C is for

by HayesPeters

Summary

You chose not to see it.

Lena bites the same spot on her lip as earlier – the one that’s still cut and raw and now bleeding again – because that’s a truth too, and she will not cry in the middle of an airport VIP lounge.

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(author watches s4 finale & s5 trailer, speculates wildly, and something ensues)
Chaos

Something in her is shaking. Burning. Clawing at the inside of her ribs like a fury-crazed beast at the bars of a cage. She needs to sit so she does; all but falling into the chair across from her brother’s corpse while the gun drops from her nerveless fingers and hits the floor with a clatter she doesn’t even hear.

And the video files just… keep playing.

Your friends have been lying to you from the start.

Kara using freeze breath. Kara using heat vision. Alex, J’onn, Nia, James, Brainy… one, more or all of them right there beside her with not a trace of surprise on either of their faces.

They’ve mocked you. Humiliated you. Betrayed you.

She can’t breathe for how her chest is aching. The videos become a wash of blurry color beyond her tears while the walls close in, and she clenches her hands around the chair’s armrests and digs her fingers in until there’s splinters under her nails that don’t hurt anywhere near enough to even register.

Every.

Last.

One.

Lena bites the inside of her lip until the taste of blood fills her mouth. She breathes, God damn it; forces her lungs to expand and contract slowly even if her head is buzzing like a hive of angry hornets and her stomach feels like it’s caving in on itself.

Because why? Why? Has she not done everything she could do; given everything she could give? Did she not admit to weakness, apologize for mistakes and missteps, and offer her trust, her affection and her assistance whenever possible?

Especially to Kara. Kara, who she knew was keeping something from her, only Lena thought it was maybe— that it could—

Denial is a very powerful thing, isn’t it?

Lena bends down, reclaims the gun, stands back up, and empties the remaining chambers right into the screens mounted on the wall.

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She isn’t stupid. She knows full well that Lex always has—always had his own agenda. Like any abuser, he gives—gave his own version of the truth and spun it to suit his purposes, no matter if those purposes were to entice loyalty or punish disobedience.

Without a doubt, that was exactly what he did this time, too. But a cruel truth is – at least in this case – still a truth, and those Lena trusted without reservation still chose to repay that trust with deceit.

It’s been standing right in front of you all this time.

And it has, she admits. It really has. She can’t even count the amount of times she brushed something
off as a coincidence in timing or a small quirk of her best friend’s personality, but in hindsight, it is so fucking obvious that just thinking about it makes the pounding behind her eyes multiply by ten.

_Annd_ you _chose_ not to see it.

Lena bites the same spot on her lip as earlier – the one that’s still cut and raw and now bleeding again – because that’s a truth too, and she _will not cry_ in the middle of an airport VIP lounge.

She decided – _repeatedly_ – to ignore the obvious in all those moments. She _elected_ to think they were something else or to disregard them entirely; blindly and _idiotically_ believing that her faith was well-placed, and that the trust that had been so easy and so hard for her to give had been not only reciprocated, but _cherished_.

_Kara Danvers is Supergirl._

Lena pushes herself to a stand, calmly makes her way into the lounge bathroom, checks that she’s alone, and then enters a stall and vomits into the toilet.

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Even with everything she knows now, she doesn’t believe that the deceit was ill-intentioned. She _can’t_ believe that, because if it was, then she’s frankly too damn blind to have any business even walking down the street without a dozen guides.

So while saying that it ‘hurts’ is the understatement of a lifetime, Lena is willing to watch and wait; to gather her own information and form her own opinions, rather than rely on the single version of the truth thrown in her face by a man who was seeking to emotionally cripple her.

(He might just have succeeded, but she isn’t going to think about that yet.)

The migraine eases with more over-the-counter stuff than is probably wise, and the flight back to National City gives her time to regain some measure of control over her whirling mind. Time to think, too; to examine and reevaluate and compartmentalize until she feels like it will at least take a few more pokes before she starts coming apart at the seams again.

She even goes to Game Night with all of them. Manages – somehow – to shove all the uncertainty and _humiliation_ down so far that she can act in accordance with their expectations; far enough that she can smile and joke and laugh, and pretend that she isn’t questioning everything she’s taken as gospel for years.

“_You’re with me, right?”_ Kara asks.

“Always,” is her response before she can think about it, and Lena doesn’t know how to feel about the fact that even now, that remains a truth.

_You’re left with no one. And nothing._

Something in her is shaking.
She doesn’t last a week in National City. It’s too new, too raw with all those smiles that she can’t let herself trust anymore, and so she bends to the lack of sleep, the nausea, the headaches and the constant urge to cry, and allows herself a temporary retreat for the sake of her own sanity.

Aspen is an easy choice for a variety of reasons. It’s different enough in all aspects to have no reminders of National City, it’s close enough that she can get back reasonably fast if need be, and it comes with a very comfortable cabin that she bought with her own money. Added to that is the sense of privacy she feels here; both because of the heavy pines that surround the cabin on three sides, and because the rest of the town’s population – permanent or temporary – includes enough wealth that her presence is barely a blip on the radar.

The fact that skiing tends to help clear her mind doesn’t hurt either, and for the first week, Lena spends every second of daylight on the slopes; focusing her energy on re-awakening long unused muscles, and returning to the cabin only after sunset to work until she passes out.

She sticks to those two activities – skiing and work – even when the second week is well underway, and firmly puts everything else out of her mind. Her personal phone lies abandoned; charged overnight and checked every morning, but otherwise as unacknowledged as the messages that trickle in.

Later, Lena decides anew every time she scrolls through the most recent batch. She’s been lied to for years. She’s allowed to leave a few people on read.

And it helps; the distance. Her body settles and her mind quiets until it no longer feels like she’s walking around without her skin attached, and the long hours of constant exercise and fresh mountain air makes her sleep easier and deeper. By the start of the fourth week she catches herself humming under her breath as she works, and that’s progress enough to make her smile and settle deeper into the well-stuffed couch.

So of course, that’s when Kara turns up in full Supergirl regalia; just as the sky is reddening on the next evening, and at the rough halfway point of what was supposed to be Lena’s second to last run for the day.

It’s probably going to have to be her last one, now, she considers, and feels her jaw clench when Kara lands at the next bend of the otherwise abandoned slope.

Fuck it.

A month and change is more than enough time for Lena to have reclaimed her skill, and she takes a very petty kind of satisfaction in stopping in the most extra way possible; by adjusting her course, setting her legs, and executing a turn sharp enough to send a literal wall of powder ahead of her.

Kara, of course, could move out of the way a thousand times in a single second, and while Lena isn't sure how to feel about the fact that she doesn't, she is sure that it's on purpose. She sees the choice in her eyes; the realization of what's coming, the almost-flitting movement of at least a dozen calculations, and then Kara squares her shoulders, lifts her chin and lets the wall of snow hit her full on.

Out of guilt, perhaps? Lena eyes her surreptitiously as she comes to a stop and pushes her goggles up. Some kind of half-assed attempt at reparation for a slight she thinks Lena doesn’t know about?
“I didn’t know you could ski,” Kara says by way of greeting; blowing at the flakes that stick to her hair as she brushes herself off.

“I thought you were supposed to be faster than a speeding bullet,” Lena returns with a sharply cocked eyebrow, but doesn’t bother to wait for an answer. “Can I help you, Supergirl?”

“Oh.” One blink, then another, as if Kara has somehow forgotten who she’s supposed to even be right now, and Lena grits her teeth and wrestles down a fresh wave of anger because Jesus Christ it’s so fucking obvious. “Lena, you’ve been gone for a long time, and you don’t respond when contacted for anything other than business. People are worried about you.”

“So are they?” She watches the sun sink below the tree tops with a spare, wistful thought for the last run of the day that definitely isn’t going to happen now. “Well.” She stabs her ski poles into the snow hard enough for them to stand on their own, and folds her arms before shrugging. “Here I am; safe and sound. Feel free to pass it on.”

“I… think your friends would like a little more detail than that, if you’re willing,” is the careful answer. “Kara Danvers in particular.”

Lena finds a loose clasp by her wrist to fiddle with, because it’s either that or lose the already tenuous hold on her temper. “So whose word is it that Kara won’t trust?” she wonders; looking back up only after a long moment and several slow breaths. “Yours or mine?”

That clearly wasn’t a question Kara was expecting, and she visibly flounders for several seconds; stuttering and switching – now that Lena knows enough to look – from one persona to the other and back until it’s frankly tiring.

“ Forget it,” she sighs; reclaiming the ski poles and using one to point downhill as she adjusts her stance. “I have a cabin not far from here, since you insist on invading my privacy.”

Kara flinches, but takes a step closer and holds out a hand. “I could—”

“No.” Lena holds up a hand of her own, and has to call on the entirety of her corporate experience to keep the sneer from her face when she continues. “Thank you, but no. Just follow me.” She settles the goggles back into place, and doesn’t bother to look back or raise her voice as she pushes off again. “I’m sure you can keep up.”

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“Cozy place,” Kara offers, once Lena has deposited her skis and boots and crossed the cabin’s open floorplan to let her in through the patio door. “Rental?”

“When I don’t need it myself.” She leaves her undoubtedly well-meaning, but ultimately unwelcome visitor by the door and sheds her outerwear as she moves; catching the motion of Kara rapidly turning away at the edge of her vision and rolling her eyes in response.

Before, she used to find the chivalrous politeness amusing and even charming, but right now, Kara is stomping all over her last nerve until Lena is about ready to shove it into a Fedex envelope and ship it to Australia. Because sure, maybe she isn’t exactly ‘fine’, but she was getting there. She’d found a place of her own choosing to recover from her entire world turning upside down and sideways so fast that her head still hasn’t stopped spinning, and now the living, breathing cause of that upheaval is standing not twenty feet away; undoing more of Lena’s hard work every time she so much as blinks.

God. Lena takes a slow, deep breath and turns on the kitchen faucet before reaching into one of the upper cabinets. “Thermals cover a good deal more skin than normal underwear,” she offers as she
fills the glass. “I’m well beyond decent; believe me.” Kara is facing her again when she shuts off the faucet and turns, and Lena has no qualms about the long, measured look she sends her as she sips her drink. “I take it Krypton didn’t have snowboarding?”

“Well… no.” The crinkle appears as Kara crosses her arms, and Lena wonders if she finds more comfort and confidence in the persona, the costume, or both. “I visited an ice planet when I was really young that had something sort of similar to what you call snowboarding, but that’s probably the closest I’ve come to skiing until I arrived here.” Pause. “Earth, I mean. Not… specifically Colorado.”

“Fascinating.” She keeps her voice purposely dry and flat because the tone makes Kara noticeably uncomfortable, and mostly wishes that she could either revel in or feel guilty about it, rather than being torn between the two. “Any other anecdotes to share?”

Kara watches her for a long moment - brow furrowed and lips pressed together – before opening her mouth and drawing in a steadying breath. “Did I—” She stops herself, though; abandoning whatever she was about to ask in favor of simply shaking her head. “… no. Nevermind.” A soft sigh, and one hand coming up to rub at her forehead. “This wasn’t why I came here.”

“No.” Lena refills the glass before crossing over to the kitchen island and taking a seat on one of the high stools. “You came here for details in spite of me not being ready to share them, which should be obvious from one, the fact that I’m here instead of in National City, and two, from how I’ve chosen to go no-contact while I attempt to figure everything out in privacy.”

The flinch is more subtle this time – a bare twitch of the skin over Kara’s cheek – but it’s there all the same. “Alright,” she concedes; after a swallow and with a slight dip of her head. “Then I’m sorry for intruding. I guess I just don’t understand why you feel like you have to do this alone.” Her voice is quieter now, and even the sound of her boots against the hardwood floor is soft as she takes a few, careful steps closer to the island. “Not when you have people who care about you.”

Lena chuckles - or at least exhales through her nose a little harder than normal – and rubs at a drop of water that managed to escape over the side of the glass. “Every last person you’re thinking of was part of the situation I’m trying to find the space to process.”

“You’re talking about your brother.”

Him too, Lena allows mentally, but elects to simply nod at the glass rather than offer any corrections.

“Lena…” Her voice is closer now. “Look. Whatever you’re thinking, you have to know that his death wasn’t your fault.”

“Stop.” One hand up – palm forward and fingers extended – and she curls it into a fist and tucks it into her lap when she feels the tremble in it. Bad enough that her voice is starting to waver. “Just—stop. Okay?” She squeezes her eyes shut and pinches the bridge of her nose, and Kara thankfully listens to her and shuts the hell up so Lena can have a few seconds to just breathe again.

For now, it’s enough, but it won’t be for long. The control she’s gained over her emotions started eroding the moment Kara turned up, and Lena needs her to leave before she can have even the slightest chance of rebuilding it. And the best way of achieving that… is probably to give her what she wants.

The truth. Or at least a part of it, she thinks bitterly. How fitting.

“Lex didn’t die on Shelley Island.”
Kara sighs. “Lena, I saw it myself,” she insists gently. “He fought me off when I tried to save him, and when he hit the ground, his suit expl—“

“His suit—” Lena barks, in the tone of voice she usually reserves for grown-ass-white-man-temper-tantrums in the board room, and guesses from the look on Kara’s face that her expression probably matches when she lifts her head. “—had a teleportation function. You saw his suit explode when it hit the ground. Lex?” She smiles; not one of her nicer ones. “Oh, he was long gone. Ran all the way home to Luthor manor, just as he’d hinted he would in the notes he knew I’d find.” Her hand is shaking again, so she curls it tightly around the glass. “I was waiting for him, which he expected.” Pause, sip. “What he didn’t expect was for me to actually shoot him.” She stands slowly; eerily aware of the scrape of the stool’s legs against the floor as the only sound there is, because Kara is so still that Lena doubts she’s even breathing. “So don’t tell me it wasn’t my fault, Supergirl,” she sneers. “Not when I’m the one who put two bullets through his heart.”

“Two b—” She doubts Kara could look more shocked if she slapped her across the face. “That’s murder.”

“I’m aware.” Lena eyes her, and now mostly just feels very tired. “Pre-meditated, cold-blooded murder of the man who was once my beloved older brother, and grew up to become one of the most dangerous people in existence.” Her hand comes up again; this time to gesture at the cabin around them. “Hence my current lodgings.” The last of the water is poured down the sink, and Lena sets the glass down on the counter. “So what am I, do you think?” she wonders; half-turning towards Kara and folding her arms across her chest. “Nature? Or nurture?”

Again, Kara’s reaction – shock, disbelief, horror - is pulling her in two different directions, though this time the fight is between laughing or crying.

A breath, and both of those are pushed back as she reclaims her control for at least another few minutes. “Look.” She scrubs an exhausted hand over her face and tucks a few stray hairs into place behind her ear. “It’s not something I’m going to make a habit of. I never set out to be a k—” Pause. Breath. “—Killer. I’m not looking to make a name for myself as the latest villain on the scene. Hell, I can’t even claim to be proud of what I did.” Her shoulders move in a helpless, little shrug. “But I also can’t tell you that I regret it. The world was never going to be safe for anyone with him alive.” She doesn’t feel like smiling but she tries to anyway, though the burning at the edges of her eyes probably ruins the effect somewhat. “A kind of poetic justice at least, right? The last, evil Luthor dead by the hands of the last—” Her voice catches, and she has to swallow, clear her throat, and then swallow again. “Well. The last ‘shades of gray’ one, I guess.”

Kara moves again; faster this time, but her hands are open and her palms facing upwards, and the ache in her eyes telegraphs clear as day not only what she’s thinking but what she’s forgotten: what she’s wearing, and who she is currently supposed to be. Because Lena Luthor, if anyone, knows a Kara Danvers hug when she sees one coming.

So she steps back, and holds up her hands. “Don’t.” Softly; a request – a plea, if she’s honest – rather than an order, because right now a hug would mean breaking down and she can’t. “Just—leave me be, alright? I’m not going anywhere, I just—need time.”

The hands reaching for her close into loose fists, but fall obediently down to Kara’s sides. “You’ll be okay?”

“I will.” A promise, and one she intends to keep if it’s the last thing she does; something that must come across since Kara nods once, and then lets Lena lead her back over to the patio door.

“Lena?” One more moment of barely-there control. One more moment of looking up without
breaking down. One more moment of the icy mountain air and Kara in the doorway; human and alien, confidante and traitor, cherished and despised all in one. “You are good, and I know I’m not the only one who believes that. Please don’t doubt yourself.” A pause, and a warm, gentle smile that hasn’t a single iota of Supergirl, but is Kara every inch of the way. “Come home soon, okay?”

Then she’s gone, and the door shuts behind her with a soft, little click.

Lena drops to a seat on the couch with a sigh and presses her face into her hands; feeling her breathing stutter and her chest grow hot for the now much longer period of time it takes before she can beat the emotion back down. Only – only – Kara Danvers could leave her feeling at once so elated for still receiving that belief, and yet so incredibly pathetic for craving it in the first place.

She needs a damn drink.
Control

Come home soon, okay?

She’s back in her L-Corp office not two weeks later, because never let it be said that Lena Luthor doesn’t keep her word. And if she shows at almost 6 in the evening when most everyone has gone home and doesn’t actually tell anyone about her arrival… well, she never made any promises in that regard.

Besides, Alex Danvers and J’onn Jonzz each have a fingertip practically glued to the city’s pulse point. If they didn’t know she was back at the very least when her plane touched down, then that really isn’t Lena’s problem.

Things, of course, have built up in her absence in spite of the amount of work she fielded from Aspen. There’s a pile of folders on her desk neatly color-coded according to Jess’ familiar system: green is obvious, then blue, black and so on, until the telling, bright red folder that shows up very rarely, and always ends up being a subtle message from her assistant that means something along the lines of ‘this is a total crock and I’m sorry, but I had no way of not passing it on to you’.

At least those always turn out to be entertaining in one way or the other, so Lena flips the pile of folders over to claim the sole red one there is; opening it as she settles into her chair and taking a minute to skim the contents before rolling her eyes.

L-Corp is not an MLM, she writes across the topmost page in bright red ink; then closes the folder with a sharp smack and tosses it into her outbox.

She continues from there; working her way through the folders from bad colors through middling and onto decent, before finally getting to the ones that should at least be interesting if not outright groundbreaking. It’s a repetitive, somewhat tedious task, but the familiarity of it is soothing, and that combines with the peaceful silence and the waning sunlight at Lena’s back to make her shoulders loosen and her heart rate slow.

Open, read, comment, close; over and over until the stack of folders has dwindled from twenty to two, and the process eases her into such a deep state of relaxation that when she cocks her head at a page and sees the photo from the corner of her eye, her head snaps around so fast that she almost gives herself whiplash.

Damn it. The anger surges up with enough force to make her lightheaded, and Lena only barely manages to catch it; grabbing onto her reaction like she’d grab a dog by the collar, and curling her fingers around the edge of her desk as her jaw clenches.

Alex, her, and Kara. A picture that not only made her smile on instinct just a few short weeks ago, but was one of her most cherished possessions. Now, she’s more tempted to take it out onto the balcony and see if a photo can fly as well as a frisbee if you throw it in the same manner, but she manages to grab and restrain that impulse, too.

Instead, she pushes back from her desk and makes her way to the bar cabinet. Jess, bless her, makes sure that it’s kept well stocked at all times, and Lena secures a tall, faceted tumbler that she takes back to the desk with her, as well as a half-filled bottle of her favorite brand of single malt.

She pours two fingers into the glass before sitting back down and – halfway through raising the glass to her lips – pauses long enough to flick the photo with a single finger. It falls onto its back with a
muted thump, and Lena settles into her chair with a long exhalation; closing her eyes and taking small, slow sips that let her feel the mild burn of the alcohol all the way down to the tips of her toes.

It would, she knows, be infinitely easier if her time in Aspen had included managing to convince herself that she doesn’t care, but that could never be more than a pipedream. She is a Luthor. By nature, she loves deeply, wholly, fiercely and helplessly, and the only way to ever change that is for that love to turn into hatred.

And that… isn’t needed. Not yet, at least; not until she knows for sure one way or the other.

Until that happens, she will still care; no matter how much it hurts to do so. But what she will also do is take the necessary steps to protect herself from getting hurt worse.

Whatever else Lena does, she learns. Every day and from everything; especially her own mistakes. With Eve, she failed to use the strongest weapon at her disposal: her mind. She reacted from a place that was pure emotion – ‘saw red’, as she later termed it to Kara– and in the process, bypassed logic and abandoned rational thought entirely.

Not this time. Lena swirls the alcohol idly around the tumbler and studies the fallen photo of herself with the Danvers sisters; keeping her breathing steady and not looking away until the red-hot pulses of anger and humiliation in her chest are locked behind a solid wall of cool, carefully crafted calculation. Then – and only then – she takes another measured sip and sets her drink down on top of the photo itself, and does so with enough force to splinter the thin glass protecting it.

This time, she promises herself as she turns to the remaining folders and opens one – *Obsidian North VR contact lenses* - she is going to use her mind.

And no one is going to pull the wool over her eyes ever again.
Lex’s favorite part of any chess set was the queen; the furthest reaching, most powerful piece. He also always played with the black pieces rather than the white ones; not – as far as Lena knows – out of color preference or any prophetic sign of actual evil, but because white goes first, and therefore is the one with the highest risk of revealing its strategy.

Lena prefers the white pieces. For her, though, it is a matter of the coloring, since white serves as a reminder for her to always, always keep moving towards the light instead of straying into the dark.

She turns the black queen over between her fingers, and wonders if anyone has managed to figure that out. It’s not exactly subtle, after all; the building that houses L-Corp is white, her office is decorated in white apart from a few dark creams, and the white makes several appearances in her home and – more often than not – on her person.

Today it’s doing so by way of a high-collared, silk shirt and pearl earrings set in platinum; two items – three, if she’s being technical – rather than the usual one, because it’s a reminder she needs now more than ever.

Lena figured out a long time ago that if Kara ever hurt her, the resulting pain would be the worst she’d ever experienced. She’d taken the time to carefully examine that prospect from all angles, and decided to take the risk because the rewards had been well beyond worth it.

But God, she has never in her life underestimated anything this badly.

Denial is a very powerful thing, isn’t it?

Gently, she returns the black queen to its rightful place on the board; twisting it a little so it’s properly aligned, and then picking up one of the white rooks instead.

Back when they were children, Lex hadn’t understood why she didn’t prefer the knights.

“’Cause you’re a girl, Lee. All girls like horses.”

“It’s not called a horse, though. It just looks like one.”

Lena puts the rook back where it belongs, and gives the cool stone a careful brush with the pad of her thumb before resting her elbows on her knees. The late morning sunlight is gilding the pale colors of her office, and she settles her head in one hand to just watch the tiny, floating dust motes wink peacefully.

It’s enough for her to lose track of time for a little while, and it takes a knock on her office door to bring her out of it.

“Yes?” she calls as she straightens in her seat and stretches one arm out along the back of the couch, and feels the smile appear all on its own when the door opens. “Since when do you knock?”

“Since Jess very pointedly informed me that it was quiet enough in here that you were probably working on something important.” Kara closes the door behind her with a sheepish, little grin, and drops her messenger bag at the end of the couch before sitting down and pulling her into a hug. “Welcome back, stranger.”

Lena lets her because she can handle that now, and hugs her back in spite of the sharp pang in her
chest. “I should’ve at least texted you,” she murmurs by Kara’s ear, and gives her one last squeeze before pulling back. “I’m sorry.”

“None of that, okay?” Kara curls a warm hand over her knee and smiles. “You’re allowed a little time to yourself after everything.”

And it’s just—it’s fucking confusing, to be so happy to see her and still so unbelievably hurt; to want to hug her in one moment and slap her in the next; to loop from gut-wrenching heartache to overwhelming affection and back like a switch shorting out, and to – on top of all of that – wonder if she even has the right to be angry in the first place.

It’s Kara’s secret to tell, after all, and Lena is well aware of that. But that doesn’t make it hurt any less to know that she’s given all of herself, and gotten maybe half of Kara in return.

“May I?” Kara gestures to the board and waits for her to nod before she picks up a piece; stroking her fingers almost reverently over the smoothly carved, black granite as she examines it. “It’s beautiful,” she offers; turning the bishop in her hand over while also moving one of the pawns two squares out. “New set?”

“Old one, actually.” Lena moves one of her knights, watches Kara set her bishop down to bring that into play, and tries to figure out if she plays so fast because of an inexperience with the game that makes her not think dozens of moves ahead, or if that’s just the speed a Kryptonian brain works at. “From before Lex and I graduated to onyx and marble.”

“Oh, I get it.” Kara waits for her bishop to be captured, and then moves her queen. “This is the Luthor version of slumming it, right?”

“Right.” Lena’s lips quirk, but she bends her neck and focuses on the board because she isn’t confident that she can hide the look in her eyes. “Ah; got you,” she then announces, and exchanges Kara’s queen for one of her own rooks in a single, smooth move. “Checkmate.”

Kara laughs because she’s never been a sore loser when the two of them play alone, and Lena smiles at the sight and wonders how long either of them can continue to be two different people around the other. Eventually, something or someone is going to break, and she frankly doesn’t have a clue which of them it’s going to be.

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Lena eyes the hand itself before looking up at the smiling face of its owner. The sad, honest truth is that Kara could steal her away for any time and any reason, and Lena would accommodate her if given half a chance.

Her trust in Kara has taken a major hit – enough of one, in fact, that the current level is effectively subterranean – but even so, Lena craves her presence.

“I think I can move a few things around for you,” she drawls in response; taking the offered hand, and letting herself be pulled to her feet and towards the door.

It’s probably not unlike how a drug addict will keep going back for a fix, she thinks. Even if they know it’s killing them.
Connections

Chapter Notes

I get so excited about having a new chapter ready that I keep forgetting to mention that I have a tumblr over @hayespeters. I lurk way more than I post, but hey - come yell at me anyway.

“Alright; I think that covers everything.” Lena thumbs through a copy of the contract; waiting for the small collection of lawyers to mutter in agreement before turning her focus to the woman sitting across from her. “Unless there’s anything you’d like clarification on?”

“Everything seems perfectly reasonable.” Andrea Rojas agrees with a nod; securing a pen and holding it up in question. “If we are both ready, then?”

“Of course.” The meeting itself is another one in a long series of them; some physical, most electronic, and all of them lengthy and exhaustive. This however, takes only a few moments, a few rustles of paper and several signatures, and then both of them are standing before Lena offers her hand. “Welcome to CatCo Worldwide Media, Miss Rojas.”

“I think you can safely call me Andrea from this point, Miss Luthor,” is the answer around a wry little smile as her hand is clasped and shaken. “Since you are now officially my boss, or at least will be before long.”

Lena chuckles. “If it helps, I have absolutely no intention of micromanaging you,” she promises; flipping through the contract one more time before handing it over to an aide to be scanned. “I have projects within L-Corp’s walls that need as much focus as I can give them, so the main thing tipping the scales in your favor as the new head of CatCo was the amount of experience you already have.”

“I suspected as much.” The lawyers precede them out of the conference room, and Andrea reaches out to catch the door before gesturing for Lena to go ahead. “I must admit that I am looking forward to at least a slight change. I imagine that media and technology are worlds apart.”

“No arguments from me,” is Lena’s dry response to that, and she smiles when it draws a laugh from the other woman. “Though from what I hear, your family’s company isn’t exactly a stranger to the world of media; at least not lately.”

“The VR lenses?” Andrea halts by the elevator when Lena reaches out to press the call button, and waits for her to nod. “No; I suppose not. Although in all fairness, social media is more of a carrier system for that project. The main body of the work is still done the old-fashioned way.”

“The main body of the work is still done the old-fashioned way.” The elevator dings open, and Lena motions towards it with one hand. “I’m almost disappointed that Obsidian North doesn’t need third party assistance for either design, development, or production,” she admits as she enters the car herself and the doors slide shut. “That’s honestly a project I would love to sink my teeth into.”

“That, I unfortunately cannot offer,” is the answer; Andrea slinging her briefcase over one shoulder and furrowing her brow before brightening. “But I can make sure that L-Corp orders for a beta-unit will move to the front of the line, and perhaps provide some general insight into the system’s
“design?” Her head cants, and the corner of her mouth quirks up. “Purely in the interests of open source programming and knowledge sharing, of course.”

“Now that—” Lena smiles and holds out her hand for another shake. “—is the sort of consolation prize I can live with.”

She means it, too. There is no denying the fact that Lena would far prefer to actually play a part – ideally a personal one – in the development of the lenses, but she also isn’t the type to stomp all over someone else’s front yard. Not when the someone in question isn’t already stomping on her last nerve, at any rate (see: Morgan Edge).

Besides, it isn’t so much the virtual reality aspect that’s intriguing her. The idea of having it implemented in contact lenses, though? Where you could conceivably create a product that uses augmented reality instead, and have it pick up on things like heat signatures, structural damages, sources of pollution?

That is something she can see L-Corp having a hand in. And if Obsidian North is willing to share notes, it’s a project that can be both started and completed that much sooner.

So overall, it turns out to be a promising day. Which is good, because it gives her something of a buffer to coming home, absently turning on the news, and getting smacked in the face with a mid-air still of Supergirl – of Kara – complete with the suit modifications Lena created for her.

She doesn’t listen to the anchors or even really read the ticker at the bottom of the screen, but she does take a deep breath followed by a second, and then purposely leaves the broadcast running while she goes about scaring up some form of nutrition.

Exactly what she should do with the knowledge, she still doesn’t know, though the ideal thing would be for Kara to open her mouth and just tell her so Lena can stop pretending to not know. If their brunch dates and other various interactions so far are any indication, she’s honestly impressed that Kara has managed to keep the charade up for as long as she has, because having to keep that constant, mental check running - to re-think everything she says before she actually says it - is exhausting.

“You know, you're terrible at hiding things from me.”

The memory hits her when she reaches for something on a high shelf in the fridge, and there’s a second where she just outright stops breathing; freezing in mid-motion and not even blinking. Kara, she remembers – or thinks she does, at least, though her recollection does have a faint tint of alcohol-infused blur to it – had laughed it off; a little awkward and a little breathless, and Lena hadn’t even thought twice about it.

Until now, where that one memory suddenly decides to function like a single pebble plugging a dam. With that one detail shaken loose so many more come pouring forth, and for that one second that lasts at least two years, Lena really, really hates her near-eidetic memory.

“Oh no, I flew here! … on a bus.”

Oh.

“I had the strangest dream. We were flying... you were carrying me.”

“I—I was? Like Supergirl? I wish!”

Oh.
She doesn’t keep count of the instances as they flash across her mind’s eye, so she doesn’t know how many there are. She doesn’t know much during that moment, really; including how she ends up sitting cross-legged on her kitchen floor with an open bottle of sparkling water in her hands.

The water was at least what she was originally reaching for, but she doesn’t remember grabbing it. Aside from that, the fridge is still wide open and now pinging irritably at her while the news broadcast drones on in the background.

Last time she felt this stupid – this completely and utterly blindsided by her own ability to ignore what’s right in front of her face – was the day Lex became a murderer.

So this once, she allows herself to react from emotion again, and just cries.
Conflicted

It isn’t because Kara doesn’t care. It can’t be, because who would let someone into their life like that? Who would watch another person be uncertain and alone and vulnerable in their presence, and then *pretend* to care just for appearances’ sake?

(Like Lillian did, all those years ago.)

It isn’t because Kara is using her; because Lena has funds and influence and *resources* that can give both Kara and the DEO an advantage. It isn’t because Kara sees her only as a useful piece in a much grander scheme; a pawn to be played and then sacrificed as needed.

(She never thought that was how Lex saw her.)

It isn’t because she’s playing the longest con in history to make Lena care about her just so she becomes open to manipulation, because Kara really doesn’t strike her as the type.

(Rhea didn’t strike her as the type.)

It isn’t because Kara has a separate, hidden agenda to monitor her; to lull her into a false sense of security for the sole purpose of striking when she least expects it. No; Lena really doesn’t think that Kara would do that.

(She didn’t think Eve would do that.)

Her monitor goes into sleep mode *again* without her having registered a single thing displayed on it, so this time Lena just groans, pinches the bridge of her nose and resolutely spins her chair around to face the city skyline, because she isn’t getting a single thing done anyway.

She can – off the top of her head – think of three plausible reasons that Kara hasn’t told her.

One: timing. Their first meeting and a long period of time following it would have been far too soon to spill a secret of that magnitude; even if Lena hadn’t come complete with a metric ton of baggage that included – among other things – an actual, 21st century *blood feud* with Kara’s family. So she can understand why Kara didn’t tell her immediately, as well as how it would probably have gotten progressively harder for her to figure out *how* to tell her the longer the pretense continued.

On the other hand, Kara is a grown woman, and in many ways more emotionally mature than Lena herself. So she should, by all accounts, be well beyond smart enough to know that the longer you keep a lie up, the harder it becomes to tell the truth.

(On the third hand: hypocrisy. It’s not like Lena doesn’t have a years-old secret of her own that she hasn’t shared with Kara.)

Two: protection. Anyone found to be emotionally important to Supergirl would automatically have a huge, glowing target painted on their back. It’s hardly outside the realm of believability that Kara has kept quiet in an effort to do what she can to help keep Lena *safe*.

On the flip side, Lena being who she is already makes her a target on a disturbingly regular basis. History has certainly proven that.

Three: selfishness; at least to an extent. It’s entirely possible that Kara just likes having someone who knows her *only* as Kara, as opposed to Kara-who-is-also-Supergirl.
That one, Lena would at least be able to understand, because how many times has she been glad to have Kara see her only as Lena? To have someone who knows her for who she is, rather than as Lena Luthor; the last one standing from a once highly regarded family, and one of the wealthiest, most influential people alive?

Her stare-off with the sky is interrupted by a familiar flash of red, blue and blonde flying by in the distance. Lena tracks the moving body with her eyes, and feels one brow quirk sharply when Kara performs five loops in a row before vanishing from sight.

Something clearly has her over-the-top-excited, so Lena isn’t surprised to hear her phone start buzzing from a call, though she doesn’t answer it or even turn her chair around to see the screen light up. Instead, she lets the droning vibration continue until it stops, and then waits for the brief series of buzzes that mean text messages to end.

Kara [2:11 PM]: lena
Kara [2:11 PM]: LENA
Kara [2:11 PM]: Lena I got nominated for a PULITZER
Kara [2:11 PM]: can you believe that??????

Actually, she can, she considers; having picked up the phone once it quieted down and now finding herself smiling at it. Because she read the article that undoubtedly won Kara the nomination; several times. It was nothing short of brilliant, and - from what she knows of the Pulitzer Prizes - certainly qualifies for a number of the journalism categories.

Kara [2:13 PM]: Will you come with me to the awards ceremony?
Kara [2:13 PM]: please say you’ll come with me
Kara [2:14 PM]: if i actually win i think i’ll need help to just stand up

Of course! she sends back, though not for another twenty or so minutes, since that’s a conceivable amount of time for her to have just left a meeting. Wouldn’t miss it for the world. Congratulations!

It’s not a promise she makes lightly, and now that it’s made, she’s going to do everything in her power to keep it. But at the same time her mind is spinning at light speed in a repeating cycle of LillianLexRheaEveKara, and Lena was always good at noticing patterns; at least in hindsight.

Twice can be a coincidence, but thrice is definitely a pattern. So what, she wonders, as she presses her fingers to her lips and stares out of the window without noticing even the sun’s steady progression across the sky, is five times?

At this point, can she trust herself to trust?
Cowardice

Practice, they say, makes perfect, and so logically it follows that pretending not to know Kara’s secret should grow easier over time.

It doesn’t. It actually becomes harder; takes that split-second longer to remind herself to address Supergirl as Supergirl, and that much more effort to exchange smiles and hugs with Kara without freezing up; to be Lena-who-doesn’t-know.

So to keep from slipping, she starts withdrawing; starts dodging at least some of the time her and Kara usually spend on hanging out. It doesn’t quite count as making up excuses, she figures, since the ones she offers are actually perfectly legit. She does have a lot on her plate with James leaving soon and her having to make sure that Andrea is ready to take over for him; not to mention with keeping her various projects at L-Corp both on track and on schedule.

Those are also very valid reasons for putting off Lillian’s persistent requests to meet up, so at least that’s a positive.

On top of that, of course, there’s the fact that her plans for Jess include keeping her in her current role only for a very limited time – God knows she deserves a promotion – so Lena has to worry about finding a new assistant on top of everything else; even if Jess practically strong-armed her into putting off the offer last time she made it and doesn’t seem to be in any kind of hurry to leave.

Not that Lena doesn’t appreciate the loyalty, but she does wonder what it says about her that the only person she really feels comfortable placing any amount of trust in is her secretary.

“Miss Luthor, it’s 8 PM.”

Speak of the devil. Lena carefully keeps her computer monitor between her face and the office door just so Jess can’t see the grin pulling at her lips. “Oh?” She manages to wrestle her face back under control, and makes a show of picking up her phone to check the time. “Hm. Seems you’re right.” The phone is put back down, and now she meets Jess’s eyes directly. “So what are you still doing here? I distinctly remember sending you home three hours ago.”

For about five seconds Jess just looks at her – clearly and thoroughly unimpressed – but then she shakes her head with a chuckle. “Can’t say I expected any different.” She crosses over to drop a new folder on a free section of desktop real estate by Lena’s elbow. “Personal shipment from Miss Rojas; just arrived by courier.” One finger taps the folder, and Jess eyes her wryly. “Figures that one workaholic would hire another one.”

“Says the woman who stays at her desk in spite of being all but ordered to leave for the day.” Lena picks the folder up, though; flipping it open and scanning the contents. “Most employees actually listen to their bosses, you know.”

“I’m very well versed in selective disobedience,” is the answer to that; Jess clicking her way back across the room and pausing in the doorway to cock an eyebrow at her. “Since you do such a wonderful job of leading by example.”

Lena waits for the door to close, and then smiles at the papers and the enclosed flash drive while giving her head a fond little shake.

Smartass.
It goes without saying that she doesn’t stay away from Kara entirely. In spite of the frustration she feels at the whole situation and the hurt and confusion that comes with trying to work everything out in her own head, she does still both want and need the other woman’s presence in her life.

Fortunate, probably, since it’s exponentially harder for her to dodge Kara’s alter ego; what with how Lex’s little cadre of fanboys keep crawling out of the woodwork every now and then.

“Do they know?” Supergirl asks her after one such instance; after her would-be attacker has been subdued and removed and the two of them are alone in Lena’s office. “About what you told me in Colorado?”

“Good question,” Lena admits with a sigh; pouring herself a glass of water because the scotch is starting to become just a bit too tempting, and bringing it with her as she moves over to the couch to take a seat. “This one didn’t mention anything about it, but who knows? All I can tell you for sure is that you’re the only one I’ve told.”

Supergirl doesn’t approach, but she does fold her arms and frown; her cape moving gently in the breeze coming in from the open balcony door. “It’s a risky secret to keep,” she offers quietly, and Lena only barely restrains the urge to roll her eyes.

“I’d say it’s a far more risky one to share,” she points out; sipping the water without looking away and offering a crooked, wry little smile. “Especially since I’m running dangerously low on people I can trust not to lie to me.”

“Well…” Supergirl is the one to look away, and to clear her throat a little uncomfortably. “At least you still have Kara.”

“Right.” Something in her chest clenches in disappointment and Lena drops her gaze too; running a fingertip along the rim of the glass and watching that instead. “I still have Kara.”

Supergirl makes her somewhat awkward excuses after that, and Lena watches her fly away with something that feels mostly like a ball of ice settling low in her gut. A counter, perhaps, to the burning in her chest and the heat at corners of her eyes. She doesn’t so much as whisper anything since God knows Kara has every chance of hearing it, but she does think a single word with a vehemence that startles even her.

_Coward._
Lena was never any good at breakups, though she finds some solace in the fact that as far as she knows, no one really is. This one, at least, is one of the easier ones she’s been through, and she would probably feel more guilty about that if her ex-boyfriend hadn’t broken up with her when they were leaving for a romantic Paris getaway; all because he jumped to conclusions rather than ask questions or, you know, trust her.

Not that Lena is blameless, since she knew from the start that if she had to be talked into wanting the relationship – let along spend actual days convincing herself to make a try at saving it – then she should never have entered into it in the first place.

There is no small amount of irony in the fact that the messiest, most painful breakup she’s ever been a part of is with someone she never even dated.

But it is what it is and at least both she and James are mature enough to handle the situation like adults, so Lena exits the town car when it pulls up to the curb, and heads inside to hand back the single item she has to return to him. She has the key in her hand when she reaches James’ floor and is actually halfway through aiming it for the lock from simple habit, but catches herself, shakes her head and knocks instead.

“Hey.” James – still wearing the eye patch - is standing in the doorway just a few seconds later, and looks at least as uncomfortable as she feels. “Come in for a sec, would you? I found a few things I figured maybe you’d want back.”

So she does, and eyes the few items waiting on James’ kitchen island as they reach it and he sits down while she remains standing.

It isn’t much, in spite of him having gone through the entire apartment as he worked to pack it up. His key to her penthouse, which she takes, a wooden puzzle he bought her once, which she leaves alone, and a picture of her with their entire friend group; minus James himself, since he was the one behind the camera.

Lena takes that one too, if only to avoid questions.

“‘You were never going to hand your research over to the military were you?’”

“I’m not a villain.” Somehow, she manages to keep her voice calm as she holds out the key – her copy, for this place - even if her insides are clenching in reaction. “And if that’s all you’ve ever really seen me as, then I don’t understand why you wanted me in the first place.” She watches James flinch and look away while she folds her arms. “No relationship is going to work without trust,” she tells him quietly. “And you never trusted me. Not really. Not when it mattered.”

“No.” James lets the key lie in his palm and just watches it for a moment before closing his fingers around it and looking up at her. “You’re right. I thought I did – I tried to - but—” He raises his free hand, then sighs and lets it drop. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

The phrase ‘too little, too late’ is chasing itself around the inside of Lena’s head, but she’s frankly too tired to extend this meeting any more than absolutely necessary, and so just nods once before turning and making her way back towards the door.

“One more thing?” James calls after her. “Please remember that you won over Alex Danvers. Hell, Kara was yelling at all of us in your favor pretty much from day one, so my issues are mine and
something I need to work on.” A brief pause, and the low creak of the chair he’s sitting in. “But I’m definitely the minority. Alright?”

Lena is glad to have her back turned, since that means she can close her eyes, center herself and take a breath that lets some of the sudden, aching tension ease back out of her shoulders.

“Good luck in Metropolis, James,” she offers, but doesn’t turn around or even look back. Instead, she leaves as calmly – at least to any outside observer – as she entered; walking the halls, taking the elevator, pushing open the building’s front door and proceeding down the few steps to street level proper before settling back into the leather interior of her town car.

“Home, Miss Luthor?”

“Please.” Lena meets her driver’s eyes through the open partition and nods, though she can’t quite find the energy to muster her usual smile. “As fast as you can get me there without violating any traffic laws.”

She’s ripped the photo in half before the car has pulled away from the curb.

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Trusting people, Lena decides as she drives herself to L-Corp later the same evening, is clearly a waste; at least where she is concerned. And if it took her half a dozen instances to figure that out – she includes James in the count because he professed to love her and still never trusted her – then… well, then at least she got the message eventually. Better late than never.

The sound of her heeled shoes echo weirdly in the near-empty parking garage, and Lena pulls out her phone as she waits for the elevator; mostly in an attempt to distract herself with the dozen emails she’s received in the bare 15 minutes that’s passed since she left home.

One of them is from Andrea, and she opens it before she enters the car and reads while the floor counter increases; feeling – at least – some amount of personal satisfaction at how she apparently managed to wrap her head around an entirely new, proprietary programming language over the course of a few hours.

So people are a bust, but technology? Lena exits the elevator and makes her sound-dampened way down the empty, carpeted hallway to her own office. That has rules. Clear, firm rules that she can read and learn and rewrite if and when she wants to.

Tech can surprise you, she knows; passing Jess’s desk – abandoned, for once – and entering her actual office before pulling off her light jacket and setting her glasses aside. But tech is also stoutly logical; governed by the laws of science, rather than the unstable whim of emotion.

Tech won’t blindside you. Lena fishes a small container from a hidden safe; easing the little box open with a soft click and taking a moment to ensure the contents are moistened sufficiently. And in that way, it’s a hell of a lot more reliable than people will ever be.

“Alright.” She slips the lenses into place with long-practiced ease, and shakes out her arms as the world starts rearranging itself before her eyes. “Let’s see what we have to work with.”
The Pulitzer Prizes are awarded in Metropolis as always, and Lena goes... well, partly because the trip gives her a chance to check up on L-Corp East and maybe visit with Sam and Ruby, but also because she promised. Even if she hasn’t really kept in any sort of contact with Kara, Alex or anyone else from that group in weeks.

Not that they haven’t tried to reach out, but what’s the point in her leading them on? The messages have eased off, at any rate – save for those from Alex and especially the ones from Kara – and while Lena figures that they’re still trying to give her space to deal with Lex’s death, she also figures that they’ll catch on eventually.

But yes, she goes, she dresses to the nines and she attends because she made a promise to Kara and that still means something. To both of them, she guesses, based on the one, somewhat subdued message she got that reminded her of exactly when and where the ceremony was held.

She doesn’t seek Kara out in the crowd when she arrives, but she does spot both her, Alex and J’onn over the course of about 20 or so minutes. It’s always in passing and from a fair distance away since Lena keeps herself busy.

Networking was never her favorite activity, but at this particular moment, she’ll take it. Anything to pass the time until she can duck back out and get away from the glimpses of Kara’s smile or the snippets of her laughter.

Lena still hasn’t fully decided if she even wants a confrontation. Normally that isn’t something she’d shy away from, but this is Kara, which messes with a lot of the regular rules until the book holding them might as well have been left in the gutter during a rainstorm for all that Lena can either read or follow them. So whether there’s going to be a confrontation or not, it sure isn’t something she’s going to go looking for now.

It’s Kara’s night, anyway, or at least it will be, from what Lena has inferred from her connections in the world of media. And no matter how hurt she is, she isn’t going to ruin that if she can help it.

So of course that means that Kara finds her shortly before the ceremony itself is due to start, because that’s just how Lena’s life works. She doesn’t even get the chance to say anything before her hand is warmly caught and tugged, and then Kara has led her into an empty little room somewhere and they’re alone.

“I am so, so glad to see you,” Kara whispers by her ear as she pulls her into a hug; one Lena returns because she’s weak and pathetic and honestly doubts that she’ll get another chance. “Thanks for coming.”

“I did promise.” Lena lets her hands be caught and held, and returns the smile because she’s pretty sure it’s physically impossible not to. “You need to get back out there, though. They’re about to start
“I know, I know.” The hold on her hands tightens, though, when she tries to step back. “I just—I wanted to steal some time with you.” Kara’s smile grows a little shy at that admission. “I haven’t seen you in weeks. You didn’t even make it to James’ goodbye party.”

“I didn’t think having your ex present at a party like that would have been the most pleasant thing in the world,” Lena demurs. “And to be fair, I was busy.”

“When aren’t you?” is the answer, though it’s clear from both the tone of Kara’s voice and the look in her eyes that she’s teasing. “Lena Luthor: clandestine corporate overlord. Exactly what kind of secrets are you keeping from me?”

And that, of course, is the exact wrong kind of joke to make. It’s hits too hard – too close to home – and this time Lena manages to pull her hands free.

“Did you tell the DEO about me killing Lex?”

“Did I—” Behind the glasses, Kara’s eyelashes flutter rapidly. “What are you talking about?”

“Kara.” Lena hates how her voice aches from the second she opens her mouth, but for God’s sake, why can’t Kara be honest with her just this once? “Can you please just—” Her voice cracks, so she stops speaking, covers her mouth, closes her eyes, and breathes.

In. Out.

In. Out.

“Do you know what it like to open yourself up to someone so completely that you give them a little piece of your soul to hold, and then you find out—” Lena steps closer until she can reach out, curl her fingers around Kara’s hand and lift it up; watching the motion as she carefully maneuvers it to rest it between them with its palm facing upwards. “—that this person – your person – has two faces?”

She’s beyond close enough to notice when Kara stops breathing.

“With one face—” Gently, she settles an escaped lock of blonde hair behind Kara’s ear, and gives a small, tender smile because she loves her and she can’t help it. “—they’re your best friend. They’re loving, supportive, and the absolute rock you always needed but never even dared to dream of finding.”

“But with the other…” Her voice drops, and she feels her smile do the same as both of her hands now come up. “They become someone else. Someone who doesn’t listen to you; doesn’t trust you—” Her fingers take a careful hold of Kara’s glasses and tug them off; softly fold the arms in and settle them in the palm of the hand that still hangs in the air between them. “—and who never believe you to be anything more than the monster you’ve spent your whole life trying to fight.” She steps back, then, and folds her arms; putting into place at least some of the distance physically that she feels emotionally. “Do you know what that’s like?”

“Lena—”

“Do you?” she repeats quietly; meeting those eyes without flinching in spite of the rocks in her stomach, and the weight of lie upon lie hanging between them like a lead curtain. “Supergirl?”

The name is out in the open now, and Kara’s breathing stutters sharply in response; her fingers
curling around the glasses and her hand dropping down to her side while her lips press together.

“And the worst part?” Lena laughs, but it’s a bitter, brittle sound that’s barely more than a broken puff of air. “I learned it from Lex. Not from you.”

“I was going to tell you,” Kara whispers; every word low and rough and forced from a throat that’s so tightly clenched that Lena can see it. “I swear. I was just trying to find the right time.”

For a long, aching moment, Lena just watches her. And then: “Congratulations on your Pulitzer, Miss Danvers.” She holds that gaze even if her lungs are struggling to fill at the sight of the tears welling up in Kara’s eyes, and knows from the hoarse quality to her own voice that she needs to leave now. “May many more follow.”

She steps around Kara - leaves without the other woman making a single move to stop her – and while she does catch the low, wrenching sob that follows her out, she refuses to acknowledge it.

It’s bad enough that she runs all but literally into Alex not twenty steps down the hall; that her arm is caught and lightly held even though she tries to leave because she needs to get the hell out of here, and ideally sooner rather than later.

But.

“Lena; hey! God, I’m glad to see you. Kara has been an absolute pain to—” Alex’s voice and expression both switch from friendly excitement to sharp concern the instant she catches the look on her face, and Lena finds herself tugged into a little nook and away from the overall crowd. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Lena watches the crowd over Alex’s shoulder; her focus irresistibly drawn to the room she just exited. “You may want to make your way two doors down and turn left, though. I think your sister wants to talk to you.”

She tries to walk away again, then, but the hold on her arm tightens and exactly how can both of them be so goddamned dense?

So Lena spins to fully face her remaining obstacle, and maybe lets her temper get the better of her by a hair or so. “Am I being detained, Agent Danvers?”

“What?” To say that Alex looks startled would be an understatement, but she does – at least – release her hold on Lena’s arm. “No! Of course not.”

“Thank you.” She squares her shoulders and sends a pointed glance in the direction she came from. “Then I believe your time is better spent with Kara, rather than wasted on me. Excuse me.”

From that point on, she manages to make her way to a side entrance without being intercepted again. That means fresh air and solitude, at least until she’s gotten around to the front of the building and can signal for her driver for the night, slip into the back of the car when it pulls up, and breathe.

She doesn’t regret it.

It doesn’t hurt.

She doesn’t care.

And she’ll keep telling herself that until she believes it.
Life becomes significantly quieter, and Lena tells herself that she prefers it that way. It’s more efficient, after all, to spend her evenings at the office, and she gets far more chances to do that when the only friend she has to keep in contact with is Sam.

(Sam, Lena decides after a some subtle prodding and a significant amount of thinking, does not know about Kara; even after everything.

Lena doesn’t tell her because the secret isn’t hers.)

She throws herself into work; into experimenting with the VR lenses, examining the limited, baseline code she’s been sent, and testing the boundaries of the range and control available in the pre-release beta units she’s been given. And it helps. A new fascination giving new ideas always does.

She starts taking the lenses home with her, rather than leaving them at L-Corp. She plays with the code behind them late into the night - altering decision trees, tweaking the subroutines for visual input and playing with optimization and minification until she’s pushed the hair-fine hardware to the absolute maximum – and discusses her findings and changes with Andrea, which, after a day or so, nets her a personal call from the head of development at Obsidian North.

So that’s definitely progress, and although Iria’s English is beyond reproach, Lena is still glad to be fluent in Spanish because that lets them switch back and forth whenever one of them needs it.

Within a week, she has a copy of the full source code for the VR lenses in her possession, on a thumb drive that counts its storage capacity in terabytes because the file is massive. Literal millions of lines of code to run something that will fit on the tip of her finger, where a newly released computer game - with all the work done by game engines and the like - will consist of somewhere around a hundred thousand lines.

It is such a monumental leap that Lena isn’t even ashamed of wishing that she’d been the one behind the idea. Because this, she thinks, is the first time she has seen anything so advanced that it actually does seem like some kind of magic.

It isn’t magic, of course. Just software and hardware, when you get right down to it. Ones and zeroes by hands on a keyboard. Which is exactly why she finds the whole concept so unbelievably cool in the first place.

The beta units have limits, which is to be expected; even after they’re updated to run the full source code. They load the immediate area when she puts them on and don’t expand the range of that area when she moves, the environment stutters – faintly, but it stutters – when she goes outside a few hundred feet of her current session’s origin point, and since areas in the immediate vicinity of L-Corp and her home load significantly faster, this set seems to have been adjusted specifically for her; something Iria readily confirms when Lena asks.

The RC ones, though, when they land on her desk? With those, there are info boxes popping up if she focuses on a particular item and narrows her eyes. Items – or people, poor Jess – that she sets as being of particular interest are outlined with a faint glow that makes it that much harder for her to misplace her keys, and with a little tweaking, Lena manages to add a narrow, opaque box at the edge of her vision that lets her watch the code execute in real time. So those are very cool.

The hand-written note from Iria thanking her for her assistance and input doesn’t hurt, either.
Her professional life is basically amazing. It’s challenging, it’s rewarding, and she’s learning enough from the VR lenses to start concocting a proprietary language of her own that L-Corp can use to create the AR lenses she dreamt up. Her personal life honestly isn’t doing too bad either; not with Sam’s easy smile and Ruby’s occasional moodiness; with Jess’ half-hidden eye rolls and quiet support, and Andrea and Iria’s professional, respectful courtesy.

It’s not the same, but it’s enough. At least as long as she keeps busy.

The rest of the time, though? It’s… frustrating. She walked away. She cut ties. She had Jess remove a long series of names from the already short list of people who can enter L-Corp – and her office – without being questioned. And yet, she is also the one missing them. All of them.

But especially Kara.

When the day winds down and her mind does the same, Lena misses her like a part of her body has been physically cut off, and no matter how many blankets she piles her bed with, she’s never been so cold before.

It feels like she’s been robbed of sunlight, and Lena – when it’s particularly bad and she persists in trying to sleep without the aid of modern medicine - tells and tells and tells herself that this was her own choice.

Still, she misses her, and wishes – in that illogical, half-resentful way that seems to come with heartbreak – that Kara would at least fight her on it.
Alex Danvers runs out of patience less than two weeks after the Pulitzers, and Lena is frankly impressed that she manages to hold off for that long.

She’s wearing the lenses because there was an update to the AR augmentations this morning, so it’s easy enough for her to figure out when Alex arrives. She doesn’t know that it’s Alex, specifically, but the faint murmur of raised voices is enough to make her eyes narrow until Jess is outlined even through the wall; standing up right in front of her office door with her arms folded sternly across her chest.

There are very few people that Jess will actually need to physically block from entering, and a nine-in-ten chance that the person she’s blocking right now is probably a friend of Kara’s, since security would have taken over if there was an actual, credible threat.

So Lena sighs, and hits a button on her desk phone. “It’s alright, Jess,” she speaks into the otherwise quiet office, and hears the voices beyond the door stop as if on cue. “Let them through.”

“You don’t do anything halfway, do you?” is what Alex asks when the door opens; pushing past Jess in exchange for an absolutely withering glare.

Lena arches a brow at her. “Have I ever?”

That makes her uninvited guest pause halfway through sitting down, and for a few seconds, they just stare at each other until the corner of Alex’s mouth quirks. “Point.” She seats herself fully; one knee over the other and one arm hanging over the back of the chair, and then sighs. “I’m sorry.”

Settling her elbows on the table and nodding at Jess to close the door, Lena interlaces her fingers. “For what? Insinuating that it would ever occur to me to half-ass anything?”

“That too,” Alex agrees with a tilt of her head. “But I meant for being a shitty friend to you, and for giving Kara bad advice.”

Lena is the one to sigh this time, but she does at least manage to restrain the urge to roll her eyes. “I fail to see how you need to apologize to me for the second one.”

That earns her a puzzled look. “You mean Kara didn’t—” Alex stops herself there and lets out a long, slow exhale that would probably be a groan if she added sound to it. “No; of course not. I swear—” Another mid-sentence, full stop, and Alex spends a full minute pinching the bridge of her nose and muttering under her breath.

When the second minute of that is well underway, Lena does some nose-bridge pinching of her own. “Look, I have a very busy—” Day. Week. Year. “—stretch of time ahead of me, so if you don’t mind exc—”

“I told her not to tell you,” Alex speaks up; adjusting her position until she’s leaning forward with her elbows on her knees. “Several times. Hell, she learned to hide pretty much from the moment she got here. The more people she tells, the more she’s in danger, which is my concern.” She watches her own hands for a long moment, and then chuckles soundlessly. “She’s more worried about how knowing puts them in danger.”

“And I could understand that if I had been some random Jane Doe from the corner of 57th and Main.” Lena traces a fingertip over her own eyebrow and stares at the papers on her desktop without
really seeing them. “I can understand keeping it secret for a while, too. A long time, even.”

“Mm.” Alex nods. “But?”

“But I have a target on my back the size of the continental US because of my name alone, and it’s been there for the better part of my life.” Briefly, Lena closes her eyes and draws on every reserve of strength she can find. “Three years, Alex,” she whispers; slipping one hand into her lap and clenching it into a fist before looking up. “Over a thousand days of friendship. Of me doing everything I could to prove myself to her, to you.” She swallows. “To myself. And for what? A smile here, but it’s tired and probably quivering at the edges. “To still be left out. To still not be trusted. To still be seen as the Luthor, and only be let in by the barest amount when I can do something for you.”

“That’s not how it is,” comes the quiet rebuttal.

Lena snorts. “Please.”

“It isn’t.” Alex scoots forward in her seat, now. “Kara wanted to tell you ages ago. Hell, she wanted to tell you right after Lex, but I told her that it would probably be too much for you to handle at once. Me.”

“Be that as it may, Kara is a grown woman and her own person.” She picks up and shuffles the nearest stack of papers; more to have something to do with her hands than for any other reason. “The choice to listen – to keep having one hand open in friendship and the other closed in distrust – was hers.”

Silence settles between them again, and while Lena firmly returns her attention to her work, there’s no sound of her visitor getting to her feet and leaving.

“She wants to make it up to you, you know,” Alex eventually says. “If you’ll let her.”

“Good for her.” Lena lifts a page and skims the last one in this particular batch; curling her fingers around a pen and signing the bottom with a practiced motion.

“But she doesn’t think you’re open to listening to her.”

“It was a highly advanced, very intelligent society,” she mutters; glancing up with her best deadpan expression. “Or so I’m told.” A beat, and she just watches the woman across from her unflinchingly; steel in her eyes and one eyebrow steadily climbing. “If there’s nothing else?”

“Fine.” Alex blows out a frustrated breath. “At least sign this, then.”

‘At least.’ Lena eyes the new stack of stapled-together papers placed in front of her, and figures that she can probably excuse that one since Alex would be naturally predisposed to have just a little more sympathy for Kara. So she doesn’t say anything or even look up at the phrasing; just picks up the papers and thumbs through them as she quickly scans the contents.

“At least?” Now she looks up, somewhat incredulously. “Seriously? You people do realize that if anyone were to spill the beans on, say, live national television, there is literally no lawyer on the planet who could shove that particular cat back in the bag, right?”

Alex just looks at her. “SOP.” She gets to her feet but doesn’t step back; instead simply standing there with her arms crossed over her chest. “But we have plans in place for any eventuality we’ve been able to think of.” Here, there’s a half-regretful, half-apologetic little tug at the corner of her mouth. “Including you. But if it matters—” Her posture softens a fraction; her shoulders relaxing and
her eyes warming faintly. “I’m glad we’ve never had to use them.”

Lena watches her for a long moment, then just sighs and signs. “If it matters, it still isn’t something you need to worry about,” she offers quietly as she pushes the NDA back across the desk. “Genetic predispositions aside, I don’t want to kill Supergirl.” She lets Alex pick the papers back up, and leans back in her chair. “I just want her to experience the same hurt she inflicted on me.”

Alex purses her lips but says nothing; at least not until she’s made her way back across the office and has one hand on the door handle. “You’re succeeding,” she then points out, and Lena hates how her chest aches at the quiet certainty in her voice. “But food for thought? An eye for an eye just leaves everybody blind.”

The office door opens, closes, and then Lena is left alone again; free to let her head sink into her hands, to bite down on her lip until the pressure in her chest eases off, and to find the strength to push away the images of Kara hurting because dammit, that’s fair.

She needs to focus on something else. Like testing the actual simulation abilities of the lenses more thoroughly, now that the official release is coming closer.

But first… She drums her fingers against the desk, and then stabs one of them against the button on her desk phone again.

“Jess? I need a sales contract drawn up. And a face to face meeting scheduled with Andrea Riojas at her earliest convenience.”

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