inhabited.

While waiting for Alex to bring Jeremiah home, Astra paced the living room. She turned over recent events, trying to comprehend the disconnect. Had Alex felt it too? It happened the second they embraced; Astra sensed the disquiet between them and had no way of defining it let alone remedying it. She did have a hunch, though it made the tension just as evident.

Her hunch had its origins in time displacement. She had only seen Alex around twelve hours ago (not including the time elapsed during her hazy trip via wormhole). Twelve hours ago they were saying goodbye in the DEO hanger, the sound of a jet engine spitting sparks and Eliza’s sobs echoing through the cavern. While the memories remained fresh in her mind, it had been a lot longer for Alex. Three years for Alex. Not even a day for Astra.

Yet the years were discernable on Alex. From her skin tone to the way she held herself, there were minute differences noticeable only to someone who truly knew her. Astra liked to think she knew Alex despite the whirlwind of months they shared together. Back then they more often discussed their plans for the future rather than what occurred in the past. Allusions to sore events only reminded them of the furrowed places they had been when all they all they wanted to do was focus on where they were going.

But talking didn’t necessarily outweigh the merits of intimacy. Astra could close her eyes and picture Alex as she had last seen her on Earth: brown eyes, brown hair, casual posture yet vigilant reflexes, her smile and her laugh… These were the characteristics Astra expected to meet on this new Krypton.

Considering her experience in space travel, she should have taken relativity into account. Events on Krypton took place at a different time and speed relative to any other location in the universe. While Astra waited out her death on Earth, Alex had already arrived in another universe, reunited with their son, and earned her credentials in bioengineering. Even as Astra’s parallel counterpart argued to give up her place, Alex was saying her last goodbyes to a banished woman.

The fabric of space/time could be as complex as the heart. It bent and sometimes broke against the slightest pressure. It accelerated or slowed to external force. It could not be predicted.

Time slipped away from Astra without her knowing it. Without her witnessing its passage. It hadn’t occurred to her how much of it she missed until ruddy skylight haloed her beloved’s face.

Astra turned towards the panoramic window, looking beyond its transparisteel wall and remembering how Alex looked in Alura’s living room. She was still Alex Danvers; just tuned to a different frequency as it were. Her hair was kept cropped as it had been on Earth, but it came with
a splash of auburn which brought out her sun-soaked cheeks. She obviously spent more time outside. Her physique was still fit though not necessarily as muscle hardened as D.E.O training would have it. New furrows told of time-worn concerns and a hint of crow’s feet deepened at the corners of her eyes. Astra believed it made her wiser and, without a doubt, more tenacious for having hacked out her place in an alien world.

Most of all, Alex contained that same astonishing beauty. There was not a wrinkle or extent of shapeless muscle that Astra wouldn’t love to kiss. Not an ounce of desire had been lost. Since the day the Kryptonian army attacked National City, Alex had always embodied Astra’s will to survive. Alex was the only reason why she risked the dangers of interstellar travel, flung herself into a wormhole, and landed on a planet that would sooner banish her back to the Phantom Zone than let her breathe their air.

Ultimately, Astra risked far too much of herself not to come there and be welcomed into the arms of the woman she fought so hardily to return to. Astra would have expected more from Alex than an embrace and a glass of water. A tiny seed of disappointment budded at the swift removal. Alex had stepped away as if she were Kryptonian and Astra’s very skin was laced with kryptonite.

She needed to know Alex still believed in her. Did she feel anything for her anymore? Or were three years long enough to dismiss the butterflies whenever their eyes met or cool the warmth when they touched? Astra remembered how Alex’s heart raced - like a throbbing pulse in her ears - but that could have been a result of shock.

It would have proved further worrisome if Alex refused her the chance to be reunited with her son. There was no gift more precious than that. As long as Astra could be with her son, she wouldn’t dwell on her future with Alex. The small concession might not seem worth the trials, but that would soon change once she could hear Jeremiah’s heart again.

The barrier between the apartment and the fresh air of Argo felt thin beneath Astra’s fingertips. She grazed the tempered surface, remembering a time when she tested its strength one fateful day her transport crashed into a platform... long ago on her Krypton. Back then she expected to die with the knowledge that her planet would never see another season. Before she raised an army in revolt, she resigned herself to accountability. She couldn’t live with herself in the thirty seconds it took to nose dive through the mesosphere.

This transparisteel felt different than the kind that unwittingly saved her life so long ago. So many aspects of this planet were different from her own, including the woman she thought was hers.

She sighed, frustrated that she could not distract herself for a mere five minutes.

Even if Alex had moved on with someone else and left no room for new prospects, Astra still saw reason to hold on. She meant what she said when she told Alex not to forget the other Astra. If she had given her a home as wonderful as the one in Astra’s midst, there should be no neglecting her impact on the lives of her and Jeremiah. And if Alex wished to suspend a verdict on their relationship then Astra would stand by like she always had, shielding her candle from fateful winds.

Astra glimpsed the nearest spire where zipping traffic cut swaths of clouds around it. An ache spread from the center of her chest as she stood watchful over the sprawling alien metropolis. She had been prepared to spend every waking day with Alex, at least until their son grew out of infancy and they could bear to leave him in the time it took to infiltrate a hostile sleeper cell for the D.E.O. It became glaringly clear from her surroundings, however, that their plans had changed. Alex did not work for a counter-alien terrorism unit, Jeremiah had grown into a toddler, and the apartment looked as foreign to her as she felt standing there. Those may be her people flying past but they did
not welcome her amongst them. That may be her sun but it burned younger and blindingly brighter than remembered. She closed her eyes against the light glancing off silver. Not all that glistened divined good omen.

Quick beats resonated from afar. Astra’s eyes snapped open. She knew that rhythm like she knew that Krypton’s sun burned red. The drumming pulses accompanied cautionary murmurs from beyond the apartment.

The entrance door hissed open and followed with the sound of pattering shoes. Small shoes, Astra realized with her aching heart. Shoes fit for a tiny half human, half Kryptonian.

Astra spun, the name of her child caught in her throat. A boy of four with brown curly hair and clothed in deep forest green leapt down the stairway. Rao, he was fast. She thought she had at least a few more seconds.

The moment her eyes laid on his, her first instinct was to stumble back and fly away (forgetting entirely that Krypton’s sun did not allow the latter). He had aged so much since he last lay in her arms, flexing his limbs and squinting his dubious, newborn eyes. His growth, his ability to make it down the steps without twisting an ankle, the way the air ruffled the bangs on his forehead… it buckled Astra’s resolve and drove her to her knees.

Somewhere beyond her pulsing eardrums she heard the calls of “Mama.” It didn’t actually occur to her until the weight of a little body smacked into her that she realized that was her.

Mama.

Mama.

Doubt vanished like a finger snap. All thoughts of running or flying were knocked out of her head at the blunt force tipping her back. Astra absorbed the impact by sweeping him into her arms.

“My son,” she sobbed into the crook of his soft neck. Her memory flashed to the accrued moments she spent wiggling her fingertip there in just the right spot to pull gurgles from his small, pink mouth. “My son.”

His hands loosened around her neck only to grasp tufts of hair at her nape. “Mama,” he spoke into her shoulder, pulling on her hair to lay down the law, “I missed you. You’re gonna stay. Okay?”

His sweet voice made Astra’s heart cry out. Her nodding came fervent as her arms held him tighter in consensus. She could think of nothing else to say but, “Yes… Okay…”

She wished she could squeeze him tighter, just for a little while longer, but the years were catching up like a sling shot around a heavenly body. Home meant little if they couldn’t recognize one another.

Gingerly, she pulled her head back and patted his shoulders. “I need to see you, little one. It’s been so long. Let me see you.”

He withdrew and made sure to keep his hands buried at her nape to ground them both. His nose and cheeks flushed scarlet. He looked out of breath, but something told Astra his head was brimming with thoughts of playtime and sunshine and snacks past bedtime.

She cupped his cheeks to focus on the glassy scrutiny returning hers. A lump the size of a peach pit formed in her throat. Could he be sizing her up? Searching for clues to discount her role in his life? Astra swallowed hard. Did he see his mother? Or a complete stranger?
Despite the uncertainty lodged in her throat, she managed to choke out what her heart yearned to speak since the day she abandoned him to the stars. “Oh, Jeremiah…”

He didn’t pull away. He didn’t flinch those beautiful eyes. She inhaled sharply at the features blossoming between her palms. There was so much of Alex in him and yet the gray-green eyes and the silk curls on his head were no mistaking his Ze heritage. His glaring origins triggered a stab of guilt for missing out on those four years.

“I am so sorry for letting you go.”

Her fingers implored for recollection by combing through his hair; just as soft as before though much thicker and stubborn than she remembered. He had a cowlick at the nape and she smiled, tracing the matted whorl of hair with her fingers.

His mouth split into a grin and, giggling, he cocked his head away from her ministrations.

Astra chuckled at his ticklish response. Nape of the neck: she filed it away for future reference.

Jeremiah was so warm and gentle. He didn’t seem to share her initial hesitation, not when he dove into her arms and certainly not when she touched him. Her eyes measured him up from head to toe and he still saw no reason to pull away. Not like Alex had.

A figure drew Astra’s attention to the raised kitchen. Alex, arms folded across her chest, stood resolute as a statue. Her gaze didn’t stray when Astra beheld her, and for a moment everything felt as it should be. Hope that they could reclaim what they had on Earth felt so accessible. It flourished in the regard their unflinching gazes traded with each other.

Astra looked back at Jeremiah, hands migrating to his shoulders and sensing his potential to accomplish anything, including bringing their family back together. Her head shook in awe as she saw Alex and even shades of her niece. “You’re beautiful.”

“Aunt ‘lura calls me handsome almost all the time.”

The kitchen echoed with a deep chuckle.

Astra’s head swam at the sound. She grinned and cupped his chin so their noses could meet. “That you are.”

His nose wrinkled around the beaming smile. His fingers curled into the course, unkempt curls that hadn’t seen a brush in hours. She probably looked a fright after the ash shower on Earth and her long voyage in the space pod. When Alura brought her in, she offered shelter, clean clothes, and food, but all Astra would accept was a presentable appearance and the noses of her family pressed into her neck.

She must have looked and smelled awful, yet Jeremiah held her like she was as soft and cuddly as the bear he slept with in his crib. Startled by the memory, she wondered if the tattered old thing still accompanied him to bed or if he even kept it at his age.

Her eyes pooled warm and brimming. She promised herself that she would not cry. She was a hardened warrior, not an oyster who lays limp in her own salt. But there she was, a pitiful wreck carried in the arms of her young son.

“Laylee says you forgot a lot.”

Her eyebrows met in puzzlement. A clearing throat nudged her head up to see a finger tapping
Astra nodded in understanding and met Jeremiah in earnest. “I’m sorry,” she said, soothing the sting of disappointment with her thumbs. His shoulders loosened under her touch. “I wish I could remember. If there is anything that still remains it is the day Rao blessed me with your arrival. I could never forget your first days nor how happy you’ve made me. But I missed a great deal since. I know you have done so many things I am to be proud of.” She looked at her boy, not having to peer too deeply to gain a sense of how her heart grew fonder at the sight. “Will you help me remember?”

He nodded without pause. “Laylee says we’re gonna help you.”

Astra looked up to find Alex sweeping her hand at invisible lint. The attempt to appear aloof failed. Her gaze darted to Jeremiah’s shoulder, just a hairsbreadth from the watchful eyes she suddenly couldn’t seem to meet.

It dawned on Astra that she and Alex would eventually have to discuss a few things before Jeremiah got too carried away with his mission to help her remember. So many questions occupied her mind, not the least of which happened to be where they went from there. Did Alex expect her to inhabit elsewhere? Astra’s chest constricted in panic. She didn’t think she could spend another day away from Jeremiah.

“Well.” Alex sighed into the awkward silence. She brought her hand to her hip. “Someone has to cook dinner. Jeremiah?”

His head cocked. “What?”

She snorted amusingly. “Right. How about you show Mama your room while I get dinner ready?”

Jeremiah smiled at that and, without further ado, seized Astra’s hand and pulled her along. “Let’s go.”

While Alex prepared dinner, Astra followed Jeremiah to his room where he showed her around. He led her by the hand to every nook and cranny. Every toy and decoration had a story. Along the way, she learned of family vacations, park trips, and swim lessons. Jeremiah seemed to display the signs of a budding hoarder as he held on to every souvenir from his trips to Kandor, mini replicas purchased from museum gift shops, and gadgets on behalf of Alex’s co-workers (of the safe, non-scalpel kind).

It became clear from his storytelling, however, that Jeremiah didn’t possess a materialistic side. He appreciated the memories behind each item and the people he shared them with. His affection for his family went beyond any worldly indulgence. The only thing he loved more than his moms, apparently, was the vast animal kingdom of stuffed plush accumulating in the corner.

Through the tour, Astra was regaled of Argo City’s famous toy store twice and sneakily propositioned for a weekend sojourn. Jeremiah brought her things to touch and sometimes smell. He wanted her to see and experience everything in his bedroom as if convinced that the slightest piece would jog a memory. As she sat on his bed, he came bearing one stuffed animal after the other. Each one accompanied a name, an occupation, and an origin story (ironically from one toy store or another). Some were married. Others were “independent-er” than the rest and didn’t believe in arranged marriages. By the time Alex called them to dinner, Astra was carrying the entire Urrikan continent of animals in her arms.

“Just you two,” Alex said from the doorway and eyed the heap of furry creatures, “no guests.”
“Nooo.”

“She just got here, Jeremiah. Don’t overwhelm her.”

Jeremiah, unsure what the word meant, assumed that if his mother didn’t like it then it was something he wanted to do. “But I wanna overwhelm her.”

“Not today. Now clean up this mess and come to dinner.”

Jeremiah swiped one of the animals off the bed, angered to the verge of tears.

Astra reached out to him, placing one hand on his back and the other over his stomach. Embarrassment kept him from revealing his state even though she could already feel the hitches through his shirt.

“No tears, little one.” Her voice gentled the tension and he became much softer under her touch. “We have tomorrow. And many more days after.”

She pulled him close, turning him so they were face to face. His unwillingness to struggle emphasized his dejected mood. The promise he needed to hear lodged in her throat at the swimming gray-green eyes. She missed him so much it hurt. Those eyes were like kryptonite stealing through her bloodstream and burning in remembrance of having let him go at one time. He didn’t know about that, but the memory of someone with her face and her voice leaving his world was still fresh.

Could she keep her promise this time? All the love in her heart didn’t matter. Discipline and the constancy to hold herself accountable ensured that she stayed the course. But after a series of fitful regressions, could she turn her back on habit and become the person, the mother, this boy deserved?

Astra left it to instinct to answer. The hands on his waist remained still as her thumbs roved back and forth. She ducked her head to catch his eye while remaining a respectful distance from his hung head. She could see the crinkles at the corners of his squeezed eyes and the stoic lips sealed over a whimper. Her heart broke. The words left effortlessly.

“I am not going anywhere.” She hated herself for not saying it sooner. “I am not going anywhere,” she said with an emphatic tone. It inscribed itself into her heart, and, were it possible, she would tattoo the words on her skin if it helped convince him. Her courage sagged upon exhale. “Please believe me. I cannot lose you again. It is unbearable.”

A child should not have to hear such words. They were as frightening to an adult as a four-year-old child, and she should have realized. It was one of many mistakes a mother had to learn from.

“Mama, will you play search and rescue later?”

The unlikely response pulled Astra’s face into a frown. “Search and rescue?”

His resilient mood brightened at her ignorance and he lunged for one of the stuffed animals on the bed. “Yeah,” he grunted under the pile, burrowing until he captured Exhibit A. “Someone hides the detainer.” He waved the tortoise-shelled animal for emphasis before picking up a ferocious looking pink monkey. “And the agent pursues with tactics. The hosil,” he raised a new animal, “can ambush the agent,” he held the monkey up high, “and do aggressive ne-go-shee-uns and stuff.”

“Oh.” Her mind pieced together the game’s fundamentals: detainee, tactical pursuit, hostile, aggressive negotiations… The corner of Astra’s mouth curled up. “And does your mother usually
head this operation?"

“She showed me how to play.” He went about the clearing of his bed in a conversational manner. “She’ll want to play too. You can choose your agent, see?” He thrust a red and black bengal feline under her chin before pulling it back and returning it to its rightful pile. “But don’t touch the dragon. Laylee’s always the dragon.”

Astra passed him the winged animal with a wry smile. “Duly noted.”

* * *

“You have mastered the art of Kryptonian cuisine.”

“It’s just something I threw together. I should have seasoned the vegetables beforehand.” Alex reached for the silver kettle on its mat and refilled her cup. The after dinner tea had a bitter flavor that repelled children’s palates, which explained why it had been brought out after Jeremiah had gone to bed. Alex leaned back in her chair with her drink. “It’s supposed to be flavorful.”

Smile growing, Astra shook her head and said, “Not many Kryptonians can make borsi’ketto. It was a far better example of cooking than I can admit to. Being in a regiment for most of one’s life does not allow time to perfect their culinary skills.”

“I was going to experiment with seafood, but Jeremiah doesn’t seem to like the taste of it. He loves the smell of the water and wiggling his toes in the sand, but the second I mention ryba, he goes all green and cranky.”

From across the dining table, Astra chuckled and brought her cup to her lips. The rich liquid slid down her throat and married nicely with her belly full of borsi’ketto. Alex was being modest. Dinner had been well balanced in spices. It had Astra’s taste buds singing for more.

She was siting upright in her chair, arms relaxed on the table where the three of them had shared their meal. While Astra had been a bit astonished by Alex’s new skills, Jeremiah did not look fazed. He ate up his mother’s cooking like he did every day in a show of good manners and emphasized his appreciation by way of an affectionate kiss on the cook’s cheek.

Her fingers pressed to the stoneware cup, leeching warmth from its contents. Alex, however, was slouched in her chair and propping an elbow on the table. She was scrubbing the weariness from her face, too tired to drink the rest of her tea.

It had been a long day for them both. Astra would give anything for a soft mattress and eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. Her mind wouldn’t stop racing with plans for tomorrow, the day after, and all subsequent months on this crisp, healthy planet. A great deal of rest was in order, but she knew they had things to discuss. Some matters were too important to delay.

Astra’s head turned to the living room where the walls were awash in an evening glow. It was long after dusk. City lights were dimmed after business hours, so most activity came from night traffic. Undefined beads of silver dashed in the distance. The transportation conduits weaving through Argo strobed all night to get people where they needed to be. Astra pressed the back of her teeth with her tongue, disturbed by new beginnings in familiar ruts.

Idle hands tore her gaze from the window to the drumming of fingers. “We need to talk about him.”

Alex’s fingers stalled. Her eyes left the untouched contents of her cup to pin Astra with an unreadable stare. “He is the product of a natural birth. Do you know what that means for him
Tilting her ear, Astra listened for the slightest noise. His bedroom surrendered nothing but soft snores. “He will be an outcast,” she said. “I know what the risks are. They are the same risks we were prepared to protect him from on Earth – Maxwell Lord and General Lane among them.”

“This is not the Krypton you grew up on. Its culture and norms will be as alien to you as they were to me.” Alex sat up to lay both hands on the table, one palm down and five fingers beating the surface to stress her point. “Kryptonian tradition holds that every child is born with a preordained role in society, but here they take it a step further. Here they internalize physical displays of affection, social practices… hell, even marriage is probably more cordial where you came from.”

Thoughts of Non and their lackluster compatibility brought Astra’s brow to arch. “You would be surprised.” A rare sympathetic bone in her body reacted on impulse. “Does this Krypton have a Non?”

The mention of him seemed to wear out Alex further. She propped her head up on the knuckles of her fist and rolled her eyes up. “I haven’t heard from him since he dissolved his marriage with your other you, but yes he’s around.”

“Is he as… belligerent in his principles?”

Amused, Alex snorted. “You mean is he still an asshole? Of course. Although, he’s not motivated by greed and delusions of supremacy. He’s the least of your worries.”

“And who might I be worried about?”

“The parents of Jeremiah’s future classmates for one.” Alex leaned forward, head now supported by both her hands. She shook her head. “This isn’t going to be easy for him. Kids can be cruel and their parents won’t be quick to explain the concepts of tolerance and acceptance. He’ll be bullied for something he can’t help.”

White hot anger flooded Astra’s veins. She bit into her cheek to stem the violent reaction surfacing. “My uncle taught me the virtue of diplomacy before violence.” If they were on Earth, Astra would have burned eye-size holes through the table. She shook her head, a grim line spreading across her mouth. “I never saw the point and I certainly do not see it now. Jeremiah will learn combat techniques and dedicate himself to strategic thought.”

“I’m not teaching him to fight, Astra. He’s a little boy.”

Astra jabbed her forefinger on the table between them. “He is my little boy and I did not fight battles only to watch my future child lay down like some defenseless cub.”

“You fought battles so that Krypton’s children could live in peace. There is a big difference between submission and prudence.”

“Then we certainly have something to discuss because I will not leave him with tyrants for children. I will homeschool him before subjecting him to that.”

“Jesus, can we not do this right now?” The furrow in Alex’s forehead deepened. Exasperation accompanied her gesticulating hand. “I’m too tired to debate.”

Fury continued to sting her cheeks, so Astra took a calming breath and released it in a rush. Her nerves settled somewhat, though thoughts of Jeremiah’s safety on any grounds, be they an educational institution or a playground, endured at the back of her mind.
Astra fixated on the worriment being scrubbed to excess. Alex was giving her forehead a shine and Astra wondered if it was even helping. The tension magnified before her eyes, opening them to the hardship of a single mother. Her face fell and she censured herself for imprudence.

Alex had been dealing with Rao knows what for the past six months, alone in a world of intolerance and belligerent opinions. One thing was becoming quite clear to Astra: she couldn’t claim to be Kryptonian when she didn’t know its people. Alex was right. This planet had a history and traditions that Astra was unfamiliar with. It would be wise to follow Alex’s lead when she had three years worth of experience on her.

Alex surfaced from her hands to implore with Astra. “You have to understand that although our personal freedoms are slowly becoming realized, there is lingering sentiment amongst a great many people who believe change will strip them of their customs. They hold onto these routines like their lives depend on it. They don’t appreciate the High Council rewriting law any more than they like humans and Kryptonians mating.”

A glum shadow cast over Alex’s face as she continued. “I’m no more accepted than Jeremiah is. This is not something you can slap a Band-Aid on. You can’t defy centuries of ingrained habit with your fists. As much as I want to believe it will all work itself out in a few years, I have to remind myself that this is an entire planet we’re talking about and change doesn’t spread that fast. This is a long-term concern that Jeremiah will be confronted with for the rest of his life. There is no one like him. As his parents, it’s our responsibility to build up his resiliency.” The weight of burden left her sighing and throwing up a hand. “My entire approach revolves around his self-confidence because if he doesn’t have that, he can’t make it in this world. As much as I want to shield him from every bad thing, he has to realize from a young age that not everyone will want to be his friend.”

Jeremiah had been raised to be kind. He would have trouble acclimating to this new mindset. Astra sagged in hopeless dismay. “I didn’t want this for him. I thought we sent him away to live a better life. This place is barren of hope.”

“No…” Alex’s expression warped through myriad emotions until it settled on drooping guilt. “I didn’t mean to suggest it’s all hopeless. Jeremiah has plenty of support from his family. That will go a long way.”

The wretched feeling lingered in Astra, making her sluggish as lead. She leaned forward in her chair to shield her weary eyes with her hand. “You make it sound so much worse.”

“Look, I’m not trying to be difficult. There a lot at stake here, not just Jeremiah’s future. The fact that you are a convicted criminal – or at least look like her – will make it that much harder to divert the spotlight.”

“When Alura brought me in she spoke optimistically about my chances. She has a plan for me to live here as a citizen –“

“But that could take days – weeks. You don’t know what the judicial process is like. Considering our guilds are still adjusting to new leadership, that will slow whatever appeal Alura has in mind. Reforms will take precedent. I’m just warning you. Don’t get your hopes up for a quick solution.”

Astra frowned. “What does this have to do with Jeremiah?”

Alex hesitated. Her gaze dropped to the cup being rotated between her anxious hands. “So… I told him that you lost your memory of the last four years – essentially his whole life.”

Nodding, Astra said, “I gathered that from our conversation earlier.”
“Space travel can be jarring, dangerous. He seemed convinced. I just… “ Alex closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. “I don’t like lying to him. I can take spinning false stories to other people because it’s easier than explaining parallel universes. It’s the lies I’m telling my son. They make me feel repulsive.”

Though Astra identified with the sickening feeling, she understood it was for a just cause. She leaned forward, taking care to gentle her voice. “You know we can’t tell him about her. He is not yet five. He is only just grasping the concept of time. To a child his age, the world encompasses no more than home and a few chosen environments.”

Astra’s eyes dropped to the hand laying limp beside Alex’s tea. Her skin looked radiant under the dim lighting, the knuckles soft and unblemished by hostile noses (Maxwell Lord included). The corner of Astra’s mouth turned up at the countless times that hand threatened her life and how it used to settle on her cheek to impart comfort. It had slipped so effortlessly into her own in moments of uncertainty, fear, loneliness…

Astra locked her fingers together and braced them on the table, hidden behind her cup. “Keeping this from him does not negate the effect she had on him. She will not be a figment of his imagination. She will still exist for him.”

The murky amber tea served as a space to imprison Alex’s gaze. A galaxy in a teacup, swirling in lost causes, expanding probability, and stardust. “We’re going to tell him eventually.” Her voice, barely audible, traveled the distance between them like it was lightyears rather than a few short feet. “When he’s old enough to understand?”

The questioning tone was unmistakable. Considering how little time Astra had spent on this new planet, she appreciated that Alex was asking for her support. “Of course. I am grateful that you took the initiative. I do not know what I would have told him.”

Alex looked up, mouth parted in surprise. “… I…” She knit her brows. “… It just came to me. As the situation stands now, I think we should continue to play along. It can’t be hard considering you don’t have any memory of his last four years.”

The feeling that something had been left unsaid lingered in the air, thick as molasses. Before Astra could ask, Alex’s chair legs were scrapping the floor. Astra rose as well, picking up her empty cup and spoon. “Allow me to help.”

“Just leave them in the wash bin. It’ll take care of itself.”

The stainless steel-looking drawer rolled out from under the sink to reveal slots of varying sizes and shapes. She tilted her head at the contraption, unsure whether it’s complexity offended her more than Earth’s appliances had.

“It’s a dishwasher, Astra.” Alex was smirking as she took the cup and spoon from limp hands. “Like the one at our old apartment.”

“This is not like our old dishwasher.”

“Maybe not exactly, but it would have cleaned the peanut butter from all your dishes.”

Astra didn’t like the insinuation and brought her hand to her hip to show her disapproval. “That was a phase. I was pregnant and I had no control over what horrendous things I was consuming.”

“You were consuming the entire Skippy product line within a twenty mile radius. I’d hardly call that a phase.” She snapped the drawer closed and spun the dial. The cycle commenced with a soft
whirr. When she turned to face Astra, she sported a sardonic expression. “Would you now like me to show you how to use the stairs?”

Astra narrowed her eyes to slits. “You are taking far too much enjoyment out of this.” She crossed her arms to conceal her burgeoning chuckle. “Does it truly vindicate your ego to see me struggle with Kryptonian technology?”

“I have to exploit you while I can.”

The challenge in Alex’s smile and folded arms did things to Astra she couldn’t explain. She had lived with Alex for twelve months and the answer still eluded her. Defiance always looked sexy on Alex. She could smile and it would send a dangerous trill through Astra’s body. In the past, her hand on Astra’s neck disassembled military stratagems like a leaning tower of Jenga blocks. No training from Krypton’s warrior guild prepared a soldier for encountering a brash, full-toothed smile. Amid the countless stories her uncle recounted during their hunting trips, not one explained this feeling of being enthralled by a human in possession of a non-cooperative disposition and a shapely bottom.

The familiarity to their banter softened Astra to such depths she could feel the trill disempowering her. Every molecule surrendered to Alex’s smile. She would do anything. She would dismantle Myriad if she could, one hundred times over if it meant a few more minutes of this dizzying impression that they were always meant to gravitate towards each other. They could be so fluent together, even when no words fell from their lips. They would simply orbit one another like two satellites waltzing.

Astra looked down at her feet, willing them to take the next step. A nameless force incapacitated her though. Was it fear of rejection? The doubt of whether or not Alex still reserved a place for her in that beautiful big heart chipped away at Astra’s confidence.

Alex broke the spell with a worrying at her lip. Her arms shrugged within their folds as she looked for the kind of strength adorning the apartment in concrete supports. When she finally spoke, her voice carried a cautionary weight. “No matter how easy it might seem to indulge his eagerness, Jeremiah can’t bear the burden of ‘refreshing your memory.’ I understand that you want to get to know him, but I have to ask you not to push him.”

Without moving, Astra beckoned for one last minute in this dreamlike bubble. Eyes full and round, she was still riding the swells of their waltz. “I thought I would never see him again. Or you. I accepted that loss.”

Alex gathered with a nod. “You’re disoriented. I understand. This doesn’t have to be a discussion. I’ll just go make up the spare bedroom.”


She mentally stumbled over the memory of her voyage to Krypton. The chill was as prevalent as the loneliness. The blackness of space swallowed her whole. The last time she felt fear like that it was when her coffin passed under the influence of the guise which bestowed that terrible power.

The shiver drew Alex’s gaze. Something must have clicked because she saw fit to drop the defiant stance. Her arms loosened as she hedged for a response. “I… I know what it’s like to wait in a pod, never knowing if you’re going to survive or even see your family again. As someone who still has nightmares about it, I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. I don’t want you to feel that again. You’ve been through too much darkness. You shouldn’t have to doubt whether you’re going to make it the next day.”
Despite Alex’s initial hesitation, the precision in her words was startling. Their veracity bound Astra in a cold harness. She never wanted Alex to feel that same isolation and yet she sent her to that place of her own free will. No one coerced her. She had simply taken Alex by the shoulders and pleaded with her to go.

“I finally understand what that is like,” Alex said, “which means I also realize that saying it changes nothing.” For a moment, it looked as if she was going to continue, but then her body gave out its last ounce of well-meant arrogance. Sighing softly, she tilted her head towards the corridor and said, “This way.”

Astra followed her into a bedroom where Alex handed over a pair of pajamas.

“Shower is over there.” Alex pointed to an unlit passage. “There’s soap and shampoo in the stall. Clean towels are in the cabinet.”

Astra looked from the silk thin pajamas to the open doorway and back. Alex was pulling down the covers and puffing the pillows. She did so methodically as if she had been doing it for years. A queer sensation pricked at the back of Astra’s neck. Was this their bedroom? Theirs as in Alex and her lover of three years.

The carpet’s soft locks brushed the tread on her boots as she walked across the room and entered the ensuite. She blocked the question out of her mind as water thundered in her ears. The fresh scent of soap filled her nostrils and she bit back a whimper as plentiful suds washed away the slag. She scrubbed and scrubbed until her skin broke out into a scarlet rash. A river of ash, sweat, and tears flowed past her feet and circled down the drain. The shower continued to pummel her face and hair and she let it go on until the water ran smoothly off her body.

The crown-like fixture dribbled its last droplets. Astra signed to the tap-tap-tap. She had not felt this clean in some time. Without a thought, her hand dragged over her stomach. A faint smile surfaced as she felt the ghost marks. It used to bother her that she never could hold on to the evidence of childbirth. Just hours after Jeremiah arrived, her body repaired itself inside and out, banishing the possibility of ever bearing stretch marks. Astra would have liked to keep those scars. She was so proud of them. No Kryptonian in a thousand cycles could admit to such an accomplishment.

Once she had towed off and cleansed her wistful mood, Astra slipped on the soft pajamas and shuffled out of the ensuite into darkness.

Dogged, the question asserted itself back into the bedroom. Her feet knew not where to step. The air crowded in her lungs while her heart was unable to distinguish this new, stammering tempo.

Then, everything slowed to the speed of a falling autumn leaf. The scent of soap laced the air around Alex. She must have showered elsewhere in the time it took Astra to rid herself of Earth’s parting residue. Alex lay on her side, facing the nightstand bearing its perched clock. Her restful face glowed pale blue in the light of the chronometer. Within her ribcage, her heart begot its soulful work.

Astra lost herself in the even rhythm. Without resorting to an inner debate, she slid under the covers. Her body submitted to the bed like a bag of boneless Kryptonian. Exhaustion wore down her eyelids to flutters.

The journey had depleted her body of energy, yet her mind continued to race. Astra was so very aware of her sleeping company. The last time they shared a bed, the world was ending. Astra’s body twitched in recollection, forcing her to take measured breathes in and out. They had joined in
wistful toil – a perfect, passionate fit that muddled the lines where she ended and Alex began. She had never felt so closely tied to any other person.

Astra lay still with her eyes drawn to the ceiling. It became difficult to shake the feelings stirred by the heart beating an arm’s length away – the sheer dismay Astra had felt on Earth, believing she would never again be this close to Alex.

But now there Astra lay, heart in her throat, a passion stoked in her belly, and eyes brimming over at the history bedded beneath her. Alex was alive and sleeping an arm’s length away. Astra closed her eyes wetly, never feeling this removed from her beloved.

She should be grateful to be welcomed so near. Even as they lay side by side in the dark, Astra sensed that Alex didn’t want to be touched. Not that night. For however long Alex maintained that distance, Astra would have to settle with unanswered questions.

But sometime during the night Alex rolled over. Astra didn’t know when it happened – it could have been five minutes after they went down or five hours. She felt the hand on her chest and then lips on hers. They were deceptively soft and warm. She knew better. It was pity and a mistake. She knew because as soon as Alex ended it she turned over and sighed at the tragedy.

* * *

The apartment that Astra now resided in contained various items of notable importance. Though she herself did not know their significance, they must have been displayed with a purpose in mind.

She found it difficult to keep from touching things. A holographic photo caught her eye. It sat nestled on a bookshelf between two volumes on molecular biology. The color photo flickered as a three-dimensional field, giving it a realistic quality of three miniature individuals smiling ecstatically around a plaque. Astra did not recognize the men pressing into Alex like two slices of bread. The temptation to ask was so overwhelming she felt compelled to take such pains to seem indifferent. A show of interest might be construed as jealousy, speculation, or distrust. Astra did not wish to give Alex reason to walk on eggshells around her.

Astra strolled around the apartment with idle thoughts in mind. Only days ago she had been facing her demise in the light of a sunset. She made her peace with Death and had been ready to return to Rao; if she even deserved to be in his company.

But like a wild cat too stubborn to submit, she had survived and was now surrounded by her family’s things, things she felt she had no right to touch. They were not her property. The flowers? She hadn’t picked them or nourished their roots. The holopictures? They may show a woman with her likeness but Astra did not have her poise or her wisdom or the familiarity with Alex and Jeremiah.

What qualifications did Astra have? Not many deserving of this home stocked in memories. She was a formal general who had inflicted atrocities on innocent people. Her existence subsisted on unknowable factors and military preparedness. She had the will to endure only because she put herself in situations that called for mass endurance.

The thought of not possessing the strength to live up to her family’s expectations turned back the clock to an age when Astra’s parents used to shake their heads at her and treat her like a fool’s errand. No amount of rehabilitation could shake her from her rebellious phase, not those six weeks in juvenile boot camp nor a permanent stint in Krypton Military Corp. If anything, her parent’s efforts pushed her further from their hopes for a daughter consistent to their faithful Alura.
That feeling of being stranded from home, knowing she made the decision under no duress, became her rebirth. Through vigorous training, she transformed herself from a vulnerable child to a proud warrior. However, no amount of victories or chin ups in the gym could banish that feeling of inadequacy. She experienced it with her fellow soldiers. She feared it more than death.

It came back to haunt her once again and wore Astra down to the thin skin of her heart. She was so different from the mother in those holopictures. She saw nothing of herself in the books, flowers, and adornments that filled the room. The experience was not unlike that of an idealistic general on Earth. That woman suffered from a similar fitful sleep that Astra had been experiencing the past few days. Because she was not the woman in these pictures. She was not the lover who had shared Alex’s bed. She did not tend to the garden flourishing on the terrace, nor the kiri-bird feeder dangling from the shell overhang.

The reality of her survival – of being on a healthy Krypton – produced an unsettling churn in Astra’s stomach. Being there felt short of a mistake. She was a stranger living with a ghost. If she didn’t know any better, she would have thought the solar flare swallowed her before she could escape its thrall and these befuddling surroundings served as her afterlife.

Jeremiah was worth pushing through the challenges. How could he not be? He was bonded to her in blood and through her love for Alex. His smile and his vigorous little heart filled sunshine into the room. He was such a happy child, well-cared for, and as rambunctious as Kara had been at that age.

Astra did worry about him, though. The auditory troubles Alex spoke of alarmed her at first. She dreaded the possibility that she had caused it. During the night when Jeremiah’s snores rolled softly beyond the bedroom and Alex lay with her back to Astra, she sometimes wondered if his grandfather made a mistake. Perhaps she wasn’t meant to have a child. If her body truly had been blessed by Rao then why had she given birth to a child with… Astra didn’t even know what to call it. Alex hadn’t been able to find answers, so they were left to distress over terms like disabled, infirm, inadequate.

Jeremiah couldn’t suffer because of her mistakes. It threw her into a quaking mess and she had to censor her body’s response otherwise the weeping would alert Alex.

Astra truly did not understand the helplessness Alex felt until the symptoms manifested. Just the other night they had finished dinner and were playing on the floor of the living room. Without warning, the hover car clattered in pieces as his hands clapped over his ears. He had his head tucked between his knees and Astra felt so helpless. She had no idea what was happening until Alex kneeled down beside him, asking in a hushed voice, “Is it the flies again?”

At Astra’s frown, it was explained to her that Jeremiah’s super hearing sometimes overwhelmed him in ringing tones and, at times, buzzing. Alex provided a less frightening cause in the form of flies. She told him they buzzed around the ears of brave children and that the flies would go away just as soon as he focused on something else, which happened to be the murmurs from his mother. There was of course no basis for flies, but the story seemed to help puff up Jeremiah’s courage and encourage him to treat it like a hero’s challenge.

Astra had watched with a heavy heart as Alex cupped one ear and bestowed kisses and hums to the other. The vibrations from her lips traveled through his ear canal, and, after a few passing seconds, the murmurs of what a brave boy he was and how proud she made him soothed the erratic noise.

When his discomfort melted away, she picked him up and carried him to bed. Left behind in the disarray of hover train parts and confusion, Astra felt like a spectator. She shouldn’t have dwelled on it. She couldn’t have known how to help him; four years spent a universe apart stole the
experience from the most perceptive of beings.

Yet the shame swam through Astra and stuck with her like oil clinging to every part of her conscience. Some facet of her, not just the mother but the one with Kryptonian instincts, should have detected something. On Krypton, she still possessed advanced hearing, speed, strength, and vision. Surely one of those was able to pinpoint the source of his ailment. He was her blood for Rao’s sake and she just sat there with her jaw on the floor.

“Astra? Are you alright?”

The voice shocked Astra like electromagnetic pulses of kryptonite conducting through her system. She spun from the happy trio displaying in the holopicture to find Alura on the sofa. The wrung hands and worried brow of her sister looked akin to pity.

“Yes.” Her stringent delivery left no room to accept compassion. Astra grasped her wrist behind her back and stared directly into those Rao damned softening eyes. “Why is it that you came? I seem to have forgotten.”

Misunderstanding muddled Alura’s expression. “I… thought that was obvious. I came to see how you were adjusting. This planet is colder and more inflexible than you are used to. I wanted to offer my support and…” Alura stopped short. She exhaled in frustration and shot up from the sofa. “Rao preserve me!” She threw up her arms. “Why must we avoid the obvious here? I am not the sister whom you grew up with on your Krypton. I did not betray my daughter only to trap and sentence you to that awful prison. Are you going to treat me like a traitor just because I look and speak like her? Because that is in no way fair to me.”

Astra, not taking the bait, narrowed her cool gaze. “But you have her values. A magistrate of the High Council is bound by law to abide and conduct themselves according to their rule.”

Unflinching, Alura set her straight. “You would be surprised by my loyalties these days. The Council of Law and Behavior was once comprised of narrow-minded elders, the very same who exiled my sister. I am ashamed to admit that I followed their lead for some time, but those days are over. I listen to my conscience and act according to free choice – something this planet has yet to appreciate. My allegiance to family cannot be bought or plundered through intimidation.” Alura peered daggers and it threw Astra off a little. “So, before you make assumptions, keep in mind that we met only three days ago. And I swear on all that Rao touches that if you hurt Alexandra, I will make sure you spend the rest of your life regretting it.”

Amazement spread across Astra’s smirking face. “Oh, this is splendid.” Chuckling, she clapped her hands together in disbelief. “Forgive me, but I am having a difficult time taking you seriously. If, however, you are honest about this threat, I must have it on record. And do explain how you will make me regret it.”

The crinkles around Alura’s eyes smoothed. Her eyes dropped to Astra’s boots and ran up the black skinny trousers and matching long sleeve shirt. She raised her brow upon meeting the expression of disgruntlement at her once over. “There is no doubt that you are Astra.”

Astra’s amusement had vanished beneath her hardened shell. “I can assure you, I am not like your sister. Whatever impression of me you gather, it is not based on anything.”

“On the contrary, I have drawn my impression from a great deal of evidence. Over the course of years I’ve known her, Alexandra has spoken of you. Very often, if she doesn’t mind me saying. Based on what I have seen so far, you are as cavalier as the stories.”
A shot of animosity thickened Astra’s blood. She set her jaw accordingly. “She said I was cavalier?”

“Also: patronizing, pig-headed, and occasionally deplorable in manners, but I will not bore you with the details. Feel free to ask the source, whom you live with after all.”

Astra had the sense to lower her guard. She could hardly doubt Alura now. The threat exhibited the lengths she would go to for Alex’s happiness and she would stand defiant against her own sister to ensure her safety. If Astra learned to trust anyone on this planet, it would be the person who cared as much about Alex as herself.

She worked the tension out of her jaw. Her eyes darted to the coffee table, the kitchen, and the carpet before finally resting on Alura. “Would you like refreshment?”

“That would be lovely. Thank you.”

The stairway carried Astra up to the raised level where the island curved like a wry smile around the kitchen. The stools were polished and concave for comfort. The cabinets and drawers were many.

She paused, daunted by their anonymity. She turned and wrung her hands. “I apologize,” she told Alura. “I do not seem to know the location of drinkware.”

Instead of taking advantage of Astra’s ignorance, Alura masked her amusement and gave her a hand.

“I appreciate the tour,” Astra said when they returned to the sofas. She picked up her glass of iced tea and stole a sip before speaking. “Alex does not seem to trust me around appliances. It is her way of making fun. I suppose it eases the tension.” She paused, waiting for a response, a criticism, an interrogation. Alura’s silence prompted her to continue. “Adjusting to new surroundings might be easier if I were able to leave the premises. May I ask after the status of my pardon?”

“Certainly.” Alura set her drink on a coaster and folded her hands. “I have been pressing the councilmembers for a verdict. I expect a response within the week. They are not as indolent as their predecessors, but they do have quite a few matters to attend to. I can only hope the delay is a result of thoughtful consideration. Rao knows how little of it occupied previous generations.”

“Your optimism surprises me. Wasn’t it only six months ago that the High Council exiled one of their own?”

“Krypton is experiencing a whirlwind of change. Although the reformist sentiment has not reached every corner of the planet, our guilds and councils seem to be in good hands.” Alura tilted her head. “Has Alexandra explained the extent of our… social revolution?”

“Vaguely.” Astra shrugged. She could hardly bother herself with the political and legal ramifications of her return when she could not gain acceptance from her own partner (or ex-partner, judging by Alex’s continued detachment). “I understand that a minority power was able to assert themselves into the upper echelons of Krypton’s guilds and convince the High Council for looser restrictions.”

Alura nodded. “Such reforms will take time to see fruition. Birthing matrixes continue to be the norm, although there is growing interest among scientists to study alternative means of reproduction. Though we are a long way from returning to traditional methods practiced by our ancestors, it is an ambition shared by many Kryptonians.”
“Putting an end to artificial procreation will stir ample debate. You cannot expect these changes to be accepted by all.”

“But it would go a long way in placing Misha in good company. Who knows? Perhaps one day he will no longer be considered the sole creation of natural birth.”

The thought of Jeremiah lightened Astra’s heart. She smiled down at the coffee table where only a few hours ago a heap of mini blocks became a fully constructed starfighter wing. “No matter how many children of natural birth result from this revolution, Jeremiah will always be special.”

“That he is.”

Astra detected the fondness in the tone and welcomed Alura’s smile. “It has been three days and I cannot rid myself of astonishment. He is an incredible little human and a fine Kryptonian.” Hot tears sprang in her eyes and she felt her throat tighten in response. “It is as if I am falling for him all over again.”

“He has the best of both races. I think the pressure that comes with being an outsider will mold him into a brave young man.”

Astra scowled tearfully. “Do not dare speak of him as a man. He is still a baby.” At the chuckle, she shot Alura a glare. “Or I will speak of Kara pursuing a mate.”

The threat thus wiped the amusement from Alura’s face.

On very few occasions could Astra admit to accomplishing such a feat. This Alura possessed a similar sobriety to her parallel counterpart. Cracking that virtuous shell took patience and precision. A small thrill of satisfaction swept through Astra. The feat of discombobulating Alura in the time it took a pulse rifle to discharge would stay in her memory indefinitely.

The dumbstruck expression endured and Astra had the temerity to laugh at her sister. She had never been quite so amused by a face, let alone one that belonged to Alura. This was a grand moment indeed – worthy of making her top ten favorite conversations.

Soon the mirthful noise persuaded Alura to join in. Any misunderstanding lingering between them thawed from laughter. For the first time in a long time, it felt right to laugh. Astra had a reason and the company to share it with. It felt so good; all concerns about Alex and their hesitant interactions slipped out of mind.

The ice in Alura’s glass clinked as she brought it to her lips. “Where are Alexandra and Misha?”

“They are at Argo City beach.” Astra adjusted the coaster beneath her drink. She grew downcast at the thought that they were laughing and enjoying the sunshine without her. It was selfish, of course, but she couldn’t help it.

Alura must have discerned her conflict. “I am sorry you cannot join them. It will only be a little while longer before you are able to come and go as you please.” She paused in consideration. When she spoke again, her words were carefully chosen. “How has he adjusted to your return?”

“Alex and I have explained to him that my travels have distorted my memory of the past four years. He thinks I have forgotten.” Astra pressed at her temple. She fixated on the condensation beading down the outside of her glass. “I am no more comfortable lying to him than Alex is. I don’t wish to deceive my own child, but he is too young to grasp the complexities of the situation.”

Grave as well, Alura agreed with a nod. “It is a delicate situation. People continue to believe that a
natural born child would corrupt the Kryptonian genome.” She tilted her head with severity. “In
their eyes, you failed to preserve the purity of our race. They were receptive to exiling their own
because you threatened their way of life. While the High Council is now in far more capable
hands, I still fear our people’s unwillingness to let go of the old ways. I understand how difficult it
is to comprehend this conflict while being cooped up here in isolation, but you should be prepared
to meet resistance.”

The sage advice caused Astra to bow her head. Jeremiah meant more to her than anything – her
honor, her life, the humanity she had found on a distant planet now rendered to interstellar dust.
She could not make any more mistakes of conscience or her son would reap the consequences.
Leaving old habits behind was easier said than done. She had to strive her hardest to devote herself
to patience and prudence, train her impulses to seek diplomacy first and to fight when all options
were exhausted. This was her son and she would be damned if her cavalier, pig-headed, deplorable
attitude fanned the flames of his adversity.

“I am sorry,” Alura said. She leaned forward, hand outstretched. Then she froze, realizing her
mistake, and pulled back. Her gaze dropped to the clinging hands in her lap. “I have overstepped.
This is a subject to be discussed with Alexandra not I. Though… I will listen without judgment. If
you wish to talk, I am always here.”

With a sigh, Astra let it go like water off a war-kite’s wings. “Easy does it, Alura.” She was not yet
ready to share the warmth cascading through her. Instead of acknowledging the pledge, she pulled
a sardonic twist of her mouth and said, “We have only met after all.”

* * *

“You know, if you build that sand castle any higher, we could live in it.”

Jeremiah giggled. “Don’t be silly, Mommy. We’re too tall to fit!”

“Are you sure?” Alex bent down to squint at the window drawn in by a tiny finger. “I think I could
squeeze in there.”

“No, you couldn’t fit.”

Alex smiled and leaned back to give him enough space to build his growing enterprise. “Oh, my
mistake.”

A few yards away, waves slushed on the white shores of Argo City beach. It was a dry heat – the
driest Argo had seen all season. While citizens went about their business day as usual, the beaches
drew little activity. Occasionally, gulls squawked and snagged at scraps lying in the sand. They
glided effortless on the warm swells above, their long wings casting shadows on the strip of dry
land.

It was much cooler here than inland. Natives of Argo knew well to take care when dipping into the
water. The Dandahu Sea contained a biting chill all year round. Most Kryptonians could bear the
frigid temperatures, but Alex’s thin skin and fragile immune system could only take about five
minutes of it.

If only Astra were there. Alex really hoped Alura’s motion to pardon her succeeded because
someone else was going to have to take Jeremiah for his dips. Before her banishment, this planet’s
Astra had usually been the one to take him for swims. Of all the things Alex cherished about her,
she missed her support as a mother. Now, the only long-term support she had in raising Jeremiah
depended on the High Council’s verdict. Alex wished they would make a decision soon. As much
as she enjoyed splashing around with Jeremiah, she’d prefer not to freeze her ass off in the process.

That day, she and Jeremiah had both donned their wetsuits. Designed with short sleeves and leggings cut below the knee, the suit was intended for shallow water use. The material’s light weight allowed for faster drying without sacrificing insulation. The secret lied in its breathable fibers which could expand and contract depending on the temperature. Out of water and under the sun, Alex and Jeremiah could rest from a swim in the comfort of their blue, body-molded suits.

Taking the day off from work was a spur of the moment decision, one which received ample excitement from Jeremiah. He came at her with all sorts of ideas, mostly comprising the usual, but Alex wanted to do something special. Instead of baking under the reflective metals of skyscrapers and on the heat absorbing concrete of the city, Alex decided to take Jeremiah to the beach for a cooling off. It was a treat they usually saved for weekends, but their week had escalated into a pinnacle of stress and excitement. She figured they both needed the time to unwind.

While they enjoyed the salty, afternoon breeze, the light crowd of beach goers minded their own business. No one stopped to stare at the faces made notorious by every news channel. Passersby were probably too aware of the rumored lawsuit Alura In-Ze threatened to slap on anyone who so much as disturbed the air around the two celebrities.

Jeremiah’s hands were molding his fourth and final tower when he spoke again. “I don’t wanna live in a castle anyway. I like our house.”

Alex nodded faintly. Thoughts of stacked moving containers and suitcases set in. The fear of living the rest of her life in that house without Astra had been startling. She didn’t want to grow old and see Jeremiah move on into a home of his own if she couldn’t do it at Astra’s side. In hindsight, the move wouldn’t have changed anything. It wasn’t like she could erase the memories. The thought of throwing out her things had caused a spike of panic. A new apartment with Astra’s clothes in the closet and her hand-written notes collected in a drawer wouldn’t diminish the grief.

Alex planted her hand into the sand and stared vaguely over the castle peaks. Although she understood why it felt necessary at the time, she couldn’t believe she almost took her son away from home.

“I like our house too,” said Alex. Looking at the dwindling supply of water in his pail, she concluded that he would need more binding agent. “You want me to get more?”

The integrity of his sand castle kept him from tearing his concentration away. He was kneeling in the sand and hunkered down so low his buttocks stuck up. With his tongue curling around his top lip, he smoothing the outer wall clean. “No. I’m…” He dragged off to put the finishing touch on the ramparts. “I’m done!”

Alex frowned at the exterior foundation. “No moat?”

“Not all castles have to have moats.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“My documentries.” He promptly stacked his pails and plastic tools, cleaning up after himself like his mothers taught him. “They’re highly educational for all ages.”

“Ah.”

She scratched her lip to keep from smiling like an idiot. Jeremiah had made it abundantly clear that parental praise in public places embarrassed him, but she couldn’t help it. One of the most precious
gifts her son had ever given her was his enthusiasm for learning new things. It took enormous motivation to pull his attention away from a book, a nature documentary, or an interactive exhibit at a museum. Just a month ago, she and Jeremiah had joined Kara on one of her visits to Kandor Intellectual Academy. Long story short, Alex had developed a sprained wrist from being driven around by her son’s incessant curiosity. His penchant for academics definitely came from her side of the family.

She darted her gaze from the organized pile of instruments to his sun rouged ears. So far the flies hadn’t made an appearance that day. She cleared her throat, minding the prying tone in her voice. “Earth documentaries again?”

He dusted his hands on his wetsuit and nodded.

Alex didn’t often discuss Earth outside of what he saw in educational reels. The memories were still too fresh. She looked at his castle and smiled. “You’re quite the architect.”

“What’s an architect?”

“Well, they don’t build things but they do have the ideas for what a structure will look like.” Alex tilted her head, peering fondly at his hair and the locks kinked by the sea. “Do you remember when we used to play blocks?”

He shook his head.

“It was a long time ago. You might not remember. We would sit around these foam blocks. Each one was a different size and shade because you were learning your colors. I would ask for a block and you’d bring it to me until we made a tower of them.”

The details didn’t seem to grab Jeremiah’s attention. He was far too preoccupied by his toes and seeing how far he could reach them. “That sounds boring.” His fingertips failed to reach his big toe, so he gave up with a huff.

“You were only a year old,” Alex said, chuckling. She ducked down to grab his wandering attention. “Nothing looked boring to you at that age. The fun part was when the blocks were stacked at their tallest.” Jeremiah perked up at the mention of ‘fun.’ Alex bit her lip to keep from spoiling it. “You got such a kick out of tearing that tower down. And you always jumped before I reached the count of three. You thought that was hilarious.”

She smiled at the memory of him worming around in a rainbow of foam. Those were the days he hadn’t known their relation, though something in her heart told her he loved her even then. Astra had confessed as much later on.

“You okay, Mommy?”

The breath hitched in Alex’s throat. The tension binding round her chest could not be easily shaken off. It asserted itself whenever a flash of that life came back. Whether triggered by a pigment of gray in Kara’s paintings or a curious pitch of laughter, that pressure would bear down like gravity exerted from a sling shot around a heavenly body. It never went away. Especially not with Astra’s likeness staring back.

She swiped under the corner of her eye and forced a grin. “Just a bit of sand.”

Jeremiah’s apprehension melted away and he returned to his usual wanderings. Sunlight continued to filter through the clouds, forcing his chin down and his gaze to scout the sand for treasure. He raked through his hair to get rid of some blowing sand because he believed his mother whether it
was in there or not.

The ambient noise of chatter drew Alex’s gaze to the boardwalk. Even from their distant location, she could smell the tantalizing lure of concession stands. “Hey, I’ve got an idea.”

Squinting one eye from the blazing sun, he cocked his head. “What?”

“The lines over there don’t look very long. And I don’t remember having my dessert today.” She narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips around her amusement. “I seem to remember a little boy of your height and taste for sweets mentioning how good the chok’ta pops are.”

The likelihood that some kid had taken his favorite treat for their own stiffened his lip. “That was me!”

Playing dumb, Alex thrust her head forward. “Was it?”

“Lay-leeeeee.” He squared his jaw and it bewildered Alex how the menacing expression mirrored that of his ex-general of a mother. “You know chok’ta pops are my favorite. Can we go?”

“That’s the idea.”

“Can we get one for Mama?”

Alex wilted at the suggestion. She felt bad for leaving Astra behind. After spending all that time cramped in a pod and in the hands of unpredictable gravitational waves, Astra was made to sit in an apartment. Anyone who had just escaped their death would want to run through a pasture, dive into frigid waters, and roll around in the sand like a youthful golden retriever. Anyone would go stir crazy shut up alone in a shady house while their family enjoyed the nice weather and the fresh air.

It reminded Alex of her first night on Krypton spent in a jail cell. The featureless walls and foreign smell alienated her to a sleepless night. Though the apartment had quite a few more amenities than a detention center, the feeling of confinement still remained.

Law prevented Astra from enjoying the day with her family but Alex knew in her heart that she should be there. It stabbed like guilt to let her son down and it tore down her courage to walk away from Astra.

“I’m sorry, Jeremiah, but a frozen dessert like that would melt by the time we got home.”

Jeremiah stuck out his bottom lip and looked down at his toes.

Alex sighed. Those puppy eyes still did wonders on her after four years. One would think having had Kara Danvers as a sister and a hormonal, clingy Astra for nine months would have toughed Alex’s resolve.

“I tell you what.” She reached for his hand and swung it jovially. “We’ll pick up something for her at the market outside our house. That way she knows we’re thinking of her. How does that sound?”

<Okay!>

Alex chuckled as he struggled to push himself up from the uneven ground. Since he first learned to form one syllable words, Jeremiah had always been fluent in both Kryptonese and English. However, when his enthusiasm became too boundless to express, he often displayed his exclamations in Kryptonese due to its short vowels.
Out on the boardwalk where attractions thrived and the sea smelled strongest, Jeremiah dragged
her politely to the stand advertising *chok’ta* pops. The cold, chewy dessert came on a stick. It
always reminded Alex of the fudgesicles her father bought her and Kara when they visited Midvale
Beach. She liked to think that passing down the tradition to her own child would have made her
father proud.

Seeing as Jeremiah had yet to achieve the art of multitasking around food, Alex directed him over
to a bench where they could sit and concentrate on their snack. Waves buffeted the platform edge
behind them. The backs of their necks became splattered with dew but it only served to cool them
off. Alex settled back with her frozen popsicle in one hand and her arm atop the back of the bench.
Jeremiah leaned his head into her arm to look up at the gulls flying over.

“Watch yourself.” Alex’s warning didn’t tear him from his observation, so she took a tissue from
the surplus in her pocket (a trick she learned from adventures in parenting) and dabbed at his chin.
The napkin came away glistening with gummy sweetness. “Jeremiah,” she chuckled, “you’re
getting *chok’ta* all over your face. Try to get it in you mouth. It’s made to be eaten, not worn.”

He hummed around suppressed giggles and a mouthful of popsicle. After a decent lick, he gave her
a toothy smile. *Chok’ta* was smeared all over his lips and now the tip of his nose. The sight was
heart warming and caused Alex to drop her arm around him and pull him close. God, she just
wanted to eat those cheeks. He had to be the most adorable, priceless hunk of child on the planet.
There was no contest.

Helpless to his effect on her, she bent her lips to his hair.

<Ah…> He whined, squirming away from her kisses. “Nooo. You’re sticky. My hair…”

“Oh, hair shmair.”

When he finally gained his freedom, he reclined back into her arm but not before shooting her a
surly look. He matted down his hair and returned to his dessert.

“Testy,” Alex said under her breath.

She relaxed beside him and joined in the people watching. Their bench was located in an ideal spot
away from the hubbub of amusement rides and concession stands. There was a fair bit of traffic
passing by as it approached the end of business hours.

Alex contemplated the past six months and how it had affected her son. Even before Astra was
exiled, she explained the situation to him the only way she knew how. Jeremiah never accepted it,
but he did accept the love and comfort from both his mothers those last three days. And when she
was gone, he carefully took up with Alex in the forthcoming nights, unable to wake up without
anyone beside him. Being surrounded by Astra’s things seemed to quell his discomfort long enough
to lull him to sleep. He was quiet about it, but Alex could read the request on his face every time
he came to her bed. He never believed Astra’s version of the story. Participating in a long
expedition to a distant solar system would have convinced most children but not Jeremiah. So he
took his questions to Alex.

Over the months, the questions still came despite knowing the futility of asking. Every week
brought more condolences to her door in the form of casseroles. It only served to remind them of
what they were missing. Alex tried her best to be a good mother without Astra. When Jeremiah
couldn’t sleep or was haunted by the memory of his mother, she slipped into bed beside him and
held him until the sobs turned to snores and they both fell asleep.
Now everything had changed. Jeremiah was sleeping again. Alex couldn’t turn over in bed without steeling her courage. It was so easy for him. The world was such a small, innocent place to a boy. It was so much harder for her. Change never did fit well into Alex’s life because she happened to like routine. She almost grew familiar with the new one her and Jeremiah had settled into. But then it all came crashing down like a landslide.

She looked the same. She even smelled the same. Alex sometimes felt that there was something wrong with her for not opening up to Astra. Why couldn’t she be happy? Why couldn’t she rejoice as her son had? It didn’t make any sense. Alex could no more comprehend her own feelings than she could Astra’s.

Though Alex hadn’t fully welcomed Astra, she made it a priority to put her son’s feelings before her own. Just because Astra was back didn’t mean they could resume where they had left off. It was more complicated than that. Instead of talking about it, she gave the impression by keeping her distance and focusing on Jeremiah’s well being.

Things may seem uncertain between her and Astra, but at least Jeremiah had his mother back. For six long months they had mourned together. There were still tears on her pillow from the nights he couldn’t bear to sleep alone. Alex knew what Astra coming back in any form meant for him. To him, her reappearance proved that betrayal and abandonment had nothing to do with her departure. The ‘why’ didn’t matter. She was home, no questions asked. It went without saying that Jeremiah’s happiness meant more to Alex than her own and it was the only reason why she allowed Astra to stay in their house – that and maybe an atom of loneliness.

Alex looked down and squeezed his shoulder. “So, how are things with your mom being back?”

If the inquiry frazzled her nerves, it hardly fazed Jeremiah. He straightened and looked up at her with his round gray-green eyes. His entire body seemed to pulse at the mention of Astra. “I’m glad she’s back, but I knew she would.”

Alex wished she had his faith. Though Astra may have returned, so much time had passed since they said goodbye to one another in a dimly lit hangar. Alex had gone through so much hardship and happiness without her. They couldn’t possibly go back to the way things had been. Could they? It couldn’t be done like flipping a light switch. Their relationship wasn’t a truck that could be fixed with an oil change and a deft touch.

Astra might be the same person, but Alex wasn’t so sure she could admit to the same. Those days of green grass and yellow sunlight felt so long ago. The bitter memory that sprang from tracing a scar rarely touched her mind anymore. Astra fell in love with the Alex Danvers who shot hostiles in the knee and poured vitriol into her arguments. The last time they saw each other on Earth, Alex had given her heart to one Kryptonian. Now she belonged to two people: one living and the other a ghost.

“I wanna help her remember what she forgot,” Jeremiah said.

“This isn’t scary for you, is it?”

“No. It’s kinda like an adventure without leaving the house.”

Alex grinned and roughed his hair with a chok’ta-less hand. “You’re a good son, you know that? I bet Mama feels lucky to have someone like you to help bring her memories back.”

“I hope so. I’m gonna try real hard.”
“Do you think she’s remembered anything so far?” At his puzzled look, she patted his thigh and lowered her voice from eavesdroppers. “I just don’t want you to get your hopes up, Jeremiah. It might be a while before she’s back.”

Jeremiah eyed her suspiciously. “She’s back. She’s a little different…” His mouth twisted to find the words to describe what he was feeling. Though a child of four didn’t possess the vocabulary to explain every conceivable emotion, they did have a boundless sense of wonder. When his gaze met weaving shadows, he said, “But Mama loves us like the gulls love the sky.”

Alex leaned back to gape at the juvenile impression of a complex metaphor. She couldn’t shake the words. Mama loves us. Suddenly, her toddler didn’t look like a toddler. He was growing before her eyes and speaking things which rattled her courage. Why couldn’t she commit to the same as he did in so effortless a manner? Why hadn’t she fallen into Astra’s arms as he did that day?

Her grip on his shoulder flexed in a dizzying pattern of tense and release. “Jeremiah…” Her shallow voice ached for breath. She sighed and donned an honest expression. Its artificial quality numbed her cheeks. “The gulls love the sky because they know nothing else. They have no other choice.”

He held her stare, failing to see the difference. “Yeah.”

Alex closed her eyes, wiling herself to believe as he did. Astra may not “return to her old self” as Jeremiah hoped but the question remained: would he be satisfied with the one in his midst? Would Alex?

Her head hurt. She didn’t blame it on the heat. She was beating a dead horse over a situation she had no control over. Instead of wearing herself down, Alex went back to nibbling on her dessert. “Finish your chok’ta,” she said. “Then we’ll go get something for Mama on the way home.”

Jeremiah remained silent. He didn’t even lift his popsicle to his mouth. He simply stared at her with his soft eyes. Their shrewd kindness dismantled every square inch of her mask until she was left exposed.

Alex released her lip from between her teeth and dove down before she lost the nerve. Her kiss found his ear where it didn’t tickle. She didn’t want the gesture to incur amusement or wiggling away from her. “You’re everything to me.” Her voice wavered over the crashing tide. She closed her eyes, shutting out the boardwalk visitors, the ocean, the birds, the fate of their universe. Alone with her son, she whispered softly for his ears only. “I love you.”

Her breath shuddered and she pressed her forehead against his hair. The salty Dandahu filled her nostrils and for the first time in a long time she didn’t despair that it wasn’t the Pacific. Home had no mortal location on any planet or universe. Home beat at a thriving rhythm beneath her hand. Alex wanted so badly to come apart. She was so confused over Astra. She didn’t know who she was outside of being a mom. There was no rush, of course. Astra’s noble manner (which could also be mistaken for reticence) kept her from pressing an answer. Yet even the most self-disciplined of lovers could not combat the yearning. Alex saw it in her eyes every morning they woke up beside one another, when they performed common courtesies and said their “pleases” and “thank yous.” Astra pleaded for acceptance without ever speaking a word and it pressed so hard on Alex’s heart she felt it would one day implode.

Footsteps sounded along the platform and chattering voices barged in. Alex recognized that this was a very public place and yet she still needed a moment to freak out. The indecision stole her
breath. Her lungs burned with every movement of her chest. This was unlike her panic attacks of old. Alex felt like she was drowning in deep water. When she looked up all she saw was Astra on the other side with those sad eyes and an outstretched hand.

For some piteous reason, Alex resigned herself to drowning. She couldn’t help it. She felt something pulling on her ankle every time she kicked to the surface, every time she so much as considered those same words Jeremiah expressed with ease.

Alex wanted to fall apart. She had it down to a science after losing her father, her mother, her sister, all her friends, Earth, and Astra… She wanted to fall but she couldn’t.

The only thing that saved her came in the form of a small hand clutching the wetsuit at her back. It was tender and insistent at the same time. It brought courage where none remained and compassion in places that begged with an embarrassed tremble. It was the same courage she had used when holding off a hostile incursion. The same kindness when cheering up her sister after a misunderstanding with Miss Grant.

Alex knew that whatever happened between her and Astra, Jeremiah would always be around to keep her head on her shoulders. It was that kind of heroism that saved people from drowning.
“Talk to me?”

Alex blinked under the crimson canopy. Leaves were drifting from their brittle branches and making a crackling noise when they landed. One of them stuck to her hair like a starfish clinging to a boat hull. She snagged it off before turning to Astra.

“What?” she asked.

“You look like you have something on your mind.”

Astra looked down the long thoroughfare peopled by impeccably uniformed citizens. On the soft lawn, artists sat drawing at their canvases. One young fellow in particular raised his brush to get their attention and had asked to paint their portraits, but Alex politely declined. Astra, to her frustration, couldn’t discern the way he was looking at them as they passed by.

Despite the beautiful morning, she was having a hard time enjoying it. Dozens of eyes following her every step. The feeling of being watched had always unsettled her, which was why she missed her ability of flying. If this were Earth she could escape their scrutiny in the blink of an eye. Even Krypton’s thin clouds that day would have served nicely as cover.

The nearest passersby failed to appear ignorant. The moment her eyes met his, he gave a start and proceeded to make a wide birth around them. Astra didn’t take her glare off him the entire time. When he drifted out of sight, she turned her head forward. Reflexively, her hand touched the small of her back, but then she remembered and bit her cheek in reprimand.

After several years away, the instinct to grab her sidearm still thrived. Considering the satisfaction taken in her extraordinary abilities from Earth’s sun, Astra didn’t think she would miss firing a weapon. Now she wished she had brought a sidearm.

Astra eyed her surroundings. Alert, her attention jumped from one suspicious character to the next. Alex had yet to reply, so she sighed. “You must have something on your mind.” After a pause, she added in reluctance, “And I need distraction.”

Alex followed her gaze. “Oh, them? There’s nothing to fear from a bunch of scientists, Astra. Most of them admire your work in Project Valor. Or, at least, they admire the woman who looks like you.”

“That is a comforting thought. Here I am, lying about who I am and what I have done, and you expect me to remain calm?”

“Alura has pulled out all the stops to ensure that no consequences will befall you. According to the dispensations outlined in the High Council’s verdict, you’re free to stay on Krypton and continue your work – whatever that may be.”

Ah, yes. There was that little hitch. The urge to drop all pretenses and give in to depression felt so tempting. What job could someone like her take up after a failed military career and a short-lived position as a weapons technology consultant to humans? She had a criminal record on two planets after all. Two dead planets. The opportunities to contribute to society were hardly springing up like daisies. She was faced with plenty of challenges – no doubt about that – but none of them would lead to a career. At the moment, Astra felt impossibly useless and pressed to find a means to support her family.
“You’re worrying,” Alex said.

“I am not worrying.”

“You’re stewing like a pot roast.” At the questioning glare, Alex pointed in the general direction of Astra’s face. “Your jaw does that thing when something is bothering you.”

Astra didn’t know if Alex intended to prove their familiarity but she was doing a brilliant job. Astra gave a sardonic twist of her mouth. She knew the childish nature of her silence but Alex knew her too. She was stubborn and she would not give these spectators anything.

Without warning, Alex slowed their pace. The heavier subjects always called for a more thoughtful stride. “You just arrived a few days ago. Give it time.”

Alex’s hands found a place in the pockets of her work uniform. The trousers and long sleeve reminded Astra of the uniforms donned by her army. She frowned, unsure how to feel about that comparison. When she thought about it, this planet did conform to a sort of militaristic order. Everyone around her seemed to be marching to the beat of the same drum. At one time, Astra would have felt proud of the sight. She shook off the disturbance trickling up her spine and walked on.

“In any case,” Alex continued, “we do have more to celebrate than your freedom. Thanks to Alura and her team, Jeremiah has all the rights of a Kryptonian citizen.” She smiled at the ground and said, “Though he doesn’t seem to understand the implications. To him, nothing’s changed.”

“There should be no rejoicing.” When Astra’s firm voice drew Alex’s attention, she locked eyes with her so there was no mistaking her words. “The High Council has yet to confer all benefits, liberties, and duties on you. To them, you are no more than a stray. How do you expect to live as one of them when they do not treat you with respect? Do not misunderstand my displeasure. I am very grateful that Jeremiah has legal claim here, but Alura was supposed to free both of you.”

Alex’s gaze flit away in discomfort. “She’s trying her best.”

“Then maybe you should seek alternative counsel.”

“Did something happen between you two?” Alex cocked her head with a sigh. “Astra, what did you do?”

“What did I do? I did nothing. Why do you instantly take her side over mine?”

“This is not a war. I’m not taking sides. Alura has done a lot to make me feel welcome here. I could spend the rest of my life repaying her and it wouldn’t come close to clearing my debt.” Soon Alex’s expression softened. “She’s been a wreck since losing her sister. Like you… she just wants her family back, so can you please try to give her a chance?”

The words rang strong and honest from Alex. Astra turned them over in silence. Though Alex didn’t know it, her brows knit in worry that she had spoken out of turn, not enough, or far too much. Astra bit back laughter. Alex always did overanalyze. A seed of affection bloomed in her chest. She warmed to the sentiment even if Alex didn’t mean for the conversation to take such a profound turn.

“You are close to her,” Astra said. They were passing under another thick canopy and in the cover of shade, she ached to feel that glowing flush from Alex’s cheek. “I hear it in the way you speak of each other. She has mentioned the challenges you have overcome.”
Alex appeared conflicted over the information. “You two talk about me?” Slowly but surely her mouth quirked up in a faint smile. “What do – Actually, you know what? I don’t think I want to know.”

Astra smiled at the absurdity of Alex’s cheeks and how they flamed in embarrassment. “It is not a secret.”

“Sure, but the conversations you have with her should stay between you two. I don’t want to interfere.”

Vague confusion filled Astra over the need to set Alex’s mind at ease. “Alura and I…” She paused in amazement at her ability to use her sister’s name without flinching. “Nothing… hostile occurred between us.” She allowed the squirming shame to sit in her gut. Sometimes good intentions didn’t come across so well in her case. “I haven’t seen her in a long time.”

Though Alex didn’t reply, her long gaze offered enough acknowledgement to quell the ill twisting of Astra’s stomach. They had once perfected this – their understanding one another without using words. They created a language based on the small intimacies whether it came as a hand graze, a hum, or a cue as unassuming as a glance.

They walked side by side, mindful of their proximity yet feeling somehow closer than before. Their hands may not have touched, but the hair on the back of Astra’s hand stood up in recognition. It suddenly felt as natural as flying on Earth. That nearly-there-intimacy was as desirable as the impulse to carry Alex up into the clouds.

The subject of Alura pulled Astra back from her reverie. Little by little their conversations had opened her eyes to the steadfastness in Alura. She had worked tirelessly to eliminate the obstacles faced by Alex and Jeremiah. Since Alex unknowingly revealed Alura’s hand in Jeremiah’s adoption, she had stopped at nothing to fight for the freedom and happiness of her family.

Astra saw the yearning in Alura’s eyes whenever they met. That forthcoming gaze wanted acceptance and she would die without it. She would rather destroy her reputation than allow any harm to come to her twin. After all the hardship Astra had suffered because of her sister’s decision to uphold superfluous law, she was loath to let go of her anger. She nurtured it for decades. There were moments in the maddening darkness of her prison cell when the memory of Alura’s words kept her alive. The condescending justification of being “bound by more than blood” pushed Astra to remain sane long enough to take the steps her people failed to heed. Anger might have been the reason Astra outlasted the Phantom Zone in addition to those first days acclimating to Earth’s gravity and abundant sensory disturbances, but then what had anger given her in return but more hardship?

Astra wanted to give in to Alura’s love. There her twin stood, alive and thriving alongside young Kara, so what good did it do any of them to sulk over the past? Alura did not beg and fall on her knees, beating her heart for recognition. Her actions spoke volumes. The obstacles overcome in protecting those Astra held dear proved her loyalty. There was nothing left for Astra to do but forgive herself for holding on so long to antiquated disloyalty and accept the woman into her heart. Only in her wildest dreams did she hope for a second chance. They may not return to their inseparable ways, but perhaps they could regain a semblance of that tenderness. Astra would be satisfied with even a shred of it.

Thinking over their most recent conversation, a niggling sensation spurred Astra’s chin up. She turned to Alex. Her need for assurances outweighed her loathing to disturb Alex’s peaceful countenance.
“Alura recently expounded upon the details surrounding the other… Astra’s… exile. She spoke of a young woman named Qora. Though she is a cousin of the In-Ze family here on this planet, I cannot claim to have a cousin of that name.” Astra gave in to the foreboding with a clench of her teeth. “Is the Council of Law and Behavior certain that she will not interfere again?”

The muscles in Alex’s jaw flexed. “Alura told you about her?”

Astra frowned at the rigid tone. “Yes. I don’t want her anywhere near Jeremiah. Family or not, she is our enemy. If the authorities haven’t taken steps to ensure that that woman is serving time, I will succeed where they failed.”

Staring ahead, Alex raised her brow at the horizon of concrete and bobbing heads. “Some things never change.”

Astra wasn’t sure if Alex meant it as a compliment. She pressed for clarification by holding her stare.

“You don’t have to worry about Qora,” Alex said after a pause. “She was picked up by authorities at a protest in Kandor and charged with crimes against the state. The High Council doesn’t like common citizens taking the law into their hands. It makes them uncomfortable and I can understand why. Her and her militant friends were rounded up and put in prison.” She glanced Astra’s way, pouring certainty into her voice. “She can’t hurt us anymore.”

The lingering stiffness in Alex’s posture told Astra she wasn’t telling the whole truth. “Have you seen her since?”

“Alura was able to get me visitor access. Qora was being held in a temporary detention center at the time while she waited out her sentencing.” Alex shrugged and said, “I questioned her motives till I was blue in the face. It didn’t make any sense to me why my closest friend would turn on me. It also made me angry that I didn’t see it coming. I’ve been trained to predict people’s motives through body language and speech patterns, but Qora was a blank slate.” She fell silent for a moment. Her eyes darted from one side of the thoroughfare to the other. Suddenly, she shook her head and scowled. “I thought she cared about us. Why would she put Jeremiah in jeopardy? She couldn’t answer that. I was there for an hour and all she did was spout that shit rhetoric. She told me she had been aligned with an underground faction calling themselves Black Zero. They indoctrinated her to their anti-human thinking. Her relation to our family made her the perfect asset. They placed her in Alura’s office to spy for them. She put on a performance, making me feel comfortable to the point of trusting her with all my secrets. It was her plan all along. When the time came, she released damaging evidence that risked Jeremiah’s life.”

Astra didn’t know whether to scream and rage at the disingenuous harpy Qora or drown in sympathy over Alex’s guilt. There was no way to spot such traitorous designs when Qora passed herself off as dutiful cousin. No one would think ill thoughts of a girl who spent as much time as possible cheering up their friend over lunch and shopping. She even babysat Jeremiah who apparently didn’t so much flinch in her direction.

Before she could make Alex see reason, a weary voice spoke over her.

“But that was six months ago.” Alex dug deeper into her pockets. Whatever diversion used to conceal her bitterness was botched by the heart in her throat. “She thought she was making Krypton a safer place to live.”

Astra tread gently on. “How did that make you feel?”
“She was my friend and she was beyond saving. What do you think?”

That undoubtedly ended the conversation. They fell silent, feet beating the sidewalk at a similar pace as their hearts. Astra kept up with Alex even if the brisk strides were unnecessary.

The walkway curved ahead. Alex led them around the bend towards a long complex. Most of the buildings they had passed looked similar in design, but the one ahead stuck out like a clean, sophisticated thumb.

Astra could admit astonishment at the cutting-edge architecture. Her breath caught over its marriage of synthetics and natural graphite. For the first time since landing, Astra recognized a bit of her home planet.

“You look surprised,” said Alex.

Shaking her head, Astra found that her voice wouldn’t cooperate.

Alex smiled unabashedly. “Wait till you see the lab.”

* * *

Visiting Project Valor’s central laboratory was a ruse in disguise. Alex had spent the past day and a half going on about the benefits of networking oneself into Krypton’s good graces, namely the scientific community. Apparently, news of Astra’s return spread to the project’s team members who decided to welcome Astra to a small “get-together” where they could “meet and mingle.” Alex’s version of the story somehow made the invitation that much more unbelievable.

Frankly, Astra knew she should expand her social circle outside the primary members of family. Her mental health, for lack of a better term, depended on a healthy, non-platonic support system. It would also benefit her to have a few allies in case the High Council turned on her or loathsome detractors came to a more permanent means of eliminating the source of their threat.

The devices used in disguising the true host of this “shindig” might have been cute if it were not for Alex’s ulterior motive. At the moment, she had three mouths to feed, only one of whom had steady employment.

Astra was floundering for a purpose, so instead of giving her the space to discover new opportunities, Alex took matters into her own hands. She brought Astra to her place of work under the guise of introducing new faces, and it was sly. Very sly. Stirring Astra’s enthusiasm would not succeed when she had fingerprints all over her back. Alex meant well but she was pushing.

The sound of clinking glassware tugged Astra back to the present. She glanced around at the faces surrounding her, watching their mouths move and thinking how ridiculous this charade was. Neither the team nor the laboratory succeed in grabbing her attention. Not when Astra’s one and only ally left her to fend for herself.

Alex seemed to have made a point of remaining at a constant distance – as if she meant to prove that she had faith in Astra’s ability to make her own friends. She stood opposite near the buffet of canapés, nursing her low-proof cocktail and trying to appear oblivious. Astra rolled her eyes. As if Alex wasn’t hanging onto every word uttered in her direction. She orchestrated this get-together after all.

Despite Alex’s underhanded methods, Astra would have preferred her company, especially being surrounded by strangers. She felt as out of place as the lunch spread and carafes of liquor looked in the laboratory setting.
A rich, formidable voice rumbled to her left where the team’s neuropsychologist stood.

“Alex mentioned that the matrix bred you for the warrior guild,” Axel said with a bob of his head. “And you ruffled a few feathers during your service.” Upon noticing her glance toward a stiffening Alex, he assured her with a smile and raise of his drink. “No worries. You’re in good company. All of us here have upset the establishment in some fashion or another.”

“You were promoted to general,” Lucya remarked. The chemist who was rarely dazzled by anything less than burning ammonium dichromate arched her brow. “That is quite an accomplishment.”

“I am not as decorated as you might expect.” Stiff cheeks made it difficult for Astra’s grin to widen.

“Still,” Axel said. “A general. Your family must have been proud.”

A heavy silence fell. Furtive glances shot in Astra’s direction while she remained mightily unreadable. Irina, being closest to Axel and armed with more audacity than the rest of the team, elbowed him in the side.

<Rao> he muttered with a shake of his head. He beckoned Astra with an open palm. “I didn’t mean to speak of the departed. My humble –“

“No apology is necessary,” said Astra. “My parents were never accepting of my work – even when it served an honorable purpose. They are dead and gone, along with the rest of my planet. It is history as they say.”

Their heads bowed and they searched the floor for the right response. Their previous supervisor would not have accepted pity or grand gestures. She took as much pride in her work as she did in keeping personal matters private. If this woman was anything like their Astra, it profited everyone to allow her the last word.

Eventually, they dispersed and formed smaller discussions, some over science and others over more prosaic matters such as sporting events. Astra assumed their interest in her had expired and she could go on drinking in isolation. Despite Axel’s honest lapse, they were a nice enough group of people. Astra didn’t mind the questions and comments. Seeing as she had come bearing the exact resemblance of someone they knew and loved, she could suffer through their endless curiosity for a few hours.

They took it rather well. Alex had prepared them to face the truth of her duplicity, and although she mentioned it in passing, Astra detected a great well of guilt in her. The team of Project Valor had taken Alex in as a friend when she thought her planet’s destruction prevented any hope of gaining any. Krypton had rejected her – as a guest, a citizen, a scientist – and her transition would have been so much more challenging if these people hadn’t stood beside her.

They were her friends and she lied to them about where she came from. For three years they believed Alex had left Earth to find opportunity. Despite the story’s lack of details, they didn’t ask questions. Which made the truth exceedingly difficult to impart.

Alex had explained the situation to the team: the two universes, Jeremiah’s birth mother, the fabrications she and the other Astra spun to ensure their safety. The team took it all in stride. They were shocked by the news and despairing at the fact that the Astra who returned was not the woman they knew. It took time for it all to sink in, but they didn’t seem to harbor any ill feelings.
Judging by the clandestine nature of the invitation, their approval of Astra seemed to mean something. Someone had taken steps to make sure this party went off without a hitch. If either of them had been nervous about heading in to this welcome committee it was Alex.

Of course, Astra had her doubts going in. She did not want to act as a stand in. She did not expect nor wish to become their version of Astra In-Ze. Fortunately, they did not give the impression that they wanted her to. Astra had as much respect for her sense of identity as they did for their dearly departed friend.

Astra rested back against one of the work stations and sipped idly from her drink. A sense of having dodged a plasma bolt settled in when her hiding spot became not so hidden.

One of the team members, a man with the bearing of a leader whose name Astra recalled as Soren, sidled in beside her.

“How are you enjoying yourself?”

Somewhat fine, Astra thought, until you disturbed my solitude. She grinned tightly and said, “Splendid.”

Drawing back from his drink, he chuckled on the back of his hand. “That bad?”

After an hour of keeping up pretenses, Astra finally broke. She puffed out and said, “I’m sorry but I see no reason to make a lasting rapport. It would benefit everyone here if the lines of distinction are established immediately.” Her chin lifted and she swept the crowd out of obligation. “I am doing this for Alex.”

“It is always good to know a stranger’s allegiances. You are that much closer to becoming an acquaintance.” He raised a brow in challenge. “What ever will you do now?”

The optimism leaked from his pores, and Astra didn’t like it. She didn’t like him. On a whim, she opened her mouth against Alex’s wishes but he got there first.

“Astra.” He faced her directly, taking on an annoying expression of kindhearted gravity. “May I call you Astra?”

“That is my given name.”

He nodded. “I am Soren, by the way.”

“Yes, I know who you are.”

He nodded and held steady with her condescending gaze. “I just want you to know that you always have a place here. We might not look like your average household, but we all consider ourselves to be family, and Alexandra is part of our family.”

Astra fought a roll of her eyes and wondered how much longer she had to listen to this. She cocked her head to show interest. Her mouth crinkled in a sardonic smile. “That is very civilized of you.”

“While it is difficult to hear of our Astra’s passing, we hope to offer you the same welcome we bestowed on Alexandra.” He looked over his shoulder before panning back. “I think I speak for the others in extending our gratitude. Alexandra has not been herself these past few months. As difficult as it is for us to watch her turn down offers to help out with Misha and her research, this has been hardest on her. Whatever the context of your relationship now, she has slowly been coming back to herself and I think you are responsible. It brings me relief to see her smiling again,
so thank you.”

Frowning, Astra followed his gaze to the exuberant conversation between Alex, Irina, and Lucya. The smile seemed to make everyone else’s wider. It was inexplicable how she managed to produce a glow that reached every corner of the room. Every person in her vicinity stared rapt by her smile.

Instead of jealousy, a mesmerizing influence rendered Astra to a standstill. Suddenly, she was remembering a piece of her childhood – a book her mother read to coax her and her sister to bed. The tale of Vera-El, mythical princess and Krypton’s very own Jeanne d’Arc, used to awe Alura but confuse Astra to sleeplessness. As a child, Astra refused to grasp the magic of devout influence. She worried her brow over how one could blanket Krypton’s sky with a constellation of stars when the average Kryptonian’s reach barely exceeded an arm’s length. Outer space was just too far for things to be thrown into their vacuum. And even if it were possible, why would the entire surface beam up and rejoice at a smiling constellation? Why, when there were hundreds more amongst it?

Witnessing the concept of ‘one of a kind’ never halted Astra in her tracks like watching Alex. Her smile embodied the mystic wonder of Vera-El, and she had never looked more radiant.

From the outskirts looking in, Astra retreated into her self-made prison of repentance. “I have not done anything.”

“You have done something,” Soren said. “If you wish for my council: do not overthink it.”

With a knowing look in his eye, he drew away.

She took his advice only because it kept her eyes from incidentally meeting Alex’s.

Alone once again, Astra glimpsed the lab in her midst. Whatever she expected to see, it did not come in the form of low-grade technology. Though it was above and beyond the crude conceptions studied by DEO’s engineers, she had seen far better tools on other civilized worlds. It would seem this universe’s Krypton had yet to make the advancements in medicine her world had made.

As much as she wanted to inform them of better avenues, she bit her tongue. The last time she intervened in a civilization, her good intentions branded her a terrorist. After Krypton, she repeated the cycle by inflicting her judgment on an ignorant, self-violating world, over half of whose citizens were innocent. Astra would not force another loved one to send her to prison or to watch her die.

The trappings of experimental science gleamed under the limelight of Project Valor’s success. Astra understood the pride these people took in their devices. When they talked about the numerous challenges overcome in bringing the project to relevance, she discerned a sense of parental achievement. It resembled a similar pride she once felt for Myriad.

Thorny musings spurred Astra to change gears. She breathed deeply, taking heart in Alex’s assurance that these people were their allies. Don’t give them a reason to distrust her, she had been cautioned, and they will take her into their graces.

Astra’s eyes jumped from one character to the next. They were not soldiers. Their training came in the form of experimental procedures in neuroscience. The longer she spent watching them, the more her suspicions retracted. They were harmless as children. Astra respected their passion and the lengths they suffered to promote their ideas. They may be starry-eyed and wedded to their work, but they were relatively inoffensive.
Inevitable as the sunrise, Astra’s gaze returned to the most beautiful individual in the room. The glow… the smile… that scrunch of her nose… The sight of Alex knocked Astra's heart rate into high gear. She had no expectations about the night, but that didn’t mean her body would obey. Her forehead broke out into a sweat. She didn’t know what was coming over her. Perhaps it was the d’zhin burning a path down her throat. It had been some thirty years since she last ingested the stuff.

In Alex’s case, however, the alcohol made her cheeks burn a lovely pink and when she laughed her voice bellowed. She never looked so free and content. Astra blinked dumbly. She couldn’t help but let the alcohol work its effect on her. Seeing Alex like this, on Krypton, made the numbing voyage to uncertain survival worth it. If Astra wasn’t wanted in Alex’s heart, it was enough to see her happy.

Astra committed the image to memory, telling herself that if she could never again touch such radiance, the least she could do was save it for her dreams.

* * *

They arrived home in time to tuck Jeremiah in. Just barely. His head was lolling against Kara’s shoulder when they descended the stairs into the living room. Alex bent down to pick him up and she chuckled softly to the eyelashes fluttering against her neck.

Dusk plunged Argo City into darkness while night life turned it back on. The artificial lights of transportation winked beyond the windows. It was much later than Alex expected to be out. She also didn’t expect her son to be awake at this hour.

Jeremiah was far too tuckered out for her to give him a scolding. Like the softie mother she was, she helped him crawl into bed and pull up the covers without a fuss. It was hard to stay mad at Jeremiah when he lay there like a four-year-old version of the Vitruvian Man. He was already out like a light, mouth parted, and emitting the lightest of snores. She wished him pleasant dreams and left a kiss on his forehead.

She did, however, scold Kara for keeping him up late. That happened before Alex welcomed her to stay and finish the movie over a late night snack. Softie for sure. They didn’t often have time just the two of them, but now with Astra in the mix their gatherings were all the more sentimental.

Astra was loath to see Kara leave. She clung to her in meager pleading for more hugs while Kara peeked over her shoulder for help. Alex smiled and shook her head. For some odd reason, Kara was taking this better than any of them. The sight of Astra and Kara hugging it out normally brought her heart to clench. There was so much history between them, so much animosity and toxic turbulence that any sign of reconciliation felt like a reason to break out the champagne and pop off a few fireworks.

But that was on Earth. This Kara certainly had an idea of the heartache and torment Astra suffered (often times by her own design). She took it like a responsible young woman and opened her arms to Astra as if she never left. Like Jeremiah, Kara just wanted her family back. She didn’t care about divergences and the frayed past. Whatever crimes Astra committed happened on another Krypton and in another life. This was Astra’s new life, her last chance, and Kara wouldn’t see her fail.

“She is just as I remember her,” Astra said after Kara left. She had just returned from bidding goodnight to Jeremiah. She walked further into Alex’s home lab, rolling her sleeves and swiping the day’s anxiety from her forehead. “She may be sixteen but she is becoming the woman I fought all of Krypton to protect.”
The shelves of a supply cabinet held Alex’s vague study. The hopeful voice was like a slice of cheese deep dish from her favorite pizzeria in Chicago. It was so good to hear Astra speak optimistically about her past even if the choices that defined it were by and large unwarranted. As undemanding as Astra’s comment, Alex didn’t want to reveal how it made her feel. She smiled and continued her inventory.

“I was watching you tonight.” Astra’s voice echoed in the spare-bedroom-turned-laboratory. She must have been turning in place, examining the surroundings. “I have never seen anyone ingrain themselves in Kryptonian society as seamlessly as you have. Though this planet’s culture has deviated a bit from mine, it is still a challenging transition for any non-Kryptonian species. Your Kryptonese is remarkable.”

The compliment turned Alex’s cheeks plum. She smiled. <Thank you.>

Astra’s subsequent chuckle made her sound as buoyant as a cloud. <You’re welcome.> Her feet shuffled against the carpet. “They think very highly of you.”

“You sound surprised.”

“No, I… It is just that on my home world we take our honorary titles seriously. We have never treated humans on the same level – intellectual or otherwise – and for that I am embarrassed.”

“I’m pretty sure it works the same here. You just haven’t spent enough time around the team to realize how different they are from the rest of the population.”

“What I mean to say,” the sound of chaffing clothing alerted Alex to another one of Astra’s anxieties, “is that I admire you for the efforts made in acclimating to this planet. You’ve found a place for yourself in a strange land and amongst prejudiced people. Your co-workers treat you as one of their own. My people would not have taken to a human as fast. Even a human such as yourself.”

Alex gave her a look. “These are your people, too. You just have to give them a chance.”

Astra lowered her head in a meager nod. She remained silent for a moment, so Alex took that as a cue to return to inventory. Just when she finished counting the pipettes, Astra spoke up, this time reinforced to a purpose.

“I know you think I’m being hardheaded about my treatment of this Krypton and I understand why you were pushing tonight’s party. It occurred to me today that you may be right.” Her voice dragged off to the sound of brushing carpet. She moved across the room before turning back to stand at its epicenter. “Hearing your team speak of Project Valor and all the support it has provided warrior veterans… I found myself wishing my people had been as innovative – compassionate, even.

“Then it made me think,” Astra continued. "For most of my life I was driven by an aspiration whether it be a military operation or saving Krypton from its incompetence. I wasn’t meant to live at a stand still. Although the idea of staying at home to care for Jeremiah appeals to me, that duty alone will not satisfy me in the long-term. I need to be driven.” Astra paused to brush a hand over her stomach. “It is difficult, however, to scrounge the enthusiasm when I am surrounded by my past. I wake every day facing the reality of having failed Krypton. What possible good can come from a second chance when I did not learn from my mistakes? If I had, Earth would still exist.”

The oddly stripped voice caused Alex to turn. Though she held her ground, she stared long enough to catch Astra’s attention. “I suggested the party because I thought it would motivate you. It wasn’t
my intention to make you feel worthless. You still have a lot to offer.”

“Who?” Astra’s clenched hands parted. “Who would accept my skills?”

Alex shrugged. “Maybe you should start at the source. The only expectations that should matter are your own. If you don’t want to go back and enlist with the warrior guild and you don’t feel that Project Valor is enough of a challenge, ask yourself what is going to make you happiest. Try thinking outside the box.”

“What box?”

“I mean think up original career paths. Creative ones that will stimulate your mind and won’t bore you to tears.”

“I don’t know. Leading soldiers into battle seemed to be the one thing I was supremely good at.”

“Well, you’re in luck. The High Council is repealing a law that has prohibited space travel outside our galaxy.” Alex continued talking as she turned back to her shelves. “Zor mentioned it before you showed up. Military officers are needed to train and command their own crews. Their primary objective will be to protect diplomats as they travel to nearby worlds. It’s our first step in rebuilding relations.”

She paused over her use of the possessive pronoun. Did she really consider herself to be one of them? After three years of attempted assimilation, did a mere syllable prove that she had finally settled?

Alex let it go with a roll of her shoulder. “It’s just a suggestion. I really don’t mean to press the issue but as you said – you weren’t meant to live at a stand still. I promise to not bring it up again. Or if you want my input…” She glanced over her shoulder and offered an encouraging smile. It felt numb on her lips. “Just ask.”

Astra’s stare penetrated a void Alex couldn’t see. She nodded and replied distantly, “Yes, thank you.”

The look of disquiet didn’t fit Astra. She was like a puzzle with missing pieces and so desperate to belong that she would try on all options no matter how irregular they may suit her.

One thing was certain: if Astra went back to the military, Alex would not see her for months at a time. A sickening knot formed in her stomach. Not that she obsessed over those in her company lately. Alex didn’t want to be put in a position that would force her to take something (or someone) for granted. And this wasn’t just about her feelings. Astra’s service would take her away from Jeremiah. It would cut him deeply to say goodbye to her when he just got her back.

Alex released a heavy sigh. She would stand by her promise not to intrude. This was Astra’s life, not hers. If anyone knew what direction an ex-general and former eco-terrorist would be headed in, it was Astra.

Instead of pressing the issue, Alex calmed at the thought of Astra focusing on motherhood. She already missed out on the first four years of her son’s life. Astra needed a path that kept her present in Jeremiah’s life. It benefited everyone if she stayed as close to home as possible, and if Alex gave it half a thought she’d realize how much Astra’s proximity meant to her.

“I was approached by Lev tonight.”

Back still turned, Alex kept her stylus moving across the datapad. “Oh?”
Alex turned from the cabinet. Her desk was littered with open notebooks, post-it notes, pencils and colored markers, and an ill-proportioned mug made from Jeremiah’s arts and crafts day. The dregs of dried out coffee (or as Kryptonians called it, *stim caf*) still gave off a pungent odor. To the untrained eye, the work station was messy, but to Alex there was a method to her chaos.

A strange sense of success came from fresh paper cuts and ink stains. With Astra looking over her shoulder, however, the desk took on a different guise. It did kind of look like some lunatic’s shrine to the science gods. There was so much material piled on that a stranger would wonder if there was a desk under all the crap. There were benefits to hard copy notes over digital storage, but space was not one of them.

Alex raised her brow at the typical disorder and asked, “What did you guys talk about?”

“Jeremiah.” Astra went still enough to gage Alex’s response. She must have sensed her quickening heart because her head cocked a bit. “We were discussing his visits to the lab when Lev brought up his hearing impairment. He claims to have found a course of treatment. I initially brushed it off as false hope until he explained the procedure in detail. I researched this Lev on the ride home. His qualifications are sound.”

Alex kept her eyes low and her voice guarded. “Lev is an expert in his field. I’m not surprised by his interest in Jeremiah’s condition.”

Astra narrowed her eyes. “He wrote a report outlining the success this implant has shown in other studies. He can create modifications to fit Jeremiah’s particular case.” The subsequent quiet brought Astra’s hands to her hips. She thrust her head forward, veritably looking down on Alex. “Lev came to you about this and he told me you turned him down. Would you care to explain your objection?”

Alex shrugged. “What’s there to explain?”

Astra panned between Alex and the desk. Something snapped in her. It showed in the shape of her eyes and the color of her cheeks. Before Alex could interpret her body language, a hand shot out and swept the notebooks clean off the desk. They splattered to the floor in a crinkled mess. Alex pulled back, mouth open and eyes shocked wide.

“There is a promising solution on the table, one that might eliminate our son’s discomfort, and you are ignoring it. I want to know why.”

Tears pricked at the back of Alex’s eyes. Conflicting impulses twisted her to indecision. She didn’t know whether to burst into tears or fly off the handle in anger. The sight of her research reduced to a thoughtless heap on the floor burned her insides like raw lava.

Flushed to agitation, Alex met the eyes staring her down. Why did Astra have to push this? More importantly, why had Lev approached Astra about it?

Alex’s gall to return the glare pressed Astra further. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Unbelievable.” Alex shook her head of its remaining sympathy. “This is like the Twilight Zone. If I didn’t know better I’d think we were back on Earth.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you’re as condescending as when you were under the influence of those goddamned powers. Only this time we can’t blame it on cosmological origins.” The blank mask spurred Alex to tilt her head. She clarified in a even tone, “It means you haven’t changed, Astra. After
A flicker of hurt passed in Astra’s eyes but it vanished in seconds. “I have changed.”

Alex didn’t buy it for a second. Her fury over spilled research notes and the knot in her throat wouldn’t let her. “You just got here a few days ago and you think you can tell me what to do? A week doesn’t make you an expert in knowing what’s best for Jeremiah.”

Astra tucked in her chin to deliver a grave tone. “I have done everything to get back to you and our son, including condemn an innocent woman to death. It was for the greater good. For your benefit. I would not have done so if she had not insisted. Do you have any idea the struggle it took? I was prepared to meet my fate on a dying world.” She looked as if she wanted to elaborate. Then her frown deepened and she pulled her head back. “Why must you punish me?”

The honesty bleeding from Astra caught Alex off guard. She blinked. “I’m not.”

“You are driving a wedge between us and it is incomprehensible. When have our differences kept us apart? Our arguments have resolved more issues and you do not even allow that. I thought we respected each other enough to face the problem, not ignore it. I can’t ask your forgiveness if you evade me at the slightest interaction.”

“I don’t evade you.” Even Alex knew it was a lazy excuse. The rising pitch of her voice didn’t help. “And we talk plenty.”

“Alex,” her flat tone demanded reason, “we negotiated better when we were on opposite sides of a war.”

Alex shifted on her feet to rid the flustered nerves. When that didn’t work, she threw her arms out with a huff and said, “What do you want me to say? I’m fucking scared, alright? Is that what you want to hear? Lev came to me with a solution. I read all twenty-three pages of his report and by the time I was done I couldn’t stop crying. That procedure – do you know what he would go through? Lev promises it won’t hurt but what if Jeremiah wakes up? What if they don’t give him the right dosage and the sedative wears off when they’re cutting through?”

The bloody images and nightmarish wails blurred Alex’s vision. God, why was she seeing double? Her breath hitched. She grabbed at her shirt, fingers fighting the constricting collar without care. From the corner of her eye she saw Astra close in, but she didn’t trust her own vision. She didn’t deserve such compassion after the cruelty she spat.

When the brunt of panic faded, Alex stood upright and caught her breath. At the back of her mind she appreciated Astra’s silence. To be told that the procedure was a surgical implant and not a lobotomy would have only compounded her stress.

“It scares the living hell out of me,” Alex said, “and I just… I can’t make that decision. I can’t put my own child in pain.”

“If you don’t make a decision, you may be putting him in more pain, Alex. He has a chance to have a life close to ordinary. Don’t you want to give him that? Even at the slightest risk that the procedure will not succeed?”

Alex felt her knees weaken. She swayed on her feet before remembering the desk behind her. With a shaky sigh, she sagged against its edge. “Am I being selfish?” The croak embarrassed Alex. She covered her face and gasped at the heat radiating from it. Shaking her head, she raked her fingers through her hair. “Is this me losing it for no reason? I don’t want to be that mother who freaks out.
over the slightest scrape. I just want to make the right goddamn decision!”

Her equilibrium tipped and Alex sighed in relief as her knees buckled. Oh, floor, she thought, where have you been all my life? The shame of what had come out of her mouth in the last few minutes made blacking out quite appealing.

Just when she prepared for the blunt force trauma to her knees, hips, and head… Just when she was hoping for bruises come morning… Someone caught her.

“Astra,” the pitiful whine twisted Alex’s stomach in self-loathing, “just let me fall. I want to get drunk and go to bed.”

The arms tightened around her waist.

“Astra…”

Instead of the short hairs of carpet, the glossy feel of Astra’s hair met her cheek. It soon occurred to her sluggish realization that she hadn’t hit the floor and her stomach wasn’t churning in expectation of a night in with three slim bottles of her Caprani friends. Astra was combatting her with kindness. Reminding her that that wasn’t her anymore. Getting blackout drunk was a phase perfected during graduate school. Pushing anxiety deep enough to leave scars was how agents coped. Astra’s arms squeezed Not you. Not anymore. Alex found it hard to call her a bitch when the compassion felt so damn good.

“I’m sorry,” Alex choked out. The embrace stole every last bit of her resolve and she sagged in finality. “You have every right to be a part of the conversation. It’s not your fault that you weren’t here.” She sniffed and lay her head on the forgiving shoulder. Astra took it as a sign to hold her closer and when she did, her hands ran silently down Alex’s back, consoling her to putty. “It’s just… Lev offered something that sounded too good to be true and I panicked. I was suspicious and doubted everything. I acted like a field agent not a mother.”

“No,” Astra hushed, “you were experiencing a terrible dilemma alone. You were a mother afraid for your child.”

“I didn’t know what to do. You weren’t there.”

Astra’s hair brushed her cheek again. Her voice imparted gentle confidence into Alex’s ear. “I think we should consider Lev’s suggestion. And if we decide together that it is in Jeremiah’s best interest, he will not have to do this alone and neither will you.” Her hand left Alex’s back to cup the back of her head. She didn’t have to say it. She was already there.

For a long while they simply held each other. A soothing hand running up and down her back kept Alex grounded. When Astra swept her in a light swaying motion, it encouraged Alex to hold tighter in anticipation. For the briefest moment a wave of vertigo came over her and she had the feeling that her feet had left the carpet. It soothed the tension, banished the panic, filled Alex to blissful content, and completed her with that light-headed, Isn’t love grand? feeling.

In reality, though, it was not her physical being but her troubles being carried up and off of her shoulders. This was what Alex had missed most. Being able to cede a bit of responsibility relieved her like no balm ever could. And it only worked because Astra was there to accept it. Alex couldn’t share the burden of parenthood with anyone else not because they refused but because the very thought brought her to tears.

Alex didn’t want anyone else to mother Jeremiah but Astra. No one else fit the role better. She bore
nine months of discomfort and happiness and unnerving doubts about her body’s ability to bring new life to term. It took a special kind of love to suffer frequent contractions and the pain of a thirteen hour labor and delivery. If anyone had the sheer gall to escape death twice and survive enormous blood loss, it was a mother of Astra’s caliber.

There was no human or Kryptonian in the world better suited to Jeremiah’s care. Alex knew it like she knew that the human body contained 23 pairs of chromosomes or that the universe was primarily composed of hydrogen. Her certainty closely resembled that of empirical evidence. Astra bonded with him the moment he wrapped his five bitty digits around her finger. That was the kind of evidence Alex took heart in. It was the only destiny she believed in.

It dismayed Alex to feeble wheezes to have forgotten how Astra’s love could infiltrate the most foolhardy of doubts. Whether it be her love for Jeremiah or for Kara, Astra rarely allowed her affection to be misconstrued or twisted to selfish design. Even when her ambition blinded her, she never did strike her niece down. And just minutes ago Alex had accused Astra's heart of incompetence. Frankly, Astra had changed. She would never allow her ambition to supersede family. Alex couldn’t live with herself if she forgot again. She would ink it into her flesh if she had to.

The veracity of Astra’s argument wrapped Alex up. If haven was a blanket, it came in the form of Astra’s arms. They budged little yet gave the impression that she would yield if asked. Alex’s whole body ached for that attentiveness after going years without it. It had been so, so long since they had been this close. Alex wept softly in relief.

But why so stubborn? A dozen questions demanded like a megaphone in her head. How could she have turned her back on this? Why did she punish Astra for something she was clearly torn up over? Didn’t Astra have as much right to make mistakes as her? To be convinced to leave a dying planet and all those doomed to follow it?

The migraine pressing on her skull prevented any rational contemplation. Her sobs were dwindling to gasps and the only thing keeping Alex from plummeting to her knees was the support of Astra’s arms and the promise murmuring into her hair. All Alex could do at the moment was open the door a little wider for Astra and hold on for dear life.

* * *

The next morning a voice caused Astra to start. The last time she had woken to such a stern command, it was accompanied by a klaxon and several military issue bunks were flanking hers.

“Mama.”

She grunted, blinking alert. A sleep mussed head appeared out of the corner of her eye. She cocked her head back to receive a better view of the two round eyes peeking above the mattress. Jeremiah’s imploring expression was rather serious.

“Mama, I’m hungry.”

Upon noticing the blood orange glow from behind the dimmed window, Astra groaned in regret. She scrubbed her eyes in remembrance of the conversation that kept both her and Alex up the previous night.

Though she had successfully kept the liquor from Alex, she could not count herself as lucky. Social gatherings with strangers inspired more stress than necessary. Astra had been a soldier. No one expected generals to make grand speeches and bids for support off the battlefield. She had more
dignity than the sycophants who hunted down opportunities like wild cats. Just the thought of schmoozing for promotion much less friends encouraged her to dull the nerves with a glass or two. Or four.

*D’zhin* combated stress in the short-term, but it left a throbbing skull the following morning. Astra cursed herself for having forgotten its potent effect.

“Mama?”

<Rao, preserve me,> she muttered. “I hear you.” She rolled onto her side, arm tucked under her pillow and raising her other in appeal. “Come here. Grant me five minutes and then I will make you breakfast.”

Jeremiah obeyed by climbing in next to her. She hugged him close to her chest, the cold chill of morning pressed to her collarbone. Eyes drifting closed, she grinned as her body warmth thawed his nose instantly.

It wasn’t long before he started fidgeting. “Breakfast soon,” he said, wiggling his bare toes against her knees. “Promise?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “Now be still.”

He resigned to her embrace.

Behind them, Alex lay oblivious as a rock and would remain as such unless thrown off the edge of the mattress or alerted by a blood curdling scream. Astra grinned fondly, recalling the lengths taken to rouse Alex for DEO assignments. The excuse of going into labor may have been exhausted on multiple occasions, but it never failed to light a fire under an exhausted field agent.

Despite Alex’s stubborn lump of a body, Astra loved her sleeping habits. More so now because she knew what she was missing. It hurt to have Alex so near and not be able to touch her, even incidentally. The yearning to be close, to be held, to simply feel the breath of another living soul tore a hole through Astra. Every night, the hope that they would ever regain what was lost took a step back, distancing itself from her to the point where she had to squint to believe that Alex was still there.

The minutes passed. Astra had no idea how long they lay there, but the soft breaths sweeping her neck tempted her mind to a stand still. She had no place to be and Alex didn’t have work, so a lazy weekend in seemed ideal.

“Mama.” His call came wide awake from under her chin. “Can we go now?”

There was no better morning than one spent in bed with loved ones. With Alex sleeping safely behind her and Jeremiah curled against her chest, Astra enjoyed it a moment longer before letting out a lengthy sigh.

<Alright.> Her mumble dragged off in a sleepy groan.

She lifted her arm for Jeremiah to roll out. The sun had risen higher beyond the windows, beckoning to be let in. Astra decided to keep them dimmed so that Alex could sleep a while longer.

Yawning, she trudged out of the bedroom behind Jeremiah. He was off to the races with his bare feet scampering across the carpet. It was far too early to chide him. Astra rubbed her bleary eyes and headed for the kitchen. She had to be careful not to stub her toes in the process. A week didn’t make anyone a master navigator around a new place. The apartment had as many stone accents as
her previous residence on Krypton, and although the healing process was quick, Kryptonians weren’t impervious to pain.

By the time she met Jeremiah at the dining table, her efforts to avoid collision sloughed off the lethargy. Jeremiah sat kneeled on a chair, elbows on the table, and looking expectantly at her from atop his hands.

She bent down to cup his chin and rub their noses. “Good morning.”

“Good morning.”

“Can you say it in Kryptonese?”

<Good morning to you, Mother.>

The sass brought her to chuckle. She could only imagine what he’d be like at fourteen. “What would you like me to make for breakfast? I think we have some eggs and blue milk for yaytsa.”

He wet his lips in anticipation. “Yes, please!”

Astra went to the cooling unit to make sure the ingredients were available. Yaytsa was the Kryptonian version of the popular Earth dish omelette, but Jeremiah wouldn’t have known that. Since returning to Krypton, she had been looking up recipes and reading the labels of store bought products in order to refresh her memory. There wasn’t much else to do those first few days in isolation. Although cooking had never been her strong suit, being a mother had certainly proved adequate motivation. She had to keep in mind, however, that Jeremiah was no longer an infant subsisting on a liquid diet. She had a growing boy on her hands who required more than a few eggs to sustain him.

“I don’t know if I have ever told you this,” Astra said as she prepped the vegetables, “but I used to cook yaytsa for my fellow cadets. My laboratory cadets,” she corrected after a beat. “It was the only meal I could make successfully and it made me very popular amongst the recruits. The mess hall chefs loathed me. We were not allowed to cook in our living quarters, so a friend and I assembled a crude but effective hot plate for grilling on.”

“Did you get in trouble?”

Astra tossed a mischievous grin over her shoulder. “Often.”

He sat back in his chair at that and threw his hands over his giggle.

The sound warmed her more than the stove ever could. Krypton could plunge itself into worldwide conflict and she would still marvel over the blissful effect. Among the thousand and one questions a mother agonized over, the one that often occurred to Astra happened to be whether or not she had the ability to entertain her own child. If she gave him anything good in his life, she hoped it was laughter. She had never witnessed a purer form of happiness. Both the Danvers and Ze family had it in spades.

Judging by the giggles jittering through his body, he certainly had something in common with his cousin Kara. “If you keep that up,” she said, “you will not be able to get down your toast.”

She plated the thinly sliced golden brown bread and spread preserves atop the slice in one deft swipe. By the time she arrived at the table, he had his hands on his lap and was fluttering his lashes at her. His lips were pinned shut against bubbling amusement. She perked a brow at the vibrations coming from his mouth but decided his efforts were worthy of reward.
She put the snack in front of him and retrieved a glass for juice. “What do you say?”

Only after clearing his palate of an enormous first bite did he reply, “Thank you.”

Instead of continuing the conversation, Astra stemmed her eagerness or else she would overwhelm the poor boy with first hand accounts. She adored having this opportunity to share a part of herself with her son. Jeremiah reminded her that she had been a child of his age and that her past contained as many, if not more, happy occasions than those that kept her up at night. There were good memories to think fondly of and many more experiences to pass on. Astra had within reach a dozen stories from her childhood and she wanted to recount every single one to him.

Her eagerness derived from more than a selfish need to remind herself that she had been a diligent soldier and playful friend. It was important to her to share stories with Jeremiah because they conveyed who and where he came from. The Ze’s belonged to a proud and dedicated house that ensured that their heirs exemplified the family tenets before the age of thirteen. Jeremiah may be only half Kryptonian but Astra felt compelled to adhere to that tradition at least.

“Do you prefer English?” She pushed the egg mixture around in the pan. Its sizzling kept her focused on not burning the food rather than the lies being spun in her head. “I seem to have forgotten what is spoken around the house.”

“We always speak English at home.” Jeremiah pushed away his plate of crumbs. Instead of asking for more, he let out a yearning sigh and lay his head on his arm in wait for the main course. “You talk in Kryptonese more than Mommy.”

Astra certainly couldn’t lie about that. She was realizing how much she missed speaking in her native tongue. Not only that, but she thrilled at the opportunity to brush up on her accent around her son, a natural conversationalist and bilingual prodigy.

She tilted her head. “Why do you think that is?”

“Because she’s from Earth.”

Astra nodded silently. Although having been apprised of the situation, Alex failed to mention how Jeremiah felt about it. He was aware of his heritage, though he hardly spoke of it. Considering his limited exposure to the news, he probably assumed mixed blood Kryptonians were commonplace. And he certainly didn’t harbor bitter feelings towards his human mother. Astra figured they wouldn’t have to worry about his views until he enrolled in school. Rao knew what questions his classmates would bombard him with.

When it came to his mother’s mortality, though, Alex and Jeremiah had their fair share of accidents. Just recently they were tossing an anti-grav discus out on the terrace. In his excitement, he flung the heavy, blunt-edged disc a bit too hard and Alex miscalculated its course. The discus knocked her in the head. She went down like dead weight and didn’t come to until the stammering whimpers shocked her awake. Astra had already been tuned to both their heart beats at the time and flew from her bedroom at the change of pace. She remembered the cold slip through her veins at the sight of her child kneeling beside an unconscious Alex and clutching her shirt in fright.

Though he was beginning to understand the repercussions of his mother’s humanity, there were times his enthusiasm was so great it slipped his mind. Alex had been blasé about it, but something told Astra that the injuries penetrated far deeper. It wasn’t fear of being hurt by her son. Alex couldn’t bear to inflict guilt on him whenever he pulled too hard on her hand or dived into her arms at overwhelming velocity. No matter how much it stung, no matter the bruises she’d sustain, Alex concealed her winces as any self-sacrificing mother would.
While the eggs cooked, Astra brought some water to boil for tea. Though her stomach expressed keen growls, she decided that *someone* should wait so that Alex wouldn’t have to eat alone. Seeing as Jeremiah would readily eat the napkin in front of him, that someone would have to be Astra.

Once breakfast came to a fluff, she served Jeremiah his heaping plate of *yaytsa*. The beaming expression on his face filled the room with euphoria. They had sat down to breakfast before, but this time he was eating something specially made for him. And my oh my was he eating it. He looked like Alex after Astra had mistakenly eaten through the fridge during her third trimester, leaving Alex to inhale a box of rice crackers.

Astra eyed his rapidly moving fork. “Is there somewhere you have to be?”

He paused only to crinkle his forehead. “No.”

“Well, I appreciate the exuberant response to my cooking, but please slow down. The best way to savor a meal is to eat it with patience.”

“I am,” he said and shoveled in a forkful of eggs. He munched slowly this time, legs swaying like little pendulums under the table.

With fingers curled loosely around her mug’s handle, Astra waited for her tea to give off a few more wisps of steam before sipping. She settled her chin in her hand while watching him in rapt fondness. A tranquil quiet settled between them. The dawn had fully broken and was spilling into the living room and reflecting off glass surfaces. She could not remember a finer morning.

The privacy struck her as novel. They hadn’t had time together to reconnect since her return. There was so much she wanted to ask him. There were years worth of events Astra had missed out on and she needed to know everything from major occasions to the most insignificant details. Jeremiah, in turn, must be brimming with curiosities about her and where she had been the past six months.

While Alex still slept, Astra took advantage of their time alone. She decided to stay on recent topics because he probably wouldn’t recall as far back as his early years.

“Your mother tells me you have started building a new spacecraft. Are the sections very small? I can’t imagine constructing one myself with such a vast array of pieces.”

“The box says it’s for bigger children but I can do it.”

She smiled. “I’m sure you can.”

“I’ll show you, Mama.” Before swallowing his mouthful, he put his fork down. He made to hop down until she stopped him.

“Later,” she said, squeezing his arm. The thought of him leaving when she had him so close wrenches at her heart. “Why don’t you finish this breakfast I slaved to make? Come sit down.”

His face remained down long enough to express his disappointment. He then looked up at her sweetly and asked, “Can I have more juice please?”

Astra obeyed out of the goodness of her heart. “So if this spacecraft building kit is meant for older children, how old might you be?” She already knew his age, but she got the sense that Jeremiah took pride in telling everyone he met.

He took her playful squint with a glistening smile. Saliva from consuming the vegetable stocked *yaytsa* dribbled down his chin. It seemed like the more he took joy out of whatever he was doing or
eating, the messier he looked.

Astra chuckled at the bit of egg sticking to his jaw and went to catch it with a napkin. Seeing how involved he was getting over his breakfast, she pressed him with a gentle, “Hm?”

Upon devouring another forkful, he lifted his chin and replied in no uncertain terms, “I’m four and a half.”

The conviction in his words raised his posture and aged him a good five years. Astra had to bite her lip to keep from mourning. She was well aware of the aging process of Kryptonians and humans, but that didn’t keep her from wanting him to stay four years old forever. Or four and a half. The ache in her chest every time his cheeks puffed out around a smile or expressed excitement in that adorable, high-pitched voice was sometimes too much to bear. It was a good ache, the kind that kept her wanting more from life each day. She couldn’t imagine this little boy not being in her world. The one time he wasn’t, the sky was overcast in menace and she couldn’t get Alex to look at her much less speak with her.

Astra swallowed the lump in her throat. “So, you’re four and a half.” She nodded in contemplation. “I am sensing that the ‘half’ is compulsory.”

“It’s real important.”

“Unquestionably.”

He inclined his head to point out the simple fact that, “You were four and a half.”

“That I was. Though my parents cannot admit to having had a well-behaved child of four-and-a-half. I frightened away all of my governesses.”

“You had governess-ess-es?”

“A few. There came a time when my parents gave up and let my sister manage me. Rao knows she already made it her business.”

“I like Oda.” Jeremiah noted her puzzlement and said, “She watches me when you and Mommy go to work.”

“What do you like to do with Oda?”

He shrugged. “We play games and stuff. Only she doesn’t like sim games. Mommy and Kara play them with me instead. Oda has these weird looking cards that we play with.”

“Chudik?” At his nod, a faint memory of rich, smoked meat and a crackling fire surfaced. She drew a wistful look. “My uncle taught me chudik. He always challenged me to a game when I visited. Fortunately, my parents never found out I was betting with my allowance.”

Jeremiah drew back from his plate and honed in on a specific part of the story. He cocked his head and spoke with startlingly adult nonchalance. “Can I have an allowance?”

She frowned in turn. “Do you know what an allowance is?”

“No, but I want one.”

He batted his eyes innocently and it was just enough to throw her head back in laughter. Judging by the silence on the other end, Jeremiah might have been serious and when she spotted his devastated
frown she schooled her expression. “I don’t know. Perhaps when you turn ten?”

“No, now.”

“Ah, excuse me. Manners.”

“Now, please?”

He was being so sweet about it Astra nearly caved right then and there. She hated saying no to that face. What did he ever do wrong that would prevent him from receiving an allowance? Jeremiah with all his kindness and heavenly scented hair and smooth skin and squeezable fingers wouldn’t harm a kiri bird.

At the back of her mind she knew that having an allowance was like a gateway to the adult world. Astra would do almost anything to keep him young and innocent. A weekly stipend meant chores and chores meant responsibility and one day all of these things would lead to her baby moving out of the house and living on his own means. By Rao, why did her chest feel so heavy?

“No promises.” Her voice cracked. She took Jeremiah’s hand in a squeeze. He looked at the white knuckles but said nothing of it. “I will talk to your mother about it.”

His mouth crinkled in displeasure. It lasted for about a minute. Like all toddlers, his attention span only allowed for a certain number of ambitions. When his eyes met the last square inch of eggs, all thoughts of an allowance vanished and he set to it like a starved Kryptonian.

Astra sat back and nursed her cup of rapidly cooling tea. “When your mother and I are home, what do we do on weekends?”

His head tilted and he looked up in thought. “Mm… we take trips to the cabin and play in the park and swim in the sea. We also go to Kandor.”

Between the cabin and Kandor, Astra’s curiosity didn’t know where to land. The cabin must have referred to the one out in Shade Canyon. Back on her world, Astra owned a similar place willed to her and Alura by their Uncle Misha. The mention of Kandor caused her equal interest. The capital city of any planet usually teemed with political activity and was a magnet for journalists and celebrities alike. She was surprised he listed it among his top activities.

“What is in Kandor?” she asked.

“The Flying Jen-Sui’s!”

The rousing outburst gave Astra a start. Her eyes shot to the corridor that led to living quarters, and when no sound came from her bedroom she turned back to Jeremiah. “Who on Krypton are the Flying Jen-Sui’s?”

“They’re the bestest people on the planet! They go to places like a circus group and do tricks in the air.”

Astra bit back her amusement. The last time she’d seen him this excited he was wiggling around on his back and squealing to tummy nuzzles. She cradled her cheek in her hand, ignoring the exultant warmth against her palm. “So they are like acrobats?”

“Yeah, like that.” Overzealous to restlessness, Jeremiah curled his leg underneath him to lean on the table with chin in hand. “They live in Kandor so that’s where most of their shows are. Most people have only seen them once, but I’ve seen them twice.”
“Well,” Astra’s eyes widened in amazement, “they must be impressive if you’ve seen them twice. When do they come to Argo City? I’m sure we can make time to attend a performance.”

<Really?!> Jeremiah’s voice squeaked so high it practically stood him up on his chair.

“What’s all this racket?”

The sleepy voice came with an air of amusement. Both Astra’s and Jeremiah’s heads turned to the corridor Alex was shuffling out of. When she reached the steps, her eyes squinted against the light. She folded her arms tightly across her chest to ward off the morning chill.

It was still so early that she failed to stifle the yawn. “S-someone talking about the Jen-Sui’s without me?”

The bossy disposition Jeremiah inherited from his Kryptonian side kicked in. “Hey, I’m their best fan.”

“You do have two t-shirts, an autographed hat, and a tablet cover.” Alex threw Astra a dismal shrug and said, “I have a tote bag.”

Astra raised a brow in return. “Measuring loyalty by volume of merchandise isn’t the be-all-end-all of fan worship.”

That bit of wisdom plopped Jeremiah down in his seat. He pouted at Astra and said, “I have loyalty.”

“You have yaytsa on your chin.”

Astra pursed her lips over the smile and passed him a clean napkin. He wouldn’t want her to fuss over him in front of his other mother – that much she gleaned in the week she’d spent with them. That small dignity was the least Astra could offer him.

With sleep lingering in her gait, Alex padded into the open dining area. Her pajamas were crinkled in places – mostly the left side, Astra observed, knowing Alex favored that side when sleeping because it kept her facing the wall. Astra shook the thought in time to catch the smile nimbly surfacing at the sight of Jeremiah’s kinked hair.

Alex combed through his short locks. “Sleep well?” she asked against the side of his head before kissing it.

“Mm-hm.”

Astra grinned at the two. They were so accustomed to each other a total stranger could have pegged them as mother and child. She had never seen Alex more affectionate, even around her foster sister.

Astra watched as Alex dropped another kiss into his hair. She spied the thumb lingering on the curve of his ear and dropped her gaze. Her index finger drew wistful figure eights on the table.

“Want more juice?” asked Alex.

She started toward the cooling unit but Jeremiah gave her a look that was half aghast, half imperious. Astra was trying to figure what had made him so grumpy when he shot the same look at her. He panned between them as if his world had turned upside down.

It must have dawned on Alex. She released a sigh and retraced her steps into the dining room. The
place grew thick with questions and Astra felt like she was choking in a vacuum. Then a hand fell on her shoulder. The touch lingered for a split-second before lifting her chin up.

“Morning.”

The soft-spoken greeting met Astra’s mouth and was emphasized by a kiss. The lips were firm but pliant, chaste but forthright. An ocean of nothingness doused Astra’s mind, making her lightheaded and obedient to nothing but the feeling. Her hand rose of its own accord, so drawn to Alex’s hair like the two belonged together as they had once been. Her mouth parted just as a rush of cold air swept in.

The sound of clanking silverware woke her from her daze. Astra swallowed and blinked. “Good morning.”

A knocking drew her attention across the table. A major transformation had taken place. Where before Jeremiah had the look of a lost puppy, now he was grinning and kicking his heels to the chair legs.

What in Rao’s name happened to distance? Hadn’t Alex made it clear, in no uncertain words, that they would not engage in any intimate gestures? For how long, Astra hadn’t a clue. She missed the feeling of Alex’s lips against hers and how it shocked her heart back to the living. Between her desire and Alex’s rule, Astra didn’t know what to make of this turn of events.

Alex came back to place a full glass of juice between Jeremiah’s hands. Astra could feel the fire in her cheeks. Her head swam again despite Alex not touching her. A roar in her chest threatened release and, no matter how confusing or exciting, none of that stopped her from chancing some kind of eye contact, accidental or not.

Instead of meeting her, Alex wet her bottom lip and curled a strand of hair behind her ear. A rare and historic awkwardness locked the words in their throats. For a tense moment, it seemed like Alex was about to speak. Her eyes darted to the floor and searched in fervent desperation. But to what? To justify herself? To ensure that it would not happen again? Astra didn’t know which was worse.

Wordlessly, Alex tucked her chin in and returned to the kitchen. The whole thing lasted seconds. To Astra it felt like agonizing minutes.

“I can make some yaytsa if you would like,” Astra ventured. She half turned and lost the courage to meet Alex’s eyes. “There are still eggs left for another.”

“No, thanks.” Alex hung back in the kitchen, drinking her tea standing up. “I’m not really that hungry.”

Astra nodded. Her appetite had vanished as well. She clutched her mug in one hand, trying to steer her thoughts from the kiss to lighter topics. Not knowing if Alex felt the same stoppage of time when their lips met (as clichéd as that sounded in her head). For her own part, it was driving her crazy.

That had not been a kiss of pity. It in no way made Astra feel second-rate. She was as much her own person as her parallel counterpart… yet a niggling doubt slipped under her skin. Could Alex feel conflicted, being affectionate with her when just six months ago she had been involved with someone else? A dark cloud of grief still hung over the house. Nothing seemed to abate it, not news of Astra’s survival and assuming not her living there. It made Astra feel unwanted. Worse still, the distance told her that coming back had been a mistake.
The nerve at her temple pulsed. She massaged the nuisance away along with all thoughts of kisses and ominous weather. This wasn’t about her. Astra had to stop making it about how she felt and rise to the occasion.

Unwilling to watch another day pass by without acting, Astra made up her mind. The contents of her mug sloshed to her sliding motion. She pushed it away and straightened out of her chair.

“May I speak with you privately?”

Alex froze, lips pursed around swirls. She lowered her mug to the counter, straightening her neck. “Sure.” She gestured to the corridor as a suggestion.

Jeremiah, not taking the hint, intended to follow them. Astra patted his knee before he got the chance to disembark. “Why don’t you take out that spacecraft of yours? When I get back I expect to see full schematics.”

“Mm…” He crinkled his mouth to one side. After a moment’s contemplation, he accepted the deal with a firm nod. “Okay,” he chimed and offered his cheek.

A spike of affection split her heart wide open. She pressed into the plump flesh as hard as restraint allowed.

“Ah, Mama…” He rubbed the fading mark with his shirt sleeve. His grin, however, could not so easily be removed.

* * *

The location of their bedroom – Alex’s bedroom – ensured that Jeremiah’s fickle hearing would not pick up their voices. For all intents and purposes, it was a safe place to conduct private business. Or intimate business, if two consenting partners should decide it was in the best interest of their appetites.

Astra veered toward the sitting area where she could put as much distance as possible between them and the queen-size bed (still unmade, not to her surprise).

“Look,” Alex folded arms and turned to face Astra, “I’m sorry about that back there. I didn’t want to give Jeremiah the impression that there was trouble between us.”

“That is not why I asked to speak with you.”

The defensive stance Alex had taken up, whether it served to protect herself or make her intentions clear, dropped with her loosening arms. She raised a quizzical brow and search down Astra’s body before snapping her eyes back up. “Are you okay?”

The show of concern, however miniscule, didn’t raise Astra’s spirits but quashed them. It was so much harder to go through with her plan when Alex made soft faces at her. Astra toughed her skin with a nip to the inside of her cheek. She would not let one little flicker of concern make her fall all over again. It was premature, considering Alex only gave cold shoulders and sweet-lipped lies.

The carvings in Alex’s expression deepened. “Astra?”

Instead of swooning, Astra retrieved an item from her back pocket. The circular tube was the length and diameter of her index finger. Its metallic exterior gleamed coolly inert while three blue rings glowed to its handling. The tamper-proof shell had not always looked so smooth. Only upon constant polish had it taken on its current shine.
Astra looked down at her thumb’s mindless rubbing. Her throat tightened at the thought of handing it over. It felt like parting with an extension of herself. She grimaced over the panic seizing her vocal cords and stretched her hand out wordlessly.

Alex took it. “It’s a holographic storage device.” She turned it over a few more times before giving up. Her frown met Astra. “What’s on it?”

“After your pod left Earth’s orbit, I returned to the apartment. Your computer still had power left when I opened it, so I took a flash drive and loaded it with every picture saved on your hard drive.”

“I don’t understand. Why would you do that?”

The tightening of her throat felt like a noose of her own making. Astra kept her hands clasped behind her back and focused on the bite from her thumbnails. “I needed the memories close by. Though I could not claim all of them as my own… I honestly cannot explain why I took the pictures of your parents. Perhaps it helped me imagine what our future could have been like under different circumstances. In any case, I needed the memories in order to bear the final hours. You were not there. Jeremiah was long gone. I had nothing but those pictures in my pocket.”

Alex didn’t blink. The lightyears long rift between Krypton and Earth’s former address hit her with a sharp inhale. She stared at the device in the palm of her hand. It rested there as innocuous as a blessing. She weighed it as if its attached strings were pulling her down.

“What exactly is on here, Astra?”

“There was no time to sift through every photograph, so I moved all the files onto the drive.”

Pausing, Astra closed her eyes and breathed through her nostrils, recalling the charred earth and electric breeze. It evoked a strong wave of nausea. She waivered on her feet, too overwhelmed to continue. She didn’t want to. She could not control her sense memories any more than she could keep the nightmares from haunting her.

Astra opened her eyes and faced the woman who was experiencing far more anguish. “After I accepted her place, I realized my foolishness in bringing it along. I may not have wanted to leave Earth without some piece of home, but there was no guarantee that the wormhole would take me to my destination. It was a foolhardy trinket, another thoughtless answer to an irrelevant question. But it kept me going. I could breathe easier knowing that if I ever found you, I would not come empty-handed.”

Flinching back, Alex shook her head. “Why? I don’t… Why should these photographs mean anything to you? Most of them were probably taken long before you crashed on Earth with the rest of Fort Rozz.”

Astra couldn’t reply right away. Like a spineless leech she fed on Alex’s anticipation, steeling herself for any strength that would see her through the rest of this conversation.

“Before I even became pregnant,” she said following a cavernous breath, “you took me in and accepted me into your family. The DEO had not yet granted me security clearance. It had only been a few weeks since I blew out my powers… and that mile wide crater of Mojave Desert. None of that seemed to deter you. I cannot describe how grateful I was to be welcomed into a home. I haven’t had many warm places to sleep.” Astra’s eyes shot up to keep them from spilling over. She took a deep breath and shrugged slowly. “I had no mother to counsel me in what it was going to be like to carry a child for nine months. For the first time in decades, I had a family to share my life with. And they shared their lives in turn.
“I understand now that I cannot be a part of that anymore. It’s gone and I am so very sorry. These pictures may not be able to replace the void in your life, but I hope they serve to remind you that the place where you came from is as important as where you are now. For as comfortable as you might be on this planet, harmonizing with Kryptonian culture and conforming to their language, you should never forget your humanity.” When Alex diverted her gaze, it felt like rejection, so Astra seized her hand and folded the fingers around her past. She spoke with as much conviction as her tongue dared express. “Never let it slip away. It is the best part of you and Rao knows it is the best part of Jeremiah. This is your legacy and his by relation.”

She looked down at the limp hand in hers, waiting for a sign that the words found a home like she had with the Danvers. Her fingers dragged down the back of Alex’s hand and allowed gravity do the rest. Parting didn’t have the same effect now as it did before. There were less tears and more cracks in places that had healed over.

Astra said, “I hope he can look at these photos one day and feel the same gratitude that I felt.”

Alex didn’t seem to know what to do with that information. Her eyes darted everywhere but the source. She was working her jaw to some sort of pretense; like a lie would feel more appropriate than speaking from the heart.

Astra bowed her head. “Alura assisted in transferring the data to a compatible device.” She gestured to the very same device in Alex’s grip. “Everything on that drive belongs to you. In answer to your earlier question, it contains photographs and videos of your childhood. Your mother and father are here…” Astra spied the hitch in Alex’s breath. She knew what her wording implied and she refused to correct herself. “…Your sister, too, and some people I do not recognize. There are also photos of myself and Jeremiah. That is the extent of its content. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to explain myself. I will leave you now.”

The last word of her breathless delivery barely left her lips before she turned on her heel and strode out of the bedroom. She kept up the vice on her bottom lip until she had the door closed behind her. The moment it snicked shut, she released her trembling lip and burst out softly. Hard stone met her hand and she braced herself against the distressing waves.

The carpet cushioned her knees in the fall. A hand that could not have been her own (for it was made raw by crescent indentations) stifled the fits of sobs coming out of her. She squeezed her eyes shut so hard it numbed her surroundings and bled the pain. She gave her weight over to the floor and the wall, crumpling without a care for the tears searing down her face and darkening her pajamas.

The chasm in her soul was as palpable now as it had been thirty minutes from Earth’s destruction. Like the myriad colors burning its sky, wordless impressions condemned her. She couldn’t bear to feel any more. Astra wept for the past because it kept her from realizing the dour inevitability of what lay before her. Rejection laced her barren stomach like a poison forced down her throat. She couldn’t bear it.

“I can’t.”

She curled her arm tighter around her middle, bracing against the urge to vomit. Claws roughed through her hair, oiling it with tears and sweat from her own brow. Astra curled into a fetal position and wept for the time that had passed.
“You should never forget your humanity.”

Alex’s fingertips traded off between tracing her hairline and scrubbing her strained forehead. When she needed to feel something else, her hands slid through short hair, unhindered due to the constant combing.

“Never let it slip away.”

She leaned heavily on her knees, her elbows making blemishes on the skin beneath her pajamas.

It had been close to an hour since Astra left her alone in the bedroom with the digital storage device. She had not returned to shower or change, though the corridor resonated voices from the living room. Astra must have been keeping Jeremiah occupied and, for that, Alex couldn’t be more thankful. She really didn’t want to see or talk to anyone. Not for a while. Not with these memories flooding back.

Her eyes lifted from the floor to meet the three smiling faces. Alex’s heart wrenched again at the photograph of her mother and father. The girl shrugging between them smiled over the glow of ten birthday candles. Despite Alex having reached the milestone of ten-years-old, her mother had insisted on the candles, the singing, and the wish making before stabbing the cake through.

Alex hardly recognized the sun-splashed cheeks and pony tail. There sat a naïve little girl whose father still slipped out every night and whose mother made excuses for. She hadn’t met her foster sister, and classmates didn’t whisper behind her back. Not yet. Her impression of the galaxy at that time comprised what most humans understood of the Milky Way. Perhaps more than the typical child her age. Still, her worldview was too small to encompass the concepts of interplanetary war, colonization, immortal prisons, and somatic reconditioning.

Alex remembered the day and the occasion. The restaurant had been a favorite of hers. Her parents usually reserved Italian dining for birthdays and celebrating academic achievements. She remembered the crisp fabric of her father’s shirt that evening and the bump of her mother’s knee as she squeezed in for the picture. The maître d’ had offered to take the picture. The flash and *snap-whirr* of her disposable Kodak camera looked like a toy in his hands. The maître d’ gave her a big, white smile and wished her happy birthday in a coastal California accent.

Alex remembered reaching for the camera and hearing her mother’s appall. The front of her brand new sundress had grazed the piped edge of the cake. An unmistakable white smear appeared on jade. Alex remembered how her ears rang to Eliza’s demand for a warm washcloth. Jeremiah just hugged her to his side, swiped his finger in the mess, and brought it to his mouth with an “Mmm.” That was the first time she ever laughed herself to tears. When it happened again, Kara had ripped a pillow during an argument and sent a billow of feathers into her nose and mouth.

The interactive coffee table dimmed. She swiped a finger on the touch sensitive stone to keep the hologram alive. She liked the photo. It reminded her that her life held fond memories before Kara came along. Sometimes she forgot that she even had a life before that fragile, pale girl of thirteen showed up on her family’s doorstep.

She tapped for the next photo. James and Winn were frozen in motion behind the sofa and in pursuit of a twenty-six-year-old blur. It was a hazy photo due to Kara’s hogging the remote and Alex dropping the camera in her dive to tackle her. Kara was catching up on episodes of
that night while Alex and James wanted to see the latest score of the Dodgers game. Winn just wanted to eat in peace. Threatening to finish the last box of pizza didn’t go over well with the speedy Kryptonian.

The photo had been taken the night after Supergirl’s eighth solo mission. Alex only remembered because Kara was still counting gleefully.

She shut her eyes and exhaled a measured breath. Astra’s hasty retreat still remained fresh in mind. Alex knew she should have expressed her appreciation at the time, but the gesture had overwhelmed her to speechlessness. Now after flitting through the slideshow of photos, a mere “thank you” proved too stubborn to conceive.

Each photograph accompanied a sorrow that crashed into her chest. By the time she went through the drive’s entire contents, she felt like a bus had smacked into her a couple hundred times. She was barely able to keep it together. Even in the privacy of her bedroom, she peeked over her shoulder to make sure the wheezing gasps had not attracted visitors.

Alex looked into her open palms and dried them on her slacks. She sucked in a breath, ignoring the hitch and the tremble, before letting it out slowly for her heart to catch up.

The hour spent scrolling through memory lane caught up to her. She was dog tired and it could not solely be blamed on the photographs but Astra and her implying that Alex needed this. The selfless gesture served to remind her that she once accepted Astra as family and that no matter the obstacles separating them, Astra would never again make the mistake of putting family second.

Alex’s head spun in reminiscence of valor, sacrifice, and heart. When she thought about it, it didn’t seem all that long ago when Astra locked herself inside a bunker to protect her niece, her beloved, and the world from annihilation. Three and a half years suddenly felt like three weeks since Alex felt supportive breathes on her forehead promising her that she would be a wonderful mother.

Reflection snowballed into further contemplation. It was like waking up from a long nap. Alex felt utterly self-aware of her actions and their consequences. A recent incident sprouted up like a stubborn weed that refused to be stamped out. She couldn’t stop thinking about that kiss she gave Astra. Her head said it was to placate Jeremiah. The knot tightening in her chest told her she kissed Astra because she wanted to. She needed to. It certainly didn’t feel wrong based on her fluttering stomach and the warmth tingling down the base of her spine. Nothing felt more appropriate than kissing her first love good morning. And why shouldn’t they kiss? Neither of them were seeing other people. There was no written law prohibiting contact between humans and Kryptonians.

Alex just happened to be emotionally attached to another woman. And although that woman would never return, the memories were still capable of coming between her and Astra. Her conscience worked overtime to solve the conflict. The worst part? While Alex was trying to find a means of discontinuing a planned future with one love, she was alienating the other.

Alex wanted distance, yes, but at what cost? She thought it was the best thing for them at the time. She didn’t know how long it would last or if they would ever get back to where they used to be. It did seem cruel not to offer Astra some hint of a time frame. Alex couldn’t image what it must feel like to come back to a family that lived three to four years in her absence. To come back to people who thought she was dead and have to start over again on a world crawling with nightmares and shadows of a previous life ill-lived.

Alex imagined herself in Astra’s position. It took very little imagination to do so. Were she to land on Krypton and find that Astra had moved on, it would have rendered her heartbroken. No matter how noble it seemed to wish happiness upon your ex-lover, the news that they had moved on still
stung.

The notion inflicted its sting on Alex. It finally hit her, what she had put Astra through the past seven days. She bowed to catch her face in her hands. A fresh spring of tears wet her palms. The drops slipped through her fingers like a tide. What had she done?

A prevailing voice in Alex’s head called for culpability. The skin covering her gutless existence pricked in answer. She should have known. She carried it with her wherever she went. It stuck like a shadow, ignoring when it befitted its ego and lashing out without forethought.

If the damage wreaked on Astra derived from Alex’s humanity, she didn’t want any part of it. Nothing of human ingenuity and adaptability had been genuine. It was all a cover for their ignorance and bloated self-worth. Alex longed for a time when Astra called her “more Kryptonian than human.” She would give anything to hear those words again.

With a watery sneer, she clubbed her fist to the table. The blurry photo of Kara’s apartment winked out.

Astra was wrong about one thing. Being human did not make Alex better. It made her a goddamn coward.

* * *

Two uneventful days passed before the full weight of Alex’s depravity caught up to her.

They had gone to bed the previous night according to custom. No words passed between them besides cordial “goodnights.” Not even the hem of their clothes brushed when taking turns in the ensuite. The moment their son’s blanket had been securely tucked around him and his forehead earned kisses from each of them, they separated in mute autonomy.

Their avoidant behavior around one another when Jeremiah was absent wouldn’t have bothered Alex before. A blindfold of her own making had been lowered over her eyes then. She plaited it in excuses of irreconcilable differences until it resembled an iron curtain. Nothing would penetrate it. Or so she thought.

Astra’s gift encouraged her eyes to open and inspired her backbone to batter through the blind. Since then, their behavior struck Alex as a serious bottle up of unresolved tension. Astra gave no indication to feeling any such strain. She concealed her intentions well enough but it was the likelihood of it that pressed on Alex’s mind. Did Astra feel that she couldn’t talk to her? Had her resentment turned so blunt that it snuffed any care?

Alex went to bed that night with a head brimming in worry. She woke up the next morning to a shout and a jerking pull on her neck.

The voice shattered through the fog. Sleep abated and soon the choking sensation shot adrenaline into Alex. Fight flipped the tables on flight as she kicked the covers off and clawed at the hand on her throat. But it was no hand. She was being choked by her own shirt collar. Alex followed the pull to the fist seizing her sleeve. Astra was wrenching so hard the edge of the collar was cutting into Alex’s neck.

She grimaced. When free, she took Astra’s hand before it socked her jaw or did its owner damage. As her vision cleared, she soon realized that Astra was already doing a bang up job herself.

This was not a novel occurrence. This was not the first time Alex’s heart broke at the twisting limbs. It was, however, time to do something about it.
Fervent tossing bunched the sheets to disorder. It was hopeless – the nail scratches in the cushion headboard, the cavernous lines framing her grimace, the struggle to escape yet another prison.

Alex tried to control the flailing but Astra’s hand broke her grip. Under the influence of the heavy draught of sleep, a Kryptonian still posed a formidable challenge. A sigh burst forth. Thoughtless to her own safety, Alex slipped an arm under Astra to cup the cold sweat on her forehead. She braced the squirming body against her own and bit her bottom lip raw to keep from joining in the anguished cries.

Her efforts exhausted her inside and out. She was fighting two fronts – one in her arms and the other threatening to jerk the tears out of her. Astra wrestled with demons Alex could not see. The nightmares began the day the High Council granted her amnesty. Astra had gone outside for the first time since arriving on Krypton. She walked a path between the scarlet grass and the morningstar sloughing off its fragrant, prickly seeds. When Alex looked behind her to see what held Astra up, a coral and carmine streaked sky hung overhead. Astra’s eyes were glistening under a thriving canopy of turquoise. She didn’t speak a word all day, not even to Jeremiah. That night brought back an age-old impediment in the struggle to put the past behind her.

It hadn’t been this bad, though. The damage had always been internal, unobservable. Despite Astra being alive and sharing her bed, between the scratches in the backboard and the sweat soaked sheets, the scene looked like something out of a Black-Mercy-turned-nightmare. Her suffering was killing Alex.

“Wake up.”

A choked sob buffeted the air. Mindless determination prevented Alex from discerning who it came from. She clung so tightly to Astra; she knew nothing else.

“Don’t do this. Wake up.” Alex pressed her mouth to a shoulder. She felt Astra seize and gasp awake. “It’s just me,” she said, burying her face in damp tangles. Having experienced a similar panic herself, Alex’s assurances poured out of her unbidden. “You’re safe. Everyone is safe. We’re home now. Home.”

Her soft voice evened out the pants. The mantra that helped Alex during her first staggering mornings waking in a strange room seemed to have a similar effect on Astra.

She shuddered to a boneless halt. No sooner had their bedroom fallen into silence than it echoed to Astra’s stark reality hitting her. She masked a face-full of tears into her pillow and shook the bed with her weeping.

Alex rubbed her arm, tightlipped and wishing she could do more. When the shakes subsided, she loosened her tongue from where it had been confined to the roof of her mouth.

“Another nightmare?”

Astra nodded.

The back of a sleep-mussed head kept Alex from meeting her eyes. Instead of disturbing their embrace, she judged by the twitching muscles beneath her hand. She continued to run soothingly up and down Astra’s arm. It was what she would want were she in Astra’s position. That’s what she told herself, but her heart wasn’t listening.

“What can I do?”

Alex pressed a ginger kiss to Astra’s shoulder. She remembered what it felt like to curl around this
body. She remembered not wanting anything from it but the nerve to ask for consolation. Bare flesh met her lips again and again. Or was it her lips meeting flesh? Alex didn’t know. For however abundant the exhaustion bound her limbs, it couldn’t have reached within a mile of what Astra must have felt.

If Alex didn’t have this beautiful wreck wrapped up in her arms, she would have scrutinized her choices as she had been doing the past two days. But she was holding a beautiful wreck and Alex had no strength left but to fall back on instinct.

She slid a hand down Astra’s arm to stroke the soft flesh of her inner elbow. The sweat that had been pouring from Astra’s forehead had dried now that Alex had swiped it clean. There shouldn’t have been anything beautiful about a traumatic mess, but Alex couldn’t help it. Starting at the hairline, she sketched her nails through sweat darkened locks, knowing from experience that the raking sensation induced a heavy, trancelike sensation. On cue, Astra sagged back into Alex and let slip a sigh.

Alex kissed her shoulder again, this time in full awareness of what she was doing. The pecks landed like butterfly wings, brushing and kissing because they loved to and because they knew nothing else. Alex stroked with her fingertips, raked with her nails, and kissed Astra all over, hoping against hope that something breached the cursed work of demons.

When Astra finally uttered a response, sorrow and nightmare made it a croak. “I never thought I would feel like this.”

“Like what?”

“… I miss Earth.”

Alex fell silent. Her eyes were drawn to the humid, dusky purple atmosphere outside the window. She contemplated the impression Astra must have received during their first night on Krypton. She wondered if Astra had second thoughts about entering her bed. There was no shortage of doubts in Alex’s mind at the time, but had they twisted her offer to stay into some impression that repelled Astra? Did she want to drive her to such a distance that kept them, literally, on opposite lines of communication? Like a general and an operative destined to do battle on any front?

For so long that side of the bed had been occupied by someone Alex gave her heart to. She then had to suffer six agonizing months with the void that had replaced it. Should she not have been content to fill it? It wasn’t like they hadn’t slept together. Why couldn’t Alex acknowledge their mutual loneliness and desperation by welcoming Astra to the other side of the bed instead of implying it? If she had, it didn’t have to involve sex (despite how badly Alex needed to feel Astra’s skin against her own). It was something her heart wanted, not her head. The analytical part of her needed so much goddamned justification. Why couldn’t the two just agree to disagree?

Alex cast her gaze away from the window to the sleeveless skin under her thumb. “Sometimes I forget for a while. But then it will hit me in the most random moments and when it does, I just can’t move. Everything is too much – the color of the sky, the way people are dressed, the mass anti-grav transportation. The reality closes in on me and I feel like I’m losing my mind.”

“Does it go away?”

Alex fought the sarcasm crawling up her throat because for however long she had grown used to the barren hole in her chest, the hollow was just beginning to manifest in Astra’s. She crinkled her brow, trying to remember what it felt like. “When it happens, I try to focus on the things I can still hold on to. I pick out people and places here on Krypton and give them personal meaning. For
instance, there’s someone I work with that reminds me of Agent Vasquez. And there’s this structure in the lower east district that looks like a museum my parents took me to when I was little. Then there’s Kara who is growing into the woman we once knew. I can also accomplish things at work that protect the public; like I did as a DEO agent. Except without carrying a weapon or punching people in a face.”

A pleasant hum rolled at the back of Astra’s throat. “But you made it look so effortless. I had never seen a human use their body as a weapon as you did. If grace and grit were compatible…”

A furious heat filled Alex’s cheeks. She didn’t fight it. “I fought you. Were you really thinking about compatibility that early on?”

“Perhaps.”

Alex rolled her eyes and grinned despite herself. If only they were speaking face to face. Perhaps then Astra wouldn’t be so sly in her ruminations. Her eyes flit down to the crook of a neck drying over in perspiration. “It doesn’t go away.” Alex’s hushed breath raised the flesh along Astra’s shoulder. “Not really. You can only distract yourself long enough to dull the ache. I’ve been in public places when I feel like I’m grasping for stability. It’s best to have a back up plan in case of emergency.” Alex reached up to brush back a lock of hair from Astra’s neck and trailed the back of her fingers upon leaving. The tending-to came as automatic as the accompanying words. “Mine has always been Jeremiah.”

“Something tells me that when you say ‘back up’ you don’t mean artillery and heavy armor.”

Alex thought of the little boy snoring away under his blankets, thumb hanging out of his mouth, and a tattered, old bear watching over him. A far cry from tactical support but positively textbook when it came to emotional support.

Her hand gravitated back to the hollow of Astra’s elbow where she roved in mindless circles. “He’s my solid ground.”

“What do you miss?” Astra’s voice came sticky in hesitation. “About your home world?”

Alex tilted her head on Astra pillow (which they now shared). She hummed, eyes falling closed and not having to think too hard about it. “I miss grass.”

“As in…?”

“Green grass.”

A moment of respectful silence passed. Then Astra burst out laughing. Her entire body jerked to the richness of it and Alex could not wipe the grin off her face if she tried. She pushed up to hover over Astra and marvel at the rare sound. “What? Why is that funny? I miss green grass.”

Astra’s amusement faded only for her to raise a brow. “Just the color?”

“And the feel of it, I guess. It’s much softer than the stalky pastures growing on this planet.”

“Krypton’s sediment is composed of course, broken down materials, some of which collided with the planet thousands of years ago. The soil requires tough roots in order to survive its environment.” Though laced in an indignant tone, she did speak on behalf of reason. “If this planet’s surface is anything like mine, that is.”

Alex returned to her side in a huff. “I still prefer the feel of Earth grass between my toes. Even if I
liked those crimson bristles lining the Institute’s main thoroughfare, I’d look weird walking barefoot on the lawn.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Give it time.” Alex sighed. “You’ll see how people look at me when I actually walk the line. Grass is the least of my worries, but I like making it an issue. Better to complain about environmental standards than other people’s opinions.”

“So you long for Earth’s rolling green pastures. Is that all you miss?”

Though the smile in her voice was unmistakable, Alex felt her own wilting. “No.”

After a long, meaningful pause, Astra broke the silence with a whisper. “I know.”

Alex sighed and gave herself over to the feel of a rough and bony elbow. Her thumb’s caressing kept up its means of soothing the both of them. She wondered if Astra could feel the eyes boring into the back of her head.

“I’m sorry about your nightmares,” Alex said. “If talking about it helps, I’m here. Earth doesn’t have to be a sore subject between us. I won’t ever forget it and neither should you.”

The rise and fall of Astra’s chest diminished to a balanced pattern of inhale and exhale. “Can we stay like this? Just for the morning?”

“Yeah,” said Alex. She sidled closer till their bodies bonded and they were breathing as one. Sleep was a forsaken notion. Alex’s stare dashed over the pale cheekbone peeking above a drape of bedraggled hair. She settled in behind Astra, nose in curls and hugging for warmth. She kept wide awake and day dreaming. “Sounds like a plan.”

* * *

“Would you like to go back to the lab?” asked Astra. “It might occupy your mind better than waiting here.”

“No, I want to be ready when Lev comes out with the news.”

“The lab is only a short walk down the hall and –”

“Astra, please?”

Unequivocally overruled, Astra turned her head away and down. “What comfortable chairs.”

She rolled her eyes. Unlike Astra, Alex just needed to stare at the windowless doors of the operating theater and worry in peace about what was going on inside. Usually the best means of calming one’s nerves was a small dose of empathy. Or distraction. Astra had never been one for subtlety.

Like a mother waiting for her child to get out of outpatient surgery, Alex just needed to be as near to Jeremiah as protocol allowed. It was only a few days ago that she and Astra agreed that the procedure would be in their son’s best interest. The doubts were still multiplying. Familiar surroundings did alleviate her anxiety somewhat. When Lev told them that he had reserved a small surgical suite at the Institute of Experimental Technology, Alex relieved at the news. She didn’t want her son treated anywhere but on their turf. Though it had been some time since she received solicitations from kook scientists, she was always ready to protect her son from study and
Frankly, Alex knew some of her concerns were baseless. Lev’s reputation as a neuroscientist had only matured with Project Valor, and he was the only person she had taken Jeremiah to who provided insight into his sensory problems. His solution came in the form of a hearing implant that would serve as a tonal disruptor. Once activated, the tiny mechanism would block the nuisance of “flies” crowding Jeremiah’s ears.

There was a downside, however. His superior Kryptonian hearing would be sacrificed for the implant’s success. He wouldn’t experience any more ringing or buzzing, but for all intents and purposes his hearing would function at the caliber of a human’s. Alex and Astra decided that it was a small price to pay for Jeremiah’s well being.

The minutes trudged on. Alex squirmed in their two-occupant chair. The lounge area consisted of a small alcove cut into the hallway. She rarely visited this level, but the floor pattern and the sharp smell of Kryptonian iodine were familiar touches. The Institute’s seventh floor was reserved for experimental medical procedures and trial study rooms. A sterile silence occupied the brightly lit corridor. Alex trained her thoughts to steer clear of words like “dead silence” and “foreboding echoes.”

Across the hall, the cold, nondescript double doors were sealed shut. What Alex wouldn’t give to be in that room. She just wanted to hold his hand. Before the demand shouted through her mind, she cautioned herself in reminder. Lev reiterated the painlessness of the procedure, but stressed that neither parents would be permitted inside the surgical suite.

She and Astra had parted from Jeremiah after an ample supply of hugs and a promise to visit the toy store afterward. Like the brave boy he was, Jeremiah gave them each a little wave and a pale smile before heading in with Lev. It took a firm grasp on Alex’s hip to keep her from following.

Fifteen minutes into the surgery, Alex’s anxiety had tripled. It didn’t seem possible that someone who had faced a Hellgrammite with her bare hands could be reduced to a useless, worn out mortar shell two seconds from detonation.

A surge of irritation washed through Alex. “Stop... petting... the chair.”

The hand paused its circular motions and remained palm down on the cushion between them. Astra’s eyes flit up to meet hers, undeterred by the snap. “As you wish,” she said, voice as soft as dandelion fluff. She leaned back into the chair, breaking eye contact only to brush her gaze over Alex’s face, neck, shoulder, and down her back.

The study being made of her thickened her tongue and burned her cheeks. Alex shifted in her chair and placed her hands in her lap. She balked internally at the perspiration collecting in her palms and between her fingers. They were as hot as if Astra were breathing into them. How could she be so close and yet so far away? From her periphery she could see the eyes probing her. They were intent, singular, and uncompromising, though not to the extent of making a specimen out of her. Astra wasn’t pushing her away with the ceaseless once over. Quite the opposite in fact.

Her spine straightened. “Stop doing that.”

“What am I doing?”

“You’re being overprotective. Can you just give me some space?”

Astra’s expression clouded in confusion. “You asked me to be here today. If you hadn’t, I would
have come anyway. He is my child too.” She raised a brow. “And just twenty-six minutes ago you pulled me into this chair and told me to wait here with you.”

“That’s not…”

Alex touched her forehead and shook the scrambled words from her head. She didn’t mean to say what she said. Space was the last thing she wanted and it happened to be their problem to begin with. Alex had been trying to find a way to explain herself, but every time the moment arose her stupid mouth got in the way. That, and sometimes Astra took pity on her when she didn’t deserved it.

“It is perfectly normal to be frightened.” Astra’s hand, flat on the cushion between them, slid forward till her fingers met the edge. It simply rested there, unassuming and ready to be taken if Alex so chose. “I, too, am frightened for him.”

“Are you?” An enormous weight lifted off Alex’s shoulders. She sighed in cautious relief. “Because you don’t look it.”

“I am more terrified than I would have imagined. You are too engaged by what is going on behind that door to see it.”

“No, you’re just really good at hiding.”

The grin Astra drew was small and sad. She dropped her gaze to the fingers driving lines down her polyester black trousers. The informal garment matched Alex’s work uniform (exempting the white stripe representing Science Branch). Astra never left their apartment in anything other than dark, earthy colors – black, blue, green, sometimes a burgundy that made her look like a tall glass of cabernet. If Alex were to guess, she would probably never see the woman in anything that twirled or fluttered. A pity. Alura always looked illustrious in her robes. If prevailed upon, Astra might warm up to the sleeveless cloaks Alex had seen some of the higher caste Kryptonians wearing. Perhaps Alex could sway her somehow.

In the meantime, Astra looked content to bear the nondescript suit. You could take the general out of the military… and so on and so forth. Alex smiled to herself.

"I don't know why I'm so nervous.” Alex coughed out a nervous chuckle. She couldn’t bear to keep her head up, so she leaned forward, knees supporting elbows. She cradled her face in her hands. “It’s not life threatening. What the hell is wrong with me?”

Instead of words, Astra imparted relief in a hand to Alex’s sloping back. Her thumb brushed in sympathy.

Alex clutched at the worry creasing her forehead. She sucked in a gasp to block the waterworks. “It’s been so hard doing this alone.”

“You must not think like that.” Astra sat forward and drew her hand down Alex’s back in one long, soothing touch. “I did not come back for him alone. If you are overworked, you must tell me. There is no shame in asking for help. We agreed to raise him together, and we do him no good by holding on to our pride. It is okay to be tired.”

“I’m so tired.”

“I have seen Kryptonians fail to grapple the stresses of being a parent. The fact that you are here shows strength. You would perish before quitting on your child and that is more than some of the parents on this planet can say.”
Alex sniffed and met her eyes. “You’ve hardly met anyone here.”

“I watch the holonews and it is more than I care to know about bullying and psychological abuse.” Astra gazed softly and rubbed Alex’s back. She could not find any other words but, “You are not alone.”

Judging by her pinched brows, it might not have sounded enough to Astra. It did, however, manage to convince Alex.

“Thank you.” She gave out around the sigh. Her body relaxed into Astra’s hand. “Thank you for being here.”

Astra nodded. “Do you remember that discussion we had in the ICU after he was born? You were sitting beside me. Between your presence and the weight of Jeremiah in my arms, it felt right to speak from the heart. And when it spoke…” Astra’s face blanched in her overwhelmed state as it had that day in the ICU. “… I acknowledged my fears about raising a child with my history. It didn’t seem fair to him at the time to inflict such a sordid legacy. But then you said something to me that has never left. You told me that I would never give up on him. He would always be my priority – first and foremost. And the same goes for you. I know beyond a shred of doubt that you will always make the right decision for him. You could never fail him or me.”

The growing lump in Alex’s throat threatened a watery deluge of response. On the verge of becoming unglued, she placed her hand on Astra’s knee for support. “I haven’t forgotten.”

Astra’s gaze grew softer in light of the words. Three simple words that needed to be expressed because they were the only ones that mattered in the whole conversation. Perhaps more important than any other spoken in the entire time Astra had been on this Krypton. Alex’s lips parted against her suppressed designs and puffed a small sigh of relief.

<Pardon me!>

The shout came from down the hall. A tall, clean shaven man in a white uniform strode up to them. Alex didn’t know his profession by the bronze stripe nor did she recognize the crest engraved on his chest.

Both Alex and Astra rose to their feet to meet him.

Judging by his increased pace, he seemed in a hurry. He nodded in Astra’s direction. <You are just the person I’ve been trying to get in touch with.> His genial eyes held the both of them.

Alex panned between them. When recognition failed to change Astra’s expression, Alex raised a brow. <I’m sorry, do we know each other?>

<How do you do, Lady Danvers?> His smile held strong and true. <And you, Astra In-Ze? How was exile?>

Alex’s senses quivered. She furrowed her brow. <What… ?>

Before she could finish, the Kryptonian’s smile Withered to a grimace. In the blink of an eye, he reached for a blaster from behind and trained it just to the left of Alex. <May you find absolution with Rao, heretic.>

His monomaniacal quarrel with Astra caught him unprepared for Alex’s counterattack.

With innate reflexes, she knocked the blaster from his novice grip. The jet of plasma missed Astra
by inches and made a molten slag crater in the wall. No sooner did his blaster clatter to the ground than Alex threw her fist square in his mouth.

In hindsight, the assault could have been better placed. It was like punching a brick wall reinforced with sheet metal and adorned in flesh as smooth as a cue ball.

There wasn’t time to feel the pain. Alex bent her knees, ready for retaliation. Though the Kryptonian barely flinched, he did retreat a step and pull his fist back.

Just seconds before side-stepping, Alex felt a tug on her arms. The well of adrenaline in her system initiated a fight response. Just because she was human didn’t mean she would allow herself to be coerced. The hostile Kryptonian knotted his fists and marched forward with madness in his eyes. She struggled within the vice grip until a whisper urged her still.

Astra pressed Alex firmly into her chest. “Back away.”

Alex didn’t understand for what reason till Astra hauled her back. Two security guards appeared down the hall. They were sprinting towards them in soundless, tight weave armor.

One of the guards bearing an organic composite blaster knelt to the floor and took aim. A glob of blue material shot out of his weapon and smacked into the back of their attacker with a thwup! The substance swallowed him in a translucent, liquid bubble, thereby halting his rampage. Oxygen and sound penetrated the globule but kept him and his violent disapproval from escaping.

Alex recognized it as a containment field. She’d seen them being used on violent protesters outside the building. It hadn’t been all that long ago that she almost got clubbed by a woman screaming <ILLEGAL/> in her face.

Once their attacker was subdued, Alex rounded on the two guards. <What the hell happened? I thought this complex had secure access?>

Of the two men, the higher ranked officer who didn’t shoot stepped forward while the other shouldered his rifle and prepped the captive for transport.

<Our sincerest apologies, Lady Danvers.> He supplied a similar bow to Astra. <He slipped past our security. It will not happen again.>

Alex grit her teeth. <Take him directly to Law and Behavior. Confiscate whatever key he stole to get in. And keep him in that field until he’s in a proper cell.>

“Alex,” Astra’s gentle touch reined her back by the elbows, <I am sure these men understand their duty.> She supplied a nod to the superior officer.

He looked between them and when Alex made no argument, he bowed respectfully. <Good day.>

The assailant had no such respect. His containment field smothered the vicious words spat from his mouth. Without further ado, the officer and his partner hauled the captive away.

Alex’s stoked glare held the lowlife. It lasted long enough for the adrenaline to wear off. The ill effect of human frailty hit hard enough to double her over. “Son of a bitch.” She hissed against the pain singing through her hand like a tuning fork.

“I appreciate the gesture, but I am quite capable of defending my honor.”

“I know,” growled Alex. She glared down at an oddly wrought knuckle. A fire suffused her cheeks
and she worked her jaw. Once treated with Kryptonian medicine, the dislocation would only take around 24 hours to heal. Alex closed her eyes and savored the pain before going off on Astra again. “Sometimes I need to be reminded that I’m still human amongst these jackasses. And do you know how long it’s been since I punched someone?”

Astra’s smirk widened. “I am sure there is a gym for that somewhere. Preferably equipped with a softer target.”

“Well, there should be.” A beat later, Alex felt the full effects kick in. She rolled her head in a pitiful wince. “…Ow.”

“Ow?”

“Shut up. I’m in too much pain to articulate.”

Astra glanced at the hand and, upon noting its changing color, supported Alex’s wrist. Her words came out distracted. “You are articulating splendidly at the moment.”

“Fuck Kryptonians and their perfect facial bones. What are they made of, anyway? Ow. I forgot.”

When Astra’s tongue clicked, she had the sense to hold back the “aww.” With one hand still loosely enclosed around Alex’s wrist, she brought the other up to cup beneath, almost as if to bring her fingers up to kiss.

“Thank you.”

A light touch across the back of her fingers overwhelmed Alex like vertigo. She brought her head back slowly in order to get the bigger picture. What was happening? She felt drunk, tipsy, and a tad heavy-tongued. “You’re welcome.”

Something weird was going on with Astra’s mouth. It crinkled at one corner, stretching the obstinate lips. It couldn’t have been a smile because she rarely had reason to do so around her. Not since Alex put a wet blanket on their relationship.

Astra gestured to their chair. “Come sit down.”

Alex bit her lip and complied.

Once sitting, Astra examined the knuckles up close for signs of swelling. Since the first “ow,” her hand hadn’t left where it cradled the damaged human appendage. Neither of them drew attention to it or the fact that they were now sitting in companionable silence. They had not been this close, physically, since the night of Astra’s last nightmare. Their thighs were pressed together, black polyester against black polyester, and closing a divide that stole years from their life together.

Alex wasn’t paying any attention to that. She was drawn to the way Astra’s hair fell around her face. It carried the very same shade and texture as when they first met. Still a stark frame around the cheeks and jaw while uncompromising their beauty. She watched, rapt, as Astra tucked it behind her ear. Those gray eyes never broke their study for a moment. Such deliberate scrutiny of her body thawed the adrenaline in Alex’s blood and left her feeling as warm as a cinnamon bun right out of the microwave. Soft, gooey, and warm. Also, graciously edible, but this was not the time for that.

“I’m sorry for my behavior.” Alex’s pulse skyrocketed. It was too late to take it back, so she let open the gates and braced herself for the stream of consciousness. “Since you came back everything has been backwards. I don’t know how to act around you without feeling responsible
for how things are. I left you to die on Earth and then you had to find out I was with someone else. It’s just been… confusing having you back. That doesn’t mean I’m not happy.”

Astra’s gaze remained focused on her current task. “I know this is difficult for you.”

“But none of this has been fair to you. I’m so sorry for pushing you away.” Her quivering voice received no response. Astra kept her head low and her eyes trained on Alex’s wrist. It was possibly sprained, but that wasn’t the point of Astra’s firm gaze. “I love you, and I won’t watch you leave.”

Astra raised her head to reveal her struggle. “Alex, this is not the right time. Jeremiah is in surgery. There is a world of anxiety on your shoulders now. You should not be saying things you don’t –“

“I do.” With her undamaged hand, Alex clutched a fist full of Astra’s suit, above the heart where her pleading might have value. “I do mean what I say. There’s this distance between us filling with so much unsaid conversation and guilt and – and misunderstanding. It seems like it’s growing wider. The further you are from me, the harder it is to talk about. And now it’s like my voice isn’t reaching you. Are you even listening?”

“Yes.” Astra’s stare became fierce. She pressed her hand to Alex’s cheek. “Yes, I am always listening.” She tilted her head to convey sympathy for her parting touch. “But you are speaking sensible words that I cannot begin to process at the moment.”

“But we’ve waited…. “ Alex shook her head of the pronoun. No more laying blame. “I’ve ignored this for too long.”

“Please, not now.”

The pale, sorrowful expression aged Astra to a frail shell. Even Kryptonians were weathered by anxiety. They could no more escape the hardships of parenting and companionship than humans could.

Alex swallowed hard. She panned down to the hand on Astra’s chest, watching the thumb stray outside its agreed upon parameters to provide comfort. The twinge coming from her injury was nothing compared to the self-inflicted pressure bearing down on her chest. She nodded wordlessly.

“Let me take you to the lab,” said Astra. “Irina may be able to treat this. She is your Vasquez with bioengineering skills, is she not?”

A chuckle escaped Alex despite her efforts. She had indeed described Irina in those exact words. Only because Astra’s indolent attitude towards Kryptonians kept her from grasping her own impression. To be fair, this Krypton didn’t exactly have a welcoming effect.

“Yeah,” Alex quirked her mouth into a half smile, “she is.”

The fingers in Astra’s suit uncurled. She smoothed the wrinkles then flattened her palm over the material sheathing Astra’s skin. If only the beats could penetrate through the suit. Alex wanted to feel that heart’s sound. She wanted indisputable evidence that this body still lived and was present in her universe. Now more than ever.

She tilted her head until her temple kissed Astra’s. Alex closed her eyes at the stroking sensation around her wound. The light touch relieved her throbbing knuckles. For a moment, it even forgave the conflict breaking her heart.

* * *
Things had been good. Very good. Astra had not a single complaint. The failed assault at the Institute three weeks ago seemed the first and last occurrence she would be subjected to on her new home planet. Alura paid them a personal visit to assure her and Alex that the charges leveled against the Kryptonian (those of assault and battery, fraud, and resisting arrest) would stick. Astra couldn’t be happier to put the incident behind her.

Much had happened since then. Jeremiah’s procedure proved successful both for his hearing and his mothers’ peace of mind. Astra finally made a decision as to how she would provide for her family, and the inflow of congratulations over her new role were pleasantly surprising. As if any of those events were not enough, she and Alex came to a compromise that had them sleeping a little closer in bed and talking more frequently than usual.

Having experienced her fair share of troubles, Astra took nothing for granted, including common nuisances. From the contemptible rhetoric spouted by news show guests to the old socks found wedged at the foot of her bed, Astra found the strength to cope with all bothers, large and small.

When faced with politicking, she switched off the channel. It wasn’t worth getting up in arms over. She had a family that loved and supported her no matter the debate continuing to rage inside the High Council’s judicial chambers.

When it came to those socks, though, Astra had to put her foot down. On some mornings, when they cuddled together in her and Alex’s bed, she sometimes wondered why Jeremiah spent most of the time kicking his feet and pressing his hands to his smiling lips. He did it on purpose, of course. Her child may be precious, but there were rules to adhere to. Alex could chuckle to her heart’s content at the stash Astra excavated from under the covers, but those socks belonged in a hamper. End of story.

Though it may not have progressed according to plan, Astra loved her life and cherished the chance that had been given to her. She embraced the good as well as the bad because if she learned any lesson on Earth, it was that a life well lived meant accepting the things that one could not control.

In regard to matters of career, Astra could not have been more content with her decision. The challenge leading up to it proved most undesirable because it drudged up a fair bit of the past in all its ill-advised decisions and solo maneuvers. She spent most of her time reminding herself that a lot had changed including the well that, once dry, now brimmed over in moral support.

She no longer had to walk these trials alone. Alura expressed cautious words of advice which Astra took with equal caution. Though they continued to tip-toe around each other, their encounters were growing more frequent and were recently upgraded to weekly lunches.

Kara had been a welcome help in driving her around Argo City, pointing out establishments that might peak Astra’s interest. As Kara was still scouting for the right academy that fit her concentration, they toured quite a few academic halls. If Astra was honest with herself, academia was not exactly her scene.

At some point or another, each member of Project Valor came forward of their own free will to offer staff recommendations. Seeing as Astra was reputed on Krypton as a neuroscientist, they faithfully promoted her qualifications based on Alex’s accounts and a handful of conversations exchanged with the source herself.

After much debate and ample suggestions, Astra made her choice. It was a surprising choice, to say the least. Feeling that her time in the military had run its course, she turned to science. Specifically, her role entailed lobbying the Science Council for the addition of a new branch: environmental protection and awareness. The political mud she had to slog through to persuade the
councilmembers proved tiresome within the first twenty-four hours.

Astra felt a responsibility to adopt this planet as her own. Being knee deep in their farce of a legislative process was not her idea of making roots. She sometimes stared up at the ceiling in bed wondering if it was worth it. Alex had turned over in bed that night, having caught the mumble, and told her that she could not image her fighting any other cause. That, and a comment on the footage Zor sent her of Astra’s filibuster. After admitting that she’d never seen anything sexier, Alex rolled back on her side, leaving Astra flushed and dumbstruck. From that moment on, all doubts about her career as an environmentalist vanished into thin air.

Astra knew this would not be her last debate with the Science Council. A plethora of motivations kept her momentum going, not the least of which factored in Alex’s turn-ons. She also had a child to look after now. For the time being, restrictions on off-planet exploration would remain tight, which meant this ecologically diverse planet would be a playground for his future.

Her determination paid off. Earlier that week, the Science Council gave Astra their support in implementing a new office within the Intellectual Guild. She would report directly to the Guild officials, while overseeing a team of her own choosing (pending approval by the Council). Everything was moving at the speed of light. New people were entering her life, her work load had expanded from house chores to delegating a growing pool of staff, and she could actually say with pride that she had a horrendous commute if only to prove she had someplace important to be every day.

It never felt so good to work for a cause. This was nothing like building Project Myriad. Here, Astra embraced cooperation. One of the dictums she had in mind when creating this branch stressed collaboration amongst opposing minds. If someone didn’t agree with their results, she welcomed them to join their ranks and become educated. Nothing good came from enslaving an entire race to one sole way of thinking. She learned that lesson the hard way. In establishing this sense of unity, Astra hoped to generate an environmentally conscious society that would work together to circumvent factors that saw the destruction of her home planet.

The reward that came from cooperating benefited Krypton as a whole in addition to Astra’s conscience. After the concessions made on her behalf, she now led a team of highly qualified scientists who would monitor the planet’s resources as wells as Rao’s solar output. They would propose policies that regulated energy usage, reduce emissions, and, ultimately, protect the planet and its diverse species. One reform in particular that Astra was pushing happened to be the domestication of flying war-kites for transportation. She knew even before Alex’s roar of laughter that it would be a long shot, which was why she proposed a happy medium. The replacement of transports with technology that combined biologics with synthetics would vastly reduce heat production from metals.

Playing the part of both engineer and delegate became a juggling routine Astra had yet to perfect. It would have been a world of chaos if Zor hadn’t lent his support. He was as ingrained in the Science Council as his reputable brother, so he had plenty of experience in handling the councilmembers. His recent dispassion couldn’t have come at a better time. He tired of policymaking and missed the earlier years he spent working to promote change at lower levels of government. Astra was too overwhelmed by her workload to turn him down. She accepted him as her partner and welcomed his assistance in carrying the bureaucratic burden.

Astra came to love Krypton as much as she loved the dear ones living on it. If she wanted her grandchildren to thrive, she needed to protect their future. The last thing she wanted was for Krypton to end up like its parallel counterpart. Small, repairable mistakes could be endured, but the stakes were too high to ignore the startling reality of a planet fracturing into iridescent green debris.
With the help of her new workforce, Astra made it her mission to utilize science and diplomacy in turning the tide and persuading the people of Krypton that their planet was far more precious than their sumptuous livelihood.

The days grew longer and saw Astra away from home longer than before she started her initiative. Leading an office became a monumental undertaking, but not a day went by when Astra didn’t accredit her efforts to family. She was first and foremost a mother. An action request into radiation safety would have to wait her approval so she could return home in time for game night.

Astra always made sure her evenings were open. They served as time she could spend alone, cleaning up the apartment and prepping dinner. Corralling a toddler and managing an organization with no less than twenty moving parts didn’t leave much time to herself. Sitting in the silence of her living room became her new favorite hobby. Before Alex left the lab, Astra picked up Jeremiah from Oda’s and made him presentable for dinner. She liked the idea of making their place welcoming and ready for Alex to come home to. She had already done so much; Astra wanted to be able to return the favor.

And so much more.

Although she and Alex had not reconnected on any deep, romantic level, they did succeed in acclimating to new life in their home. With Jeremiah involved, it became all too easy to come to a consensus. They had always made a good team. It seemed a foregone conclusion that they become partners in home life, giving their son everything he needed in exchange for plentiful smiles, hugs, and laughter.

Astra might not have the honor of calling herself Alex’s beloved once again, but they both could admit to being far closer than friends. They were two women kept by a secret, a memory of having loved utterly. At night, when Alex was too worn by the workday to keep up appearances, Astra noticed the subtle differences: the head lolling onto her shoulder when they watched a movie, the body inching towards hers in the cool bed. It was heartwarming progress Astra cherished in silence.

In the weeks following, Astra realized she wasn’t the only one hard at work. She noticed that Alex, despite her inferior status in Argo City, had developed a niche. She had been keeping weekend hours at the Institute and sporadic nights spent in her home lab. It pleased Astra to see her refugee human seizing a positive means of coping. Alex had finally found a use for her skills and they didn’t apply to hunting down aliens.

Astra approached the closed door of Alex’s home lab. Her curiosity craved to be sated. She knocked softly in appeal.

“Come in,” came the voice on the other side.

The door slid open upon command. Astra walked into a room permeated in the scent of stim caf and solvents. The bedroom-turned-laboratory reminded her of Alex’s lab at DEO base. What looked to Astra like a clutter of view screens and lab stations was ordered chaos to Alex. Astra had been there before, but the wave of déjà vu always astonished her. It had its differences, of course, one being the advanced technology and another being the child-proof system. Heavy equipment and sharp objects were arranged in such a way that kept prying four-year-old hands from reaching.

At her desk, Alex swiveled around on her chair. “Hey.” She smiled in greeting. “What’s Jeremiah up to?”

“He’s down for a nap. Miniature spaceship building is exhausting work.”
Alex snickered.

The enlarged hologram above the desk drew Astra’s gaze. She tilted her head, feet moving across the carpet with purpose. “Are you going to tell me what you’re working on?”

“Maybe.”

“You cannot keep it a secret forever.”

Astra peeked over her shoulder. A complex image complete with algorithms and streaming data spread out for viewing. Most of it looked like gibberish. She may have built a neural program capable of enslaving an entire planet, but she did not do so without help.

She peered closely between the two halves of the screen. Something about the representation caused the back of her neck to prickle. She may be useless in the laboratory, but a general such as herself had not advanced in the military without picking up a few tricks.

“That is not a Kryptonian genome, is it?”

Alex looked up from her keyboard to follow Astra’s gaze. “Um, no. It’s a synthetic variant of their genetic sequence. Specifically, the part that influences immunity.”

On the other side of the partition revolved a string of chromosomes. Some were flashing in time with the Kryptonian chromosomes and paired according to color. The genetic code did not look Kryptonian.

Astra frowned. “Who is the test subject?”

“This is a comparative analysis.” Alex replied in nonchalance as if that’s all the answer Astra needed. She then turned in her chair to offer her full, undivided attention. Her lips quirked up in a cautious smile. “You really want to know?”

The elements of the room drew Astra’s gaze. This was Alex’s domain, her private lab and study for whatever went on in there. Astra would be remiss if she did not acknowledge the slight hurt that Alex hadn’t shared this with her.

“… I suppose so.”

“Aw, you’re put out that I didn’t ask you to join my secret underground society.”

Astra flushed pink. “I am not.”

Whatever amusement gained from Astra’s embarrassment (quite a lot, actually) ebbed soon after. “It’s fine,” said Alex, softening her chuckles. “It’s not a lair or anything. I’m sorry I’ve kept you in the dark, but I wanted to wait for the right moment to tell you.”

“Tell me what, exactly? And why the secrecy?”

Barely concealed enthusiasm met burning curiosity. With a touch of rosy in her cheeks, Alex straightened in her chair to properly express the fundamentals of her research. “Okay, so you already know this place is sort of my own private lab. I don’t use it for work-related developments. Whatever tasks need completing for Project Valor are performed at the Institute. Here, however, I’ve conducted my own research with the help of this equipment.”

“Indeed.” Astra raised her brow at the variety of instruments and litany of books housed on their
shelves. “Where did you acquire all of this?”

“Well… I got some help from your parallel self.” The reminder broke Alex’s gaze and swept it downward. Upon realizing her long pause, she grimaced and waved her hand to unseen woes. “Anyway, I’ve been working on this study for about three years now. No one here knows about it but Soren and a few of the team members.”

The strained voice paired with Alex’s sudden jump in heart rate seemed suspicious. “A few?”

“Okay, maybe all of them?”

Anger and melancholy knotted Astra into a conflicted bundle of molecules. “You told them but not me?”

“Hey, it’s not like that. You just got here three months ago. There’s a lot you’ve been dealing with being on Krypton and all.”

“And being with family. Family who I expect to treat me with the same respect I give in return. That means honesty.” Astra shook her head, befuddled. “This is your research. When have I ever given you the impression that I do not care about your work?”

“I…” Alex winced and shrugged one shoulder for lack of a better response, “… was afraid how you’d react? I’m not exactly working within the bounds of legality here. I didn’t think you’d understand what I was trying to accomplish.”

A long-winded sigh escaped Astra. She touched the pulsing nerve at her temple. Her entire body was fraught in terror over the repercussions of this illegal research. She didn’t know whether to worry about what Alex had said or what she wasn’t saying.

“Please.” She dropped her hand and made a feeble attempt to mask her anxiety. “You are doing me no favors by dragging this out. Tell me who the test subject is so I can ready my testimony. If the Science Council does not approve then I will do all I can to protect you.”

Alex’s mouth parted to answer but something kept her from speaking. She thinned her lips, eyes holding Astra in inner struggle. “I’m the test subject,” she said. Her shoulders drooped in surrender. “That synthetic genome is an experiment I’ve been working on to pinpoint the factors that prolong Kryptonian life. It’s my goal to harness the genes related to immunity and introduce them into my own. If successful, the treatment will combat illnesses and injuries commonly caused by human aging.” Alex offered a small smile, a hope that Astra took the same implications to heart. “The treatment may extend my life beyond the average human lifespan.”

Astra looked from Alex’s buoyant expression to the chromosomes hovering in three-dimensional form. “Treatment?” Her lip curled around the bitter word. Her skin crawled to the notion that this incomparable human being thought so lowly of herself. “Treatment? Have you lost all sense? There is nothing to treat. You are as healthy as I.”

“But I’m not going to live as long as you. How do you think that makes me feel?”

“It is the natural course of human existence. You know this better than anyone. You are a scientist, Alex. There is a cycle all life adheres to, some cycles shorter than others, yet there is no way around it. Death comes to us all.”

“Says the person who cheated her own death twice.”

“Those were different circumstances. What you are doing is an aberration of the body. Of science.”
Fuming anger tinged Alex’s cheeks red and scored her brow in furrows. She shot up from her chair. “Don’t talk to me about aberrations when we have a child in the next room being condemned by half the world’s population. Do you have any idea what it is like to be a minority against the world? To be reduced to an insignificant ant in a metropolis of advanced civilization?” Alex flung out her hands. “I’m the only human amongst this perfect society that will outlive me by generations. I’m powerless and sometimes it’s like my voice barely reaches anyone. You Kryptonians think so highly of your flawless biology, it never occurs to you what you’ve failed to maintain through your evolution. Empathy and the will to understand people who may not be on their level, biologically or intellectually.”

The tirade had Astra folding her arms over her chest. “What is this really about? And do not cite further disparagements. This is not about your attitude towards Kryptonians.”

“The fact that you have to ask is what holds me back. Maybe you don’t deserve to know.”

“Alex.” Astra balled her fists. “Tell me.”

“Jeremiah.” Alex’s intonation, though softly spoken, penetrated the antagonism prickling their searing flesh to incite meaning in their hearts. “What other reason do I need? Him being half-Kryptonian likely means he will have a similar life expectancy as his peers.” Alex swallowed the knob in her throat. “If I do nothing, I won’t be able to watch him grow and mature into the prime of his life. He’ll reach one hundred years and I’ll be long dead.”

Astra shook her head sadly. “We knew the risks. I thought you accepted them.”

“Well, I wasn’t thinking clearly. We had that discussion a long time ago – for me, at least. And that was Earth. This is Krypton where medical technology is leaps and bounds ahead of Earth’s. If I have the means, I will do whatever is necessary to be with my family.”

Glistening eyes roved the ceiling for sympathy. Alex clenched her jaw against the fear visibly sweeping through her body. In keeping her eyes from Astra, she was better able to express the source of her tremble. “It has been an internal struggle, day after day, having to exceed the expectations of a society that will never accept me. It is a futile struggle, but if I can find a way to prove myself through ingenuity and determination, there’s a chance they won’t look at me like I’m nothing.” Steeling herself, she met Astra and said, “My own son can look at me and feel proud and fulfilled. I want that for him. I want that for us. I’m not going to wait for someone to make my life easier. I can’t always rely on Alura and her connections. Being treated as an equal will only result from standing on my own two feet.”

“You can still do that without endangering your life.” Astra threw a spiteful hand at the hologram and said, “Experimenting on yourself is not the answer. You may hurt yourself before achieving any hope of seeing Jeremiah grow up. Infusing Kryptonian genetic material into your own may have an adverse effect on your immune system.”

“Which is why I’ve spent the past three years making a study of it. I haven’t inoculated myself with anything. Not yet.”

“Oh, those words are heartening.”

The sarcasm brought Alex to frown. “Why can’t you just support me? After all I did when those powers were making you lose sight of yourself. I stood by you despite the danger you posed not only to myself but to everyone around you. I could have convinced J’onn to lock you up and keep you away from Kara but I didn’t.”
“This is not a contract where we balance out our debts. This is your life and you are putting it at needless risk.” A rattling notion occurred to Astra. Her breath caught in her throat as she fought to get the words out. “I have my family back. Only a few months ago I thought they were lost to me forever. I can’t lose you to some experiment gone wrong. I realize the struggle before you. I am sorry that your voice is not heard and that you feel powerless. This is not how a planet should treat refugees. They should understand the loss, as you said, and convey their bit of respect.” Astra tilted her head as tears tickled the back of her eyes. “But listen to yourself. Time is short for you, that is true, so why take for granted the years likely guaranteed to you already?”

“You don’t understand.” A well of sorrow buckled Alex’s voice. Chin trembling, she sucked in a breath to block the sob bubbling forth.

The sight split through Astra’s chest and shredded her heart. Despite holding firm to her convictions, she did understand that she was the cause for Alex’s break down. She was losing her faith, a concept that Kara spent years building up.

Astra took a step forward. She gentled her voice so it didn’t frighten Alex away – further away. “I’m only concerned for you. What you are doing is dangerous. Eventually, these studies will lead to trials and there is no subject who stands nothing to lose. I cannot mark the days and watch you mare your flesh with needles, Alex. A few years added to your lifespan is not worth the risk. Please see reason.”

“I’m not some amateur. I was educated by your people, Astra. I am a doctor of science and that means something around here.”

“This is not science. It is foolish.”

Single-minded purpose issued from Alex’s glare to Astra’s round, pleading eyes. "She didn't think it was foolish. She encouraged me."

An incomprehensible rage jarred Astra. Her spine became rigid and her vocal chords strained to the graceless bellow. "I am not her!"

"That's for damn sure."

Without another word, Alex shoved her chair forward. It smashed into the edge of her desk, sending a ripple effect through the quaking tablet and keyboard and pitched the back edge into the wall with a crack! Markers rolled off the surface, clattering to a soundless halt on the carpet. The momentum had the chair swiveling to and fro in pitiful squeals.

Uncaring for the mess her anger had wrought, she spun on her heel and stormed out.

Astra remained stock still in the room. She felt alienated by the sterile medical table glinting in the rays filtering through the window. She felt loathsome, self-betrayed, and more defeated than her deflated courage ever felt after battle.

Astra stared blinking at the vacant doorway, asking herself how it all ended in retreat.
Judging by the missing tennis shoes, Astra assumed Alex went for a run to clear her head. If only Astra had an escape. At the moment, none of Argo City’s locales attracted her. The gardens were too overwhelming to the senses. Families were swarming the beach grounds due to the balmy weekend weather. It seemed like a good idea to avoid the park grounds and their joggers. Work didn’t particularly draw Astra even if she knew for certain it would occupy her thoughts. She felt too lazy to lift a stylus. Even if she wanted to get some fresh air, Jeremiah confined her to the apartment. Rao knew what mischief he’d make without adult supervision.

Desperate for distraction, Astra found herself laying in a twin bed with her head occupying a corner worth of pillow. The bed spread was decorated in white stars on a dark blue canvas of space. A few exotic planets she could not name were sprinkled amongst the starry scape. Beside her lay a softly snoring Jeremiah. He lay on his stomach with his hands tucked under his pillow.

She smiled at the angelic view. He was out cold and would not wake unless shaken. It always boggled Astra’s mind how children could fall asleep so quickly, especially during the day. She had her share of experiences with younglings – Kara mostly. In those days, the instances spent playing together on the floor of her living room usually ended in snores. For two seconds Astra would look behind her for a toy gone astray and turn around to find the little one passed out in a heap.

As Jeremiah lay oblivious to her ruminations, Astra wished she had his modest, uncluttered mind. In a moment of weakness, she brought her hand to rest gently on his back. The smooth rise and fall of his body assured her of its vitality and youth. There were so many years left in this little boy. She longed to kiss his head or stroke the fading scars behind his ears. Seeing as they had an hour left before supper, she reined in the longing and left him to nap.

Like a trace of dawn slipping through the blinds, her earlier dispute with Alex snuck up on Astra when she least expected it. Looking at Jeremiah caused a wave of remorse to wash over her. Despite the harsh words spoken, she understood Alex’s argument. How could anyone miss out on this precious child’s life? Alex came from a culture that prepared children to lose their parents long after the achievement of certain milestones. Sometimes things don’t go as expected and a daughter may lose her father before her eighteenth birthday. Although Alex had never planned on becoming a mother, she signed up for a life with Jeremiah and all the hardships it entailed. Being mother to a half-Kryptonian meant broken furniture, questions and white lies, disguises, and the constant lectures on the value of nonaggression.

The line items of that contract hadn’t changed much now that they were inhabiting a different planet. Alex knew the inevitability that Jeremiah would outlive her by one hundred years. Astra knew perfectly well how faithlessness threw people to the edge and Alex was no different. Whatever treatment she had in mind might end in failure, but she was desperate enough to try.

Astra shuddered in dark anticipation. She couldn’t imagine leaving Jeremiah to fend for himself on this world. Alex’s heart was in the right place, but a bullheaded part of Astra shook the sympathy from her mind. Whether they were together or not, she couldn’t allow Alex to take such thoughtless risks. She wanted Alex in her life for as long as human biology allowed because that was the most beautiful part of her. She fell in love with a human – stubborn and uncommunicative but a human nonetheless. She didn’t want Alex any other way. Though shooting herself full of Kryptonian material would not diminish the characteristics that encompassed Alex Danvers, intentions mattered. Alex planned to reject her humanity, something Astra had been trying to remind her of in pictures and interpretative culinary delights (many of which ended in failure and a peck on the
cheek for the efforts made).

Astra nuzzled into the pillow and closed her eyes in the scent overwhelming her senses. Why did he have to smell so good? Even when he was a baby she couldn’t get enough of it. He might not smell as fresh and powdery than she remembered, but the nuances were just as remarkable.

With a dry smacking of lips, Jeremiah roused. He curled up his legs till they met his chest before turning on his back and stretching spread eagle.

Astra caught the hand before it gave her a black eye. Her gut wasn’t as lucky. It felt like being kicked by a Mygorg. Though Jeremiah had better manners than the aforementioned brutish race, his bite tended to be worse than his bark. Rao, did he have her strength. Her lips muffled the grunt, but there was no mistaking the shade of pain in her face. Now she understood why Alex snuggled him from behind.

The yawn dwindled to a small puff. When he finally registered her presence, he grinned sleepily. “Hi.”

Blinking back tears, Astra nodded. “Hi.”

He rubbed his eyes, saying, “Do I have to get up now?”

“In a little bit.” Astra figured the coast was clear so she uncurled from her defensive position. The hem of Jeremiah’s shirt had ridden up in his tossing. She tugged it down, smoothed it over, and covered his stomach with a protective, nurturing hand. It felt so natural it never occurred to her. “How was your nap?”

“Mm-hm.” Distracted, his eyes roved around. “Where’s my Karhu?”

Astra lifted her head from where it rested in her hand. She made a sweep of his nearby nightstand and dresser. Karhu…. Karhu… Why did that word sound familiar? Ah, yes. Karhu was the Kryptonian word for bear. And if Astra learned anything about Jeremiah’s time in the cradle, this bear held quite a bit of significance.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted a ratty brown bear. It lay wedged between Jeremiah’s pillow and the headboard. The sight of it clenched Astra’s chest. Faint memories came to mind of a floor scattered with teething rings and soft, saliva saturated toys, sour soiled t-shirts, and the prevalent smell of pizza. The chaos of first time motherhood.

The burn in her throat kept her from saying much. The reality that Jeremiah was not a baby anymore struck her hard. She would have to accept it eventually. Lost years would remain as such.

She reached for the bear and brought it down between them. With a wistful quirk of her mouth, she stood the animal on its four paws as she had done for her wide-eyed newborn.

“My, my,” Astra said as she looked over the stuffed animal from folded ears to stubby tail. “Your friend here has seen better days.”

“He’s got old age. That’s what I say.”

Youth’s ingenuity never ceased to amuse her. “And he has seen many places, I am sure.” She pinched the discolored left ear. “What happened here?”

“I ass-e-den-ly wasn’t watching when a snap nix got him on the ear. I don’t like snap nixes. I like picnics, though. We have lots of picnics.”
Astra raised her brow at the mention of snap nixs. The flower tended to snap reflexively around anything that touched them. She remembered a time when Alura dared her to touch its petals. Being grabbed by the muscular petals was unlike any agony nine-year-old Astra had ever experienced. Several days after the yellow stain from the snap nix’s mouth faded, her sister was still a sobbing mess of apologies.

The memory drudged up a world of anguish before Astra reminded herself that she still had a sister. She tilted her head. “Does Karhu still like picnics?”

“I guess.”

“What’s wrong?” Astra squeezed his hand gently. She knew that a tucked chin meant he was hiding embarrassment.

“Karhu missed picnics with you,” he said in a mumble. His eyes remained downcast. “We go the four of us to the park and bring lots of food. Laylee never eats as much but she still likes it.”

Frowning, Astra tried to put the pieces together. “But we went picnicking a few days ago.”

The outing had been suggested by Alex who after finally surfacing from her bedroom decided that they needed to do something together as a family. Astra had taken it with surprise despite knowing just minutes before Alex had been alone with memories of her Earth family and friends. Surprising though no less agreeable. That day Alex and Jeremiah (along with one tattered old bear) brought Astra to their spot under the coral mullnut tree. A bountiful feast of healthy snacks and delectable sweets had spread out four checkered squares wide by five squares long on the blanket. The appetite in Jeremiah’s eyes and the roving of his tongue around his lips was as unforgettable as the lightness in Alex’s bearing. Whatever Astra expected to feel had in no way surpassed the overwhelming gratitude catching her breath by the end of lunch.

Her eyes focused in on Jeremiah’s reclusive face. If he hid any further, he would smother himself in bear fur.

Slowly, Astra pulled the bear down by the nose until gray-green eyes blinked back. “I thought Karhu had a nice time. Didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t want to go without you anymore. Like before.”

Her mouth formed a grimace. What could she say? An apology seemed insufficient. Promises didn’t come with the same weight her heart bore at the question of Karhu’s happiness. This was not the same as soothing a wailing infant. This was a walking, thinking, child who remembered. Jeremiah had a sharp mind for a four-year-old and would catch on to her lies. Someday.

The fur beneath her fingers yielded in silence. She gave it a stroke from head to tail. “Did you know this was your mother’s bear when she was a youngling?”

“Laylee’s bear?”

She nodded. Her back prickled to the words possibly spoken out of turn. She hoped she hadn’t overstepped.

His cheeks puffed out around the grin. The sparkles in his eyes barely shown around the crescent thin eyelids. “I always had Karhu like I always had you and Mommy.”

The sentiment sounded as familiar as it felt deep in the heart of her. She always had Jeremiah like
she used to have Alex. The thought had its origins in a past she was unwilling and unable to speak of. Jeremiah was too young anyway. She shook it easily out of mind by way of a tremble. No matter what vicious climax flared out of control between her and Alex, they would always have Jeremiah.

Jeremiah’s shifting broke her out of her thoughts. On his side, bear hugged tightly under his chin, he looked at her with those round, engaging eyes. “Tell me about when I was a baby. You and Mommy never tell me.”

“We don’t?” Astra fell silent. That didn’t sound like Alex. “What do you want to know?”

“Was I good?”

Like an active, spontaneous geyser, the tears sprung. ”Oh, little one, of course you were good. You still are.” She cupped his cheek, fingers nestled in the curly copse of hair. She stroked her thumb down the bridge of his nose, teasing his lips into a smile. “You were a very well-mannered baby. Hardly a peep. Though there were a few nights you kept your mother and I up at night.”

“How many? More than five?”

She bit her lip to stifle the laugh and shrugged.

“More than eight?”

Her amusement bubbled up but she held firm, shrugged once more.

“I forget what comes after ten. Was it more than ten?”

“Mm, more than ten. That is all I will say. You napped perfectly during the day. But there were some nights you did not want to go down. I think your head was so full of imagination even then.”

“Did I sleep with you and Mommy?”

“No, but you were in a crib beside our bed. We took turns soothing you.”

He gave her an unabashed smile. “But you forgave me because I’m good.”

“Good, charming, adorable, and most importantly because you are my son.” She stroked the back of her fingers down his cheek. “I will always absolve you as long as you ask forgiveness.”

“What if I do something real bad?”

The chirping voice inquired out of appall. Paired with his skyrocketing eyebrows, he had perfectly achieved the Alex Danvers Gape.

“Well, I hope you will come to us before you do. You know you can come to your mother and I about anything, yes?”

He nodded, fingers picking idly at the bear’s discolored ear. “Mama?”

“Yes?”

“Mommy always says I have two names because I’m named after two different peoples.”

“That’s true. You were named after your great uncle, Misha, and your grandfather, Jeremiah.”
He frowned at the mysterious origins of his discontent. Watching his fingers pick the hairs of a floppy ear, he said, “You used to talk a whole lot about my great uncle.”

“Jeremiah,” she said softly, utterly terrified her voice would wake the wide world to their retreat. She didn’t want anyone to intrude or else her son would have an advanced education in strangulation. Her breath stuttered in her throat and she took his elbow for strength. The material of his shirt felt impeccably soft under her roving thumb. “Jeremiah, does your mother talk about your grandfather?”

He shook his head.

“Never?”

“She says he’s where I got my name.”

A wave of sadness barreled into Astra so hard and unrelenting she blinked back. She had never felt such sadness, not when learning of Krypton’s calamitous fate or Kara’s death. It wasn’t just the shock that Jeremiah hadn’t known his grandfather, but that Alex hadn’t breathed a word of the man who made his grandson’s life possible. Overcoming grief, especially for one’s parents, took time. Astra might not have had the same relationship with her father as Alex had with hers, but she understood what it felt like to be in the good graces of a man such as Jeremiah Danvers. She felt the same choking sensation when Alex had been informed of his death.

Through burning chest and narrowed vision, she held onto her son. It felt like swallowing entire stars and being left in the dark with nothing to guide her but two gray-green suns. She was experiencing Jeremiah Danvers’ death all over again and it hurt.

“Mama?”

“Yes.” She swallowed the stone in her throat. Unable to do anything for the heartburn, she held on to a small elbow, relieving in the chance to do so without minding her strength. “I cannot speak for your mother. She is still grieving for those that are no longer with her. And I do not know if time will ever mend those wounds.” Jeremiah’s eyes mirrored her sadness. She wondered if he knew how they glistened or why. “I knew your grandfather. Before you were born, we shared similar circumstances, not altogether comfortable, although in a way he filled the absence of your mother. For the short time we spent together, I came to admire him – first for his progeny, later for his sacrifice. I am indebted to him not only for saving my life, but for giving me the discipline to be worthy of you.”

“You are not an aberration.”

She returned her hand to his cheek, marveling over the life she carried for nine months. Before Cadmus captured her, Astra believed her cause was lost. Jeremiah Danvers gave her a reason to fight for that shred of goodness inside of her.

“Don’t let nature tell you who you are. You are proof that we can fight against it.”

He showed her the wisdom of faith. Her love was not only worth holding on to but capable of overcoming duty and blind ambition.

“You honor me, Astra, daughter of Krypton, leader and last surviving member of House Ze.”

Astra had never connected with any other human besides Alex. Not on any emotional level a war weary general willingly conceded to. The one time it happened, blood soaked her hands and last rites hung heavy on her tongue. It felt like an amalgam of hello and goodbye, a shock of realization
that she had taken for granted wise words from a guilt weary father.

“Be good.”

Though the burn in her stomach persisted, she no longer felt hindered by bleary vision. She embraced the sadness like she allowed the tears to fall where they may, dampening the matted fur of Karhu and on her shirt for all to see.

“My Jeremiah.” She sighed, stroking his cheek with her thumb. “I wish you had known your grandfather.”

Interest piqued, he pushed himself up higher onto his pillow. “Am I like him?”

“Mm,” her lips split into a grin as she turned his chin up for scrutiny, “there is a resemblance. Within as much as without. I do not think I have ever seen such kindness in a pair of eyes since I last saw him.”

He blushed behind the head of his bear. “I like Grandfather. Tell me more.”

“Soon. We have to think about dinner.”

Ever the ravenous Kryptonian, his cheeks puffed in anticipation. He asked with wide eyes and a sweet melody on his tongue, “Can we eat now?”

Chuckling, she touched the tip of his nose. “Not this very second. I’m thinking of making something special for your mother. One of her favorites. Would you like to help?”

“We should do pash’tok for Laylee! I’ve done it before and I’m better at it than you.”

“We shall see about that.” Astra’s amusement settled at the thought of an imminent arrival. She had no idea what mood Alex would come home in, but she hoped they could find it in themselves to put aside their conflict for the night. If Alex was anything like the mother Astra was (which she believed wholeheartedly), she would want to appreciate home and family and realize that no genuine disagreement kept them doing so.

Astra gazed fondly on Jeremiah as his hunger-motivated fidgeting mussed the blanket. “I love you my little star.”

A gasp puffed from his mouth. In a fit of giggles, he raised his hands above his head on the pillow like he used to do as a newborn. “Malen’kiy zvezda!”

Astra basked in the glow of unadulterated happiness. The contagious sentiment brought her chest to lurch. Smiling, she slinked her fingers down his sides to tickle him in all the sensitive spots she was now familiarizing herself with.

“Malen’kiy zvezda.”

Nimble fingers found his kryptonite, sending Jeremiah tipping back in a roar of laughter.

* * *

The squeak of tennis shoes alerted Alura to a visitor. Her first thought was Kara whom had been filling in for her part-time lead paralegal. Though Kara chose to take a more artistic direction, she gained plenty of experience in legal documents and jargon from her mother. Alura’s current assistant didn’t mind the extra help and Alura couldn’t be happier to spend more time around her
daughter who would be soon heading off to meet collegiate expectations.

Both assistants were a welcome change from their predecessor. Since Qora’s incarceration, Alura boiled over the missed chance to fire her good for nothing assistant. She had been as shocked by her cousin’s betrayal as Alex. The fact that she had a very demanding position to fill hardly reached the priority of slapping criminal charges on Qora and making them stick.

Once the appropriate replacement had been hired, Kara offered her help in exchange for partial tuition support. After some consideration, she finally decided to enroll in Argo City’s Artisan Academy to study painting. Her acceptance letter came a week ago and became thoroughly soaked with tears after a hug from Alura. Alex and Astra threw a party to celebrate Kara’s achievement (and decision to stay in Argo, though that never made it on the cake). While their hearts were in the right place, the event made Kara’s move a haunting realization. Alura couldn’t stop crying.

The squeaks were approaching the vestibule outside her office. First-year artisan students were expected to attend an assessment before the high professors in order to evaluate a student’s potential. Kara had been slaving all weekend over her project and went wild cat on anyone who so much as peeked into her room.

Whoever Alura’s visitor was, it couldn’t be Kara. She pushed a button underneath her desk to raise the opaque privacy buffer. The door thawed to a thick surface which she peered through easily.

Her brows scrunched. “Alexandra?”

Alex closed in at a brisk pace that could have exceeded her heart rate. It sounded shockingly robust to Alura’s ears. By the time her visitor made it two feet from the door, she had shaken off her surprise.

She rose from her chair. “Open.”

The door slid open for Alex’s benefit.

“Hey,” Alex greeted, flushed and breathless.

The second she passed over the threshold, her shoulders folded and she seemed ten pounds heavier. It could have been Alura’s imagination, but something weighed on Alex’s conscience and that sigh only released a small percentage of it.

The smile had a sluggishness that resembled her gait. “Sorry for not calling. Do you mind the intrusion?”

“Not at all. I would embrace you, but you appear…” Alura’s gaze traveled over the sportswear. Her nose wrinkled to their pungent odor. “… Moist.”

“Ah, yeah, I stopped by your place but Zor said you were taking care of some things here.” She shrugged. “I needed the miles.”

Alura gaped out of sheer concern. “All seven of them?”

“Okay, I cheated and took the tram for four.”

“Please sit down before you faint. I will fetch some water.”

Alura made swiftly for the carafe at her windowsill. A wheezing huff came from behind that couldn’t be blamed on the depressed cushion of the guest chair. When she returned with a tall glass
of water, the overwrought knot in Alex’s brow told her she was not thinking about hydration at the moment.

With practiced poise, Alura rounded the chair to lower herself in the one beside Alex. She crossed her ankles and folded her hands on her lap, waiting for Alex to make the first move. Polished as a magistrate on the outside, keenly thinking up disaster scenarios as a sister on the inside.

The flesh of Alex’s bottom lip bore the brunt of gnawing teeth. When her eyes finally met Alura’s, her entire mask cracked. “I think I really fucked up.”

“What things?”

Alex surfaced from her clammy palms to wave a finger and shock the devil in Alura with crazed eyes. “And by the way, this was not at all what I planned on saying.” Her jaw clenched hard in self-castigation. “I had this whole spiel on Astra’s superiority complex and how selfish she’s being. Like holding me back is going to help anyone!” Her anger wilted as fast as her falling shoulders. “But it’s like my run has tired me out.”

Alura bit her lip over the smile. “Exercise has cleared your head. May I ask how a fine day culminated in disagreement?”

Alex relieved herself with a deep breath. “We were in my private lab, talking, and she got curious about what I was working on. So... I told her the truth.”

Alura thrust her head forward. “You mean to tell me that this is the first Astra is hearing of your research?”

“She knew I was working on something. I just didn’t tell her what.”

“Alexandra. You should have told her sooner. She has a right to know.”

“Obviously, but you know how she can be.” Alex scratched her glistening forehead to distract herself from the overwhelming frustration boiling over. “That’s one huge aspect of her personality, I’m sure, that pops up in every parallel version of her in the multiverse.” Her voice dragged off in a ragged huff of “Ergh!”

Alura cast her frown to the window. She never expected to be spending her afternoon balancing concerns. This was what made caring for two stubborn people such as Astra and Alex so vexing. The parallel divide might make her allegiance to Astra seem improper, but that fact in no way diminished her efforts to safeguard the woman who carried a striking resemblance to family. Nothing, not even subtle divergences could prevent Alura from seeing Astra as her sister.

Her impenetrable loyalty to Astra greatly resembled that of her loyalty to Alex. She once made the
human refugee her responsibility. Alura had been depended on for all things legal, financial, and moral. With patience and practice, Alex eventually found a means of standing on her own two feet. Now she was family. Albeit not related by blood, she took up a special place in Alura’s heart next to Astra.

How could she possibly defend one against the other?

“I don’t mean to put you in an uncomfortable position.”

The hesitant words parted the vapor of Alura’s disquiet. She turned from the window, head tilted. “Pardon?”

“You’re Astra’s sister. Her confidante. If you think this will cause a rift between you two, I’ll stop right now. After all the efforts you two have made in repairing your relationship, I’m not going to betray your loyalty to her.”

Alura smiled softly. “You are more perceptive than Kryptonians give your race credit for. However, your concerns are misguided. I care for the both of you – as individuals and as fated companions.” The scowl struck Alura as lax and without punch. Her face flushed in amusement. “Though I will admit it is not easy to balance my loyalties and reserve judgments, I feel bound by friendship to hear your plight. In case you hadn’t heard, I am a magistrate of and advisor to the High Council and in possession of some two hundred cycles of experience.”

Alex rolled her eyes as a hint of a smile pulled at her mouth. “So I’ve heard. Do you really think you can counsel me on Astra?”

“I may have met her only a few months ago, but I see marks of the woman I grew up with. You will not find a better counselor, if I may be so bold.”

“I just don’t know why she won’t listen to me. This is very important research, not only to me but to our family. She doesn’t seem to understand that.”

“What did she say exactly?”

“She said it was dangerous, which…” Alex wagged her head to indulge the thought, “…okay, yeah, the trials have their risks, but it’s not like I haven’t thought about it. I’m taking precautions. I’m studying possible immunizers at every angle.” She sagged back with a sigh. Far too exhausted to shout, she conceded to sullenness. “She’s acting like I’m shooting myself up with poison. It’s not like that at all.”

The defense, though heartily spoken, had its flaws. Alura sat back, fingers touching her cheek in thought. “Sometimes there are only so many precautions we can take before we realize our oversights.”

Alex frowned. “What oversights?”

“Perhaps there are some things that cannot be fixed – shouldn’t be fixed. Your research, while compelling, may have disheartening results.” Alura studied her closely before asking in a grave tone, “Are you prepared for the possibility of failure?”

“You’re agreeing with her?” Alex gawked. “What the hell, Alura. You know how hard I’ve been working on this. You know what this means to me. How can you take her side? I am a scientist! I form theories and seek out ways to test and prove them. If it ends in failure, I go back to the drawing board, but I do not just give up. Taking risks is my job. It’s what I do. Why does no one get that?”
“I am not disparaging your value as a scientist. After all the effort you put into earning your degree, Project Valor is honored to have you on its team. There is no finer scientist than one of your integrity and work ethic. But is it not also your job to take other perspectives into account? All I am saying is that Astra’s argument is coming from a place of concern. There is no one else on this planet who cares more about your well being than her. Why should you be angry at her for wanting to protect you?”

Irritation balled Alex’s fists and shook them to her words. “That’s not why I’m angry. She doesn’t trust me to handle this kind of research.”

“Her trust is not what is coming between you two. You are doing that all on your own.”

Alex blinked. “Excuse me?

The undressed voice told Alura that she was finally getting somewhere. “Do not act surprised. This has been going on ever since she arrived on Krypton. Astra is finally returned and this poses a problem for you because she waited for you and you didn’t. There is guilt in your heart, Alexandra, and you cannot seem to let it go. But that is not all, is it?”

Alex had her hand propping her head up and focused on nothing but the short beige fibers of the carpet. “Why are you saying this?”

Instead of answering, Alura maintained her momentum. “She has forgiven you – not in so many words, I’m sure, but in her own way. Astra is still waiting for you. You cannot bear to take the next step in your relationship, so you keep her at arm’s length. You put Misha before your own needs, which I can understand as a mother, but as a woman, Alexandra, you deserve better than a life of fear and regret.”

“Fear?” Bidden by the challenge, Alex’s gaze met Alura. Her expression flickered in a mélange of outrage and self-sabotage. “I’m not afraid.”

“This is not what I came here to discuss. You can’t be counseling me on my relationship with your sister. If Astra knew –“

“If Astra knew we were talking, she may refuse to speak to me for an eon, that is true. And I would not blame her. But there is more at stake here than my relationship with my sister. You and Astra have Misha and if this… cold war conflict endures, it will eventually affect him.”

The grim transformation pulling Alex’s features down encouraged Alura to lean forward. Alex’s hand lay limp on the chair’s arm. Alura covered it in assurance that no matter who she defended, her main priority would always be family, which included the silly human in her midst.

“I know you think ignoring it is the safest solution,” said Alura, “but you are only hurting Astra and you are hurting yourself. I like to think I know you well, but there is one thing I have learned today that has never occurred to me.” Alura took a measured breath and tread softly, tenderly so as not to frighten Alex off. “You are talking yourself out of love. Like the perceptive person you are, you know that the longer you spend time around Astra, the sooner it will all be like it was before. And despite the times changing, your heart certainly hasn’t.”

After a trembling breath, Alex wiped her eyes with her free hand and used the other to squeeze fast to Alura. “I can’t keep losing.” She shut her eyes tight enough to crinkle the skin at their corners. “I’ve trained myself to overlook certain things in my life because if I don’t, I’ll think about who is
in it and realize the chances of losing them too.”

“What about Misha? And Kara? They are a part of your life, so why do you not push them away?”

“Because what I feel for them isn’t the same as what I feel for Astra. It’s…” When the words caught up to her, she froze, breath hitched and standing on the brink of a dawning realization. “Oh… no…”

“Alexandra, don’t.” Alura took hold of her hands and brought them to shelter between them. Out from under the tear drops, their folded contributions pressed hard enough to whiten their knuckles. “Do not punish yourself. This is no way to live.” She stopped herself, suddenly grasping the fault in her logic. “I cannot speak for your loss. These past three cycles you and I have talked of many subjects – family, career, current events… Rao, the weather. When you first divulged the events surrounding Earth’s ruin and all those that followed, I did not expect the extent of grief which you have felt – are still feeling. While I am touched that you trusted me with such personal emotions, it couldn’t have been easy, bringing such wounds to open. But it also showed me a side of you that is worth speaking of.”

Alura squeezed Alex’s hand gently and said, “I cannot claim to have met a more courageous individual – human or Kryptonian. You speak your mind, Alexandra, and you protect your kin. You keep your ghosts with you every day and that must be excruciating, but it is also very brave. Strength is not reserved for survival alone. It is also necessary in asking for support.”

She stared long and hard into Alex’s eyes, hoping to rouse some of that strength she spoke of. “There is no other person who can go through this with you but Astra. She has been with you from the beginning. My sister whom I have grown with since birth knew this well and it is why she sent Astra here in her place. What you had with Astra on Earth cannot be shared with anyone else. It is extraordinary and sacred and it belongs to the both of you. It is nothing material that can be forgotten, abandoned, or appropriated.”

Silent as the vacuum of space, Alex stared at their joined hands, unblinking against the torrent behind her eyes. “Where is this coming from?”

Alura grinned and let go of the laugh. “Thanks to you, my relationship with my husband has become something far more than I ever expected it to be. Perhaps I am speaking from personal experience.”

“Yeah, well it doesn’t sound like High Council business, that’s for sure.”

The undignified snort was entirely worthy of Alura’s widening smile. “There is a fine line between love and emotional instability. I scold Zor for leaving his shoes in the living room. I hate it when he says ‘Yes, darling’ every time I unburden myself of the stupidity spread by my colleagues. It is so dismissive. It drives me mad when he whistles and cooks at the same time.” Alura sighed at the sheer volume of complaints crowding the forefront of her mind. “Our home is a fertile breeding ground for pet peeves as it is with many marriages, but none of them should change how a couple truly feels for one other. Despite our disagreements, I love Zor to distraction and I know he feels the same.”

The muscles in Alex’s hand jumped under Alura’s. Noting the edginess, Alura decided to drive home the point. “What I have with Zor is worth the hardship. What is yours and Astra’s worth? Is loving and losing more advantageous than missing out on a possible lifetime with Astra? Whether or not your research succeeds, there is time set before you now. Jeremiah will always be here, which means Astra will never leave. She will always be here, reminding you of a distant past and a future you chose not to venture. You are a scientist. Risks are your profession. Why not take one
“I was awful to her today.” Her voice came soft enough for its undertones to echo self-pity. “I said something unforgiveable, something I implied out of anger, and I don’t think she will believe me if I told her it meant nothing.”

“She would be foolish not to forgive you. I do not think she is a fool. Not at your expense.”

Bemused, Alex arched her brow. “Are you saying she’s foolish in other areas?”

Alura rolled her eyes. “Let us be honest. Astra is no angel.” She smiled at the watery chortle and watched with high hopes as Alex wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. “Despair no longer, Alexandra. She is home now. It is as it should be. Take heart from what you have and do not face alone what is lost.”

A long moment passed in the quiet of Alura’s office. Nothing disrupted their space, not the echoes of footsteps or chimes of phone calls. Despite the troubling circumstances, Alura could not be more grateful for the time spent with Alex. She resigned to the fact that Alex must take the next step on her own. She could press her advice only so far. Experience and faith told Alura that Alex would make the wisest, most informed decision not simply for her family but for herself.

Without warning, Alex stood. The vulnerability on display shot Alura up from her chair and before she could ask, Alex swallowed her in a hug.

“I don’t know what to say,” Alex said, chin on Alura’s shoulder and fingertips pressing into her back. “Thank you doesn’t seem sufficient enough. I must sound like a broken record.”

“A… a broken record?”

“It means I’m just repeating myself.”

“Oh,” Alura said, holding dear to the human she considered a true friend and cherished member of her extended family. “I do not think of you as a record – broken or not. Never fear speaking from the heart. It is one of your many marvelous qualities.”

“Though a bit infuriating at times?”

Alura chuckled. “That too.”

After a moment, Alex sniffed the air they shared in close quarters. She shrugged meekly. “God, I’m horrified. Now your clothes are all sweaty. I’m sorry.”

“That is not important,” Alura said. She minded her strength in the embrace though not at the expense of affection. “This is.”

* * *

Jeremiah turned out to be very handy in the kitchen. With his guidance, Astra caught on to the fundamentals of a recipe she could not admit to cooking much less having eaten before. According to an online culinary database, the key to a good pash’tok was in the crust. If worked too much, the crust would turn out tough. Too thin and the savory filling would seep out through the cracks.

Dinner had never been taken so seriously by Astra. For her apology to mean something, it had to be flawless, special to Alex’s tastes, and without strings. A deep crevasse nestled between her eyebrows throughout the entire process. She wasn’t alone. Jeremiah sweat a few bullets in the
effort to make sure his mother’s favorite turned out acceptable and not in a crumbling mess on the floor as it happened on Astra’s first try. After a lengthy shouting match that ended in flour-dusted hair and cheeks, they were back on track.

By sunset, their plates were polished clean and the only remnants of an olive branch came in the form of gravy saturated crumbs. Astra owed all her gratitude to Jeremiah. Even if he spent most of the time perched on his stool and hurrying her around the kitchen by the point of his finger, she could overlook the bossy attitude and gave him a big kiss for helping.

Alex proved unyielding. Her lips glistened in the juices of Astra’s and Jeremiah’s labor. The perfect balances of spices brought the flush to her cheeks, a deep rouge that matched the color of her wine. Her tongue, though, was not as forthcoming. She grinned for her son’s benefit and passed along due compliments, but no such words or looks came Astra’s way. The entire night Alex seemed adamant on overlooking the chair in which Astra sat.

Topics of conversation locked in Astra’s throat. Aided by crust and potato, her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth or to the front of her teeth or between her lips in unfulfilled anticipation. She didn’t even know if her heart was in it anymore. What cause had she to relieve the strain anymore? If she could not speak in profound earnest, what drove her thoughts to more savory pies?

Instead of pressing alms, she resigned to the added layer in their facades and went to bed a very conflicted woman whom could not ignore the deluge of complications. They sat at the forefront of her mind like kiri-birds pecking the inside of her skull. The migraine would not go away. It was red and hot and igniting supernovas at the back of her eyes.

"Will you stop sighing like that?"

Alex’s fuming tone rang unmistakable in the mute darkness of their bedroom. Neither of them moved behind their lines.

The heartbeat in Astra’s forehead pulsed with a vengeance. She fought the urge to knead it out and continued to stare at the wall that was Alex’s back.

She couldn’t bear to ignore an unresolved situation. Alex had been so angry, so hurt and she left without any protest from Astra. They should talk. It was something done between people who shared children. They talked and worked out the problem before their impressionable child suffered the repercussions. Astra had been trained not to turn her back on the battlefield. She may not retain the rank any longer, but one hundred and fifty years of habit still ran through her blood.

Two hours after hitting the pillow, Astra lay awake, psyching herself up for arbitration. There was obviously a miscommunication between them that needed clearing up. Unfortunately, both of them were too proud to admit their own faults.

Suddenly, the bed dipped to one side. The luminosity of city transportation stole through the dimmed window and painted the sheets ice blue. Astra blinked in the semi-darkness to see Alex getting out of bed.

“Where are you going?”

Astra raised her head just as Alex plucked up her pillow and stuffed it under her arm. Her expression glimmered solid, cool like a sheet of glacier. Astra had never visited the arctic continent on her planet due to its melting over long before her birth, but she understood the metaphor.

“I’m going to the couch.” The walk-in closet made Alex’s reply distant. She rummaged through a
shelf stacked with blankets and clean linens. “I can’t sleep.”

What Astra heard was *I can’t sleep with you*. It stung far more than she would admit. The effect spread through her chest like an incurable virus. Why did she feel so defenseless?

Alone in the freezing bed, vulnerability swallowed her whole. Nevertheless, she sat up and shuffled to Alex’s side of the bed which still carried her body warmth. “We need to talk,” she said. “There’s been a misunderstanding.”

“I’m tired, Astra. Can we do this some other time?”

“No. We have put this off too long.”

In wrestling down a blanket, Alex let the urgency take hold. She gave up with a sigh and turned back, pillow and scowl in tow. “What do you want me to say? That my research is irresponsible and the three years I put into it are worthless? That I can’t seem to get over survivor’s remorse? It’s all my fault, isn’t it? It’s always my fault!”

“I said no such thing.” Astra paused to mind her tone because she did not want this to spiral out of control. They couldn’t have a repeat of earlier. “Perhaps we should start off by laying aside blame and focusing on the issue.”

The pillow landed unceremoniously on the bed. Alex folded her arms and turned her chin up to show her defiance. “Which is?”

Astra cocked her head. “For starters, we do not talk.”

“We’re talking now.”

“We shy from matters of importance. Namely those that have brought us to this juncture. Us, Alex. We don’t talk about us.”

Alex threw up her hands and let them slap to her thighs. “Is there even an us to talk about? What more is there to salvage from this? It keeps happening over and over again. Whether through cosmic intervention or our own misguided choices, they all result in our estrangement.”

Three months of aching overwhelmed Astra and nearly set her rising off her heels. She wanted so much to reach out and prove her existence to Alex. Her skin was warm and her chest resonated with fervent heartbeats. Did she not know? Did she even care?

“But I am here now,” Astra said, pouring all her certainty into it. “We are not estranged from one another.”

“I mean emotionally.” A bit of Alex’s resolve slipped with the sigh. She approached the bed and knelted down in the place vacated for her. “Astra, I don’t know what you’re thinking or feeling, and I know that’s my fault for not asking. I don’t engage with you, I punish you with silence, and that’s not fair.”

She stared down at the bed, eyes widening by the second. Her anxiety turned inside out. Adrift and grasping for a stable thought, she brought her fingertips to her temples. Realistically, they couldn’t stem the nerves pounding out of her skull but the pressure seemed to distract her long enough to get the words out.

“I don’t even know what I’m doing anymore. Everything is upside down and spinning so fast. I secure myself in this box made to fit a limited amount of emotional baggage. Maybe that’s self-
preservation. I mean,” her eyes flicked up to beckon Astra, “can you blame me? I’m just so tired. I’ve been holding on to all these ghosts because no one else will. No one else can. I’m censoring my thoughts and actions around you and it’s driving me mad. It’s been a constant state of panic and uncertainty for me. I don’t know what’s going to happen. Jeremiah needs to be looked after, but how can we do that when we’re so... so..."

“Alex, slow down.” Instead of encouraging Alex through touch, Astra let her words soothe. “Take a breath. There is no urgency. I do not expect to have everything worked out in a night. What is your human saying? Rome wasn’t built in a day?”

“Yeah.” Alex pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead and concentrated on deep breaths. When the heat left her cheeks, she dropped her hand and blinked shyly. “I shouldn’t have flipped out like that. That’s not how I wanted to apologize.”

Astra froze. “You wanted to apologize?”

“I didn’t give a great impression, did I?” Alex closed her eyes with the sigh. “I am sorry,” she said, opening her eyes to prove it. “What happened earlier today was my anger getting the best of me. Three years of backhanded compliments and people telling me what I can’t do have made me very defensive of my research. I guess I’m still angry, but that’s no excuse to take it out on you. You were just trying to look out for me. I shouldn’t have left like that.”

“I understand what this research means to you. We can continue to have a discussion about it. A decision does not need to be made this very second. There may be dreadful consequences should the Science Council discover the nature of your research. I will do whatever I can to ensure its secrecy – you know that. But also know that this choice should not be made lightly.”

Alex raised an eyebrow. “I’m not backing down. If you truly know what this means to me, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

The defiance in Alex always turned Astra on. Even when they both knew her physical strength couldn’t harm a Kryptonian outside kryptonite emitters, it still stoked the embers of desire.

This time, however, her defiance tested Astra. She returned the staunch remark with a throwback to their more hostile days: a mocking smile. “You know just as well that it is not in my nature to back down from a fight.”

That fanned the flames in Alex’s eyes. “Astra, seriously? Come on!” She shot up from the bed but Astra caught her by the wrist.

“No, I am being serious. This is our solution.”

“You’re going to have to spell it out for me because I don’t speak Vague.”

“Fighting. Arguing. It has always been our method of negotiation.” A niggling excuse warned her to stop before it all collapsed in disaster. She shuffled closer, refusing to let go of Alex’s wrist which her thumb was now idly brushing. “I want to spend whatever time we have left together, and if that means fighting than I welcome the challenge.”

Alex frowned. “What does that even mean?”

“Marry me.”

Alex blinked and when Astra’s expectant look didn’t change, she blinked again. “Excuse me?”
Despite their arguing, the day had made them weak and the words didn’t really pack any punch. Everything about the way Alex stepped closer to the bed and how they couldn’t be physically apart indicated how badly they wanted to make up. Their bodies were as drawn to one another as their souls. As impractical as it all sounded in Astra’s head, she held on to her last hope with a Kryptonian grip.

“I said marry me.” The air crowded in Astra lungs or evaporated completely. She couldn’t tell which. At the risk of repeating herself stupid, she pulled her mouth into a (hopefully) endearing smile and said, “Marry me, Alex.”

She was in too deep to change the tune. All the while Alex evaluated the proposal’s legitimacy, Astra’s heart was swelling against her ribs and her eyes were misting over. She could not take it back. Her body would not allow it.

“Why would you ask me that?” Alex asked in a quivering, low voice. “We’re not even together in the traditional sense.”

“To be perfectly accurate, I did not ask you. It was a suggestion.”

“A suggestion of marriage. Between you and I.”

“You do not sound enthusiastic. Are you opposed?”

“To what? A whim? I may be reckless at times, but at least I have a plan.” Alex looked down on Astra as if she had just stolen her favorite sidearm (E-7 Stinger, Kryptonian made). “What is this? A shotgun proposal?” She scowled. “Talk about rushed.”

“This is very odd.” Astra turned her head slightly to study the excessive huffing. Was Alex having trouble breathing or was she simply annoyed? Did she have something in her eye and that’s why she was blinking so erratically? “You seem to take great issue with my delivery, and yet nowhere in your argument do you contest matrimony.”

Alex puffed out another sigh and grabbed her forehead as if to steady herself. “Wow,” she said, sarcasm spiking her tone, “you’re real observant.”

“I know this sounds spur-of-the-moment and unromantic. Is that not how we are, though? You said once that we do not behave according to convention. I am asking you to marry me because it feels… unprepared and spontaneous and that is our way. You still require full naturalization and I want to do right by our son. Also, I love you. There is no one else who will hear those words, not with the weight of my vow to honor you, protect you, and hold you dear for all the life left in me.”

When Alex failed to detect the ploy in Astra’s argument, the intensity in her eyes soon cooled. Whatever response she had in mind was reserved at her discretion.

Astra was unwilling to wait out for a sickening verdict. The silence was unbearable, the weight of Alex’s nonresponse was more exacting. It cut into her layers and reaped her confidence in one fell swoop. Astra didn’t know what hit her.

A pale came over her. "I don't know how to do this,” she said, barely hearing it over the sound of her own blood rushing. “I'm not good with gestures. It took your father a week to teach me how to properly shake a human's hand. I’ve been a soldier for so long, I don't know when to put my actions aside and secure diplomacy through conversation. Soldiers don’t ask. They take. I don’t want to take this choice from you.” Astra swallowed over the tightening of her throat. “This is not a suggestion. It is a question."
Alex’s head shook from side to side. Her eyes closed as if too embarrassed to watch the wringing out. Whatever decision forged by her ruminating was concealed by blank, now open eyes. Astra couldn’t figure out what it meant. She longed to break the silence, but there was nothing to say that hadn’t been said already. The seconds crawled along and she waited – if in vain then so be it. She had already betrayed too much of herself. It should have horrified her how extensively she exposed herself.

Anticipation prickled her back and before Astra could stop herself she was shuffling forward on the bed, one knee in front of the other, and baring her soul as she would never conceive of before. “Please, say something.”

Alex took pity on her by stepping forward. Her hands took Astra’s pallid cheeks and pulled her into a kiss.

The force of it sent Astra back to a period of aimless passion. Nothing dimmed the intensity, not the haze of uncontrollable abilities nor her plea to be needed. Astra’s poise, fragile as it had been in that underground safe house, didn’t stand a chance against the onslaught. Alex’s mouth was so hard and unforgiving. Her nails scratching through Astra’s scalp, seeking the unattainable without a map or a compass.

This was not about Astra. This was something between Alex and her mortality. Astra could feel the heat of her body through the pajama top igniting to an unseen torment. A tease, a jest, something she still wrestled with but turned her back on a long time ago. Though it might not have reached the answer Astra was looking for, she could sympathize with that crippling need to prove oneself.

Somewhere along the way Alex had pinned her to the bed, wrists above the head, heels dangling over the mattress, and leaving Astra to mull over her technique. The heady mist occupying her head made it impossible to record the sequence of events because minutes and seconds were about as important as the shirt being muscled over her head.

A shock of cool air met her skin. Alex bore down on her like certain gravity. The texture of cotton felt rough against her stomach. Whether a conscious ploy or it slipped her mind, Alex’s shirt remained on, her pupils too dilated to see the shift in power much less take satisfaction in it. Astra caught her lip between her teeth to keep from making herself known. Nothing brought relief until soft, smooth skin met hers.

Alex tightened her grip around Astra’s wrists, poured fire into the kiss, and prodded for reciprocation through a bit of suggestion all her own. Between the tongue sliding across her bottom lip and the rolling pressure from Alex’s hips, Astra couldn’t keep up. Why did she feel so heavy? Alex was like a great ocean upon her, crashing into her solid body and forcing her down to an endless rock-bottom.

Astra was still sorting out the expression on Alex’s face before they tipped over the edge. Amidst the fog, a thread of clarity slithered in. If she was about to fall again, she could not take Alex down with her, not if she didn’t feel the same and this was all for pity’s sake.

“All… Alex.” Astra slipped out of human shackles and planted her hands on either side of Alex’s cheeks. “Don’t. Not for me.”

The ocean receded and turned to silent rainfall. Droplets sprinkled on Astra’s bare breasts and neck. The silence only lasted so long until thick, winded breaths accompanied the rain. A head bowed couldn’t ask for mercy over a thunder of their own making. It was counterproductive and self-sabotaging.
But Astra recognized sincerity. She let go only to curl the draping locks behind Alex’s ears. She returned her hands to reddening cheeks, wondering if she put the humiliation there.

As if hearing the thought, Alex cracked open her eyes and met the tears puddling in the scarred valley. Between Astra’s breasts, the clean white line prickled under her gaze.

In the blink of an eye, the tide turned. Astra’s mouth parted in awareness. She moved her thumb over Alex’s cheekbone in long, slow motions. She encouraged Alex to speak for her own voice crippled under the emotions pressing down on her chest.

The touch to Alex’s cheek smoothed any lingering hardness. Her arms shook from holding herself up until finally she sagged over top of Astra. She slipped her hands under Astra’s shoulders to find retreat in the course brown locks. With only the support from her elbows, she hovered like a raincloud muddled in gray turmoil.

“I thought I was never going to see you again,” she said.

Astra couldn’t bear to witness the unraveling. A spike of anger came over her at the circumstances suffered by Alex. “No more,” she said as she dried the tears without ever leaving Alex’s cheeks. “You do not have to think that anymore.”

Sorrow deafening breaths made Alex’s chest heave. She squeezed her eyes shut and grimaced against the sob. “I can’t go through that again.”

“I know,” Astra said, even though deep down she knew fate would force her to take a turn. She blinked around the pool filling her eyes. “This is where it starts.” A lock of Alex’s hair loosened and swung down between them. With care and consistency, Astra curled it back over an ear. “Here, between us. There is so much we haven’t accomplished. Think of all the time we have. You say it’s not enough, but if we cherish every day, isn’t that worth a natural life?”

Alex opened her eyes. The scowl didn’t amount to its usual animosity. “God, you’re still going to fight me on this? What do I have to do to convince you that my research is just and necessary?”

The corner of Astra’s mouth twitched in a half grin. Wordlessly, she pulled Alex’s hands from out of her hair and brought them over her chest. She tucked her chin in to better appreciate the dexterous fingers. She kissed each one, lips pressing the tips and the knuckles and tender valleys, knowing her hedging pulled the huffs from above. Alex, still clad in pajamas, was straddled atop her hips in a strained silence that edged on exasperation.

Finally, Astra kisses fell to the fourth proximal finger of Alex’s left hand. She lingered over the delicate skin her thumb was stroking. “I can think of one thing.” Her eyes flicked up to meet Alex. She didn’t bother concealing the sly smile spreading across her lips.

“You’re such an asshole, Astra.”

“Mm, have I flustered you?” The smile grew around her chuckle. She weaved their fingers together. “You only use profanity when you know I am right.”

Alex barked with laughter. “Oh, is that right?” She bent down to press their smiles together. “You really have it in your head, don’t you?” She let go of Astra’s bottom lip and upon seeing the question in her gaze said, “Thinking you have all the answers. That you’re the more superior species.” Without pausing for air, she caught Astra in another frustration-fueled kiss. “You fight me at every turn. It’s in your blood, isn’t it?”

The fingers ran down Astra’s sides like silken ribbons. They stole under the waistband of her
pajamas, seeking flesh and defeat before raking back up to grip her hips. Astra felt all a pool of arousal on the bed and quivering to the slightest breath on her mouth and graze of nails across her skin. “We can do this all night,” Astra gasped around pecks. Between the fighting and the not fucking, her mind had never been more decided. “Every night. Just say the word.”

Alex deepened the next kiss with a beguiling moan. All wards collapsing, she capsized with them, their bodies flush and igniting at first touch.

Astra didn’t even care that they were partially clothed. Nothing deterred the burst of affection or the need kindling between her legs. It didn’t matter in the slightest that Alex hadn’t said “yes” or “no” or “maybe.” Astra just wanted to touch and be touched. To love and be loved as space and circumstance had prevented so many times over. This had to be theirs and theirs alone. Or what was the Rao damned point of all they had sacrificed?

Astra helped strip off Alex’s clothes as Alex did the same for her. Without question, they laid down and made love for the first time since saying goodbye on a dying world. It was familiar to Astra, but a different kind of familiar. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but then she really didn’t care about where those fingers ended up other than the places that brought respite.

Teasing had no place there. Between them, any space left belonged to honesty. And it came instinctively from Astra’s lips. In soft, hushed tones she bid “marry me” all over Alex’s body. She already thought of her as her wife and proved it in murmurs in the softness of a neck, the dip of a back, and between her thighs. She’d never felt closer to Alex, never felt so needed by those arms bracing across her back and pulling her in for kiss after kiss.

“My wife,” she spoke to the freckle on a shoulder. “My wife,” to the star-shaped scar on a knee and over the low groaning current. Those weren’t words. They were praise and devotion rolling off her tongue and seeking home someplace, any place with her beloved.

Her teeth nipped at a slack jaw before dipping into Alex who lay beckoning in delirious murmurs and embracing every inch for all she was worth. “My wife.” The homage caught with cries as she carried Alex through wistful ends.

It would be the first of many. If there was a limit to how much they could give and accept in kind, it wasn’t recognized. They didn’t stop. For all the longing in them, it never once occurred to them that there was an end.
Afterwards, when the sheets were beyond grasp and they had wrested all they could out of their bodies, they wound up in a haphazard knot of limbs and heart strings. A crisp, early morning waited just beyond the dimmed window. The people of Argo City were waking up and going about their first hours in monotonous fashion. As far as they were concerned, it was an ordinary morning.

The first thing Alex registered upon waking was the weight. Astra lay draped over her, head on her back and an arm tucked low about her waist. Not knowing when this occurred, Alex resigned to the arrangement with a sigh. The soft, unobtrusive snores were a bit of a wake-up call, though. She couldn’t remember the last time she heard that sound, barring the little snuffles from one room over. It was no mystery who Jeremiah got his snoring habit from.

Alex yawned, inhaling sharply the still thick atmosphere hovering around her. The familiar smells of her bedroom succeeded in lowering her head back down to the pillow, but her nerves were wide awake. The rolling snores buffeted her back and ruffled the loose curl tickling her shoulder blade.

Alex slid her arms deeper under her pillow, trying not to stir the leg nestled between hers. Warm breaths trailed up her spine. The tremor reached unfathomable depths she was just beginning to reacquaint herself with. Alex had forgotten the intensity of being in Astra’s arms and at her mercy, of lifting each other up and plunging together like boneless flesh and feeling. She missed that all-or-nothing understanding between them; all that back-arching-build-up or none of the reward. They were as compatible in bed as they had been on the battlefield, and Alex couldn’t imagine them any other way.

She hoped Astra hadn’t noticed her tears. Their lovemaking had stirred something inside Alex she hadn’t touched in over three years. To be experiencing it again was a bit like waking up after a long sleep or discharging her first shotgun after returning from medical leave or wrapping her lips around the finest chocolate of her childhood.

Ultimately, none of them came close to the blissful ache in her heart every time they came together. It overwhelmed her to the verge of sorrow because how could she forget? She had always ached for Astra, even when they were within reach of each other. In the beginning, she denied it out of self-preservation. Who wanted to involve themselves in unrequited love? It hurt to want so much, knowing you were crazy enough to persist in silence.

Astra had been a loose cannon, a non-patient with literally half a mind to murder her rather than return her affections. On the outside, Alex refused to sympathize with Kara’s feelings for her aunt. Inside, she was waiting for judgment day. She was already petrified of what Astra might do to her if she pieced together the fragments of her memory of what occurred on that rooftop. It seemed like the logical course of action to cover up any burgeoning feelings with fear of the unpredictable.

All the minutes spent justifying added up. From a heart flutter to a hand fidgeting for contact, there were no lengths Alex wouldn’t have gone to smear those petty feelings and keep herself on the right course of action. Since enlisting with the DEO she was always on duty, on call, no pleasure, all business. When Astra reappeared as flesh and bone in a whirlwind of dust, Alex told herself that nothing changed. The general may have been one army short, but she was still a fearsome opponent.

Minutes turned to hours and hours to days. Even as a scorching steel door separated them, Alex had told herself not to give in. There was no time for sentimentality. That poor excuse for a superwoman, that failure of a general and misunderstood soul was a thorn in her side. Yes, that’s
what got under her skin – Astra’s impudence, her smug superiority, and that victorious smile which displayed before the battle was even secured. Not the ache for her tenderness, strength, and loyalty. No.

If Alex had known how much time they had left, she wouldn’t have behaved as she had. So much time wasted in the ‘figuring it out’ while time ticked down to Earth’s day of reckoning. Now, that woman she ran through, betrayed, fell in love with, and left behind to die was returned to her. Astra lay with her like they hadn’t fought to the death.

Alex didn’t want to waste any more time and she didn’t want to keep making excuses. This was their home, their time, and she would be damned if Rao or any higher power snatched it from their arms.

The wave of hair on her shoulder blade slid down and vanished. The tickling sensation was replaced with an emergent groan. The pressure of lips to Alex’s back was a welcome torture. Despite the bare dregs of energy at her disposal, the touch excited her. Astra knew precisely where to provoke a response. No matter how much time had passed since they pulled the last “Gods” and “Raos” from their mouths, Alex felt like she could do it all over again.

Alex’s heart thudded in her chest. She closed her eyes, realizing how hopelessly foiled her resolve. She was in love with this feeling and there was no discouraging it any longer.

"Repeating it like that won’t convince me," Alex said.

Lips removed themselves from Alex’s back and were supplanted with a cheek. “I did not say anything.”

“I felt your lips on my back. You know I’m an expert in reading body language.”

Astra’s cheek crinkled. “There’s no fooling you this early, is there?”

“No if you blindfold me and return to your side of the bed.” The weight atop Alex went still. No breathes touched her back. She wilted at the loss of that reassuring presence. “I wasn’t serious,” she said, turning her head to catch Astra’s eyes. Disbelief sloshed against the empty lining of her stomach. “You don’t want to sleep away from me, do you?”

Instead of responding, Astra crawled up and lay on her side so Alex could turn over. The sound of crinkling sheets and shuffling limbs muffled Alex’s raving heart beat. The silence was deafening. Astra’s nonresponse spoke louder than any word in the dictionary – English or Kryptonese.

What was happening? Alex lay on her back feeling the force of doubt press down on her. Was she going to leave her? A confounding number of pleadings caught in her throat. Astra wasn’t even touching her. What did she mean by it?

Astra hovered over her with a peculiar expression, one of soft cheekbones and lightly stoked coals for eyes. Alex felt taken aback. She had never seen passion in idle form. This was not Astra wearing her down. This was Astra displaying every fiber of commitment in a gaze.

“I think I made myself clear last night, but on the off chance you were not paying attention, know this: you are the mother of my child and I love you. There is no other person – human or Kryptonian – I wish to spend my days with. No matter what you decide, I will always be yours. When you are in need, I will make myself available. If you desire my counsel or my company, I will be present and if not, you will receive no argument from me. Should I fail to live up to these oaths, you have my solemn permission to take Jeremiah and leave me forever.”
Alex swallowed the upsurge of sentiment evoked by the words. “That’s nice and all, but nowhere in that speech do you explain why.”

“Why?”

The face crunching frown resembled Kara to such a degree that cracked Alex’s mettle. “Why…” It discharged in a hasty, rattling sigh. “Why do you want to marry someone like me?”

“You really have to ask by now?” Astra raised her brows then wilted at the reaction. She brought Alex’s gaze back by cupping her cheek. Her unrelenting gaze was at odds with the thumb caressing Alex’s long dried tears. “The anger inside of me after losing Krypton and Kara – when I thought she perished with everyone else – it turned me into something far more relentless than before. I didn’t recognize myself and it didn’t matter if I never could.

“That night in the desert I succumbed to my abilities, prepared to leave the Earth and all its inhabitants in peace. Then I woke up in the DEO’s medbay, alive and somewhat diminished from the state of possessing incalculable power. When you came to visit me, I realized how much I wanted to stay. The look in your eyes that day… you reminded me that pain is necessary and so is our humility. There is nothing worthy to gain if it must be taken by force.

“I was so sure that I lost myself, but you persisted and it was persistence that opened my eyes. You welcomed me into your life and made me a part of your family. Offering consolation to a former enemy, knowing what I could have done to you at Fort Rozz, showed true bravery.”

Astra’s gaze shifted to the kinked strands of reddish brown hair. She removed her hand from Alex’s cheek and combed it out in slow, tender motions. “Kara may have given me hope, but you gave me a reason. I am no hero, Alex. I can hardly call myself a soldier for justice. The only belief I cling to anymore is the belief that family supersedes all personal desires. I intend to take responsibility for my actions not for honor’s sake but for the security of our future – you, Jeremiah, Kara, and Alura. Rao, even Zor.”

A slow smile surfaced to her lips. Her eyes sparkled like timeless star dust. “And if you wish for the abridged version,” Astra continued, “I want to marry you because there is an outrageous amount of ignorance crawling on this planet, and I want everyone to know what a remarkable woman I have to come home to.”

Copious tears pooled in Alex’s eyes. She feared the slightest movement would give her away, but the need to see Astra’s face superseded embarrassment. She blinked, triggering a roll of beads down her cheek. It cooled instantly as its terminus reached a motionless thumb. From beyond her streaked vision, Alex found Astra staring down at her with a painfully open and expectant expression.

The words still swelled under her ribs, lifting her chest in a great gasp. In a moment of spectacular clarity, Alex nodded and said, “Okay.”

A look of surprise flickered across Astra’s face. She planted her hand to the bed and pushed up to see if she heard right. “Pardon?”

"I'll marry you."

Those three words were all it took to make Astra break out into the goofiest smile. It grew wide enough to turn her cheeks pink.

The skies of Argo City pulsated to high flying transportation. Outside, nothing was more important
than traveling from Point A to Point B in a timely fashion. Inside their bedroom, momentous occasions as well as trivialities took precedence.

Alex wouldn’t normally consider herself to be an optimist, but she was beginning to see the appeal. She had a safe home to share with her family, where they could experience all the wondrous moments of life. And she was going to marry Astra, retired general, ex-enemy, and a work in progress who also carried the worthy designation of aunt to her sister and mother to her son. Alex couldn’t think of a better way to be thankful for every second of every day if it kept this feeling alive. There were no better feelings than fresh air in your lungs and happiness blossoming in yourself.

The buzzing city melted away until it was just the two of them. A fluttering sensation began in Alex’s chest. Astra was happy and so was she. She couldn’t believe they were there, alive and relieved to the verge of tears. They were also wearing nothing but smiles.

Without warning, Alex rose up and pushed Astra on her back. The delight sparkling in gray eyes widened her smirk. She sat atop Astra’s hips and planted her hands on either side of her head. From this angle, Alex had the upper hand. The squeeze to her thighs told her that Astra liked it just as much.

“If we’re going to get married, neither of us are going to plan this wedding,” Alex said.

She was grinning far too much for sarcasm to bear. Shivers ran beneath Alex’s thighs as Astra absentely flexed her grip. Alex bit back a delicious cackle. She couldn't deny that Astra’s nervousness thrilled her. Ironic, as Astra had been the one to push this matrimony business. Now the ex-general was sweating bullets at the mere mention of the ceremony.

A surge of sympathy spurred Alex to tilt her head with a smile. She ducked down to offer a dose of courage to her now fiancée. Astra was restrained and much too distracted to fall into the kiss. Her lips pinned back a moan and persisted until Alex parted them with her tongue. The world around them evaporated the moment their tongues touched, wet and tentative as naïve lovers. The longer their lips touched, the softer and more thoughtful they became. Alex tangled her fingers in Astra’s hair and dissolved in the kiss. Not a thought lit her brain. She was flesh and sensation with nothing to drive her but the graceful fingers trailing her sides and the affection catching in her throat. She led the kiss along until the tension left Astra’s body.

Astra sighed heavily, eyes serenely shut. “Rao, I love when you do that.”

Alex propped herself up to get a look at how she rendered the slack, superior being under her. She snickered at the feverish Kryptonian and cocked her head playfully. “Do what?”

“You make removing all my barriers feel so… “ <So good.>

The abrupt slip into Kryptonese was a sure sign Astra was aroused. She’d been doing it more lately; not necessarily in an erotic context though no less blissful. Ever since arriving on Krypton and brushing up on native expressions with Jeremiah, her enthusiasm (or desire) had a tendency to bewilder her tongue.

Once Astra had harnessed some lucidity, her eyes fluttered open. “What were you saying of the wedding plan of action?”

Once a general, always a general. Alex rolled her eyes, albeit with an affectionate flutter of her heart.
“That we’re not going to be in charge of it, that’s for sure. I don’t trust either of our sense of style and we both know you don’t have the patience or the temperament to play well with others.” At the undeterred expression staring back, Alex narrowed her eyes as if to put the fear of it in Astra.

“There’s the guest list, sending out invitations, finding a catering service, ordering flowers, dress fittings… And before all that you have to budget the entire event and book a venue.”

Astra blanched to the obstacles. “Oh, I see.”

“Have you ever been to a wedding?”

“Apart from my previous marriage? And Alura and Zor’s nauseating ceremony? Very few if I could help it.”

“Well, I can’t say I’m an expert. The fact that it will be a Kryptonian wedding makes me even less qualified to plan one.” The scope of a wedding – her own wedding – caught up to Alex in a sigh. “I’m winded just thinking about it.”

Astra slid her hands up Alex’s thighs and smiled sweetly. “Or we could elope?”

The idea had Alex scoffing. “I may not have dreamed of getting married like every girl in Midvale, but if I’m going to get married, I’m going to make it memorable. And I know this sounds corny but I want to be surrounded by our family when we make our vows.”

Astra, smirking, seemed to know better. “You want witnesses to prove I am legally bound to you and must please your every whim.”

“Well, of course.”

Grinning from ear to ear, Alex couldn’t contain her joy at the sound of that. Astra as her wedded plaything and partner for life. She adjusted herself so their nakedness was flush and her arms were locked around Astra’s neck. She would never cop to the sound purring from her chest, but this was as close to cat napping pleasure she’d ever felt when nestled in the crook of Astra’s neck. The pleasure that came from being pressed to all the familiar places made her body hum with excitement. She leaned back to capture Astra’s mouth and emphasize just how much.

Astra broke the kiss and met Alex’s eyes which were savoring hers in equal measure. “So,” she nuzzled the tips of their noses with a wry smile, “whom did you have in mind for a wedding planner?”

* * *

“Alura, please.”

“Alexandra, do not pout at me like that. I said no and that’s final.”

It had been twenty minutes since Alex and Astra put forward the idea. They decided to do so at Alura’s apartment in the hopes that she might be more obliging on her own turf. They had no such luck for Alura responded like a brick wall of inflexibility.

In the safety of the kitchen, Kara and Astra stood watching the whole thing play out. Jeremiah sat at the table, happily absorbed in Zor’s famous fruit cobbler and oblivious to the drama.

Alex was chasing Alura around the living room with the most imploring expression known to mankind. She was persistent - Astra would give her that. No one else wanted this more than Alex. She and Alura had grown close over the years, evolving from trusting friends to loving family to
getting under each other’s skin like any two sisters. She wouldn’t settle for any other wedding planner. Although Astra’s heart warmed to their rapport, she didn’t like the evasive tactics being executed at the moment.

“What could you possibly hope to achieve by this childish hounding? I have declined several times. Shouldn’t you be somewhere?” Alura jittered around a mounted sculpture of a mollusk with Alex fast on her heels. “Are there no samples to analyze at the laboratory?”

“It’s the weekend. Nice try.”

An irate noise came from Alura as she grabbed her hair and spun for the corridor that led to living quarters. At the very last moment, Alex cut her off.

“Just consider it!” Alex pleaded. “You don’t have to make a decision right away. Just think about it. That’s all I’m asking.”

Wordlessly, Alura turned her back and walked right back into the living room. Her heavy tromping footsteps accompanied a wide-eyed expression somewhere between surly and petrified.

“Don’t worry. She’ll say yes.”

They were confident words coming from a sixteen-year-old. Astra shot Kara a suspicious look. “What makes you so sure?”

“Well, she hasn’t exactly recovered from the falling out between her and my aunt. Believe me, I was here when it happened and it was not pretty. I don’t think she’s forgiven herself for what she put our Astra through, not telling her that Misha was hers and all.” Kara’s gaze left her mother to gauge Astra’s response. When none came she said, “She doesn’t want to break your heart again.”

Astra inhaled deeply through her nostrils, fighting the instinct to double over. She stared at Alura, her heart twisting painfully. Despite the logic buzzing round her head, she saw so much of her sister in the woman fidgeting with her cuticles. Alura always took people’s feelings so seriously. As she sat primly on the sofa, an unbearable burden caused her shoulders to waver. She wanted people to like and respect her, but when it came down to it, she always put others before herself.

Now, in another universe, staring down the resemblance, it still annoyed Astra. The sense of always knowing best, her monopoly on good values and selflessness… it prickled along Astra’s back like a wispy piece of lint she could no more flick off than reach. Strangely enough, the itch also manifested in both of her eyes. They burned and watered to some invisible stimuli. The itch, the tightening vice, the budding remorse… none of it abated until a squeeze came to her shoulder.

“It’s not your fault or Alex’s.” Kara’s voice caressed the air between them. “My mom just has some things to work through. Eventually, she’ll realize that there is no better penance than planning her sister’s wedding.”

Astra cast her gaze away from the soft words being exchanged between Alex and Alura. She cleared her throat and tossed her hair back in a diverting tactic. “I do not understand why she would refuse in the first place. Though she is more likely to get on my nerves during this whole farce of a reception, I have full faith that there is no other person better suited to the task.”

“Farce?” Kara crinkled her brow. “This is a celebration. After all you and Alex have been through, don’t you think it’s time for a little reward? Let loose and enjoy the moment. The reception is intended to reflect the love you both have for each other.”

“Receptions are for highbrow egoists who have nothing better to do than flaunt their conquests.
What Alex and I have is private and any revelry should be done as such.”

“I know that’s something you tell yourself. It might be acceptable in daily matters, but this is a special occasion. I mean, are you really so bossy that you’re going to keep Alex all to yourself?”

“Kara Zor-El, are you sassing me?”

Kara’s mouth split into a blinding white smile. “Did I? Cool.”

“Do show some respect for your elder.” Astra looked away with a shake of her head. “What on Krypton is Alura and Zor teaching you?”

Kara had the sense to bow her head. “I’m sorry. I just like having these moments with you.” She paused to worry at her lip. “Those six months were rough on all of us. I was close with my aunt. We did so much together – sleepovers and shopping along the boardwalk and eating the unhealthiest fare we could get our hands on.” She shrugged and said, “In a strange way I feel like she’s back, so I’ll take whatever time with you I can get.”

The meek voice hit Astra where it stung. Her eyes became downcast as she realized her brazenness. Sometimes it slipped her mind that they had it just as hard. Alex… Alura… Kara… they would always miss what Astra could never return to them, no matter how solid her flesh or how warming her words.

Catching a breath around the storm in her chest, Astra found the words falling freely from her lips. “You remind me of my niece on Earth. I would be proud if you turn out to be a fraction of the woman she was.”

“No pressure, huh?”

Astra frowned at the humorless chortle. She no more liked to see this shadow over Kara than she did around Alex. “That is not what I meant. Being on this planet is a difficult transition for me. I don’t wish to replace your aunt any more than you wish to replace my niece. Although our worlds may contrast in some respects, fortune drives me to make peace with my destination. I’ve been given many chances to live up to others’ expectations and I will not fail this time. You’ve shown me your heart, and I know this sounds premature, but I love you as I loved my niece. I would very much like to get to know you better.”

“We’re not strangers, Aunt Astra. We’re family.”

Kara had called her that before but it hadn’t flipped her stomach in such a way that had Astra beaming on the inside. “Yes, but I don’t feel that we spend enough time together.”

“I’d like that,” Kara said, smiling. “Seeing as you and Alex are going to be busy soon, why don’t we wait until after the honeymoon? I really appreciate the honesty, but hanging out with your niece is not exactly at the forefront your mind.” At Astra’s frown, Kara gave her a pointed look laced with amusement. “You’ve got heart eyes for my soon-to-be Aunt Alex.”

Unsure whether to be cross or embarrassed by the insinuation, Astra opened and closed her mouth. “I… don’t have any eyes but the regular shaped ones.”

She panned from Kara’s gape to Alex looking lovely in her casual long tunic and trousers. A vision in woodland green and paired with her brown eyes… Astra’s heart skipped over itself like a clumsy, catnip intoxicated cat. She was quite sure she would marry her then and there if asked.

A snort came unbidden Kara. She clapped a hand over her nose and giggling mouth. To prevent
Astra’s face from turning red as a cherry, she took pity and composed herself. “Okay. Yeah. Whatever you say.”

Astra supplied her a baleful look. This was no time to take things personal. She swallowed down the childish retort in her throat and turned to her own child. Jeremiah was right where she left him only his bowl had been cleaned of cobbler. Thanks to Kara, he had about two hours worth of painting at his fingertips – literally. While the brushes sat in their case, each one of Jeremiah’s fingers had been dunked in a color and smeared over the piece of paper. His tongue curled around his lips as he manipulated the colors in a mishmash of curly cu’s, figure eights, and his full name and house designation.

*Jeremiah House of Ze and Danverz.*

Astra smiled fondly as he hovered over a squiggly masterpiece. She could easily forgive him for mixing up his s’s and z’s. He looked positively rapt in his work. The liberal dose of paint seemed to make the paper ripple and soggy. Oh, when Alura finds the mess on her dining table…

Kara shifted on her feet. Whatever she meant to say must have locked up in her throat for she seemed to be hedging for the courage. She stole glances from under her lashes. “I love you too, by the way.” She smiled a self-conscious smile.

Astra felt the warmth spread in her chest and she sighed with utter content. She would have curled her arm around Kara and brought her in for the most embarrassing hug of her life, but the moment was interrupted by footsteps.

Alura approached them wearing a rather drained expression. From behind, Alex wore a beaming smile. She wiggled her eyebrows.

Astra pursed her lips around the smile and raised her brow. “Can I assume you wore Alura down?”

Alex’s cheeks turned extra pink as she brushed quite intentionally past Astra. “You may,” she replied cheekily and slid into the bar stool next to her.

Astra held the smoldering gaze a moment longer before clearing her throat. She turned to Alura and said, “It only took an hour.”

“Hey.” Alex asserted her toe into Astra’s thigh. “Correction: it took thirty minutes. Alura’s as stubborn as some of the people I’ve interrogated.”

Alura cocked her head severely. “Are you comparing me to a hostile?”

“Okay,” Kara chimed in with a wave of her hands, “can we all try to focus on what matters? Mom, are you planning Aunt Astra and Alex’s wedding?”

“Yes,” Alura caved with a sigh, “and you will be helping, my dear. You are the only one here without a job,” her eyes flicked to Jeremiah’s masterpiece and back to Kara with an incline of her head, “and of clean fingers.”

Something about the way Alura was holding herself struck Astra as suspicious. She may not have grown up with this woman, but their ticks were virtually the same. “Alura?” Astra ducked her head. “Is there something we should know?”

“Frankly…” Alura’s hands ceased to fidget so they could gesture in honesty. “Yes. There is a hitch to this wedding. One neither of you are going to appreciate.”
The foreboding tone of voice had Alex folding her arms and sporting a grim expression. “What is it?”

Alura shot a nervous look at Astra. “Our parents.”

It took a second for the significance to sink in. When it did, Astra felt her stomach plummet. “Oh, no.” She bowed her cringing face into her hands.

“Oh, no?” Alex echoed, voice leaden with tension. “That doesn’t sound like sarcasm.”

“It’s not,” Astra said. She surfaced from her hands. How was she supposed to explain this to Alex without worrying her? She was already worrying *herself*. “According to Kryptonian custom, the engaged couple are supposed to host a reception, which in Kryptonian culture takes place before the ceremony. While the ceremony itself is a rather intimate affair between the couple, the reception is far more momentous when it comes to preparation – and attendance. It is an event where the couple presents themselves before their house elders, be they parents, grandparents, or other living relatives. In this case, it would be my parents.”

The news turned Alex pale as a sheet. “Shit, I didn’t even know they were alive.” She winced at how insensitive it sounded. “I mean, I’ve never even met them. The other Astra hadn’t mentioned her parents.” She worried her brow between Astra and Alura. “What is this going to be like? Should I be worried?”

“To be honest,” Astra supplied her a sympathetic wince, “I haven’t met them either. I am unsure how similar they are from the parents I grew up with on my home world. Unfortunately, our relationship was not what one might call… doting.”

“Do I want to know what that means?”

“When I left home to join the Warrior Guild, they were not pleased. I might have been abiding by the path laid out by the birthing matrix, but my enthusiasm for moving out did not come across as respectful.” With a deep breath Astra cast off the unsavory tension brought on by the memory and continued. “By the time I married outside our caste, we were hardly on speaking terms.”

Alex’s shaking head met her hand. “Great.”

“Alura? What can we expect?”

“From our parents?” Alura drew a dazed look before pressing on. “Seeing as their daughter chose to reject the matrix’s path for her and she bore a child out of wedlock – for all they and the rest of Krypton know – you can expect their full displeasure.”

“Well,” Astra rolled her eyes, “I wasn’t expecting their full cooperation.”

“They will not be pleased that you are marrying a human.” She turned to Alex. “When they found out I was helping you and Jeremiah secure citizenship, they threatened to disown *me*.”

“That’s hardly comforting.” Alex sulked for another moment before lighting up to a bright idea. “Okay, so here’s a solution: how about we don’t invite them to the wedding?” She panned between them, a hopeful expression on her face.

Alura shook her head sadly. “Krypton has strict criteria when it comes to marriage law. They must attend.”

Astra felt ablaze in anger. Her parents had to ruin everything. It wasn’t enough that they kept her
from every eligible suitor she took a fancy to. Turning her gaze outside their class standing seemed
to be a rebellious act within itself. She hadn’t been keen on marrying Non in the first place. There
was no love between them, but he showed marks of loyalty and his vision for a mighty Krypton
mirrored hers. Her parents knew her distaste for convenience marriages and repaid her by showing
up at the reception anyway.

It wasn’t enough that they doomed her first marriage from the get go. Now they had it in mind to
do the same with Alex. Ironic because Astra had every intention to make this one work.

“But we do not need their permission,” she shot back, face creased in determination. “Krypton law
states that two people of consenting age may be lawfully bound in matrimony. As long as there are
witnesses to the occasion.”

“But the eldest member of each house must be present at the reception,” Alura said. “It is a symbol
of transition, a binding of two families. During the reception, both parents (if living) are required to
attend.” Twisting her mouth in discomfort, she turned to Alex with sympathy swimming in her
eyes. “Either you and Astra strike an accord with her parents or there is no wedding. I’m sorry.
There is no way around it.”

“I can’t believe this,” Alex muttered. “They hate me already. How are we going to persuade them
to attend my wedding? To their daughter?”

Before Alura could pale to a ghostlike sheen, she stepped forward and touched both their shoulders.
“This wedding will happen.” She eyed Astra staunchly. “Our parents may be prejudiced and
conventional to a fault, but I know you have faced far worse than their likes. Though it will take a
great deal of resolve on our part, we will make them come around. Do not fear them catching on to
your secret. You have Kara and I, and we will avert suspicion.”

“Mom’s right.” Kara tucked into Astra’s side. “I’ve only met them a few times, but I have a feeling
they won’t notice. It’s not like they’re going to ask you what you received for your tenth birthday.
And if they do,” she shrugged in nonchalance, “I’ll just trip down the stairs or something as a
diversion.”

The votes of confidence constricted Astra’s chest. After going so long without family support, the
sudden onrush of it overwhelmed her. She grinned wistfully and cupped her niece’s cheek. “While
I appreciate you putting yourself in the line of fire for me, it is not necessary. I can handle them
without you harming yourself.”

Alura lingered a beat longer on the affection between them. She turned to Alex and said, “And
you… They will see you for the bright woman you are. They are bound to warm up to you once
they hear of your Kryptonian education. I can’t think of any reason such a success would be met
with discouragement.” She watched the hesitant glances exchanged between them. “Have faith. Act
as yourselves and allow us to intervene if things turn sour. As long as you both remain respectful,
diligent to the task, and for the love of Rao do not discuss politics, we will get through this
unscathed.”

“Alura…” Alex sighed at the full weight of what was being offered. “This means a lot to us.
Honestly, you don’t even have to give us a wedding gift. You’ve done so much already.”

Astra picked her gaze from where it lay on the floor. She didn’t require a prompting from Alex
when a flood of appreciation swelled in her chest. “Thank you, sister.”

No other words could have possibly lightened Alura’s mood. Ears turning pink as peonies, she
bowed her head and cherished the gratitude in silence.
Kara nearly burst trying to hold back her glee. It wasn’t every day that she witnessed her mother and aunt in bashful states of contentment. Kara looked between them, fists clenched on either side of her cheeks and practically shaking. <This is so awesome,> she said under her breath.

“Now,” Alura sighed, hands together and pressed to her lips in thought, “let us discuss the reception. There are several matters that need tending to before invitations are sent out.”

“Oh!” Kara bobbed on the balls of her heels. “Can I be in charge of color schemes? I have a knack for this, I’m telling you.”

“Well,” Alex pulled up a chair beside Jeremiah and gave her a wink, “you are the artist of the family.”

“Hey.” Jeremiah’s head snapped up to reveal a pout. “What about me?”

“How could we forget you?” Kara piped up, smiling. “You’re our muse.” She came around to sit on his other side all while trading a humorous smirk with Alex. She relinquished a brush from her case and peered around his work station for a clean sheet. “Now let’s get you a new canvas so we can jot down some ideas.”

At that moment, Alura spied the colors pooling beneath the soggy paper and gasped behind her hand. <Great Rao of Light.>

The domed greenhouse composed just a quarter of Argo City Gardens. It was a veritable jungle of foliage and pollination. Brightly colored blades and leafy thickets were bisected by well treads pathways. Warbling birds perched on spindly branches and acted as a pest eliminating member of the ecosystem.

The climate controlled complex hosted seventy-three different species of flora. They were all genetically altered to perfection and closely monitored by student botanists of Argo’s Science Academy. The school worked in conjunction with Argo Gardens to study, monitor, and experiment on the greenhouse’s lush tenants. All the plants were eligible for sale, which made it an ideal source to purchase for home planting, a table feature, or just a conversation piece.

Astra breathed in the aromatic world and sighed out in comfort. Alex looked radiant under the mid-afternoon sun. The rays streaming in through the breathable dome brought out the red highlights in her hair. Red like the blossoms bordering their path and mahogany like the shoots clustered in fragrant soil. Astra couldn’t imagine basking in the terrestrial beauty beside anyone else.

Up ahead, Jeremiah led the way. Five minutes in and his knees were already stained in a mixture of earth and fertilizer. Neither she or Alex chose to reprimand him. They figured he would be rolling in the dirt first chance he got, so they dressed him up for the occasion in coveralls and a hat to abate the sun.

He was having a ball of a time plodding through the undergrowth in his “adventure cap” and “dirt uniform.” According to the student on staff, he looked more of a botanist than any in Argo. This puffed up his ego quite a bit more than the dome could hold. They had to call out to him on many occasions, advising him to stay in sight before they lost their little botanist to the wilderness.

Despite Astra’s lack of strategy in proposing marriage, the greenhouse proved how embarrassingly romantic her timing. Everything from the creeping violets to the giant oregus were in bloom. Picking a bouquet from the vast array of perfection would be a downright challenge. As per
Alura’s instructions, she and Alex were tasked to pick four individual flowers to adorn their reception. It happened to be their one and only responsibility. Neither of them were keen on the art of place setting, picking out dishware, or Rao forbid choosing the music. Astra figured she accomplished her part by proposing. Alex, poor beautiful thing, didn’t have an artistic bone in her body and got off the hook easily enough.

The flowers, however, were something the couple should pick out, Alura had said. Flowers that reflect their journey. It felt positively wicked to let her down when she was already having a riot of time playing wedding planner, so off to the greenhouse they went.

Jeremiah was a big help though. When he wasn’t leaping out of the bushes to pull one over on his parents (with alert mothers like his, he was zero for five), he announced his picks with a point of his finger. Needless to say, he had a hard time whittling down his favorites. He zig-zagged the trail, tapping a petal with a bop, and declaring “I like this one.” He carried this out with virtually every flower.

The trail took a shallow dip through a tropical region. Alex’s boots scuffed the thoroughly trampled ground. “So, this bouquet is supposed to symbolize our journey, right?”

“Yes.” Astra hummed in concentration. She lifted the blossoms of a pearly-white flower to her nose. “It should reflect the evolution of our relationship in all its ebbs and flows.”

“So… how is that going to translate into flower? Because all I keep thinking is weeping willow, hemlock, and bleeding hearts. No offense.”

Astra’s grin brushed the velvety smooth petals. “When you put it like that, it does sound like an accurate representation.”

“I would be completely fine with roses though.” Alex’s sweet voice rivaled that of the sticky mauve plant hanging over Astra like miniature church bells. “I don’t know if there’s a Kryptonian version of the rose, but I’m sure that will do fine.”

The itch to call a spade a spade drove Astra mad. She turned and cocked her head. “You’re just saying that because you don’t know a tree from a flower.”

The pathway narrowed to a bridge that took them over a babbling stream. Alex paused to run her hand over the railing made from twisted vines. “So I don’t have a green thumb. That doesn’t mean I don’t have a valued opinion.”

“I have only been here a few months and you’ve managed to kill two of our plants. Excuse me if I take your advice with a pinch of salt.”

“Oh. That hurts.”

The hand to heart ploy hardly fooled Astra. She’d seen Alex take far worse jabs and walk away with a sarcastic quip on her lips. The notion pulled Astra’s mouth into a smirk. She slinked forward, slipped an arm about Alex’s waist, and pulled her into a gentle kiss. It tasted like summer fruit from the lunch they’d shared not long ago.

Her smirk widened against the stubborn trap. It was a frequent game played between them to see who would surrender first. When Alex played the victim she usually just ran with it. She would have none of the kiss if it didn’t get her way.

Fortunate for Astra who was all too accustomed to sore loser behavior (having broken human resolve several times at the tips of her fingers the night before). High on confidence and tingling to
the sweet taste, she teased Alex with grazing lips and tiny vibrations of laughter until finally she opened her mouth in a defeated groan. Astra melted in the arms folding round her neck and slid her tongue forth, victorious.

The echo from the brook drifted under their feet in watery undulations. Tranquil in volume, it was a romantic companion overlapping the sound of their mouths touching. It did prove the needlessness of discretion. Astra didn’t want to think about how inappropriate it might look to others for her body to be pressing so intimately into Alex. Thankfully, there were no onlookers so Astra could hold and kiss her fiancée to her heart’s content.

Alex broke first. Her lips were flushed and she was panting in unfulfilled desire. She pressed at Astra to peek around her. The sound of Jeremiah’s stomps through the dirt ensured Astra that he was still nearby, and judging by the eyes clouding back to darkness, Alex was satisfied as well.

Alex’s lips curled into a crafty smile and returned a quick kiss. “It was nice of them to offer us the greenhouse to ourselves.”

A slight note of pride raised Astra’s chin. “I am providing them a governmental service at no additional cost. If all goes according to plan, their irrigation system will be fully automated within the month.”

“Quid pro quo.” Alex snickered against Astra’s cheek before giving it a nuzzle. “Now that we’re on the subject, how goes the Environmental Conservation Branch’s first project?”

“It’s coming along now that we hired a lead contractor. He dazzled at the meeting. Apparently, the Science Council has been giving him the run around for months. He’s been lobbying for sustainable architecture long before I proposed the idea.”

Astra kissed the shell of Alex’s ear before snagging her lobe gently between her teeth. The shudder rippling through the body pressed to hers sent it rising on the balls of its feet. Such confining proximity excited the temperature around them and competed against the heat stoked deep within.

Alex offered her neck with a soft mewl. “Sounds like he may become a permanent member of your team. You thinking of hiring him on a full-time basis?”

Nose poking the lightly fragrant neck, Astra wrapped around Alex in an effort to rival the clothes she wore. Between her fresh smell and the skipping beat in her chest… Rao, Astra couldn’t get enough of her. She hugged her tighter, hoping to fill her senses with nothing but Alex. Alex who was as intoxicating as the most powerful flower in the garden.

“Depends on how successful this project is,” she murmured, voice growing vacant as mist. The conversation had taken a dive into sticky territory she nor more wanted to think about much less speak of. “If we can’t make our first initiative take off, we are signing our death warrant. The Science Council will have no choice but to cut our branch.”

Alex kissed her ear and whispered soft enough to tickle the downy seeds of a morningstar. “It won’t come to that.”

Astra nodded at the support thawing her armor. She didn’t want to imagine how difficult the endeavor would be without Alex’s faith. It sufficed to say that she wouldn’t touch another government office if it didn’t benefit her family in some way. Two years ago, the presence of an offered hand would have been brushed off with an indignant sniff. Now, Astra trembled in anticipation of being touched through all the layers encasing her soft parts.
The passionate humidity sticking to their skin and clothes soon cooled. Disjointed clomps traveled from hard-packed soil to low woody slaps. Jeremiah crossed the bridge to where Astra and Alex stood wrapped up in each other.

“Mommies, I’m tired. Can we go home?”

Turning from Alex’s snicker, Astra looked down on him with a hand on her hip and all due counsel. “Perhaps you would have lasted longer if you hadn’t used this place as a playground.”

“But it is a playground. It’s got trees and plants and…” His hand reached up to paw at the railing vinery. He gave up with a heavy sigh. “And a climbing gym.”

Alex nudged her shoulder into Astra’s and said, “He’s got a point there.”

“Be that as it may, we still haven’t come to a decision.” Astra supplied Jeremiah a raise of her brow. “We need four flowers for the wedding. You get two. Which are your favorite?”

Puzzlement dragged down his features. Scratching his side idly, he tilted his head. “Whose wedding?”

That was not at all the reply she was expecting. Astra cocked her head back and snapped around to Alex who looked just as confused as she felt. Then it clicked. In the whirlwind of planning since their engagement, they overlooked the most important task of all.

Astra couldn’t believe they didn’t tell their own son. They figured with all the talk of a wedding and considering their recent closeness (excessive hand holding, snuggling, and kisses at any random moment), Jeremiah would have caught on. It was erroneous on their part to assume. Astra felt like a horrible mother. The skin crawling shame was well deserved.

Jeremiah looked up at her with a face dawning in horror. “You’re not married to Laylee?”

Bless her darling boy for assuming they were already married. Astra’s heart broke at the first sign of tears.

His trembling fragility rivaled that of a newborn duckling. He inhaled sharply over the hiccup and turned his glistening eyes to Alex. “You don’t love Mama?”

“Oh, baby. Don’t cry.” Alex kneeled down and took him gently by the waist. “I love your mother very much. That’s why we’re getting married.” She took off his hat to run through his hair in soothing strokes. “I’m so sorry for not telling you, but there’s nothing to be sad about.”

The rosy tint in Jeremiah cheeks persisted. Weak-willed, he brushed under his nose and panned up to Astra.

The suspense in his eyes threw Astra to her knees beside Alex. She took his hand and squeezed his little fingers. “We are already a family,” she told him. “We will always be a family whether your mother and I are together or not.”

Alex nodded with conviction. “It’s important that you know how important you are in this wedding.” She glanced at Astra, fond eyes smiling, before panning back to their son. “We wouldn’t care so much about each other if it weren’t for you. Remember what I sometimes call you?”

“A miracle.”

Alex smiled and squeezed his sides to pull the giggles out of him. “Our little miracle,” she said
over his wiggling delight.

“We love you very much, Jeremiah. An act of Rao could not change that.”

A lingering suspicion furrowed his brows. With near commanding determination, he cupped Astra’s chin and lifted so there was no mistaking his words. “Promise we won’t move? I don’t wanna go anywhere.”

“We are staying right where we are,” Astra supplied him the unwavering gaze he was looking for, “for now.”

“Good because my animals don’t want to move either.”

Alex chuckled and caressed his cheek. “With your growing number of friends, we’ll never be able to fit them in a box big enough to move. We’d have to get a hovercrane.”

He leaned into her hand, giggling despite himself. “That’s silly, Mommy. A hovercrane is too small to fit our home.”

“My bad. What about a spaceship?”

Amid the raucous of laughter, the peeping of a nearby bird pulled Astra back to their surroundings. She sighed at the waning afternoon. Alura would not be happy with their lollygagging.

She picked up Jeremiah’s hat and adjusted it on his matted head of hair. “We still have to complete our quest,” she said. “How about we pick at least two flowers and then we’ll go home? I’ll make a blue milkshake and we’ll give each other foot rubs. How does that sound?”

If only Jeremiah knew all the ammunition his mothers had to bate him with. Frankly, it was a win-win situation with both parties benefitting from a foot massage. Still, Jeremiah grew bored after offering a few minutes of half-hearted squeezes. Throwing in a milkshake sealed the deal airtight.

Hands behind his back, he shifted from foot to foot before grinning. “Okay.”

Astra watched him spin on his heel and speed down the bridge toward a cluster of plum blossoms. His newfound energy was startling. She rose up to meet an arm looping around hers.

Alex leaned in and said, “You are so much better at that than I am.”

“I enforced surrender for a living, Alex. I know which buttons to press.”

“Does that mean you know my buttons?”

Astra chuckled darkly. “Do you really want to go there?”

“Fair enough.” The way Alex’s voice husked made it sound far from surrender. “We’ll table this discussion until we’re genuinely alone.”

“That sounds like a threat.”

“It’s a promise,” Alex said and sealed it with a long kiss.

Later, when the heady fog dissolved all of Astra’s brain cells and a scratching of nails along her arm put them back together like a bolt of lightning, she walked them leisurely along. Jeremiah was waving his hat in the air to get their attention.
The reception was scheduled to occur in three weeks. The thought of having to dodge her parent’s questions brought a bitter taste to her mouth. With an arm around Alex, she drew lightly down her arm and took her hand. “I want you to know...” She persevered over the thickness in her throat. “I want you to know that I realize what you are signing up for and I thank you. No one should be made to win over anyone in order to marry the person of their choosing. I’m sorry to put you in this. If you do not want to go through with the wedding, let me know at any time and I will make it go away. We don’t have to get married.”

“I want to,” Alex said, no hesitation. She gave Astra’s hip a squeeze. “You put up with J’onn for a year. The least I can do is put up with your parents for a day.”

The self-assuredness on display caused Astra a moment of blissful relief. She had felt nothing like it. It felt so strange to be tied to a person who was willing to put up with a possible catastrophe. Astra had so much unresolved baggage with her parents, her sister, her entire past. It would have been enough to scare away anyone, but Alex, the brave one who stole her breath away, was stubbornly staying put. The feelings it induced in Astra were as mysterious as the multiverse itself. Then again, she had never been in love before. Not like this.

Astra watched the colors change in Alex’s hair. From auburn to deep brown the transition brought on memories of smooth earth, defiance, and first impressions. Astra swallowed. “You have no doubts about pledging yourself to my house?”

Alex’s head tilted. She gave no sign of her answer until a slow, easy smile settled on her lips. “I’m happy to call myself a Ze if it means being your wife.”

“So, this is not simply about legitimizing Jeremiah in the eyes of Kryptonian law?”

“There are many reasons why I’m choosing to marry you. While it would never be enough that I love you…. I’ll be damned if it’s not the most important reason.”

Astra stared, her heart dashing. “That is a good answer.”

“Well,” sighed Alex, “I dodged a bullet there.”

“What do you mean? What bullet?”

Alex eyed her warily. “For a minute there I thought you were going to say it was a romantic answer.”

Astra smiled too wide for it to lend weight to her claim. “I wouldn’t dare.”

*****

In the mere hours leading up to the reception, Alex kept busy in her private lab. According to custom, robes of brightly colored silk were required to celebrate the occasion. Alex’s were loaned to her from a very excited Alura while Astra purchased hers. As she and Alura had the same figure, the robes were a perfect fit. The intricate gold embroidery looked as if it had been stitched yesterday, and not a hint of fading could be seen in the emerald robes.

Zor said they were as beautiful as when he last saw them on his bride. In fact, he went one step further in offering to hand off Alex at the ceremony. Seeing as the responsibility had to lie with someone of a house other than the person being married to, Zor of House El seemed like the appropriate choice.

Alex scrubbed at her forehead. She muttered a curse for getting ahead of herself. The ceremony
was still a week away. She had to get through the reception first before tying the knot. Which meant she had to be on her best behavior for her future in-laws.

With little argument, Alura had convinced her parents to attend. Apparently, they wanted to meet Alex in person. Alex tried not to make a big deal out of it. Whether Astra’s parents accepted her or not, they couldn’t stop them from being together. Surely.

She reclined back and propped her bare feet on the desk. At the moment, she was clad in knit pants and an old, pilling tunic. Her hair was already prepared in loose curls. She still had a half hour before she needed to throw on her robes, but her nerves pressed for action.

She should really be getting ready. It was her wedding reception after all and it would not be acceptable to wear such informal clothing. To compound her stress, she was going to be meeting Astra’s parents and that alone made Alex want to stay home and never leave the house.

But she lazed back in her chair and scrolled through her research notes. It was part of her ritual in abating stress. Whatever Astra’s strategy, she was taking care of it in their bedroom where she hadn’t left for nearly two hours. Instead of bothering her, Alex gave her some space. Were she in Astra’s position, she would need to prepare herself for what was to come. If In-Ze and his wife are anything like Eliza Danvers or J'onn J'onzz (yikes), they would be walking into a warzone.

The reception was taking place at Alura and Zor’s due to the apartment’s capacity for more guests. It was impressive how Alura had put together the wedding reception in such a short amount of time. Neither Alex nor Astra cared for extravagance. The only reason why they were bothering with a reception was to keep up traditional pretenses. They might not care about the wedding details but they did care that it was legitimate.

The anticipation of first impressions always had a way of cutting deep into one’s confidence. Alex hoped she didn’t talk too much about her work. She didn’t want to make it seem like she cared more about her job than her son. Where Jeremiah was concerned, she had plenty of stories and he would be present to charm them with his manners and adorable smile. Although, Alex had to remind him that this was not the same grandfather whom he was named after. The news that he had not one grandfather but two sent him over the moon.

To be honest, Alex knew she had nothing to worry about. Alura and Kara were loyal allies who would divert some of the attention if it approached unpleasant territory. Zor had made plenty of food to make light conversation over. A few minutes ago, Kara called to confirm that their house was a veritable house of buffet. Over the information dump, Alex could hear her stomach growling through the speaker. Kara spoke of meats and cheeses, casseroles, small bites and large portions one needed a gaping mouth to fit around. There would be savory pies and sweet pies, sticky fragrant rolls blanketed in sugar, hot stews and the Kryptonian delicacy Alex could only describe as a spicy gazpacho. Either Zor found a way to fit all of it on one table or he had turned his living room into one of those great medieval halls Alex used to see in period films. Aside from those logistics, she was particularly interested in the wine.

Alex was also updated on Alura’s eleventh hour insanity. In her effort to plan the perfect reception, she was using every spare second to turn a vase of flowers at just the right angle and tie up all those other loose ends no one (repeat: no one) ever thought about. Alex wasn’t worried about a thing. She had plenty of faith in Alura. That, and neither she nor Astra were picky when it came to details. As long as their family and friends were present, that’s all that mattered.

Alex bent forward to grab her stylus from the desk. She reclined back in the comfort of her chair and scribbled a memo to herself in the margins. Just as she scrolled to the next set of notes, a shout echoed through the open door.
“Mommy! Why is the grass green?”

Alex drew a puzzled look. What in god’s name was in that yogurt he liked so much? She put down her tablet and stylus and headed out to the living room. Astra still hadn’t shown herself yet. The corridors were vacant. The living room was quiet. Outside, Argo City basked in a warm, cloudless morning.

Alex spotted him out on the terrace that hugged their apartment. He was still dressed in his pajamas because he got in an argument with Astra about his hair which had definitely seen better days. Jeremiah didn’t like to be touched by strangers, mostly because strangers didn’t like touching him. He was beginning to pay attention to the looks people gave them when they were out in public. That wasn’t to say everyone on the face of Krypton knew him by appearance, but he certainly saw them. At four-and-a-half, he shied away from anyone his parents didn’t consider friend or family. Alex had gotten used to cutting his hair and, though she would not be up for honors any time soon, she was getting the hang of it.

That morning, Jeremiah remained firm: either he carried on in his pajamas or no hair cut. After plenty of feet stomping (from him) and icy narrowed eyes (from Astra), he finally allowed Alex to trim his bangs and around his ears in exchange for an entire morning spent playing in his pajamas. Astra, furious at having conceded to a four-year-old, shut herself up in their bedroom and hadn’t been seen since.

On the terrace, Jeremiah hadn’t moved. His head was hung like he was looking at the ground. But at what?

Approaching the sliding doorway, Alex stepped through. “Jeremiah, what –“

She gasped. Instead of unyielding concrete, her feet met soft, wispy blades of grass. Green grass. It grew everywhere. The wide curving platform was a sea of shorn lawn, the kind her father used to mow during the spring, summer, and tepid autumn. The sharp scent triggered a sudden swell of memory. Alex remembered a time when she fit on his lap, sweat stinging her eyes and the smell of pollen and gasoline in the air. He drove them around their property, cutting neat swaths of grass while the machine spat out fresh clippings from its side. She could still feel his hary, muscular arm around her middle, keeping her from falling off the tractor.

“Laylee, look! It’s green!”

Alex jerked back to the present. She swallowed thickly, hoping he hadn’t seen too much of her stupor. “I see it.”

Jeremiah was far more interested in the ground to notice. He squatted down, gripping the grass in both fists and examining the stuff with a keen squint. His eyebrows were growing thicker with age and could be seen crinkling from a mile away. The grass submitted to the academic study. Jeremiah pressed his finger between the blades to judge the springiness of the soil. He smiled… he smiled just like him. So much like the man who drove the perfect bands around her house in Midvale.

Alex didn’t want to explain the ponderous weight in her chest. If she were inclined to, the past would meet her in a debilitating effect that she spent three years combatting. There wasn’t much time to consider it anyway. A noise distracted her from the prickling sensation and spun her around.

Astra had shown up, shoulder propped against the door jamb. By the grin on her face, it was evident who was responsible.
Alex gaped openly. “When did you…?”

“I planted it last night. Zor has a friend in botanicals who was able to sell me rapid growing fertilizer.”

“It’s green.”

“Yes, it is.” Something made Astra drop her arms. Her grin withered and she took a step forward. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re crying.”

“No…” Alex touched the tickle at the corner of her eye. Her fingertips met moisture. She didn’t need visual evidence. Her chest heaved and for once in a very long time the ground didn’t slant beneath her feet. Out of sheer astonishment, she tilted into the body approaching her.

“I did not intend to upset you.” Astra’s voice, fragile as tissue paper, trickled down Alex’s back. She gripped her back in insistence. “I did not calculate the effect this would have on you. It can easily be stripped out. I am sorry.”

Alex nearly choked over her dismay. “Don’t you dare apologize. I’m not sad.” The tears were leaking out onto Astra’s shoulders (thankfully not her new robes). She wiggled her toes in the prickly grass and hugged Astra impossibly tighter. “I’m so happy.”

“You… like it?”

“Freaking Rao, yes.”

Astra submit to a laugh. Relief came off her in waves. She laid her head against Alex’s and absently grazed her nails to the small of her back just the way Alex liked it.

“Thank you so much,” said Alex.

“For the grass?”

The confusion in Astra’s voice made Alex laugh. “For everything.” She held Astra tighter in order to demonstrate her gratitude for the memories, support, forgiveness, and most of all for Jeremiah. Both of them.

Astra tucked into her neck for more of that intimacy they had been lately seizing like fervent newlyweds. “You’re welcome.”

A warm breeze swept the terrace. Alex leaned back to press a firm kiss to Astra’s mouth. It couldn’t possibly repay all Astra had done for her, but it was a start. Astra melted into the kiss with lax lips humming.

“You know,” Alex said, eyes still burdened by the heady fumes, “you didn’t have to get me a wedding present.”

Astra shook her head, lips incidentally brushing Alex’s. “It is not a wedding present.”

That got Alex’s head cocking back. “Oh?”

“I can do nice things for you without needing reasons other than I like and love you.”
And there was the other shoe. Alex fought the urge to roll her eyes. Astra, the closet romantic. Who would have expected the crabby general to turn soft? For lack of a better response, Alex grinned from ear to ear at her luck. She could get used to this.

“What’s happened?” cried Jeremiah. He seemed conflicted over Astra’s renovation. His study of the grass fell short of enlightenment. He was now sitting cross-legged and staring up at them, wide eyes begging for an answer to this mystery. “It’s still green!”

Alex smiled over Astra’s laughter. The deep, rolling vibrations pressing against her chest were the epitome of love. There was no peak it couldn’t reach. Alex hoped it would always feel like this. She hoped that when her skin was pale and saggy and her eyes weren’t what they used to be, some things would never change. Jeremiah’s curiosity would always demand answers to impossible questions and Astra would still give those rich sounds. Most of all, she hoped that they loved each other then as much as they did now.
For those of you who already have a fancast in mind for Astra and Alura's parents, read no further. I don't want to spoil your imagination. Anyway, for those of you who are interested, my fancast has always been Edward James Olmos as In-Ze and Mary McDonnell as Ros In-Ze. I can't for the life of me unsee their characters in Battlestar Galactica as the Ze's. Here you have the seasoned, stoic military man Admiral Adama and the somewhat warm-when-she-wants-to-be but relentless President Laura Roslin. In the Event Horizons universe, I see them as admiral and high administrator respectively. They're retired, but that doesn't stop them from serving as consultants to the council (as diplomats, advisors, educators, etc). They travel a lot, so that explains why Kara doesn't know them well.

I've held onto this headcanon with a death grip and no one will pry it from my cold dead heads. Discuss.

The wedding reception was, generally, a success. Alex and Astra’s choice as wedding planner proved to be spot on. Of everyone, Alura knew them best and kept the decorations simple, the flowers sparse, and the food of principle importance. Alex was more than impressed by the low-key atmosphere, however she couldn’t help but feel remorse that Alura went to so much trouble in fulfilling their preferences for an event only lasting a few hours. Of course, Alura wouldn’t hear of it. In response to Alex’s hesitations, she encouraged her gently toward the dining room where the food was hot and waiting. She was such a mom.

By the time Astra’s parents arrived, Alex’s nerves were gamboling like protons in a particle accelerator. She could barely put two sentences together – and in Kryptonese. Never in her natural life had she felt this driven to prove herself. The outcome of this meeting mattered despite Astra’s insistence that it didn’t. Seeing as Krypton’s marriage laws were heavily influenced by traditions – long held traditions – they had a better chance of eloping to another star system than seeking a marriage license on Krypton without family approval.

Nevertheless, Alex’s in-laws showed up that day so they were halfway there. The pressure was on to make a good impression for both Jeremiah’s and Astra’s sakes. When their stately faces met hers, Alex felt like she had swallowed a frog – her greeting, though rigorously practiced under Alura’s tutelage, came out as a croak and was met with two unsurprised brow raises. Strike one.

Astra’s mother wore dark blue and icy gray eyes while her father came as a pillar of immovable black. There were lightyears of experience in their eyes that told Alex she hadn’t the slightest chance of impressing them. But she persisted. Armed with Alura’s pre-reception fact lecture, she showed her knowledge of the Ze house – their history and accomplishments, their pride and their character. With Kara’s cute one-liners, she exhibited some savvy Kryptonese and earned several winks from her instructor during the day.

If Astra was nervous too, she had a superior means of hiding it. Her voice rang smooth and her sardonic facial tics were kept to a minimum. Though not a minute passed when she didn’t account
for the woman going through this epic nightmare for her. Whenever Alex felt herself floundering, she’d sense a presence drawing near and a pressure on the small of her back. Actually, Astra had been there the entire time, even when Alex’s nervousness distracted her from the encouragement in a leg squeeze under the table, a touch to a hip in passing, a Kara-like wink, or mischievous smirk as if to hint at later, celebratory activities.

Alex had never met a more worthy woman to spend the rest of her life with. It’s what made this event such a critical turning point. These people, the In-Zes, may be strangers and a possible obstacle between her and this wedding, but they were a part of this family’s legacy. And on Krypton, that meant something. All that the Zes had accomplished, generation after generation, helped build a world that their people could look upon and admire. That was Jeremiah’s birthright. Alex didn’t simply claim a desire to join this family… she wanted to. That meant a certain degree of acceptance of everyone with the Ze name. Now that she had a child, she understood the suspicion In-Ze and his wife Ros must be feeling. Years down the line (many, many years), she could see herself cross-examining whomever adult-Jeremiah brought home. Such a prospect put things in perspective.

The mission remained clear. Her objectives were present in elegant fashion and behaving like the diplomats they were renowned to be. Hell, a university had been named after Admiral In-Ze. Several charity foundations were set up in the Honorable Ros In-Ze’s name. The bar was astronomically high. But Alex knew the mission at hand. She needed to prove that she was a good mother to their grandson and a faithful companion to their daughter. If Alex was worthy in Astra’s eyes, surely that would be enough for them. She may fault them for judging her before ever meeting her (and for being human, at that), but were she in their position, her expectations would have been rigid too. Astra’s mother scrutinized her half the time, silent and cool, while her towering father wouldn’t shut up about honor among generations of Ze’s. It became clear very quickly where Astra’s sense of superiority came from. In Alex’s time on Krypton, she learned that not all Kryptonians claimed the trait as their own. No, that was strictly a Ze trait.

They wanted the best for a daughter they claimed to disapprove of. As it turned out, they harbored no such ill will towards Astra and proved to be surprisingly interested in her new career. Hearing the pride in Astra’s voice when speaking of her staff and all they were accomplishing within the first month resembled the pride in her parent’s broadening eyes. Alex wished she had taken a picture if only to prove to Astra that anyone could change.

Keeping under the radar proved easy enough. Astra’s parents turned out to be parallel copies of the pair from her world. There were a few bumps in the road, though. While they applauded their daughter for divorcing her wildly unambitious husband, they didn’t approve of “the human.” That comment alone set off a chain reaction of outrage. Astra, and by default Alura, came to Alex’s aid and defended her virtue. Amid the barbs being thrown at their unsuspecting elders, Alex couldn’t help the warm sensation springing in her chest. Between the twins, she had never felt more apart of a family.

After Astra and Alura stated their cases, a rocky moment turned to smooth sailing. They all seemed to agree to disagree. The ceremony would proceed as planned and in two weeks time she and Astra would be wed. Though Alex had her doubts about being taken seriously as an adopted member of Kryptonian society, she realized their blessing wasn’t important to her. As long as Astra and Jeremiah were safe and happy, Alex didn’t need anyone’s approval.

On the whole, Alex had a pleasant day. She couldn’t remember a time when she felt this kind of support. Everyone from Project Valor accepted their invitation and abided by the post script caution to keep Astra’s identity under wraps. Soren and his wife Oda arrived arm and arm. Axel brought a very beautiful, very practical plus one that everyone including stern, protective Oda
approved of. Lev came as his usual blushing self. Last but not least were Irina and Lucya who couldn’t be separated during the entire event. The reception seemed to have inspired them because Axel had been spreading gossip of their own engagement plans.

Alex had one person in particular to thank for the success of the reception and he came in the most adorable child-size robes money could buy. Her future in-laws seemed exceptionally charmed by Jeremiah’s shy decorum, though he certainly warmed up to them in the end. Before they took their leave, he scrambled off the sofa to hug each of them around the legs. Alex couldn’t have felt luckier to have a son such as him. She and Astra made a point of never discouraging affection between members of family. Judging by the wide-eyed expressions on their faces, Jeremiah’s grandparents were unaccustomed to such warm contact and from a child no less. Time would tell if they fulfilled their promise to visit again. Nonetheless, he had been instrumental in softening them up even a tad.

When the last guest departed and all the carafes were drained, Alex and her family said their goodbyes to Alura, Zor, and Kara. Heaps of gratitude were exchanged in addition to leftovers which Jeremiah appreciated immensely.

Going home that night came with a different sense of relief. Alex opened the door to their apartment and was met with all the familiar smells of home. The place contained memories worth sighing over while just as many in the making were worth waiting for. There were no hostiles to eliminate. No sacrifices to be made on humanity’s behalf. Neither Alex nor Astra received any urgent messages on their communication devices. They weren’t needed for tactical support or putting down resistance. This was a place where they could be no more than Alex and Astra. No one to please. Nothing to prove.

The lack of pressing matters would have driven a workaholic field agent mad. With no pressure on her shoulders, the odd sensation would have prickled the back of her neck and encouraged her to find the source with full analysis and introspection.

But upon entering her home, holding her son’s hand and feeling the constancy of her fiancée following, Alex didn’t feel lost. She felt blessed.

* * *

Days later, Jeremiah was scheduled to spend the night at his aunt and uncle’s, but he came down with a minor viral infection. Neither Alex nor Astra wanted to take the chance of it worsening. Though he had the immunity of a Kryptonian, children were still susceptible to illness. With Jeremiah around, any plans they had for the night were put on hold. It was a minor setback to say the least. Having a toddler put a damper on their alone time. They didn’t often have the apartment to themselves and when they did they took full advantage. In the meantime, they gave Jeremiah plenty of fluids, put him to bed early, and made do.

Long after Jeremiah dosed off, Alex and Astra were wrapped in the afterlight of their bedroom. It was just three days before the wedding ceremony and neither had it in mind to keep their hands off each other. They made love above the covers with a tenderness that drove them to passionate brinks. It lasted seconds, sometimes minutes, before receding back to murmurs and idleness.

Familiar hands slid down and under Astra’s negligee in a teasing pattern that pulled the keens from her mouth. It was cold outside the blankets, but with Alex’s complete nakedness sliding against her she felt as warm as if she were laying on a summer lit shore. The moisture collecting on her thigh every time Alex glided near provided an altogether different rush from her last one experienced just moments ago. The pressure of a tongue along her earlobe and the whispers that accompanied it raised her skin in frigid waves. The shivers spreading throughout her body crashed with the ache
between her legs. It drove her hips in barely restrained bucks. Every roll sought out Alex’s thigh and met it in the lightest of kisses.

They were good like this. Astra could not admit to behaving in a humbler manner than when she lay with Alex. Mutual appreciation had a way of stirring desires previously unrecognized. She had no idea how good she could be to a person. Not since Alex. For the first time in a long time being good had its rewards.

But they could also be bad. Very, very bad. This time, though, the word had a different connotation – a deeper connotation that pushed her thigh up to meet a flood of outcry. That, too, she learned from Alex.

The swell of her heart didn’t diminish after the sight of crinkled brows and an anguished “o” shaped mouth. With both hands Astra drew her down by the back of the neck until they were nose to nose. While Alex caught her breath, Astra dropped kisses all over her rosy face. The post-coital gentleness stirred the purrs from Alex like clockwork. In her mind, Astra swore in several languages before admitting to herself how badly she wanted to wrap herself up in this human fragility. So genetically inferior, but when found in the right person, those flaws challenged them to break the parameters their creator had enforced. To see this in Alex, it was so beautiful to behold that it stoked an uncontainable flame. Astra’s possessive thoughts would have embarrassed her were it not for how generously Alex had given herself just seconds ago.

“I’m sorry.” The rasp met Astra’s chin. Alex had tilted her head down so the kisses reached her temple. “I was over eager. You should have –”

“Stopped?”

Astra’s snicker was lightly seasoned with mischief. Even so, it alleviated whatever doubts the orgasm failed to dispel. Still recovering, Alex’s body sagged inch by inch until they were pressed against each other. Her skin was a touch more flushed than Astra’s, but now all her zeal was leaching from her body and transferring to the twitching muscles beneath her.

Alex tilted her head, offering her jaw. There she received a prompt kiss, a quick flick of a tongue, and a subsequent nip. “I know you like to be thorough,” she said, smiling to the increasing gregariousness of Astra’s attentions. “You won’t dare let me off without having touched every inch of me. It seems like someone’s broken their own rule.”

Astra kissed over Alex’s chin and along the defined edge of her jaw to the tender flesh below her ear. She reached around to drag meddlesome brown hair back. Astra latched on, sucking harder than before and earning a gasp. She loved the sound almost as much as she loved how it made her feel. Her hand slid over the nodules in Alex’s spine and settled in the small of her back as if their origins were one of the same.

After bestowing attention to the blossoming pink flesh, she drew up to impart a bit of wisdom into Alex’s ear. “There is no point in being predictable if it does not catch you off guard.”

The breezy sensation rippled through Alex. Her shoulders concealed the shudder by way of a shrug. “It was a surprise.”

Astra’s chuckle sent reverberations through them. Their bellies slid easily together. She bit her bottom lip to stifle the moan. “I noticed,” she pecked her cheek sweetly, “as well as our neighbors, I’m sure.”

Before Alex could retort, Astra captured her lips and entered her mouth with a hot flick of the
tongue. Alex returned the kiss and soon a flicker of heat turned to a blaze. The tender pressure of a hand on Astra’s cheek bore little resemblance to the one scrambling for the hem of her negligee. Seemingly caught between two objectives, Alex finally gave up by pouring all her efforts into removing the obstacle. The expensive silk from Kandor had been a gift. Alex meant to return the favor that currently grew green on their patio, but instead of responding with happy tears, Astra had put it on with the intention of it not staying on for very long. At the moment, the sheer black negligee slid up her body, brushing her nipples and her eyelashes with all the fluidity of water. It landed somewhere near the corner of the bed. Astra couldn’t be sure because the hands cupping her breasts demanded her full attention. That and the positively audacious kisses to her mouth. A gasp filled her lungs at the long stroke of Alex’s tongue. Any thoughts Astra entertained of running the show fizzled to obscurity. It was ridiculous how quickly Alex could disarm her. If only they had discovered how successful (and pleasurable) the tactic. Perhaps events would have led them down a different road beset with fewer losses.

A subtle rocking from above snapped her out of it. She grasped the back of Alex’s neck and deepened the kiss to regain even the smallest semblance of control. The intensity of the kiss grew exponentially to a point that had Astra forgoing her own gratification.

Gasping sharply, Alex pitched forward to the hands seizing her backside. “What are you doing?” Despite her surprise, the words trickled thickly from her mouth. She stared, pupils blown wide, lips swollen red, and panting confused.

“I am in a particularly giving mood tonight.” With practiced ease, Astra rolled them over and began kissing down Alex’s nakedness in aimless fashion. Lips leading while hands followed in tender squeezes, she visited places mapped from memory. “Please lay back and do not argue.”

“I wouldn’t dream of – Ff-uck.”

Having stated her intentions with a nip, Astra left one firm nipple for the other. The contours of Alex’s breasts fit perfectly in the palms of her hands. She licked the sweat from their slopes, her own designs coinciding with the soft moans from above. Astra fed off the salty trickle that started between breasts and ended where Alex needed attention most. She hadn’t yet finished swirled her tongue around a navel when Alex threw discretion out the window. Her moan pitched upward and bounced off the vaulted ceilings. Clearly, there were no cares taken to spare their neighbors. She lost sight of the world in pleading hips and clawing fingers. Astra didn’t mind the tangled mess Alex’s insistence made of her hair. If anything, it provided her the nerve to pace herself. Judging by the explicitness of Alex’s response, she hadn’t foreseen the inconvenience of this endeavor.

“Astra, god, fuck… I fucking hate you.”

At the soft skin near Alex’s hipbone, Astra grinned around the open-mouthed kiss. An inkling kept her going. Something about the hitch in Alex’s voice, the flex of those fingers, and the leg hugging her hip told her she was doing it right.

After indulging in her thorough side, Astra had Alex bound by a pleasure too intense for coherent words and melting in the palm of her hand. All the occasions they had been together like this, close enough for varying flesh to become one, she sometimes found herself wondering how they became so effortlessly accustomed to their needs. It was a pointless quest. Every time she looked back, one night would blur into another and another until a prismatic canvas of flesh, spattered with the occasional color of infatuation, filled her mind’s eye.

Considering all the feverish enthusiasm marked by their first encounters, she couldn’t even remember how they were able to make their son. On Earth, Alex had studied the causes to no avail.
Possibly, they could find an answer with the help of Kryptonian technology, but something about definitive answers tore the beauty out of it. Whether his conception had been a coincidence, an act of Rao, or a miracle of evolution, there was no doubt in Astra’s mind that Jeremiah was a blessing, and should the opportunity present itself again, she might very well welcome another.

Nonetheless, there was something timeless about making love with Alex. As if none of the past mattered any more than the present or future. They were the same in these moments, without name, gender, or ulterior motives. They were but stammering hearts and fingers, boundless sexuality and friction. Astra had so much love in her body that she was willing to give up everything for Alex, everything down to her last shred of dignity. She would fall to her knees if asked, mend differences with her parents if need be. All for one woman’s happiness, pleasure, even her amusement.

Astra closed her eyes and hummed around her craving. The sound of Alex coming had since passed. Somewhere along the way, they had sought to burrow their way under the covers. The sheets were losing the heat ignited by their ardent respects. Even so, a curious thickness laced the air and would have been dismissed as tension to the blind eye.

“This is better than watching you eat tacos.”

Astra looked up to meet two deeply brown eyes staring rapt in fascination. Without breaking her gaze, she finished cleaning her fingers, one at a time, slow enough to ratchet Alex’s heart a few more beats per minute.

The corner of Alex’s mouth crooked up. She knew exactly what Astra meant by it. They were as fluent with each other in their body language as they were in their native tongues.

“Mm.” Astra smiled around the tips of her two fingers before releasing them with a soft pop. “I can’t imagine anything more delicious than tacos.”

Alex jaw dropped. Not sure whether to be offended or amused in an I’m-outraged-to-the-verge-of-laughter way, she took a swipe at Astra’s shoulder.

Though the blow didn’t harm her, Astra absorbed it with a slight recoil if only to appease Alex’s sense of outrage. “What?” she said, chuckling.

“You asshole.”

“I am making a witty remark.”

“Yeah, I know. You’re still an asshole.”

She frowned, genuinely disturbed by the statement. “Do I not have a sense of humor?”

“Oh, you do. Just not in the way you intend.”

Astra’s eyebrows crunched further. “In what way?”

The anger melted from Alex’s expression and made way for a boastful smirk. She grabbed Astra’s still clammy hand, leaned in, and said, “That way.” She kissed the confusion off her mouth.

“I still don’t understand.”

Alex drew back, rolling her eyes and yet smiling for some reason. “I know,” she sighed.
A comfortable silence settled between them. It stretched on for as long as Astra held out against a shadowy intimidation. They were to be married soon. Three days until Alex became her wife and she Alex’s. As impatient as Astra was to seal their vows, one matter in particular had yet to be settled.

“We have not spoken of your research since before our engagement.” Astra listened to the quickening rate of Alex’s heart. She wilted at the ill sign already. “I am still in disagreement.” Her voice wobbled half-heartedly. Deep down, she knew her resolve was wearing thin. “The anticipation I feel to spend my life here on Krypton as your spouse has brought on certain… hesitations. I understand your argument. I do. However….”

The uncertainty weighing Astra’s tongue was more bothersome than any irritant. She shook her muddled head and demanded clarity of her mind. After a few deep breaths she drove on. “We have a difference of opinion but that doesn’t have to stop us from talking about it. It is not that I do not want to be with you. You know how I feel. But this research… these experiments that you will be conducting on yourself are simply wrong. Do not mistake my inflexibility for malicious intent. I want you to be successful in your scientific endeavors but not at the expense of your health.”

“I’m not just doing this for us,” Alex said. Her face hardened to the assertion. “I want Jeremiah to have both of us around. I need to be there for him, which is why I’m going to see this through with or without your support.”

Astra should have been outraged but she knew how heartily Alex felt for their son. That same disregard for limits flowed through her veins too. Jeremiah bonded them for life and yet Alex was taking such risks to throw hers away. Astra could not help fearing for the worst possible outcome. She was trained to doubt, encouraged to navigate every defeat before it struck. Alex was doggedly persistent and she would stop at nothing to get what she wanted. Astra shivered at the thought of what might happen of that persistence got the best of her.

"I want to be with you," said Alex. Her eyes welled with tears. Her throat bobbed in effort to speak over the lump. "I just want to be with you forever. As long as the limits of science allows."

Astra felt that same panic lodge in her own throat. Despite the burn behind her eyes and the rattling of her bones, she refused to be threatened by such wretched sentiment. “Alex,” she swallowed hard and continued on in breathy, deliberate words, “I cannot allow you to take this risk. What if something happens? What if it all goes wrong?”

“What if it all goes right? We can spend the rest of our lives together. Don't you want to grow old with me?” Alex asked, taking Astra’s face in her hands. “We deserve this, Astra, after everything we’ve been through. The risk is worth it.”

The logic (and startling affection) in those words silenced Astra. With the beating of Alex’s heart in her ears, she allowed the sound to soothe her into a lukewarm bath of consideration. “I was right about you,” she said, finally meeting her eyes. “You have done great things here. I don’t want to hold you back.”

As the words dragged off, Astra closed her eyes and sighed, somewhat morose over being bereft of any gauntlet. This was not a battle she could win. It would more likely split them apart than mend them closer. She yielded not out of a self-serving need to be with Alex but out of loyalty to her. A marriage should require give and take. Partners do not always have to agree on every given issue. This was Alex’s wish and Astra admired her tenacity too greatly to sabotage her ambitions – her life.

“Hey.”
It was not the tender exclamation but the touch that broke Astra from her thoughts. She melted to the feel of Alex’s thumb brushing the back of her hand. It was forgiveness all in one caress and defended by the steadfast eyes gazing back. It felt so good to be taken in by those eyes, yet that beaming quality failed to reach every corner of Astra’s dark passages. Her throat constricted and she diverted her gaze.

“Hey,” Alex said more firmly, “don’t do that.”

“Do what?” Stubborn, Astra focused on the crinkled white sheet.

“I know what you’re thinking and it has no business being in your head. You have nothing to prove. No more comparisons. You deserve to be here. I want you here.”

“It is not as easy as you think. I cannot forget.”

“I’m not asking you to forget, Astra. Do you love me?”

Her eyes snapped up. An unsettling force chased her despondency away. “You know I do.”

“And will you do anything – within the limits of justice – to protect our son?”

“Justice aside, yes, absolutely. Anything.”

Alex smiled as if she knew what her sprung trap would beget. “That is why I love you.” Her eyes fluttered closed and she gave out a restful sigh. “I’m not afraid of losing you anymore.”

Jaw set firmly, Astra flung the sheet aside to slide closer and take Alex around the waist. “I have no intention of becoming lost. Or defeated.” With her beloved snug in her arms, Astra hadn’t felt such a sense of fulfillment, not after winning a major battle and certainly not the moment she first laid eyes on her son. This was something completely new. It scared her out of her wits while simultaneously knocking the wind out of her.

Her chest swelled with emotion. She couldn’t keep the tears from pooling. War hardened muscles twitched for a moment before growing lax as if lulled to sleep by a beautiful siren. Her grip on Alex’s hips eased and she pressed their foreheads together.

Her last act of capitulation came from her whimpering heart. “I am entirely yours.”

* * *

In the morning, Alex woke to the feel of Astra pressing into her back. She smiled, her chest filling with a bouquet of contentment. Before she could enjoy their morning solitude to its fullest, a small knock came at the door.

Without opening her eyes, Alex mumbled, “It’s open.”

In shuffled Jeremiah. His pajamas were wrinkled from sleep and one of his socks was flopping in step.

“Hey,” she said, soft enough not to stir Astra. “Feeling any better?”

Jeremiah sniffed in answer. The sheer thought of putting words together must have tired him out. Even a Kryptonian virus akin to the common cold could pack a wallop. He brought his fists to scrub the lethargy from his eyes. When they dropped, he looked like hell warmed over. It was hard to tell if he was legitimately worse or his need to be pampered brought the performer out of him.
He got to her bedside and stood on his toes so his chin cleared the edge. It looked like he was steeling himself, so Alex waited for him to speak.

He tilted his head which had been mussed from burrowing under the covers and from a genuine lack of care. “Can I snuggle with you?”

The request, made distorted by his stuffy nose, broke Alex’s heart. His eyes were puffy from sleep and his nose and cheeks carried a flushed sheen. Due to the lack of heat coming off of him Alex concluded that he hadn’t developed a fever. Much to her relief.

How could anyone refuse such a face? Before she could answer, Astra’s arm tightened around her.

“Jeremiah,” Astra said from behind, “can you give us a moment alone? We will come get you in your room.”

His haste in closing the door behind him proved how adamantly he wanted to spend time with them. Alex groaned, fully awake and squinting over her shoulder. “What…?” Astra was sliding off the edge of the bed, more alert than a Kryptonian on stim caf. It didn’t occur to Alex why she sent Jeremiah away until the sheet fell away. “Oh. Smart move.”

Astra chuckled and tossed Alex’s pajamas at her.

Minutes later, Jeremiah wound up sprawled on Astra in a most haphazard fashion. The cold had a most riotous effect on his respiratory system for his snores had doubled in volume. The aggressive puffs rushed out of his open mouth. A string of saliva began to pool on the front of Astra’s nightshirt as a result.

Astra didn’t seem to mind the drooling dead weight one bit. Bemused, she ran her fingers through his hair to wish his dreams well while her other hand rested on the steady rise and fall of his back. A faint smile drew across her lips. Whatever thought had just crossed her mind must have amused her for it was enough to pry open her eyes and catch Alex watching her.

“I’m sorry,” Astra said, cheeks coloring. “I’m being greedy.”

“Never mind.” Alex shook her head, smiling gently as she watched them. No force on Krypton could make her disturb the view. “He missed you so much.”

Astra’s eyebrows rose, half expecting a “but” to follow. An earthly sacrifice had her second-guessing Alex. The notion must have felt at home someplace in her heart for Jeremiah had spent the past two months on Krypton unknowingly wearing down his mother’s reservations to an imperceptible nub.

Reading the question in the pause, Alex gave her a pointed look that could not be mistaken. “You, Astra. He missed you.”

The statement sunk in. Astra’s fingers curled in locks of hair and a blue pajama top. Heavenly relief smoothed the lines on her face as she settled in the softly padded nook of a sure thing. She reveled in it with closed eyes.

Then her bottom lip was snagged between her teeth and she looked at Alex. Her mouth curled up in a lopsided, almost ironic grin. “I never imagined that we would be here, together, and with a child.”

“Yeah, I certainly didn’t have a clue.” Alex tucked her arm beneath her pillow. Now at eye level with Astra, she was better able to mirror the irony. “We went from trying to kill each other to
starting a family. Fate works in mysterious ways.”

“No, not fate. Fate upholds a reality where we are bound by cosmic order. I don’t like the idea that individuals are not held responsible for incidents, be they good or ill. Our choices are what led us here. I chose to save you just as you chose to help me. I am now choosing to live beside you for as long as we have. None of this would be possible if we had not taken certain paths. One minor deviation and all of this might look very different to our eyes.” Astra’s heavy gaze returned to Jeremiah. Her fingers continued to stroke out the bent strands of his hair. Conflict crinkled her brow for a moment but it soon melted away. She met Alex with a far lighter expression. “I want to focus on the future. No more looking back.”

As much as Alex wanted to ponder the weight of what had been said, she pushed her questions to a corner of her mind reserved for later analysis. This was not the place for existential debate, nor a time to dwell on what-ifs or what-could-have-beens. Astra was glowing beautiful and holding their sweet boy in her arms.

“We can do that,” she said softly between them.

Without thinking, Alex reached out to push a long strand back from Astra’s cheek. The warmth in her cheeks and the tenderness of her hands felt so natural she didn’t blink. Whatever they had been before, this was them now.

Astra closed her eyes as the knuckles grazed her cheek. “I love you.”

“You just want to get a kiss from me.”

With perfect poise, Astra kept her eyes closed and smirked. “With the way you look in the morning, can you blame me? With every minute that goes by, your beauty grows staggering.”

A considerable part of Alex was riled up enough to pose argument, but she felt the need diminish in light of the way the compliment rolled off Astra’s tongue. She would never admit out loud how much of a sap she was for these little indulgences. Nevertheless, she sought to reward Astra by leaning in. Her lips hovered with practiced finesse as she watched, amused, as Astra failed to remain patient.

Alex inched back from seeking lips only to say, “I love you,” in return. She finally closed the distance between them.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If two points are destined to touch, the universe will always find a way to make the connection – even when all hope seems to be lost. Certain ties cannot be broken. They define who we are and who we become. Across space, across time, among paths we cannot predict – nature will always find a way.

Savi Sharma, Everyone Has a Story

Jeremiah navigated the fields of his homeworld with soft feet and a heavy heart. He hadn’t come out here for some time. Not much about the outskirts of Argo City afforded entertainment in the mainstream sense. The city was surrounded by 30 miles of protected nature and wildlife that remained untouched by humanoid intervention. If people these days wanted to experience the lush outdoors, they preferred to visit the climate controlled gardens or flip on the holoscreen for a 360-degree view of a natural landscape of their choosing.

But Jeremiah had no need of entertainment. Nor had he come that far outside the city limits to smell the morningstar. With his back to the bustling hubbub of metropolitan life, he continued onward through the knee-length pasture.

A shadow streaked overhead. Without breaking his stride, he craned his neck and shielded his eyes from the blistering red sun. Broad wings sailed the upstream winds. The creature looked light as fog, but Jeremiah knew their power. He had rode a beast of this likeness himself and felt their robust strength ripple beneath him.

Since his mother’s campaign to push organic technology, war-kites had become a common means of long distance transportation. For thousands of years these great beasts ruled the skies. Now they had been domesticated to bear passengers and cargo, tasked to serve nobly the houses of Krypton.

Jeremiah tilted down his chin which dimpled in thought. He remembered the long days he spent waiting for his mother to come home from the capital city of Kryptonopolis. She had worked tirelessly in conference rooms and engineering labs to convince the Guilds and Councils that environmentally conscious transportation was in their planet’s best interests. A policy to wean citizens off their gleaming vessels would be met with resistance, no doubt, but if it could be implemented slowly, in time people would embrace the majestic creatures; bond with them even.

Astra’s persistence had not been in vain. At the present cycle, an average of two war-kites served every one family on Krypton.

Jeremiah left his war-kite grazing on the grassy rooftop of his apartment complex. Griffin was his name. The idea for naming his steed had originated from a story his mom often told him when he was a child. As a boy, the mythical creature scared the wits out of him. The half bird of prey, half lion visited his nightmares with more claws and teeth for shredding than sketched by its narrator. That was the problem with childhood imagination. It had a tendency to exaggerate.

Later on, he accepted the gift from his Kryptonian mother, knowing it was far more a sign of love than a means of marking his passage into adulthood. Since the moment his new friend bowed his feathery head in respect, Jeremiah knew Griffin would serve him loyally and vice versa. He couldn’t think of a better name to bestow on his war-kite while simultaneously honoring his
mom’s efforts to remember the complete adventures of one Harry Potter. Unfortunately, he hadn’t managed to persuade her into the saddle, not even as a passenger. Alex had sworn off flying long before he could walk. She never explained why. A niggling feeling always cautioned him from asking.

The wild, stalky pasture eventually opened up to an environment not seen anywhere on Krypton. When the soles of Jeremiah’s boots pressed into grass, he ground to a halt. He didn’t have to look down to know the grass carried the curious color of green.

A wave of nostalgia overwhelmed him like a swelling ocean tide. As he closed his eyes and breathed in the scent, memories tingled his skin and set his hair on end. It was as if he had been sent back through time. Nothing of the swishing fields disturbed his trance. The smell and crinkle of grass beneath his boots thoroughly captured him in a past marked by youth and idyllic circumstances. But at the age of 126, Jeremiah knew very well what the cycles would bring to him and his family...

All those cycles ago...

After little thought, he would enter the Intellectual Guild to become an artist like his cousin. He had been fascinated by the creative arts ever since his fingers sledged through sticky paint. Kara always teased him about how he would one day advance to a level that would see his accomplishments at exhibitions. How right she had been. When he made his decision, not only was she the least surprised of them all but she became a supportive mentor to him throughout his career.

Jeremiah’s career choice would disappoint Astra who saw his potential to become a great warrior. She had high hopes he would one day join the Interplanetary Corps. The highly trained group of scientists and soldiers were enlisted from planets within their galaxy. At the time, many Kryptonians had decided to be among the first explorers to spread Kryptonian culture beyond the galaxy, discover new worlds, and colonize. Jeremiah had excelled in sports and self-defense and beat both his mothers in laser tag at the tender age of thirteen. But he was a visionary and would not ignore his imaginative side. It would be some time (but not too long) before Astra accepted his decision.

Many cycles later, Jeremiah would earn his place among the prestigious sculptors of Krypton. His magnificent pieces were of a style never before seen. They captured the quintessential indomitability of Krypton with an otherworldly smoothness. When gazing upon the startling originality of his work, a great many people could not seem to remember the stigma so long ago attached to Misha Danvers-Ze.

Jeremiah would meet a fellow artist and he would court her properly. Alex interrogated the young woman before Astra could get a crack at her. They eventually came around to accepting this woman who had captured their boy’s heart. The newlyweds worked alongside one other, sharing their home studio and hosting charity galas to promote the importance of the arts to younger generations.

Jeremiah and his wife would live a long, content life surrounded by their two, healthy twin girls. Unfortunately, Alex and Astra never had the chance to meet their grandchildren. As much as Jeremiah loved being a father, he missed being their son, and for them to pass before they could look upon his own children still hit him hard. He determined to make sure that his daughters knew the sacrifices their grandparents made for them. Their future on Krypton was secure thanks to Astra’s and Alex’s contributions in medicine and science. They brought true honor and prestige back to the House of Ze. Though the girls were recognized as singularities of natural birth, no disgrace would ever befall them while they carried the Ze name. Though attempts to return to
traditional fertility capabilities were slow and marked by setbacks, his daughters represented a symbol of hope for the Kryptonian people.

Alex would extend her life twenty cycles beyond the normal human lifespan. She passed away in her bed, peaceful and in the arms of her wife of 67 cycles. They lived a long and happy life on Krypton without tragedy or suffering. Of course, there were pangs from the past stretching behind like a rocky winding trail, but what mattered was that they were together. Alex would die with the body of a 58-year-old, a body that had experienced Astra’s passion just two nights earlier. Within the Ze Citadel, a panel cut from the finest stone was inscribed with her accomplishments and placed beside generations of Ze plaques – an historic honor bestowed upon any non-Kryptonian. Alura made sure of it.

Astra would never be the same. Jeremiah visited her on occasion. Alura too. Eventually, they decided to turn the visits into a weekly habit. Four months after Alex’s passing, Astra would collapse. She never woke up. Medical authorities reported it as an unknown cause of death, but Jeremiah knew better. Astra’s heart had given out for no reason applicable to science. Nothing that could be slid under a microscope to study or prodded for results. Even as a young boy he always had a sense that his parents could never be parted. It was a feeling, much like the one prickling inside his chest whenever he had caught his mothers looking at each other a certain way or when they held each other, trembling in timeworn grief like they thought he was too young to know why.

Jeremiah stepped further onto the plot of grass until he came before two gravestones. They were constructed four months apart and marked the burial of two upstanding citizens. The strange ritual proved difficult to authorize, but Alura pushed hard for a permit that allowed Astra to plant a tract of green grass for her wife to be buried in. The day after Alex’s interment, she called Alura to finalize her will and testament. Her last wish was to be buried alongside Alex. No Kryptonian funeral rites. She wanted a human burial.

The grass around the stones was growing wild. Jeremiah knelt in the soft bed, picked up the two dry, brittle posies and tossed them into the wind. In their place, he laid a fresh bouquet of golden flowers just like his Kryptonian mother taught him. On one occasion they had visited the single grave, she had mentioned her time amongst humans and her observations on their funeral rites. Jeremiah’s heart still broke at the frailty of her voice. He had heard her speak of Earth before but not like that. Not like she had lost it all over again.

Ignoring the prickling around his eyes, Jeremiah rolled up his sleeves and made silent work of the overgrown grass. His large sculptor’s hands were gentle as he tore out only the necessary tufts. He treated the task as he would any restoration of an artwork – with patience and single-minded purpose. With tears in his eyes and a heart slamming in his chest.

By the time he was done, the sun was sliding low over the horizon. He didn’t care how long he had taken. His patrons could wait. His work would be there in the morning. His wife knew his heart. The two headstones now looked like they had been visited. Their faces brushed clean, their bases cleared of brush, and their beds honored with a fragrant offering. After everything they had done for him, Jeremiah owed them his time.

As he knelt on both knees before their graves he could rest assured that wherever they were they would always be together, in Rao’s light or in heaven. He settled back on his heels, weaved his fingers through the soft blades, and stared at the names inscribed. There lied two people who made him. The significance never failed to dawn each time it came to mind. He would not be on Krypton, thriving in a career of his choosing and happily in love, were it not for them.

And his long-departed mother, the one without a grave, the one who had taken him in and later
kept him from banishment and exile. She was as instrumental in securing his happiness as anyone. She made the ultimate sacrifice for his betterment and that of his family. As hard as Jeremiah tried to remember her outside the smells and sensations, he could not find a means of honoring her memory. The only possible thing he could do to make certain her sacrifice had not been in vain was to live a life without regret.

Jeremiah bowed his head and whispered customary prayers, one in English, the other two in Kryptonese. When the last word fell from his lips, he opened his eyes now dried of tears. His mouth curled into a grin his wife attributed to both his stubborn mothers. It had all the rascally intent of Astra and the endearing oafishness of Alex.

He touched the smooth, curved heads of each grave. Not in farewell. More of a promise to remember. He stood, wearing the same smile and feeling lighter than when he arrived.

Anyone passing their graves would know them as the Kryptonian and the human, mated for life and for love against startling prejudice, war, and fate.

Jeremiah would know them as his parents, insufferable over their arguments and melodramatic over his. Ultimately, there were no two people better made for each other.

* * *

Ecstatic giggling spurred Alex’s gaze up from the pages of her book. Families and couples alike crowded Argo City beach on that warm afternoon. The seas were choppy and made an even murkier gray from a partly cloudy sky, though that hardly prevented people from venturing the chilly Dandahu Sea. Kryptonians of all ages flocked to the boardwalk for the amusement rides, the entertainment, and the mix of salty and sweet snacks. By and large, the stretch of pure sandy beach beckoned the greatest number.

Despite the crowd, it was easy to spot the white streak. A small, private laugh came from Alex. How Astra managed to keep her hair dry amid all the splashing was beyond her. She watched as her wife and son played. The foam crawled over their feet, popping and fizzing like an effervescent soft drink. Sometimes it reached Astra’s waist and on those occasions she didn’t blink before lifting Jeremiah up out of the violent, icy sea and holding him high. A sense of pride stretched across Astra's lips as she did so. Once the tide receded, she’d promptly toss him in the shallow end where Jeremiah broke out into fit of laughter. He could not be enjoying himself more. With wet curls matting his head and the bitter sea being spat out every once and a while, he paddled on as delighted as a drenched retriever.

If Jeremiah’s delight could have been surpassed, its only contender was Astra’s supreme amusement. Alex had never seen her so happy. Not a worry line marred her beautiful face. If she didn’t know any better, she would have thought this woman an alluring stranger.

Astra stood resolute against the waves buffeting her legs and watched as Jeremiah steeled himself for a nose dive.

From her lounge chair, Alex strained to hear the emphatic discussion between them.

Astra’s attempts to hold back laughter were heroic. She cracked a smile at the hesitant Jeremiah who was staring so hard into the deep end Alex worried the mark between his brows would become permanent.

Astra started toward him, gesturing with her hand. “Do you want me to –“
The whining retort startled Astra to a halt. With fists at his sides, he stomped and only succeeded in offsetting his balance in the current. After regaining his balance, he gave her a death glare. “No, Mama. Let me do it.”

Astra had the sense to temper her grin. “Alright then.” She nodded gravely and crossed her arms over her wetsuit.

The waves rolled in one after the other. As Jeremiah’s gaze followed each one, he prepared to bridge the cresting obstacle by squatting. Alex couldn’t tell if the subtle tremble in his bent knees was due to the water’s temperature or the fear of failing in front of his mother. A wave lapped against his knees, stretching its frothy fingers along the beach before returning to its source. When the next one came surging in he dived, arms spread and folding forward. Just before his hands met in formation, the crest of the wave splashed into his pinched face. Instead of a nose dive, his belly landed on the water with a plop!

Astra’s laughter resounded above the crashing water. She clapped her hands together and pressed them to her gaping amusement.

Poor Jeremiah, thought Alex. All that concentration and nothing to show for it but a belly flop. Still, the laughter proved contagious.

By the time Jeremiah surfaced he had a scowl on his face. His bangs were plastered across his forehead in a dark blanket and the sight would have incurred more laughter were it not for the intensity of his grumpy, dripping face.

Upholding some tact, Astra got a hold of herself. Her chuckles perished under the hand to her mouth.

“Don’t laugh at me.” He tucked his chin down, surlier than his parents combined.

Astra’s hand fell away to reveal a traitorous smile. “I wasn’t laughing,” she insisted and slogged through the knee-deep water with palms spread like she was approaching a bad-tempered wildcat.

The icy sting of sea water had turned his cheeks red. He pouted. “It hurt.”

A surge of fondness filled Alex’s chest. She tilted her head, smirking. Yeah, it hurt good alright. So much in fact that he saw fit to press his cheek into the palm of Astra’s hand.

“Do you want to go back to your sand castle?” asked Astra.

“No.” Jeremiah tilted his head up and squinted in the sunlight. “I want to try again.”

“So be it.” Astra retreated dutifully, languorous fingers swirling through the water. She nodded and spoke in a stout voice. “Back in formation.”

And they were back at it again: Jeremiah nibbling his lip and studying the wave patterns while Astra watched patiently from the sidelines as ordered. No shortage of smiles affected her. They seemed to feed off every furrow of his brow and every break in character accompanied by a giggle.

Alex knew Astra loved nothing more than watching her son apply himself against great hardship. In some ways, a lot of ways, Jeremiah was Astra’s duplicate. He had her temper and her staggering zeal to prove herself. Their eyes could pierce the toughest armor. Sometimes, Alex had to blink to shake off the utter resemblance.

It still struck her speechless that this little boy came from a nobody like her and General Astra In-
Ze. He was an innocent, bright-eyed child who had emerged from passion despite the restless times. Even if their love had been undisciplined and largely untested at the time, they managed to create something beautiful. God, how did she get so lucky?

On Jeremiah’s third attempt, Astra made a reckless, though kindhearted, move to assist. Her offer was met with incensed splashing and finally (finally!) those lush brown locks became drenched.

The rich, boisterous laughter made Alex weak as putty and had her slouching further into the pillows in careless relief. She didn’t care if people witnessed the enjoyment she was taking out of the childish sport. The two-seater lounge had an awning for privacy though not much could conceal her smiles. Alex crossed her ankles, humming in the depth of plushy cushions and cool shade.

It had been months since the wedding yet Alex recalled it as if it took placed only yesterday. It surprised her how much she enjoyed the event. The small, private ceremony took place on a rooftop made lushly romantic by a garden. She was never one for weddings but it seemed that when it regarded her wedding, the experience proved to be more significant. Astra’s parents attended. They were kind in all their apathy and remained unsuspicious of their daughter’s true identity. Frankly, they were more attentive to their grandson and the means in which their dynasty would prosper through him. Seeing as they and Astra were not particularly close, Alex guessed that they would only have to see them once every year if they were lucky.

Alex glanced down at her book. She fingered the corner of a page in rumination. The other day she had visited Alura. Good news came in the form of a warm smile and a signature (moderately crushing) Ze hug. Alex learned that Alura was up for a promotion and Kara had made her decision to enter Argo’s Artisan Academy to study painting. Alex shared in Alura’s relief. They couldn’t be more pleased that Kara would be staying close by. Even if Kandor was only a speeder trip away, it was far easier to ambush Kara with food and affection and blame it on the scale of a small city.

Alex was so lucky to have Alura. Though she no longer had her foster sister with her, she saw her in Alura and this world’s Kara. It warmed her heart to know they considered her family long before bonding herself in matrimony to Astra. Their family made it possible for her to enjoy this cobbled-together new life on Krypton. It became routine for her to bring lunch to Alura’s office where they would catch up and gossip about politics. She, Astra, and Jeremiah always had weekly standing dinner plans with them; Zor would test his new dishes on them and explain his technique while Alura seemed to be the only one giving him her dazzled, undivided attention.

It was also heartwarming to see Astra bond with Alura and Kara. Alex knew she was hesitant to get close to them, fearing she would revert back to her old ways. As time went on, however, she proved to be as loving with them as she was with Alex and Jeremiah.

Alex looked up to see Jeremiah chasing his mother through the surf. With an agile sidestep, Astra dove into the shallow water and snatched him up with a beaming grin. Chuckling jovially, he splashed up a storm around them.

When the chill started penetrating their wetsuits, they started towards dry land. Jeremiah plopped his bottom in the sand and didn’t hesitate to add on an additional wing to his sand castle. Astra, astounded by his stamina, shook her head and trudged past his conical estate.

She flopped down beside Alex and flung her arm over her eyes. Her breath came in pants. The general who had flattened armies and made the most confident men tremble with a look had been rendered spent by a four-year-old.

“There’s no doubt he takes after his mom,” Alex remarked teasingly.
Astra, however, thought a little differently and pointed it out with a raise of her brow. “He does, doesn’t he?”

Alex simply pursed her smiling lips and went back to her book. They spent the next half hour laying in the shade, Alex dividing her attentions between Jeremiah and her reading and Astra drifting off into a nap that made her downright impossible to disturb.

The page Alex turned crinkled as she hurried to find out what ensued. Her eyes ran rampant over the glyphs that were by now second nature to her. The story captivated her to an extent that left her distracted from the stirring beside her. Her crinkled brow endured until an arm slid behind her back. Concentration broken, Alex rolled her eyes to the rich sound of chuckling.

“I’m sorry.” Astra’s tone sounded far from genuine. She settled her chin on Alex’s shoulder. “I was dreaming about our honeymoon.”

Eyes on the page, Alex grunted.

Astra’s other hand fell in the crook of an elbow. She pressed a kiss to Alex’s wetsuit-padded shoulder. “Those were the most blissful days I have ever spent with anyone.”

“It better be.” A rich hum met the skin of her neck and sent shockwaves through her. Alex fought the urge to squirm under the long, tender kiss. “It was relaxing, wasn’t it?” Damn it, she thought. Five seconds of resolve was just embarrassing by human standards.

“Mm, we should go back soon. Just the two of us.”

“That’ll be a challenge. Jeremiah has been threatening tantrums to go back to the ‘fire house.’”

Astra hummed, noncommittal. Her focus was entirely upon driving Alex crazy.

The glyphs were starting to blur together. A moment ago, she would have thrown a punch at anyone who disturbed her solitude. She needed to find out what happened next in this slash romance adventure tale. But with Astra buried in the crook of her neck, whatever anticipation buzzing through her system before was replaced by a completely different kind.

Alex let out a shaky sigh. The lips on her throat warmed her blood and raised her skin. She didn’t want it to end. Damn the book. Damn the pedestrians ambling by.

Suddenly, the sensation fluttering across her flesh turned to ice. Alternative paths inevitably roused a darker one. “I know we agreed not to bring up the past.” She felt warm lips recede from her stiffening body. “But there are times I can’t help but think how different our lives might have been if I had acted differently on that rooftop in National City.” She turned to gage the silence.

Though Astra’s expression changed markedly, her arm around Alex’s waist remained and her hand on the soft flesh of her inner elbow continued to stroke idly. “Even if you had not gone through with it,” Astra said, “I would not have been persuaded to turn myself in. Not to the DEO and not to the human race. I had lost a great deal even then. There was nothing more to live for but to see through my goal. Whether through Myriad or other means, I would have remained on course in saving Earth from its inhabitants. If you had not killed me, I would have… I would not have slain you, but I would have incapacitated you.”

The painful memories struck through Astra’s expression like lancing shadows. Alex dropped her eyes, feeling very sorry she brought it up.

Astra’s grip tightened around her elbow, not hard enough to injure but to emphasize the gravity of
her words. “Do not apologize for speaking your thoughts. You should not have to be in constant vigilance of my frame of mind. We should be able to speak of the past in all its varying wavelengths.” She ducked her head to catch the wavering eyes. “You say that you do not fear losing me. If that is true, you shouldn’t fear setting me off. I am at no risk of causing catastrophic damage – physical or psychological.” Her gaze turned to the boy sitting cross-legged before his masterpiece. She smiled softly, perhaps reflecting as Alex was over his freedom to choose his own path. Astra returned to Alex’s patient gaze. “Not when I have so much to be thankful for.”

Alex nodded. “I believe that. I really do. There’s just so much that’s happened. So much tragedy has befallen us.”

“While a great deal of good has blessed us.”

“A lot of good,” Alex agreed and couldn’t help but smile back.

Ill thoughts were slowly being driven out. The longer she stared enthralled by the devotion winding around her like silk, the further away those doubts were pushed. When they dissolved in the sunlight crawling up their toes, she lay completely in Astra’s arms. They didn’t kiss. They didn’t speak. They just stared as if nothing could break them. And they believed it heartily. After the lengths they went to find and keep each other, no force could part them.

Soon enough, Astra tempted her closer with a rascally grin and a twiddling of fingers at Alex’s waist. Alex ended up in the snug embrace, realizing how much the view had improved just by being in the arms of someone she loved. With a prickling sensation in her chest, she looked around at her life. It was not what she expected at all: living on Krypton, being someone’s wife, raising a child. The scene struck her as alien as she sometimes still felt amongst the Kryptonian people.

In spite of the lingering self-irrelevance she felt as a foreigner, it occurred to her that she couldn’t imagine a better life. She was there with the woman she fell in love with, someone who had once been her worst enemy, someone she ran through with lethal kryptonite. But that had been so long ago. They shared a life here on Krypton and a beautiful son destined to put a smile on their faces every day. All the billions of paths made possible by all the innumerable choices, and somehow all of hers from birth to present led her there.

Alex tilted her head to pick up the beating of Astra’s heart. As she blindly folded their fingers together atop her lap, she closed her eyes over the skip and hitch. She sighed. If a billion choices led her to this, she didn’t regret a single one.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone for the comments and kudos. Writing this has been a ride, to say the least, and the conversations I’ve had with people over the course of the series have made it all the more enjoyable. My gratitude to you.

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