Summary

Separated by over two thousand light-years, fate brought two souls, one Kryptonian and one human, together. What neither of them could have planned for was falling in love.

This AU story is set on Earth 39 in the multiverse, (not the Earth 38 of the Supergirl TV series), and follows the lives and adventures of Alex Danvers and Kara Zor-El on that world for about a decade; starting from when the young Kryptonian arrives in Midvale to begin her new life with the Danvers, up until she becomes Supergirl (through episode one).

Notes

While I have taken many artistic liberties, and explore some delicate subject matter as the
story progresses, I have done my best to stay true to the core of these wonderful characters. I hope you enjoy and stick with the journey to the end, or in this case, the beginning.

Disclaimer: Supergirl is superhero action-adventure drama television series developed by Ali Adler, Greg Berlanti, and Andrew Kreisberg. Season 1 aired on CBS, then moved to The CW Television Network for Season 2 and 3. The show is based on the DC Comics character Supergirl (Kara Zor-El), created by Otto Binder and Al Plastino. These characters are not mine, and no profit or infringement is intended with this fanfiction.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Lost & Found

Chapter Summary

Where Kryptonian refugee and new Earth resident Kara Zor-El comes to live with the Danvers family in the idyllic, mid-Atlantic coastal town of Midvale and meets sixteen-year-old Alex for the first time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

July 6th - Year One

Day One

Midvale – The Danvers residence

1301 Hours UTC -5, U.S. East Coast Time

A gentle breeze rustled through the leafy canopy surrounding Eliza and Jeremiah Danvers’ tranquil seaside home. Inside the structure’s well-maintained slate gray interior sixteen-year-old Alexandra, or as she preferred, just ‘Alex,’ sat alone in her second-floor bedroom, struggling with a conflicting tangle of emotions as she awaited the impending arrival of her newly adopted sibling… Kara.

Less than a week earlier, her parents delivered the startling news that they’d decided to adopt the fifteen-year-old girl without any warning. They were usually very respectful with Alex about discussing family matters, allowing her to have input, but this time they’d completely excluded her, which had hurt… a lot. Her father had actually used the ‘didn’t you always want a little sister?’ line on her...

Seriously? What the Hell, dad!?!?

How could he throw that in my face? Yeah, sure, I always wanted a baby sister, not an insta-teen! Alex and Kara were almost the same age…

Up until then, her life had been going pretty great. She had an awesome group of friends, a solid 4.0 non-weighted GPA, was taking AP science courses over the summer at the local community college, and had, so far, barely managed to stay off the radar of her high school’s evil cliques. Now, all of a sudden, her parents were expecting her to pile on the added burden of living with and looking after a stranger?

Ugh! It so wasn’t fair!

As upset as she was, Alex actually felt terrible for Kara. From what she’d been told, the poor girl’s entire world had been shattered. She’d lost her family in a fire, and aside from an older cousin who lived in Metropolis, was completely alone in the world. Alex couldn’t even begin to imagine what she must be going through emotionally, and begrudgingly admitted that her parents were probably doing the right thing. But knowing that wasn’t enough to keep her from wallowing in self-pity.
As the week wore on, things went from bad to worse. Alex's new 'sister' was all her parents seemed to be able to talk about… it was ‘Kara this’ and ‘Kara that’, and ‘when Kara gets here’… it made her so angry! For several days she punished them by limiting her responses to as few syllables as possible whenever they spoke to her.

And glaring, there was also lots of glaring.

She was being a brat, and she knew it.

That said, she was also a very observant person. Alex had always noticed little things, behaviors most people would miss, and over the last week, she began to get the impression that there was something strange going on related to Kara’s adoption. Her parents were acting oddly out of character; nervous, always whispering, sneaking around, almost… guilty.

Her suspicions compounded as she caught odd snippets of hushed conversations, and overheard confusing sound bites from secretive, late-night phone calls… real cloak and dagger stuff.

After doing some good old-fashioned eavesdropping, which as it turned out she was pretty good at; Alex uncovered outright lies, and gaps in information about her new sister that, taken as a whole, were hard to explain. Like the fact that Eliza and Jeremiah had stumbled over details, even contradicting each other before regrouping, and there seemed to be no record of Kara or any proof of the fire that killed her parents… none that Alex could find anyways.

Something was definitely hinky.

When she confronted them about it, the nervous pair broke down and told her the truth, which turned out to be far more insane than anything Alex even thought possible. Apparently, Kal-El, aka, Superman, wasn’t the only survivor of the doomed planet of Krypton, a world that had existed over two thousand light-years away from Earth. His cousin, Kara Zor-El, had also escaped its destruction and was going to become her new sister….

Um… what? No freaking way!

Alex tried to stay angry, but once they apologized for their dishonesty she quickly forgave Eliza and Jeremiah for their behavior… though, she did make them grovel, just a little. Her emotions were also a bit of a mess, and an eager impatience began to build inside of her as the day of Kara’s arrival approached.

The inquisitive human wanted to know everything and nagged her parents incessantly for tidbits of information about her new sister. What would the alien girl be like? Was she okay? Did she have her cousin’s superpowers? Did she speak English?

Her mother explained that Kara had only recently arrived on Earth back in June (not even three weeks prior) and that Superman had contacted her and Jeremiah almost immediately for help. They’d been secretly assisting Kal-El with his own powers for years and were the closest thing to experts on Kryptonian biology and physiology on Earth.

This information was revelatory to Alex, not only because it meant that her parents were friends with the Man of Steel, but that he considered them qualified to foster his cousin, his... family.

Unfortunately, not everything was good news. Alex had been warned to keep Kara’s secret within their small circle of trust, which meant she couldn't tell anyone, not her friends, and not even her best friend… who she never lied to.
Alex wasn't happy about that, _Ugh! This is was beyond unfair!_

Something her father told her about Kara’s difficult journey to earth was also eating at her. He said that her ship was damaged when Krypton exploded, leaving her adrift in space… for years, literally frozen in time like an alien version of Sleeping Beauty. But, from Kara’s perspective, only a few weeks since she’d set off from her world. In reality, something like twenty-four Earth years had gone by. Kara was still a teenager; approximately the same age she was when she left Krypton.

_It must have been horrifying for her, trapped in that dark, silent place for weeks, all alone..._

How was being stuck in time even possible? Based on conversations with her folks it was her understanding that Kara’s ship, pod… whatever it was called, had trailed the infant Kal-El’s nearly identical craft by only a few minutes, yet his trip to earth had taken almost no time at all. So, even factoring out the impossible, that _his_ pod traveled over two thousand light years in just a few days, both ships should have arrived on Earth nearly simultaneously…

But that didn’t happen.

Kal grew up on Earth and had become a hero and the idol of millions; Superman, Metropolis’ very own Man of Steel, while Kara had slept in stasis.

Alex tried to wrap her head around the few facts that she had to work with and kept redoing the math, (she was excellent at math), but the sparse data didn’t add up. How the Hell could Kara, have only _just_ arrived on Earth so many years after her cousin, and the same age she was then when she left her home planet? How could there even be a place in the universe where time stood still? The Laws of Physics didn’t work that way!

Yeah, seriously, it made no sense.

She sighed as her thoughts went off on a tangent, and she began obsessing over the unknown date of her new sister’s birthday. Alex’s own was quickly approaching, only a couple months away on October seventeenth. She wondered if a race as evolved as Kara’s still celebrated such mundane occasions…

Her analytical mind was also still working overtime on the missing variables involved in Kara’s long voyage from Krypton… like what kind of energy powered her ship to allow her to travel faster than the speed of light, what disrupted her course, and just how exactly _did_ time stop for her?

The wait was maddening!

Everything she was being told seemed impossible, and yet… Kara was real, and would soon be standing down in Alex’s backyard with her much older cousin towering over her… living proof of the impossible.

A sudden gust of summer air drew her attention out beyond her bedroom’s open window… where movement and a flicker of sunlight played among the leafy treetops. Her breathing quickened as she inched closer, doing her best to stay out of sight as she gently pushed back the lace curtains to get a better view as Superman floated down out of the powder blue sky like some kind of a god. Perhaps she should have been more impressed seeing the devastatingly handsome Man of Steel hovering just outside… but her focus was unabashedly riveted on the blonde angel dressed in a stylish white Henley shirt, blue jeans, and sandals cradled in the hero’s massive arms.

Alex’s breath caught in her chest. Kara was… beautiful! Not simply pretty, or cute, but drop-dead gorgeous! Her new Kryptonian sister's attentive blue eyes were open wide, seemingly taking in
every facet of the world below as she descended. Alex couldn’t stop her gaze from wandering with envy over Kara’s soft curves, and long, denim-clad legs. There was no way the girl was younger than she was...

When the pair touched down onto the thick lawn, she slid from her older cousin’s arms with an inhuman grace that Alex had never seen anyone display, not even her best friend, Shah, whom she was sure was a ninja.

Kara seemed wary at first; almost dangerous as she scanned her immediate surroundings, but soon the tension in her posture relaxed. Alex watched as the girl took a deep breath, and turned her face to the sun, taking a moment to close her eyes and bathe in its warmth. A hint of pleasure showed in her slight, enchanting smile… and Alex became so mesmerized that she couldn’t stop staring.

Superman was standing next to his younger cousin, surprisingly barely a head taller than her. The hero had something slung over his right shoulder that looked like a long black bag or backpack, not that Alex was paying that much attention to him. It was just… breathtaking. Seeing the two of them together, side-by-side, it became quite evident that they were cut from the same divine cloth.

Caught up in the moment, She wasn't prepared when Kara glanced directly up at her, and their eyes met…

Alex was suddenly lost in an endless sea of blue.

The Kryptonian beauty did not appear startled but was definitely intrigued… and inquisitive. For a split-second, Alex felt a connection click between them, a pleasant tingle in her brain accompanied by a caress of electricity over her skin. She gasped. Then, to her surprise and delight, Kara suddenly began to shimmer and disappeared from Superman’s side. At the same time, Alex’s bedroom door creaked open and the air around her gently stirred, thrilling her senses with a subtle, intoxicating scent… something she couldn’t place, or even describe… like sunshine, springtime, and the subtle fragrance of blossoms.

A presence had joined her in the room, and though she couldn’t see anything, she knew it was Kara. Alex could feel her warmth lingering close by… observing her, curious, but tantalizing out of reach.

Then, she heard the most amazing sound, a voice... softly whispering a series of incomprehensibly beautiful words, like a melody. Then, her visitor grew silent just before the air suddenly rushed back out of the room, and the door quietly shut. Simultaneously, out of the corner of her eye, Alex saw the beautiful Kryptonian reappear as if out of nowhere back down in the yard, peeking out from behind the cover of her cousin’s cape and looking up at the second-floor window. Her cheeks were flushed, and her perfect lips lit up with a slight smile.

Alex squeaked, something she never did normally, and nearly jumped out of her skin!

Seeing Kara move at super speed was incredible, as was hearing her angelic voice for the first time. And though it was weird to think it, smelling her had been unexpected… and amazing. Knowing that the beautiful blushing girl was aware that Alex was up in her room, watching her down below... was beyond a rush.

No longer caring about being seen, the brunette leaned forward, her heart beating faster, to push the bedroom window all the way open.

It was at just that moment that Alex heard the screen door at the back of the house below her open, and soon after observed as her parents carefully made their way down the stairs that lead to the patio. Holding hands, the two scientists slowly approached the two Kryptonians waiting there, and Alex’s
heart melted. Kara, scrutinizing their every step, wore an innocent expression that was a mix of apprehension and timid curiosity as she stepped cautiously out from behind Superman…

Alex had always been good at reading people; her dad called it her ‘superpower’, and she could tell that only the gentle touch of her cousin’s hand on Kara’s shoulder kept the anxious girl from bolting like a fawn. Alex considered the Man of Steel and decided that aside from his model good looks, being insanely strong, able to fly, shoot lasers out of his eyes, see through walls, and all the other crazy things he could do… he was pretty much like a normal person when it came to the emotions expressed on his face, and in his body language. There was love, sadness, and regret in his gaze as he watched Kara take a tentative step forward, and raise her palm to Alex’s mother, who returned the gesture, pressing hers to Kara’s slightly smaller one...

Yes, that was it. Superman didn’t want to leave Kara at all, he was in agony… yet here he was, entrusting the life and safety of his cousin, his own blood, and family, to aliens… people that Alex reasoned that he must trust above all others, to keep her safe. With the Danvers, Kara would be away from him, and by extension, his enemies. Alex tucked that revelation away for another day, adding it to the pile of evidence that her parents were closer to The Man of Steel than they ever let on.

What else could they possibly be hiding from me? She wondered.

As the scene below unfolded, it was apparent to her that Kara knew that she was being left behind. The girl seemed to be in shock as Superman handed Alex’s father the black leather duffle bag he’d been carrying with what must have been the entirety of his cousin’s belongings inside.

The look of betrayal on Kara’s face when the moment of her abandonment finally came was devastating to watch.

Superman moved to kneel before his cousin, her smaller hands disappearing into his huge ones, and Alex heard his calm, deep voice sing in the same musical language Kara had whispered to her. She couldn’t tell what he was saying, but it was clear that he was trying to comfort her. Kara refused to respond, so he eventually switched to English, and calmly explained to her that she was at her new home, and would be safe, and loved with the Danvers. Alex pressed her hand over her mouth as Kara raised her chin defiantly, and stoically turned her back on him… The only connection she had left with her long-dead world, and her family. Her glistening eyes were set with steely determination.

Kara’s arms were crossed firmly over her chest, but one trembling hand desperately sought out the delicate blue gemstone that hung from the necklace under her delicate white garments. For all her resolve, Alex could see the brave girl was barely holding herself together.

Superman finally sighed in resignation as he stood to thank Alex’s parents, hugged Eliza, and firmly clasp Jeremiah’s hand one last time before sorrowfully rising into the sky. Then, he disappeared like a bullet into the distance, thunder rumbling in his wake as he shredded the sound barrier.

It was only then that Kara, still clutching her necklace, fell to her knees and began to sob quietly.

Alex’s nails dug into the windowsill in frustration. How could he do that to her?

Before anything else happened, Kara raised her tear-stained face to the sky and mournfully cried out in the same musical language Alex had heard her use before. It was so beautiful, so unbelievably exquisite, that everyone froze at that moment, stunned to silence.

Alex didn’t understand the words, but could literally feel them (no exaggeration). She would never forget Kara’s haunting plea… so sad, lost, and lonely.
Her human heart was breaking along with her new sister’s.

When the young Kryptonian finally collapsed, Eliza immediately wrapped her arms around her and Kara clung to her adoptive mother like she was her only lifeline. The kind woman kissed the crying girl’s forehead and whispered soothing words that Alex knew the power of very well after years of being on the receiving end of them.

Alex desperately wanted to go comfort Kara too, but for some reason could only stand helplessly by and watch as her dad sprung into action to help her mother by picking up the broken Kryptonian to move her into the house.

As the screen door below slammed shut, Alex broke from her trance and was immediately in motion. All her thoughts were focused on Kara she fumbled with her own room’s door, burst into the hallway, and soundlessly padding down the stairs, following her parent’s voices.

Once at the bottom, she slipped unobserved behind the cover of the wide wooden doorframe that formed part of the arch that opened into their spacious living room. Peering around the corner, she could see her mom facing away from her on the sofa; Kara’s head resting comfortably on her shoulder as she’d snuggled up against her.

Alex relaxed, at least Kara wasn’t crying anymore, she’d suffered enough already. She could clearly see the girl’s beautiful face, which was thankfully turned in Alex’s direction, and watched as the blonde’s eyelids fluttered, battling sleep.

*God, she must be exhausted.*

Alex began to take a step into the room, but hesitated, feeling awkward, and not wanting to interrupt the tender moment. She ended up remaining hovering outside the doorway… once again a silent observer.

Her dad didn’t seem to know what to do; the sturdy astrophysicist was walking back and forth nervously near the couch. He rubbed the stubble on his face, and fiddled with his glasses, as he tended to do when he was trying to solve a problem.

Eliza sighed and whispered, “Jeremiah… please go somewhere else to do that; the last thing we need is a hole worn through the floor.” He immediately stopped pacing. “Why don’t you go finish making those… arrangements we were talking about?” Alex noted that her mother was not offering a suggestion.

*Way to take command mom.*

It upset Alex that her mother and father were talking about more secrets that related to Kara, things they had not shared with her. She wasn’t a child anymore, and they needed to stop treating her like one. More importantly, Kara was her family now too… Alex was surprised by how strong her feelings on the matter already were… it was only a few days earlier that she’d thought of Kara as a… stranger, a burden.

Ack! I’m a terrible person.

Alex mentally kicked herself for being such a bitch but decided that at the moment self-reflection and recriminations would need to wait.

Jeremiah nodded, “Right, of course, I’ll do that. Do you have her? Is everything…?” He almost tripped over a chair as he turned to head toward his office.
“Everything is fine my love,” Eliza assured him. “She’s out cold. I’ll carry her up to her room in a few minutes and get her settled in… don’t worry; she’s surprisingly light as a feather.”

Jeremiah grinned. “I have a theory about that…” He began excitedly but was put back on track with one look and a raised eyebrow from Eliza. “Which, I, ahem… will be happy to tell you about later.” He then reached down to pull a thick, sealed envelope out of Kara’s bag, the one Kal-El had left, and then turned to disappear down the hall.

Alex relaxed against the wall by the opening, enchanted by the alien girl in the room beyond. It was hard to believe, but she was even lovelier asleep. Alex watched with envy as her mother gently ran her fingers through Kara’s long wavy locks, wishing she could do the same. Imagining the silky soft feeling. Eliza then began to hum a soft, melodic tune that she’d sung to Alex as a child whenever she was sad, and Kara finally seemed to be at peace.

It was less than a minute later that with a sudden glint of blue Kara slowly opened one eye, then the other, her fascinated gaze focused directly on Alex…

Unsure of what to do, she momentarily froze… but relaxed almost immediately as Kara’s face lit up with a welcoming smile.

And that’s when Alex’s whole world changed.

It was crazy… magical? Warmth suddenly infused her entire being, a delightful feeling of a tentative joy, hope, and… belonging. It was as if the stunning girl from another galaxy caused the sun to rise, but just for her, and her alone.

Shaking, Alex leaned out further from behind the cover of the doorway, her focus never leaving Kara, who was also studying her. The girl’s gaze drifted down to Alex’s feet and moved up her body… her gentle appraisal lingered appreciatively here and there along the way.

The attention was thrilling and completely unexpected… and definitely not something Alex was used to from anyone, besides some of the boys at school. Surprising herself, she didn’t find it unpleasant at all… in fact, quite the opposite. She felt warm all over.

Wow!

Alex couldn't believe what was happening.

Maybe it's just an alien thing? Alex thought nervously… she bet Kara hadn’t seen that many humans yet, especially someone close to her own age. She told herself that had to be it… right?

Their eyes finally locked, and while nothing was said out loud, a conspiratorial acknowledgment passed between the two of them. It was as if Alex could totally understand her! Kara was grateful for Alex’s presence, and for her part, Alex did her best to assure her new sister that everything was going to be okay, that she was safe in her new home.

Kara seemed satisfied enough by their silent exchange to slump even more comfortably into Eliza, using the older woman’s shoulder as a pillow. The young Kryptonian was fading fast but offered Alex one last weak smile before yawning sweetly and once again closing her eyes.

Alex stayed for a while after that, captivated by the soft lines and contours of Kara’s face as she drifted off to sleep… this time for real.

Slipping away before she could be discovered, Alex silently dashed up the stairs... skipping the creaky step, her heart pounding like crazy. Everything was crystallizing in her mind. Her conflicted feelings and unwarranted jealousy over Kara were already a distant memory… burned away by the light of a Kryptonian star.
As she scurried into her room, Alex slid down against the back of her door as it closed, and ended up sitting on the floor in a giddy daze... She couldn’t stop thinking about Kara. Before she’d actually met her in person, everything about the girl’s existence and adoption had seemed somehow unreal, but now… Alex felt like a kid who’d just received the best birthday present ever, but so not a kid.

She had to fight the urge to run to her open window and shout to the whole world; I have a sister! But, she didn’t… because at the same time, a very selfish part of her desperately wanted to keep Kara all to herself.

......................................

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to So_Light for edits!
Chapter Summary

Where Alex helps Kara begin her journey understanding what it means to be human, and part of the Danvers family. Along the way, she begins to discover more about her new sister, and herself.

Alex has been looking for a way to get Kara to open up, but what she could never have guessed is that all it would take was a pot roast...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

July 8th - Year One

Day Three

Midvale – The Danvers residence

Time - 0924 Hours UTC -5, Wednesday morning, U.S. East Coast Time

Kara slept straight through her first day as a Danvers, and when the Kryptonian girl finally did wake up, she didn’t want to come out of her room.

Alex was disappointed, but Eliza explained that with Kara’s hyper-enhanced senses, sounds, movements, vibrations, or any input whatsoever from the world around her was magnified exponentially, whether it was merely a whisper, the sound of the water running in the sink, or a car’s engine idling several blocks away.

The cacophony was overwhelming, and Kara needed time to adjust to it all.

By day three Alex was relieved when she began to show signs of adapting. The alien girl was up, out of bed, and exploring the house or destroying it, depending on your perspective. The trail of accidentally broken cups, glasses, tableware, chairs, door frames, hinges, knobs, and small appliances was quite impressive. Alex’s parents were patient and understanding, but Kara was mortified and apologetic every time she crushed, bent, or shattered something new.

It had to be frustrating, trying to adjust to such a fragile world, but through it all Kara always put a brave face, and her naturally sunny disposition couldn’t help but shine through. How she could remain so polite, and curious about seemingly everything, despite the horrible ordeal she’d just been through was both astounding, and heartbreaking.

Alex had so many questions that she wanted to ask her new sister… things like; did she have any siblings on Krypton? What was her planet like? How did her ship work? What energy source did it run on? What did it feel like to spend twenty-four years in stasis? Did she dream? But she held back, not wanting to bring up potentially painful memories too soon.
Superman hadn’t offered much information on his young cousin’s past to fill in the blanks about her life when he dropped her off, which was annoying.

What Alex did find intriguing was what the Man of Steel had provided them. Inside Kara’s duffel bag among her clothes, had been a thick packet of forged documents and electronic files. These included a birth certificate, passports for six countries, a Social Security card, school transcripts, and other falsified documents. There was also a significant amount of cash and a bank account in Kara Danvers’ name with a balance high enough to send her to just about any four-year in-state college she wanted.

Alex had no idea where Mr. Truth and Justice procured the illicit documents or the money. Did Kal-El have a day job? He certainly didn’t rob banks…

Not that it really mattered, she was grateful. He’d done it for Kara.

Oh, and the most shocking tidbit she discovered was that her new sister was actually closer to seventeen in equivalent Earth years. She was older than Alex! Jeremiah told her that when it came time for Kal to set a birth date on the documents, he’d decided to make Kara two years younger, on paper, to give her more time to adapt to her new world.

For some reason, finding out that she was technically younger than Kara didn’t bother Alex at all… well, not much anyway.

Jeremiah and Eliza were busier than usual the first few days after Kara’s arrival, trying to adjust to their new parental responsibilities. Both were preeminent scientists in their fields; Jeremiah was the Director of Astrophysics and Cosmology at the prestigious Plastino Planetarium, while her mother, Dr. Eliza Danvers, was a physician and bioengineer, and the Head of R&D for Swan Biomedical, yet, despite their important roles, they both somehow managed to spend extra time at home with their new daughter.

Truthfully? They all doted on Kara as much as she’d allow them to, but Alex could tell how uncomfortable being the center of attention made her new sister.

One night, she accidentally overheard her parents stressing over their work piling up, so the next day Alex volunteered to spend extra time with Kara to help take the pressure off their schedules. Eliza and Jeremiah were both exceedingly thankful, even bumping up her allowance to show their appreciation for her seemingly altruistic offer.

For her part, Alex felt a little guilty for acting like she was doing them a favor, or somehow ‘sacrificing’ her summer when the truth was all she wanted was more alone time with Kara. The extra cash was nice, though!

The trade-off did mean spending less time with her friends over the break, which sucked, but it turned out that while her squad of misfits was bummed about the news, everyone was remarkably supportive. It helped that she promised to keep coming to game nights on Sundays; no way she was going to miss being part of Brian’s epic D&D campaign.

Being deceitful to her friends was hard enough for Alex, but blatantly lying to her best friend Shah about her new sister, even to protect her, was the hardest thing she’d ever had to do in her life. She and the amazing Persian girl had been certifiably inseparable since they first met four years before, and didn’t keep secrets from one another. They just didn’t… well, not counting Alex’s really big secret, but that one she could never tell.

In this case, Jeremiah had made it very clear that revealing the truth about Kara would be very
dangerous for anyone they told. His warning was ominous and implied that there were evil people out in the world who, if they became aware of Kara’s true nature, would do anything, or hurt anyone, to get their hands on her.

Alex didn’t want to put Kara’s safety at risk or be the cause of something terrible happening to Shah, the one person in the world she was closest to. She’d never be able to live with herself if either of them was ever hurt, or worse, so she smiled and lied to her best friend’s face.

Ugh, her stomach still hurt from obsessing over it. I’m an awful friend.

Entirely oblivious to Alex’s inner turmoil, her parents continued with their planning for Kara’s future and ended up deciding to (at least temporarily) homeschool her, which was new territory for them. They told Alex that if things went well, and if Kara responded positively to their instruction, come the fall she could start attending her high school… as a sophomore, a year behind Alex.

She honestly didn’t think that Kara going to any school was such a good idea… at least not yet. It wasn’t because Alex didn’t want her to, but of how sad and fragile her new sister still seemed. Kara was a sweet alien girl with unimaginable power… and Alex was seriously worried that one day in her school might be enough to emotionally damage her forever, or maybe just really piss her off.

The thought of someone hurting Kara made Alex want to break something.

Oh well, she hoped that time would prove her wrong and Kara would be ready for school by fall. It could be fun…

..............................

The Kryptonian girl was utterly fascinated by their house and everything in it. She wanted to know how it all worked, what every object was used for, and spent hours just interacting with things… trying desperately not to pulverize whatever she touched. Alex watched her struggle at first and tried her best to help.

Apparently, it was a very difficult thing not to break stuff when everything around you had no noticeable weight and crumpled like paper at your touch.

Kara had to focus immense effort on being gentle.

The determined girl also immersed herself learning how to perform everyday human activities, which Alex enjoyed helping her with. She’d lost count of the number of toothbrushes a frustrated Kara had bit unintentionally in half, among other mini-disasters. And, after the previous night’s incident, was mourning the loss of their trusty old popcorn maker. As the corn kernels began popping an already nervous Kara jumped out of her chair and quickly put two neat holes through the steel pot when lasers erupted from her eyes.

The poor girl was still apologizing a day later for destroying the source of the salty, buttery snack she adored so much.

Thankfully, other aspects of her education were going much better. Kara already knew how to read in English, and did so every chance she could get, devouring the contents of newspapers, labels, reference books, manuals, novels, magazines, and even college level textbooks… her comprehension and speed were off the charts.

Alex was delighted at how the beautiful girl would slow her pace to savor poetry, or a good novel, which she was supplied a steady stream of by Alex and Eliza’s almost daily trips to the local library.
Kara also loved listening to music, so Alex’s parents had quickly given her an iPod of her own, along with a rugged headset that the appreciative girl treated like a precious thing made of glass.

She was allowed no access to the Internet the first week. Eliza made it clear that she and Jeremiah simply weren’t ready to deal with the surprises and complexities letting the world in might bring to the impressionable young alien.

Not that the inquisitive girl ever lacked for things to do. Kara seemed pleased to occupy her hours in the living room… binge watching documentaries, reading, studying, and practicing languages. Alex joined her often, sometimes sitting quietly nearby with her own books, answering her sister’s questions, listening attentively to her musical Kryptonian accent, on her phone texting friends, or observing the beautiful girl out of the corner of her eye… merely enjoying her proximity.

Those were the moments Alex savored the most when she was with Kara and the rest of the world would just drop away, leaving her with such a powerful feeling of contentment that her chest seemed too full. What was happening? Was she supposed to have these feelings? Was it… weird? Did it matter if it was?

Secretly, she loved the sunbeam smile Kara reserved only for her, and the Kryptonian’s soft, lingering glances that made her shiver… and sometimes forget to breathe.

After four days Kara still hadn’t opened up any further about her life or experiences, and Alex hadn’t pushed for it. She could tell that her sister wanted to talk to her, but wasn’t quite ready.

Alex told herself to be patient, but it was getting more difficult every day not to say something.

....................................

July 10th - Year One

Day Five

It had been five days since her new sister’s arrival, and the first time Kara would be joining the Danvers at the table for family dinner. Alex’s parents expected her to use a knife and fork for the occasion properly, but she, for some unknown reason, preferred to use a spoon.

Maybe they didn’t have forks on Krypton?

The incredulous look on Kara’s face when Alex’s mom told her to put down her favorite implement in favor of the other utensils was almost comical. Her skepticism didn’t seem to be alleviated after Eliza demonstrated the use of knife and fork by cutting the perfectly cooked lemon garlic asparagus on her plate and putting a very deliberate bite in her mouth.

Kara eventually did sigh in resignation, probably to appease Eliza, and expertly mimicked her adoptive mother’s actions.

Alex’s thought the situation was a bit funny at first, but her mirth dissipated as she watched the interaction. While not apparent, Alex could perceive that Kara was silently struggling to accept her new reality, and at the same time trying hard to please her new human family. Alex was sure that Kara understood what a knife and fork were for, but was holding onto her past with white knuckles. Maybe she felt that if she continued giving into her new human customs, she’d be letting go of her old life, bit by bit?
Alex resisted getting up to hug Kara; instead, she offered her an encouraging smile while the girl chewed. Oh, she likes asparagus!

Things took a left turn after that when Alex’s mother brought out the roast. When Eliza removed the steaming lid of the large cast iron pot, and the smell hit them, Kara flew backward out of her chair hovering in midair! She was flying, just like Superman. Alex didn’t have time to marvel, as the horrified girl cried out in her melodic language and disappeared in a blur of swift movement… only to reappear a split second later, as if she’d teleported, hovering in the hallway outside the dining room.

Kara had moved so fast that Alex did even see her do it! She was amazing!

The panicked girl floated down to stand on the polished cherry hardwood, breathing hard, fists clenching and unclenching at her side, and staring horrified at the huge, steaming roast on the table.

She glanced apologetically at Alex first, and then over at her worried adoptive parents, before speaking the most words Alex had ever heard her use, in English, at one time, “I… I am very sorry… Alex, Eliza, Jeremiah, I… did not… um, do not, eat the flesh of… other sentient beings… I have… never smelled anything so… so… disgusti…” The look of revulsion on her face combined with the draining of color in her cheeks was enough to see where things were going, and just as quickly as before the poor girl vanished, this time followed by the sound of retching in the upstairs bathroom that she and Alex shared.

“Oh! My poor Kara! I’m so sorry, what have I done?” Alex’s mother lifted the heavy container off the table and headed to the back door and the outside trash bins, muttering “Stupid, stupid, stupid…” Her dad just sat at his seat looking dumbstruck.

Alex leaped out of her chair, tossed her napkin on the table, and glared at her father, “Well, that was a something the Man of Steel should have told us about. He has the time to stop supervillains from taking over Metropolis, but forgets to let us know that his own cousin doesn’t eat meat?! How could we know? Jeez dad, can you at least get him to tell us about any other important things we should know about Kara?”

Pleased with her rant, Alex glared at him, and then promptly stomped off toward the stairs and the sound of Kara’s agony as her father began to fumble with his cell phone.

Before she was out of earshot, she could have sworn that she heard him mutter, “Dammit, Clark!”

When Alex reached the second-floor bathroom, Kara was slumped over the toilet, tears streaming down her tortured face as she dry heaved yet again. Alex quickly ran a glass of cold water from the tap and slid in close to offer it to her sister. Kara looked up and gave her a weak, embarrassed smile, and gratefully accepted. During the exchange, their fingers briefly touched, causing a tingling sensation to linger delightfully over Alex’s skin.

Oh! That felt… good. Kara was so warm, was that normal? Every inch of Alex’s body suddenly had goosebumps… the good kind and her thoughts were all jumbled up. What she was feeling was… ah, wonderful, but decidedly inappropriate… probably. Yes, definitely inappropriate, but she loved it.

Kara rinsed out her mouth twice before downing the rest of the water, her intelligent blue eyes never wavering from Alex’s face, who was doing her best, but failing miserably, to collect herself and cool off her face, her cheeks felt so hot.

Kara was the first to speak, “I am sorry… sister…”
“Alex. Please, just Alex.”

“Alex. I apologize for… I, I um…” Kara didn’t know the right words but moved her hands in an exaggerated manner as if frantic to demonstrate the meaning she was searching for.

Alex smiled knowingly, “Freaked out?”

Kara seemed relieved and sat back more relaxed. “Yes. I… freaked out… overreacted. Was… not prepared. Everything here is so…. um, big? Intense.” She nibbled nervously at her bottom lip and once again looked to her sister for help with her words.

Alex put a supportive hand on Kara’s forearm and again felt Kara’s comforting warmth beneath her fingertips as she cleared her throat, “Exaggerated, amplified, yes, I think that’s what you mean. It’s your hyper senses here on Earth, you just need to learn how to control them… to not let the world in all at once.” Then, added with sass, ”That is something your insensitive cousin did bother to tell us.

Kara tried unsuccessfully not to laugh, covering her mouth as a musical snicker escaped her lips. She was trying to hide her amusement at Alex’s dig at Kal-El. How adorable!

After recovering, the blonde took a breath and continued, “Yes, everything is amplified… everything.” She gestured all around her. “Sounds… smells… touch….” Alex could help but notice that Kara’s eyes drifted to Alex’s hand that was still gently resting on Kara’s arm, but before Alex could withdraw, the slight pressure of Kara’s fingers tingled softly across the back of her hand, keeping her there. “Sometimes… it’s too much. Other times… it’s nice. Comforting.” Alex swallowed hard as Kara gently squeezed her hand.

Alex didn’t move away, she didn’t want to, and her new sister was making it clear that she wanted her to stay. “Anyway…. don’t worry, I’ve been begging mom to go vegetarian for months, now that there’s two of us to gang up on her I’m pretty sure that you won’t have to deal with meat again, at least not in this house.” Alex paused, and a burning question on the tip of her tongue sprang out of her, “So, can I ask? Is being a vegetarian a Kryptonian thing, or personal choice?”

Kara considered her question and then nodded, “All of my people are... vegetarian. To eat the… ‘meat’ of other sentient creatures, to us, is… unthinkable, and… such an act is… forbidden?… a crime, barbaric and unacceptable. In old… ancient times, my people consumed the flesh of… animals, but that was long ago.” She looked like she was about to gag again. “On my world… in my time, all sentient beings are treasured… and given a voice. Our food is… was, very different from yours. Not grown… made… designed, like me… your books call it, um… ‘bioengineered’… to be perfect. Yours tastes much better, but ours could feed worlds.”

The sisters shared a smile, and when Kara continued, she became solemn, “Krypton had been dying for a long time. The only green places left were deep underground, inside our… planet or, um, protected, and covered?” She looked at Alex for help, her soft brows knit together in frustration at her inability to describe her meaning.

“Like in… parks, or sanctuaries here on Earth?” Alex offered, admiring how much her English had improved, and how much she was sharing!

Kara relaxed and nodded. “Yes! They are shielded under, um, domes of light, like around our home. There were also… wild areas, created on moons and other places, like the old off-world colonies.”

Whoa, that was a lot to take in and spurred countless more questions in Alex’s fevered brain… ‘Like me… bioengineered to be perfect’, ‘given a voice’? What did that mean? And there were colonies, other worlds out there in the universe, possibly filled with Kryptonians? Alex kept her thoughts to
herself but logged everything in her memory for another time. The current situation wasn’t about her, or her questions. It was about Kara.

Alex grinned. “Well, how can you argue with the teachings of a super-advanced civilization? Meat BAD!” She was happy to elicit a giggle from Kara with her comment. “Dad might not like it, but tough, he needs to cut his cholesterol.”

“Look… Kara,” Alex paused and leaned in closer to her sister, her tone softer. “I’m really sorry you had to experience that, we didn’t know.”

The blonde girl nodded, “I understand… Alex. I did not… intend to… um, cause a fuss?” She shrugged her delicate shoulders with an adorable, apologetic smile. That’s when Alex heard her mom laugh softly from the doorway behind her, obviously tickled that Kara had used one of her ‘mom-isms’.

Gulp, how long had she been standing there?

A few minutes later, after Kara had washed up to Eliza’s satisfaction, she was being dragged off to give dinner another try, and Alex began following them.

“Alex, wash.” Is all her mother said as she headed out into the hallway with a compliant Kara in tow. It had been Eliza’s ‘this is not a request’ voice.

As her Kryptonian sister passed close by in the cramped bathroom, Alex’s hand unintentionally brushed against hers, and with startling urgency their fingers sought each other’s out, entwining. It was a private, and an inexplicably emotional moment that Alex couldn’t begin to describe, and was very reluctant to let go of.

She almost panicked as their hands began to separate as Kara was pulled away.

The Kryptonian caught her eye, and as if noticing Alex’s distress, offered her a brilliant smile. It was immediately soothing as if Kara were letting her human sister know that everything would be okay like Alex had done for her the first day they met.

She relaxed and released her sister’s fingers.

Kara then obediently trailed Eliza out of the room, though she kept glancing back at her as she walked away.

Alex watched the girl until she disappeared down the stairs… marveling. She had no idea anyone could move with such… grace. Kara didn’t step, as much as glide, like some sort of predatory cat, or how Alex had always imagined how Tolkien’s immortal, impossibly beautiful elves would move in real life.

How could Kara seem so normal one minute, and then become this incredible, otherworldly being the next? How could the two of them communicate so easily without even speaking? And why did Alex feel so drawn to her?

It all felt so normal, and so right, just like being with Kara did. Alex couldn’t explain it.

It was a lot to take in, and too much to process all at once.

Oh well, at least she’d finally managed to make a dent in Kara’s armor. And to both her frustration and delight, ended up with even more questions about her alien sister than when she started.
Suddenly, the idea that her parents had been discussing… whispering about, now felt all too real. Somehow forcing Kara to change herself to appear like some mediocre human… to diminish her, was unthinkable. Alex would not allow the extraordinary girl to feel, or be, less than what she was, and silently vowed to do everything in her power to make sure the genuine Kara was not lost as Eliza and Jeremiah helped her ‘blend in.’

She didn’t know exactly how, but she’d figure out a way.

Alex turned back to the sink, and was about to run the warm water, but hesitated. Softly rubbing her fingertips together she could still feel Kara’s lingering warmth on her skin, and for some reason couldn’t stop smiling.

..............................

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed.

• I just had to work the popcorn maker incident in. :)  
• Time. I decided to not give a stated year to my story as to not date it. Assume that when Kara becomes Supergirl is current time, so my story begins about ten years in the past.  
• How do I deal with 'years'? As I said, for good or ill I decided not to date this story, and don’t use calendar years to denote time. How does it work then? I used when Kara first arrived on Earth to determine the ‘Year’ of the story for each chapter. She crashed landed in mid-June, so June 15th is the start of each story ‘year’.  
• Kara’s human birthday is Sept 5. Remember to add +2 years to arrive at Kara’s actual Earth-equivalent age. 
• Alex’s birthday is Oct 17.  
• In this universe, Krypton is somewhere between a Type II and III civilization on the Kardashev scale - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kardashev_scale - Kara’s & Kal’s people were so far ahead of us that their technology is beyond our horizon, and in some cases, our imaginations.

While I have taken many artistic liberties in writing this story, I have done my best to stay true to the core of these amazing characters.
A Place to Call Home, Part One: Physics Problems

Chapter Summary

Where Alex finds a sneaky way to get Kara to open up about herself and Krypton, and the pair's growing bond continues to strengthen.

Kara assists Alex with a problem, and a new circle is formed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Late July - Year One

July 21st

Midvale – The Danvers residence

1721 Hours UTC -5, U.S. East Coast Time

The subtle, nearly imperceptible stir of movement outside of Alex’s bedroom door alerted her to the fact that an alien was watching her, and it was all she could do to keep a straight face.

Careful not to shift her eyes from the thick textbook she’d been studying, Alex slowly rocked back in her dark wooden desk chair. Any indication that she was aware of Kara’s spying and the skittish girl might disappear in an instant… retreating back to her room down the hall. That safe place had become her very own Fortress of Solitude ever since moving in.

Alex continued her pretense of preparing for her midterm but was contemplating a much more difficult problem, how to draw Kara out from behind her Kryptonian deflector shields and get her to open up. It had been a little over two weeks since that gut-wrenching day Superman left her new sister in the care of her family, and things had been progressing more slowly than Alex had hoped.

The most the sweet girl had said at one time to her was the night of the infamous pot roast incident.

Her alien sister’s nightmares were the worst part; Alex would often hear Kara crying in the middle of the night, calling out in her native language like a prayer. It was so beautiful, and yet so utterly sad. ‘Alura’…. ‘Zor-El’…. ‘Astra’… ‘Uva’, Alex rolled the names off her tongue over and over attempting to duplicate the right pronunciations.

Alex would jump out of bed and run to Kara’s room to comfort her, but she hadn’t found a way to get that close to her yet… just to outside her bedroom door where she’d sit huddled on the carpet, her ear pressed against the cool, dark wood of the door listening helplessly to her sister’s quiet misery. She would often wake up on the floor the next morning, a pillow tucked under her head and wrapped in a warm blanket, obviously placed around her in the middle of the night by her mother or father.

Alex stopped her reminiscing and took a deep breath. She had a good idea of what course of action
to take with Kara at that moment and decided to just do it.

Well, here goes nothing…

She slammed her astrophysics book shut and groaned, “I’ll never get this done in time! I’m so screwed!” Then stood up, and collapsed on her bed face down on top of her purple comforter, one eye secretly still trained on the door to her room. Hopefully, she wasn’t overdoing the drama… her plan was kind of off the cuff, but her best bet to snare her target.

Come ‘on Kara, come ‘on… take the bait!

In slipped her Kryptonian sister; one moment, appearing in the crack of the open door, the next flitting across the room like a hummingbird to stand beside Alex’s desk as quiet as a mouse. Kara cocked her head to the side, and peered down at her sister’s closed textbook, making no move to open it, but gazing intently at its cover as if she could read the inner pages.

Which, Alex guessed, she was actually doing.

She slowly rolled over on the comforter and propped her head up to watch her adopted alien sister. “Hello there.” Alex’s voice was soft, like a whisper, conscious of Kara’s enhanced hearing.

The blonde glanced over and offered her ‘older’ sister a bright smile, her attention quickly returning to closed tome on the desk. “Hello, Alex. Is physics causing you… trouble?”

Alex suppressed a smile of her own, remembering her act. Kara’s language skills were improving rapidly, her words were now smooth and perfectly formed. “Astrophysics, and yeah… I have midterms in a couple weeks, and the prof wants each of us to do a major presentation.”

Kara’s appeared confused… and her nose wrinkled adorably. ”Pardon. Midterms? Prof? Can you… please explain?”

Alex was still trying not to react to her oh so cute expressions. Stay calm!

“Okay, you may not get all of this all at once, but here it is… This is about my summer course, yes geeks like me find summer classes fun, anyway… a midterm is a test, and I have one coming up next month based on the material we’ve been studying the first half of the summer. How I perform and am graded on it will determine half my grade for the entire class. My ‘prof’, is my professor… my teacher, who’s kind of crazy, and awesome by the way. She’s decided to challenge all of her students to a competition; to come up with the fastest way to send a ship to Mars and back using a set of available data, resources, and technologies.” Alex wasn’t lying now, that is what she really had been working on, and struggling with.

Not that Kara could help her… could she?

Hmmmm… why not find out?

“I already have a pretty brilliant plan if I do say so myself… but I’ve been kind of distracted… totally not your fault… and have a ton of data to deal with. What I’d really love to do is borrow a few hours of precious quantum-computer time from my dad’s lab to crunch it all, but with timing so tight the odds of that happening are not good… by which I mean it’s not happening.” She let out a long sigh. “Oh well, I suppose I’ll just have to present what I have by then … and hope that I’m not humiliated by a freaking math error, an errant equation, or something else I missed. Ugh!”

Kara smiled, “I understand enough now, thank you for explaining.” And then she casually reached down to pick up Alex’s laptop, which was sitting next to a stack of science, engineering, and
reference books on her desk -- but stopped short, and glanced tentatively over at her sister, “May I?”

Alex smiled. She loved how Kara was always so proper, and polite! “Of course. It’s probably going to be pretty boring stuff to you.”

Kara studied the device, and then quickly went to work, her delicate fingers flying across the keyboard and trackpad, opening files and windows like a pro. Over the course of the next several minutes, and with inhuman efficiency, she systematically reviewed all of the notes, calculations, and complex diagrams. Without breaking from what she was doing, the girl reached down with one hand to open Alex’s worn, leather-bound notebook lying on top of the desk and began scribbling notes inside its pages. Her intense blue eyes never left the laptop screen.

Alex was entranced just watching her.

When Kara finally spoke, she was more confident than ever before, though she still paused here and there at words she was unsure of. “I can’t be… entirely sure, but your calculations?... here, are off. See?” She held out the notebook to show Alex her intricate scrawl of numbers and formulas, and then went back to writing. “It was only one small error, but it… cascaded? I fixed the problem, and am… cleaning up the rest. You won’t need computer time. I can review all of this later tonight, after dinner, and… create the necessary simulations in here for proofing.” She smiled and gently tapped her temple.

Alex was stunned. “Let me get this straight. Are you telling me that you just cycled through weeks of my work in a few minutes, found where I screwed up, fixed my math, and then after dinner you’re offering to run a deep simulation from my designs – all in your head? A simulation, I should add, that would take a cutting-edge quantum super-computer tens of hours of compute time to complete?”

“Yes! Exactly.” Kara was beaming as she nodded as if it was clearly obvious that was what was going on. “I will… run… an interesting word by the way, so tiny and confusing with its multiple meanings. Oh sorry, I went off on the track… as I was saying, I will need to run the simulation multiple times, so it may take me all night if I don’t sleep. Which is fine, as I don’t require very much sleep anyway… just sunshine, mostly, and food, especially when Eliza is cooking.”

Alex's mind had wandered, God, she's so cute when she rambles… Then, she quiet suddenly realized Kara was watching her with an adorable smile, waiting for her to respond.

“Oh… okay then. That clears everything right up.” Alex was sitting up now, staring at Kara with even more awe and appreciation. “That’s sarcasm by the way. Take a note.” The girl wasn’t just physically awesome, but incredibly smart, with knowledge in her brain from her incredibly advanced technological civilization. Alex remembered what Kara had said before, ‘like me… bioengineered to be perfect’… and shivered. Later Danvers, later… “So, what did you think of my design?”

Kara immediately blushed, bit her lip, and cast her eyes down at her feet.

“Oh… and… spit it out. I’m not afraid of the truth.”

Kara threw Alex a sheepish glance before responding, “The technologies… are, um, not very… advanced? I think that is the correct word. These are ancient and… obsolete concepts to my people, though similar to those from our early days when our eyes looked out at the stars, and we dreamed of what was beyond. Before we knew….” A brief look of melancholy flickered across her soft features before she continued, “With what you have to work with, your plan is… excellent? Impressive actually. You caught a flaw in the design of the engines. Great work! That, and the other… modifications you made should increase… the yield of the propulsion system by at least ten percent, which is… brilliant… I can say ‘brilliant’ in this context, right? I would never have considered the
Alex sat slack-jawed. “Yeah, I saw the error, and tweaked the design, but… wow… I thought that maybe I could squeeze a little bit more out of the engines, but ten percent… that’s major. Are you sure?” Alex’s mind was racing; the interesting bit to her was how offhandedly Kara had labeled the cutting edge, yet to be produced Impulse Drive designs as basically rudimentary, and archaic.

Also, Kara had called Alex brilliant… Oh yeah!

Kara shifted her feet, closed her eyes briefly, and a few seconds later she re-opened them, grinning. “Yes. I am very confident.” Her melodic voice was assured “I ran some of the relevant numbers again, just now, and they appear correct, but I can’t be completely sure until the next day… sorry, I mean tomorrow.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. Is that… acceptable? Wait, am I being strange?”

Alex smiled, “Acceptable, yes, and no, you are not being strange. You’re being kind of cute, actually, and totally awesome!”

Then, to her surprise, Kara did an excited little happy dance that shook the floor a little before coming to a quick, wide-eyed stop. “Oh, it’s too bad we can’t just use the Phantom Drive… in my pod. We could get to Mars in no time.”

“Again. Seriously?”

“Oh huh!” Kara nodded enthusiastically. “My ship uses what your people call, I believe the closest thing would be dark energy, to fold space-time.”

“And… Phantom Drive? Who named it that?”

Kara was still grinning, “Kal. He’s such a geek.”

“No freaking way! That’s so cool.” Alex jumped up, wrapped her arms around the blonde, who felt sooo soft. “You know Kara, I think you’re kind of amazing.” The delightful girl seemed startled at first, but melted into Alex’s embrace, hugging her back a little too enthusiastically… inadvertently lifting Alex off the floor.

“Oh, ow, too hard… Kara, Kara, fragile human here!”

The girl frantically checked Alex over for physical damage despite her protests after setting her back down on her feet. “I’m fine; you didn’t break anything. So, tell me… where is this awesome ship of yours now anyway?”

The Kryptonian frowned. “Kal-El said that he had a ‘friend’ who could… store it? Keep it safe. After he found me at the… crash site, he flew away with it and left me in the desert for many… um, hours. It was very dark. When he returned the next… morning… my ship was gone.

“Hold up… the next morning? No! HE did NOT just up and leave you all alone in the desert all night after you’d just crash landed on a strange alien planet, did he?”

Kara lowered her gaze, “Yes, he did.”

“I am going to have words with that… that idiot man the next time he stops by… grrrr.”
“It’s not his… fault Alex. He probably just wasn’t worried about me.” Kara's shoulders drooped, and her confident demeanor was quickly evaporating. “You know, on Krypton I had no powers, but here on Earth… I’m not sure what you’ve been told, but nothing seems to be able to damage me now. Apparently, I’m… indestructible…“ Her voice cracked as she placed a hand on her chest as if seeking to touch her mother’s necklace under her shirt, “But… out there, between the stars, I was just me… the old breakable me and I was so afraid. Even now… I haven’t been able to really talk to anyone about… about what happened.”

“It’s okay Kara; you can talk to me.” Alex moved in close.

The downcast girl nodded and smiled gratefully, “Thank you.”

Alex guided her over to her bed, where they sat down so close together she could feel the warmth of Kara’s thigh pressed against her own through her jeans. Her sister then began speaking softly, looking down at her hands that were cradled neatly in her lap, “From my, um… perspective… it’s only been a few… ugh, dates are so hard! Weeks… it’s only been a few weeks since my mother and father put me in my pod, and sent me away from Krypton.

“The Council in all of its self-professed ‘wisdom’ refused to believe Jor-El or my parents’ warnings. Alex, they were so unbelievably arrogant! Our parents told them to build ships, reactivate the gateways, and get everyone off-world, but so few would openly question The Council’s decisions, and those who did were silenced. When the official warning finally did come, it was too late… Rao was like an angry god… growing, expanding… exponentially, and consumed my world in fire.

“When Krypton finally exploded, everyone on the planet was already dead. I know because I watched it happen from my pod.”

Kara’s voice was haunted, and she closed her eyes tight for a few seconds as if she were trying not to see the devastation replay all over again. Alex placed a comforting arm around her shoulders as the distraught girl continued, “Kal was ahead of me, but when the… shockwave from the explosions struck my pod, its engines were disrupted, and the energy field needed to fold space-time collapsed. That’s when I slipped between the cracks of the universe… to the place where time doesn’t move. It was so cold, and dark… and terrifying.”

Alex leaned into her shoulder to comfort her.

Kara swallowed, leaned back into Alex, and took a deep breath before continuing. “It didn’t hurt, in fact, it didn’t feel like anything. I just… fell asleep, for what seemed like only a second but woke up twenty-four years later, Earth time, as my pod was entering your world’s atmosphere. I don’t know how it finally broke free of the Phantom Zone and completed its journey here without an AI, but it did. Not that it really matters. I was too late to be there to protect baby Kal-El, to help him grow up.”

“Don’t you see, Alex? I failed. I failed everyone… my parents, Jor-El, Lara, and HIM! Maybe that’s why he left me in that… desert place all alone took my pod, and sent me away.

“What am I supposed to do now? Continue to… burden you and your family with my secret? Yes, I hear things. I know that I’m putting you all in great danger just by being here… pretending to be n… normal. I’ll never be normal again. If anything ever happened to you, or your parents… because of me.” She paused, and the energy seemed to drain from her as her trembling shoulders sagged. “I should just leave, and go back to that desert.”

“Don’t talk like that.” Alex pulled a pliant Kara into her embrace, and the girl’s head came eagerly to rest on her shoulder. She hadn’t been prepared for her troubled sister’s outpouring of emotion…
Kara had obviously been doing too good of a job hiding her grief, anger, and guilt.

They stayed like that, just holding onto each other, for so long that Alex lost track of time. It could have been hours or days… it just didn’t matter… she was where she was needed, and wanted to be.

It was funny, but Alex felt like somehow she was now the one falling between the cracks in the universe, where time didn’t move… and welcomed it.

Finally, when she thought it would help she said, “You know I’m not his biggest fan but Kal didn’t want to leave you, it broke his heart. I’m certain that he thought you’d be safer here with us, away from him and his dangerous life. He loves you, and so do we. You know that, right?”

Kara sniffed back tears, nodded, and relaxed further into her. Alex’s face ended up nestled in a pillow of her golden hair as she contemplated what she was going to say next.

“Kara, listen. You asked, so let me tell you what you’re going to do, okay? You’re going to live here with us, as a Danvers, and we’ll teach you all about being human, but at the same time, I’m going to help you with your powers… on the down low.”

The ‘younger’ girl's eyes widened, “No, Alex, Eliza, and Jeremiah said that I shouldn’t, people might see… and Kal…”

Alex shook her head. “I know what mom and dad said, and I know why they said it. They’re afraid Kara, and Kal’s just following their lead by only teaching you just enough to pass as human. But we both know you’re special, and I think you, and all of us, would be a heck of a lot safer if you knew how to really use your abilities and not just hide them.”

Kara’s blue eyes opened wide as Alex’s words sunk in.

After a moment she continued, “How about we make a new circle of trust? Right here, right now, just you… and me, so you can feel safe talking about this.”

“Then, you need to stop blaming yourself for things you had and have no control over. Don’t you understand? You haven’t failed anyone! You’re just a girl; okay, sure, now a very powerful girl… who shoots lasers out of her eyes… but what happened to Krypton? That’s not your fault, and neither was your pod being knocked off course, or getting stuck in the Phantom Zone.

“What happens from here on is all up to you, no one else, not even me and I’m your big sister. Keep your family’s memory alive; find a way to do good in this world to honor them, use your powers, or not… your future is whatever you decide it will be. It’s your life and your destiny… but you’re NOT alone. We may not be your biological family, but you are one of us now, and you have me to help you… and Mr. ‘I can’t even remember to tell my cousin’s new family that she’s vegetarian’ to watch your back. That was sarcasm again by the way.

“Let me be clear, there’ll be no going back to the desert for you… not unless it’s a trip to a spa, with me of course, an archeological dig, or maybe some hiking. El Mayarah, right?” Alex was so proud of herself; she’d spoken the Kryptonian word for Kara’s family’s motto, ‘stronger together,’ almost perfectly.

Kara was still holding on tight to her. “Thank you. So much.” It was a whisper, and her breath was warm against Alex’s neck. “This has all been so… surreal?, I think that’s that right word… but you’ve made it better. And what you said to me just now, I can’t begin to explain how wonderful you’ve made me feel.”
At some point, they slowly, and very grudgingly, released each other. Kara took the opportunity to lean back a little, and wipe the wetness from her puffy eyes. “I’m sorry for being like this… I’ve never cried so much, or so often. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Stop apologizing. There’s nothing ‘wrong’ with you. After all, you’ve been through? You should be a mess! I’m actually shocked at how together you are. I’d be worse.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

“Thanks, Alex.”

As the human girl watched a hint of a smile play on Kara’s lips, she felt her world continue to shift in her direction, like a compass pointing true north… as it had been since the first day they met. While she couldn’t explain it, in her human heart was certain that going forward her life would inexorably be entwined with the beautiful girl before her.

Kara seemed to become lost in thought after that, and just as Alex was about to ask if she was okay the Kryptonian suddenly looked directly at her… eyes bright, her delicate jaw set and determined as she announced, “I have considered, and wish to join this new circle with you.”

The Kryptonian then leaned in to deliver a gentle kiss on Alex’s cheek before shimmering off at super speed to silently gather up all the midterm notes and Alex’s computer to take back to her room.

For her part, the human Danvers sister was left unable to speak or move. She sat stupidly on the bed, nodding, with her fingers touching her still warm skin from Kara’s lips, realizing just how desperately she wanted more… and to know everything about the beautiful girl. What was her life like growing up on Krypton? Did she go to school? What were her likes and dislikes, her fears… crushes, everything…

Then there was a bigger question… how in the hell was she, Alexandra Danvers, going to help train a Kryptonian to master her powers? Not one she was ready to tackle the job, yet; she definitely had some homework to do first… and recon to dig through her mom and dad’s files on Superman.

Her brief freak out was interrupted by the sound of Eliza’s voice calling them to come downstairs for dinner.

It seemed that most of her questions would have to wait.

Alex pulled her thoughts back into a semblance of coherency, “Looks like we’ll have to figure out the details of our new arrangement later… but before we go, I wanted to thank you for checking my work.”

“That is agreeable… and you’re welcome. I like helping you.”

“I… ah, I was also hoping to ask if you could maybe… teach me Kryptonese sometime?” Alex paused, her face feeling too warm… “When you speak it, it’s the most incredible thing I’ve ever heard in my life. It would help with training too…” God, Alex, you should have lead with the last part, gah! Fawning much?

Kara erupted with a bright smile, “Thank you Alex. Of course I will! I’m so glad you find my language pleasing, and it would be wonderful to hear it spoken by someone else again… besides my cousin. I don’t want to hurt his feelings, but he’s actually not very good at it. Quite terrible to be honest.”
After sharing a laugh at Kal’s expense, Alex decided to finally bring something up that had been on her mind for days, even though she was sure her mom was wondering what was taking them so long. “Um, okay, I have one last question to ask about your language before dinner. Well, more specifically, what was it you said to me the first day we met here in my room?”

Kara suddenly seemed to find the floor very interesting and lowered her gaze as a soft rosy tint crept into her cheeks. “It was merely a greeting.”

Sure it was. Alex grinned and raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Kara stammered, and then continued, “You were the first human girl my own age I’d ever seen, and you… you surprised me.”

“Really? And what did you expect Earth girls to be like?”

Kara bit her lip, and then spoke very softly, “I didn’t know that you would be so beautiful… or remind me so much of home.”

She thinks I’m beautiful? And I remind her of Krypton? Alex swallowed and stood in stunned silence for a few awkward seconds before the elevated urgency of Eliza’s next yell summoning them for their evening meal dispelled the moment.

“Girls, d-i-n-n-e-r!”

“Um, we better…” Alex had never felt so elated and embarrassed at the same time in her entire life and had momentarily lost the ability to form words. Kara thinks I’m beautiful.

Her Kryptonian sister looked up, apparently as relieved by the forced change of topic as Alex was, and came to her rescue. “I understand, we should not disappoint Eliza.”

As Alex started to get up Kara sat back down beside her on the bed, a look on her face as of she’d suddenly remember something important. “Um, Alex… about your presentation, don’t worry. I just need to… verify your work, I won’t add to it. Not that I could do much more. I understand the concepts, the… calculations and equations; such rudimentary knowledge were required of all children on Krypton… but I was considered very much a… nonconformist. In a world that really only valued logic and science, I preferred studying the great writers, poets, philosophers, and historians of old… other cultures, and art. Rao, Alex, I miss painting.” She sighed wistfully.

Oh, my God, she was a misfit too! Alex didn’t think she could possibly love her more. Mental note: Kara gift idea, canvases, brushes, and lots of paint.

“Anyway, the sciences were always my worst subjects, and… honestly?” She whispered with a grin, “They bored me to tears.”

Another mom-ism!

At that, they both fell back on the bed cracking up, and that’s how Mrs. Danvers found them after running up the stairs -- worried that something terrible had happened.

Her two daughters, laughing their fool heads off together.

..............................

Late July - Year One
July 22nd

Midvale – The Danvers residence

Time - 0115 U.S. East Coast Time, UTC -5

It was later that night, well, technically early the next morning, and Alex couldn’t stop thinking about Kara. The amazing girl had stayed true to her word and disappeared into her bedroom after dinner to spend the next few hours quietly checking over Alex’s work. The technically ‘older’ Danvers sister had stayed up far too late nervously waiting for feedback, trying to read, checking social media, watching TV, pacing like her father… doing everything **but** going to sleep to keep her mind distracted.

There was no way she was going to calm down until she knew the results.

Dressed in a pair of her comfy pajamas, she was just coming back to her room from a trip to the upstairs bathroom when her alien sister’s bedroom door creaked open, and the radiant girl stuck her head out. Kara, her long blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, called out in a hushed voice into the dim light of the hallway. “Alex… can you come in here?”

She immediately darted over, slipped into Kara’s room, and nearly collided with her, but the agile girl moved just in time. Aside from the soft illumination from a laptop screen across the room somewhere, was pitch-black inside. Interesting.

“Do you always keep the lights off?” Alex asked with a smirk.

There was a pause, followed by Kara’s nervous laugh as she zipped over to her desk and turned on the old vintage lamp located there. The ancient Tesla bulb glowed to life, illuminating the efficiently organized desktop space that included a beautifully restored 1930’s-era typewriter. “Sorry,” She apologized, “I don’t need the light, and sometimes forget…”

“Don’t worry, I understand.” Kara never ceased to amaze her.

Alex glanced around the room, which had once been used as her father’s office. It was elegant but homey. Bookshelves filled with weighty old tomes lined half the walls, and Jeremiah’s prized phonograph was off in the corner, with his vast collection of vintage 78s and vinyl now neatly ordered in its cabinet thanks to Kara. The busy girl was always organizing things in the most amazing ways. The floors were rich cherry hardwood like the rest of the house, with a thick Persian rug in the center of the room. The soft grandma Danvers hand-sewn quilt on Kara’s queen-sized bed was covered in Alex’s journals, laptop, and designs, obviously where her sister had spent most of her night.

Alex noticed a Kara-sized dent in the covers at the center of the mess, and she had to shake herself as she began thinking about how warm, and comfortable, that spot would be to curl up in…

Kara was facing her and almost vibrating… as if she could barely contain her excitement. “Alex, Alex… I finished! The simulation checked out. Your design… it’s good.”

“Really? You finished already? And it really works?” Despite her sister’s nodding, Alex kept rambling, “Are you sure?”

Kara was grinning from ear to ear. “Yup, and I confirmed an eighteen percent yield to thrust, Capt. Danvers. You’ll be on your way to Mars in no time!” She gave her human sister a fake little salute.
“All the numbers are… solid, I promise. You can review my notes… tomorrow, I made sure to call out all the corrections for you.”

Alex hugged Kara, thanking her repeatedly; she’d saved Alex’s life! She could feel all the worry drain out from her… and that’s when the wall of tired rolled in, and she yawned, loudly.

Kara suddenly whooshed away, papers rustling; doing something… oh, the laptop and everything else that had been on the bed was now stacked neatly on her desk. Kara then took Alex’s hand in her warm one, and whispered, “You can go to sleep now.”

“Yes, sleep… must.” Alex turned with a pout to glance in the direction of the door and took a couple of tentative steps before stopping. What was it so far away? Ugh, so tired!

“Alex?” Kara said her name tentatively, like a question, drawing Alex’s attention back to her. Kara appeared incredibly anxious, her blue eyes darting to avoid Alex’s gaze, and she was fidgeting with her beautiful necklace again.

“Yes, Kara… what is it?”

“Would you… stay with me?

Alex was suddenly jolted wide-awake. No matter how powerful her Kryptonian birthright made her, Kara was still a vulnerable girl who had just lost her family, her entire world.

She needed a protector too.

“Of course I will.” Alex’s voice broke a little as she felt herself being tugged toward the bed, deeply aware of the deep trust Kara was placing in her. As they slipped under the covers she felt Kara let go of her hand for just a split second, and it was at that moment the room went dark.

Alex was in awe…

Her swift Kara, like the goddess Artemis, incarnate.

The intoxicating girl glided in close, and quietly thanked Alex, who immediately wrapped her arms around her grateful ‘little’ sister. And, as she somehow, inexplicably, always felt around her, the ‘older’ Danvers knew with certainty that she was exactly where she wanted to be.

As they settled in under the soft cotton sheets, her human nose was delighted by the mingled scents of drier fresh pajamas, fresh mountain air, and cherry. Kara always smelled so damn amazing.

The slightly taller girl then moved to spoon up against her so firmly, it was as if she were afraid her human sister would disappear if they lost contact. In response, Alex snuggled in closer; to assure Kara that she wasn’t going anywhere.

It took Alex a few minutes to realize they were communicating silently once again. It was a subtle thing, and felt… right.

Whatever terrors Kara had been battling alone up until then visited the tormented girl again that night, but this time Alex was with her to chase them away. And, also this time, when Kara whispered her parents’ and loved ones’ names, there was no fear in her voice, just love, and longing, and Alex’s soothing embrace.

At some point Kara shifted around and burrowed in, her head finding its way to the pillow of her sister’s shoulder. That’s when Alex heard her own name whispered in Kara’s melodic Kryptonian
accent for the first time.

“Alexandra.”

She’d never heard anything so beautiful in all her life, and all at once it was like a swarm of electric butterflies had taken flight inside of her chest, leaving her breathless. She didn’t know exactly what to do, but squeezed Kara even tighter, as if that were possible, and tenderly kissed her tantalizingly warm forehead.

That was at the exact moment that Alex felt the tension in her sister’s deceptively powerful body relax, and to her delight, the tiniest little snore escaped from Kara as she drifted off to sleep.

It was a design flaw that made the beautiful alien seem a bit less like an immortal goddess who’d fallen to Earth and distinctly more human.

Imperfect, but more perfect at the same time.

She listened attentively as Kara’s breathing slowly settled into a deep and restful rhythm, probably the weary girl’s first peaceful slumber on Earth.

_The first of many, if I have anything to say about it_, Alex mused to herself as she continued to relish the radiance of Kara’s soft Kryptonian skin under her fingertips… and finally allowed the night to take her as well.

........................................

Chapter End Notes

- Kara's mind is a treasure.
- Alex will help her ‘younger’ sister fit in as human and instruct her on how to speak, and act more like someone her age... though Alex never really has her heart in forcing Kara to conform to stereotypes. She has always proudly considered herself a misfit, and would rather Kara be herself and an outlier with Alex and her squad than living an even deeper lie. Kara is also a terrible liar, so... it makes sense.
- One more chapter of the sisters at home, and then I'll get them out of the house. I promise!
- I had no reader or editor this chapter - apologies for any errors.
A Place to Call Home Part Two: Worlds Apart, Together

Chapter Summary

Where Kara and Alex talk about love, life, superpowers, and the Fires that consume hearts - and worlds; or, a series of questions leads Alex to unexpected revelations about Kara’s life growing up, her mission, Kryptonian culture, love, sex, and the destruction of her planet.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

August 6th - Year One

Midvale – The Danvers residence

1438 hours UTC -5, Thursday afternoon, U.S. East Coast Time

“…eight legs?!” Alex sputtered, almost choking on her lemonade. The ‘older’ Danvers sister quickly set her glass down on the nightstand to avoid spilling the sloshing contents all over the quilt on her bed.

Kara was busy effortlessly zipping back and forth from one corner of Alex’s bedroom to the other as they talked, all the while maintaining a row of random objects that appeared to be hovering along her path: a thick hardcover history book, a large cast iron skillet from the kitchen, two of Alex’s new CDs, Kara’s treasured iPod (Eliza and Jeremiah wouldn’t give her a phone yet), a spinning top that the Kryptonian must have excavated from deep within Alex’s closet, a heavy granite bookend that looked like a gargoyle, and Eliza’s favorite hairbrush.

“Yup.” Kara said, “Like Odin’s horse Sleipnir all Tharg’s have eight legs, that why they’re such good climbers. Unrelated fact, they’re also wonderful storytellers.” She paused thoughtfully before continuing. ”I was really lucky to have Uva as my companion all my years growing up… she was my… hmmm, I believe a human comparison would be something like a nanny, and a mentor. She was my teacher as well as my friend, and very wise.”

Alex was fascinated. “What did she look like?”

Kara’s wistful, answering smile told Alex a lot, “She was beautiful. From what I have studied, her appearance was much like a lynx or caracal wild cat here on this world, but larger, and she had stripes, with long, soft hair, and colored like a tiger. Her green eyes were like jade slits, and she had long, cute tufts of fur on the tips of her ears. She would always curl up with me at night to keep me warm, and keep any bad dreams away… but I have you for that now.”

Alex blushed as she grinned back the cheerful blonde, and made a mental note to talk to her mom about letting Kara pick out a kitten as a pet. “You miss her. I’m sorry you had to leave her behind.”

“Thank you; I appreciate your kindness.” Kara sighed, and suddenly spun on her heel and collapsed
on the bed right next to Alex, who involuntarily cringed, expecting all of the objects that Kara had been keeping up in the air to come crashing to the floor any second.

Of course not, all of them were already carefully stacked over by Alex’s desk, or returned to where they belonged all over the house. Kara had moved so fast Alex’s slow human perception never seen it happen…

Wow! No matter how many times Kara used her super speed she, the poor slow human, was always impressed.

The girl was now distracted fidgeting with her necklace. She’d previously told Alex that the expertly crafted, living, metallic chain and its blue jewel had been Alura’s and that she’d given her daughter the heirloom the day she was sent away from Krypton.

Kara sighed. “At least I have her biological matrix imprint inside my crystal. If I ever have access to the right technology I could go inside and visit, or recreate a version of her, a duplicate here in this world with all of her memories. Well… at least all of those up until the time her matrix was imprinted.”

Alex blinked owlishly as she absorbed Kara’s words… and a bit for dramatic effect before she said, “I should stop being surprised every time you open your mouth and say something mind-blowing, you know that, right?” She nudged her ‘sister’ playfully. “So… questions… What else do you keep inside that crystal, and what was it like growing up on Krypton? Did you have other pets besides Uva?” Alex knew that Alura’s necklace was very precious to Kara, and she’d been dying to know more about it… and everything else about the girl’s life.

Kara’s eyes widened. Was she offended by something Alex had said? “Uva was not a ‘pet’, she was an honored member of our family. She chose to be with us… with me.” Kara’s tone sounded hurt.

The last thing Alex had intended…

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to…”

Kara quickly relaxed, and Alex could feel the tingle of her regret through their connection. “It’s… it’s okay. I know you didn’t. How could you?”

The ‘older’ Danvers exhaled; relieved she’d just dodged that bullet.

“Alex, I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have to… how did Eliza put it? Oh yeah, ‘walk on eggshells’ around me. I’m not made of glass or going to be mad at you for not knowing something about my old life, or making assumptions. That’s why we’re playing the Question Game, right? To help us both understand each other and our worlds… and, like your mother said, to help me cope.”

Alex nodded. “Don’t worry about it Kara, I understand. I like the Question Game too. Please… continue.”

“Thank you. Okay, where to start? I think you need to understand something before I go any further down the Kryptonian… um, rabbit hole.” Kara was grinning, proud of the clever use of her recent literary knowledge; she’d really enjoyed Carroll’s book, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.

“First off, my people were knowledge hoarders… they loved knowing everything about everything, and more. Our technology was, is, far more advanced than anything you have yet achieved here on Earth, or will… for thousands of years. Our science would seem like magic to an average human… which, by the way, you are definitely not one of!”
Alex suppressed a giggle and brightened at the compliment as Kara continued...

“But we weren’t always this way. Long ago we were like humans are now; driven by our baser desires. We fought, killed, and did terrible things to one another, but over time we grew, and changed. My ancestors eliminated disease, hunger, prejudice, war, and mastered nearly every aspect of our existence… including evolution. We made wonders, created life, became the caretakers of entire civilizations, transformed dead worlds into paradises, wrapped stars in webs of light to power galaxies, moved planets, and extend our natural lifespans tenfold.”

Extended their natural lifespans times ten? Kara would outlive her. This thought above all other things gnawed at Alex unpleasantly…

“Anyway, that was a… complicated way of starting to answer your questions. I just wanted to help you understand my world, and prepare you for things… like the fact that my home was conscious, alive. She was a non-biologic intelligence, like my pod. I’ll just call them AI’s to keep it simple, sentient beings who were an integral part of our society and every aspect of our world.

“Growing up there you were never really alone, unless you asked to be, and never lacked for anything. I had no siblings, and my mother and father were much too busy to spend a great deal of time with me, or each other for that matter. I had my studies, my art, travel, and when I was at home, my snuggly nanny cat Uva. There were also always lots of little AIs of all shapes and sizes running around called T’zin… that my father created from the elements to serve us. Each had a purpose; some could fly, others could swim, run, or dig, and lots of other abilities. They were mostly caretakers and guardians, but sometimes we would sneak off and make mischief together.” She giggled.

“They sound like gremlins.” Alex grinned. Kara, the gremlin queen! Alex mused silently.

“Oh yeah, kind of! Good analogy, I like that nickname! Well, all of them… the gremlins… had individual personalities, and were a bit childlike. The ones in our house loved playing with me. I even gave them each a name, which they appreciated… though father frowned upon it.

“When my parents weren’t around we’d sometimes go out exploring out beyond the protection of Kandor’s dome… which was against the rules of course, but my gremlins were good at keeping secrets.” Kara looked so happy at that moment, as a hint of laughter pulled at the delicate curl of her lips. Alex assumed she was remembering joyful times and was happy to know the sunny girl had something to hang onto.

Alex felt a surge of warmth come back to her in her thoughts, like an all-over full body hug from Kara. Wow!

She did have a question though. “I thought mom and dad said you were born in a place called Argo City?”

“Oh, ah, yes and no. I wasn’t born exactly, but I did grow up there. My family moved to Krypton’s capital about ten Earth years before… before the end.” A solemn silence passed between them for a moment, but then Kara brightened, and continued…

“As far as my crystal… well, besides my pod, and Kal, it’s all I really have left of Krypton or my family, as far as I know. I don’t think your people have any words to describe the amount of information stored within it or a way to get any of it out… but mother told me that my whole world is inside, at least the memory of it.”

Alex leaned in to hug Kara and said, “I’m so glad you were able to bring something of your family
with you,” and didn’t want to let go.

When they finally, and very reluctantly, pulled apart, Kara lifted the necklace off and coiled it into Alex’s open hands and said, “Here.”

She couldn’t help but marvel at the stunning craftsmanship. The silvery metal that made up the wispy chain was unlike anything she’d ever seen, or felt, before... so smooth, and unnaturally cool to the touch. Tiny Kryptonian runes, or ‘glyphs’ as Kara called them, occasionally shifted and changed on its surface... as if were alive. Incredible!

The jewel was the same endless color blue as Kara’s eyes and looking closely, Alex could perceive what appeared to be the sparkle of tiny stars inside. “Whoa, this is so pretty.”

Kara was beaming as she turned, and held up her gorgeously long locks like an invitation. Alex sighed, and then reluctantly slipped the treasure back around the beautiful girl's neck, feeling the comforting warmth of Kara’s skin as the ends of the chain touched, and then just grew together before her eyes.

Whoa again!

Alex gently nudged Kara around to face her, and deadpanned, “Okay, so let me get this straight, you grew up in a living house, with a talking Tharg nanny who was an honorary family member, had little gremlin rule-breaker AIs running around, and own an infinite hard drive necklace, that also appears to be alive... and filled with stars? Is that about right?”

Kara was still grinning, and nodded vigorously, “Yup. Basically.”

“Well... Hey, no big deal. See I’m barely impressed...” Alex tried to keep a straight face. “I mean, it’s not like you had flying cars or anything...” It was at that point, that Alex’s façade crumbled and they both started laughing.

“You need to move on Alex; it’s not healthy to dwell on disappointment.” Kara teased, referring to her new sister’s already well-known gripe about the lack of commercially available automobiles that could fly.

Alex glared, and was able to distract Kara for half a second by dangling a Red Vine near her face, allowing her to poke the alien girl in her midriff successfully; in turn, causing the adorable Kryptonian to giggle.

God, she has amazing abs.

“Cheater.” Kara pouted but began to smile as she cuddled up with her new treat like a hungry cat with a mouse.

Alex jumped right back in; she still had some time before it was Kara’s turn. Playing the Question Game with her alien had become one of the human girl’s favorite activities, especially when she learned so much new info about Kara every time.

“Okay, okay, next question. You said before that you were bio-engineered... what the Hell is that all about? Don’t Kryptonians, you know...” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “... Have sex?” She made a pumping motion with her arm like she seen the jocks do at school.

Kara didn’t seem at all rattled by the question or Alex’s rude gesture; in fact, as she swallowed the remaining stump of bright red licorice she grinned. “Of course we do!” Then blushed. “I mean, not me, I never... I mean, not yet... Ugh... Alex!” She smacked her ‘sister’ gently on the shoulder and
huffed before continuing. There’s the cuteness again, it’s impossible to escape from it.

“Okay, let me try and explain. My people were very… mmm, open-minded about many things, including sex, and gender… We had plenty of the former and latter was a non-issue… because all were equal. Because of this, sexuality is not a taboo topic for me like it seems to be here on Earth. Truthfully, it freaks me out how uptight humans generally seem to be about something so natural. Kryptonians sought to understand, to celebrate their minds, and their bodies… including all known pleasures.”

A shiver of delight ran down Alex’s spine. Did Kara just purr? The alluring Kryptonian had her complete attention as she continued… “In my culture, sex was for exploration… and enjoyment, not making babies.”

Alex had been in the process of taking a sip of her lemonade and ended up involuntarily spitting the sour liquid through her nose.

“Sorry, sorry!” Kara whooshed off for a second, returning apologetically to offer Alex a handful of paper towels. “Did I say something bad?”

“No, it’s okay Kara. You just… surprised me, that’s all. Please go on.” The human girl tried not to laugh as she wiped off her face.

“Good. Okay, on Krypton, children are not born like on Earth but created by a melding the best aspects of the parents and the ancestors from their Houses, culled from what you call DNA, though the process is infinitely more complicated. Because of this, the gender or orientation of the parents became irrelevant to conception. The fetus created is then nurtured to life within living, intelligent, gestation chambers.”

Alex couldn’t maintain a calm expression. “You mean… like grown in a lab?”

“Yes, I suppose, though it’s not what you may be imagining as some mechanical, sterile environment with faceless people in lab coats, or those awful bio-hazard suits, it was… it was like being in a mother’s womb, at least from talking to Kal it seems like a similar experience. All I can remember is feeling warm, safe, happy, and very comfy.

“Anyway, when the baby is ready to be ‘born’ the parents and their family participate in a ceremony, an Awakening rather than a birth. Like most Kryptonians of my generation, I had an Awakening, though there was still a small minority of our people who practiced natural childbirth. Kal-El was born that way. His parents made that choice, their branch of our House followed the old teachings of the Kryptonian god Rao more strictly than mine.”

Alex already knew about the Kryptonian deity, Rao. Kara had explained that the being, a personification of their Red Dwarf sun, had been worshipped for millennia on Krypton as a god of light and life. Religion, other than for academic purposes, had pretty much almost died out in favor of reason many long generations before Kara’s Awakening. But Rao’s influence ran deep in her culture, and there were still those who believed, like her cousin’s parents Jor-El and Lara.

Alex was still trying to process all of what Kara had explained. “Wow… So you grew inside one of those… um, gestation chambers. Is it all right to ask? Does that make you any different from someone like Kal, who wasn’t?”

Kara considered the question, rolling herself playfully into Alex’s side. “Good question. Back on my world, even without powers, all of my people’s physical abilities, senses, and cognitive potential were already well beyond human, but the Awakened were more so. We had evolved and
bioengineered ourselves over countless millennia. Children like me came into the world not only physically ‘perfect’, but already filled, or I suppose you could say programmed, with massive amounts of knowledge, and skills… think of it like Kryptonian cell memory. Some of this information is just known upon Awakening, the rest is unlocked over time, giving us a tremendous edge over those who are born. This is why I was able to help with your work, even though the subject was never taught to me, or one I was interested in. Cell memory is also something Kal doesn’t have.”

“So, you were basically ‘born’ with a multiple Masters degrees, and work experience?”

Kara smiled apologetically, “Kind of…”

Alex was fascinated, and a little… okay, a lot jealous. What she wouldn’t do for some of that! “Just so you know, you are so helping me with all of my homework this fall, and like, forever.” They both laughed.

“Anyway, so you were already incredible on your world, but what about your abilities on Earth? I mean, I’ve seen you do things, Kal told us a little and I kind of know some of what he’s capable of from his exploits as Superman.”

Kara nodded, “My baby cousin is not so good with the explaining… sorry. Let me try.” Her brows creased adorably before she continued on. “So, on this world, your star, Sol, has changed us. Both Kal and I are light-years beyond what we were on Krypton, all of our senses and physical abilities are off the charts. Honestly, I still have a hard time believing it. I mean, Alex… I can fly! A tiny section of my skin can convert your sun’s energy into more power than all of the solar panels on the Earth! When I focus my senses I can hear the sound of your heart beating miles away, identify all of the ingredients in one of Eliza’s delicious meals by smell, and if I had to, I could probably track someone, or anything, better than a bloodhound. I can see through walls, my strength will eventually be immeasurable, and my immune system eats Earth viruses and bacteria for breakfast… between you and me, I don’t think I’ll ever get sick here or even grow old… I don’t know. I’ve never tested my limits, but Kal says that my powers will only keep getting stronger as time passes and I suck up more sunlight.” She sighed… “If you really think about it, I’m the final result of tens of thousands of years of Kryptonian mad science, and I’m honestly not sure how I feel about that.”

Alex was still reeling; she already had known that Kara’s abilities were… astounding, but... holy crap! Somehow, knowing that Kara would always be able to tell where she was, even miles away, didn’t freak Alex out… it actually made her feel safe. “Is the sun why your skin is warmer than mine?” Alex’s question was spoken more timidly than she’d intended, damn.

Kara suddenly became more alert, her curious gaze boring, it seemed, directly into Alex’s soul. Alex looked away, trying to be casual, but was failing miserably… Was Kara stifling a grin? “Yes, it’s all of that energy being converted inside of me, that heat has to go somewhere… though most of it is shunted off to… somewhere else, I’m really not sure where, or how, but I feel like it’s someplace far… far away in the universe.” Kara’s brow scrunched again, and she suddenly looked concerned. “Why? Does, does it bother you? I am working hard to control it, cooling my surface temperature when I interact with humans…”

“No, no, it doesn’t bother me,” Alex assured her urgently, touching the ‘younger’ girl’s arm. I’m not afraid of you! “I… like it, you never need to worry about your temperature or anything around me, ever, and especially not when we’re alone. I like you being… you, the real Kara, my Kara Zor-El.” Okay, Alex was blushing again. Stupid, stupid, stupid! Omg, did I just say that out loud?

That seemed to please Kara immensely, and like that, the alien girl’s million-megawatt smile was
back… and she briefly pulled Alex into a long, warm, soft, delightful hug. Was her alien ‘sister’ breathing in her hair?

Wow. She held on for dear life.

“Thank you Alex. That means so much to me,” Kara whispered. My Alex.

“I’m glad.” The ‘elder’ Danvers was feeling quite pleased, her head was swimming… and the scientist in her wanted to know more. “Okay, more questions! What about love? Relationships? You had a mom and dad, so there must be…”

Kara nodded in understanding. “Yeah, affection was similar on Krypton as it seems to be here. I loved my family, Uva, Jor-El, Lara, Kal-El, and even the gremlins as you call them… and they cared for me. Mating relationships existed between two, or more… yes, more, individuals, and were very common, but not always sexual, or monogamous. Though, I would be.”

“Would be what?”

“Monogamous. You know, if I was ever... with somebody, and that’s what they wanted.”

“Ooooh…” I would too... if that’s what they wanted. Alex wanted to add, but her brain and mouth didn’t seem to be in agreement on the wisdom of such an action. Thankfully, it appeared Kara understood her well enough without actually saying words.

“I just wanted you to know that… for academic purposes of course.” Kara smiled awkwardly as a red flush crept into her cheeks.

Yup. She got the message. “I’m glad you told me… you know, purely for science.” Alex grinned, hiding a slight blush herself.

“Yes, I thought you, of all people, would appreciate that.” Kara chuckled, and Alex’s heart was beating a mile a minute from the clearly obvious subtext of Kara's comment as she continued speaking, “Anyway, as I was getting to, on Krypton, someone’s appearance, race, genetic make-up, status, or gender were non-issues for mating, and wouldn’t stop anyone from loving another, unlike what seems prevalent here on most Earth cultures. I’ve done the research… and boy, you guys seem pretty uptight.”

“Not all of us.” Alex protested. The human girl was definitely onboard with the Kryptonian way of thinking. She’d known she was bisexual since she was just a kid, but had still never told her parents... worried about how they might react. Hearing Kara admit that she embraced something that sounded a lot like pansexuality made her heart sing.

“I know. Thank Rao!” Kara grinned and snuggled in closer to Alex on the bed. “Oh, I was also reading about the human concept of romantic love. We didn’t have that… exactly, but we did have something comparable, and even more powerful. It is said that when a Kryptonian truly finds the right partner, I’m quoting now, ‘The Fires of Rao consume us, and in its grasp we are helpless’.”

Was Kara blushing again? The girl was like a stoplight. Apparently talking about love and sex was a big deal for this particular Kryptonian. Alex almost teased her but decided against it.

“Back home I read everything I could find in the archives about The Fires. Those were some of my favorite stories.” Kara smiled and closed her eyes as if remembering something cherished.

Alex made another note, buy her sister some decent romance novels… not the trashy ones. Well, maybe a few trashy ones…
Kara added, “There are a series of poems I adore by one of my favorite poets, the great Tala-Lor. It was like a love letter to her bondmate about their experience with Rao's Fire. Would you… like to hear one?”

Alex nodded vigorously. “Yes please!”

Kara flashed her a look of gratitude, and said, “Okay. It goes something like this in Kryptonian…”

She then proceeded to recite something in her musical language that was so beautiful that Alex was moved to tears. She’d understood some of the words, thanks to Kara’s regular instruction over the last month, but it was the actual emotion she felt conveyed in the vocalization that made her heart want to burst.

Kara had just projected actual feelings using only her voice! How was that even possible?

“I know how you feel; I cried the first time I heard it too.” Her Kryptonian sister reached over and gently squeezed Alex’s hand, bringing her back into the moment. “Let me give it a try in English next, but I’ll probably destroy it in translation. Please don’t blame Tala if I screw it up. Here goes…”

..............................

In the midst of life, I awoke from sleep
My soul cried out, in search of this
Our hearts have blurred, our love is deep
Embraced by flame, I feel you with me

Your hand slipped into mine
Leaving fingerprints on my heart;
Our souls, braided in time
These are the fires that bind

I kissed your delicate skin
Watching a ray of bright light dance off your cheeks
For your love is something that in every lifetime,
I shall always seek

..............................

“That is so beautiful.” Alex sniffed, wiping an eye with the back of her hand.

“I know, right?” Kara then looked off longingly, a hint of melancholy seeping in before she added, “It’s so sad that soon after Tala’s time, my ancestors began to see the unknown as something only to be conquered, dissected, and overcome… including love, which, by its very nature is all about
passion and chaos. What could be more terrifying to a race of… um, help me, sister… What would you call us? Don’t worry, I won’t be offended.”

“Control freaks?”

“Yes, thank you… exactly.”

“So… when two, or more, of your people, do fall in love, what happens? I really want to know about that ‘or more’ part too.” Alex grinned salaciously.

Kara tilted her head and played with a strand of her hair as she considered the question. “Pledging yourself to another is not done lightly. It usually only happens once in a person’s lifetime, if they are lucky. When it does, a connection is formed between the individuals involved, though it is subtle at first, and can be ignored or broken by the other if they don’t feel the same way. The offering of one’s self is like opening your soul, becoming completely defenseless to the other. If accepted, the two become one, ‘two souls, one heart’… partners for life. If others are involved, the process is the same, but it is between all.

“It is a very powerful bond and… kind of magical.” Kara seemed embarrassed to admit the last part, but it was obvious how much she believed it. “Kal’s parents were consumed by it, in a good way. Oh, Alex, I wish you could have seen them! They were so much in love! You could see how much passion they shared, how they adored each other in all aspects of their lives. My parents, on the other hand, had great respect for one another, and were technically compatible, but didn’t share the same spark as Jor-El and Lara, and definitely had never been touched by The Fires.”

Alex smiled in support, “I understand. Some people were just meant to be together I guess. What about you? Have you ever had a partner… you know… felt The Fires of Rao?” She waggled her eyebrows suggestively and nudged a startled Kara.

“Pfft!” Did Kara just snort laugh? “No, I told you. I was too young! I mean, yes, I may have had attractions, back then… but had not yet met the right person to even consider such a thing. On Krypton the Fires had not yet taken me.” She then quickly added, “And there has been no sex if that’s what you’re asking! Rao, are all Earth sisters as irritating as you?” Now she was once again blushing adorably.

Stoplight.

Attractions, huh? That topic will require further exploration… later. Alex glanced over at the clock on her nightstand… oh no! She was running out of time for more questions!

“Yes, all sisters are annoying, it’s part of the job description… and no, before you ask, you can’t trade me in.” Alex playfully stuck her tongue out at Kara, who promptly returned the gesture.

“So, jumping back a bit, you still owe me. Tell me about ‘more than two’ part…” Alex could feel her cheeks burning this time.

Kara smiled, “No reason to be embarrassed. More than two in a relationship wasn’t uncommon. I have read extensively about it.” She cleared her throat, “When there are three the bond was called, hmmm, I don’t have an equivalent word for it, but a Triumvirate in English is closest. More than three were rarer, but known as Ensembles.

Alex was a little confused, “So, they all loved each other? There was no jealousy? And it wasn’t just… um, for sex?”
“No, no envy. Rao’s Fire burned in them just as brightly... to accept one was to accept all, but yes, I’m sure there was plenty of sex too.” Kara grinned. “My people might appear distant, or even cold, on the outside, but like the surface of our frozen world... what is your Earth saying? Ah, I remember... appearances can be deceiving.”

“Wow, I had no idea Kryptonians were so... flexible?” Alex was a bit stunned, but also profoundly intrigued.

“Thanks, but I understand how odd this must all seem to you.”

“No judging here. I think your world was an amazing place.” Alex suddenly realized she’d been holding Kara’s hand, their fingers comfortably entwined. It felt so nice she didn’t let go. “Well, as much as I want to stay on this topic, I only have time for a couple more questions, and there’s one I’ve been dying to ask, so here it is... What’s it like, having your abilities? Seeing through your eyes? I mean, you and Kal have X-Ray vision! That alone must be awesome!”

Kara ducked her head at the praise. She always looked so cute when she was embarrassed! “I can try and explain. On Krypton my eyesight, like all of my senses was already greatly enhanced. I could see clearly for great distances, or on the darkest nights.”

“Um... wow?”

“Yup. Anyway, the day after I landed here, in that desert, your sun had already started igniting my Kryptonian cells... and I began experiencing the most intense, jarring moments of sensory overload, and bursts of energy throughout my body. It was so scary! I thought that either your world was attacking me; or that I was going blind, insane, or maybe even dying.

“Thankfully, Kal returned after sunrise and helped me through the worst of it. In the few days we were together he taught me how to focus, and take some control over my physical actions and reactions. I’m so glad he was there Alex; I was spinning around, shooting lasers out of my eyes! I almost killed a baby lizard! The poor thing was traumatized.”

“Happens to me all the time...” Alex deadpanned. “Just kidding. Did you miss my sarcasm again that time?” They both laughed, but she quickly added. “But seriously, I’m so sorry Kara; you really must have been freaking. I’m really glad Mr. Insensitive was there for you, redeems him only slightly in my eyes though.”

“Thanks. I wish he’d help me now. I’ve begged, but he’s still not budging on doing anything beyond simply teaching me how to ‘control’ my powers.”

“You mean ‘handcuff’.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Kara sighed.

“It’s a conspiracy of adults. I think that my parents sucked him in somehow. They think they know what’s best for you, and me, but in reality, it’s only what’s best for them. I know from experience. Don’t worry Kara; we can do this without Kal... we’re already doing it.”

Kara nodded. “I know... he’s given us no choice, but the whole situation still makes me sad, and a little angry. Anyway, back to your less frustrating question about my sight. Here on Earth, under Sol, I can see the entire spectrum of light and energies, not just the visible ones... at least when I let it in I can. It just takes... concentration. Like opening the... the thing, hmmm, you know... The iris on a camera! When I focus, I can see energy waves up and down the scale, magnetic fields, wireless signals, things that I can’t even name, and ripples that I think are the warping effects of gravity...”
She moved her hand in front of her as if following the contours of some marvelous unseen thing… “I have to work really hard to keep it all out. Sometimes I have these terrible headaches.”

Alex was both excited and slightly overwhelmed by the new knowledge, but very grateful Kara had confided in her. Her sister was an actual badass. “That must be so hard to deal with, but incredible. You’re kind of amazing you know.”

“You’ve said that before... I like it.” Kara purred.

Alex had an idea and slowly shifted behind the girl, staying on her knees on top of the comforter. “Can I try something that might help with the headaches? I’d like to give you a massage. Mom thinks that I have ‘magic fingers’; at least that’s what she calls them. Eliza has work stress, not as scary as lasers coming out of your eyes stress, but I am willing to give it a try.”

Kara seemed unsure at first, but didn’t resist, and quickly melted into Alex’s touch as her sister began gently rubbing her warm scalp and temples. After a couple of minutes, Kara was lying on her stomach whimpering, “Don’t stop. That feels sooo good!”

Alex leaned in close to Kara’s ear and whispered, “See? Magic fingers.” She was beyond pleased when Kara shivered in response, and she redoubled her efforts. As she worked on her neck and shoulders, Alex was struck once again by the warmth and softness of Kara’s skin. It seemed impossible to believe that any part of her could stop a bullet, or something worse…

Alex massaged in silence for several minutes, well, silent aside from Kara’s contented moans, which made Alex smile more than they definitely should have. To be able to do something to make Kara feel this good, and happy, was exactly what Alex had been looking for.

What was scary, and exhilarating, was how much she wanted to give her more... and not in a sisterly way, in fact, that word didn’t suit how she felt about Kara at all.

She did glance nervously at the clock three times as the minutes passed and finally spoke up, continuing to massage Kara’s back. “Okay, this next one should be easy, well at least I hope it’s easy…. Here goes. I’ve noticed how extremely, hmm, orderly you are, I mean like really, really, really organized. You are so Emma Roberts’ Nancy Drew in the movie, almost exactly…”

“I adored her in that.”

“Me too! Watch it again tonight?”

“Absolutely. I’ll make the popcorn.”

They both broke out into giggles at the inside joke.

“Anyways, you even dress in the same kind of way, so stylish, pretty, and different, but a cooler, geekier version.” Alex rubbed deeper into the muscles of Kara’s back, and she moaned in response, “You’re smart, incredibly educated, and mature beyond your years, learned English in less than a month, and everything you do and own is prepared and organized just so… look in your closet; it's perfect! Anyway, I guess what I’m saying is, is there any reason for that, or is that just you being awesome?”

Kara’s eyes were closed, head luxuriating on her pillow, but she managed to smile and say, “Thanks for saying all those nice things about me… that’s an interesting question. I’m not sure, but the thing is, I notice details.

"I see patterns everywhere and can absorb and understand vast amounts of information and
variables faster than your world’s most advanced supercomputers. Even back home I could anticipate things that would most likely happen before they happened when I paid attention.

"Here on Earth, it’s exponential. When I see a problem, no matter how big, or complicated, I start to take it apart piece-by-piece until I find what’s broken, and then put it back together again until it works. After that, I pull back to see the big picture as well as all of the potential effects, failure points, and repercussions. Then, once I have all of those variables and probabilities, I can start simulating results until I find the best final solution. And surprisingly, sometimes what looks best at first isn’t always the right choice.

"When I bring order to chaos, sometimes order ends up looking a lot like disorder. Anyway, it’s how my brain works. I think the things you mentioned all are part of how I express that. I feel like I need to fix things, for me, and for the people I care about."

“Like organizing all of dad’s records, and the books all over the house, my room, or helping mom and dad manage the house, and restructuring their finances?” Alex almost laughed; her parents had ended up firing their Financial Advisor, who Kara had discovered was more interested in charging them fees than actually growing their bottom line.


“Are you sure you’re not Wonder Woman?” Alex poked.

Kara looked perplexed for a moment and then grinned once she understood Alex was joking. “No, but I would love to meet her one day. Kal knows her. I think they dated for a while.”

“No way!” Alex really did need to pin down the Man of Steel on his next visit for an interrogation. “Okay, I’m seriously running out of time. Next question! “You mentioned colonies before… is there any chance that there could be other Kryptonians out in the universe who survived?” She quickly waved one hand in the air before returning to massaging.

Kara’s pleased expression grew serious, and there was a pause before she answered, her face squished sideways on the bed. “Yeah, definitely. Let me explain. While my people had become extremely inward focused by my time, and there were fewer of us; we still adhered to the Will of the Protectorate.”

Alex’s expression became perplexed as she began to ask, "The Will of the what?"

Kara smiled sweetly, "...of the Protectorate. An ancient treaty of peace between all of the great civilizations, led by Krypton. It was a body somewhat like Earth’s United Nations, but with bite, and spanned thousands of galaxies. We had military forces, as well as advisors and scientific expeditions spread throughout the known universe. All of those would have survived for sure, plus those living on other worlds and star systems.

"You see, a long time ago Kryptonians had spread to practically everywhere in the known universe and lived in peace among countless races. Sadly, over time, we became less enamored with other worlds, and there was a slow retreat back to our homeworld. The more adventurous of us remained out among the stars to live their lives; on the Core Worlds, the Outer Systems, Daxam, Oa, out on The Rim, and other places where they remain now. It’s impossible to know exactly how many there are out there, but it has to be a lot.”

Kara and Kal weren’t alone! Alex’s head was spinning at the revelation. There were others like them out there, maybe even family. Then reality really hit her... Kara had people to go back to.
Alex was elated for her 'sister', but at the same time, her heart sank. “Wow, Kara, that’s… that’s great news.” Alex’s words came out far less sincere than she’d intended, downright unenthusiastic, and sad. “I guess we just need to find a way to contact them… maybe they could send help, a ship?”

Kara shook her head violently, “No!” She sounded almost panicked and looked back at Alex over her shoulder from her position on her stomach, pouting as her massage stopped. “I'm sorry, I didn’t mean to react that way… it’s just… complicated.”

That was a definitive No.

Alex didn’t understand why Kara wasn’t pleased. Wait, she already knew about the other Kryptonians from day one, yet had said nothing. Something was off. “So, uncomplicated it. Why not?”

The ‘younger’ girl reluctantly rolled out from under Alex onto her back and gazed up with a thoughtful expression at the slowly rotating blades of the ceiling fan. Alex didn’t push but lay down next to the fairylike Kryptonian at her side, and patiently waited for her to answer.

When Kara did, it was in a quiet, more sober tone. “Kal and my parents didn’t just send the two of us to Earth to escape the doom of our world. Before we left my mother explained to me that the two of us were also meant to be Earth’s protectors, and to inspire humanity… to give your people hope for a better future, or at least put you on a path to one.

“I’d probably shouldn’t be telling you any of this, but I don’t care… there’s no one to get me in trouble anyway. Our parents wanted us to prepare humanity, to ready you for possible contact with the thousands of other races and civilizations out there…” Kara gestured up at the ceiling, to the stars beyond. “Many are great, wise, and good, but others… are not. There are those that are very dangerous and would jump at the chance to conquer and enslave this beautiful world like a prize. Earth isn't ready for that.”

Alex’s head was spinning. “Okay, that’s a little terrifying.”

“Yup. So, you see why I don’t want to try and send any kind sort beacon… Rao only knows who, or what might answer it. Besides, I have no one to send it to. Everyone I cared about died the day I left my home, except Kal, and he’s here.” She sighed. “I knew this was a one-way trip when my mother gave me a choice to go Alex, and for better or worse, I can’t change that.”

Alex could almost feel the weight of the burden Kara carried on her graceful shoulders, the sacrifice she’d chosen to make. Alex snuggled in close beside the beautiful blonde, who cuddled back, and a peaceful silence settled between them.

It was wonderful, just lying there together, the summer sun glowing on their skin through the room’s tall windows.

Alex had received her share of revelations that afternoon, and though she had a million more questions, it felt like Kara was done, at least for the moment.

Yet, the next second proved her wrong.

In a voice like a whisper Kara said, “You know, for a long time only Jor-El and Lara knew of Earth. They kept your world’s existence secret from everyone except for my parents and a few others they most trusted… those who shared their belief that Krypton was lost. The Council that governed us refused even to see the danger they were creating as they continued their experiments to change Rao. They had become too arrogant to listen, regardless of the consequences and despite the very loud
protests coming from Jor-El and the other scientists.”

“Change your sun how?” Alex was fascinated.

“Altering its gravity, and re-igniting its collapsing core… to keep Rao from going supernova. We’d already moved our planet’s orbit several times over the ages to stay ahead of our star’s expansion, but that process had unintentionally introduced instability into its matrix… and to try and move Krypton again would have torn our slowly dying world apart in minutes. Jor-El told The Council that the path they were committed to would do just that… accelerate Rao’s end and doom the planet… but they ignored him.

“My parents tried to shield me from all of the chaos, but things got bad towards the end. The Council threatened them, cracked down on all ‘dissenters’, basically shut down all travel off-world, and even turned our planet’s military against the people to keep anyone from leaving. My mother held the position of Justice, the highest judiciary on Krypton. She was never home, always at work arguing with The Councilors or off doing her job. Her twin sister, my Aunt Astra, was a high-ranking General in the military. She attempted a, what do you call it? Ah yes, a coup d’État, but it failed; and she was taken into custody; dragged off in restraints from my house… because of me.

“Oh Alex… I never saw her again, and I don’t even know what happened to her after, no one would tell me!” Kara sobbed as she once again fought back tears. Alex could see how much her Aunt meant to her, and how whatever had happened was haunting the guilt-ridden girl.

“Anyway, after that my mother’s heart firmly turned against the Council, our parents put a very risky, secret plan into motion. Two small, stealth ships would be built that could escape Krypton’s planetary defenses… one pod to send Kal to Earth, and a second for me to follow him in. Our parents believed that he and I would be better off growing up as far away from Krypton as possible, to learn to be human from… I’m quoting now, so please don’t get mad, ‘flawed’ Earthlings, and make our lives here on Earth.”

“The task was mine to make sure their plan succeeded, to be Kal’s protector and teacher until we could act together to help humanity. Well, we both know how awesome that all worked out.” The bitterness in her voice was stinging. “To make things even worse, the caretaker, survival, combat, and military training in my cell memories were supposed to be activated on my journey, by my ship’s AI was severely damaged when my pod was disrupted… and I lost her, so I don’t even know how to get at those memories, to become this amazing guardian for Kal or the Earth that I was intended to be.”

Alex pressed her hand to Kara’s shoulder to comfort her, and she, in turn, leaned into her touch.

“Thanks, Alex, but I’m done crying and feeling sorry for myself. And even though my mission failed spectacularly, and Kal doesn’t understand, and won’t help me, I’m not giving up. I need to believe that he still needs me here, or will need me… one day, and maybe there are humans who need me too.” Alex could feel Kara’s strength and determination reverberating through their silent connection.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said before, about creating a new mission for myself, one that honors not only my parents but my extended family on Earth. I will aid Kal-El with our task, somehow, one day, as well as protect my new family and my new world… with your help.”

“I’m so glad Kara, because I’m all-in, and really… really want you to stay.” With me.

Kara smiled, wiping her eyes. “Good, because I very much like it here, and don’t want to leave.” You.
Alex couldn’t hide how happy she felt and wrapped Kara in a lengthy hug. “That’s a load off because as your protector, I’d hate to have to chase you off to the stars just to keep you safe.”

Kara squeezed Alex back, this time very gently. “I don’t know what to say, besides thank you. I always wanted a sister, but I never dreamed that I’d find the best one in the universe two thousand light years from home.”

That was the beautiful moment when Alex’s phone alarm started blaring The Killers “Mr. Brightside.” As she sat up, fumbling to silence the infernal device, Kara made a pained face and plugged her sensitive ears.

When the music stopped the mood had changed, and Kara’s frown turned into smile powered by a few million megawatts of sunshine, “Great song! The Killers, right? I’m so stealing that album from your music library! Anyway, it seems like all we’ve been doing is talking about me, now it’s my turn for questions! Ahem.” She cleared her throat before continuing… “Inquiring minds want to know all about Alex Danvers. Things like, why does the brilliant almost seventeen-year-old love the angry, discordant music she does?”

“Hey! Linkin Park is not ‘discordant’.” Alex protested, but Kara continued over her…

“Inquiring minds also want to know, has the beautiful brunette ever been on a ‘date’, had a girlfriend… or maybe even a boyfriend? And the big question… has she ever had sex? Hmmm?”

Alex had literally face palmed while her sister was going on and on. “Kara… Kara!! Can you please stop with the announcer’s voice? Alex Trebek, I swear I’m taking away your TV…” She sighed. “Look, I just… can we talk about my non-existent dating or sex life some other time?”

Kara’s laugh was magical, and when she spoke, her voice back to normal, “Fine, but you owe me details, later.”

“Thanks, Kara.” Alex chuckled, then was broadsided by a realization... Oh, my God, she called me beautiful! Kara thinks I’m beautiful!

The ‘younger’ girl was still talking as Alex sat stunned, “I suppose I do have a million other questions about you and your world I could ask, though all of them are far less interesting… such as, I really would like to know what an earworm is. Ew! Just saying it sounds gross. And, can you explain, did humans once actually believe the Earth was flat? That can’t possibly be true, but I had to ask anyway. Oh, and one more… what’s it like being the smartest student at her high school who can kick almost everyone’s butt if she wanted to?” Kara leaned in close and smiled, and Alex actually full-on blushed in response.

Things were interrupted when Kara’s stomach growled, loudly. “Well, that’s a start, but can we pause and order pizza before you answer? I don’t know about you, but I’m totally starving.”

Alex was still buzzing from Kara’s brazen compliments and relieved for a distraction from being in the beams of her spotlight. It was so much easier when she was the one asking the questions. “You’re always starving.” she deadpanned, “Sure, I could eat. Round two in the kitchen?”

Kara grinned impishly and said, “Awesome. Race ya!” before immediately whooshing away, are blowing the papers off Alex’s desk in the process. The big bed suddenly seemed altogether far too cold and empty devoid of Kara’s warmth.

A moment later after getting up, Alex was about to step out her bedroom door when Kara re-appeared out in the hallway, floating near the ceiling.
“Kara, you goof. You’re sooo lucky Eliza and Jeremiah aren’t home.”

The levitating girl was trying not to giggle, and did a graceful pirouette in mid-air, like a ballerina. “But it sucks being stuck on the ground all the time! You know, I think how I feel about flying is kind of like how Jeremiah takes his socks off as soon as he gets home from work every day and makes that happy noise as he wiggles his toes.”

Alex couldn’t help but chuckle. It was so true.

Kara’s expression then changed to a mischievous grin, “Anyway, I forgot to tell you the rules for our race… The loser has to pay creepy pizza guy.” She then promptly re-disappeared in a gust of wind and a blur of golden hair before Alex could even get a word out.

A few seconds later, as Alex was grumbling about rude alien sisters, super speed, and loudly stomping down the second-floor hallway, she heard Kara taunt her from the bottom of the stairs. “Come ‘on poky! What’s taking you so long?”

That was the last straw.

She finally pulled out the big guns, yelling back, “I’m sorry, I’m just a slow human, and probably much too weak to be able to give you any more massages… like, EVER!”

Kara was suddenly standing right in front of her, flashing Alex those big endless blue puppy dog eyes… weapons she knew from experience could not be resisted for long.

“You w… wouldn’t… w… would you?” The pouty Kryptonian girl’s words were spoken in total mock anguish, but adorably so! No! Fight it, Danvers! Fight it!

Alex was the one grinning now, “Yup, I would.” She flexed her fingers in front of the blonde, hoping her show of resolve would break the girl before her weakness for Kara’s pout face forced her to surrender instead. Time to crank up the threat level, and end this. “I think I may need to retire my magic fingers.”

Kara’s eyes grew wide before she hung her head in defeat, and, with a final pathetic pout, stepped aside from the top of the staircase for Alex. “Fine, you win. But you can’t retire them! I still have a knot, right… right back… here…” Kara whined pathetically and reached around to try and point to a spot between her shoulder blades, all the while still managing to be charming.

Ugh! Stop with the cuteness!

“Poor baby.” Alex chuckled. “Fine. I’ll rub it out after we order…”

“Yes!” Kara clapped excitedly; suddenly all better as she quickly followed her sister down the stairs.

“Alex, you’re the best… but you owe me for the pizza guy. You know that, right? Right? Alleeex!”

After the conclusion of this chapter, one very hungry Kryptonian, and her amused human consumed three extra-large hand-tossed veggie pizzas. The delivery person turned out to be a girl Alex’s knew from her high school, and not the creeper whose eyes never seemed to leave Kara’s chest. They made her a cup of coffee and tipped her five-dollars.

Alex told gullible Kara that earworms were real, and the terrified alien girl stuck cotton balls in her ears that night before going to bed. Alex took pictures of her sleeping to prove it… lots of pictures.
Magic fingers are awesome. I know from experience.

........................................

Now, I also wanted to share with all of you a special Year One bonus scene:

Stars & Rooftops

Jeremiah spends many nights out in the backyard with his teenage daughters. They watch the heavens with his treasured telescopes and talk for hours about the universe. Alex loves her father with all of her heart; especially how, like when she’s alone with Kara or Shah, she can unleash her intellect with him, and be challenged... yet at the same time always learn, and on occasion even teach him something in return.

The ‘oldest’ Danvers daughter owns one of the delicate instruments, a gift from her parents for her 13th birthday, and even though Kara doesn’t need such a device to see the stars, she secretly covets one. When Alex offers to share hers, the alien girl blushes and doesn’t refuse.

For the young Kryptonian, these beautiful moments take her back in time, back home, to the countless nights she spent with her Aunt Astra... who also loved teaching her about the stars as much as Kara loved her. Rao, Astra, what happened to you?

Kara likes her new, vibrant world; on Krypton the atmosphere was only to be studied, not a place for dreams. How sad this fact seems to her now. By comparison, on Earth, while above her is a sky she does not recognize, it is one filled with wonder! Monsters, gods, and heroes all walk there, accompanied by thrilling tales of tragedy, adventure, and romance.

How Jeremiah, clearly a man dedicated to science, can also be so much more than that... an entertaining storyteller, a dedicated mate, a patient teacher, a loving father, but also one who holds secrets, is just another revelation... not only about the admirable person, he is but the nuanced complexity of the people of Earth.

Late one summer night, Kara and her dreamcatcher are outside of her bedroom windows on the roof of the Midvale house. Over the weeks since her arrival, the gently sloped expanse had become the sisters’ special place. They lay together on a blanket, so close that they’re sides are touching... content to just be together, gazing up at the stars.

The scent of the fresh ocean breeze, mingled with Alex’s intoxicating scent, is a heady thing to her senses and makes her dizzy.

Or maybe it’s more than that...

Like an anchor, she wraps one of her sister’s hands in her own, savoring the perfection of silky human skin under the slow brush of her thumb. When Alex’s fingers shift, and eagerly entwine with hers, an overwhelming feeling of powerlessness permeates her entire being.

At that moment she is certain; nothing in the universe could be as beautiful as this.

At peace, Kara lays her head back and looks up to the vast sky above her. When she wills her irises to open wide, the already dazzling panorama begins to fill to overflowing with a dazzling proliferation of ancient galaxies, nebula, and stars that only a moment before, had been invisible.

“Rao! Alex, I wish you could see what I see.” Her words are hushed, awestruck.
The brunette closes her eyes as she wiggles her head into the crook of Kara’s neck and onto the warmth of her soft shoulder, imagining what Kara is seeing. And then, in a whisper, says, “Tell me…”

Chapter End Notes

A big thanks out to my unpaid intern, regular coffee shop writing companion, and prolific Fan Fiction author, for writing Tala-Lor’s beautiful poem. My amazingly talented daughter, you are a shining star!

Again, no editor or reader this chapter but me, so please let me know if you find errors and I’ll address them promptly.

Caracal wild cat info
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caracal

Next chapter we’ll jump ahead to October, and Alex’s 17th birthday. What’s Kara secretly been working on in the Danvers’ garage for weeks?

Odds & Ends:

Language lessons
After Kara begins her diligent instruction of Alex in Kryptonese, she is delighted to discover that her ‘older’ sister possesses an uncanny ability to quickly pick up new languages almost as fast as her. Aside from English, Alex is already respectably articulate in conversational French, and fully fluent in Persian (Farsi), both spoken and written, and begins teaching her eager sister.

Sleeping arrangements
Alex has officially become Kara’s personal dreamcatcher, and consequently, her own bed hasn’t been slept in since July. To Alex’s confusion and internalized glee, her parents actually praised her for being such a dedicated sister and encouraged her to keep it up.

Covert Missions & Training
Alex’s recon into her fathers less than secure files on Superman yields a cornucopia of useful information that aids her in creating a training regiment for Kara. Using jury-rigged, and rather ingenious methods, she helps Kara begin to understand and sharpen her hyper senses. It’s a start. Mastery will take time and practice.

The Big Lug
Kal-El visits Midvale every other weekend to ‘train’ Kara, which essentially means how to handcuff her powers, not to understand or master them. While a little heartbroken, and disappointed, by her cousin’s lack of support, she believes that he’s just being overprotective, and in her heart has forgiven him… mostly. Besides, she already has a trainer.
Where Alex celebrates her seventeenth birthday, and Kara meets her sister’s close-knit group of friends. Also, afterward, Kara takes Alex flying for the first time and gives her two very special birthday presents.

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Thanks for letting me tag along, I had a wonderful time,” Kara said, kicking at the leaves that scurried like colorful dancers around her feet as she walked side by side with her ‘sister’. The pair were navigating the seemingly endless sidewalks of a residential neighborhood on their way home from Alex’s seventeenth birthday pre-celebration with her Squad of misfits.

She grinned. The happiness Kara radiated was infectious, just like the beautiful girl’s smile, visible even in the diffuse light of the streetlamps. The truth was, the ‘older’ Danvers had initially been a little concerned about bringing the Kryptonian along to hang out with her friends. She shouldn’t have been, but the thought of being under Shah’s all-seeing gaze, where her best friend could observe all of her and Kara’s interactions in minute detail for hours, had slightly unnerved her. As at school, the two of them had had to be extremely careful to maintain what felt like an unnatural distance from one another. To behave like siblings, instead of whatever it was they were becoming.

Both found the constraints frustrating.

All Alex had wanted to do all evening was reach out and touch her warm alien, or wrap her arms around her. She kept catching herself inching closer to Kara at every opportunity, stealing moments to brush up against her, or offer a chaste hug that would hopefully not draw suspicion.

Fortunately, thanks to a considerable amount of restraint on both their parts, the sisters seemed to have passed the Shah test by the end of the night - and better yet, Alex’s ‘little’ sister had fit right in.

Quinn had instructed Kara in the awesomeness that was Star Trek Crazy Eights, and she ended up winning more hands than anyone. The card game was something he’d made up for their friends... The Squad, what the small group of misfits and outcasts called themselves, and was basically standard Crazy Eights with a twist.

The game required the use of a deck of cards featuring the characters from the Original Star Trek series. Along with the regular rules, players could lay down a card of a similar suit, of a character (regardless of suit) and effectively change suit by doing so, or any eight - and have the option to
change, or not change to a different suit).

It was a blast!

To top the evening off, teaching Kara how to play Dungeons & Dragons had ended up being a crapload of fun. It helped that the delightful girl had prepared, and was a natural, both with the game, and people.

As they continued their journey home, Alex glanced up to check the unfamiliar cross streets to make sure they were still headed in the right direction. Kara had been the one to suggest they walk back from Brian’s house after their gathering, which Alex had said yes to, of course. Danvers, you’re so whipped…

The three-mile trek wasn’t the kind of hike she’d normally volunteer for, but the crisp Fall air combined with the cloudless, starlit evening was too inviting to pass up… Plus, it gave her alone time with Kara, which was a gift better than playing D&D, birthday parties, or yelling out a tortured “Kahn!” whenever she dropped a Kahn card on the pile.

“I should be thanking you! Everyone loved you, Kara, especially Shah… and she’s normally near impossible to impress. She said that you’re fun to be around and brilliant… yeah, she told me that! Quinn said that I, and I quote, ‘have the geekiest sister, ever,’ don’t worry, that’s a total compliment. He also said that you’re definitely part of our gaming group now, may the dice gods be with you! If that doesn’t say acceptance, I’m not sure what does.”

“What about Brian?”

“Him? Well, he’s… he’s Brian. You had him at ‘gorgeous blonde in his basement.’ I don’t think he knew what to do with himself after you actually started speaking Elvish.” Alex chuckled.

“Anariel is a high elven priestess; I was just staying in character… and it was a nice basement, that flat screen was as big as one of my bedroom’s walls.”

“Sure… staying in character AND showing off your uber language skills because you never sleep, and have faaaa too much free time on your hands.”

Kara grinned adorably and said, “Maybe… just a little.”

“Well, whatever, it was awesome. You were… kind of amazing, as usual, and seduced all of my… excuse me, our friends. Oh well, at least I still get your best stuff just for me. If they could only see you walk around the house not touching the floor when you’re in the zone listening to a good song on your iPod or hear you speak in Kryptonese… they’d be blown away. I know I always am.”

Her normally graceful ‘sister’ suddenly tripped, stumbled forward, and reached for Alex’s outstretched hand to stabilize herself. Um, that’s new. Was Kara suddenly avoiding looking at her? Hmmm…. she was blushing.

Kara had always worn her emotions on her sleeve, like an open book, actually, and Alex loved that about her. It wasn’t the best quality for an alien trying to pass as human to have… but it was oh so adorable.

The girl straightened up, adjusted her stylish faux glasses Jeremiah had given her over the summer, and mumbled, “I’m fine… just practicing my clumsy. That’s all…”

Sure you were, Ms. So obviously embarrassed… but about what, or more specifically, whom? It was
clear Kara was crushing on someone, and while Alex hoped she knew exactly who, and why she reacted the way she did… she wasn’t 100% sure, or, honestly, maybe she just felt some need to pretend otherwise.

Alex forced a smirk, and using the most suggestive tone she could muster said, “Okay, spill… is it Brian?”

Kara’s delicate brows knit together quizzically. “Is he what?” Then, very slowly, a look of horrified understanding crept in as she began shaking her head. “Brian? No, no, no. He’s a great Dungeon Master and a sweet guy, but Alex, seriously? He has no sense of personal hygiene… The boy would have had jam on his Star Wars shirt all night if I hadn’t of cleaned him up. So nope, nada, zilch… not gonna happen.”

Alex was still grinning. “So… you’re saying NOT Brian then?”

“So, definitely not Brian. And you’re a very evil girl.”

Alex stuck her tongue out at Kara, who promptly did the same back at her as she mused, “Fine. Okay, not Quinn either, you’re betting on the wrong team for him…sooooo, it has to be… Shah!”

Kara’s fading blush brightened once again as she ducked her blonde head.

“I knew it,” Alex said in triumph, but turned her face away from her sister a little as she bit her lip. Please no, not Shah.

For a moment Alex’s mind slipped back four years, to her first encounter with Shahrazad Nazari at the park near her house. It was also the first time she’d ever seen anyone performing parkour, especially an incredibly intense, beautiful, Iranian girl with a sweet British accent…

Shah had blown her away from the start, and they’d been best friends ever since. The girl Alex first met was a much angrier version of the spiritual young woman she had blossomed into over time. Back then she’d seemed haunted, and Alex had been drawn to her.

Shah always insisted she was ‘Persian’ not ‘Iranian,’ wore a hijab, was Muslim, a science geek, spoke five languages, and was an outspoken feminist with a chip on her shoulder the size of a VW Beetle.

Because of that, she didn’t have the easy time fitting in at school at first… at least before meeting Alex, who pulled her into the ranks of her small circle of friends right away.

She’d always been protective of Shah… hmmm, okay, protective was disingenuous, possessive would be a more honest way of describing her feelings. She loved how the opinionated Persian firebrand was never afraid to speak her mind and was as big a science nerd as Alex was. Shah wanted to build starships for God’s sake, and had the brains to one day do it!

Alex had never had anyone like her in her life before…

She didn’t know Shah’s backstory for almost six months; it took her a while to get the girl to lower her defenses, but when she finally did everything came tumbling out. Shah and her mother, Ravan, had spent the previous five years in London before immigrating to the United States. Ravan had purchased a property where she felt her daughter would be safe, which turned out, luckily, to be in Alex’s neighborhood.

Unfortunately, the Nazari family had a good reason to feel wary.
Both of Shah’s parents had been quantum physicists back in their country and forced to work for the
Iranian military in a very secret capacity. Ravan didn’t like talking about it, so Shah and Alex only
knew that the scientists had been extremely valuable to the regime and closely monitored, which is
why they had had such a hard time when they decided to flee the country.

They had begun their journey as a family of four, but just as they were about to make a clean escape,
Shah’s father, Arad, was captured by Iranian intelligence at the Turkish border. During the melee,
her younger brother, Cyrus, had been killed… struck down by a ricocheting bullet on the side of a
dusty road.

Shah had been running hand-in-hand with him when it happened.

She blamed herself for Cyrus’s death, thinking if she’d run just a little faster, or moved just a few
inches to the right to take the bullet for him, that he’d still be alive. It was heartbreaking, and Alex
gently soothed her friend’s tears of grief and guilt, and they’d grown closer.

Ravan, already burdened with so much sadness, had held on to a sliver hope that her child had
survived. But, despite years of searching for answers using relatives and contacts back in Iran, the
Nazari family still had no firm answer.

The boy now only existed as a paradox, like Schrödinger's cat, neither truly alive nor dead.

It was so awfully tragic.

After arriving in Metropolis Wayne Tech immediately hired Mrs. Nazari in a high-level, classified
position, and she’d made sure Shah never lacked for anything since. Her best friend had a great
house, love, and amazing food and was doted on by a loving mother and Tala, their housekeeper.
Tala always prepared enough to feed an army whenever Alex, and now Kara, came over, and the
feast was always delicious! Crispy saffron and tart cherry rice, veggie kabobs, kohresh stew, nān
bread, doogh, a traditional Iranian drink of yogurt, water, salt, and dried mint… and one of Alex’s
favorites, Aab Hendevaneh, basically watermelon juice…

Alex, now salivating, was brought back from her reminiscing when Kara spoke up…

“I like Shah, a lot. I mean, she’s super smart, outspoken, and mature. Oh, and calm, like Zen calm.
She can be this elegant, spiritual woman one minute, then a major geek who knows martial arts, and
has a sword collection… that she actually uses… the next. How cool is that? Her stories about
growing up in Iran were so vivid and sad. I’d really love to see her country someday.” She sighed.
“She really is a beautiful person, under that snarky exterior… and sooo pretty.”

Alex swallowed… hard, as Kara continued, “You two have a lot in common… I see why you like
her so much.” Kara’s curious, smiling eyes studied her sister’s reactions.

Alex tried to bump Kara’s shoulder, but the Kryptonian barely budged.

“Of course I like her, as in I care about her… you know, as a friend. That’s all.” Ugh, Alex didn’t
even sound convincing to herself.

Kara shook her head, “Oh sister, that denial looks terrible on you.”

Alex struggled with a comeback but didn’t have one. She huffed and shoved her hands deep into her
jacket pockets as they crossed another empty street and kept walking.

Kara took advantage of the silence to continue with a barely concealed grin, “Sadly… Shah and I
wouldn’t work as a couple, even though I am technically sixteen now.”

Oh, thank God! The little tease, she had me going for a minute… “Eighteen.” Alex deadpanned.

“Who’s counting? Anyway, I’ve hit the magic number where I can lobby Eliza and Jeremiah for one-off dating approval, not that I have any interest in anyone at school.”

Oh? Alex’s interest was peaked.

Only a little over a month earlier, the Kryptonian had celebrated her completely made-up September fifth sixteenth birthday. No one knew what comparable day on Earth her Awakening had actually occurred on, but Kal had made a great choice regardless, because, Sapphire… obviously. The color was a close match to her Kara’s stunning eyes and the heirloom necklace from her mother. As Kara’s first Earth birthday present Eliza had taken them both to see Cat Power live in concert. It was awesome, and a great test for Kara’s control of her senses, especially hearing.

It was also fun being, at least publicly, the same age as her adopted sister for the last month.

Kara added, “Not that any of that really matters… because I’m not the one who has a crush on Shah.”

Alex stared at her in horror… the conversation was headed in a direction that she’d purposely been avoiding for a long time. Ugh, why did Kara have to always be so damned perceptive!

“You could tell her how you feel, you know….” Kara’s tone was encouraging but slightly hesitant.

“No way. Shah’s my best friend… who isn’t an alien,” Alex offered Kara a small smile, “…and yes, I liked her from the first day I saw her in that sweet black hoodie, almost flying up a wall like a Kryptonian… but doesn’t mean I should EVER tell her that.” Kara, why are you pushing me about this?

The blonde looked perplexed, tilting her head adorably, like a puppy, as she did whenever she was confused.

“Kara, humans are not logical. You know this… so the truth isn’t always the best policy, not when feelings, especially complicated ones, are involved anyway.”

“I don’t understand… why would you lie to someone you care about?”

“Okay, let me explain… ONE: surprising someone with your feelings for them rarely ever ends well. That’s just kind of a universal fact; TWO: she’s not gay! Okay? At least I’m about 90% sure she isn’t…”

Doubt was already clawing at Alex’s brain, Shah and she were always touching, and showing affection, was it more than her Persian cultural sensibilities? Ugh! Alex pushed the confusing thoughts aside and stopped chewing on her nail.

“I shouldn’t have to continue, buuut… THREE: she might freak out, hate me, and never want to talk to me again… ever, and losing her as my friend would be completely unacceptable.” Alex’s chest hurt just thinking about the possibility, “FOUR: even if she was interested, I’ve never really had a real girlfriend or boyfriend, so there’s a good chance I’ll screw things up… so go back and reference number three; Aaand, that finally brings us to number FIVE: you arranging my funeral after I tell mom and dad that I also like girls… a lot, more than boys.”

Alex took a deep breath, and kept number SIX to herself… I do care for Shah; I also think I’m
falling in love with someone else… but admitting that out loud would acknowledge what had changed in Alex’s life, and rip open another very dangerous door, one that could never be closed again, and that she wasn’t ready to face…

Kara nodded, appearing to be processing all of what Alex had just babbled. “I’m sorry this is so hard Alex, I just know what my senses tell me, and there’s something there. Shah’s heart rate has a normal level, and a ‘when Alex walks into the room level.’ And don’t get me started on her spike in body temperature or those amazing pheromones she starts putting out whenever you’re around…”

Alex covered her ears. “Stop! TMI!” She couldn’t believe what she was hearing… but Kara would know. Hmmm.

Kara started to speak, stopped, and then started again as Alex lowered her hands, “About your number FIVE though… Really? I think you already know how Eliza and Jeremiah will react when, yes, when you finally come out and admit to being bisexual. They already accept and love me… you know, their adopted daughter slash alien girl with about zero boundaries when it comes to attraction? What did you call me before, pan-sexual? So there. Also, they are far more, ummm, open-minded, than you give them credit for… super hearing and X-Ray vision… remember?” She was grinning impishly.

“Ew! I don’t want to know…”

Kara giggled. “Anyway, my dating experience is even less existent than yours, so I have no right to give you any advice… but if I had any, I think the great inventor and statesman, Benjamin Franklin, said it best, ‘Nothing ventured, nothing gained.’ Some things… and people… are worth taking a risk for.

“You need to be fair to yourself, to her, and to… whoever you may choose to make room for in your heart after Shah…” Kara paused thoughtfully, her soft gaze flickering over Alex’s lips… “You should at least be sure of your feelings, and hers, before you close that door… so you can move forward.”

Alex was a bit stunned by Kara’s words; they were so honest, and felt right, even though they weren’t what she’d wanted to hear. “Wow, when did you go and get so wise?” Alex exhaled and kicked at the leaves. “I don’t know Kara. I feel so confused.” And she knew that her feelings for Kara were a big part of that. “It’s scary. Why do you think I’ve been all avoidy about it?”

“I understand.” Alex could hear the empathy in Kara’s voice and sense the warmth of her body as she moved in close to comfort her. She always seemed to know what Alex needed.

“Hey, do you mind if we stop here?” Kara asked politely.

Alex wasn’t sure what was going on, but she took a break at Kara’s request on the nondescript stretch of sidewalk and stood quietly as Kara tilted her glasses down and stared intently out into the shadows as she slowly rotated in a 360-degree circle. Why is she scanning the area? Alex could always tell when Kara was using her powers, and right now her alien was definitely up to something.

“Kara, what are you…?”

Suddenly, in one fluid movement, the blonde became a blur, took Alex’s hand, and pulled her off the lit path of the sidewalk into the darkness. They ran through a thick grove of trees and burst onto the edge of a vast, seemingly endless field without stopping.

What the heck? Where are we going?
Far ahead, Alex could glimpse swing sets and a massive (and familiar) castle-like play structure silhouetted against the clear night sky. Ah, Tiller Park, they were only a mile from home.

Why is Kara taking me there, and why are we running? Alex allowed herself to be pulled along, excited to find out the answers.

“Come this way...” her sister urged, switching to Kryptonese as they plunged deeper into the shadows... “I would like to show you something that may give you some clarity... something beautiful. My gift to you, Vaena.” Her voice was music, wonderfully soft, and filled with eager purpose.

Kara using her native tongue so freely sent a thrill through Alex, as it had the very first time that she heard her speak it. Their regular lessons were definitely starting to pay off, as she'd understood every word, aside from one... ‘Vaena’. Kara had uttered the delightful term reverently, like an honorific to address Alex, and she desperately wanted to understand it’s meaning, and why just hearing it made her feel so, so... amazing.

“Kara. What does... Vay-A-Na mean?” Ugh, she'd murdered it... but she was running blindly through a pitch-black park... she’d get it right next time. “And, where are we going?” Alex continued speaking in Kara’s language, which over the months had become their secret language.

They were now in the middle of the broad darkened field, drinking in the delightful, earthy scent of freshly cut grass. The world around them was a sea of black, fading into a vibrant dark blue above the horizon, all awash with a thousand pinpoints of light; stars, millions of light years away, glittering like diamonds. Metropolis’s red glow simmered behind them to the east, muted by a wall of tall trees, and distance. It was like they were in another world.

Kara had brought their mad dash to a halt and turned to face a grateful Alex, who was still trying to catch her breath. Graceful as ever, her left foot found a divot in the lumpy grass, causing her to trip, but was saved from falling by Kara, who gently slipped her hands under her sister’s elbows to keep her steady.

“Thanks,” Alex said in English, as they stood together, neither in any rush to move apart. Illuminated by starlight, Alex watched as Kara nervously slipped her glasses off and into the pocket of her black pea coat. It was obvious that the younger Danvers had something to say; she fidgeted and nibbled adorably on her lower lip, two of her top tells.

Alex suppressed a grin, and taking pity on the girl, spoke again in Kara’s language, to help give her a push, “Are you ever going to answer my question?”

Kara looked up adoringly at Alex, seemed to steel herself, and then whispered, “Vaena is an ancient Kryptonian word that was once nearly forgotten. It was kept alive by the poets of old and in legends. It loosely translates to ‘one who is loved’ but is much more... profound, and a name that can only be given, not taken... I’d like to give it to you, for your birthday, if you’ll accept it.”

Alex could feel the butterflies fluttering inside of her as she leaned in close, unapologetically seeking Kara’s warmth. Then... wait! Was it Alex’s imagination? No, it wasn’t. Kara’s eyes were beginning to glow softly... as if an azure fire burned somewhere deep inside of her, with the light being reflected through the windows of her eyes.

Whoa! Was that normal?

Pulse racing, Alex carefully reached out to touch her cheek. “Kara, your eyes, they’re... glowing. My God, they’re so beautiful.” She involuntarily giggled with unexpected delight when Kara leaned
into her hand and gently nuzzled it. After a few incredible moments of very obviously savoring her touch, she lovingly deposited a chaste, blazing, cherry-lip-gloss kiss on Alex’s palm.

It wasn’t like Kara had never given Alex a peck on the cheek or forehead before… they’d often kiss goodnight, hello, goodbye, just because they were happy, it was just something they did in the Danvers house. But those kisses were usually quick things; the way children do it… not like this… a reverent, lover’s caress, like a promise, delivered by lips as soft as silk.

There were no words to describe how amazing the beautiful Kryptonian’s blatant expression of affection made Alex feel… desire. A hunger like she’d never felt or even imagined before, burned, and ached inside of her. **Oh... My... God!**

As Kara did whenever she thought Alex was starting to freak out, she took one of her human’s hands and gave a gentle squeeze. And, as usual, it helped, as did the brief silence that settled between them.

When Kara finally responded to Alex’s question about her radiant eyes, the glow had already started to dim. “This has never happened to me before, but I’ve also never felt this happy either. I’ll ask Kal if he knows the reason when he visits next… perhaps he’ll deign to tell me.” She grimaced.

Kara’s gaze then calmly shifted upwards, to the sky. “Alex? This is why I brought you here. *Carpe diem,* right? **Please,** let me show you the stars.”

Still tingling with longing, Alex had almost regained a semblance of composure when she suddenly couldn’t breathe… was Kara suggesting what she thought Kara was suggesting?

“No!” She nearly shouted, but quickly brought her volume back down to a whisper. “I mean, we’ve talked about going flying… sometime, someday, but I didn’t think it would be… **now.** I’ve always wanted to go… with you… but we can’t! You know that I’m scared of heights, and what if someone sees? Something bad could happen to you!”

Kara shrugged. “No one will see. I picked this spot for a reason; it’s like a… dead zone. We are all alone, I checked, and double-checked. There are no peeping neighbors, no dogs, no aircraft of any kind, or satellites overhead, and no video cameras… only bats, bugs, some field mice, and a hungry owl. Don’t worry… I won’t drop you.” Kara began to slip her arms around Alex, but paused, as if to allow time for her sister to decide if she really wanted to go. She asked, “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” The word just popped out of Alex… almost like a very loud squeak, and she quickly covered her mouth in surprise and laughed. She’d wanted to fly with Kara from the first day they’d met and now was her chance. Her initial caution quickly gave way to anticipation and the euphoric thrill that came from the fear of being discovered.

Kara was grinning from ear to ear as she finished sliding her arms around Alex’s slender waist, and lifted her without effort. Kara’s warmth now surrounded her, and everything felt absolutely perfect…

“Wait for a second!” Alex startled. She’d had horrible thought, “You **do** know how to do this, right? This isn’t a trial run or anything… Is it?”

Kara suppressed a giggle, “I thought you said that you trusted me? Come on Alex, don’t worry; I’ve been practicing... in secret! As I said, I won’t drop you… ever. I promise.”

And then, they were rising steadily into the air, Kara slowly turning in a smooth tight spiral… and the world below them became smaller and smaller. It was so quiet and absolutely serene.

Alex knew that she should have been looking up as an immense swath of glittering stars from a
galactic arm of the Milky Way began to appear above, or out to the horizon where a mixture of light and colors melded together creating a masterpiece more stunning than any work on the wall of any museum, or finally, off to the great city of Metropolis in the east, where dark, shimmering fingers of metal and glass seemed to emerge from the Earth, reaching desperately for the heavens.

But she didn’t see any of those things, at least at first.

Alex was already walking with the gods, or at least one of them, and couldn’t take her eyes off the face of the Kryptonian angel who carried her.

Kara was more beautiful than Alex had ever seen her before, or maybe this was just the first time she was seeing her clearly: the real Kara Zor-El… the one unfettered by contrived human flaws and controls… who radiated unbridled joy, strength, and confidence.

A goddess incarnate who fell to Earth and into Alex’s life… and heart.

They must have been at least a mile up in the air by that time, but she didn’t feel cold, was breathing easily, and wasn’t worried. She was weightless, surrounded by a sea of glittering stars, and the warm comfort of Kara’s embrace.

My Kara.

No one else in the universe knew her as Alex did, or loved her as much. Just being with her was magic.

“Why are you crying?” Kara’s unrestrained melodic voice was filled with concern as she leaned in.

Alex sniffed, “Because I’m happy, stupid. I’ve never seen anything so beautiful in my whole life.” She wasn’t lying, but she also wasn’t talking about the sky, or the stars, even as lovely as they were...

Kara gently brushed a few strands of errant hair from Alex’s face, and at the same time sneakily slipped something light, and silver around her sister’s neck using super speed.

Surprised, Alex looked down, and almost stopped breathing when she saw the necklace… and reflexively reached up to slide her finger over the cool metal.

“Is it… mine?”

“Yes. “ Kara was grinning brightly. “I made it for you.”

*Made it??* Alex pulled out her phone to illuminate her new treasure and was almost rendered speechless. The silvery wisp of living chain looked exactly like her sister’s, except a gorgeous blood-red gemstone dangled from it.

Ruby was Alex’s favorite…

“Oh my god, it’s so beautiful! You made this?” *For me?*

“Yup.” Still beaming.

“T… thank you! I can’t believe... How did you…? I mean where did you…?”

“In our garage.” Kara came to her rescue. “I forged the chain using a little of the Kryptonian metal from Kal’s pod, but the stone was the hardest part…”
“It’s huge! What is it, a ruby?”

“No, a diamond… a red diamond.”

“No way!”

“Yup. I honestly had no idea what I was getting myself into… I guess there’s a reason they’re so rare. I ruined a dozen test gems practicing, but yours turned out perfect! It’s basically two and a half carats of superheated carbon; the atoms crushed in my own hands. It was pretty awesome! I could feel the heat radiating between my fingers!”

The science geek in Alex perked up, “How much pressure? And what temp?”

Kara pursed her lips (which was very, very distracting) for just a moment, and then said, “I was able to hold a constant 725,000 psi, and could have squeezed harder! And with my laser vision, I still don’t like that name, by the way, I was able to maintain 2,200 degrees Fahrenheit. Tired me out though, big time.”

“Holy crap! 725k?! That’s like… fifty thousand atmospheres! And all of that heat… in your hands! Whoa!” Alex needed to catch her breath, before continuing, “First, let me say congrats, and second, how the Hell did you get that kind of precision without a way to measure it, exactly?”

Kara grinned, “I kind of had a little help… Kal owed me.”

“You sneak.” Alex smiled, so happy it felt like her heart was going to burst. “How’d you get the Big Lug to agree to that with my parents breathing down his neck about ‘no powers’?”

“He really wanted out of the ‘Kara doghouse’… he called it that. He said, ‘using your powers just to make something isn’t going to hurt anyone, so… what Eliza and Jeremiah don’t know…’ My cousin is so cute when he’s being bad.” She snickered.

“Well, good on him. So, tell me more… talk science to me Kara-Zor-El.”

“Okay, wow, I can literally ramble off formulas and alien crystalline formations all day if it makes you this… ah hem, excited.” Kara giggled. “Anyway, we had to get the chromium mixture just right for your color, so he added that and the other impurities in as I focused on the rest. At the end of the process, he used his freeze breath to cool it all down so the diamond would form properly.

“I wish we had thought to record everything for you, it’d be like watching an episode of that show you love, ‘How It’s Made,’ but with Kryptonians.”

Alex burst into laughter, and quickly said, “Oh my God, Kara, don’t make me pee myself all the way up here.”

After they’d both finally calmed down Kara’s eyes grew wide, as if remembering something else. “There is one more kinda, sorta important thing… we put a sliver of my living crystal inside your diamond; it’s what gives the gem that ‘Eye of Sauron’ effect. It was… necessary to speed things along, and to create a link back to my necklace; at a quantum level. I guess what I’m trying to say is that it’s technically alive. She won’t ever have a personality, really, but can understand and communicate with you, as her ‘person.’ She’s truly one of a kind… like you.”

Alex touched the red jewel sparkling on her necklace, and felt a warm pulse beneath her fingers… I’m Kara’s person? Wow…

She was in absolute awe at what Kara had done, and feeling unworthy of such a magnificent gift…
but loved beyond words.

“Thank you…” She snuggled into Kara's warmth, wrapping her arms around the young goddess' neck, and breathing in… before finally gazing out at the wonders around them.

At that very moment, as a shooting star streaked across the sky, Kara leaned in to whisper, “Happy birthday Vaena.” and placed another delicate, tingly, teasingly lingering kiss upon her cheek.

Alexandra Danvers was literally in heaven, held aloft by an angel… her angel, and never wanted to come down.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, this was a fun chapter to write. Any and all errors are my own, please let me know if you see any and I'll address them!

**Info on Red diamonds:**
http://www.capetowndiamondmuseum.org/blog/2013/04/red-diamonds/
http://www.capetowndiamondmuseum.org/about-diamonds/formation-of-diamonds/

FYI, 725,000 psi is similar to the pressure a hundred miles beneath the Earth’s surface, down in the mantle.

A shout out to my hardcore Trekkie daughter, who taught me the Star Trek version of the Crazy Eights card game over the Christmas holiday last year:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crazy_Eights

Star Trek Original Series deck used:
https://www.amazon.com/Aquarius-52240-Star-Playing-Cards/dp/B00AZSTY5Y/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1484030364&sr=8-2&keywords=star+trek+original+series+card+deck
A Normal Life Part 1: Needful Things

Chapter Summary

Where Kara and Alex prepare for Alex’s favorite holiday of the year, Halloween!!
Which is only one week away.

More of Kara’s past comes to light, Alex receives an unexpected surprise, and the girls come to a new understanding.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

October 23rd - Year Two

A week after last chapter, after school

Midvale - The Danvers’ Residence

1641 Hours UTC -5, Friday afternoon, U.S. East Coast Time

“Did you look in this one?” Kara called out, immediately choking on a puff of dust from yet another battered cardboard box pulled from the recesses of her bedroom closet. “Gak! Come on Alex, looking for Jeremiah’s old blaster would be so much easier if I could just use my X-Ray vision. Can’t I cheat, just a little? Pretty please?”

Squeezing between rumpled coats and crinkling, plastic-shrouded garments Alex leaned out from the shadows of the cavernous storage area and into the ancient yellow light cast by the lone bulb sputtering above them.

She was about to say something snarky about Kara’s whining, but the words never came out once she spied her adopted sister, on a step ladder, trying desperately to shoo away the growing dust cloud that surrounded her without using her powers.

Poor beautiful Kara…

Alex paused to savor the moment, taking pictures in her mind.

Wow, how unlike her to be so disgustingly carefree only a week before Halloween. Happy even.

The eldest Danvers daughter was notorious for being a complete dictator about being ready for Halloween well before her favorite holiday, often by weeks. Yet, here she was, stuck in a small confined space with a gorgeous alien… in absolutely no hurry to find the finishing touch for her Han Solo costume.

Maybe the company she was keeping had something to do with her sudden lack of urgency? Okay, fine! The truth? The Kryptonian had everything to do with it… Alex honestly enjoyed every minute
being stuck in a closet with her.

“Sorry 'little sis', but you agreed, no powers today… remember? You’re stuck playing mortal, just like the rest of us.”

Kara shot Alex a wounded look, but then suddenly made the strangest startled face.

*Oh no!*

Realizing what was about to happen, Alex quickly pushed aside some hanging clothes and grabbed ahold of the thick, wooden bar that ran down her side of the small room. She closed her eyes and held on for dear life as the super-powered Kryptonian inhaled sharply, and then sneezed.

There were crashing sounds and general chaos for a few blurry seconds as an explosion of air ripped through the closet, almost blowing the door off its hinges! Lifted off the floor by the gale, Alex couldn’t keep her grip, and was sent sailing backward, where she landed quite unglamorously on her butt atop a stack of now crumpled boxes… that thankfully had cushioned her fall.

*Ouch.*

Yeah, that was all that had cushioned things…. Yup, true story.

As she regained her senses, the slightly dazed and bruised human turned her head to peer out at the dazzling rays of sunlight now streaming in from Kara’s room… where all of the accumulated dust that had resided in the closet was drifting like a cloud of nuclear fallout.

Well, better out there than in here Alex thought, almost giggling.

Wow, did I just fly?

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry!” Kara rushed to Alex’s side to free her from a tangle of clothes and hangers, and help her sit up. “I’ve never done that before. I didn’t know I could do that!” The beautiful girl's eyes were wide, and she was breathless. “Are you okay? Did I hurt you? Is anything broken??”

Alex noticed that Kara had begun to focus her gaze… X-ray vision…

“No, no, no! No powers.” She pressed her hands to cover Kara’s eyes. “I’m fine! And nothing’s broken.”

The Kryptonian huffed, and crossed her arms with a super cute glare, “All right… but you’d better be.”

Alex laughed, and with Kara’s gentle assistance began to stand; but paused as she noticed a familiar leather duffle among the mess off to the side of the closet. The expensive-looking black bag was the one Kara had brought with her when she first came to live with her family. It must have fallen from where it had been stored and forgotten.

Now it lay open on its side on the hardwood floor… where Alex glimpsed a tantalizing glint of white fabric within its interior, calling to her.

Back when Kara first arrived, the ‘older’ Danvers sister had never had a chance to satisfy her curiosity and view what treasures the mysterious bag contained… though she’d always wanted to.

She nudged her sister, gesturing in its direction, “Kara, your bag, it’s…”
The graceful girl nodded in understanding as she followed Alex’s gaze… quickly moving over (at human speed) to collect the duffel. Alex followed her out into the bedroom, watching with amusement as the normally invulnerable girl coughed and fanned the air around her head before depositing the bag on her bed.

Alex to the rescue!

She held her breath and darted across the dusty room to quickly open the two tall windows overlooking the roof of the house’s first floor. Since their first flight together they’d spent many evenings out on the gently sloped expanse, either coming and going or snuggled together under the stars. They usually used the openings as doors, but today Kara needed airflow.

Alex breathed in deeply as the welcome chilly October breeze scuttled in.

*Take that, damned dust cloud, humph.*

She glanced back at her sister, at least expecting a thank you, but the graceful blonde was just standing by the bed, unmoving, and staring down at the duffel.

“What’s wrong?” Alex asked as came up from behind and placed a hand on her shoulder, joining in her quiet vigil.

The girl sighed, “Memories… it’s full of them.”

“Ah, I understand… I think. Bad ones?”

Kara’s lips curled into a melancholy smile, “No… and yes… both, I guess.” She shrugged, “I haven’t touched it since before I left my cousin’s apartment in Metropolis. Kal carried it when he brought me to Midvale, and your mom moved all the clothes Lois bought me into my dresser my first day here. I left the bag in my closet right where she put it… I think I’ve been too afraid of what I might find if I actually looked inside.”

Lois? Ahh…. It was all making sense now. Kal did have an apartment and a day job. All the bits and pieces of information were coming together, and at that moment all of Alex’s suspicions were confirmed, and she knew exactly who Kara’s super cousin really was. Not that it mattered. It wasn’t like Alex would ever tell anyone.

“We can put it back…” Alex offered, reaching for the straps.

The soft, familiar touch of Kara’s warm fingers on the back of Alex’s hand stopped her. “It’s okay Alexandra.” The ‘older’ Danvers’ breath hitched as she heard her full name sung in Kryptonese like a melody. “It’s time… I want to see what he salvaged out of my pod. Will you help me?”

How could she say no?

Alex sat down on Kara’s bed next to the bag. “Of course. Come. Sit.” She patted the comforter right beside her, and Kara effortlessly snuggled in.

“You do it.” The Kryptonian pleaded, burying her face on Alex’s shoulder. “I can’t.”

Alex patted Kara’s back, and with the other hand reached inside to slowly pull out a neatly folded garment made of a silky white material. It was gorgeous and tied together with a red ribbon, a decorative touch she recognized and commented on, “That looks like mom’s handiwork.”

Kara lifted her head and smiled when she saw what Alex was holding, “That’s my Ka’dah. Oh,
“KaH-dah?” Alex carefully enunciated the unfamiliar term.

“Yup, that’s right. Your Kryptonese is getting really good. I guess I need to start working with you on glyphs next, huh?” Some of Kara’s positivity seemed to be returning as she reached out and pulled one of the ends of the ribbon, allowing the outfit to unfurl.

“Whoa, it’s so pretty.” Alex was filled with wonder as she explored the incredible fabric. Slipping one of the soft, silky folds between her thumb and fingers, the alien material responded to her touch with a slight tactile vibration, and a brief, soft blue luminescence wherever she touched it… like it was alive…

The design itself was simple but elegant. The top had a crisp look, almost royal, with a high Mandarin-type collar, long sleeves, ties around the waist, and pants that were styled more like slim cut skinny jeans than anything, tight at the ankle. Her attention was drawn to something that she’d missed at first, a subtle imprint on the chest, a relief version of Superman’s famous ‘S’…

Alex was entranced. She ran her fingertips over the symbol’s minute hills and valleys, and without looking at Kara asked, “What does it mean? The ‘S’? It obviously doesn’t stand for ‘Superman’ or ‘super’ like everyone thinks… it’s a Kryptonian glyph of some kind. My parents never mentioned anything about it.”

She couldn’t stop marveling at the impossible treasure from a far-off world.

Kara laughed, “People actually think that’s what it means? Seriously?” She shook her head. “No, it’s our family crest, the House of El.” Kara’s voice echoed pride, loss, and longing. “You’re right, it’s a glyph… a very complex one, layered with meaning. I suppose if I had to boil it down though, it might best translate to ‘stronger together’, a phrase you already know in Kryptonese as ‘El mayarah’, our family motto… to always remind us that we are never alone.”

“That’s so… beautiful… and definitely suits you.” Alex didn’t miss her sister’s blush at her compliment.

Kara then pressed in close, and like a temptress, and asked, “Want to try it on?”

It was a very enticing invitation, and for a fleeting moment, Alex actually thought that she might be able to pull off wearing it. Her alien sister was only a couple inches taller than her… but the gorgeous outfit had obviously been tailor-made for Kara, who, to be completely honest, had the toned, athletic body that any girl in Alex’s school would die for, including her.

“I wish!” Alex lamented, “I doubt that I could squeeze my, um, hips into it… and the chest would be way too loose.” She made a sour face.

Kara wasn’t fazed, and was beaming as she leaned against Alex’s shoulder and said majestically, “Your wish is my command, Vaena.”

Alex’s Kryptonian title rolled deliciously off Kara’s tongue, and the room suddenly felt way, way too warm…

The blonde stood up from the bed with purpose… her eyes never leaving Alex’s face as she said, “First, take off your clothes… and when you are ready to put on Shatari, that’s her name, by the way, touch the fabric. After that, just think about what you want to be wearing… Imagine what it’s made of, how it feels, its form, fit, and function, even the smell, every detail you can think of, the
best you can, and hold those thoughts and images in your mind, the AI will do the rest…” Alex’s look of confusion must have been very clear to Kara, because she giggled and said, “Alex, just trust me on this, okay?”

She wanted to comply but hesitated as she rose from the comforter, blushing at the thought of stripping in front of Kara.

“Oh for Rao’s sake, you humans and your modesty!” Kara shook her head as she turned and covered her eyes with one hand, still holding the elegant Ka’ dah out for Alex behind her with the other. “Happy now?”

“Yes…” Alex sighed in resignation, obviously the opposite of happy, and did as she was instructed, slowly stripping down to her bra and panties. She felt stupid for making a big deal about Kara watching her undress. Especially since after that amazing night of their first flight, their relationship had become… different, closer, though they’d never actually talked about it, at least directly.

She had no idea what the Hell they were doing, but she’d never been happier.

Their public act of normalcy also didn’t stop Alex’s heart from racing whenever she’d catch Kara’s lingering, appreciative glances out of the corner of her eye, or the pleasure of knowing she was often the cause of the Kryptonian girl’s sudden bouts of staring, clumsiness, and adorable babbling.

No one had ever looked at her the way Kara did… like she was beautiful.

“Kara, I want to believe you, but there’s no way I’m going to be able to fit in this with my… ahem, assets” Alex continued grumbling as she took the ethereal garment from Kara. “Shatari, huh? It’s a pretty name. I assume from the root ‘Sha’… meaning…

“Alex…” Kara said impatiently, her hand still covering her eyes. “Stalling…”

“Okay, okay, I’ll try it on.”

“Yaaay! Okay, now, like I said, think about what you want to wear…” As Kara continued, Alex grinned as she noticed a familiar soft glow reflecting off her sister’s hand from her eyes. She silently speculated on what object or sight had sparked the Kryptonian girl’s fire.

“Alex… Alex! Pay attention!”

The human girl tried not to laugh, but when she spoke it was still giggle-speak. “As you command.”

Kara glanced back at her for just a second, and then rolled her beautiful blue eyes, keeping her gaze up at the ceiling afterward… “Not looking! Now, visualize, and hold the images and thoughts in your mind. You were listening, right? Now, you may feel something strange pass through you, like a faint current. It won’t hurt, and don’t worry about it… breathe Alex. Breathe.”

Kara’s calmly worded instructions helped Alex focus, and soon she’d closed her eyes and was imagining one of the most exquisite gowns she’d ever seen, an Alexander McQueen. Not anything that she’d ever dare say she wanted out loud, but something she’d secretly coveted.

The dress was black elegance that would wrap her like a glove. There were no straps or shoulders, and the corset, the bodice portion, was intricately adorned with gold embroidery, below which the full midnight skirts flowed down to the floor, smothered in ruffled tufts of tulle. Alex concentrated on the image she’d seen in an issue of Vogue, and directed her thoughts… at least she tried to.

Well, Shatari, or whatever I’m supposed to call you… can you help a girl out?
She felt like a complete idiot for actually trying to communicate with the almost weightless alien outfit that she still held in her hand.

Suddenly, a surge of energy moved through her like a wave. It felt… tingly, and really, really… pleasurable, like little fingers were massaging her, all over. For a moment she was lightheaded, but the feeling quickly passed.

That’s when she realized that she wasn’t holding Shatari anymore, and the silky embrace of the Kryptonian fabric was wrapping itself around her… all… by… itself.

Alex opened her eyes.

“Rao!” Kara gasped and was staring at her…. mouth open like a cartoon character. “Alex… you look… stunning…”

Alex first blinked at her sister, and then looked down at her dress… **THE** dress, **the McQueen**! The one she’d imagined, she was now wearing it! She almost squealed, well, maybe she actually did, but we won’t speak of that… ever.

Nearly hyperventilating she spun on her heels (yeah, friggin’ heels!), which she was now somehow also wearing, and looked over at herself in the full-length mirror in the corner of Kara’s room.

“Holy crap! Kara! How did it do that??!!”

Her Kryptonian sister was up on her feet, and moved to stand near Alex, marveling at her in the mirror… in a decidedly non-sisterly way.

**Wow.**

Kara’s big blue eyes never left her reflection as the girl began to explain, “Shatari is an AI sentience far more complex than our necklaces, and very much alive. To put it in perspective, Shatari is to your Eye of Sauron necklace as Neil DeGrasse Tyson is to a Tesla. She’s like a super smart person with access to data and information orders of magnitude beyond the entire Internet, and the best friend you’ll ever have… while our crystals, as lovely and important as they are, are more like passively sentient smart appliances.

“My parents gifted Shatari to me as a Companion when I was a child; well before I began traveling… she basically grew up with me, and has been my minder, my friend, travel buddy, and has clothed and protected me for years.”

“Protected?” Alex asked as she turned around to examine the back of the elegant dress.

Kara, caught definitely admiring Alex’s ass, quickly looked up and grinned, “Yup. She’s not just pretty. At this moment you’ve never been safer in your whole life. By now Shatari has integrated herself… gently, into your biology. She knows you now and will keep you safe, from everything she can at least. Imagine anything that could hurt you, radiation, diseases, poisons, heat or fire, drowning, or even accidents, she’ll always try and shield you. She can do other amazing things too. I don’t understand all the science, but she has many filters, sensors, as well as… defenses, and is always on the job.”

“No way… wait, when you say ‘integrated’, what do you mean?” Alex was only a little worried…

“Nothing bad, she just had to get to know you, and your body. You’re her first human, but now she has your blueprint. The neural and other interfaces are harmless but necessary, she needs to be synced with your body and thoughts. Once you take her off the connection will be temporarily
broken, but next time you connect, even from a distance, it will be effortless, since she’ll already
knows you.

“Over time, if you keep wearing her, it will begin to feel as if there’s no separation between you…
like you’re one.” Her sister’s faraway look spoke volumes.

“It’s obvious you miss her Kara. So why aren’t you wearing her?”

The Kryptonian girl sighed, “I redlined her structural tolerances the first day my powers kicked in
here… and almost killed her. Companions in Ka’dah form weren’t made to bear the stresses of a
Kryptonian enhanced by a Yellow Sun as powerful as Sol. I can’t take the risk of ever wearing her
again, even if I’m careful.”

“God… I’m so sorry Kara.” Alex squeezed her sister’s arm.

“Thanks. You know… my father used to say, ‘some blessings are curses in disguise’. I never
understood what he really meant until I came to Earth.” Kara took a deep breath and ran her fingers
over the fabric of Alex’s dress. “At least she looks amazing on you.”

*Her touch was soft, exquisite, and left Alex wanting more.*

Feeling a need to distract Kara from her melancholy she decided to change the subject, “You
mentioned something about defenses?” Alex’s gaze was drawn back to her reflection in the mirror
and the stunning dress… that was, in reality, a vastly intelligent, powerful, alien symbiotic entity.

*No big deal, right?*

At that moment, after her inner snarky thought, Alex felt a warm pulse of amusement come from…
well; she wasn’t sure as much of where as much as whom… Shatari.

*Whoa!*

“She likes you,” Kara said matter-of-factly as she fluffed Alex’s shoulder-length hair and ran her
fingers through her locks before responding. *Oh damn… that feels soooo good. Don’t stop
Kara*. Alex melted into her touch.

“Yeah? You can tell?”

“Uh huh.” Kara tapped one of her temples. “Still connected, we share thoughts often. I like keeping
her company. Anyway, you asked about defenses… funny story, her inertial-dampening field saved
my life once.”

“What!? Spill.”

“I fell off a cliff I shouldn’t have been solo free climbing on a desert planet called Arcturus… To be
fair, the guide warned me not to.”

Alex looked dubious, “This doesn’t sound like a funny story…”

Kara grinned, “Okay, maybe not funny… but it is exciting. Just hear me out. My situation couldn’t
have been worse… I was about half a mile straight up, looking down into a very rugged ravine when
the rock face broke apart, and I fell. That galaxy had a binary star system, a red supergiant with a
hotter blue main-sequence star, so… no superpowers to save me.”

Alex shivered hearing Kara talk about binary stars.
Danvers, you are in so deep…

“My life passed before my eyes; they do say that here, right? Thank Rao for Shatari, she slowed my descent so that by the end of the fall I basically floated down, and just walked away. Had I known at the top how it would end at the bottom it would have been a much more enjoyable experience. As it was, I was terrified.”

Alex reached over and touched Kara’s arm. She imagined how awful it must have been for her.

Kara brushed her fingers lightly over Alex’s, eliciting a smile.

“We’ve been to twelve worlds together, she and I, but in all of that time, I never realized that she was capable of… this. Such beauty, just like her host.” Kara was full on blushing.

Alex was delighted by Kara’s attention and compliments… like a powerful drug that she craved more and more of.

They both stood there for a few seconds, unsure of what to do next, fidgeting, and avoiding looking directly into each other’s eyes.

Kara broke the awkwardness by shifting into her bubbly voice to say, “That dress is fabulous, especially on you. So Couture… can I get your picture?” She deliberately ran at human speed over to grab her prized Polaroid Instamatic camera off her dresser.

“Fine, go ahead.” Alex sighed like a diva and struck her best, dramatic runway model pose.

Kara ended up taking a pile of pictures, some of them incredibly silly, like Alex blowing her a kiss dressed like Marilyn Monroe in one of her famous photos. Alex switched outfits a dozen times, with Shatari flowing like water from one to the next. The human girl’s control of her thoughts became more exact with each new design.

It was awesome.

They eventually ended up on their backs on top of the bed, shoulder-to-shoulder and laughing… with Alex dressed exactly like Han Solo from Episode IV.

“I must have her!” She pleaded. “Kara, please-please-please! She completes me! Look, I have his shirt, the sweet leather boots, and everything! All I need now is that damn blaster.”

They were lying side-by-side, their foreheads touching. Kara grinned and said, “Okay, since you’re begging. Yes, but I’ll need your help finishing up my Leah costume. Consider it compensation.”

Alex laughed, “Done! Thankyouthankyouthankyou!” Then she leaned in and kissed Kara on the cheek, lingering far longer than she knew was appropriate, but that didn’t seem to be a problem for either of them anymore.

Kara didn’t blush either but was did suddenly warmer… simmering in fact, as her soft lips brushed the edges of Alex’s own. She didn’t want to stop but somehow manage to shift slightly before losing all control. Undeterred, Kara smiled and nuzzled her.

After that they lay there quietly for several minutes, just entwined in each other’s arms, foreheads touching, running fingers through each other’s hair, enjoying the closeness… and each other.

Then, Kara did something new… she shifted languidly against her, absentely running her fingers over the skin of Alex’s exposed arm, trailing goosebumps and liquid fire up over her collarbone and along
her neck.

Alex moaned and had to clench her fists to keep herself from doing something really, really stupid, and unquestionably dangerous, with her hands. She desperately wanted to kiss Kara again, but not on the cheek this time, and to feel, and taste her.

The desire was almost overpowering in its intensity… and a little scary. Okay, a lot scary!

Panicked, she did the only thing she could think of… she opened her mouth.

“So, um, twelve worlds huh?” Gah… smooth, Danvers.

Kara, obviously disappointed, replied… “Thirteen, if you count Krypton.” Mercifully, she broke some of the tension between them as she gently withdrew her warm, feathery touch. Alex almost whimpered.

And then, a soundless understanding passed between them...

*Slow down. Be patient. Be calm. All will come in time.*

It had become their ‘thing’, just like how they’d been speaking Kryptonese most of the day, as they had come to do whenever they were alone. The two of them having some kind of telepathic empathy should have freaked Alex out, but their silent communication had only become more powerful since her birthday, and made things better… more perfect between them.

Maybe Alex was starting to take a more Kryptonian view of life?

Kara’s husky sigh was almost inaudible, but Alex heard it and caressed her alien sister’s cheek in response.

She felt the same frustration at the restraint they both were managing, but… something critically important had changed, in her.

While Alex still wasn’t ready to take that plunge yet… as much as she wanted to (and she really, really wanted to), she now knew in her heart that she could… and would, when the time was right… despite the shitstorm of accusations and consequences that would surely come after their feelings came to light.

And that wasn’t even taking into account explaining themselves to Eliza and Jeremiah… ugh.

*Hold on… what was that?*

*Kara would… wait for her?* Did Alex get that right?

She looked up into the endless, warm blue of her sister’s eyes, and saw a shadow of her own hazel reflected there. It was mesmerizing; watching the colors meld together.

Alex continued studying the captivating Kryptonian, and her patient, knowing smile, searching for an answer to her question. And a few moments later, the truth became crystal clear… as if Kara’s melodic voice had spoken directly in her mind.

*Yes.*

My God, she understood! And yes, Alex did get it right… she’d wait for her, as long as it took.

*Whoa.*
Her beautiful Kryptonian smiled and brushed her willowy cheek against Alex’s knuckles. It was bliss…

Then, Kara sighed, and (very) reluctantly picked up their conversation where they’d left off… as if no time had passed. Though their fingers remained entwined.

“We were talking about traveling, yes? Well, spending time living among other cultures was an essential part of my education; at least that’s what I always thought it was. Looking back, knowing what I do now, maybe my parents were just preparing me for coming here? For you, Eliza, and Jeremiah? I don’t know, but I had so many wonderful experiences on my journeys and saw such incredible things, I wouldn’t give up any of them.

“I even had the opportunity to visit Uva’s world with her once, and met her littermates.” Kara brightened as if remembering something important, “Oh, you know, I meant to tell you before, but four of those worlds had stars similar, though not near as perfect for me as your Sun, like a quarter of the effect. So Earth wasn’t the first time I’ve had powers of some sort, just not this strong.”

“Cheater! You had practice.” Alex pretended to bite at Kara’s hand, which, to her Kryptonian credit, she pulled away at human speed, and they laughed.

“You need to tell me all about those worlds, and your adventures.” Alex’s tone was dreamy.

Kara pulled over the duffle from the side of the bed where they’d pushed it, “That might take a while.”

Alex grudgingly slipped her arm out from under the girl, and they both flipped on their stomachs to refocus on the open bag. “That’s okay, I have a lifetime.” She’d hoped to convey the deeper, secret meaning, and couldn’t help but feel joy at the huge grin that her comment brought to Kara’s face.

“So, what’s this?” Alex had pulled out a long matte black tube with a carrying strap and caps securing both ends. It looked like something an artist might lug around.

“Ah… that, that’s from my mother… a very rare material for a military grade version of a Companion like Shatari. Basically, a suit of battle armor, similar to, but much more powerful than a Ka’dah, and robust enough for a yellow-sun empowered Kryptonian like me to wear without damaging it. The armor has actual weaponry, defenses, and well… honestly, some insane capabilities, but… there’s a catch, it must be made by the wearer, no one else.”

“Do tell.”

“Oh, just to give you an idea, everyone on Krypton had Companion AIs like Shatari, but only key members of Justice and the military elite had this,” Kara said the words almost reverently as she ran her hand over the case. “It was intended that I learn how to craft my armor from the material in this tube as part of the training placed in my cell memories by my parents… but of course, that worked out so well.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m not sure if I’ll ever be able to do anything with it now that I have no idea how to get that training out of my brain. At this point, it’s nothing more than a pretty scarf.”

Alex uncapped one end of the case and slid a long rolled up bolt of silky fabric into her hands. It was unnaturally cool, and scintillated with color… shifting from the deepest ebony to indigo, a gorgeous red, and then a rich royal blue, depending on the angle of the light. The cloth, or whatever it was, didn’t light up or react when she held it like Shatari did… but seemed inert, like it was sleeping.

It was hibernating, waiting for an interface to imprint with… Um, how do I know that?
It was almost as if Alex could feel the creature's life in her hands… wait, she absolutely was sensing its lifeforce by touch!

Wow!

A gentle pulse from Shatari provided her answer…

Ah! I see! She… I… have sensors, lots of them, and… okay, wow again… apparently, a heads-up display!

Radical.

Alex’s attention was split between ogling the shimmering material and taking in the mountains of data cascading in glorious 3D within her HUD. She said, “Hey Kara, I'm pretty sure Shatari can help us figure it out, in time. In fact, I think she’s already trying. Or maybe you’ll free those memories up on your own? I hope so, you’d look incredible in this, and so would I.”

“Yes, you would.”

Kara grinned wolfishly.

Another compliment. Alex smiled as she mentally dismissed her HUD and returned the shiny material to the black tube to continue digging through the rest of Kara’s stuff. Next up in her treasure-trove was a small case that contained six slim, gorgeously cut, crystal shards of various colors.

Kara referred to these as ‘memory shards,’ apparently, some sort of virtual diary from her life and travels. “The crystals are like impossibly large hard drives. Shatari should be able to access them; they’ll give you lots of information about the worlds I traveled to.”

“Awesome!” Alex said, and as she held one of the crystals in her hand, sent her thoughts to her new AI companion. The cool part was, she got an answer or a feeling… “Shatari’s on it, says it might take a little while, that it’s not as easy as… getting satellite radio?… Whaaat?”

Alex went quiet, having an internal dialogue with her new best friend, then started babbling like her sister, “Oh my God, I can listen to the radio wearing this, holy crap… not just any radio, but like any radio signal… and I can get phone calls, texts… and not just mine, anyones! Everything’s just floating out there for the taking… No way! Kara, Kara… Shatari can send video directly to my brain, or optic nerves, or whatever… I’m watching HBO’s east coast feed, live, right now, just laying here.” Alex spread her arms wide on the comforter and stared up at the ceiling, entranced.

Her sister seemed greatly amused by Alex’s infatuation. “You’re adorable when you have new technology you know.”

Alex grinned, sat up, and cuddled into Kara’s side, “I’m never adorable… that’s your thing, sis. Cranky without coffee maybe, obsessed even, but adorable… not so much.”

“Sure,” Kara said with a smile, obviously finding her sister’s statement invalid.

As they silently returned to their search of the duffle Alex reached back in and pulled out a small silky black pouch, inside of which was a slim device with a blue crystal in its center that comfortably fit in the palm of her hand.

Kara gasped when she saw it, “Rao! Astra’s beacon!”
Alex gave it to her sister, who clutched the tiny thing lovingly to her chest. “My aunt gave it to me when I was little, and I carried it everywhere with me, to every world. She and I each had one, and we used them to signal each other. No matter where I was, or how far away, she could find me, and keep me safe. I always knew when she was close, too; it would sing to me. Rao, Alex, I’ll never hear her sing again!” Tears followed, and Alex rocked her until all that was left were sniffles. “I’ll keep this.” Kara eventually said, gently sliding the beacon into her a pocket of her jeans.

After that, all that was left in the duffle were a complete set of Harry Potter books in hardcover, a well-read copy of Stephen Chbosky’s “The Perks of Being a Wallflower” (which Kara was ecstatic to find), a gorgeous fountain pen in a box that had “Love, Lois” written on a classy-looking tag, and a brand new reporter’s notebook with two business cards paper-clipped to the inside of the cover. These were from Lois Lane, Investigative Reporter, and Clark Kent, Senior Reporter, of the Daily Planet.

Kara was excited over finding her books but was biting her lip and looking quite concerned after Alex saw the note and business cards.

“I knew about your cousin being Clark Kent already sweetie. Don’t worry; I won’t tell anyone.”

Kara breathed out dramatically, clearly very relieved, “Oh, thank goodness! I knew you wouldn’t say anything… that’s not why I…. you know I trust you, right Vaena? I just didn’t want to burden you with yet another secret, especially one that it isn’t even mine to tell… or make your life even more complicated, maybe even put you in danger.”

Alex reached over and touched the stammering girl’s cheek, nudged her into the path of her gaze. “Kara, look at me. I’m your protector, right? So load me up; it’s not a burden when it’s for you. We shouldn’t have secrets… well, not from each other at least, about anything.” Alex swallowed, suddenly feeling guilty… what the Hell made her say that? The things left unspoken but seemingly understood between them couldn’t be considered secrets, could they?

If they were, then Alex had too many; including the fact that she’d never felt the way she did about Kara about anyone else, ever… not even Shah.

And there were other things, so many little secrets that she’d never voiced...

Like, could she ever openly admit how much she desired the warmth of Kara’s astonishingly gentle and knowing touch? How a thrill shot through her whole being whenever the two of them made physical contact, no matter how slight? Or how the girl’s soft breath on her skin made Alex crumble? Could she tell Kara how the sight of the uncontrollable dilation of her pupils whenever she looked at her drove Alex to madness? Or how she desperately craved the sensation and comfort of their bodies entwined together or the feeling of the angelic girl’s graceful fingers tracing the contours of her face in the dark… as if Kara somehow adored her as much as Alex did her… as if that could even be possible.

Would she ever be able to step into the light and reveal how she loved all the things about her Kryptonian that made her so beautiful, inside and out? Things that made her happier than she’d ever imagined possible?

Kara’s compassion, her innocent belief in the good in people, how she saw Alex and the world through a lens of beauty, and so many other unnamable things that made her the person Alex couldn’t conceive of being without.

Though she lacked the vocabulary to express her feelings clearly, what Alex knew for sure was that Kara was a part of her now, as much as her own heart… and she could never let her go.
The beautiful girl smiled back at her as if understanding… but at the same time, seemed to be weighing a decision of her own. When Kara finally did speak, her melodic words were like a solemn oath, “I promise. No secrets.”

And at that exact same moment, Alex felt something deep inside her come to life! Like a light shining in the darkness, or warm embers, burning in her heart…

Whatever it was, it was powerful, utterly breathtaking, and pure.

She wasn’t sure how, but in that perfect moment of clarity she also finally understood, without any doubt, that Kara felt the same way about her.

................................

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Any and all errors are my own, please let me know if you see any and I’ll address them!

Next up: Chapter 7 will bring some family time with Eliza and Jeremiah, and Alex and Shah do some sparring…

Some thoughts on Chapter 6:

Non-biologic Intelligence on Krypton
AIs are pervasive in Kryptonian society and an integral and equal part of it. They are living beings; unique individuals who animate and control all manner of things from the crystalline superstructures Krypton’s cities and homes are built from, to starships, and smaller conveniences like Kara’s and Kal’s pods. Kara’s symbiotic Companion AI, Shatari, just happened to be in the form of a Ka’da'h.

There are levels of AI sentience, some are more like appliances without drive or free will, others like Shatari are free, with a full range of emotions, but bound by a promise they chose to make. Hers? To protect and serve the House of El and its progeny.

Alura’s Kryptonian necklace, now Kara’s
Kara's mother's crystal is a marvel. It is also many things: a low level, passive AI sentience that acts as a secure quantum communications hub for the user they serve (distance is not a factor), and an anchor, or beacon in space-time allowing for the potential of translocation, folding of space-time, and travel between universes. When linked to another crystal they can form an unbreakable telepathic and empathic network. Just between us, Shatari has accessed both Kara and Alex’s crystals and has already begun the integration work. Kara is aware.

Alex’s gorgeous Alexander McQueen dress
http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-otbVi4XWLe6E/TgLz53wH17I/AAAAAAAAlAg/gj/3l0wP47bTl/s1600/alexander-mcqueen-resort-2012-runway-022_145956877480.jpg
A Normal Life Part 2: Family & Friends

Chapter Summary

Where the Danvers family spend some quality time together on a lazy Sunday afternoon… cooking, playing board games, and avoiding the stealthy pounce attacks of Kara’s new kitten.

Alex and her best friend Shah come to terms… sort of.

Shah figures out Kara’s deepest secret… no, not that she’s really an alien, the other one. :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

October 24th - Year Two

A day after the last chapter

T-Minus 7 Days to Halloween

Midvale - The Danvers’ Residence

1141 Hours UTC -5, Saturday, U.S. East Coast Time

“Now, feel my wrath! Bwahahaha!” Alex cackled maniacally as she swept her father’s poorly defended western border clean, crushing North Africa in a decisive attack. Then, whistling the Imperial March from Star Wars, gleefully slid a pile of her green plastic troops over from Brazil onto her new, hard-won territory.

Okay, so Alex was a little overly competitive at everything, even Risk.

Jeremiah stood beside the dining room table, arms crossed as he pensively studied the game board… still in apparent denial over his rout. He loosely held his 1950s-era black-rimmed glasses in one hand under an elbow and rubbed his stubby chin with the other. It took a minute, but he finally nodded in Alex’s direction, indicating defeat, “Well-played General Danvers… but, your advance will end in Africa. That, I promise you.”

“Yeah, yeah, promises, promises old man... Let’s see some action.”

“Harrumph.” He grumbled and went back to examining the board.

Alex settled back down in her chair to wait for her father’s next move. Cheek supported by her knuckles, she gazed with laser focus back through the wide archway that opened into the Danver’s kitchen.
She’d been distracted for the last hour by Kara… mostly, but also by her mother. The chatty pair had taken up residence there, working on dinner for later that lazy Sunday evening.

The kitchen was filled with an ethereal glow from the wide skylights above, and Alex couldn’t help but see how at home and joyful Kara looked surrounded by its soft halo. Her unconscious, graceful sway to the soft echo of Frank Sinatra was, without a doubt, one of the most beautiful and sensual things Alex had ever seen in her life.

She could sit there all day watching the girl without ever making another move on the board.

Hell, she’d be happy to forfeit the game.

Apparently, Shatari was content as well. Alex could feel and hear her loaned Companion humming a beautiful Kryptonian lullaby softly in her mind as Kara went about her work.

A large granite island located in the center of the well-equipped kitchen was covered with mixing bowls, open cookbooks, and various cooking implements that Kara had expertly and meticulously arrayed around for the tasks at hand.

She and Eliza moved around the large space in perfect synchronicity as if executing a well-choreographed dance, all the while mixing ingredients and talking about old family recipes... and embarrassing stories about Alex when she was a kid.

Amidst all the activity, and while not crashing into each other, they also managed to evade the mighty claws of the terrible beast that stalked their ankles: Kara’s new kitten, “little Nom”, short for “Nom Nom”, of course.

Whenever either of them drew close to the edges of the island, or the cabinets, Nom would strike, either batting at his enemy and then fleeing or wrapping himself around his human host’s ankle like a parasite. He loved going for a ride as he gnawed on shoelaces, socks, whatever he could dig into with his tiny, needle-like teeth. The bundle of adorable energy was currently collapsed near his diminutive food and water bowls taking a nap, his tiger-striped head lying peacefully on his crossed paws.

As she watched, Alex couldn’t help but smile, and her thoughts drifted back a few days to when Eliza had finally broken down and taken Kara and her to the local animal shelter.

.................

Though it seemed as if the big-hearted Kryptonian fell in love with every single creature there and wanted to take all of them home, Kara finally chose to adopt the scrawny, bigheaded, ultra-cute, unknown mixed breed kitten that had taken an instant liking to her. Alex observed the two of them interacting at the shelter with a warmth in her chest she could not describe. Kara sat on the floor near Nom’s crate, giggling musically with the little tiger cat crawling all over her.

The longer Alex watched them, the more she fell in love, too.

Anything in the universe that could make Kara so happy was good in her book.

On the way home, they were sitting side by side in the back seat of Eliza’s Range Rover. Kara had a small cat carrier on her lap, and was leaning down to keep an eye on her mewling captive… poor little Nom Nom.

Alex was taken off-guard when her Kryptonian actually began to purr, just like a real cat, and wiggled her finger at the mesh window. Nom’s little paw came up to touch her in response, and then,
as if satisfied he was safe, the tiny cat promptly curled up and went to sleep.

Alex was stunned... and after glancing forward to make sure Eliza wasn’t listening in spoke quietly, in a conspiratorial whisper, “That... was... amazing! Not just the purring... I mean, wow. How did you get the little guy to settle down?”

Kara grinned and reached over to take Alex’s hand. Pleasantly surprised, she eagerly entwined her fingers in the warmth Kara offered.

The alien girl had so definitely become her drug of choice.

“I was just mimicking the sounds the mother cat used at the shelter to quiet her kits, it seemed to work. It’ll take me a while to comprehend any of his true language, so much is actually body movements, and very subtle.”

“Wait... backup, you can learn... cat?” Alex was already in awe of Kara’s ability to learn languages; she already knew seven, not counting two forms of Elvish, and Alex and Shah were tag-team teaching her Farsi... but seriously, CAT?

“Yes. It’s not a human language, using words in a structured way you would understand, but it’s a language nonetheless. I can learn enough for basic comprehension, and be somewhat understood in return.” Kara narrowed her eyes at Alex, “Wait a minute... why don’t you try communicating with him?”

Alex was suddenly very nervous but did her best to keep a serene mask up for Kara, “Cute. Why should I try? I don’t speak kittenese... and you purr better anyway.”

“Nooo, you don’t, but Shatari could figure it out faster than I could... and since you’re wearing her...” Kara’s voice dropped to a very faint whisper. “…I thought that maybe you’d like to try.”

Alex was busted. Damn. She shrugged, “You win, so much for trying to tweak her quantum field to trick your senses. You’ll need to tell me how you noticed her later.”

“Score!” Kara shot one hand up, nearly putting her fist through the roof of the vehicle.

“Don’t let it go to your head, we’ll try harder cloaking our aura next time.”

Kara leaned over and kissed Alex on the cheek, just a chaste peck, but still absolutely wonderful. “Thanks, Alex, I appreciate you helping me with my training, both the how to be human stuff and the wacky alien stuff.”

...............................

“Krypton to Alexandra!” Kara called from the kitchen... pulling her back to the present.

Alex shot up from where she’d been sitting entranced at the table. Next to her, Jeremiah was still plotting his strategy and didn’t even react to her sudden movement. Kara was smirking at her from the other room, standing behind the island in the kitchen her hands covered in flour and dough.

“I hope you were daydreaming about... something nice.” Her Kryptonian winked at her out of sight from their parents and then headed back to work on her half-made cherry pie.

Alex started to blush... of course she was daydreaming about something nice, amazing was more like it... and someone to be technical about it.
It was you, dummy. She stretched, “So what’d I miss?”

Jeremiah didn’t break eye contact with the game board, “Kara was telling us a little bit about you and your friends’ Halloween plans for next weekend.”

“What have you all decided to be?” Eliza chimed in. She was standing at the island with Kara, busily mixing up the ingredients for her famous chocolate pecan pie, which was to die for, and doing that thing where she was asking Kara to smell her mix to tell her how much more of everything to add.

‘No powers’ my ass.

“Well, this year is a Star Wars theme for The Squad, in honor of our very own Princess Leia… heroic, tough, brave, beautiful, and never once tempted by the Dark Side, even after losing her planet.” Alex stood up and bowed across the room to Kara, who regally dipped her head in response.

“Thank you, thank you!” The blonde replied cheerfully, and then continued, “Eliza, Jeremiah, please allow me to introduce Captain Han Solo, space pirate, ship captain, rogue, and generally an all-around handsome scoundrel.” Kara was certainly enjoying herself.

Alex bowed again in acknowledgment, and looked up with a grin, “I resemble that remark.”

“We looked through my closet and found your old blaster, Jeremiah, I hope you don’t mind loaning it to its rightful owner.” Kara motioned over to Alex.

Alex’s father was still studiously engrossed in the Risk board, but looked up briefly to respond with a wistful look on his face, “You found the Imperial Slayer, huh? I thought I’d lost that old thing a long time ago. Isn’t that something? Passing on a relic to a new generation… No problem Your Grace, the scoundrel can have it…” He then shifted his attention to Alex and spoke with sterner tone, “Just don’t lose it, Solo.” And then he was rolling dice…

Kara spoke up while Alex focused back on the game. “Quinn’s going as C3PO. Which is perfect, because he’s such a drama queen. Brian’s a Jawa, and since he’s the ultimate geek he has this remote-controlled life-size R2D2. It’s incredible, and it moves, looks and acts just like the real one… but I really hope he doesn’t hit any potholes, it tends to tip over… a lot. And Shah, she’s an amazing Luke Skywalker… made her own costume and everything, and can actually handle a lightsaber! Well, not an actual one, of course. She bought it on the Internet and it looks absolutely real, especially at night.”

Between dice rolls, Alex said, “Yeah, and we’re still planning on going trick or treating, and then to that party at Quinn’s parents’ house, you know the one they do every year? It’s always really classy. After that is it okay if Shah comes back here to watch movies until we pass out?”

Eliza stepped briefly into the dining room, drying off a mixing bowl, with a grin on her face, “That sounds fine dear, your father and I can make ourselves scarce after the little goblins in the neighborhood all head home. We wouldn’t want to ‘cramp your style’.” She chuckled like she had a secret.

Alex was confused… “Um, cramp my style?”

“Oh, nothing… but that lovely young woman is always welcome here. It’s like she’s part of the family already.”

“Hmmm…” Alex narrowed her gaze suspiciously at her mother after her not-so-subtle comment, and then over at Kara, who shrugged her shoulders with a clueless look. “Okay then.” Was it her
imagination or did her mother just give Alex tacit approval, if not encouragement, to date Shahrazad?

She was caught off-guard, like a deer in headlights… unable to move, or even speak.

Just a few weeks ago Alex would have been euphoric, but now? Now it just felt confusing, and weird. She didn’t want their approval. Knowing that her parents were okay with her being with Shah meant she was out of excuses to deal with her long-held feelings for her best friend… feelings which had become very, very complicated after Kara’s arrival. How she felt about Shah hadn’t really diminished, just… changed.

Alex still cared deeply for her, but her desires had become tangled up with the adorable alien who was making a cherry pie in her kitchen... the one Alex couldn’t take her eyes off of as she, very slowly, licked the cherry juice from her fingers…

Oh… my… God….

And with that, Alex’s train of thought derailed… Actually, it was more like a hundred car train wreck… and almost simultaneously Jeremiah’s forces retook North Africa.

Her father sprung up from his chair, and clenched a fist in victory as he rasped, “Now you know the power of the Dark Side!”

Alex, scrambling back to reality, and trying really, really hard to act normal, let rip her best dramatic wail while falling to the floor on her knees. “Noooooooo!”

But, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kara watching her with a devious smile as she ran the tip of her tongue over her cherry red lips.

October 26th - Year Two

T-Minus 5 Days to Halloween

Midvale - Shah’s dojo

1646 Hours UTC -5, Tuesday afternoon, U.S. East Coast Time

Shahrazad

The staccato clatter of Shah’s fighting sticks landing a rapid-fire succession of blows against Alex’s bo staff echoed throughout the cavernous dojo like gunfire. Alex gasped for air… barely escaping her best friend’s deadly weapons of choice with a desperate but skillfully executed series of blocks, dodges, and rolls.

Shah’s surprisingly relentless assault had not been what she’d been expecting when her best friend suggested a ‘friendly sparring match’ after their regular training session.

Alex had ended up spending more time flat on the mat than standing on it and was drenched in sweat. Shah was a machine, mercilessly driving her back into the corner, herding her to where she’d eventually be trapped.

The insanely swift girl in the black gi was unnervingly quiet as she pressed her advantage, delivering
an impressive beat down. Unlike the other students, who would bark short yells in an attempt to frighten or startle their opponent, Shah rarely uttered a sound when in combat… which made her that much scarier. Several of the other students gathered at the periphery, viewing their engagement with slack-jawed amazement.

Alex was certain that her friend was a Persian ninja, who was currently handily besting her…

As she continued to be driven backward Alex felt the precarious edge of the mat under her back foot… and knew that battle’s end was drawing near. Shah almost had her. There was a split second where Alex saw a brief opening, raised her front knee, quickly drew back her staff, and thrust forward in flawless form. It was a bit of a sacrifice move, but she forced Shah to defend and hoped to turn the tide.

What she didn’t expect was how her attack had been anticipated and watched in slow motion as Shah lurched backward, avoided the strike, blocked with both sticks, and then immediately counterattacked.

 Damn, how did she move so fast? Is she a Kryptonian too?

“Tokhm.” Alex cursed in Persian under her breath.

Shah’s dark eyes and lashes were now only inches from her own, just a little higher up, and a subtle grin flitted across her friend’s hawkish features. Her fighting sticks were positioned for the kill, one behind Alex’s neck, and the other in front under her chin… literally at her throat.

The fight was over.

Alex dropped her bo staff to the floor in submission.

They stood there, frozen in time for just a moment before the room erupted into hoots, whistles, and applause.

More seconds passed, yet Shah had still not moved or disengaged… in fact, the opposite was true, her penetrating gaze had sharpened. She studied Alex’s face, staring deep into her eyes… searching for… something. It was as if her best friend were attempting to peer directly into the inner recesses of Alex’s brain… or her soul.

Whatever it was, and Alex was terrified she knew exactly what it might be, Shah seemed unsatisfied with whatever she found there… but still, her dark brown catlike eyes appreciatively lingered, much longer than would have been comfortable if Alex wasn’t enjoying the staredown so much.

When she finally spoke, Shah simply said, “You were distracted” before coolly withdrawing her weapons and releasing Alex, who slumped to her knees, breathing hard on the mats.

“Way to get your ass kicked Danvers!” One of the boys watching called out chuckling.

“Did… did you see how she moved? No one moves that fast!” An awestruck brown belt stammered, obviously referring to Shah, and definitely not her.

Alex, panting, scrambled to her feet, and they both stepped back and bowed respectfully to each other. She was still a little out of breath as she unceremoniously wiped sweat from her face and neck with a towel Shah handed her.

Alex’s mind was churning with how Shah had spoken her three words so matter-of-factly… her friend knew her too well. It was one of the many, many things she’d always loved about her, but
now made her nervous.

Now that she had things to hide.

Of course, Alex was distracted, and Shah could see right through her… which made keeping secrets from her extremely challenging, and painful. All the lying was making Alex sick… the guilt gnawed at her gut. She absolutely hated not being honest with Shah, about everything.

Until Kara, they had shared all of their secrets… well, almost all of them.

Alex wished that she had it all figured out, but her head and her heart were a hot mess.

“Yeah, I guess. I just have a lot going on.” Ugh, so lame Danvers!

“Mmm hmm.” Shah obviously knew something was up and wasn’t through with Alex on the subject, but mercifully backed off... and moved to pick up Alex’s fallen red oak staff to hand it back to her. “Fine, but you owe me details.”

“Deal.” Alex blew out a breath in relief.

After washing up and changing, they met up in the lobby of the dojo. Shah, all of 5’4” and gorgeous… looked together and lovely as usual, wearing a stylish ensemble that included a black hijab etched with silver Persian inscriptions, leather jacket, designer jeans, and blue and white high top Converse that she was intentionally squeaking on the floor as they sauntered toward the exit.

Alex felt tragic by comparison, in loose-fitting cargo pants, a Nirvana T-shirt, and her favorite vintage military field jacket. It was obvious who the shiny one of the pair was, something Alex was used to when around either Shah or Kara. The thing was, she honestly didn’t mind… as an introvert, she hated being the center of attention in social situations.

At that moment a warm pulse tingled over Alex’s skin, clearly an attempt to comfort her. It felt nice and did help make her feel better. Alex sent a hug back through their shared thoughts.

Thanks, Shatari.

Out on the sidewalk, a pack of tween boys was walking by, and every single one of their heads snapped to openly stare at Shah’s ass, which was admittedly amazing, but… Alex growled defensively and stepped back behind her friend to block their view.

Something in her death stare must have scared the bejesus out of the little losers because they immediately scattered like rats.

Shah’s warm, throaty laugh was just what Alex needed as the shorter girl slipped her leather-clad arm into Alex’s and drew her in close as they strolled on. It was always so easy being with her.

“Little jerks...” Alex muttered between mumbled curses.

“My hero,” Shah whispered, and then effortlessly leaned in and pressed her curvy body up against Alex. It felt wonderful, and she relaxed a little more into Shah’s side.

Her friend asked, “So, did you finally tell your parents?”

Alex nodded, “Yeah, and you were right, they were shocked… at first, but I think I made a good argument. Dad was a little upset about me ‘bailing’ on Stanford, but he’ll get over it. You forgave me. Anyway, George Mason has the best program for Astrobiology and a great bioengineering
department. They’re also really close to NASA’s offices in DC, AND just a train ride away from MIT, instead of all the way across the country... you and I can see each other on weekends.”

“That is all true, but I still don’t know why you’re so fired up about switching majors. Wasn’t the one you had hard enough? I know that you’re a genius, Alexandra… it takes one to know one… and I say that with all modesty, but changing majors? Changing schools?”

Alex smirked, “That’s just how I roll.” That’s just how I roll? Idiot, idiot.

Sad faces scrolled across her HUD. Shatari!

Shah still seemed unsettled. “Possibly, but as long as I’ve known you, you’ve wanted to be an Astrophysicist. ‘I’ll find the worlds, and you’ll build the ships’… that’s what you used to say to me. It’s all you could ever talk about doing, finding life out there in the universe….” Shah paused, briefly lost for words, which was a rarity, “Look, intellectually I get it, and you know I’m a hundred percent supportive, but…”

Alex swallowed, hard. Knowing what Shah had left unsaid… you didn’t talk to me about it, and never told me why...

Shah was feeling disconnected from her, and it was Alex’s fault. She’d distanced herself from her best friend out of necessity when Kara arrived… she’d also stayed at arm’s length on any topics that could possibly expose her fictitious identity, which probably felt a whole lot like she was avoiding Shah… which she kind of had been, for other reasons.

She realized then that she’d been a shitty friend…

The problem was, Alex did find other life in the universe. Kara just happened to be living with her and sleeping with her (in the literal sense) and Alex’s new college focus was all because of her Kryptonian. The hope and potential that the beautiful, amazing girl represented for humanity’s future, as well as the dangers lurking out in the universe Kara had warned her of, changed her outlook on everything.

But she couldn’t tell Shah that, as much as she wanted to. Could she?

“That’s fair, I’m sorry I should have…”

“Please, don’t apologize,” Shah gently cut her off. “You know that’s not what I’m looking for. I’m not trying to make you feel guilty either… I just would like to understand why.”

Alex sighed and snuggled in closer as a chilling breeze gusted through a side alley as they crossed a street on the way to their favorite coffee shop. “I… I guess…” Alex began. “It was inspiration… What’s that word? It was like, I suddenly realized what I was supposed to do with my life, at least the school part.” She could feel the heat creeping up her neck and into her cold cheeks, she was blushing… thinking about a certain blonde alien’s delicate fingertips gliding over her bare skin.

Shah seemed to notice, and the corner of her mouth did that thing where she was smiling but not really smiling… which was hot, like really hot. Alex had in the past, fantasized about kissing Shah on that spot, on her lips, and lots of other places… for a long time… but, as she always reminded herself, her best friend was straight and Alex had learned a long time ago to be happy just admiring her.

It still didn’t stop her from thinking about it sometimes though… like right then, though for the first time ever it was more with nostalgia than anything.
The truth was, she couldn’t stop thinking about kissing someone else now.

“An epiphany?” Shah offered.

Alex almost couldn’t speak, “Y… Yeah, something like that.”

Shah grinned, “I see. Allah must have sent you an angel.”

Alex had nearly recovered from her coughing fit by the time they entered The Underground Coffee Lounge. Shah had disappeared briefly and returned with a glass of water for her as they sat down at a quiet little table by the windows.

“I thought… ” Alex cleared her throat and drank deeply before continuing, “that you didn’t believe in… you know, all that mystical mumbo-jumbo.” She coughed one last time for good measure.

“Technically, the belief in angels is one of the pillars of my faith, so I feel obligated to. Whether I personally believe if the malāʾikah, Allah’s heavenly messengers, are literal or figurative is up to me. The idea just seemed a bit whimsical, and romantic.”

Alex melted a little… “Thank you. And it is… romantic.” Alex reached over to squeeze Shah’s hand before standing up to go order for them. She knew her best friend’s drink by heart.

After returning and handing Shah a soup bowl sized ceramic cup filled with steaming chai, Alex slid back into her seat and stared down at the beautiful foam cat that decorated the top of her latte… it was a work of art.

She absently mentioned, “So… Kara’s decided that she wants to be a journalist.”

“Really? Well,” Shah took a sip of her thick, aromatic tea, and swallowed with obvious delight, “Oh that’s good… Anyway, her choice doesn’t surprise me. Your sister’s living heroes are crusaders for truth; people like Lois Lane, Clark Kent, and Catherine Grant… She is a seeker, like them… very passionate, and her innocent soul shines with righteousness. Perhaps, by taking this path, she feels that she can bring a measure of justice to the world?”

Alex nodded slowly at her friend, stunned by Shah’s spot-on analysis of Kara, spoken with such eloquence, and maturity, as always with Shah. She was rather mystical in how she could see into people, but… whoa, she’d only been Kara’s friend for a few months, though they had become close.

“Yeah, she really does want to save the world.” Alex wished she could tell Shah how literally true that statement was.

“I see that, like her hidden grace, intelligence… and the steel in her eyes when she doesn’t know I am looking. Kara is a rare soul and a mystery… like her sister. You two make such a perfect pair.”

Alex must have turned fire truck red, her face felt like it was suddenly a thousand degrees. She ducked her head and sipped her latte, grinning like a madwoman.

A fact that Shah must have certainly noticed… her sharp eyes never left Alex as she savored another taste of her tea. “I see many things clearly.” She said pointedly.

Her friend’s tone had an all-knowing quality, making Alex squirm in her seat. Cryptic much? Did she guess Alex’s secrets? “Are you saying I’m a mystery?” Alex asked, her hesitant voice quavering.

“Yes, one I have enjoyed trying unsuccessfully to unravel for years. Just when I think I have you figured out… you surprise me again.”
Alex was a little confused… that sounded like a compliment, but what did she mean? She dug for clarity, “Did I surprise you today?”

“Oh yes.” Shah grinned knowingly over the rim of her cup but said nothing else.

“Aaaannd?”

“And, that, I’m afraid, shall remain my mystery for you to discover.”

Alex slumped back in her chair pouting, arms crossed, “Hmph. Tease.”

“Takes one to know one.”

“Ugh, you drive me crazy, aziz-am.”

One of Shah’s eyebrows shot up as she heard Alex mutter the Persian term of endearment that Alex had started calling her soon after they first met… and a wide smile erupted on her friend’s face.

“So, you still remember…” Shah replied in Farsi. Her tone warm, and carried the echo of shared memories.

Alex knew how happy her speaking in the language of Shah’s homeland always made her friend. Shah called it Persian, or Farsi, which was distinctly different from Arabic. She missed the frequency of their long conversations in the elegant language, which had been only slightly easier to master than Kryptonese. Thanks to Shah, Alex’s fluency, including slang and intonation, was nearly as perfect as anyone in Shah’s family.

Alex eagerly continued, without shifting back to English, “Of course! How could I forget? I had a magnificent teacher. Her voice was like a song, and her words poetry. So much so that I kept asking for lessons long after I didn’t really need them… I don’t think she ever knew that or how important she is in my life.”

Shah set her cup down; her dark lashes shrouding her gaze as she lingered on Alex’s hands. “She did not.” She said quietly, wiping the wetness of a small tear from the corner of her right eye.

Alex reached over and slipped her fingers into Shah’s welcoming hand.

Her friend smiled, then, as if realizing something, glanced up at Alex to say, “You have once again surprised me… thank you, joon-am.”

...............................

T-Minus 1 Day to Halloween...

October 30th - Year Two

Midvale – The Nazari Residence

1123 Hours UTC -5, Saturday, U.S. East Coast Time

Shah was in heaven. Hanging out in her bedroom with Alex on a lazy Saturday, listening to music, and talking for hours… it was just like old times. They chatted about their last fight, analyzed their combat moves, and talked about school, movies, music, books, science, the Squad, and of course,
Halloween, which was the next day.

Kara joined them for a while, and she and Alex helped the girl put the finishing touches on her costume, though the beautiful girl ended up being more Warrior Leia than Princess by the time they were done with her… which was exactly what Shah was going for in the first place.

It was amazing to observe the younger Danvers’ hidden talents at sewing and design.

The whole day was just… delightful, and she savored every moment with her spiritual Persian sister.

Shah had missed this… the closeness the two of them had always shared and wanted it back. Something had changed since Kara’s arrival that summer. It wasn’t just that Alex had become extremely busy and often apologetically unavailable… that stung, but at least Shah understood it…

No, the issue was that her friend had begun harboring secrets… from her.

Others may not have noticed the subtle changes but, like Alex, Shah could read people, and whatever her best friend was bottling up inside was affecting her, in worrying ways.

It hurt at first, knowing that Alex didn’t feel that she could share whatever it was she was dealing with, but as time went on Shah became truly concerned. Perhaps something traumatic had happened… an incident Alex was ashamed to talk about? The guessing only made things worse, causing Shah to obsess on the mystery and worry for her best friend’s wellbeing.

Left with no other recourse she, of course, began snooping.

It started innocently enough: observing Alex more carefully and gathering tidbits of information from their friends, including Kara. Shah didn’t blame her for Alex’s distance; she loved the diligent and kind-hearted girl as well and Kara always seemed to go out of her way to get her and Alex together. Still, she felt that Kara had somehow played a role in Alex’s current state, and needed to understand what was happening to her best friend.

To discover such information, Shah begrudgingly drew from her less-than-savory skillset: the talents she’d learned as a child, instructed in the finer arts of deception, subterfuge, and persuasion by her parents’ rebel friends while growing up in Tehran. She had lied to the thugs from the Intelligence Ministry on more than one occasion to protect the people she loved.

It just felt wrong lulling a sweetheart like Kara into her trap, but she told herself this too was for a good purpose. How surprised she’d been to find the sheep she believed she was stalking was a wolf in disguise!

Once Shah engaged Kara in her subtle interrogation, she’d expected her to naively stumble into her verbal traps, and blindly follow her leading questions like breadcrumbs… but that didn’t happen.

To Shah’s astonishment and respect, the beautiful girl foiled her at every turn, like a chess master.

But even in apparent failure, Shah learned something. In deftly avoiding her ploys, which few people had ever done, Kara had revealed something unexpected… a brilliant and tactical mind, one that enjoyed a challenge. Upon reflection, though, Shah wasn’t sure if she’d been a challenge for Kara at all…

How was that even possible?

Shah also came to the realization that the girl was carrying a heavy burden… but what that was, she did not know… Kara was a puzzle like her sister, but different. The sweet and affable girl hid her
true self behind a mask of layered imperfections… but why? Shah would catch the briefest of moments where Kara seemed… unearthly, and the more she looked, the more she noticed.

Kara insisted that she was far too clumsy to ever learn how to fight, or to join Shah and Alex at the dojo except to watch… yet Shah had seen with her own eyes how Kara could move when she thought no one was aware: as lithe as a panther, as quick as a snake, if not more so.

She was always taking care of everyone else, helping them shine, while intentionally allowing herself to fade into the background as if she didn’t want to be noticed.

She wore glasses, allegedly for bad eyesight, but upon inspection in Kara’s room one day, Shah discovered the lenses were not prescription, just glass.

She’d found them perched atop a stack of the inquisitive girl’s ‘casual’ reading material: weighty tomes by the likes of Hesiod, Herodotus, Marcus Aurelius, Kant, John Locke, mixed with poetry, including Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, and… Shah’s breath hitched as she saw it, a book of poems by the Sufi poet Hafiz, in the original Persian… and that was just for this week!

Tomorrow, who knew?

How Kara had decided on the disparate assortment was anyone’s guess… the enigmatic girl grew more complex at every turn. Shah saw hints of perfection… little things, but not enough to bring her any clarity.

The real question was now becoming, who was the real Kara Danvers?

Shah began to see her after that, really see her and understood why Alex loved her so much, possibly as more than as her adopted sister.

It was also interesting that every time Shah uttered the word ‘sister’ in reference to Kara, her friend would wince, and look pained. It was so subtle that Alex probably wasn’t even aware she was doing it. Yet, it was another small thing, on a growing pile of unquantifiable evidence that something was not as it seemed.

One revealing incident that had taken place just a couple days earlier had deepened Kara’s mystery even further… and Shah was still processing it…

-------------------------------

October 28th - Year Two

Two days ago...

The Squad, as they joking called their little group of misfit friends, had been taking advantage of a streak of unusually warm and sunny weather to spend some time after school that Thursday wandering the local City Center… three sprawling levels of shops, restaurants, and movie theaters surrounded by parks, and sports fields.

For Shah, it was the joy of spending time with friends with the bonus of retail therapy... her favorite kind.

Brian had decided to remain at the Comic Stop to play a few games of Magic The Gathering while Alex had briefly run back to the store they’d just been in to buy the jeans she’d been lusting over.
Shah, Quinn, and Kara had continued on to the mega three-level bookstore and straight into the great little coffee shop on the first floor… one of their normal hangout spots.

A few minutes later Shah was sitting back on one of the large fluffy couches with Kara, who just flopped down next to her grinning triumphantly. The girl’s vibrant blue eyes were still watching Quinn and the handsome young man whose unwelcome advances she’d just deflected.

“I like what you did there. Smooth.” Shah commented quietly to her.

Kara seemed startled and turned to Shah with a very convincing look of puzzlement. As she did so, the slender fingers from one of her hands sought out the gorgeous blue diamond pendant that hung from her neck, which matched the amazing color of her eyes. Shah found it interesting that Alex had one just like it, but with a blood-red gemstone.

“What I did? I don’t understand.”

Shah leveled her best bullshit detector gaze, as Alex called it, on the younger girl, “You told him that I was your girlfriend…”

Kara’s eyes became huge… She took a breath, and dropped her faux innocent expression, “You heard that?” She bit her lip and then continued, “I’m so sorry, I just needed to get away, and it was the best idea I had. I… I didn’t think you could actually hear me.” Kara looked mortified.

“Well, at least you made Quinn’s day.” Shah tried not to smirk as she sipped her tea. Oh, the irony, the girl who could often overhear conversations from a room away, busted. “Not your type?”

“No so much,” Kara admitted but didn’t elaborate.

Shah decided that she needed to get a little more mileage out of the situation. “So, about our new relationship status, are you going to ask me out properly? Do we kiss on the first date?”

Kara blushed, bit her lower lip, and was suddenly very interested in picking up and fiddling with the coffee mug that she’d set on the nearby table. She tried to talk but started to giggle instead.

Shah thought for sure she was going to die from how adorable Kara was right now; she just wanted to hug her. “I’m joking, sheereen-am! In fact, I commend your quick thinking and swift escape. Very impressive.”

“Um, thank you?” Kara grinned.

Shah smiled in return. “Of course.” Then her attention drifted across the room, past Quinn and his new boy… friend, to Alex, who had just stepped into the coffee shop holding a bag, and was heading over to place her drink order. Shah's keen peripheral vision caught the fact Kara’s gaze had also sought out her sister. The tense girl was focused like a laser… but it was the look in Kara’s eyes that struck Shah like a thunderbolt.

What she glimpsed there was fire, and a deep yearning.

Shah had seen that look before, a long time ago… in her best friend’s eyes.

So, Kara was attracted to Alex?

Shah did not react but kept calm, taking another sip of her tea. She was careful not to alert the distracted, but normally freakishly perceptive Kara to her revelation. She wondered, was Kara’s desire for Alex just a crush, or was it more? The younger Danvers had only let her guard down for a
moment before her surprisingly controlled wall slammed down again, but Shah was certain that what she’d seen, and felt, was far more than infatuation.

A moment later, when Kara picked up her coffee to speak with Shah, everything about the girl screamed that all was fine with the world, with her, but Kara’s eyes told a different story, as she continued to covertly stalk Alex over the rim of her cup.

October 30th - Year Two

Back in the present, Shah and Alex were lying back on her bed together, listening to the amazing new Björk album, and one of their favorites, Coldplay's 'A Rush of Blood to the Head' on vinyl. It was wonderful, but in the back of her churning mind, Shah could not shake an almost primal need to understand what was going on in her best friend’s life.

She now knew Kara’s burden, but what of Alex? Was her best friend aware of her sister’s feelings for her? Thinking back over the last few months, the signs seemed to all be there… that Alex did know, and perhaps even returned her affections.

For her part, Shah was conflicted… Torn between a barrage of emotions; including jealousy, loss, relief, happiness, and even concern.

They had never talked openly about it, but Shah had always known, without a doubt, that her dear friend wanted her. Part of her reveled in the adoration, and secretly enjoying being coveted… especially by Alex, who was such an incredible person… beautiful inside and out.

Shah had wished, hoped, that she could one day return Alex’s affection in the same way. She’d considered responding many times, more to make Alex happy than to explore her own desires… not that she didn’t have those longings, she definitely did, but had just lacked the courage to act upon them.

More importantly, she’d made the decision that their friendship was most important, and it wouldn’t have been fair to Alex. She deserved to be with someone who could give her everything… his or her whole body and soul, not merely a friend who would do anything for her, even if Shah did love her.

While Shah had never given Alex hope that she was capable of returning her affections or represented herself as anything other than straight, she was, in fact, unsure of her own sexuality. It had been easier to say nothing, and Alex had never explicitly told Shah of her feelings, probably to spare her from what she was doing now… obsessing, worrying, and second-guessing.

She had spent a great deal of time trying to analyze her feelings after Kara’s revelation.

Jealously was a new experience for her, at least towards another person for a person… She was definitely envious of Kara for loving Alex in a way she had been unable to or hadn’t allowed herself to. How horrible, strange and wrong that was.

Shah decided right then to crush that unwholesome feeling.

Her relief, and sense of loss, at apparently no longer being Alex’s focus was accompanied by guilt, at least at first.

As the pieces of the Alex/Kara puzzle had come together in Shah’s mind, she reached the
extraordinary conclusion that what she’d perceived as Alex distancing herself from Shah may not have been about her at all… but about Kara.

That powerful sense of yearning, the desire that Alex had always lavished on the Shah, had diminished over the past few months. That had not been her imagination. Perhaps her friend’s feelings had shifted to her adopted sister? Shah had no evidence that Alex even knew of Kara’s feelings, let alone reciprocated them, but she couldn’t help but consider the possibility… Kara was the kind of person you couldn’t help but fall in love with.

Shah should have been relieved that the pressure on her was gone, but she missed it... She knew it was wrong for her to want it back, but she did, which was unfair to both Alex… and Kara.

She needed to be a better friend than that, to both of them.

And that’s where her concern came in.

Alex and Kara were sisters… Kara was adopted, yes, but society as a whole did not look fondly upon what would be labeled as unacceptable by many, no matter the circumstances.

Shah’s own awareness of such matters involving her own faith was murky at best, but she assumed such a thing would most likely be considered *haram*, forbidden. She made a mental note to ask her Imam about it.

Not that anything really mattered to her besides her friends’ happiness…

She was scornful of most taboos and dogma but if one, or both, of the Danvers sisters were falling for each other, they were heading into dangerous waters and would need a friend to help see them through.

That was something she could, and would, do.

Shah swallowed… but if she was reading the situation completely wrong, and Alex still loved her, then it was an even more frightening scenario: she would need to confront her own heart… if it wasn’t already too late to matter.

........................................

Chapter End Notes

End Notes:

Sending a big round of hugs out for the kudos and amazing comments, thank you all so much! (and please keep them coming, every single one really helps!)

Next up: Chapter eight is a doozy! Shah follows a hunch off on a secret mission, and ends up seeing, and hearing, more than she bargained for.

Any and all errors are my own, please let me know if you see any and I'll address them!
Some thoughts:

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: Starting with this chapter I’ll do my best to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Below are terms used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:
aziz-am - my dear (what Alex calls Shah)
joon-am – my dear, or my life, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)
sheereen-am - sweetie (what Shah calls Kara)

Alex’s Kryptonian name/title, given to her by Kara:
Vaena – Proper noun, title. As of yet undefined beyond “One who is loved” but more profound (What Kara calls Alex)
What’s A Little Stalking Between Friends?

Chapter Summary

When Alex and Kara sneak off on a clandestine adventure Shah follows... and ends up seeing, and hearing, a great deal more than she bargained for.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

November 6th - Year Two

Ten Lakes State Forest Preserve –upstate from Midvale and Metropolis

0945 Hours UTC -5, Saturday, U.S. East Coast Time

Approximate Coordinates: 43.213903, -74.803848

09:45 AM

How Shah ended up freezing her butt off on that cheerless November morning was not her best shining moment.

It was her obsession with secrets, Alex and Kara’s any way… and her own bloody fault.

One thing had led to another, and another, and so on, bringing her inevitably to where she was… Somewhere deep in a vast tract of state wilderness four and a half hours northwest of Metropolis, silently slipping from tree to tree, stalking her unsuspecting prey…

Her friends.

Yeah… like she said, not her best moment.

Her mission called for both speed and stealth, and she’d come prepared. Her long hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she was dressed in her wilderness survival gear, camouflaged in the mottled pattern that resembled the faded fall colors of the leaves around her. Every potential piece of her clothing that could be was cinched down, and besides her iPhone and slim wallet that were both tucked safely away within inner pockets, she only carried two slender combat knives, her fighting sticks, water, and a small worn canvas satchel secured to her back containing some energy bars, a parabolic mic, and earbuds.

Shah still wished that she'd brought a sword. She had no idea why... it’s not like carrying a blade around was practical… she just liked how the weapons felt in her hands.

In her haste that morning she had passed on eating breakfast, a decision she now was beginning to regret... worried that her now growling stomach might give her presence away. Sadly, she’d already devoured the small bag of Goldfish crackers she’d recently acquired and didn’t have time to get out an energy bar.
She paused behind the cover of a bramble-covered hill to unwrap the cloth that covered the compass strapped to her wrist and took a quick read on her position. The Danvers sisters were about 100 meters ahead, moving swiftly through the forest in a northwesterly direction on their way to the mysterious destination that Shah had seen marked very clearly with a big red “X” on Alex’s secret map. The same map her best friend had texted three days earlier to Kara, whose usually closely guarded iPhone had, by some happy twist of circumstance, been left out where Shah could briefly access it…


Nov 3rd, Wednesday

3 days ago…

She only had a few seconds to glance through the sisters’ text convo, but what she saw was as mysterious as it was revealing. Along with the Google Map image with the big red “X” on a specific location…

43.213903, -74.803848

Map coordinates.

Shah memorized the Latitude and Longitude, and read what she could from their exchange before she had to set Kara’s phone down…


Alex: X marks the spot!

Kara: why there?

Alex: it’s a surprise. be ready for a workout

Kara: why do we need to leave so early tho?! :-(

Alex: poor bby, you don’t sleep anyway so your argument is invalid

Kara: but we had squad plans…

Alex: they'll understand, this is important

Kara: :-( :-( :-(

Alex: quit complaining

Alex: trust me, you’ll like it

Alex: Nom says go. Kara, you need this :-) 

Kara: fiiiine

Kara: Sunday morning?

Alex: yep. 4 AM. road trip.

Kara: by land?
Alex: yes, our mutual friend says it's too risky to fly

Kara: ugh, ok I'm in

So, her friends were not ‘studying at the coffee shop all day’ as Kara had told Eliza, and Alex was not ‘helping Kara with homework’, as Alex had told her... to her face!

Shah felt a growl building deep in her throat.

But, after a few relaxing breaths, she decided to give them the benefit of the doubt, thinking that there had to be a very good reason for their behavior. Rather than making assumptions, Shah instead turned her focus to uncovering the mystery of why Alex and Kara were lying about what they were up to.

So began her covert investigation.

After spending some quality time with a decent geolocation app and Google, she discovered that Alex’s map coordinates pointed to an area once used by the old New York Central Railway System that had been abandoned over forty years prior. She ended up skipping classes one day (pretending to be sick), which she never did and traveling over four hours by bus, and train, to scour the dusty archives of the upstate County Records Office, where she was able to retrieve the pre-digital era documents for more details.

It turned out that the forgotten area had been a very important rail hub back in the day, a depot with repair facilities, offices, storage buildings, and even a factory of some kind. Sadly, it appeared the depot had, over time, been reclaimed by nature. In fact, it was now located within a State Wilderness Area, far off the beaten path.

From the ancient maps and charts, it appeared that a multitude of railway lines had run through the once crucial nexus point. While some had been retrofitted or upgraded over the long years, a vast number had disappeared from official existence; most likely still there, but in ruins... overgrown and lost from memory.

She almost laughed as a chill tickled her spine... it felt like she was in a movie. Shah was either overreacting and Alex and Kara were just sneaking off to explore the abandoned place without her... or her friends could be stumbling into some super villain’s secret lair.

Either way, she decided to follow them, invited or not, to get some answers.

The bit in the text about flying was confusing... and why was it ‘risky’? She checked the weather for Sunday on her app, and the forecast was fine... crisp and mostly clear... but no storms. Shah also wasn’t aware that Alex knew anyone who owned or flew a plane, and while there were a couple small craft airstrips indicated on the map within five to ten miles of the “X” it didn’t make a great deal of sense to fly there unless her friends knew someone who could pick them up in a vehicle.

Shah didn’t spend too much time on that line of inquiry, as Alex had clearly said it was going to be a ‘road trip’.

The question begging to be answered, among many, was... how would they get there?

November 6th - Year Two
Shah arrived at the Danvers house well before the break of dawn on Sunday morning, quietly stashed her bike in the bushes down the street, and adjusted the worn, military style canvas bag slung over her shoulder. She barely noticed the bitter chill, saying a silent prayer of thanks for the warmth of the flexible climbing gloves, and other high-tech survival gear that she’d chosen for her mission.

Her frigid breath trailed alongside and behind her as she stalked among the shadows to find a secluded place to hide one house down.

At exactly 4:00 AM her silent vigil came to an end as Alex and Kara exited their home… bless Kara’s maddening propensity for punctuality. Both were outfitted like they were going out for a study session over coffee, not an adventure in the frozen wilds, and Shah had to admit, they both looked really great.

Alex seemed buoyant, dressed in her favorite faded jeans and matching leather jacket over a lovely olive green wool cardigan (that Shah knew went perfectly with her friend’s gorgeous hazel eyes), and a matching knit hat. At least she was wearing hiking boots, though they were more cute than rugged. The older Danvers sister also carried an unfamiliar canvas backpack, but it didn’t look full enough to be hiding any hiking gear or equipment.

Kara wore a to-die-for military-style khaki jacket over a striking black outfit. While it seemed like a choice more suited for Alex than for the sunniest Danvers, it was killer on her! Then again, what wasn’t? A very cozy looking long black and white wool scarf was wrapped around her neck, and the lightweight messenger bag that generally contained either her MacBook Pro or several books was slung loosely at her side.

Shah followed them to the metro stop, and onto a bus, where she sunk down in a seat trying to hide as far from the sisters as she could… doing her best to make it appear like she was with the three other random people along for the ride.

After one transfer they were at the main Rapid Transit Station, where she followed the talkative pair as they quickly hopped on the northbound express train. Shah hung back, only getting on at the last minute, hood up, and her head down.

The Danvers sisters’ final stop was a rural train station located in a very out-of-the-way place called Ten Lakes. After they detrained, Shah watched as her friends disappeared into the public bathroom, where they were inside for maybe all of five minutes, before stepping back out.

Shah was floored.

Alex had completely transformed… somehow, and looked totally amazing! Her best friend was suddenly dressed like a walking ad for REI or The North Face, wearing high-end hiking gear from head to toe.

She looked like a pro.

Where did it all come from? Stashed at the facility beforehand? Did they meet up with someone Shah missed? She was unsure, and that bothered her.
Kara, on the other hand, was wearing the same outfit as before, but something about the beautiful girl had changed… or more accurately, shifted. She was taller, her stride longer, more confident, and seemed to be positively floating beside Alex.

Shah had no idea how her friends planned to get to the map location; it was still at least a six-mile hike through rugged terrain if they went off-road.

After the sisters stopped for crullers, Kara’s favorite, and coffee, they proceeded to exit the station and walk with purpose into its dimly lit parking lot. Shah was perplexed as to why Alex was carrying two steaming cups and surprised when once out in the lot they boldly approached a gruff looking man who appeared to be in his mid-thirties, dressed in jeans, well-worn hiking boots, one of those puffy vest jackets over a red flannel long-sleeved shirt, and had a ball cap perched on his head, though it was too far away for Shah to make out any logo or words.

He was standing with one boot on the side of a mud-spattered pickup with oversized wheels, scanning a glowing iPad that had a black antenna on it. When he noticed the girls approaching he smiled broadly, waved, and flipped the cover of his tablet closed.

Shah swiftly moved to a more secluded position, checked to make sure she didn’t have an audience, then pulled a small, parabolic mic out of her bag, wirelessly connected the device to her phone, pointed it in the direction of her friends, and slipped in her white earbuds…

The man was speaking, “…on time.”

Alex extended her arm, as did Kara and they shook hands with the man, who now, after observing him, seemed more teddy bear than gruff. “Thanks for meeting with us this early Mr. Johnson.” Alex had her charm on full blast.

“Please, just call me Carl.” He was blushing.

“Okay. Carl. Oh, here… three sugars, right?” Alex extended the spare coffee she’d been carrying to the man, whose face lit up as he accepted, gratefully taking a drink.

“Yeah, thanks. I owe ya!”

“No prob, you’re the one helping us!”

Carl stammered briefly but jolted into action after that. “Ya probably wanna see whatcha came for before we drive over ta Ketter Ridge… to the trailheads there. Um… here…” He opened the cab of the truck, pulled out a folded laminated map, and handed it to Kara, who was closest to him.

He seemed excited and flipped his iPad back open to show them something. “That…” He said, indicating the map Kara was scanning. “Is a hi-res topo map of the region, with metadata layered into the ink. Ya can read it with the app I sent. It’ll show the best hiking paths, the coolest abandoned sites, and all the old rail lines. The whole area’s mapped.”

“That’s perfect! You really know this stuff, Carl… and gosh your photos on your website are just amazing.” Alex’s praise and un-Alex-like phrasing seemed a bit effusive but genuine, and he was grinning like he’d just won the lottery.

Men… just like boys… Shah rolled her eyes. Alex could sweet talk a stone.

Shah noticed Kara’s quiet nod to her sister after examining the map… it seemed the younger Danvers was letting Alex know it was acceptable. Kara’s ever-expanding skill set continued to surprise and intrigue Shah… who knew that the girl could also read detailed topographic maps?
Shah’s more immediate concern was Carl’s comment, ‘before we drive over to Ketter Ridge’. She had a sinking feeling that she was going to need to find a ride… soon. Almost immediately, the quick-thinking girl stowed her gear back in her duffel, and headed back into the station, looking for someone who seemed approachable.

Unfortunately, what she found, at least at first, was the opposite.

Empty seats and mostly dark ticket booths gave the dreary, cavernous facility a less-than-welcoming vibe. Shah scanned the open space to try and find someone who might help her. There were maybe twenty people total around, most dressed in rugged work clothes, a couple in suits or dresses under their heavy coats, headed to Metropolis or a suburb for their jobs, and an African American woman probably in her late thirties with two little twin girls around six-years-old, standing near her.

She was kissing a tall, extremely handsome young man dressed in military garb on the cheek as if saying a tender farewell next to a train with open doors. Shah assumed the clean-cut soldier with kind eyes was her son, though; she must have had him at a young age. She took her time watching… he was devastatingly handsome, tall and broad-shouldered… definitely a warrior.

And his smile… wow…

She found herself wondering what the beautiful soldier’s name might be…

The sound of a boot scuffing the 1950s-era tile behind her caused her to startle and turn. There, about ten feet away, stood an unkempt man with two boys, maybe eight and ten-years-old, cringing behind him. Shah could smell the stench of alcohol from where she stood. His children seemed normal enough, aside from the discomfort in their body language… but the man, presumably their father, possessed hateful, bloodshot eyes, and wore a permanent scowl on his face.

He was staring, or more accurately glaring, at Shah.

“You lost little lady?” He called out with a sneer, “Wha? Cat got yer tongue? Dontcha speak English?” He took a menacing step toward her.

Shah drew herself up to her full, admittedly unintimidating, 5’4” height, and stared right back at him like a challenge. She’d dealt with men like him before, in every city that she’d ever lived, and knew that above all else she could not risk showing him fear.

She clenched her left hand into a fist to keep it from shaking.

“Whether I am lost, or found, or speak English… or not, is none of your concern.” Despite her raw nerves her voice was calm and carried a hint of danger.

The man seemed confused by her reaction and, after a moment processing it, began to seethe with impotent rage. Pressing her advantage, she continued to hold her ground and even inched forward a bit to test his apparently failing resolve.

She watched with satisfaction as a hint of fear crept into his eyes… and he stepped back from her.

The older of the two boys threw her a panicked glance as if pleading for her to… do what, flee? Back down? She would do neither. This man was a bully, and Shah did not tolerate bullies.

The boy, seeing she would not withdraw, grabbed one of his father’s hands and pulled, begging him to leave, but the man jerked free roughly, and raised his hand as if to strike the now cowering child… all the while keeping his focus on Shah.
“You’re in AMERICA now!” He spit at her as the boy scrambled out of his reach. “Take that damn rag off your head… or better, go back to whatever shithole country you came from!”

Shah had already shifted into a fighting stance, and was tensing for an attack, when a very loud and stern woman’s voice rang out, “James Douglas Fields! Shame on you! You leave that girl alone!” Suddenly, the mother she’d spotted moments before stepped between Shah and the awful man, with the two beautiful little girls in tow.

The angry woman then laid into him with passionate conviction, “You pathetic, racist, little man, go slink back into whatever bottle you crawled out of this morning and leave this young lady alone, or so help me God I will spray you in the face.” She lifted her right arm, revealing the hardcore container of military grade pepper spray held in her rigid grasp.

“I already called the police.” She then shoved her phone forward with her other hand so he could clearly see that she’d dialed 911.

The intoxicated man suddenly looked terrified and folded beneath her epic assault. Babbling an incomprehensible apology to her and Shah, he fled the station at nearly a run. The two boys, completely shocked, were trying not to laugh as they followed, looking back at the woman in awed disbelief.

Shah had never been as impressed with a human being as she was of her smiling savior.

“Well, that’s that.” The taller woman said with a joyful playfulness that was a hundred and eighty degrees from the tone she’d used to vanquish Shah’s enemy. “Serves him right.” She chuckled after him.

Her warm brown eyes filled with compassion as she turned to look at Shah, “Sweetheart, are you all right? I’m so sorry he said those terrible things.” Her voice was warm like honey and made Shah think of marshmallows and hot cocoa by the fireplace.

“I am fine now, thanks to you.” Shah smiled and offered her slender hand, “I am…” she froze for a split second; could she risk giving this wonderful woman her real name? She quickly decided to not reward her savior’s kindness with a lie… “Shahrazad Nazari, but my friends just call me Shah, and I am in your debt, ma’am.”

The woman’s face lit up, “Now, no need for ma’am with me girl, Marjorie will do just fine! Shahrazad… such a pretty name, and a British accent… wonderful! I always wanted one of those, especially back in college…” She leaned in and whispered with a devilish grin, “you know, before kids. Sorry, I get derailed easy. It’s very nice to meet you too, Shah. I’m Marjorie Phelps, and these are my twin girls, Taylor and Melinda.”

The gaping youngsters both blushed in adorable unison, twisting in place as they sang, “Hello Ms. Nazari.” Their eyes never leaving Shah’s face…

Marjorie looked slightly embarrassed. “I’m sorry they’re staring, it’s probably your hijab, they’re not exactly world travelers yet. I hope you don’t think everyone here is a redneck like that old drunk.” Then added, under her breath so the little ones couldn’t hear, “Maybe they’ll finally take those boys away from him this time… Enough of that though, can I do anything to help you darlin’? I hate to say so, but you look a little lost.”

Shah sighed, relief flooding over her. “Yes, thank you, Marjorie, very much. If it wouldn’t be too much of an inconvenience, could I trouble you for a lift?”
The older woman grinned, put her pepper spray back in her voluminous purse, and pulled out her keys.

“Where to, my dear?”


7:56 AM

Thanks to Marjorie, and her bright blue mini-van, Shah was soon ahead of her friends. The older woman tried to talk Shah into coming home with her or dropping her off in town instead, but she’d insisted that she’d be fine and was just late meeting friends for some hiking.

Marjorie was skeptical, and Shah knew why. The trails in the area had once been a popular destination, but that was a long time ago. Since that time, the forests had reclaimed the land, and the trails had become wild and dangerous.

The concerned woman had reluctantly agreed to drop Shah off as close to the old Ketter Ridge trailhead as she could get, at a lonely cul-de-sac at the end of a long gravel road in the middle of nowhere. Shah didn’t escape her savior easily, though.

Marjorie would not leave her until after she’d given the girl a big hug, her cell phone number, a Ziploc bag full of Goldfish crackers, a bottle of water, a warning about how to escape black bears by screaming or poking them in the eye, and the promise that Shah would call her right away if her friends didn’t show.

“Shah,” The older woman began, but hesitated before continuing, obviously concerned. “Are you in some kind of… trouble?”

“No, no… Marjorie, not at all, it’s… not like that. I’m… I’m just trying to satisfy my curiosity about something. Something very important. That’s all.”

“Okay then, if you’re sure…” Marjorie narrowed her gaze, waiting for the girl’s response.

Shah, her hand on the door latch already, smiled brightly, “I am quite certain… and, if I do require any assistance, I have your number.” She waved the little piece of paper on which the older woman had written her address, phone number, and email address.

“Well… fine then.” Marjorie was clearly not happy with Shah’s answer, or satisfied, but accepted it. “It was wonderful meeting you, Shahrazad Nazari… Bedrood.”

Shah stared in slack-jawed amazement, blinking in disbelief at the sound of the familiar Persian parting phrase that had just rolled beautifully off Marjorie’s tongue.

The woman’s grin was blinding, and her eyes danced with joy, “I wasn’t always in Ten Lakes Shah joon, don’t look so surprised.”

Shah suddenly found herself stretched across the seat hugging the amazing woman, who was enthusiastically squeezing her in return.

When she finally slipped out of the comfort of Marjorie’s arms and exited the vehicle, Shah waved at the girls in the back, who were calling out in harmony like a chorus, begging her to stay and ride home with them. She then turned back to her new friend with damp eyes and slung her camouflaged duffle over her shoulder.
“Marjorie, I can’t thank you enough.” She began...

“No need. Just come visit us sometime. I think… the girls would really like that.”

Shah bowed her head, understanding her message, “As would I, especially if you promise to tell me how you came to learn my language.”

The older woman grinned, “Now that’s a story!”

“One I cannot wait to hear. Khodāhāfez fearless Marjorie, until we meet again.” And with that, Shah was gone… seemingly disappeared into thin air, accompanied by the awed gasps of wonderment by Marjorie and her girls.

Shah chuckled under her breath, she’d used a little trick of distraction and diversion she’d learned long ago as a child in Iran, and had perfected over time. Taylor and Melinda were giggling and cheering hysteriaically behind her in the car, calling out for more ‘magic tricks’ as Shah made her way into the margin of the thick cover of trees.

Marjorie’s kindness had buoyed her spirits, and as she hunkered down in a secluded place within the thicket to wait for her friends, Shah promised herself she’d email the amazing woman right away and plan a visit to check in on her and her delightful little girls during the holiday break.

...............................

8:25 AM

Shah didn’t have to wait very long.

Less than fifteen minutes after settling in, Carl’s mud-spattered truck appeared, rumbling down the road to deposit Alex and Kara, who almost immediately struck out to find the trail after waving goodbye.

She followed, doing her best to observe and listen using her lightweight mic.

The Danvers sisters were laughing about something as they crunched over the gravel and Kara scanned the thick forest around them. Alex followed behind her, studying the map that Carl had supplied. As they walked, Kara slipped her glasses off, put them away, and pulled the ties out of her hair.

It occurred to Shah that she’d seen Kara wear her hair in a myriad of styles, beautiful braids, Leia buns, ponytails, but never just down…

Shah hardly recognized the stunning creature she was looking at now. Kara was barely dressed for the cold but seemed impervious to it. She strode with purpose, shaking her long wavy locks free with delight, her face turned toward the morning sun joyfully. She was so radiant that her golden hair seemed to collect the light and make it brighter… somehow even warmer.

After a moment, Kara appeared to find what she was looking for, Shah had no idea how, and then marched directly to the edge of the gravel, pointing up into the dense, wooded hills beyond. “Alex,” She said, getting her sister’s attention, “the trail starts up there.”

Alex looked up from studying the map, and smiled, “Nice. Well, at least we won’t need this anymore… thanks to Shatari.” She dramatically flourished the map, and then folded it up, before hefting her backpack off her shoulder with a grunt, and slipping the object inside.
Shah was confused, why go through all the trouble of acquiring such a map, and then not use it? Who was Shatari? And how did Alex’s backpack get so full? They must have stopped somewhere…

Kara grinned, “So you two figured out holo-mapping huh? Awesome! You’re our guide now… Ms. Indispensable.” Kara noticed Alex struggling with her bulging pack… “Oh here, let me take that.” She reached over and lifted it from her sister with one hand as if it weighed nothing, tossing it onto her own shoulder without effort.

Alex didn’t protest at all, in fact, quite the opposite. “Thanks, I’m so not complaining. That thing weighs a ton!” She rubbed and then rotated her shoulder. “Yeah, we’re good to go… and Kara, I’m always indispensable. You of all people should know that.”

And then, something so surprising and wonderful happened that Shah nearly gave herself away. Soft and beautiful words, like music… and nothing she’d had ever heard in her life, began to flow from Kara’s vocal chords as she replied to Alex.

The language was so aurally pleasing, so… unearthly, that Shah had nothing to compare it to, and was left wide-eyed and speechless.

*What was that?*

Shah tried to recall the various languages she’d ever heard the incredibly talented Danvers sisters speak, six? or maybe seven? but none sounded remotely like what she’d just heard.

Alex smiled with such obvious pleasure, that Shah knew she was relishing listening to Kara as much as she was. The more surprising thing was that when Kara paused, Alex responded in the same beautiful language! Her words had a different flow and tone but were just as lovely, like a similar song sung in a different key. Shah was entranced.

Then, without taking her eyes from Kara’s, Alex moved in close and slipped her hands into the younger girl’s. They stood only a foot or so apart, eyes nearly even, speaking back and forth in melody… fingers entwined, absorbed in each other as if nothing else in the world existed.

Shah was certain that at that point she could have stepped out and yelled their names and neither of them would have heard her.

*They are sooo into each other…*

There was no more doubt. Shah’s heart was racing, or maybe breaking, the feeling so powerful that she had to place her gloved hand over her mouth to keep the sound of it from escaping.

In the next breath, Alex shifted back to English, which sounded dull by comparison to whatever language she’d just been speaking, “…Yes. I hate it too, but we’re doing this the hard way, just like we agreed. That means English… and walking. Don’t worry, you’ll get a chance to cut loose… later, I promise.”

*The hard way? Cut loose*? What did all of that mean? Shah took a deep breath, her curiosity overcoming her fading waves of distress.

Kara sighed, but slowly nodded her acceptance, as if steeling herself for some extremely difficult task. Then, they were off, up into the cold, thickly forested hills, moving with deliberate speed and purpose.

To call the broken, overgrown, and uneven ground they were on a trail was laughable. The wilds
had taken it long ago… yet somehow Alex unerringly followed its twisted, shadowed memory. Shah had a heck of a time keeping up, but thankfully, the pair made enough noise to mask the occasional crunch of a leaf or twig from her soft footfalls. Years of training that she honestly never thought she’d use in real life had made her an excellent shadow.

The echo of Kara’s occasional musical laughter carried the painful reminder that Shah had not been invited to her best friend’s adventure. She was a spy… an interloper, breaking the codes of both friendship and honor.

She could only pray that they would one day forgive her.

After a frustrating hour or so where Shah couldn’t listen in, Alex finally led Kara up a rugged, and crumbling incline that required some climbing, so the pace relaxed. Shah was impressed, and surprised, at how swiftly the younger Danvers scurried up the hill, with what was probably at least a fifty-pound load on her back. She moved slowly enough to help Alex when she slipped, but like lightning when Alex almost fell.

*How did Kara move so fast?*

Alex seemed angry for being saved and a brief argument ensued, but Shah didn’t have the mic ready to listen in to the sisters’ conversation.

Later, Alex and Kara were navigating through a deep, wooded valley, with high cliff-like walls on either side, when they came to their first real obstacle… a massive, wooden train trestle. The dark construct looming before her friends reminded Shah of something built out of giant Tinker Toys… its thick, creosote-soaked timbers stretched upwards 200 feet from the valley floor where they stood.

The ancient structure’s bulk precariously bridged the wide scar of earth, but any further progress was blocked by a rockslide that had collapsed the valley beyond it. A waterfall had formed at the end, just past the trestle, raining its frigid waters down to gather in a dark pool at the bottom, cloaked by a misty spray. It provided a stunning if ominous, backdrop to the scene.

Shah had taken a slightly longer route, sticking to the high ground to remain undetected, so she had an excellent view of Kara and Alex below. She found a great hiding spot for viewing and re-focused her mic on them, adjusting her earbuds…

“…k me.”

“Alex, language,” Kara said sternly, causing the older Danvers to chuckle.

“Fine, but… I am not climbing… *that*.”

“Well then, we can’t go forward, so it’s either up, or turn back and hike for half an hour… we seem to be at an impasse…” Kara giggled, “That’s literally the first time I’ve ever used that word in an actual sentence by the way, how cool is that?”

“Kara, you’re such a geek.”

“Thank you.” Kara’s tone was gracious. Shah could see the sweet girl's megawatt smile, even from the distance. “Can we cheat now? Let me fly you to the top.”

*Let me fly you?* Shah was confused…

“No… temptress! The hard way, remember? Buumt, it is a long hike back… maybe you could…” Alex’s final words were so faint they were lost in the crackle of some sudden interference with the
mic. Shah couldn’t make them out.

She could see Kara’s grin though, and that she was… jumping up and down and clapping?

Kara then carefully transferred the heavy pack onto Alex’s back, then turned around to face away from her sister, and squatted down a bit, “Hop on!” She said with excitement.

Was she teasing Alex? No way she could…

Alex didn’t climb up but took off for a short run and jumped, landing firmly on Kara’s back, where she commenced hugging her golden-haired girl mercilessly. Shah could not help but observe how Kara didn’t budge when Alex’s weight and momentum hit her. In fact, Kara hadn’t moved at all, She’d just turned her head so she could stare back in wonder at Alex riding on her back.

Both of them were laughing.

Shah was still trying to grasp what she was seeing when Kara asked, “Ready?”

Alex raised herself up a little, using her sister’s hands like stirrups on a horse, stretched forward, and leaned in to kiss Kara, at length and luxuriously, on the cheek, “For luck.” She whispered, the mic barely managing to catch her breathy words.

They were so together…

”Hold on,” Kara said, already moving.

Shah’s heart was in her throat as she watched, and she almost stood up and screamed for Kara to stop.

The younger Danvers ran over the precariously loose stones of the riverbed without any hint of a stumble, Alex clinging to her back, all the way up to the base of the immense trestle’s framework. Shah had never seen anyone move with such grace. There was no hesitation in her friend’s body as she began ascending immediately, faster than Shah imagined anyone could, even an unencumbered Olympic athlete.

Amazing…

Kara never missed a handhold, not even when one of the huge timbers she was hanging on to gave way and plummeted with a massive crash to the rocks below… taking shards of rusty metal, railroad spikes, and splintered wood with it. Kara just swung twelve feet to another beam, and kept climbing… never showing strain, probably two hundred feet straight up to the top.

The strangest part was Alex: laughing like she was on a rollercoaster the entire time… she did shriek once, but she sounded more excited than terrified, as she should have been.

For as long as Shah had known her Alex had been brave… she wasn’t afraid of anything, or anyone… but as Kara’s passenger, she seemed completely unconcerned about the danger she was in as if there wasn’t any. Shah was breathing hard, consumed with worry for both of her friends’ safety until Kara finally reached the top. She swung Alex up to land surefooted on the rusted tracks of the bridge and quickly followed.

Shah whispered a prayer for her reckless, stupid friends… then refocused the mic.

“… was awesome!” Alex was trying not to look down. “Let’s get off this rickety thing before it falls down.”
“Don’t worry, if it did, I’d catch you.”

“I’d be counting on that,” Alex said, as she began hopping from one heavy plank to the next, following the tracks toward the edge of the trestle bridge. She appeared to be purposely avoiding the rather large gaps between the warped boards that stared directly down into the precipice of the valley. Kara glided next to her, and smoothly plucked the backpack from Alex again, effortlessly fastening the heavy burden over her own shoulders. She remained near her sister protectively, moving along the rail closest to Alex with the grace of a ballerina.

“I’m too klutzy to join the dojo…” Shah pondered the possible reasons why Kara would lie to her, especially when Shah could see how… mind-blowing the girl was.

After they left the bridge things got even stranger…

Between rare snippets of fuzzy audio, Shah watched as Alex appeared to be… could that be right? She appeared to be instructing Kara on… how to be less graceful. As they followed the tracks Kara went from the impossibly elegant creature Shah had just observed, to a seemingly normal girl, slipping on stones, or off the rail as she lost her balance… over and over again. The problem was, Shah now knew that was a lie. Alex was definitely critiquing her performance.

She finally had a good angle t her mic…

“… much better…” Alex was saying. “That looked great! But maybe too much, you don’t want to seem too clumsy.”

“Got it, not too clumsy.” Kara then, as if on cue, stumbled for the hundredth time, looking to Alex for approval. Shah had to admit, that one looked pretty real…

“Nailed it.”

“Yes!” Kara and Alex high-fived, before the younger Danvers briefly slipped back into being the impossibly fluid creature that Shah had realized, somewhere along the way, was the real Kara hidden behind the mask.

“Oh, wait a minute… we’re here. Finally!” Alex exhaled, bent slightly with her hands resting on her knees as she caught her breath, then pointed. “Just ahead, we follow the tracks over that ridge.”

Kara stepped forward and appeared to stare intently in the direction Alex had indicated. There wasn’t much she could see, besides trees, rocks, and train tracks, as far as Shah could tell… unless Kara could peer through the hills.

Kara turned to her sister, “It’s clear. Rao, this place is incredible! Kind of creepy, but I can see the allure, for our… um, activities… I can’t believe you found it… I guess the Internet is good for something besides porn, not that I have any personal experience with that.”

Alex laughed. “Thank Carl. Let’s just hope he’s right, and no one ever comes here.”

“No one is here.”

Shah was struck by the confidence with which Kara’s words were spoken, with absolute assurance… as if she actually knew.

*Is that what Kara meant by ‘It’s clear’? And who, or what was a Rao?*

All of Shah’s thoughts came to a halt when she caught a glimpse of what lay beyond the ridge. It...
was a haunting scene that took her breath away.

In what was once a wide-open valley, a facility the size of a small town had thrived. Now, all that was left were the overgrown remnants of its dilapidated bones. A large complex of once-tall industrial buildings lay before them like an ancient ruin, crumbling memories of a bygone age. From her position, Shah could see how the ancient tracks all converged here, in the old depot.

Amid the towering, moss-covered walls, shattered windows, and rusted iron frameworks, a massive roundabout sat prominently in the center. The mighty mechanism still had a huge locomotive sitting frozen in time on its main track, and others scattered around it. Further out were hundreds of long tracks arranged in rows, like a huge storage yard, where scores of old rail cars of all kinds sat rusting, like a train graveyard.

“Time to get to work,” Alex said.

Shah could tell she was excited as the sisters picked up their pace.

“Where do we start?” Kara asked.

Alex pointed down toward what was most likely the entrance of the formerly bustling facility, and Shah did a double take. Why was there a replica of Stonehenge built out of train cars down there? She didn’t know, but that’s where Alex and Kara were headed, so that’s where she followed.

As she silently slipped through the trees that led down into the mysterious valley, Shah’s mind was filled with more unanswered questions than she’d had that morning.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Shah, it’s a sad feeling, losing something you never had. And where in the heck are Kara and Alex going anyway?

Next up: In chapter nine, Shah becomes a willing spectator to Alex’s planned training session for Kara, and, as her friends’ secrets unravel further, falls deeper into their conspiracy of two. Plus, we get to see our young Kryptonian cut loose for the first time.

Thanks for reading! Any and all errors are my own, please let me know if you see any and I’ll address them!

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Parting Phrases:

Bedrood: (Persian/Farsi) Means “good-bye”.

Khodāhāfez: (Persian/Farsi) Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on who she’s talking to for its spiritual context. Literally translated it means: "May God be your Guardian" - Khoda, which is Middle Persian refers to Ahura Mazda,
the ancient Zoroastrian god, and hāfiz from the Arabic “hifz”, meaning "protection". The vernacular translation is simply "good-bye".

Terms
Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far that were used in this chapter, and will be used/interwoven throughout the rest of the story.

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:
aziz-am - my dear (what Alex calls Shah)
joon-am – my dear, or my life, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)
sheereen-am - sweetie (what Shah calls Kara)
Shah joon: What Marjorie called Shah in the car. Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean 'dear’. So, Shah joon', means ‘dear Shah when Marjorie says it. This is a common word to use in every conversation and every context. It is still a mystery how Shah’s new friend knows Farsi.

Alex’s Kryptonian name/title, given to her by Kara: Vaena – Proper noun, title. As of yet undefined beyond “One who is loved” but more profound (What Kara calls Alex)

Some reminders, because time in my crazy story can be confusing:
• I decided to not give a stated year to my story as to not date it. Assume that when Kara becomes Supergirl it is current time, so my story begins about ten years in the past. Years are identified in the header.
• How do I deal with 'years' in the story? Not like a normal Jan-Dec calendar year, but by Kara's birthday. Kara arrived on Earth in mid-June, and her birthday is September 5th, so technically Year One was near its end, with Year Two beginning on Sept 5th with Kara's 16th (18th) birthday. This means Kara's first Christmas was in 'Year Two'. Years are tracked Sept 5 - Sept 4.
• Kara’s human birthday is Sept 5, and Alex’s is Oct 17. Add +2 years to arrive at Kara’s actual Earth-equivalent age.
Chapter Summary

Where Kara and Alex finally reach the abandoned railroad depot, and Alex begins training her Kryptonian in earnest.

Shah sees things that cannot be unseen.

Secrets are revealed, choices made, and bonds forged.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

November 6th - Year Two

Ten Lakes State Forest Preserve

Old Railway Depot, upstate from Midvale and Metropolis

1010 Hours UTC -5, Saturday, U.S. East Coast Time

Approximate location: 43.213903, -74.803848

10:10 AM

Their first obstacle came early.

About halfway down the rugged hills that led into the wide overgrown valley, a silent guardian interrupted Alex and Kara’s descent. A weathered but very much intact security fence, over fifteen feet high and topped by rusted razor wire, blocked their path. The ancient barrier cut the old rail line in two and wound into the stark hibernating forest as far as Shah could see in either direction.

As her friends took a short break to discuss their options amid their frosty breaths, Shah moved into a position about fifty yards from them and ducked behind a tangle of brush to keep out of sight. As she began to carefully unpack her mic, a large flock of crows descended upon the branches of the nearby maples and began cawing relentlessly… distracting her for just a moment.

When the annoying birds finally grew silent, and she once again turned her attention to the girls, they had, to her complete surprise, already found a way to reach the other side of the fence and were moving quickly away from her.

How did they get over there so fast?!

Shah sprang into action, securing her items and then her duffel on her back as she ran toward the boundary. She quickly studied all of her possible approaches, and when she was just a few feet away from the tall fence she angled her body, leaped forward, and kicked off from a perfectly positioned tree. Using her momentum, she propelled herself over to the flexible mesh of metal, hitting a few feet
higher up than she started, and immediately sprang eight feet back to a different tree.

She repeated the process three more times, all the while moving swiftly upwards. When she finally reached an elevation higher than the barrier, she made one final leap… just clearing the razor wire as she rolled to a relatively quiet landing upon the cold, mossy earth on the other side.

Her adrenaline was pumping as she burst forward, sprinting after her escaping quarry.

*I did it!* She was so proud of herself, but her excitement was quickly dampened by the fact that Alex had not been there to witness her feat.

As she maneuvered through a maze of thick hardwoods, Shah eventually spied movement ahead… Momentary glimpses of her two friends between the thick gray trunks. Her attention was drawn to Alex, who was jogging behind her younger sister. Something strange was happening to her…

Something that seemed almost magical.

Alex's clothing began to shift as she flickered in and out between the trees, seemingly becoming one fluid form as it altered both its shape and appearance. At first, Shah believed it must have been a trick of the light, but no… in seconds all of Alex’s hiking gear had disappeared, and been replaced with perfection.

Shah stumbled.

Her best friend was now wearing a gorgeous black Burberry mid-length leather trench coat with the shearling collar exactly like the one the two of them were drooling over just days before, that neither could afford… not at over two thousand dollars! And it was more than that, Alex’s entire wardrobe had transformed… a pair of exquisite Tory Burch leather riding boots graced her feet, as well as high gray boot socks and black leggings that melted into a classy, black high-collared shirt.

It was the *exact* same dream outfit they’d put together online together for fun the previous Sunday… and Alex looked bloody amazing in it.

*How is that even possible?? Where did her other clothes go?*

Shah blinked hard and shook her head, but nothing changed the facts, or that she’d seen what she’d seen.

She pushed aside her confusion and continued following until the pair reached their very ominous destination. What lay before them looked like a bizarre replica Stonehenge, but even larger than the original, and made from actual trains. A massive ring of rusted locomotives and rail cars jutted out of the earth like standing stones, towering twenty-five feet or so above the ground.

The Trainhenge even had a passenger style and other types of cars set across the top of the circle, creating shadows in the morning light that stretched across the grassy moss from which the whole place seemed to grow.

*Not creepy at all. Nope.*

After taking a few photos and selfies with their phones, Alex and Kara began investigating the area, while Shah used the time to find a place to hunker down and pull out her mic.

“What’s that?” Kara asked her sister, who was standing next to a massive metal engine of some kind that sat up on top of a stack of ancient blocks like a grave marker… its once white paint was now tear-stained with reddish brown rust. It was taller than Alex, twice as long, and had to weigh tons…
“Well, according to our friend, this was once an 1,800 horsepower EMD 567D1 diesel-electric two-stroke 45-degree V-16 engine… which I now apparently know waaaay too much about.” Alex laughed… running her hand over the skin of its flaking paint as she balanced along the base like a gymnast.

*Again with this mysterious ‘friend’, and how is Alex now suddenly Google?*

She observed with envy as Kara pulled some carefully prepared snacks for the two of them out of their backpack before hanging the bag by its straps on the engine for safekeeping. While they ate, Shah had a quick snack before spending the next hour or so watching her friends cheerfully explore the landscape of the vast complex… without her.

Once again Alex instructed Kara carefully, requiring the attentive girl to follow and mimic her every move, reminding her constantly of how to be more ‘human’ and believable.

Shah was still lost on what that all meant… but it was becoming clearer that Kara was definitely extraordinary, and a very complex person with hidden strengths which she and Alex fully intended to keep private.

More was revealed when the duo was entering a large opening in one of the factory walls. Both of her friends deliberately stumbled over the broken bricks littering the ground as a test of their agility. As Alex climbed over the shifting pile, Kara followed, doing her best to mimic every one of her sister’s actions. But when something caused the younger Danvers to put her hand up against the edge of the broken wall’s frame, a large section suddenly broke free, raining chunks of heavy bricks and debris down on her!

Shah almost screamed out her friend’s name but stopped short when she saw what happened next. Kara just… stood there, and appeared to not have been moved, physically injured, or even bothered by the incident… *at all*. She merely scowled with irritation, brushed crumbled masonry off her jacket, shook fragments out her hair, laughed, and kept moving…

Her sister, on the other hand, had turned around and appeared very upset… “KARA!” Alex’s shout echoed throughout the ruins, startling the blonde with its intensity. “You can’t do that!”

“But Alex… seriously? It was nothing…”

“No, it wasn’t ‘nothing’! What do you think would happen if you dropped bricks on me? If I was lucky enough to not break anything, I’d at least be hurt! I’d feel pain, get knocked down… Kara, I’d bleed! It’d at least leave scratches, cuts, and bruises… What if someone saw you do something like that, looked for marks, and started asking questions?” Alex was breathing hard, the pitch of her voice higher than normal. “Or worse?”

Kara looked abashed and lowered her eyes to stare at the other girl’s boots. “I’m sorry… I’ll do better, I promise.”

Alex moved in close, grasping the young girl’s arms gently at the elbows. Her tone became soft, and she was very gentle when she spoke, “Kara… Kara, look at me.”

The younger girl glanced up, her sad blue eyes even with the brunette’s concerned hazel gaze.

“I’m not scolding you. I’m trying to help. I don’t want… They can’t take you away from me. Ever…” Wow, Shah had never heard Alex sound so passionate, or worried.

Kara straightened, the strength and determination Shah had glimpsed in her before seemed to flood
back before her eyes… The beautiful girl had dropped her mask, and had become a glorious angel once again as she said, “I wouldn’t let them.”

There was power in her voice… and absolute certainty, as if she knew there wasn’t anyone in the world that could touch her unless she allowed it...

“But, what about what we heard… what dad said?” Alex sounded totally anxious…

“We talked about that, whatever secrets Jeremiah is hiding, he’s doing it to protect me… We don’t know, yet, from whom, but we will find answers… I promise. Just not here, and not now…”

Then, to Shah’s frustration, they shifted into their maddeningly beautiful musical language, and she lost the conversation. She did listen though, it was too enjoyable not to, and noticed a word that Kara addressed Alex as, ‘Vaena’, at least twice. It was so lovely… but what did it mean?

Listening also gave her time to consider everything she’d heard. Kara was definitely not human, but what was she? And what danger were she and Alex in? And who was out to hurt her?

And the better question… what rabbit hole had Shah fallen down?

The adventurous duo eventually returned to Trainhenge, where Alex made a beeline for her backpack and immediately hefted the heavy bag down from the old engine. Kara stood nearby, watching with interest as her sister began transferring its contents to the mossy ground as if she herself didn’t know what was about to be revealed.

The blonde then voiced Shah’s question… Thankfully, in Persian!

“Oh, I’ve been dying to know, what are those for?” Alex had carefully unwrapped four egg cartons from the plastic bag they’d been secured in.

“Ah… Farsi, Shah would be proud…” Alex mused back in the same tongue, then sighed wistfully. “I wish she were here.”

Kara placed her hand gently on Alex’s shoulder. “Me too.”

“I know that she’s safer not knowing, but it just sucks. A lot.”

*They want me with them!* Shah felt warmth in her chest and her heart began racing. Then a realization also dawned on her… *Alex lied to protect me!* At that moment She wanted to hug them both, and then smack them.

*I don’t need protecting… I should be helping train Kara.*

Back to the eggs… “These….” Alex grinned mischievously and said, “are for you. You’ll see.” She then went silent for a few moments and counted her treasures.

“Well, at least most of them survived the trip here.” She made an icky face as she flicked egg goo and shell pieces off into the weeds. “Looks like we only lost three. Your reflexes and Shatari’s inertial dampers for the win! And, as far as what they’re for, it’s all part of my *ingenious* training plan… you’ll be catching them.”
Shah was listening intently. *Shatari’s inertial dampers?? Again, curiouser and curiouser...*

Kara looked dubious…

“Hey, how better to focus on control… it’ll be fun.”

“Hanging with The Squad would be fun, this… this is the opposite of fun.”

Shah almost laughed at Kara’s less than enthusiastic response… *that was cute.*

Alex looked up at the blonde from where she sat on her knees reloading the eggs in their carton, and said with all seriousness, “Not fun but necessary, my Padawan…”

Kara rolled her eyes, “Okay, Okay… jeez Obi-Wan, when you say it that way it’s actually kind of exciting… will I get a training montage?”

Alex giggled and pulled open a sack, dumping out a pile of something that caused Kara to recoil in apparent horror.

“Alex, why the heck did you bring… THEM!?”

On the mossy turf that cushioned Alex’s knees was a jumble of neon hair and demonic grins… or, more accurately, her entire collection of troll dolls.

Much to all her friends’ delight, Kara was notoriously afraid of the creepy little creatures…. One time Quinn put one on Kara’s pillow after she’d fallen asleep during an all-night D&D campaign. Her epic scream upon awakening was something none of them would ever forget and, needless to say, no one ever did it again.

To that day, nobody had figured out why all the glass in the game room had shattered.

Alex looked apologetic, “Sorry, they’re the best thing I could find in a pinch. I do have a plan for them, and it involves their inevitable and horrible demise… we’re not bringing them back with us if that’s what you’re worried about… I’m so over trolls. Are we good?”

Kara had on her adorable pout face but nodded at the metal box sticking out of Alex’s backpack. “Are the pretty vials in the box also part of that plan?”

Alex scooped up a foot-long military-style metal case that she hadn’t opened yet and cradled it protectively in her arms… “Hey, no peeking.”

*Peeking? The box was closed and securely latched….*

“Fine, no snooping… let’s do this.”

Shah settled in to watch as Alex directed Kara to go stand in the flat, mossy center of the ring of ancient train cars. Littered about were fallen hunks of rusted metal from the precariously dangling cars above. These fragments, some very large, were so overgrown with moss that they looked more like part of the green landscape, even in November than anything crafted by human hands.

Her best friend hung back at the periphery, testing the ground and circling the ring, scanning the grass and tossing errant rocks and pieces of metal aside as if clearing a path for herself. “So… here’s the plan. I’ll throw the eggs, and you’ll catch them… hopefully without breaking any… if this won’t help you learn control, I don’t know what will.” Alex then carefully lifted a carton of a dozen eggs in one arm.
Kara grinned, rolling her neck and shoulders as if preparing for an onslaught before she slipped effortlessly into a graceful battle stance. Damn, she was incredible… Shah could see the beautiful girl’s blue eyes focus on Alex.

She was ready.

“Go!” Kara called out, and Alex moved behind the pillar of a rusted coal car, dashing out suddenly to lob an egg at her sister, then another almost immediately after as she disappeared behind the next standing train car along the ring.

Kara grabbed at the first egg too hard, and its yellowish guts sprayed through her fingers. The next arrived a split second later, but she was ready and plucked the annoying projectile from the air with a burst of impossible speed.

Not even a second later the same egg was sitting on one of the earthen mounds ten feet away from Kara, but Shah hadn’t seen the girl place it there, just a blur of movement.

She was in awe and mystified at the same time.

The eggs kept coming, and Kara had only broken four of the dozen... which was unbelievable because by the end Alex was hurling them like baseballs. Each time Kara kept an egg from exploding, there was a blur, and it appeared on the mound next to the other survivors. By the time the older Danvers had made it around the ring to grab the second carton, Kara was getting cocky, “Bring it! I can do this all day.”

Alex laughed, and Shah watched as her clothing transformed again, this time from Burberry to something… no way! Alex looked like a Predator from the movie of the same name, but an admittedly more feminine, and sexier version. “Turning things up a notch sis, Shatari has a surprise!”

Could this get any crazier? Again, who is Shatari!?

Then… it did get wilder! Alex shimmered, and disappeared! Even Kara looked completely stunned, mouth agape as an egg hit her in the face, splattering its goo in her mouth, neck, hair, basically everywhere.

“Bullseye!” Came Alex’s triumphant cry from somewhere around the ring… she was still invisible, and moving fast.

“Grrroooosssss!!” Kara was flicking egg from her face and mouth, and without looking her left hand shot up to safely catch the next projectile that was aimed at her head. “Alllexxx! You’re sooo dead!”

The competition turned to laughter as it went on... with the unseen Predator lobbing eggs at the swift, sure blonde in the center. Alex’s early advantage was quickly eroded as Kara closed her eyes and began catching eggs without looking, but just… listening.

Then, at the end, Alex was down to her last few missiles, and sent a barrage… Kara’s eyes suddenly glowed an intense blue, and bursts of scintillating light beams… like lasers, shot from them to incinerate all of the incoming projectiles before they could reach her.

When it was finally over Alex materialized on her way to Kara at a jog from the edge of the ring, her Predator form slowly dissolving. She was clapping and smiling.

Shah was shaking… not just from what she’d seen, but also from the realization that this all seemed normal for them… Oh yes, and Kara could shoot lasers out of her eyes.
LASERS…

out…
of…
her…
freaking…
eyes…

These were not the answers Shah had thought she’d find… she stayed glued to the mic, her hand trembling.

Alex clothes had fully shifted back to the stunning Burberry outfit.

How in the world was she doing that? On top of all the crazy, it was still maddening not knowing.

“Great job, Kara! That last move, with the laser vision, was brilliant. I really thought I had you. Oh man, it smells like breakfast over here…”

“Oh, you had me.” Kara’s tone was disgusted, and she went back to wiping yolk out of her hair. “This is so nasty. Please excuse me, I’m going to track back to that river we crossed. I’ll be a few minutes. You didn’t happen to bring any soap or shampoo, did you?” Before Alex could answer Kara blurred, and disappeared in a sudden gust of wind that pulled Alex slightly in the direction the girl had headed.

Trackback to the river… to wash her hair… Yeah, you know… that freezing cold one, three miles away! No big. Shah was still shaking, attempting to hold on to some semblance of reality.

While Kara was gone, Alex went to work, meticulously transferring the tiny colorful vials from the metal box into the hollowed-out insides of the trolls. Once she was satisfied with her work she stuffed them back into the satchel and set off with it and her iPad. Moving quickly, she hid the little dolls all over, inside buildings, in the ground, up high… scarily high, and even in a tree… logging their locations on her tablet.

What? Was she playing a game of hide-and-seek with Kara?

Shah spent the downtime in prayer and contemplation. The sun was high, and it was time.

12:55 PM

The younger Danvers returned in an explosive rush and with a glorious spray of water that would have soaked Alex had it not burst over her as if some sort of invisible force field protected her. It was like a bubble that only became visible at the moment of the liquid’s misty impact.

Kara, stood immobile a few feet away from the brunette, her hair half-frozen and dripping wet, and looked disappointed. “Cheater!” She pouted.

“Poor baby.” Alex teased as she leaned in to kiss the younger girl’s cheek. Then in a mischievous tone, added, “Time for more work.”

Kara’s gleeful smile disappeared as her eyes narrowed, and she looked side to side suspiciously. “I
sense something foul…”

Alex giggled, “Yup! Troll time!”

Kara crossed her arms and harrumphed.

Even the adorable girl’s pouts were charming. *It was no wonder Alex loves her.*

“It’ll be fun, I promise.” Alex reached out to caress the younger girl’s forearm. “Look, here’s the deal… I’ve stuck concentrated amounts of specific chemicals, minerals, and other complex compounds into some of the dolls that you’ll need to find, and mystery substances in others that you’ll need to analyze and identify.”

Alex was enjoying herself… that much was obvious. She was such a geek.

“Great… you know I hate chemistry…” Kara sulked melodramatically.

“Come ‘on! Use that supercomputer between your ears! You already do this at home without even thinking about it. Kara, that amazing brain of yours, combined with an olfactory system that’s off the charts makes you basically the most advanced mass spectrometer on the planet! This shouldn’t be hard for you… at all, especially once you hone your senses.”

Supercomputer brain? The most advanced mass spectrometer on the planet? What the??!! Shah was still processing her best friend’s bizarre statements.

Alex continued, “I’ll time you. The faster you recover the correct ones, the better your score will be, and the sooner this exercise can end. By the time we’re done, you should be able to do this in seconds.”

“Okay…” Kara said, appearing skeptical.

Alex glared and said, "Oh, you're doing this. Don't make me get rough." And then slowly lifted her hands up to wiggle her fingers in her sister’s face... as if she were casting a spell or something.

“You wouldn’t.” Kara gasped in mock horror.

“Would.” Her smug grin told Shah that Alex already knew she’d won.

And then, like magic, the sunny girl perked up and was eagerly bouncing on the balls of her feet as if she couldn’t wait to get started. “Okay, okay… no reason to go nuclear, let’s do this. What am I looking for first?”

Wow, what threat did Alex make to get that kind of reaction out of Kara?

Her best friend then glanced down at her iPad and said, “First up, is barium chromate, BaCrO₄… Go!”

Kara bit her lip nervously, and appeared to be thinking… really, really hard.

After a few moments of Kara struggling Alex called out, “Okay, the first clue is... I’m a yellow powder, an oxidizing agent that produces a green flame when heated. Sometimes also called barium chromate oxide or barium tetrachromate.”

A look of revelation came over Kara’s features, and she rose up into the air.

She…
rose…
up…
into…
the air….

*She's... in... the... air…*

Kara was flying… turning in a smooth majestic circle, rising higher and scanning the area below….

*Kara's flying!!*

Shah was spellbound… and at that moment she recalled her comment at the coffee shop just before Halloween, the one that had caused Alex to nearly choke to death, came back to her…

*Allah had sent her an angel!*

A couple of minutes passed, and then Shah heard Kara gasp, “oh!” and in a shimmering burst of speed, the girl plummeted to Earth.

After landing gracefully on her feet, the impossibly swift girl tossed a huge hunk of moss-covered rusted steel aside like it weighed nothing. The probably two-ton object sailed sixty-feet into the forest before it came to an abrupt stop, buried several feet into the hardened soil.

*Khodaye man!* Shah was so astounded that she’d almost slipped up and cursed out loud.

Kara then reached down beneath where the object had been and dug something out of the earth. She then turned around with a dramatic flourish and victoriously presented a pink neon-haired troll doll to the world.

“Found it!” She exclaimed with childlike excitement.

And then, after doing a happy dance, she zoomed over to Alex so fast that she may as well have teleported. If she hadn’t been in shock, Shah would have laughed at the disgusted look on Kara’s face as she dropped the obviously loathsome thing at her trainer’s feet.

Now, Alex, she was laughing… “Oh my God, Kara, they’re just dolls! You can fry them when we’re done. I had to dig like a mole for ten minutes to get that one under there. Jeez….” She leaned in and kissed the beaming blonde before continuing. Kara seemed dazzled after the peck, touching her cheek dreamily as Alex said, “Okay, okay, ready? Next up is… sodium chloride, NaCl, with a special ingredient buried inside that you’ll need to identify!”

Kara began scanning the area once again, this time remaining standing next to her sister… “Table salt? Seriously? Okay, okay… I’m on it.”

Alex nodded as Kara sprang into action, this time blurring off into the closest crumbling building, a factory with standing walls that held hundreds of panes of ancient, cracked glass. A few minutes later, the younger Danvers gracefully rose from the ruin to hover above, clutching the troll above her head triumphantly.

Alex, with Shah following closely, was already most of the way there from her previous position.

“Got it!” Kara yelled, and even from that distance Shah could see her toss the troll up in the air and
vaporize it with a burst of searing light from her eyes. “Oh, and the special ingredient?” The blonde made a disgusted face. “It was a teeny tiny little vial with a solution inside… a mix of 6.1% sodium hypochlorite, NaClO, and water. Basically, bleach. Blech, my nose is still stinging.”

Alex made it inside the wall, and called up to her flying adopted sister playfully, “Nice work! You’re improving. That only took you four minutes and twenty-five seconds! A great time to beat! All right… next up are… copper sulfate crystals, CuSO\textsubscript{4} \textsubscript{5H\textsubscript{2}O! You’re going to like this one… hint, they come in your favorite color.”

Still hovering, Kara yelled out, “Blue!” And began to search, her sapphire eyes aglow as she scanned the world below.

Amazing!

Shah was really worried about being seen but eventually found what she hoped was a great hiding place to hunker down in with a full view of the inside of the building Kara was floating over.

Suddenly the angelic blonde put on another burst of speed and zipped down into the structure, drifting uncomfortably close to Shah’s hiding place as she searched the interior of the ruins.

Shah swallowed hard, held her breath, tensed, and waited.

The younger Danvers didn’t seem to notice her as she drifted just outside of a complex of dilapidated offices, which had long ago bustled with workers. Shah had observed Alex slip in earlier to place this particular troll but hadn’t seen exactly where she’d hidden the creature.

“Oh ha!” Kara exclaimed, landing smoothly by the outer door of the warren of rooms. She quickly tried to open it, but the door came off in her hand. Her delicate brows scrunched up with adorable annoyance as she tossed the offending object aside, the old wooden door careening forty feet across the factory floor with a dusty clatter.

“Oh, enough of this…” The girl said with exasperation, and strode forward with purpose, not stopping or affected in the least as she basically walked right through the remnants of all of the remaining walls… shattering them like paper. Dust, brick, wires, and metal collapsed to the floor as she drove a Kara-sized hole through a total of five barriers… finally ending her path of destruction when she reached the deepest room.

The large space must have once been some sort of secure location. It was lined with rusted iron bars, and on the back wall was an eight-foot-wide round vault door made of steel. Where she had entered, the bars were snapped and twisted inward… they’d not even slowed her down.

Such power!

Kara called out, “Not funny, Alex! This is a locked bank vault! The door’s some sort of really dense steel, and almost twelve inches thick! I can barely see through it. How the heck did you get it in there?”

She can see through steel too??!

A grinning Alex had followed right behind Kara’s bulldozer act, and to Shah’s surprise, was not at all touched by the bits of the still-crumbling building that Kara had left in her wake. The force that had protected Alex from the water still surrounded her, though it would have remained invisible without the newly disturbed cloud of dust.

It was fascinating; at first, Shah thought that the subtle energy field repelled the solid objects
encountering it, as the water had been, but as she watched she observed that any material falling into the field was not so much deflected as it was slowed down so drastically upon entering that it only appeared so. Alex had simply moved on before anything came close to touching her.

Amazing… some sort of ‘inertial dampening field’… of course! Now Alex’s earlier words make sense… in an insane, I’m living in a sci-fi story kind of way.

“It was cracked open when I was in here, so I dropped the troll inside and cranked it closed.”

Kara had already tried to use the large wheel that controlled the lock but had accidentally snapped the three-inch-thick steel bar clean off. Shah could tell that her younger friend was intimidated by the task… and why shouldn’t she be, a foot of solid steel?

Holy.

“No way I can open that.” Kara's voice was soft and full of doubt as she stared at the door’s barely rusted exterior. Her seemingly delicate hand trembled as she placed it on the surface of the metal.

Alex came up beside her, touched the filthy arm of her jacket, and squeezed, not letting go. “Mom’s gonna go ballistic, I don’t think this is going to come out in the wash.” Kara laughed, and they leaned into each other.

Alex, the Master of distraction… Shah grinned.

She then caught her best friend’s near whisper in the younger girl’s ear, “Kara, I know you can do it. Break it… for me.”

The effects of her words on the girl were instantaneous and galvanizing.

Kara nodded with new determination as she straightened, and fixed her steady gaze on the vault… facing the obstacle head on. “Stand back Alex, please.” Her voice was clear and confident.

Impressive.

After Alex moved back out of the room, the most amazing thing happened… Kara took a deep breath as if to steady herself, and then exploded forward a blur of motion, like a lightning bolt, slamming her fist with unimaginable force into the steel door’s center. The result was a deep resounding boom and a powerful shockwave that shook the entire structure!

Shah was almost knocked on her backside as the surge passed through her. Loose bricks and glass shattered, and a cloud of dust and particulates from the debris rose all around. She held on for dear life.

When the dust settled, Kara was standing before the battered vault, fists still clenched. The thick metal had crumpled inward; creating a deformed area almost a foot in diameter… Hardened metal dented six inches deep in the shape of her fist at its center.

The wall around the door had shattered, with chunks of crumbling brick and rebar exposed in stark, jagged lines radiating around it…

Unfortunately, the vault itself still appeared to be structurally intact.

Kara huffed, and then hovered up about three feet off the ground, firing a tightly focused beam of light that combined the energy from both of her eyes… searing into the metal. She proceeded to cut a long, white hotline that dripped molten steel along the center of the vault door… splitting it from top
She then quickly landed, rubbed her hands together and thrust them forward, burying her fingers deep into the glowing, liquefied metal. For a moment Shah almost couldn’t believe what she was seeing, but then realized she needed a new definition of ‘impossible’ where Kara was concerned….

With the youngest Danvers, anything was possible.

The girl had maneuvered her hands around until it looked like she had a good grip on both sides of the vault, and then heaved… wrenching the massive door into two pieces! The left side went flying thirty feet to embed itself in a brick wall, while the right half sailed much further, skittering to a spark-filled, skidding halt on the factory floor.

Kara stood in silence, her gaze focused down, almost… marveling at her hands, which were open, palms up, with molten steel still dripping from between her fingers as she flexed them.

To Shah, it seemed as if the girl was as shocked as she was, and in awe of her own power… coming to grips with what she was actually capable of, possibly for the first time.

Alex ran up from behind, counting the seconds out loud, which seemed to break Kara from her thoughtful reflection. Her destroyed sleeves were still smoldering when she reached down to claim her neon purple haired prize. “Stupid troll.” She muttered, incinerating the creature to ash with her laser eyes.

Shah noticed that Kara had very carefully collected the vial of beautiful blue crystals from the troll’s innards first, and slipped it (unseen by Alex) into one of the front pockets of her pants.

By the time the last troll met its demise Shah had to pee, badly.

She had never liked relieving herself in the wild but quietly went about the task, praying that she wouldn’t be detected. Kara had definitely improved as the test went on, finding Trolls laced with more and more complex chemical agents, in shorter and shorter times. Shah had heard enough over the last hour to piece together an understanding of many of the girl’s heightened senses and abilities but still had no idea how Alex had been transforming her clothing.

Shah was captivated watching her and Kara work together. They were such a perfect team.

Her best friend was quite the teacher, and apparently just what Kara needed to hone her senses and impossible abilities, as well as her humanity. Shah could see where her own skills could come in handy and was already planning a combat regime for Kara… Of course, that would depend on her revealing herself first, and on her friends being willing to speak to her afterward…

1:45 PM

By the time the last troll met its demise Shah had to pee, badly.

She had never liked relieving herself in the wild but quietly went about the task, praying that she wouldn’t be detected. Kara had definitely improved as the test went on, finding Trolls laced with more and more complex chemical agents, in shorter and shorter times. Shah had heard enough over the last hour to piece together an understanding of many of the girl’s heightened senses and abilities but still had no idea how Alex had been transforming her clothing.

Shah was captivated watching her and Kara work together. They were such a perfect team.

Her best friend was quite the teacher, and apparently just what Kara needed to hone her senses and impossible abilities, as well as her humanity. Shah could see where her own skills could come in handy and was already planning a combat regime for Kara… Of course, that would depend on her revealing herself first, and on her friends being willing to speak to her afterward…

After another snack and more ‘human’ training, Alex finally said, “I think we should call it a day, we have a short flight window coming up.”

“Wasn’t there talk of me getting to ‘cut loose’ before we left?” Kara said, grinning expectantly.

Alex nodded and turned to point out to the vast train graveyard, toward a wide flat area that was mostly bare, except for a massive locomotive that lay on its rusted side. It was at least sixty feet long, and of a classic design, like ones Shah had seen as a child. It had a single light on its rounded swept front, and dual windows looking forward from the cab. Through the oxidation and worn paint, she
could still read the ‘Union Pacific’ logo on the front.

“That’s a 120-ton engine… go destroy it.”

Kara looked at the locomotive, and then back at Alex. “Seriously? Just like that? Like… ‘Kara smash’?”

“Yup, you know you want to. It sucks having to be so careful 24/7, here’s your chance to let go… be yourself.”

Shah tensed, she could see the turmoil and tension in Kara’s body language as she looked between the train and Alex… and literally felt the rush of energy when the girl made her choice.

Kara suddenly blurred, covering the distance to her target in a split second, and slammed into the bulk of the heavy machine’s side with the roar of a collapsing building.

Shah nearly fell down from the force of it. The air was rent by the sound of shearing steel and grinding stone as Kara pushed the massive locomotive half a football field with the force of her momentum. Shah had to plug her ears, the screeching was worse than a hundred sets of nails on a hundred chalkboards.

As it ground to a stop, she saw that the enormous train had bent in a ‘v’ shape, with Kara at its focal point. The amazing girl blurred again, flying up into the air at an angle, and then came careening back down to impact the engine’s side with another deep shattering boom, sending metal and fragments of debris sailing off in all directions. The next strike was even more powerful as if she were gaining confidence, and strength with every terrible collision.

Shah swore she could hear musical laughter somewhere in the din.

At one point, Kara suddenly placed herself in front of the locomotive’s path after she’d just stuck it, only to smash it back in the opposite direction… and then did it again, as if she were playing Ping-Pong with herself… using a 120-ton ball.

The explosive sounds of steel meeting something infinity harder and moving at high velocity boomed and echoed through the entire valley like thunder, over, and over… as if the god Vulcan himself was pounding relentlessly at his divine forge.

More glass crashed and shattered in the surrounding buildings… walls crumbled.

Finally, Kara let the now unrecognizable mass of twisted metal collapse to the ground in an avalanche and launched herself joyfully up in the skies to sail above it. She hovered there for a moment, her eyes blazing with blue flame, as if surveying her work, before unleashing her punishing beams of searing light. Plasma scalpels sliced into the remains at a frantic pace… again and again, sparks, dust, smoke, and chunks of the old engine shot up from the earth under her onslaught…. as if gravity itself had momentarily reversed.

Such power!

Shah was breathing hard as she watched in absolute wonder… yet, at the same time, was completely unafraid of the angel before her. Her friend.

Now, what was she doing?

Kara’s movements were so fast that it was impossible to track her, but in seconds she had somehow collected all of the scattered pieces of the train and began molding the red-hot debris into something.
Molten plasma from her eyes, and the endless impacts of impossibly powerful blows, eventually reduced the once mighty engine to a thick column of glowing steel well over thirty feet long.

Of course, it still weighed tons, but that didn’t stop Kara from hefting it up like a weightless post and driving one end deep into the ground… The Earth shook as if there’d been a quake.

The girl drifted back down to stand before her handiwork; a twenty-foot high pillar of blackened, glowing steel that jutted out of the cold soil like a totem.

Seemingly satisfied with her creation, she once again used her laser vision. This time she was very careful as she skillfully engraved an intricate pattern into the obelisk’s apex.

Alex came running over… her arm seeking out and wrapping itself impatiently around Kara’s waist as they pressed together side by side. Shah couldn’t help but notice how perfectly the pair fit together.

One thing was certain; she’d never think of them as ‘sisters’ ever again.

The couple stared up at the still smoldering symbol that Kara had etched into the steel. It was beautiful, like some iconic star chart. At its center was a sun, and around it, in perfectly entwined orbits, were three corresponding planets.

By that point, Shah had finally worked up the courage to reveal her presence. She took a deep breath, stood up, and walked out of her hiding place toward her friends.

Kara was the first to notice, turning her head her playful blue eyes locked with Shah’s and she… smiled? Then swiftly placed her finger to her lips in the universal sign to shush before nudging the still oblivious Alex’s back. “Alex, track me.” She said with glee.

Kara never took her warm gaze off of the newcomer, but proceeded to launch herself straight up into the air like a bullet… pulling everything not nailed down with her. Shah almost floated for a second! *Freaking wow!*

Within a couple of seconds, the ear-splitting sound of thunder rumbled over the valley… a sonic boom?! And then, as a second booming roar echoed in the far distance, the low gray clouds above crackled with bluish lightning.

While staring up at the skies in wonder, Shah forgot that she wasn’t supposed to be there… and walked up to Alex, joining her best friend in watching the sky.

The older Danvers did a momentary double-take, and began blushing furiously… but seemed reluctant to take her eyes from the heavens. “Hey.” She said nervously.

After a moment’s silence, Shah simply replied, “You lied to me.” It wasn’t so much an accusation… she was just stating a fact.

Alex turned to focus on her. They were only a few feet apart, and Shah could see her best friend’s happiness had turned to worry as she bit her lower lip… searching her face for a clue as to how Shah was feeling…

She knew Alex too well.

“I’m sooo sorry. Are you mad?” The brunette asked tentatively.
“Yes! I’m upset! And what? no, ‘how did you get here Shah?’, ‘where did you come from?’ ‘did you enjoy freezing your butt off crawling through the dirt to spy on your friends who lied to you?’ You honestly don’t seem surprised to see me…” That was weird...

Shah had a sinking feeling.

Damn… did they… know I was here?

Alex twisted in place, “Um, we kind of planned this… well, not Kara’s phone and you seeing the convo, that was a mistake. She was late meeting Brian and Quinn online to play COD. Anyway, once we realized what’d happened we decided to let you… follow us, so you could see. We were both so sick of lying to you. Now her secrets… OUR secrets… are yours too.”

“I see.” Shah mused, somewhat disappointed that it wasn’t her mad infiltration skills that got her there.

“You were really sneaky though!” Alex smiled encouragingly. “We left breadcrumbs, and she tracked your heartbeat all day… Kara does that with people she cares about. She… she can’t help listening for them, to make sure they’re safe, even miles away.” Shah couldn’t help but grin at that; it was something the sweet girl with godlike powers would do.

At that moment, thunder once again rumbled above, and the golden-haired girl slowly descended from the clouds like an angel. She was coming down feet first, steam rolling off her like mist, aglow from the touch of the soft beams of light that pierced through the gray blanket above.

Shah had never seen anything as beautiful before in her life.

Awestruck, both Alex and Shah fell silent… and just watched her.

Kara landed close by, her face flushed pink, and lit with joy… but that wasn’t the most remarkable bit. She was also pretty much naked, all that remained of the girl’s clothes were a few smoldering shreds.

Not that she seemed to care, or even notice.

Shah tried not to stare as Kara bounced on the balls of her feet with pent-up excitement.

Way too… distracting… doesn’t she know how, ah, incredible she is?

“Hi, Alex! Hi Shah!” Kara waved sweetly at her without any surprise or drama and kept talking, “I did it! I broke the sound barrier! Twice! My first times ever!”

Alex chuckled, “Congrats. You went supersonic up there! You only took 3.3 seconds to reach Mach one, and topped out at over… 1,967 miles per hour.”

Kara was still giddy. “Oh Alex, it felt sooo good! When I banked over the far end of the valley, I could actually feel the gravity pressing on me, like when I take off… but stronger. It was amazing!”

Kara had spread her arms to adorably demonstrate her turn.

Alex, as always, had an explanation… “I think it’s all about how long you experienced the force. On takeoff, you pulled a little over 35gees, but it was so quick you barely felt it… but on the turn, which was only around 12 gees, the maneuver took longer, you spent a few seconds under that stress… so maybe that’s why?”

Kara put her hands up in clueless submission and smiled, “Maybe? Makes sense to me, but let’s ask
the engineer… Shah?”

“I’d need more data.” Shah was so confused. She’d seen Kara fly, but how did she reach a velocity of nearly two thousand miles an hour? A speed that exceeded most fighter jets. *Wait a minute…“Alex, how do you know how fast she was going? Or how many gravities she was pulling up there?”*

Her best friend turned to her… she definitely looked guilty about something, “Long story… I had a little help, from...”

“Let me guess, a ‘friend’? Named Shatari?”

“Yeah.”

“You guys so owe me so many explanations.” She frowned.

Just then Kara zipped over at super speed and wrapped her arms around Shah in a great big hug, lifting her physically off he ground and all the while babbling in Persian.

“Please don’t be mad, Shahrazad. Alex and I are really, really sorry! We never ever wanted to lie to you, but it’s not safe for people to know about me. Believe me, my life is sooo complicated. I didn’t want to drag you into it, put you in danger, or risk either of us losing you as a friend.”

Shah was dealing with a storm of emotions as she savored being hugged by the beautiful girl she’d come to know as sweet, smart, and the kindest of friends, but now realized was also maybe an angel, and was basically naked in her arms. Her turmoil quickly settled, and she did the thing that she really wanted to do, regardless of how hurt she was feeling. She slipped her arms around Kara and hugged her tight; catching the scent of her recently washed strawberry hair.

*So, she did find soap.* Shah closed her eyes and allowed herself to relax into Kara’s soft embrace, breathing in deeply… wow, she smelled kind of amazing.

*Bloody intoxicating more like it.*

“Um, Kara, let me grab your other clothes from the backpack…” Alex nervously interrupted their moment, gesturing up and down at Kara before running off in the direction of where she’d left her pack.

“Why?” Kara glanced down at her nakedness and giggled upon realizing what Alex was talking about. She did let go of Shah, and sighed with playful exasperation, “You humans and your modesty, I swear.”

“You’re not human,” Shah whispered, her lips close to Kara’s ear. She was still trying to come to terms with the facts about her alien friend that she’d witnessed and overheard…

Kara pulled back just a little, keeping eye contact, her gentle touch never leaving her. Shah wasn’t scared, even though she’d seen her young friend crush steel with the hands that now held her so lightly.

The sunny girl smiled and tilted her blonde head a little as she answered in Persian, “No, I’m not. But, I am now, and will always be your friend… and I’m still me, no matter what planet I was born on. I never lied to you about any of the important things, Shah, and now that you know my secret, I can tell you more… everything if you want.” She paused as if remembering something very significant, and then took a step back in all of her naked, perky glory.
Shah began to protest, but stopped herself, a little shocked and embarrassed at how much the loss of Kara’s warmth and closeness had distressed her.

The nude, grinning girl happily thrust a hand out before her for Shah to grasp. “I’d like to properly introduce myself… I am Kara Zor-El, the last daughter of the House of El. My birth parents sent me to Earth the day my planet, Krypton, was destroyed… Yes, that Krypton… the same world my cousin, Kal-El, or Superman, as you know him, is from.”

The lights came on in her mind as Shah absorbed this new knowledge and added it to everything she’d already learned. A smile crept onto her face and she slowly took Kara’s warm, startlingly soft, hand in her own, and shook it. “So, wow… cousins? My friend is Superman’s cousin… It all makes sense now. You do seem to have the same powers that he does.”

She is still an angel; I don’t care what she says.

“I guess so, just not so great at any of them yet. That’s what Alex and I are exploring with my training… not that he would approve if he knew. He doesn’t seem to want me to use my abilities like he does. We definitely could use your help.”

Shah’s tone became serious, “How do you know you can trust me? That I won’t tell anyone?”

Kara smiled and her sharp blue eyes told Shah everything she needed to know before the beautiful girl spoke, “Because you wouldn’t do that. I know you. You and Alex are sisters… and I hope that you’ll accept me as one too.”

Her amazing friend had absolute trust in her… Shah’s heart sped up as Kara continued…

“Oh Krypton we have a saying, ‘Blood bonds us all’, and while the blood in my veins may not be the same as yours, I feel that the three of us are family in spirit. There’s another saying, my family motto, in fact: El mayarah, or in English, it translates loosely to something like ‘stronger together’, and I’ve always believed that about Alex and me. I know that we’ll only be stronger as three.” She pointed up at the pillar she’d just made, and the symbol at the top. “That’s us.”

There it was, three planets around a star.

Then they were hugging again, and Shah’s heart was melted to slag as tears clouded her eyes.

She was so… relieved, and happy. Everything was so… easy with Kara.

All of Shah’s petty anger at being excluded before had drained away to nothing, now she just needed to know more. “About time you realized that, sheereen-am.” She said as she planted a kiss on Kara’s forehead. *Is she always this warm? Wow.* “Or I guess I should say, Kara Zor-El.”

Alex returned and thrust a rolled up t-shirt and sweatpants at Kara before joining the huggle.

A split second later Kara had donned her new clothes at super speed, and Shah couldn’t help but chuckle at Alex’s bold choice. The blue sweatshirt and pants both had Superman’s logo emblazoned on them.

Kara caught her staring and looked down at herself, “Oh, I see… um, okay, let me explain. One, these were on sale, two, they’re very snuggly and I like them, and three, this…” She pointed to the ‘S’ on her chest, “Is my, and Kal’s, House symbol. It’s a Kryptonian glyph, kind of like a family crest on earth.”

Shah was grinning, falling even more in love with her alien friend. “Totally appropriate.”
Alex interrupted, “Okay guys, we need to go. Our flight window is closing, we’ll have unfriendly eyes overhead in ten minutes, and thirteen seconds. Kara, clean up, and everyone gather up your things. We can’t leave anything behind… well, besides the twenty-foot pillar of steel, I guess, but I don’t think it looks that out of place here.”

Kara zipped off and blurred around the landscape, incinerating any remaining trolls, and covering up any traces of their presence in the area that day. Alex gathered her backpack and secured everything inside, while Shah did the same with her duffle.

“You’re definitely telling me about how you know about ‘unfriendly eyes’ as soon as we get back… and how you’re doing that quick change act. Whatever that is, I want some if it.” They shared a giggle at that. A moment later, Shah built up the courage to ask, quite calmly, “I’m a bit afraid to ask, but will Kara be flying us home?”

Alex glanced over at her friend as she zipped up a pocket on her bag and offered a sympathetic look, “I’m so sorry, Shah. This is all happening so fast, I just didn’t think to explain… or ask. Yeah, Kara will fly us, she’s really good at it…”

Shah grinned, one eyebrow arching up involuntarily. “You two go flying often?”

Redness began creeping into Alex’s neck and cheeks…. No way! Alex Danvers never blushes, and now twice in one day! Shah sighed… she really has it bad for the beautiful Kryptonian.

When she spoke again, it was with a breathy, very non-Alex tone, “Yeah, whenever we can sneak away… it’s the most wonderful experience… and every single time is like the first time.”

The Persian girl smiled, and nodded, “I am eager to try it now. Heights don’t scare me, and from what I’ve seen of Kara’s skills, I don’t have to worry about anything except enjoying the ride. Besides, who wants to take the train and buses again?” They both grinned at that.

As Kara was still off finished up her tasks, Alex grew contemplative and pulled her friend into a hushed conversation. “Shah, listen, you’ll have answers, maybe more than you’ll be able to bear, believe me.” She smiled ruefully, “I’m just so glad I’ll have someone to share the real Kara with… and that the someone is you, aziz-am.”

Their hands found each other and Alex held on as if Shah was a lifeline. A tear streaked down one of her cheeks, and Shah could feel her tremble. “You know I’m just making it up as I go, right? She needs so much more than I can give her… someone better. You don’t know yet, but you will… there are horrible things out there in the dark.”

Alex’s turned her worried hazel eyes to the skies, “And not just aliens. My dad has all these secrets, and he doesn’t know we know, but he’s terrified that there are some really bad people, like government black ops or something, looking for Kara, to hurt her, experiment on her… but I will never let that happen.” The fierce determination in her voice spoke volumes about her feelings for Kara Zor-El.

Alex continued, now almost pleading, “Shah, she needs to be ready. She was sent here to protect us from destroying ourselves, but she needs to learn how to protect herself from us first! To fight… and stop trusting everyone. She… she may be invulnerable, but Kara can be hurt so easily…”

Shah could feel the weight of the secrets on her best friend, and the depth of her fear for the gentle girl, her love… and did her best to take on part of the load Alex had carried alone for too long.

“Joon-am, first off, I saw what you did for her today… and Kara couldn’t be in better hands. I have
also trained beside you, and know how amazing you are, so stop trash-talking yourself. I am with you in this now, Alexandra. Let me help… both of you. You don’t need to do this alone anymore. We’ll teach her, and keep her safe, together.”

Alex’s look of relief and gratitude was quite a reward, but what really made Shah’s day was seeing the fire return to her best friend’s lovely hazel eyes. The realization hit her then that she’d actually never lost Alex… the guilt of keeping Kara’s secret from her had just been too much, and now her friend was free of it.

Shah drew in close on her tippy toes, laid her head on Alex’s sturdy shoulder, and sunk into her damned Burberry trench that smelled of fresh leather.

*It felt so real!*

Then, Kara whooshed up to stand right next to them, like some hot, grinning, golden-haired, gender-bent Peter Pan… giggling like everything was a game, without a care in the world, and gently wrapped her warm arms around both their waists.

“Ready?” She asked impishly but didn’t give them any time to respond before pushing off the ground and lifting them, ever so gently, high into the gray November sky.

Shah felt exhilaration and contentment as the wide valley shrank below them…

She was flying with the Angels… her angels.

**3:18 PM**

...............................

Chapter End Notes

Two are now three! No more secrets, Alex finally has her best friend back, and a new partner (in crime), um, to help with Kara’s training.

Next up: In chapter ten, new memories unlock fragments of secrets deep within Kara’s mind. Where will they lead? Oh, and Alex finally has words with the Man of Steel.

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me.

Thoughts:

Gaze upon Alex’s Burberry goodness:
https://www.pinterest.com/pin/113504853082307697/

Kara, Brian, and Quinn were playing Call of Duty - "COD"

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words (aside from proper names), as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.
Terms used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari’s case; a member of the House of El, friend, and companion to Kara and Alex.
Khodaye man – Oh God! (used to show amazement)
Vaena – Proper noun, title. As of yet undefined beyond “One who is loved” but more profound (What Kara calls Alex) - Alex’s Kryptonian name/title, given to her by Kara

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:
aziz-am - my dear (what Alex calls Shah)
joon-am – my dear, or my life, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)
sheereen-am - sweetie (what Shah calls Kara)

Time, some reminders...
I decided to not give a stated year to my story as to not date it.
- Assume that when Kara becomes Supergirl is current time, so my story begins about ten years in the past.
- Years are identified in the header.

How do I deal with 'years' in the story?
- NOT by the typical Jan-Dec calendar year, but beginning on the date of Kara's arrival on Earth... mid-June, so June 15th
- This means Kara's first Christmas was in 'Year Two'.

Kara’s human birthday is Sept 5, and Alex’s is Oct 17.
- Add +2 years to arrive at Kara’s actual Earth-equivalent age.
- This is Year 2, so Kara is 16 (18 actual), and Alex is 17
A Kryptonian Yankee…

Chapter Summary

Where new memories unlock fragments of secrets deep within Kara’s mind, leading her to explore her human life, and passions.

Alex knows Superman’s secret, and Kara has to break the news to the Man of Steel.

Kal-El and Alex have words.

Chapter Notes

There’s a link to Kara’s song inspiration in the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

November 16th - Year Two

Midvale - The Danvers’ Residence

After school, about a week and a half after Trainhenge

17:11 hours UTC -5, Tuesday, U.S. East Coast Time

Alex could hear the faint hum of the old sewing machine through the ceiling, and walls, as she sprinted up the stairs two at a time to the second floor of their house, sliding on her slippery socks across the polished hardwood to reach Kara’s open bedroom door.

Inside was a kaleidoscope of chaos… with her harried Kryptonian smack dab in the middle of it, of course. The intent girl was bent before the vintage, pedal driven Singer, dutifully measuring, marking, and cutting stacks of material as she used her super speed to power the ancient device. She and Jeremiah (with a little help from Shah to rebuild and machine a couple of its worn-out mechanical parts) had spent the better part of the last week and a half meticulously restoring the family treasure, and now it was getting a workout.

“Holy crap, Kara, did the entire theater explode in here, or what?” Alex chuckled as she entered the room, stepping over piles of fabric, boxes of accessories, unassembled sections of foam armor, and past a tall rack filled with half-completed costumes.

“Vrry fnny, hrr hrr.” Kara muttered around the pencil she was holding in her teeth, at the same time trying, unsuccessfully, to blow stray strands of her unruly golden blonde hair off her cheek and back over her shoulder.

Alex paused briefly to observe as her crafty alien maneuvered a long piece of rich blue fabric under the relentless needle of her machine, before quietly stepping up behind the girl’s chair. Kara tensed
with a kind of thrilled anticipation as she drew close and, very slowly let her fingers glide across the
girl’s deceptively powerful shoulders.

Alex didn’t stop until she reached the base of the blonde’s neck, where she applied firm pressure
with her nails… enough to know the invulnerable girl would really feel it.

Her squirming Kryptonian’s reaction was just what Alex was hoping for… she shivered, and arched
back into Alex’s touch, causing her precisely measured seam to weave off track...

“Vayna! Vrry distrkting.” Kara briefly tilted her head back to look up at the ‘older’ girl with her
gorgeous unnamable blue eyes, and offered a hopeful, “Lter?”

“Fine.” Alex pouted as she leaned down to kiss the girl’s warm forehead, and relented with the nails.
Kara brightened with a huge grin around her pencil, nodded thanks, and turned her attention back to
tearing out the thread from her crooked seam, cheery as ever.

Unable to move away, Alex slid her fingers gently along the sides of Kara’s neck, eliciting a sexy
little moan from her for good measure, and then carefully began to adjust her messy golden ponytail.
As she untangled the strands from the white headphone wires of her iPod and rearranged the long
dark bamboo spikes her artful alien had used to hold her glorious locks under a semblance of control,
Alex caught a hint of sound and paused to listen more closely.

Her breath caught when she heard the faint echoes of Amy Lee’s soft lullaby voice driving into the
thumping rhythm of ‘Bring Me to Life’ drifting from Kara’s earbuds… a classic, and not the Taylor
Swift or John Mayer Alex had been expecting from her sweet, bouncy girl. Alex had been raving
about Evanescence’s newest album, ‘The Open Door’, for the last week, but had never expected
Kara to pay attention, or actually listen to any of her music… especially emo gothic rock.

Yet, here the girl was, doing just that… for her.

To say the moment was emotional would have been an understatement.

So, of course, Alex had to change the subject…

“What the heck do you not have in here?” She forced herself to speak, surprised that her voice didn’t
tremble, as she began removing the various items the impervious girl had stuck into her hair for
safekeeping… setting them one by one on a shelf beside Kara’s work area. “Scissors? An Exacto
blade? Pins? A marker… Wow, Kara, you really are a mess.”

Before she could respond, Alex reached around the girl’s shoulder and gently took hold of the
chewed and pitted blue marking pencil. Her fierce Kryptonian would not let go of it, and as Alex
pulled, the ‘younger’ girl turned her head to glance up at her with pleading puppy dog eyes.

Unfortunately, Alex had no defenses against that particular superpower and she crumbled. Knowing
Kara needed her was like a drug in itself.

Alex sighed, “I knew you’d rope me into this eventually… okay, how can I help?”

Kara leaped straight up from her seat and hovered in the air, clapping. She then gracefully drifted
back down to hug Alex, who was promptly stuck by a couple pins… though feeling Kara pressed
against her was worth it.

“Oh Alex, I’m so sorry, sorry!” Kara apologized repeatedly, pulling the offending metal slivers out to
stick them in a pincushion on the table.
She then assigned Alex the task of cutting fabric from various patterns and sorting out the mess that was Kara’s room to make some elbow room for more costume production. Not too stressful, or complicated, which was good… Alex was great at the science, not so much with the sewing…

As they worked, she asked, “So, did you actually know what you were getting yourself into when you signed up to be a costume designer for A Connecticut Yankee?”

Alex was well aware of her Kryptonian’s uncontrollable urge, a need really, to help people… especially her friends, though it did drive her crazy sometimes. However, if being giving, creative, and altruistic made Kara happy and kept her grounded to her human self while keeping her powers potentially off the enemy radar, then all the better.

Kara kept at her task, but answered over her shoulder with a chuckle… “Honestly? Not really. But Quinn really needed someone to step up and help, and the only volunteers for the job were absolutely horrible… I mean, this is coming from a place of love… I wouldn’t trust Cindy Williams or Paul Devoe to sew on a button, let alone understand the honor of being asked to design the aesthetic for an American Classic… Alex, I mean, come on… we’re talking about Mark Twain here! Anyway, Quinn’s so excited about playing Sir Galahad, I couldn’t just sit back and allow my friend’s potentially most memorable high school moment to become a fashion disaster.”

*Of course not!* “So, you’re not passionate about this at all?” Alex smirked from where she was cutting fabric on a makeshift table. Thank goodness Shatari was overlaying instructions in her HUD!

Alex had no idea what she’d do without her Kryptonian AI anymore, having basically become inseparable since Trainhenge. She’d even had to start cycling clean clothes into the wash after her mom started noticing she never had any dirty laundry…

“Sarcasm. Ah ha! I got it that time.” Kara grinned triumphantly, and then continued, “Maybe I am a bit… exuberant, but it feels really good to help my friends… as just Kara, you know? To do something I can shine at without worrying about being caught for a change.”

Alex nodded. “I get it, believe me.”

She would have helped Kara anyway, but knowing how much it meant to her cheerful alien made it her top priority, too.

Alex did have one question though, “Hey, can I ask, why the sudden interest in costuming? I mean, it’s really cool, and you’re freakishly amazing at it, like everything, but…”

Kara stood up and gently brushed thread from the tunic she’d been working on. “It was after…” Her voice dropped to an adorable whisper. “… Trainhenge. I started getting this feeling that I needed to do something important, but I wasn’t sure what it was. Then a couple nights later I was just zoning out, listening to Mazzy Star, and doing homework, when I happened to X-Ray the vintage cabinet over there,” Kara gestured across the room, “and noticed that your grandmother’s old Singer was hidden inside of it.

“It called to me… you know? Not out loud of course, but wow, I just knew.”

Alex tried not to chuckle. If it weren’t Kara talking, if it was literally anyone else, she would have assumed they’d been on drugs.

“Knew what?” Alex was metaphorically on the edge of her seat… since, you know, she was on her knees.
“That I needed to create something… beautiful, or lots of things. That’s the night I asked your dad for help restoring it and decided to get back into art.” She gestured over to the tall easel, paints, and canvases by her windows. “I loved painting so much back on Krypton, and for so long it was too painful to think about doing it again. Oh, and like you already knew, I joined the choir.”

“Humph, why didn’t you tell me about this ‘feeling’ then? I was really starting to doubt your sanity with all the sudden new extracurriculars.”

Kara appeared slightly admonished as she hung the tunic on the rack; “It all seemed so silly, or at least anticlimactic, after trash[ing] a 120-ton train with my bare hands and flying at two thousand miles an hour. I wanted to understand what was happening to me… I didn’t want you or Shah to worry.”

Alex softened, “So… do you? Understand now?”

Her Kryptonian slipped like a ghost over to the jumble of armor pieces and foam cut outs to kneel right next to Alex, and began helping with the cleanup… sorting, at super speed, before she quietly continued, reaching over to squeeze Alex’s hand.

“Yup, at least some of it. I remembered… things I’ve never actually done, or should even know about. I think that I, we, somehow unlocked some of my cell memories that day. Just bits and pieces… like fragments of a puzzle, but it feels like… if I do this, follow my heart and creativity to some mysterious end, that there’s a prize waiting for me, like some sort of Holy Grail. I just have to be good enough to earn it.”

“Good enough?” Alex was puzzled by the comment.

“Yeah, whatever I’m supposed to do at the end of all of this will require mad skillz, so it might take me a while… and that means being a costume designer for lots more plays as practice… until I get it right.”

Alex leaned in, and bumped Kara’s shoulder with her own, “Hmmm, a crafting quest! Well, brave knight looks like I’m signed on as your squire for the foreseeable…”

“Oh, Alex, you don’t have to…”

Alex reached over and pressed two of her fingers to Kara’s lips, effectively silencing her… and then grinned devilishly as she moved in closer until their faces were only inches apart. “Of course I do.” She said. “Plus… you’ll owe me. Lots and lots and lots of magic massages.” That last part was spoken with a hint of danger.

Kara blushed bright red and giggled shyly, but her softly hooded gaze stayed focused on Alex’s index and middle fingers hovering only millimeters away from her lower lip… which she was biting as if contemplating doing something wicked.

A moment later, as Alex watched in stunned silence, Kara tilted her head and began to slowly place a series of exceedingly warm, lingering kisses on her fingers.

Oh Rao! Alex was on fire and certain her jackhammer heart would surely break from her chest.

“Vaena, your wish… is my command.” Kara whispered between her tender ministrations. Alex slumped back to the floor, following Kara’s every move in a daze of astonished disbelief.

She was also smiling deliriously.

Her beautiful Kryptonian lithely moved in on her hands and knees even closer, as supple as a cat,
and lovingly grazed her lips over Alex’s open palm before nuzzling her cheek there.

Kara’s intoxicating scent and perfect body were pressed hotly into her now, and Alex could no longer resist. She broke from her stupor and swiftly wrapped her arms around her, hands deliberately gliding over the contours of Kara’s taut abdomen and powerful biceps.

The girl actually purred as she melted into Alex’s embrace.

Once they settled onto the Persian rug, Alex looked down at the angelic face of her golden-haired goddess, now snuggled so peacefully in her arms, and swore once again, (as she did every time), that she’d never seen anything so beautiful in all of her life.

Long moments passed as they remained there, on the floor of Kara’s room, lost in each other… Alex running her fingers through Kara’s silky golden hair, and Kara tracing the lines of Alex’s face, neck, and along her collarbone.

And then, just as she had built up the courage to do more than just THINK about what it would be like to lean in and take the stunning girl’s parted lips in her own, the object of her desire tensed and frowned. Alex was about to ask what was wrong when she heard the front door of the house open, and Eliza’s voice called out from downstairs.

“Alex! Kara! Can you two please come down and help me unload some groceries from the car?”

Shaking her head with a rueful chuckle, Kara reached up and caressed Alex’s cheek like an apology and Alex did the same. They shared a long, yearning glance, and sighed in frustrated unison.

“Rain check?” Alex finally asked with a half smile. Does the world hate me?

Kara nodded but was suddenly grinning for no apparent reason, “Of course. Don’t worry, I’ll make the wait worthwhile.”

Alex swallowed hard, suddenly panicked, which Kara must have seen because she immediately followed up with, “A massage Alex, just a massage.”

“Oh…” She shocked herself with how devastated she sounded.

Kara became concerned at Alex’s reaction. “I mean if that’s what you really want… if it was up to me we’d be… I mean… Um, we could… ugh.” Kara’s brow scrunched up. The poor thing was flustered and tongue-tied, and Alex knew why.

Shh, it’s okay Kara. I get it.

The girl immediately appeared relieved. Her shoulders relaxed, and she smiled adoringly back.

Whoa!

It was as if she had actually heard Alex’s thoughts! Are we, actually talking?

Yup. Kara was beaming. Our crystals must have finally synced up.

Wow… This is, just incredible…

Their ability to communicate silently had been growing stronger by the day, but this… this was something new, and amazing.

You are so beautiful. Kara’s thoughts danced in her own like a song.

Alex smiled uncontrollably at the compliment and looked down, her cheeks actually flushing more
than they already were. *I think you have that backward.*

*No. I'm totally sure.*

At that moment, Alex felt like the most beautiful girl in the world… certainly the most loved. There was so much she wanted to say to Kara, to… do, but they needed to deal with Eliza.

“Let’s pick this up later… Maybe tonight, in bed, when you finally tell me about that planet where everything was upside down. That place sounds so damn cool.” Alex grinned. “Sadly, right now we’d better move it before mother buzzkill decides to send a search party.”

Alex liked how she’d made Kara giggle.

Turning her face toward the open bedroom door, she yelled, “We’re coming, mom!” just as the girl wrapped Alex even tighter, in an inhumanly warm, full body, Kryptonian hug.

November 19th – Year 2

Friday, three days later

Midvale High

“I’ve never actually been in this part of the building. You know what goes on here, right?” Alex’s tone was ominous as she stopped to glance cautiously left and right at the intersection where East met West Hall, unsure of which direction to go.

“What? Singing? Maybe baaand practice?” Shah replied with amusement in her voice. “Oh, the horror!”

“You have no idea. Some of these kids can break your eardrums.” Alex shuddered.

“So dramatic, *joon-am.* So be it, let’s find Kara, return her bag, and leave this foul place before you get cursed or something.” Alex stuck her tongue out at her friend and they shared a giggle before pressing on.

Shah seemed to know the way.

Alex readjusted Kara’s heavy canvas messenger bag on her shoulder as they made their way down the wide hallway.

*I swear to God or Rao, or whoever… the girl keeps bricks in this thing!*

Alex immediately felt a wave of what she could only describe as… joy, pulse through her as if Kara had sent her a hug. *Whoa! That was awesome!*

*You came!!* Kara’s sunny thoughts sparkled in Alex’s brain.

*Of course, I came… dummy.*

*Awww, you love me!*

*Busted.*
Alex was desperately trying to wipe the stupid grin off her face as she glanced over at her best friend, who was chuckling. *Crap!* Alex rolled her eyes as she realized she'd been talking under her breath, something she really needed to figure out how to stop doing. Shah had overheard her side of her and Kara's mental conversation, which kind of defeated the whole purpose of having telepathy.

“I didn’t know you could be so cute Alex joon.”

Alex grumbled halfheartedly, something about ninjas minding their own business, as she and Shah continued walking. The truth was, she was just too happy to be a curmudgeon.

She hadn’t noticed at first, but the carved stone of the old walls of the hallways, combined with the creepy lighting and ornate iron light fixtures looming above, created an almost medieval feel around them. Alex became fascinated and began considering the very intriguing possibility of the Squad sneaking in to play D&D in one of the classrooms on a weekend.

Then, the faint sounds of a chorus of soft, musical voices, almost like an impossibly harmonious chant, echoed from somewhere ahead… it was one of the most haunting and beautiful sounds Alex had ever heard.

She and Shah stopped to gawk at each other in amazement…

“What is that?” They asked in unison.

They picked up the pace in the direction of the tantalizing music, and quickly reached their destination, skidding to a stop before a nondescript classroom door labeled, ‘Choir Room #4’. The angelic voices came from within.

Shah silently gestured for Alex to have a look, which she gratefully accepted, slipping up to the door and peeking through the slim window that ran halfway down its center.

*Oh… Rao. Kara.*

Inside was her Kryptonian; dressed in the elegant green chiffon midi dress that Alex had watched her slip over her amazing curves earlier that morning. It was imprinted with a twisted gold pattern that made it appear as if a sinuous dragon had wrapped itself around her waist, shoulders, chest, and down the garment’s long sleeves. She looked absolutely stunning… and was singing at a podium, one hand on the keyboard of her open MacBook, the other holding her iPhone.

Her eyes were closed as she swayed hypnotically to the layered melodies, headphones on… and the coolest part? The amazing voice, or more accurately, voices, were all hers!

Alex shouldn’t have been surprised, what couldn’t her Kryptonian do?

Shatari had already been analyzing the music, pulling the beats and individual wavelengths of woven sound waves apart, and reported that there were actually four distinct vocal tracks of Kara, three recorded, and one live… each singing a simultaneous line of independent melody. Her four voices were accompanied by ancient, courtly instruments in a kind of a seamless polyphonic harmony that stirred visions of majestic kings and queens from a fairy tale.

Shah squeezed in beside Alex at that point to also peer through the glass at the sight beyond and took in a surprised breath, “Ah! khoob ast!”

Alex was blown away as well, and nodded in agreement with her best friend’s sentiment. She whispered, “I can’t believe she’s singing in French… like, flawlessly.”
“What can’t an angel do to perfection?” Shah was smirking.

Alex just grinned; thinking about her Kryptonian, giving, and receiving magic massages, and continued savoring the amazing sounds.

Kara’s music teacher, Ms. Richards, was in the room with her. The stylishly dressed late twenty-something was relatively new to Midvale, having only been hired as the school’s music and choir teacher that year. She’d come fresh from the prestigious Wayne School of Music in Gotham City… a fact she made sure everyone knew: even a science geek like Alex had a clue who she was.

She was also usually a very composed and together lady.

But at that moment, she stood before Kara, literally weeping… one hand over her mouth, a well-used Kleenex in the other.

Alex didn’t know what to think… Kara had been sneaking around, alluding to a ‘surprise’ she was working on the last couple weeks, but had kept Alex at bay by promises of a big reveal soon…

Oh… of course, you didn’t forget your book bag at all! You never forget anything. You just needed to lure me and Shah here, to show us what you've been up to.

Yes, but you love me anyway. Kara’s warm, expectant gaze greeted Alex through the glass, a sweet smile curling the edges of her delicious lips as her melodies continued, shifting from high to low and then flowing into an almost melancholy silence. At the end, Kara remained absolutely still as if cherishing the quiet, before she dipped her head with dramatic effect and bowed gracefully to her teacher.

Ms. Richards was dabbing her eyes, clapping energetically, and shouting, “C’est Magnifique! C’est Magnifique!”

She then strode forward and stepped up on the stage. Unfortunately, as the shorter woman opened her arms to hug Kara, she tripped… and Alex watched the scene in slow motion as her agile Kryptonian moved in just the right way, at the right time, to turn a potentially awkward situation into something that seemed choreographed.

Kara swept in, steadied her teacher by placing her hands on either shoulder and then leaned in to kiss her on first one cheek, then the other.

Alex’s French wasn’t bad, she’d been working on it, but she could barely keep up with the banter that ensued between Kara and her animated woman after that. With Shatari’s help, she gleaned that Kara had, apparently, just performed the most impressive, rather ‘stunning’, rendition of a 13th-century French motet called Dame, Que Je N’os Noumer, from something called the Montpellier Codex.

Kara explained that she’d heard a version online from a quartet called Anonymous 4, was inspired, and decided to give it a try on her own.

According to the info flashing up on Alex’s HUD, a motet was a piece of music in several parts with words, or more precisely, a highly varied choral musical composition. The motet was also one of the pre-eminent multi-voiced (containing several melodies) forms of Renaissance music.

Alex actually grasped most of that… and was beyond impressed.

Okay, everything began making a kind of ‘Kara can’t help but help people’, sense… King Arthur, the play, Quinn being in it, the singing, and her sudden interest in 13th-century polyphonic courtly
music… all on top of the costuming.

Kathy (Ms. Richards insisted Kara use her given name now) continued to lavish praise on both Kara’s performance, and her ingenious method of using her computer to accompany her to make it seem as if she were a quartet. Kara was quick to give her friends credit and explained how Brian had created the app to record and an algorithm to arrange her voice, while Quinn had been her mentor on prepping for the vocals.

She said, “I just learned the parts, hit the button and sang four parts. The software put it all together.”

Kathy seemed momentarily speechless as she gazed at Kara with a kind of… awe.

Alex knew that look well…it’s not often if ever, you are surprised by someone as unbelievably talented and humble as the young Kryptonian. The woman’s features finally dissolved into a look of adoration.

Throughout the rest of the conversation Ms. Richards used words like ‘confidant’, ‘poised’, ‘initiative’, ‘mesmerizing’, and ‘beautiful’, more than once in reference to Kara… and agreed without any further discussion to upgrade the girl from costume designer to also her co-arranger, and composer for *A Connecticut Yankee*.

‘Kathy’ also eagerly took Kara’s offered thumb drive with the song she’d just performed, as well as a number of other tracks… like a whole album’s worth, to send back to her ‘friends’ at the Wayne School of Music to ‘have a listen’.

Alex was smiling, and unable to take her eyes off Kara through the door’s window. She could literally feel her Kryptonian’s happiness glowing inside her own heart, a reminder of the still-present embers smoldering within her.

As the girl was packing up and preparing to leave, Kathy hugged her one last time, and said, “You know, Kara, I haven’t cried at a performance in a long time… you really do have the voice of an angel.”

Outside the door, Shah smirked, poked Alex in the ribs, and said, “Told you so.”

November 21st – Year Two

*Midvale - The Danvers’ Home*

*17:27 hours UTC -5, Sunday, U.S. East Coast Time*

Thanksgiving was quickly approaching, and the Danvers family was in full execution mode preparing for their guests’ arrivals and other holiday festivities. Kara had even convinced Clark to bring Lois for the big day before they flew back to Smallville for the long weekend with his mom and dad on their farm.

It helped that she’d finally told him that Alex knew his secret. He wasn’t happy about it at first, but decided, in the end, it was probably a good thing that whole Danvers family was finally in the know.

It went something like this…
It was a rainy Sunday evening, and Kara was lying on her back on her bed, iPhone up to her ear. She’d made Clark nervous after she’d sent a dreaded ‘we need to talk’ text earlier in the afternoon then been immediately called away to help Jeremiah move some heavy things around in Eliza’s basement lab. She hadn’t been able to respond to her cousin’s forty replies except for one ‘ltr’.

That was two hours ago, and poor Kal was a ball of nerves when she was finally able to get back to her room and call him.

“So, what’s going on? Is everything okay?” His voice was a couple octaves higher than normal and his words were rushed with worry.

“Well, um, you see… I’ve been wanting to tell you about something, but I… um…”

“Hey, Kara… whatever it is, you know that you can talk to me about it, right? No judgment.”

“Oh Kal, no. It’s not… like that.” She huffed. “Okay, here I go… A while back, Alex kind of figured out the whole Superman’s secret identity thing, and…”

Her hypersensitive hearing detected the sound of the phone on Clark’s end hitting something soft (carpet maybe?), the whoosh of air, and then white noise…

_Uh oh…_

She carefully ended the call and slipped her iPhone into her back pocket.

_Incoming._

3…

2…

1…

She could feel the very air tremble at his approach. Rao, he really was something!

And there he was, standing in the doorway of her room, dressed in his rain-covered, glistening, iconic blue Superman costume… and looking a just a little bit upset. Okay, honestly? She’d never seen Kal so red-faced since he was a baby!

“Kara….” He ground out between granite clenched teeth.

She stood up from her bed to face her cousin, mouth open, her hands pressed against her chest.

Of course, that’s when Alex chose to ‘coincidentally’ saunter out of her room and into the hallway, her eyes glued to her paperback edition of _The Return of the King_ on her way to the bathroom.

Seemingly oblivious to his presence, she promptly tripped on his cape.

She regained her cat-like balance easily enough, and only then did she appear to give casual notice to the Man of Steel.

Alex was such a faker! Kara knew her calculating human far too well… she was up to something.

What she did next put Kara in stitches!

Alex grinned like a brat, looked Superman’s cape up and down, and calmly said, “Hiya Clark, can
you please hang that thing up? Someone might break a leg next time.” Before continuing to the bathroom and closing the door behind her as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Both Kryptonians just stood there staring after her, slack-jawed, and at a loss for words.

Finally, Kara began laughing so hard she fell backward onto her bed pointing at him. “Rao, Kal, the look on your face… it’s totally priceless…”

The hero seemed angry for a few seconds, but then started to laugh too… and gracefully walked over to kneel beside the bed next to her. His kind gray-blue eyes studied her face as she laid back, head propped up on her pillow.

Kara suddenly felt far too exposed, like he was seeing things about her she wasn’t sure she was ready to share…

But his eyes stayed kind, and if anything, he seemed to relax.

“You like her,” he gestured with a nod toward the hallway, “the fearless one,” he said with his deep voice and the slightest of warm grins.

She wanted to protest, to keep pretending… but her pulse was racing, and she could speak nothing but the truth, “With all of my heart and soul… all of it is hers.”

He smiled at that, with a hint of sadness in his eyes, but also great joy, and then reached over to gently brush strands of Kara’s stray hair from her forehead…

She was lost for a moment, marveling with the realization that he was touching her with the same hands that had once literally touched the Sun.

“It won’t be easy for either of you, especially at your age, and under your… circumstances. Humans can often be… limited in their thinking… believe me, I grew up as one… in Kansas…”

“I know… we know. But as you said, she’s brave, and so much stronger than I am. I’ve never wanted anything or anyone like this Kal, ever. And… and I keep telling myself that all will come to us, in time… but I want so much, right now.”

He sighed, “Time… I think back to when I was a teenager, in love with Lana Lang through the lens of my telescope. Even the idea of dating someone was just a crazy, impossible dream. You’re way ahead of me, cuz… don’t worry, breathe, slow down. You two will figure it out, not that I should be giving out advice.”

Kara chuckled, remembering the stories he’d shared with her about his awkward high school days.

The big man then leaned in and touched her forehead with his own, and whispered in his accented Kryptonian, “Blood bonds us all.”

Tears came unbidden to her eyes. Her baby Kal had become this beautiful, powerful, wise, and accepting man who took her breath away… and she loved him beyond reason.

Kara took a deep breath and whispered back, like a solemn oath, “She will never betray your secret.”

He smiled as he stood back up and said, “I believe that I have nothing to fear from someone my cousin has entrusted with her own heart.”

She nodded, more tears welling up in her eyes, and smiled back.
“Hey, I’m so sorry Little Star, but I gotta go. Lois is, ah hem, ah, waiting for me.” Rao, he was blushing! “See you at Thanksgiving.”

And then, he was gone.

Kara giggled like a child, and not just from hearing Kal’s nickname for her, but from realizing what… well, technically whom, she’d pulled her cousin away from.

...............................

Moments later… out in the hallway

Alex had gone full-on Predator mode… cloaked like a Klingon Bird of Prey, shielded by energies not yet conceived of by the human mind, invisible even to a Kryptonian, and waited patiently in the upstairs hallway for Superman to emerge from Kara’s bedroom.

When he finally blurred by to place a booted foot onto the window ledge at the end of the hall, only inches away, she struck… silently grabbing his cape to get his attention.

You know that song, the one about not spitting into the wind, and not tugging on Superman’s cape? Well… it provided excellent advice that Alex should have heeded when concocting her ‘ingenious’ plan to ensnare the Man of Steel into a conversation, especially at that moment.

She suddenly found herself lifted up to the ceiling, with Superman’s ham-sized fist wrapped around her throat and squeezing, his eyes glowing fiery red…

_Crap! Shatari, you couldn’t have bothered to tell me that our inertial dampers default to passive mode for all Kryptonians unless explicitly told otherwise!?_ Alex could feel her companion’s regret through their connection. The poor thing hadn’t even considered that Kal might actually attack them.

_OKay Danvers, maybe not the best idea you ever had…_ It’d made a kind of Alex sense at the time; she didn’t want Kara to hear her accost her cousin.

As she uncloaked, she tried without great success to speak as she clawed uselessly at his iron wrist and forearm. “Gak… s…sorry… so…rry… is jus…t… me… Al…ex! Can…’t… breathe… black… ing out… now…”

A look of complete shock came over the chiseled hero, and he quickly set her back down on her wobbly human legs…

Alex glanced warily down the hall towards Kara’s room as she rubbed her throat, and then pointed with urgency to the window. “Outside!” She rasped.

Startled by her command, Superman immediately obeyed, flying at super speed, with her in his arms. They blurred to the grassy bluffs behind the house that overlooked the beach and the serene ocean beyond.

Hmm, I could get used to this… ordering the big lug around. Alex smirked, thinking that she now knew what it was like to be Lois Lane.

The glow of a radiant red sunset at her back to the west lit the skies and mixed with the darkening shadows out on the ocean behind Kal, who towered in front of her…
The scene seemed to reflect Kara’s agitated cousin’s emotions at that moment.

“What were you thinking Alex?! Oh, wait, you weren’t!” His hands were gesticulating all over. “I could have killed you! A few more seconds and I…” Then something about her seemed to startle him out of his rant and draw a heightened level of his focus to her body. “Are you… what is that?” 

Are you wearing Kryptonian tech?” He narrowed his gaze.

Alex knew that he was trying to use his X-Ray vision on her, so she immediately had Shatari obscure her true nature once again from his senses… to his obvious surprise.

He looked absolutely perplexed, and then… impressed?

“It’s Kara’s Ka’dah.” Alex’s words were spoken like a challenge that she was prepared to defend with her life. “We share her companion now.”

“Ahhh.” Kal nodded, appearing to size Alex up in some new light. Then he sighed, and the tension seemed to leave his broad shoulders.

When he spoke again, he was thoughtful. “I was too young to have one, a companion when I came to Earth, but my parents did send along plenty of material for my cape…” He made a small flourish with his own elegant red accessory, “and material for battle armor, but I’ve never had any idea how to do anything with that. If it was a tractor, a car, or even a typewriter, I could figure it out, thanks to my dad… my human father.” Suddenly, he was just Clark, looking off wistfully to the sea as the rain started lightly falling again, “But technology from the world of my birth is as much a mystery to me as it is to humans, I suppose…”

Alex didn’t miss the hint of wistful regret in his words, or how he referred to Krypton as the place he was born, rather than his world, unlike Kara, who had always described Krypton as her home, and remembered it vividly.

Regardless, Big Blue was opening up to her! Alex almost made a joyful, happy sound out loud… but wisely resisted.

It had been much easier to deal with Kal after Trainhenge, when Kara finally told him about training with her and Shah. Surprisingly, he hadn’t been very upset but didn’t want to know too many details, he’d said so he could maintain ‘plausible deniability’ with Jeremiah and Eliza, but Alex had sensed there was more to it than that.

He’d actually offered his assistance if they really needed it but otherwise promised to stay out of their way. It was then that Alex had decided that Kal wasn’t such a bad cousin after all… he was letting Kara fly.

She brightened, “Hey, Kara, Shatari, and I are actually working on some leads on the battle armor front.” At his questioning look, she added, “Shatari is our companion. Nothing solid yet, but we’ll get back to you when we have a breakthrough… buuut, that’s not actually why I wanted to talk,”

She purposely raised one hand to massage her bruised throat, and cleared it…

Ah, there we go, she could see him cringe a little with guilt. More leverage for what she was about to ask.

Time to strike.

She shifted to full-on Kryptonese, “Please tell me what ‘Vaena’ means.”

He turned his gaze back to her and suddenly looked like the proverbial deer caught in the headlights.
Alex knew for certain that there would be no escape for him… she’d get her answer, at long last.

“Where did you hear that word?” He asked, his deep, somewhat off-key melodic voice quiet, contemplative… his whole demeanor shifting back into a controlled calm.

Damn, she was already losing her advantage…

“If you must know, from Kara.”

His blue eyes lit with understanding, and he grinned, “Then isn’t that a better question for her?”

He knows what it means for sure!

“She said that it means ‘one who is loved’, but I think she’s holding something back.” The word felt like a caress every time Kara said it… not that Alex minded, at all… she just needed to verify what she already believed.

Kal slid one hand up to rub his chin, and looked off to the ocean, “In what context did she speak it?”

Hmmm. Curious, maybe he will help. “She gave it to me… the name, on my birthday… with my necklace.” Alex was suddenly blushing, her fingers seeking her blood-red crystal like a lifeline.

Kal nodded, “You must know how very special you are to her then? For her to….” His words ended in silence that drifted into the sound of the far-off surf.

“What? For her to do what Cl.. Kal?”

He turned his face partially away into the sun’s fading red glow, his endless blue-gray eyes misty, and not just from the surf. “It’s not my place to interfere in this Alex, whatever must be said is between you and her. You should ask Kara… but…” He sighed. “Know that what she’s given you is something infinitely fragile, and precious… and it’s all of her.”

Alex was still reeling from what he’d just revealed… ‘and it’s all of her’, as he reached over and gently touched her cheek, “I’ll tell you one thing, brave one, the only time I remember ever hearing that very powerful word spoken in all of the countless memory shards I have at The Fortress, was from my mother’s lips to my father, whom she loved more than life itself.”

He smiled thoughtfully, and then was gone like a breeze, leaving Alex standing in the grass, feeling the full weight of Kal-El’s words as she gazed out over the darkening, windswept ocean, thinking of her beautiful Kryptonian.

Neither the rain nor the cold touched her.

Chapter End Notes

The wrap up:
Kara’s cell memories are unlocking, but it looks like there’s a way to go until the day she can help herself, and her cousin. Oh well, at least Superman is finally aware of Kara’s extracurricular training… even if it is on the down low.
Speaking of sneaky Alex, I think she’ll think twice about tugging on Superman’s cape next time, don’t you? Or at least make sure her shields are up if she does!

She and Kara still have a way to go to find their bliss, (jeez, thanks, mom!), but they’re getting there… I promise.

Next up:
In chapter eleven, ‘Home for the Holidays’, Kara, surrounded by friends and family, experiences her first Thanksgiving. Jeremiah has news, Kara tells Alex a bedtime story, and (last but definitely not least) Rao’s Fire is revealed.

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me. And spread the word about this story to anyone you think may enjoy it.

Thoughts:

Kara’s green chiffon midi dress inspiration, but with dragons of course! : https://www.stylewe.com/product/green-swing-chiffon-printed-long-sleeve-midi-dress-5475.html

I invite you to listen to Kara’s song inspiration:
Montpellier Codex, Mo 377, Dame, Que Je N’os Noumer-Amis donc est-Lone tens a, Tenor-Motetus-Triplum by Anonymous 4: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1NtVRvLIMs

What was playing on Kara’s iPod (remember the timeframe!):
‘Bring Me To Life’ song by Evanescence
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YxaaGgTQYM

A Connecticut Yankee info:

“You Don't Mess Around With Jim” song by Jim Croce
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4qUXcXuMSE
Don’t tug on Superman’s cape

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms:
I attempt to italicize all non-English words (aside from proper names), as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Terms

Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari’s case, a member of the House of El, friend, and companion to Kara and Alex.
Ah!khoob ast – Oh! That’s good! (Persian)
C’est magnifique! – It’s Beautiful! (French)
Khodaye man – Oh God! - To show amazement. (Persian)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:
aziz-am - my dear (what Alex calls Shah)
joon-am – my dear, or my life, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah
calls Alex)
sheereen-am - sweetie (what Shah calls Kara)
‘insert name’ joon: Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with
the word jān or joon- they both mean 'dear'. So, 'Alex joon', means 'dear Alex’. This is
a common word to use in every conversation and every context.
Others names/nickname/titles:
Vaena – Proper noun, title. As of yet undefined beyond “One who is loved” but more
profound, and very weighty according to Kal (Alex’s Kryptonian name/title, given to
her by Kara)
Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara
My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Time
See Chapter Nine end notes.
Home For The Holidays

Chapter Summary

Where Kara experiences her first Thanksgiving surrounded by friends and family!

Kara and Lois do some bonding, Jeremiah has news, Kara needs more speed, Ravan, Alex, and Shah all receive gifts, and Kara tells Alex a Kryptonian bedtime story...

Oh, and Rao’s Fire is revealed!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

November 25th - Year Two

Midvale - The Danvers’ Home

Thanksgiving

10:20 hours UTC -5, Thursday, U.S. East Coast Time

Kara, Lois, and Eliza ruled the Danvers' kitchen, preparing a sumptuous Thanksgiving feast of mixed Persian and American cuisine. They’d made the pies and other desserts the day before, but the main courses and sides were on the agenda for the day. Kara was on point for the Persian dishes and had fretted for days about getting everything just right to impress Shah’s mother, Ravan.

The dedicated vegetarian had slowly become accustomed to cooking meat (on occasion) as part of some meals. She still refrained from eating any herself… though she had become rather enamored with cheeses, and wine, which, lucky for her, the Danvers had a liberal family policy on.

Not that there was any danger of Kara ever getting drunk, her alien metabolism burned off any euphoric or impairing effects far too quickly for that… she could drink as much as she wanted. Rather, her love of food and drink was all about her amazing hyper senses. The enhanced tastes, textures, and aromas she experienced with every smell, sip, and bite,

A good wine was like sunshine on her taste buds, and not only that, as she swished the liquid in her glass and breathed in, it was as if she were transported to the actual vineyard where the grapes were grown.

I could probably even go find it… if I wanted to. That's so cool!

What’s cool? Alex asked with interest.

Her Vaena’s thoughts were a mixture of fire and ice down her spine. Kara sucked in a sudden breath and smiled with pleasure as she closed her eyes. Oh, nothing. just daydreaming. How’s the hike?

Awesome! I’m showing Kal our favorite tide pools, and those little blue crabs. Your cousin doesn’t
I suppose, though it kind of makes sense. Kansas really isn’t known for its beachfront property.

They both laughed, and after hugging in their thoughts, somewhat reluctantly returned to what they were each doing.

Back in the kitchen, Lois had thankfully volunteered to assist Eliza with the turkey, allowing Kara to stay focused on making sure the kababs, Koresh, saffron rice (all yummy and crispy on the bottom!), bread, and everything else on her carefully plotted menu was perfect.

Little Nom scurried about the house as they cooked, keeping mostly to himself, delirious with the fascinating smells. He was a bit confused by the frenetic activity, though Kara did her best to explain what was going on to him. His focus on the turkey was all-consuming. He consoled himself for her ignoring his hungry mewls by curling up with his other mother, Alex, as often as he could.

Clark, Alex, Shah, and Jeremiah went for a long walk down the beach that morning and hiked the rugged hills of the nearby state park a bit before returning. They were all hyped up for the start of ‘Game One’ (everyone said it like it was a proper noun, which was just, well… weird). It was Kara’s understanding that after lunch, at an appointed time, the Detroit Lions would take on the Indianapolis Colts, and apparently watching this battle on the new big screen TV in the Danvers’ living room was a big deal.

Because of her mental connection with Alex, she was certain that the Colts were going to blow the Lions out of the water, which seemed to be a good thing?, and that her Vaena was far more excited about Game Two that would take place later that afternoon, when the Chicago Bears and the Dallas Cowboys would confront each other in a great skirmish.

It was ‘the main event’, at least according to both Alex and Clark.

Not that Kara had any idea what was going on, or what that all meant… her knowledge of American football was sadly lacking, and her cell memories were devoid of any relevant data on the topic. She shook her head with a sigh and went back to re-reading one of her favorite books, The Iliad, in Greek and from memory as she mixed ingredients.

Then she giggled when she came to a line of Homer’s that so perfectly fit her…

‘…There is the heat of Love, the pulsing rush of longing, the lover’s whisper, irresistible—magic to make the sanest man go mad.’

Kara was mad… obsessed… and definitely in love.

She never lost track of the object of her affection. Even when they were apart she could feel her human’s emotions, hear Alex’s strong, steady heartbeat, and relished the little waves of thrilling erotic pleasure intentionally directed at her that would occasionally, and unexpectedly, ripple through the quantum ether.

Rao! She glanced around sheepishly as a wave of pleasure stirred within her. Her crushing grip almost cracked Eliza’s prized granite countertop that time.

Her desire for her human was getting exponentially more difficult to repress or ignore.

For lunch, Clark took charge of the grill on the patio.
To Kara’s surprise, her reporter cousin loved grilling, and prided himself on his uber-skills as a ‘grill master’… though the little eye roll and grin Lois exhibited after handing him a big apron with the words ‘Kiss the Cook’ sewn onto the front spoke volumes.

But Kal was impervious to the cold so, with his clear enthusiasm, was voted the best alien for the job. Plus, there was no way Kara could stomach doing it.

It was kind of a perfect day… there was a blazing fire, spiced cider, a variety of delicious wines, coffee, tea, and two tables stocked full of snacks that never seemed to run low. This meant Kara was never without a plate… and in heaven, or at least how she imagined her theoretical heaven might be.

She was also delighted at how comfortable everyone seemed to be together, like a big, happy, extended family.

When not being inseparable, Shah had gravitated to Lois, and Alex had become strangely chummy with Clark. Kara wondered what had changed about their relationship, and how she’d missed whatever that was. Regardless, it made her extremely happy to finally see two of the most important people in her life having such a great time just being together.

In the afternoon, Kara was mercifully able to take a break as all of her food was cooking.

She hung up her apron, breezily kissed Eliza on the cheek, and went off with an elegantly prepared tray with tea and cookies for two to sit in the sun-dappled living room with her cousin Lois.

The first thing she noticed upon entering was the quiet, and how the tranquil space’s wide windows seemed to let the whole world in.

The second was the beautiful, dark-haired woman sitting in Alex’s mother’s armchair. Kara hadn’t really looked at her while she’d been focused on cooking, but now…. whoa…

She was captivating.

Dressed in a striking black Versace jacket, tank, and skirt, and a gorgeous pair of short black heels, Lois Lane Kent was elegant without seeming elitist, poised but not overly so, soft but sharp of mind and wit, and everything Kara wanted to be as a journalist… Hell, as a woman!

She was barely over thirty and had already won a Pulitzer, among a multitude of other awards, and for Rao’s sake, she was the one who’d finally broken Lex Luthor! The relentless investigative reporter had hounded the billionaire for years about he and his company’s illicit, and horrific, clandestine activities, including trying to murder her husband on repeated occasions (though she could never get enough proof to get to him personally). It was only after reading her article describing him as ‘an impotent, loudmouthed buffoon who is about as intimidating as a second-rate villain in an Austin Powers movie’ Lex finally lost it, and revealed his madness to the world.

Of course, he did so by trying to kill her… but Superman saved the day, and finally put his nemesis away for life in a high-security padded cell.

But for Kara, the best part about Lois was that she’d given her human heart to Kal… and, more importantly, had accepted his as his bondmate.

The gorgeous and accomplished woman was remarkable. She didn’t exactly intimidate Kara, as much as the Kryptonian felt a deep admiration or a reverence for her… and yes, an awkward attraction as well.
They talked at length about the articles Kara was writing for her AP Journalism class, her goals, college, politics, the older woman’s advice on books, and even possible internship opportunities…

All of that was great, but she was itching to ask her cousin other, less career-oriented questions, while they were alone.

“Lois?” She finally asked, softly.

“Yes, Kara?” Lois politely set down her tea, giving Kara every ounce of her attention at hearing the change of tone in her voice. The girl hesitated. It was almost overwhelming to be engaged with someone so focused… the self-assured woman hadn’t even glanced at her phone once while the two of them had been together, and always held Kara’s gaze when they spoke.

She was certain that these were traits Lois had honed from years of interviewing the most powerful beings on the planet and took note of every single one of them.

The thing was when you were with Lois Lane you definitely felt special, and something else… envious of Clark Kent.

“I, um, I wanted to ask you about something personal. Is… is that okay?”

The sharp line of the older woman’s appealing lips curled into a smile, “You can ask me anything, sweetheart…” She leaned forward, briefly revealing the soft lacey edges of the black bra the hugged the generous curve of her breasts… and whispered, “Anything…” Raising her eyebrows in a wickedly salacious way that made Kara blush immediately, and almost choke on her tea.

They were both giggling then, and with the tension broken, moved in closer together to talk in absolute privacy.

Kara was so relieved. “Thank Rao! I really need some… um, human-alien relationship advice?”

“Oh course. Is there a boy?” The word rolled deliciously off Lois’ tongue. “A human you’re interested in?”

Kara looked out the window, fidgeting with her mother’s crystal, “Not exactly… It’s a girl. She’s… very special to me.” Kara took a nervous breath, almost shaking as she added in a rush, “I love her, with all of my heart.”

“I see,” Lois said as she paused to lift her cup off its saucer for another sip… Glancing at Kara’s necklace as she did so. “How does she feel about that? And does she know your secret?”

Kara blinked, a little perplexed at the woman’s calm response… “That doesn’t bother you? Me liking girls?”

Lois breathed in, set down her cup, and reached over to envelope one of Kara’s hands in both of hers, “Sweetheart, not even in the slightest. In fact, you’ve officially become my hero. I like women too, very much. My soul mate just happened to be a man, and an alien to boot. Oh, the stories I’ll tell you… when you’re older.” Delicate laugh lines crinkled as Lois actually blushed! “Anyway, believe me, who you love matters, not what race or gender they are, or even what planet they happen to be from.”

Kara beamed with joy and gently squeezed Lois’ hands in appreciation before letting go. “Thank you. You know, I’m going to hold you to those stories.” They both grinned conspiratorially as if making an unspoken pact. “Anyway, as far as my girl, she feels the same way about me… and yes, she knows.”
“May I ask? It’s none of my business, obviously, and I won’t tell a soul, but are you contemplating…” She let the moment hang, and Kara caught right on and started blushing again.

“It’s hard not to, and getting more and more difficult to be… restrained, if you know what I mean.”

Lois nodded, listening closely to every word and, Kara noticed, subtly observing her body language. Oh, she was good.

“So, what’s holding you back?”

Kara had to consider that question carefully before answering. Her and Alex’s situation was nuanced, and she didn’t know if she could be completely honest with Lois. Would she be as understanding as Clark? “It’s complicated. There’s the whole me having superpowers thing, and the possibility of losing control when I… um, you know…” She stammered, and was certain she’d turned bright red, “There’s also people… close to us, who we love, that might be hurt, or see us… differently when they find out how we feel about each other. It would be a big step for both of us, and we’re afraid of what may happen.”

“Kara, are you okay?” Lois’ tone was concerned, and Kara realized that she’d started crying. The older woman became lost in a blur of tears.

“I’m so sorry, Lois… I, I just don’t have anyone to talk to about this, and there’s so much…” Kara couldn’t breathe, and Lois was suddenly right beside her, her clean scent and soft arms enveloping her.

Kara was holding on for dear life.

“Shh, shh, it’s okay, baby you’re okay.” Lois rocked her like a child... just like her first days on Earth, after the desert.

Once she’d found her voice, Kara rasped out, “You don’t understand, Lois, she’s graduating next year! I tried to convince Jeremiah and Eliza to allow me test early and skip two grades, but they’ll only let me do one. ‘It would draw too much attention’ they said... so she’ll still be a year ahead of me... which means... means... she’ll have to... she’ll... leave me behind.” Kara was shaking.

“Hey, hey, listen to me, sweetheart… focus, eyes on me, okay?” Lois smiled, cupping Kara’s face in her delicate, manicured hands. “You know what? Despite what you’ve read in books, and seen in movies, love isn’t easy. It can be brutal. Like, kick your ass to the curb, rip your heart out, crying all night… but, it can also be the most amazing, most joyful thing you can ever experience, and it’s worth all the bumps. In the end, if the love you’ve nurtured is strong and real, you will both survive it, and that bond you have with your partner will just get stronger, even with the scars… maybe even because of them.” She paused to rub Kara’s back as the girl wiped her eyes with her sleeves.

“Sometimes distance helps us understand who we are, and why we love and respect that other person. Spending time apart may strain things, be different, even scary, but it will also allow you both to stand on your own, as individuals. You must become ‘I’ before you can be ‘we’. As the ancient Greeks once said, ‘gnothi seauton’, or in Latin, ‘nosce te ipsum’, which means ‘know thyself’.

“Real love doesn’t need to be locked away, or protected, and it certainly will die if suffocated by jealousy. A good relationship has mutual respect and trust, and when tested should be able to withstand, and even thrive, in the darkest of times. Even when the world feels like it’s against you. Rao knows, Clark and I have seen our share of crap... yet here we are.”
Kara sniffed and snuggled into Lois. She said, 'Rao'! “You really believe that?”

“I do. Check my heartbeat, you’ll see.” Lois gently patted her chest like an invitation, and Kara listened. Lois spoke truly; her heart’s serene, soothing beat lulled Kara into its rhythm.

“Lois, I’m so scared.”

“I know, I know… but Kara, if the lucky girl with the mate to that necklace loves you as much as you love her, you kids will be fine. Just promise me that you’ll always make sure she really knows how much she means to you. Also, if you don’t mind, I’d like to put an unsolicited idea in your head… is that okay?”

“Uh huh.” Kara nodded, hanging on her wise cousin’s every word.

“Have you considered the fact that there isn’t a university on the planet that flying at super speed couldn’t take you to as often as you both want?”

Kara’s jaw dropped… it was a variable she’d been too afraid to consider before. No longer.

Lois continued, “Anyway if I could give you any advice as a human, to save you some pain and heartache down the road, it’s this… I would beg you not to be too overprotective. Let her fall down sometimes, be the protector when she can, and never stop listening, even if you’ve heard the story before. Also, don’t do something just because you can, think before you act, trust and empower her, see her for the formidable person she is, and for heaven’s sake, share the load… you know, the mundane things… like doing the laundry, cooking, taking the cat to the vet, and shopping for groceries.

“And finally, I suppose, is always stay humble… The minute you start believing that you’re a goddess, above all of us rabble, you’ll start acting like one… and believe me when I say this because I dated someone like that, okay two someones. It was always an exciting ride, but so painful. They really only cared about themselves and in the end… were completely unlovable.”

Kara’s head was spinning, but she’d memorized every word Lois had shared with her.

She felt so much better.

Wait… something the wise woman had said stood out, ‘if the lucky girl with the mate to that necklace loves you as much as you love her’…

“Lois?” Kara asked tentatively… involuntarily reaching up to touch the sapphire blue diamond that hung from her neck through her shirt.

“Yes Sweetie, I know… and it’s okay.”

Kara buried her face into Lois’ Versace jacket and died of embarrassment. Well, she wished she could have… but only for a moment. Lois quickly followed up with, “I think you two make a beautiful couple.”

“You do?” Kara perked up with a glittering smile.

“Absolutely, she’s pretty amazing huh? Brilliant, like her parents, tough as nails, and inspired by you I have no doubt.”

Now they were talking freely about Alex and Kara couldn’t stop, she was so happy to share all the wonderful things about her human with someone who understood. They talked for forty minutes...
“Oh! I’m so sorry Lois, need to get that.” Kara said with a sigh. “It’s Ravan… I guess no more talking about my human or my superpowers.” Lois grinned, and one of her eyebrows shot up at Kara’s telling description of Alex.

The girl blushed realizing what she’d just said, but her cousin just patted her thigh dismissively and nodded encouragingly. Feeling gratefully understood, and supported, Kara continued, “Shah knows everything, but her mom has no idea about Clark, or I.”

“Story of my life, girl, story of my life. I can juggle alternate backstories, secret identities, and crazy excuses with the best of ‘em.” She winked as they stood up, and hugged one last time.

“Thank you,” Kara whispered her heartfelt gratitude.

“You’re welcome, my dear. And remember, you’re going to be just fine. You know can call, text, email, or visit me anytime, right?”

To her utter delight and surprise, her beautiful cousin gently placed her own palm up against Kara’s and spoke in the same melodic language, “And in blood we are family. El mayarah, Kara Zor-El.”

The afternoon…

The Kryptonian had never been able to spend much time with Shah’s brilliant, yet soft-spoken mother, and it was a joy to finally have the opportunity to do so. Though Ravan was one of the world’s leading scientific minds in the realm of dark energy and quantum physics, she was also surprisingly reserved and humble.

And beautiful.

Kara felt that the woman carried a deep sadness within her, like a piece of her was missing. As a Kryptonian, she was very perceptive plus she knew Ravan’s sad story from Shah, but most people would never even notice. The girl sincerely hoped that the woman had someone in her life to share her troubles and to be comforted by.

She, of all people, understood how important that was. Kara had been lucky enough to have Alex in her life to help her deal with tragedy.

For Ravan, it had been a decade since the scientist had last seen the man she loved, and Arad still languished in some unknown Iranian prison. Worse yet, both she and Shahrazad had been witness to her son, Cyrus, being shot, and they still didn’t know his fate for certain.

Over the last few months, Kara had run thousands of simulations in her mind with the data sets she had, and in nearly all of them, ninety-seven point three percent, young Cyrus always died. The facts seemed clear, but for Ravan, who had been unable to let go, her boy remained neither dead or alive, in a state of limbo…

*Like the Phantom Zone.*

The very thought made Kara shiver.
Perhaps this shared melancholy is what drew Kara to her, but whatever the reason, she and Ravan ended up spending a great deal of time together throughout the late afternoon, speaking in Persian about many things.

Kara had also wanted to give her girls time together, just the two of them. It made her so happy to feel and see Shah and Alex curled up together, watching the game after dinner, and having a great time annoying Clark after realizing he was rooting for Dallas and not the Bears. The signed jersey he pulled over his head at game time gave him away.

Lois had left the room with a tall glass of wine at that point to go chat with Eliza.

As they spoke, Ravan openly marveled at Kara’s impossibly swift mastering of her native tongue and its many nuances. She said, “If I were to close my eyes and only hear your lovely voice, I would believe you were Persian, from times of old.”

Kara placed the blame squarely on Shah’s patient instruction and spent a while extolling her virtues, though she could tell the woman was only being polite by pretending to believe her.

As they continued chatting in the lyrical language, the pair diverged into deep topics, including science, quantum mechanics, poetry, philosophy, history, and the stars... and Kara watched as the older woman shed her sadness, at least for a time.

At one point, Ravan had excused herself to go to the bathroom and had left her glowing iPad behind on the table. Kara, bored, picked up the device and wasn’t surprised to find math… lots of it… the incomplete dark energy equation that the Persian scientist had been obsessed with solving, and completing, for years.

As her mind always did, Kara began to deconstruct, analyze, and put all of the disparate pieces of the problem, or in this case, the equation, into place. There were errors, incorrect assumptions, and omissions, not because the overall concept itself was flawed, but due to the fact that no one on Earth had yet conceived of the variables, or the answers, and wouldn’t for decades… or much longer.

Not without a nudge.

Kara considered whether she should assist Ravan, the way she had once helped Eliza.

Soon after her arrival in Midvale, Kara had wandered into her newly adoptive mother’s basement lab at their house and had helped ‘fix’ her research for her.

The Kryptonian girl had basically created what would later become a pile of patents for Eliza, a lucrative stream of financial royalties, and a multibillion-dollar miracle for her company, the newly rebranded Swan Bioengineering. Alex’s mom was also promoted to the role of Distinguished Scientist and Director of all R&D, which as far as Kara could tell basically meant Dr. Eliza Danvers could tell everyone else what to do, and work on whatever projects she wanted to with her own teams.

“XenoXX121” was a genetically engineered life form, biochemically programmed to safely devour and break down malaria from living tissue and blood, even in their mosquito hosts. The organisms could also be adjusted to target other viruses, deadly bacteria (in place of antibiotics), or other toxins and compound elements… even radioactive ones.

The world had never seen anything like it.
Eliza almost deleted the research but decided it was too important and had the potential to save too many lives to just throw it away. It was a good call, as Swan had already begun working with the Gates Foundation, the United Nations, and multiple NGOs to begin trials in the worst-hit areas of the world in a massive effort to finally eliminate Malaria from the planet once and for all. Another beta project under Eliza’s direction was with the Scripps Institution of Oceanography. Together, they were just about ready to unleash a modified version of the organism, hungry for plastics and their toxins, on The Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

Kara had applied the Kryptonian ‘do no harm’ ethic during gene sequencing: the little guys could never be re-engineered to be used for nefarious purposes, merely what they were designed for… and only three people in the world held the master key to unlock their tasking code: and of those, Swan knew of only Eliza, not of her daughter, or Kara.

Alex had nicknamed the little microscopic creatures ‘Pac-Men’. Kara didn’t understand why at first, but cracked up when she finally got the joke a month later.

This time, things were different. The Kryptonian knew exactly what she was doing as she studied Ravan’s greatest work (in progress).

Kara’s fingers flew over the virtual keyboard, and she began making changes… filling in missing portions, and completely rewriting others. Once she was satisfied with her efforts, she casually slid the tablet back to Shah’s mother place before the older woman returned to the table.

Kara took a deep breath. *Rao, I hope I made the right decision.*

Ravan smiled as she sat down, looked down at the screen, and suddenly stopped moving, stunned by what she saw there. She shakily began checking through the massive equation, and her eyes widened in further amazement the more she explored.

“This… this is not possible. I don’t understand.” She said with confusion,

“It looked like you needed a little help.” Kara smiled, shrugging her shoulders.

Staring at her in wonder, the older woman spoke in a quiet voice, “Twenty-two years. That’s how long ago Arad and I started work on unraveling the secrets of dark energy… before it was even called that. The challenge has vexed us… me, ever since. The answers have always been so enticingly close, yet so far away.” She set the iPad down on the table.

“Well today, you show me the impossible… as advanced as our theories are, this…” She gestured at tablet, “This is decades, a century, ahead of any science… and here I am, like a child, barely grasping at the frayed edges of what I am seeing.”

Kara slid over and took one of the Ravan’s hands gently in her own. “I have only put you on the right path to the answers, you still need to solve it. And don’t worry, it will prove true. When Arad comes home, you can finish the work together.”

Shah’s mother still looked shocked, but continued, “How did you…?”

Kara grinned, “That’s a long story, one I hope you’ll understand that I need to keep private, for now.”

The older woman arched a dark eyebrow, “My daughter knows, doesn’t she? She says you are one of the Malāʾikah… I thought she was joking…” She looked back down at her device, and then back
to Kara in wonder. “No longer.”

“Yeah, as much I have tried to tell her I’m not, she still chooses to believe that I’m an angel.” She allowed her glance to shift over to where Alex and Shah were chatting away on a couch in the living room. “I don’t know what I’d do without her... without both of them.” As her gaze lingered on the pair, she smiled and allowed her eyes to briefly glow a soft blue for Ravan.

Kara heard the older woman’s sudden intake of breath and accelerated heart beat. Then her expression changed from one of surprise to a profound understanding...

"I... see. You watch over them?"

Kara nodded, “Yes... as they watch over me and help make me better... at everything.”

Ravan’s features softened and brushed back her luxurious black mane of silver-streaked hair. When she spoke next, her tone was warm, “I can’t say I understand you... or everything going on with you three, but I’d have to be blind not to see how much you all care about each other, and how happy you and Alexandra are together...” She hesitated and then said, “Please know that you two are safe to bring your joys, or your troubles, to my house, dear one, whatever those may be. Consider our home a place of sanctuary.”

*She’s saying her house is safe for Alex and me! She knows!* 

Ravan had no way of realizing what a powerful thing she’d just done in Kara’s eyes. On Krypton, for one House to take the burdens of another onto itself was one of the greatest acts of sacrifice and allegiance that could ever be offered... the kind you read about in stories. The House of El could only respond in kind.

Kara forgot herself and zipped with super speed from where she was sitting to instantaneously embrace the older woman in a warm hug. To say she startled Ravan with her display of inhuman power would have been an understatement, but the woman quickly recovered from her initial shock, and wrapped her arms around Kara and pulled the girl in tight.

Kara liked the sensation, of holding and being held by this older, softer version of Shah, who smelled of chai, spice, and sandalwood. She could have fallen asleep in her arms if she’d been invited. Kara also felt warmth in her own heart, mixed with sorrow, as she recalled being held by her Aunt Astra in the same manner on so many nights.

Ravan spoke softly as she began smoothing Kara’s long hair, “I’ve come to rely on my daughter’s insight into matters of the soul, so regardless of my own lack of faith... if Shahrazad believes you were sent by Allah himself, then who am I to say otherwise... especially when I truly see you now.” She sighed. “All I ask, beautiful Kara, whether you are angel or mortal, is that you keep my daughter safe... and that someday you trust me enough to reveal your secrets.” Ravan was close enough that her words tickled Kara’s ear.

She didn’t want to let go of the woman... so she didn’t, “I will, I promise.”

“Thank you.” Ravan’s response was a grateful whisper. 

After a while, they reluctantly untangled themselves but remained huddled together at the table, thick as thieves for the rest of the evening.

Speaking mostly in Persian, they reviewed the equations and delved deep into the details of the alterations and additions Kara had made. She only knew so much from her cell memory but explained everything she could, doing her best to arm Ravan for the next stages of her scientific
investigation... including offering an audacious way to prove her work.

Shah’s mother was now on an unstoppable course to reveal to the world not only a method to detect and measure the mysterious 95% of the universe currently hidden from human science and understanding, but a way to interact with and utilize that matter and energy.

Her breakthrough would enable humans to eventually realize unbelievable things. In a few short years, fossil fuels would become a thing of the past, and free, clean energy would be available for everyone. The earth could begin healing; everyone could stop fighting, and start exploring the universe. Kara knew the odds were high that in that new world, humans would most likely just find something else to fight about. But, she also had an inexplicable faith in her new people, that they could rise above the baggage of their past, as her own ancestors once did. She smiled, thinking of Shah… who she was certain would be first in line to build the first ships that would one day navigate the stars.

*Oh, I can dream.* Kara did not choose to share that thought with Alex, yet at least. She’d have to explain what she’d done soon enough, but not right then.

Ravan was speaking, and Kara watched and listened to the newly energized woman with a kind of glee. She privately wondered what that future day would be like, when Dr. Nazari, hopefully with Shah’s father at her side, would announce her discovery and face the limelight.

Her discoveries would change the world, overnight… Kara was counting on it.

The possibility of human migration to other worlds was admittedly a little scary to Kara, considering how horribly they’d treated their own planet, the creatures on it, and each other. She deemed them clearly unfit for such a step but took great solace in the fact that it would be many years before her new people would be leaving their tiny, safe solar system.

They had time to learn and evolve… and when the time did come, she, Alex, Shah, Kal, and good people like Ravan would be there to guide and prepare them.

Kara would make sure of it.

............... 

**Post Game Two, later that evening…**

Dinner was a big hit.

Everyone seemed to enjoy themselves, and her new friend, Ravan, known for being a great cook herself, congratulated Kara on her amazingly authentic, and delicious, Persian meal.

After dessert, and the Bears’ crushing 7-21 loss to Dallas, *Rao, who knew Kal could be so irritating when he gloated?* the deck heaters were turned on, and the four large telescopes in the Danvers’ home were set up on the wide, comfortable patio out back, where everyone retired for coffee, refreshments, conversation, and star gazing.

Nom enjoyed being outside and seemed to always find a person willing to allow him to curl up in their lap to share their warmth. The pecking order was Kara, Alex, and then whatever lap was available.

At one point Jeremiah pulled the three girls aside to his big telescope, grinning like a man with a
“Look.” He said, offering the eyepiece to Kara.

She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to see, but leaned into the massive instrument and adjusted the focus. In her view, among the vast field of glittering stars, their ancient light only now reaching Earth, her eye was drawn to a small, splotchy, reddish, or orange-ish planet.

Kara could just make out some of it’s largest features... including mountains etched in black. “It’s beautiful, Jeremiah.” She said, stepping back for Alex to have a look.

He continued, quietly, just for his limited audience, “Mars, the so-called Red Planet, named after the Roman God of War. We have yet to set foot on it, but, we will… one day in the not-too-distant future.” He was so ready to spill the beans about something…

Shah took a turn looking into the telescope, and Alex grinned at her father, “Spit it out, dad, what’s up?”

“Okay, okay” He was so excited! “I haven’t had a chance to tell your mother yet, but I’ve been asked to join NASA’s first manned Mars mission... on the command team.”

“Holy shit!” Alex clamped her hands over her mouth. Shah and Kara giggled at her unintended outburst, and Jeremiah waved off a concerned look from Lois. “Sorry, dad…” Alex whispered, then added, “Congrats!”

Shah asked, “Pardon, but I assume that means you’ll not be going with the away mission?”

He was still smiling, “No, but I’ll be part of the group leading the effort here on earth, building a team of scientists to find proof of alien life once they get there.”

“Well, as an alien, I approve of their choice. Well done.” Kara’s comment as she toasted Jeremiah’s announcement started a round of laughter among the group.

“It’s an incredible thing...” He mused, “Growing up, I always dreamed of walking on other worlds, but having a daughter who can actually do that, and from a place more incredible than humans could ever imagine? Something like that changes your perspective and priorities.” He smiled warmly at Kara, and she could see the love in his eyes.

Wait... “Jeremiah, what do you mean, that I can do that? Walk on Mars?” Kara asked.

Her adoptive father’s handsome smile turned into a grin, and he pushed his square glasses up further on the bridge of his nose, “Of course you can, Kara, I mean... you could if you were in command of your powers. You don’t actually need any kind of atmosphere to fly in, or even to breathe, not all the time anyway, and while the vacuum might feel strange at first, maybe even cold, and you’d need to adapt to maneuvering in it, and not breathing for a while, none of that would be an issue for a Kryptonian under Sol’s influence.”

The three girls listened intently as he downed his wine, and continued, “Also, the distance wouldn’t matter, not to you. Even if Mars were at aphelion, its furthest point away from us, 250 million miles give or take, the only true variable would be how long it would take to make the trip. Once you escaped Earth’s gravity, you could break orbit, fly there... spend the day, a week, or however long you wanted, and fly home. I’m not encouraging you to ever do that, by the way, I’m just talking theoretically.”

“Talk about a mic drop, look at her face.” Alex was staring at Kara, who appeared completely stunned.
Shah wrapped an arm around the blonde’s shoulders and teased, “Breathe Kara, breathe… Oh, my apologies, you don’t need to.” That started yet another round of laughter and poking, that Kara joined in on.

A short while later, the three of them huddled together next to a heater, a bit off from the others to talk privately. Alex and Kara were sipping the one glass of red wine they each were allowed, a dark, and delicious California merlot, while Shah had gone with a non-alcoholic sparkling cider.

Kara had been a little wound up since Jeremiah’s revelation about her abilities and was speaking passionately to her friends, but in a hushed tone, “I need to push myself harder. At five times my current top speed I could be to Mars in a day, worst case for distance. Maybe I should go to the moon first… as a test?”

Shah whispered, “Yes, but you’ll need to reach orbital velocity first, and that’s about four point nine miles per second or a little over seventeen thousand miles an hour… like… twenty times the speed of sound. That’s a lot faster than anything you’ve managed to hit so far. The thing is, we need to find your speed limit… and asking Clark is the last resort.”

Alex’s eyes flicked as if she were reading something that wasn’t there. “According to Shatari, Kara has the potential to fly at velocities well beyond what we’ve been talking about… you’re right though, our girl needs to practice and push her limits.”

Shah, with a huge grin on her face, nodded. “And we need to find her something to wear that won’t shred or dissolve at those speeds. Perhaps she can alter her aura to act as a shield…”

“I don’t know…” Alex was whispering salaciously now. “I like Kara’s clothes peeling off her when she flies.”

Shah had to cover her mouth to hold back her laughter, and Kara just beamed… positively thrilled that Alex enjoyed seeing her naked… and that she was thinking about Kara undressing at that very moment.

A flushed and semi-distracted Alex then fell into an animated back and forth with their friend about the details of Kara’s training. Shah said, “We need to find a safe area, big enough to give her plenty of runway for bursts of super speed. Do you or Shatari have her acceleration and braking data from her past flights? I can use that to determine the minimum size required for a practice zone.”

Alex was staring off at her HUD only she could see. “Yup, pulling it up now, and dropping the files on the quantum cloud storage Shatari created for you to fetch from. The link is in your inbox about… right… now. Wow, good thinking Shah! You know, I still say it’s too bad we can’t just borrow the high school track for an hour and let her do laps.” They all shared a chuckle at the absurdity.

Kara suddenly thought of something and spoke up. “Oh! Can you guys focus on the Atlantic? Check for unfriendly or earth-scanning satellites, ship traffic, military, and the rest of the standard checklist.”

“We’re on it.” Alex said, adding a fake salute.

Shah was looking at Kara with pursed lips, one eye closed, the other focused on her friend through the swish of the amber liquid in her glass. “Kara, is this urgency really all about Mars, or something else?”

Kara fidgeted with the stem of her own wine glass and took a sip of the rich reddish liquid it contained before answering. “No, it’s not about Mars, as much as I’d love to bring Jeremiah back a souvenir.” She sighed. “I guess I’ve just been feeling so… restrained since the Depot. Smashing
that train and letting go, felt good... like... really, really good. Every day, acting ‘normal’ is so stressful, and yes, I know I’m improving my human side, and it’s good and important, but I need to find a way to focus on my other powers as well. Shah, I feel like I’m bursting at the seams to just **do** something!”

Her friend nodded, “I understand how you must feel *sheereen-am*, always hiding who you really are. I wish you could be your true self all the time, but I think you do a great job fitting in. Please, let Alex and I handle finding you somewhere to spread our wings. You deserve it.”

Kara was so grateful, and not just for Shah’s kind words and friendship, but for taking some of the weight from her shoulders.

A while later, the three of them were up in Kara’s room, listening to the album ‘Good News for People Who Love Bad News’ by Modest Mouse, an interesting band that Alex was really into. They were also surveying the costume work that still needed to be done before the play which was rapidly approaching.

The task seemed impossible, but with her friend’s assistance they ended up making more of a dent at least.

Later, Shah was sharing some details with them about her visit upstate with her new friend, Marjorie Phelps, who had helped her out when she was ninja-stalking the two of them. The thirty-six-year-old was a mother of three: her adorable twins and Tyson, her adopted twenty-year-old son, who was training to be a Navy SEAL.

The easygoing woman had quickly become Shah’s closest friend outside of The Squad, and it was easy to understand why. Marjorie was fluent in Farsi, and some Greek, having spent over four years in Iran as an archeologist, and three more traveling all over the Middle East and the Mediterranean on research missions in college. She’d taken a break to have the twins, and ended up quitting her job again after her stay-at-home husband’s sudden death from a heart attack the year before. The devastated woman had sold their Metropolis condo and moved out to the boondocks... back to Ten Lakes, where she’d grown up. Tyson had taken his adoptive father’s passing hard and returned home for several months to be with Marjorie and the girls.

Honestly, observing Shah’s movements and odd behavior as she related the story, Kara was certain their friend was smitten with Marjorie’s handsome warrior son. Her heart was warmed by this knowledge, Shah deserved to find other friends and her own mate.

Alex and Shah’s conversation had then moved on to how her Kryptonian aura could be altered to sustain a microenvironment, complete with its own gravity, but she wasn’t really listening anymore. Kara was simply enjoying just watching the pair as they sat on the bed together, their hands touching without thought, their bodies leaning forward into each other as they talked... so absolutely at ease with one another. The scene and the love she felt between them vibrating along her bond with Alex made her happy in her heart.

She wondered how fate could have been so cruel to her early in life, yet also given her these two incredible women, such bright stars that she often didn’t feel worthy of.

Kara had been working on something very special for them and decided that now was as good of a time as any to do some show and tell. She gracefully eased onto the bed to sit cross-legged nearly between the pair and gently took both Shah and Alex’s hands in her own.
They stopped talking and looked at her with questioning eyes.

Kara began, “I wanted to talk to you both about something. Alex, can I have Shatari, please? Just for a minute?”

Alex shrugged, became still, and the Kryptonian AI transformed into a kind of fluid darkness that flowed onto Kara but did not solidify into any clothing. Instead, Kara let go of her friends’ hands and ran her fingers through and over Shatari’s unstable form with great care and gentleness, as if she were petting Nom, and her eyes glowed gorgeous blue.

Alex, bereft of her companion, was now dressed only in a skimpy assortment of black… a worn bra, tank top, and underwear, but seemed unconcerned at her state of undress. Catching Shah’s look of surprise, she said with a smirk, “You’re lucky I’m wearing anything, aziz-am.”

It was Shah’s turn to blush.

Kara’s fingers found her friends’ hands again, and she spoke in a formal fashion… “Shatari, thank you for your service and friendship across all of our years. I now release you into Alex’s care, to be her companion, and protect her as you would my own life and my heart. Be safe, I could not bear to lose either of you.” There was a surge, and Alex was once again covered in the cute outfit she’d worn at dinner… but… Shatari had also left part of herself behind on Kara.

“What’s happening Kara? What did you just do?” Alex was understandably concerned and confused.

“I’ll explain, hold on a sec.” Kara now looked over at Shah, who was staring with an intense fascination at the swirling darkness that Shatari had left behind. “Shahrazad, you are the greatest of friends, and in case you didn’t already know it, I love you like a sister. To me, you are already part of the House of El.”

Kara thought hard to remember as many of the ceremonial words she could alter for what was coming next, “I hope that you will accept a rare gift from one whose long-dead race once ruled the stars and her AI companion who has also grown to care for you like a daughter. This gift does not come free of obligation, but you have already proven yourself worthy in many ways. Shatari has sharded herself for you, it’s kind of like cloning, or giving birth. This is a great and rare honor, and usually only done for family, but that is what you are to both of us. She and I have named this new companion Zara out of respect for your heritage, and we release her to you, to be your protector, and companion for life, if you will have and care for her.”

The companion swirled along Kara’s side like a great black cloak, and down her arm, but tentatively halted at her wrist, inches from Shah’s hand, where she waited patiently.

Shah looked into Kara’s eyes, and nodded, “I accept this great honor, Kara Zor-El, and Shatari. I will care for Zara, and welcome her friendship and protection until the end of my days.”

With that, the Kryptonian AI immediately settled around Shah, becoming a stunning leather jacket that fit her curvy form perfectly. The Persian girl erupted into a huge smile, and said, “I think we’re going to be very, very good friends… Oh! My HUD’s in Persian! Thank you, Zara!”

“You sure seem to enjoy surprising people,” Alex said as she wrapped Kara in a powerful embrace and buried her face into her neck, leaving two feather kisses behind before whispering, “I can’t believe you just did that… idiot. I love you.”

Kara slid her arms around Alex in response, “I love you, too. You know, I think Shatari has always
belonged with you. Now you’ll both be safer, and with Shah’s help, we should have more of an advantage with training my abilities.”

Shah then leaned over and added a warm kiss to Kara’s cheek, and commenced hugging both her friends, creating a huggle. “I love you, too, you know, my Kryptonian little sister. And this stubborn one...” She poked Alex, “I have always loved.”

Kara had never felt so happy.

Soon they were all collapsed on the bed together, laughing, and Alex asked, “Be honest, Kara; you and Shatari were just tired of listening to Shah and me fight over who was going to wear her the next day, right?”

Kara hid her head under a pillow and said, “I plead the fifth!” as Shah began tickling her mercilessly.

Later that night...

Guided by the soft glow cast by the stars in the clear night sky outside of Kara’s tall bedroom windows, Alex stealthily slipped into the cozy room join her under the covers.

Such was their nightly ritual.

They snuggled in close and spoke in their thoughts about the events of the day, as well as other things, all the while touching each other lightly as if to assure themselves they were there in the dark, safe, and together.

They agreed that Kara’s first Thanksgiving had turned out pretty amazing, and set a high bar for future holiday celebrations. Alex ended up admitting to liking ‘the big lug’, as she now referred to Kal and teased her Kryptonian about her infatuation with a certain hot Daily Planet reporter.

They eventually moved on to stories of worlds beyond Earth, Alex’s favorite topic. Kara always seemed pleased to share her memories, and over the months it had just become something they did… their thing.

Alex was spellbound as her Kryptonian described the time she’d spent on a large moon called Lorem, where she had been assigned to a scientific outpost as part of her studies. Located in a remote star system twenty-thousand light-years from Krypton, the moon had been transformed millennia before by Kara’s ancestors into a paradise of swamps, seas, and rainforests, teaming with life.

Alex, as always, recorded and took mental notes that Shatari logged for her later review. She already had several digital journals full of her observations and recordings from Kara’s intricate tales.

While on her assignment there, Kara encountered a race called the Zolar… gentle, mantra ray-like beings as big as whales. They were intelligent, telepathic, and possessed the amazing natural ability to manipulate space-time. Once a year, they would rise from the vast oceans that covered their water-planet and make the over 150,000-mile trek to Lorem, orbiting above.

The reason for their annual migration was to hunt a plankton-like creature that the Zolar prized above all other prey. These glowing sprites were birthed by the trillions in Lorem’s endless swamps and would float like teeny tiny Chinese Lanterns up through the atmosphere, through a gauntlet of predators, racing them to the stars. Those who survived the arduous journey into the void were
transformed, or reborn, into what Kara could only describe as star-faring butterflies made of light.

The young Kryptonian had actually made friends with a mated pair of Zolars who would visit her often when they spent time on Lorem. Kara remembered how they would squabble like an old married couple, arguing over which one would get to invite the little girl to ride on their back. Alex’s heart melted as she listened to Kara’s wistful telling of her adventures exploring the ancient, bioluminescent-forested swamps with her new friends.

She closed her eyes while Kara’s voice whispered in her mind, and imagined that she was riding on the wide back of a gentle Zolar, next to the laughing Kryptonian girl.

Alex was captivated by her vivid descriptions of that primordial world and its inhabitants… and her musical Kryptonese painted living, watercolor pictures that danced in her mind. The most amazing thing was that after a while she was there, riding with Kara snuggled in front of her, on the back of the massive creature, with its soft, warm skin under her thighs.

Kara wasn’t just speaking now, but sending her living memories!

As they both began to fall asleep, Alex yawned, stretched, and nestled in close, wiggling her head onto Kara’s shoulder, using her welcoming golden locks as a pillow as had become her habit… no, more like an addiction, like Kara’s scent.

Alex ran her fingers over the girl’s arm, savoring every moment as she slowly worked her way down the delicate curve of her side to her hip, where she rested her hand. She then settled into a kind of deep contentment, listening to Kara’s breathing, which was even and slow… in… out… in… out… in rhythm with her own.

“Vaena…” A whisper escaped Kara’s lips as she relaxed into Alex’s embrace and touch.

That name, her name, uttered by the silver-tongued girl, never stopped being the most beautiful thing Alex had ever heard. It wasn’t just the melodious complexity of the word itself, which, she was realizing over time, was layered more like a glyph than simply an expression, it was how every time Kara spoke it, an uncontrollable feeling of warmth, belonging, and sex hummed through every one of her cells… calling her home.

Or at least that’s how it felt.

But this time, something even more magical happened.

She’d never truly experienced, in the literal sense, the beat of Kara’s powerful heart in her own chest, until now. It pulsed in sync with hers. She could actually feel Kara as if she were her… the beautiful Kryptonian’s soft breathing, and the deliciously fiery sensation of her own hand on her, um, Kara’s hip, their bodies entwined so perfectly together, the music of her dreams, and the absolute power in her veins.

Rao… this is what Kara feels like… all the freaking time!

Then, all at once, Kal’s words came back to Alex in a rush, ‘know that what she’s given you… is something infinity fragile, and precious… and it’s all of her.’ Which took Alex back to what Kara had told her months ago about Kryptonians falling in love, and the Fires of Rao when Kara had said:

‘Pledging yourself to another is not done lightly. It only happens once in a person’s lifetime, if they are lucky. When it does, a connection is formed, though it is subtle at first, and can be ignored or broken by the other if they do not feel the same way. The offering of one’s self is like becoming defenseless to the other, opening your soul. If accepted, the two become one, ‘two hearts as one’…
Alex was shaken by the revelation.

It was true, it was really true… everything she’d been feeling, for months. Kara, her amazing Kara, had chosen her, Alexandra Danvers, as her One True Pairing, her OTP, and placed the fate of her delicate Kryptonian heart in her clumsy human hands.

Alex didn’t even need to think about whether she should embrace the bond, aside from doubting if she was worthy of her geeky Kryptonian goddess. The fact was, Kara already possessed her heart; she had from the moment Alex first saw her.

Kara was Alex’s home, where she belonged. Nothing would, and nothing could ever stand between them.

The avalanche had already begun.

End Thanksgiving

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:

I’m officially calling Kara’s first major holiday a resounding success, and so happy that she and Alex are now finally bondmates! FYI, there is one final step they’ll need to take for their union to be forged eternal… one that requires a level of intimacy they haven’t reached, yet.

Lois’ wisdom, love, and support really helped Kara weather a crisis (the very definition of El mayarah - ‘stronger together’). And helpful Kara, intervening like mythic Prometheus to give Ravan fire. Wait, doesn’t that break the Prime Directive or something? Nah, she’ll just need to live with the consequences.

Oh, Bears fans, I’m so sorry, but take heart… This is a different universe.

Next up: In chapter twelve, shit gets real. It’s Kara’s hero moment and life or death in a chapter called, ‘Trouble Will Find Me’.

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me. Please share this story with others you think might enjoy it!

Thoughts:
Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms - In the story itself, I do my best to italicize all non-English words except for proper names, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.
Glossary of Terms
Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the
rest of the story. The list will grow.

Ah!khooob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

C’est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. (Kryptonian)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature.

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

aziz-am - my dear (what Alex calls Shah)

joon-am – my dear, or my life, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

sheereen-am - sweetie (what Shah calls Kara)

‘insert name’ jōn: Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or jōn- they both mean ‘dear’. So, 'Shah jōn', means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in every conversation and every context.

Others names/nickname/titles:

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Vaena – Proper noun, title given to a Krytonian’s bondmate. It is “One who is loved” but so much more profound - Alex’s Kryptonian name/title, given to her by Kara.

Time

See Chapter Nine end notes.

Music (off topic)
Hope I’m not boring you, but I wanted to share a bit of the music I’ve been listening to while writing, including Jaime XX radio on Spotify, and some of my favorite bliss-outs on Youtube. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve listened to these, over, and over, and over….

Tycho:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5sSUJoYnbk
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0txgXdGW5s
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6ih1aKeETk
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEI1_oGPQr0
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPfNgIj2eNU

Bonobo:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdpDtAjZuWQ&t=2748s
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clsczmHXf9U

ODESZA:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Wh3qxA3mY
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6Ap9X8SDgU
Aphex Twin:  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xw5AiRVqfQk&t=4035s

XXYYXX:  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpDGEaA4yZk&t=1732s  
Daughter:  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPK67Px8sR8&list=PLwgcZMQ2VP7H1BoKhf-u9vbFSNh8BWkON  
Sigur Rós:  
From their journey around Iceland  
Route One (Part 1, 2, & 3)  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szbGc7ymFhQ&list=RDszbGc7ymFhQ#t=3314  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szbGc7ymFhQ&t=3311s  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aV7YutDr5Nw

Medasin – Motion:  
https://youtu.be/-Ypy5cG_of4?list=PLGznEl712WelO6ZhS8Ic2ssweLuQaCK1d

Also, liberal rotations of Coldplay, Radiohead, This Will Destroy You, Daughter, Lana Del Rey, Lorde, Purity Ring, The National, CHVRCHES, Boards of Canada, John Mayer, Bon Iver, Flume, and Burial. :)
Trouble Will Find Me

Chapter Summary

Where Kara is faced with making a life-altering choice. Her hero moment...

It's mid-December, and we begin with a little well-deserved Danvers celebration after the musical...

We also get a taste of how far Kara's come in the saving lives department, as well as spend time with her training with Shah, and flying speed trials over the Atlantic.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mid-December - Year Two

The Danvers’ residence

Eliza stepped into the house, carefully placing her keys on the bureau before hanging her winter coat on one of the iron hooks that lined the front entryway. Alex and Kara followed in after her, stomping their boots clean of snow as they chatted away…. both still energized from the day’s excitement-filled events.

Hit by the warm air inside, Alex’s cheeks stung… but in a good way. She always loved how their home always felt so toasty in the wintertime.

As she and Kara slipped off their coats, Jeremiah crossed the threshold behind them. Alex could tell that he was distracted, nervous about something. Her father had been less talkative than normal for the last week or so, and was it her imagination or was he actually looking over his shoulder?

What’s bothering him? She sent her thoughts to Kara, who briefly glanced over at her adoptive father as he closed the blinds on the window by the front door.

I don’t know, but something’s not right. I did several sweeps on the ride in, and nothing in the neighborhood seems out of place.

Alex sighed. Shatari says the same thing.

Come ‘on Vaena, I’ll keep an eye on him. Right now, let’s celebrate, ‘k?

I’m so sorry, Kara, this is your big moment and I’m being all paranoid… maybe I should go put on a tinfoil hat?

Hush, let me thank you.

Thank me? What for?

Kara’s warm hand slipping into hers pulled Alex out of her thoughts; her Kryptonian was still
sparkling, her big blue eyes smiling at her. “Thank you so much, Alex.” She said out loud, mostly for Eliza and Jeremiah’s benefit. “I don’t know what I would have done without your help. No one else could have intimidated the entire cast the way you did! You actually got everyone to show up here for their fittings, and pitch in to help over last weekend and every night this week after school. You mobilized a whole freaking army, for me!”

Kara hugged her, and let her lips linger like a caress on Alex’s neck for a moment longer than she probably should before leaning back, slightly flushed.

Wow… Alex was grinning like an idiot.

“That’s my daughter…” Eliza said with a chuckle, her gaze turning upward, “Lord help me.”

“Mom.” Alex tore her eyes away from her beautiful bondmate to frown at and gently flick the woman who’d given birth to her on the shoulder.

Her dad had already disappeared into the kitchen.

Alex could hear him rustling around and cracking open a bottle of ‘bubbly’, as he always called it. His deep voice drifted out into the hallway, “You were both rather genius if I do say so.”

Eliza summoned both of them into the kitchen and, as she began taking down the good crystal glasses, started gushing effusively about the play. “I’m not just saying this, but A Connecticut Yankee was one of the best productions I’ve ever seen… it didn’t even feel like a high school musical. The costumes were absolutely stunning, the acting was wonderful, and… oh,” She put a hand over her heart and tears glistened in her eyes, “Kara, that music! Good gracious! And your voice… it was so haunting… so beautiful. I had no idea… My girl.” She opened her arms and Kara immediately swarmed into her for a long embrace.

Alex could feel the warmth glowing in her chest… Kara’s joy was like music, vibrating softly within her.

The glasses were soon filled, popping with tiny bubbles, and everyone took a stem in hand to toast with Jeremiah, who said, “To our amazing young ladies, who worked together flawlessly to leverage their incredible creativity, skills, determination, and leadership to help pull off a five-star musical… with a little, okay, a lot, of help from their friends, of course.”

“Cheers!” They all said in unison.

Then Kara grinned and toasted her House’s motto, “El mayarah!”

“Stronger together!” They all called out as one.

……………………

That next morning...

“Alex! Alex!” She was called from a place of dreams back to wakefulness, squinting in the dim light of the familiar Tesla lamp on the bedroom’s desk. The Kara-sized space beside her was still warm but empty, aside from a curled up, but annoyed Nom… and the whirlwind of her Kryptonian’s intensity was all around her.

Why is that damned light on? What in the heck is Kara doing?
She gingerly cracked open one eye, and saw her gorgeous, half-naked Kryptonian shimmering at super speed, one moment hopping on one foot beside the bed struggling with her sock, the next pulling on her second tall leather boot, and after that juggling her iPhone into a pocket, and then returning the device to her desk for some reason, as she brushed back her long golden locks into a ponytail.

Alex approved of her hastily assembled outfit; adorable reindeer leggings, flowing gray cashmere scarf, and a wool winter jacket just a couple shades darker.

Kara’s blue eyes widened gratefully as Alex sat up, and she finished slipping her new, sleek Bluetooth headset over her ear. “Oh, thank Rao you’re awake!”

“Kara? What-the-frick-time-is-it?” She mumbled the question as her eyes focused on the reddish-orange glow of the Steampunk vacuum tube clock Kara had bought at Metropolis Con that past summer… the numbers coming into fuzzy view…

It was 3:45 AM.

Something is very, very wrong…

“Alex, listen, I don’t have much time. It’s Mr. Carlson…”

She rubbed her eyes blearily, and yawned, “From down the street? Mr. Yappy Dog Carlson?”

“Yeah, him. Don’t freak, but he’s having a heart attack and requires medical assistance immediately or he will die. I need to go to him now. Please call 911, ‘k? I’ll stay with him until the ambulance…”

Alex was almost fully awake, and already in panic mode as she cut Kara off, “You can’t! You know what mom and dad said, no heroics, no powers. Kara, it’s too dangerous out in the open, there’ll be cops, EMS… you could get caught.”

Kara smiled, leaned down, and left a molten lava kiss with fiery touches of her fingertips on Alex’s cheek, “I have to. Vaena, whatever happens is on me.”

Alex began to protest as she stood up, but Kara whooshed forward to gently smooth her electric hands down her sides, and rested her delicate touch on Alex’s hips, “I can’t just let him die, not when I can do something about it. Trust me, I have a plan. Why do think I bothered getting dressed?”

Filled with Kryptonian confidence, Alex sighed, and let go of her fear. “Go, be a hero. I got this.”

She caught a glimpse of Kara’s sunrise smile and the sparkle in her eyes as she disappeared in a blur out one of her room’s tall windows, along with a brief, but intense gust of wind.

“Shatari, call 911, now… anonymous id please, and disguise my voice. Mmm, make it a male… and over forty.”

A few moments later, as Alex finished giving directions to the dispatcher, she sent her awareness to Kara, Help is on the way!

As their thoughts mingled, Alex experienced a whole new level of immersion. In her mind she could hear all the ambient sounds around her bondmate, a dog yapping in the background, quick, rustling noises, and Kara’s soft voice briskly counting… 15, 16, 17, 18… it's thirty compressions, right? Two breaths? …23, 24...

Alex had to think for a moment to remember the answer… Yeah, thirty, and then two.
Got it! Thanks Alex. I never thought I’d be saying this, but I’m glad we took that stupid class. Kara chuckled. Turns out, not so stupid.

At the same time, Shatari had begun pulling information and videos about CPR and heart attacks from the Internet into Alex’s HUD, as well as tracing all communication traffic related to her call to emergency services.

About time! Kara, an ambulance is on the way…

I hear the sirens, but they’re at least another six minutes out. Her bondmate spoke briskly in between being focused on giving Mr. Carlson breaths, and continuing compressions. I had to shock his heart; thank goodness he had a portable defibrillator in the house… I still haven’t figured out how to do that with my powers.

We’ll work on that. How’s he doing?

Holding on, barely. Thanks for the backup. There was a pause for more breaths. So, before it’s too late… here’s my story: I couldn’t sleep, went out walking to look at the stars, and saw Mr. Carlson collapse through his front window. I then flagged down a passing car and asked the driver to call 911, (that’s why I left my phone at home by the way), and no, I’m sorry officer, I don’t remember the make or model, or who was behind the wheel. It was dark, but I know it was a….

A man. Alex prompted.

A man… and when I went to check on Mr. Carson, thankfully the door was unlocked, so I started CPR. Got it? You never heard me get up or leave, ‘k? Eliza and Jeremiah don’t need to yell at you, too.

Fine, but only because you asked nicely.

Wonders, you do listen sometimes… Oh, you masked your location and voice when you called emergency services, right?

Yeah, def.

Good, because they’re getting close. You better go wake up Eliza and… There was a cracking sound on Kara’s end, and a feeling of terror shot through their bond, Oh crap crap crap! Alex, Alex, I broke his ribs! I must have pushed too hard! Her Kryptonian sounded so frightened…

Alex tried to calm her, That happens sometimes Kara, remember? It’s okay, just keep going. You can do this. He can heal once he’s in the hospital.

Kara was shaky when she replied, but had gotten back to the task, Okay, okay, thank you Alex. I’m still going with compressions, just a couple more minutes… “I’m so sorry if I broke you, Mr. Carlson.” She said out loud.

Alex could just make out the faintest wail of approaching sirens in the far distance….

………………..

Late-December

Holiday Break

The Dojo
The empty training hall was mostly dark, though a flickering light emanated from one of the exercise rooms in the back. It was after hours and, as she’d started doing like clockwork a couple weeks before, Kara was training with Shah. Alex usually accompanied her for the extra practice, or two on ones, but tonight Kara’s bondmate was spending time with Quinn and Brian.

Out on the mats, her Persian sister was a cyclone of movement… accurately delivering swift, seemingly endless blows from all directions. Kara was off balance, spinning this way and that to compensate as the blur of misty darkness rolled to her left, right, then around her backside, leaving behind tiny stings on her flesh as the full force of her friend’s punishing war sticks made contact, again and again.

Her Kryptonian awareness, speed, and reflexes were the only thing that saved Kara from being thrashed like a piñata at a five-year-old’s birthday party, and yet… she’d still failed to block half of Shah’s attacks.

Her tormentor was now standing a few feet away, her terrible weapons held at rest at her sides, her beautiful emerald green eyes gleaming like a tiger’s, set within the shadows of her black hijab. Zara roiled black and sinuous around her like smoke, which was so amazingly cool! (and kind of terrifying), coalescing back into the black ninja-like outfit that had originally wrapped her friend’s generous curves.

*Oh, thank Rao! Break time!

They’d been at it non-stop for an hour and a half.

Kara was breathing hard and soaked in sweat. She bent to rest her hands on her knees, and looked up at her worthy opponent, “How is it…” she gasped between satisfying breaths of air, “…that the one with the powers is the redshirt who keeps dying here?”

Shah tilted her head and surveyed her student calmly before answering. Kara felt the full weight of her appraisal.

When she spoke it was in Persian, of course, “When you fight, there must be harmony… all of you, your senses, mind, body, spirit, and your abilities must move as one, like water. In here, in this place, you must be of the *Malāʾikah*, not Kara Danvers. Leave her outside, or I simply cannot help you.”

Kara was flattered by her friend’s unshakable belief in her connection to divinity… but she was no angel. Shah, with her confusing blend of science, logic and spirituality, refused to believe differently, though, so it was no use arguing with her. She held Kara to a higher standard than humans, and today was no different.

While Shah’s words had stung, she was also right. Kara was so used to managing her layered human façade, exerting constant control over every action and movement that it made learning to fight extremely difficult.

“Harsh, but okay, I get it… it’s just so hard to let go. I mean, I can’t just turn my human side off like a light switch.”

Shah’s patient smile brightened as if Kara had said a magic word, and when she spoke her voice was warm, like Ravan’s. “That’s the point love, you must learn how to switch it off. When your powers are needed, your human mask cannot get in the way. You know this to be true… *Sheereen-am*, let me help you.”
“But I might… hurt you.”

“Zara will protect me. Inertial dampeners, remember? No more excuses.”

Kara breathed in deep, and nodded in acknowledgement… of course her ninja was right, she was always right.

“I’m ready. *Man say mikonam ke yad begiram.*”

Shah look delighted as Kara switched to Persian, and replied, “Do or do not, there is no try. You **will** do.”

Kara grinned at her trainer’s Yoda quote. It made a kind of sense, if Alex was her Obi-Wan, then Shah was definitely her old master… just a much younger and hotter version. She’d certainly traded up… *poor Luke; you have no idea what you’re missing.* “Fine, I will **do**.”

Her friend breezed over to hug her, and asked, “So, how’s everything at home, are Eliza and Jeremiah still upset at your heroics?”

Kara snorted, “Pffft, yeah, just a little.” They both laughed. “I’m grounded until the new year. They only let me come here because they think I’m just watching you practice, and they trust **you** to make sure I get home by ten. I think they’re still trying to hook you and Alex up… They’d flip out if they knew I was actually training to fight; they won’t even let me try out for the debate team. They’re being so unfair.”

Shah smiled thoughtfully, “Yes, but from their perspective, you risked exposing yourself when you shouldn’t have. I’m sure they care that you saved a human life; Mr. Carlson is alive because of you, Kara.”

The young Kryptonian shrugged, and wiped at the corners of her eyes. “Maybe. I don’t know. They were so mad, Shah. Eliza has never yelled at me like that before… she seemed so...”

Shah leaned in and said, “Terrified? Kara, they are not ashamed of the real you. And, knowing your heart, my guess is that’s what you’re thinking. I am certain that they are quite proud of what you did… and are simply afraid of losing you. They love you and Alex so much, and would sacrifice anything to keep you both safe… that’s what parents do, so I am told.”

Kara considered her friend’s words, and finally asked, “Do you really think so?”

“Of course I do! I know what it feels like when it comes to loving you Danvers girls.”

Kara’s heart was singing when she threw herself back into the fight, this time as the graceful Kryptonian and not the clumsy human.

The delight on Shahrazad’s face was apparent, and neither of them held back… well, not much at least.

………………..

**Late-December**

**Holiday Break**

**Somewhere over the Atlantic**
The worst of the bumps had evened out somewhere around Mach 4 as Kara continued to accelerate through a massive storm, hugging the roiling seas barely three hundred feet below. Her stomach should have been churning, but it wasn’t. Pushing her speed to its unknown limits was the most exhilarating thing she’d ever experienced… well, almost. Rao!

She blushed as her thoughts turned to her bondmate.

Just then, Shah’s voice crackled over their tenuous audio connection, “Congrats, you just broke the X-15’s record!”

“So, I’m faster than a 1950s era experimental hypersonic, rocket-powered aircraft? Yay?”

“Hey, it’s a big deal! The X-15 was awesome.” Shah retorted.

“Okay, okay, no disrespect intended.” Kara chuckled. “But I need to go faster…”

What Kara really wanted to know was just how much faster she could go. She once again bent her will to her speed, and the clouds, rain and even the waves far below parted in an explosive swirl of hurricane force as she exploded relentlessly forward.

“5,233 miles per hour!” The welcome sound of the certain someone she’d just been thinking delightful things about shouted in her ear. Alex… Kara’s breathing quickened as she felt the golden threads that connected them warm.

She once again silently thanked her human and AI sisters for finding a way to maintain contact with her as she pressed her limits. The whole headset solution had been Shah’s idea; she was already a brilliant engineer, but with Zara’s help she was scary.

She’d modified Kara’s Bluetooth headset, as well as her own phone, with Kryptonian tech, and sync’d both devices into Kara and Alex’s quantum network. Shah could now securely communicate with them, regardless of distance using her phone. This was great news, because that meant Kara could stop carrying her iPhone around while training. In fact, the Kryptonian had left her indispensable device back in her bedroom for safekeeping on this run.

She really couldn’t afford to break another one.

Kara had left Alex and Shah standing on the bluffs overlooking the ocean behind the Danvers’ house an hour earlier, when the magic window for her speed trial had opened.

“Hey Alex, my quantum field is stable, I’m barely even wet! Oh! And the best part is, my headset and clothes haven’t been ripped off yet… like last time. That was only slightly awkward.”

“Not for me.” Alex teased… “Frankly, I’m very disappointed at this development.”

“Save me.” Shah chuckled, “You two need to get a room.”

They all laughed, and Kara pushed on, joy pulsing like lightning through her entire being, and only increasing as she continued accelerating… seeking her limits.
Seconds later... Alex called out, “6,433 mph! Time to take your foot off the gas speedy... Now! Decelerate!

Shah chimed in, “Kara, you only have six seconds, or you’ll overshoot your safety zone.”

Reluctantly, the Kryptonian put her hands forward, leaned back, and willed herself to come to a complete stop in the middle of a great gale, the energy from her passing blowing her long hair forward. Around her, massive columns of black and grey clouds towered far up into the angry sky, and wind tore at her from all directions.

She closed her eyes and focused, strengthening the field around her until she no longer felt the wind.

“Wahoo! 3.6 seconds to zero forward motion!” Shah’s voice was ecstatic. Kara had to smile; she knew her Persian sister would be crunching the terabytes of data she was collecting on her speed trial for days.

Shah loved data.

Her friends were geeky and weird, just the way Kara liked it.

Alex broke in, “Rut roh Raggy… Kara, Shatari’s picked up a secure, encoded distress call coming from a couple hundred miles northeast of Puerto Rico, in the worst part of the cyclone. Ah, looks like it’s military… U.S. Navy.”

“Is there anyone responding?” Kara swallowed, dreading the answer.

Shah said, “Yes! Thank Rao! There’s a destroyer group… ugh, they’re still a hundred miles south of where they’re needed, in very rough seas. They’re not going to make it, at least in time. The chatter I’m picking up sounds panicked, but there’s no details.”

“Crap!” Alex cursed, “The distress signal dropped, and we don’t have a clear location.”

“What do we know about that destroyer that you’re tracking?” Kara asked, grasping at straws.

“We have a name.” Alex said breathlessly, “The… USS Zumwalt, under the command of a Captain Sam Simmons. Kara, what are you thinking? Kaaaaara, no! Don’t… it’s outside of your safety zone, like a light year outside!”

She knew what she needed to do, what Kal would have done... saved people without hesitation.

“Alex, unless there’s some other cavalry coming you’re not telling me about, you know I have to.”

“Dammit, if you think being grounded for two weeks was bad... Kara, this is the U.S. fucking Navy we’re talking about! And the Zumwalt’s some sort of next gen stealth ship, not exactly welcoming… and you’ll be flying into a hurricane!”

“Alex, just do your best to guide me, the storm should help with cover. And get me everything our friends can find on that ship.”

Be careful, please.

Kara was already blasting through the sound barrier, hitting a rocky Mach 5 through turbulent clouds and lightning on her way Southeast toward the distress call.

Always am, aren’t I?

Liar. Love you, you… idiot.
Love you too, Vaena.

Six minutes later…

As Kara began her approach to the USS Zumwalt, she went comms silent (better safe than sorry), and dropped to about a ten foot ceiling above the water’s surface, skimming just above the tips of the massive blue-green waves churning the seas below her.

She had, both physically and mentally, felt the cursory touch of the vessel’s sensitive radar, and other detection systems miles before she was even close…

The ominous, over 600-foot-long warship’s presence became even more pronounced, and a bit frightening, as her distance closed with it. It was as if some vast, soulless intelligence was reaching out into the darkness looking for her…

*It’s like the Eye of Sauron!* Her thoughts were panicked.

*What?* Alex asked in reply.

*The ship... it’s... it’s... looking for me.*

*Yeah, apparently the Zumwalt has some sort of baby AI, but it’s like a far far less evolved than our companions. There’s a simple solution here beautiful, just don’t let it find you.*

*Har har... Alex, I’m serious.*

*So am I! Focus, Kara; you can do this.*

Kara took a deep breath to steady herself, bolstered by her bondmate’s words. *Thanks, Vaena, I know... I can do this... I can do this... I can do this...*  

*Alex, this is sooo creepy!!*  

*Kara...* Alex let her bondmate’s name hang there between them until she relented.  

*Okay, fine... I can do this...*  

Fortunately, Shah had been feeding the details that Zara had scoured from all sources, including those behind government firewalls, to Alex, who was doing the same. With all that valuable, and very illegal, information collated together, Shatari then sent it to Kara in a melodic burst of hyper-compressed Kryptonian data. Once received, she immediately began making subtle adjustments to her aura, what Shah had recently started calling her personal quantum field, to avoid detection by radar or any other means known to humans.

Kara brightened! *Oh, wait... I can do this!*  

*I told you. You’ve got this.* Alex hummed.

*Thanks! Oops, going back to silent mode on all comms, just in case.*

*Gotcha, check back in asap, ‘k?* Alex was worried, but did her best to hide the stress vibrating through her thoughts.
Promise. Kara blew her bondmate a kiss, and sent a hug through their bond, as she pulled her aura in tight around her… becoming effectively invisible to the ship’s nascent AI, which was still searching for her in the dark.

At a hundred yards out, she slowed to a gentle but bumpy glide in the gale-force wind and marveled at what she saw. The Zumwalt did not resemble either the organic, or the crystalline technology of her home world, but the ship still looked like it belonged in a freaking sci-fi movie… its sleek angular hull and deckhouse heaving in the high, rough seas.

She tried not to think about the two massive turrets mounted forward on the mighty ship’s deck. One housed some sort of immense, electromagnetic rail gun inside its gunmetal gray armor... it was hard for her to make out all the details. Kara’s X-Ray vision was partially blocked by the composite materials in the ship’s skin, but she could see enough to know that its powerful, surprisingly quiet, electric engines were hot, pushed to full power as the vessel inched north against the violent winds and high seas.

She was oddly comforted by this knowledge… that the Captain of the Zumwalt was the kind of person who was willing to put their life, the lives of their crew, and a multi-billion-dollar ship on the line for a seemingly hopeless rescue mission.

*I think I already like Captain Simmons.*

Only feet away from the surging deck, Kara paused. She knew it was imperative to act quickly… lives were at risk, but she really needed a moment of reflection. As she took a few deep breaths, she contemplated taking the next step… one that would be life-changing.

Stepping into the light.

She was both terrified and giddy with anticipation.

How would the sailors perceive her? She glanced down at herself. Certainly not as Kara the high school student, singer, costume designer, friend, kitten-lover, gamer, cosplayer, and daughter… she hadn’t really thought much about what she was wearing that day…

Shah had dressed her for maximum aerodynamics in case her aura failed, not for meeting people. She was wearing a black, long sleeved, high-necked Sugoi Versa waterproof jacket and matching bike top and tights that were essentially skin tight. Striking blue highlights on the sides of the jacket and legs accentuated her shape to the point where Alex had even commented on how good her ass looked.

Kara’s feet were bare and her long hair must have been a sight, darker than normal, lightly drizzled with freezing seawater…

Well, her aura wasn’t perfect. Yet.

She thanked Rao for the one bit of foresight Alex had procured for her as she pulled a black facemask out of an inner pocket of the jacket and slipped it over her head. It would only cover the lower portion of her face, but it would have to be enough.

*Showtime.*

She scanned the ship’s interior easily now that she was hovering close above the deck and found what appeared to be the high-tech command center, filled with virtual screens and sailors moving between stations, doing their work. The Captain wasn’t there; ah… she was back in her cabin, or bunk, Kara wasn’t sure what they called it.
Damn, it’s times like this I miss Shatari and her ever-present HUD. I could use that addictive flow of information, now more than ever!

But she didn’t have it, so she gathered as much intel from scanning the ship as she could, and then made her plan.

Once she had the map set in her mind, Kara moved at super speed to what looked like large, sealed doors of some kind toward the rear of the middle part of the ship. She tried to open one of them, but the massive reinforced portal was locked like a bank vault and wouldn’t budge without her being forced to break it… or melt it.

She considered her options for several moments, sighed… and decided to knock.

**Boom, boom, boom**

Kara listened intently as the ominous sound echoed inside the vessel’s corridors.

*That should make me some friends.*

Kara groaned inside. *Rao! They’re going to shoot me on sight for sure.*

Five minutes passed as the ship continued to roll with the furious waves, and water crested over the hull again and again. Through it all, Kara stayed mostly dry, hovering a foot above the deck, untouched by the tumult.

Glancing up, she noticed recessed cameras, tracking her every move.

*What the people on the other end of that video feed must be thinking…* Kara bit her lip nervously as she waited.

Then, the sealed metal portal made a series of deep, metallic, mechanical sounds, and its internal gears began grind. Inside, through the thick steel blast wall, Kara could see two sailors, a lanky young man and a hulking woman, with automatic weapons trained on the door; a very tall and handsome officer, maybe in his early 40’s, was backing them up with a handgun. There was also a brave, weaponless soul who had been sent to open the hatch.

She floated down to the deck and raised her hands up at chest level in supplication, but not over her head.

When the door opened, pandemonium reigned as the officer with the handgun began yelling at her to ‘Grab the deck!’, and the two with the automatic rifles inched forward threateningly. She tried to talk to them, but the officer just became more agitated, and then the next wave struck and the ship rolled.

He slipped, and his gun went off.

Kara’s perception sped up to point where the water droplets all around her seemed to stop moving, the humans froze in mid-fall, and she saw the shiny metal projectile from his gun hanging in the air about a quarter of its short journey toward the unarmed sailor’s chest, who’d stepped out of view once he’d opened the door. At super speed, she intercepted the bullet, plucking it from the air with her fingers, and then zipped over to grab the officer with her other hand to keep him from falling.

She noticed the name on his uniform… CDR Thomas R. Daniels.

As the world returned to normal speed, she was staring into the shocked slate grey eyes of the much
taller man she was holding up off the deck with one steady hand. She also noted how his closely- cropped hair was prematurely gray, almost white, and how attractive he was… in a sexy, Anderson Cooper, really buff kind of way. She relaxed her grip, and dropped him unceremoniously to the deck... where he barely managed to keep his footing.

She hadn’t realized he’d still been holding him two inches off the floor.

“Sorry.” She apologized, with all sincerity, and deposited the bullet into is open hand. “This is yours. Look, Daniels, is it? Please put that thing away,” Kara indicated his gun, “and you two…” she purposely made her eyes glow with blue fire as she leveled her gaze at the two sailors holding their large weapons on her, “… your guns can’t hurt me anyway, so stand down before you accidentally kill someone. I’m here about the distress call and can help. I need to see Captain Simmons, now! There’s no time.”

The duo cautiously lowered the muzzles of their weapons a fraction, and backed up, obviously shaken by her display of power, as they waited for orders from their officer. Daniels had collected himself, though he was still staring in wonder at the bullet in his hand, and turned to Kara, “I don’t know who you think you are, young lady, or how you got here, but...” he began to protest.

Kara stopped him. “Look, every minute we stand here is a minute that your people aren’t being saved, can you please just take me to the Captain? I swear I’m not here for any monkey business.” Kara pleaded.

“Monkey business?” One of Daniel’s eyebrows shot up like Spock’s on Star Trek as a strange, amused look came over his features. “Really?”

Kara blushed from embarrassment, very glad she had a partial mask on. “Yes, no shenanigans either. I’m just here to help, honestly.”

Daniels carefully holstered his weapon and indicated the other two do the same. The young sailor by the door whispered a prayer and crossed himself before scurrying away with a wave from the towering officer.

“Do you always wear a mask?” The older man now seemed more intrigued than angry. He was looking at Kara more closely now, as were the others.

She stayed calm, “Not usually, just when I’m doing something crazy like knocking on the door of a U.S. Navy stealth destroyer in the middle of a storm. Look, I want to help, does it really matter who I am?”

“It’s a hatch… and pardon my asking, but what are you, eighteen? Nineteen?”

“Something like that,” Kara smirked under her disguise and stood a little taller. Now she knew how the very handsome Commander Daniels saw her.

He swallowed hard, “Christ, I have a niece almost your age…”

“I bet many of the people on the ship you will never get to in time have family, too. Please help me save them.”

He seemed to make a mental decision and turned to the two gunmen, “Caruso, Yoshida, secure the hatch, I’m taking…” He glanced over at Kara looking for help. Oh! A name… of course, she’d have to think of something on the spot. Thinking of Elaheh, a name Shah sometimes called her, Kara blurted out, “Ela. You can call me Ela.”
“I’m taking Ms. Ela to the Captain. Dismissed.”

The two sailors where still eyeing Kara, but saluted, barked “Aye Aye, Sir!”, and went about their business efficiently.

Kara moved quickly, following Daniels through a warren of narrow hallways and staircases as the ship continued to pitch under their feet. “So, Ela, you do this kind of thing very often?”

She laughed, “Never, actually. I was just flying by and heard the signal. Honestly, it would have been easier to just keep on going: I was already grounded once this month. Well… technically still grounded, but that’s another story… In my defense, today I was just doing speed runs, not looking for trouble… trouble found me.”

He looked over at her with a warmer look in his gray eyes and smiled. “Just ‘flying by’… hmmm. And the fact that signal you ‘heard’ was securely encrypted?”

“Oh that… sorry. Encrypted, not encrypted, doesn’t really matter… my sisters and I don’t abuse our powers if that’s what you’re worried about. We don’t care about military secrets, or whatever, I only involved myself because of the situation with the distress call.”

“Sisters? Like you?” He asked, obviously intrigued.

She giggled, “Kind of, but prettier.” He didn’t pursue the topic further and glanced over at her several times with a look of amazed fascination. He definitely seemed mesmerized by her hair… which probably looked terrible. Kara bit her lip thinking about it.

They’d finally reached the Captain’s Suite, the wide hatches were already open, and three armed sailors stood by. Daniels touched her arm, grinned, and motioned for the guards to back off.

He then turned to her before they walked in, and stuck out his hand, “Commander Tom Daniels, Executive Officer, at your service, Ms. ‘Ela’.” The way he stressed her name, it was clear that he knew it was made up but was going along with it.

“I’m second in command of this warship and you’ll hear me referred to as Commander, XO, Sir, or Daniels, take your pick. I’m afraid you took me by surprise earlier, and I behaved badly. Imagine my shock when a lone flying young woman with fiery blue eyes avoids the best radar in the Navy, hovers above the deck, knocks on the hatch to onboard my secret stealth ship in the middle of the worst storm of the season, and then catches a bullet. Thank you, by the way, for saving Petty Officer Carter from my mistake.”

Kara smiled and nodded. “Pleased to meet you, sir. Sorry about the eyes, I was trying to be intimidating. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble, and I appreciate you helping me. Your gun firing was an accident anyway, not your fault.”

Daniels shook his head, momentarily stunned. “You’re a strange, amazing young woman, ‘Ela’. And the eyes worked, by the way.”

The XO introduced her to Captain Samantha Simmons, the hard as nails Commanding Officer of the Zumwalt. The regal woman was almost as tall as he was, and reminded Kara of her Aunt Astra, though she had a little more grey in her short-cropped hair, and a deeper, almost raspy, voice. She could see that, like her aunt, this woman knew how to make difficult choices… there was a glint of
hardness in her emerald green eyes.

In a cramped conference room, ‘Ela’ pleaded her case by presenting the facts: the Zumwalt was not going to make it to the beacon in time, there was no other help coming, and she just needed to know the details of the situation, and where to go. Commander Daniels reported how Kara boarded the ship, flying, and stressed that she had made no hostile actions… that his firearm had fired accidentally.

Captain Simmons was skeptical at first, and asked Kara to demonstrate a little bit of her power. Kara felt on the spot, but hovered up to the ceiling, zoomed back down to lift the massive wooden conference table over her head with one finger. The Captain was impressed and quickly conferred with Daniels. She grudgingly agreed to Kara’s proposal, but gave her a stern warning that should ‘Ela’ betray them, she was fair game for Daniels and her sailors to take into custody.

After that, events advanced very quickly. She was ushered to a prep room, with gear and various large screens that displayed maps of the sea floor, and then to the Command Information Center, the CIC. Kara slipped her headset out of her jacket pocket and asked, “Can I turn this on? I need my… team.”

Daniels blinked, speechless for a few moments, before his brow creased in concern, “I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but Ela, you’re in the middle of a maelstrom, that Bluetooth isn’t going to do you a darn bit of good.”

_He thinks I’m using a common retail Bluetooth headset, how adorable._ “So, I assume it’s okay to turn it on then?”

He shrugged, “Sure. The good it’ll do.”

Kara soon heard the sweet crackle of her friends’ voices bombarding her with questions… she had to calm them down. “Hi… hey, guys, I’m with our friends, the U.S. Navy… yeah, those guys.” She grinned across at Daniels who shook his head and was almost chuckling. “I’m about to get the details, ‘k? Commander, can I loop my sisters into this conversation?”

He spread his hands in defeat, “Whatever you need, Ela. I can have one of the techs hook that device…” Before he could finish, Alex had Shatari trace the signal back, and then piggybacked into the Zumwalt’s systems… never touching the firewalls. The crackle on Kara’s headset could now be heard through the speakers in the room. “Or not…” Daniels said, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“Hey everyone,” Alex said briskly, “Don’t let us slow you down, but we need details, and coordinates, like yesterday.”

That’s when Daniels explained the gravity of their situation. “The USS Washington, an Ohio-Class guided missile submarine, had a catastrophic failure on training maneuvers at the confluence of the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. She’s hung up at a depth of nearly 2,200 feet, teetering on the edge of the Puerto Rico Trench. It’s a terrifying four mile drop, straight down to the bottom of that five hundred mile long crack.” He paused for a moment as if considering if he should, but then continued, “The Washington is loaded with a compliment of 125 Tomahawk missiles, Mk48 torpedoes, 159 officers and crew, and 60 Special Operations forces”

It was worse than Kara had imagined. _Wait… don’t the Navy’s subs run on nuclear power?_ Kara had no idea how much radiation her body could take.

Alex quickly responded. _That’s a good point. Hold tight, need an expert on this one._
Daniels glanced at Kara and kept his eyes on her as he said, “Not that we’re aware of, the failure was in the electrical systems, but their propulsion was also down, and the crew is running out of oxygen. Based on the last communication we received before the blackout, they have about five hours left, if the current doesn’t drag them over the edge first. We have a DSRV, a Deep Submergence Rescue Vehicle, on the way, but it won’t arrive until tomorrow morning at the earliest if it makes it at all.” As if on cue, the great ship rolled with a massive wave, sending papers and other loose material sliding off consoles. He called out, “Hold on!”

A pretty young Latina sailor, maybe 20-years old, tripped and went tumbling toward a bank of huge glass monitors. Kara immediately zipped over, righted her, and held on until the ship’s movement subsided to a bearable level. She’d moved at super speed, and was standing upside-down on the ceiling with the woman in her arms, not thinking of her audience. Fifteen Navy crewmen were left staring and speechless, but as everything returned to normal seemed more energized at their work, casting smiles and looks of astonishment her way.

"Dios Mio! That was amazing!” The woman she was holding blurted out, “I’m such a klutz on this roller coaster. Gracias! Petty Officer Second Class, Jessica Rodriguez, by the way, Networks and Communications lead.” She hugged Kara tight as the Kryptonian glided back down to return the sailor to her workstation. But once they were safely back on solid ground Jessica (very reluctantly) let go of Kara’s waist.

“My pleasure. Nice to meet you.” She said, before carefully extracting herself from the star-struck Petty Officer’s warm, welcoming embrace to return to the Commander.

Before she could fully escape, Jessica blurted out, “What’s your name?”

“My name? Ah, it's Ela.” Kara said with a smile.

Before Petty Officer Rodriguez could respond, another sailor called out, “Are you a superhero ma’am? What do they call you?”

Kara stopped dead in her tracks, unsure of how to answer.

Daniels must have seen her paralysis, or near panic, and stepped in before she had a chance to embarrass herself, coming over to stand next to her. Rodriguez and the other sailor came to attention as he approached. “At ease, Petty Officers. Back to work everyone… Now!”

“Yes, Sir!” Jessica answered, and returned to her console, though she continued to keep an eye, and a dreamy smile, on Kara… who blushed and awkwardly focused back on Daniels. Her sensitive hearing detected Rodriguez chuckling under her breath.

As Daniels escorted Kara back to the debriefing area, she whispered, “Thanks.”

“It looked like you needed a rescue.” His eyes showed his amusement but were still kind. “Back to task, I have the coordinates of the Washington’s beacon and terabytes of data that we captured before everything went dark. We’re still crunching through it, but it could take hours to know if there’s anything helpful in that mess.”

“Maybe not, Commander.” Shah’s elegant voice echoed through the room’s speakers. “I’m analyzing it now, apologies for the appropriation… ask for forgiveness and all that. I should have answers for you in a few minutes.”
“Wha..? I.. Did she just…?”

Kara laid her small, warm hand on the confused man’s very muscular arm in support. “Don’t worry, she does that to everyone. I know it’s hard to trust, but believe me when I tell you that your data’s safe, we just need to get answers quickly.”

He looked into Kara’s eyes and seemed to weigh his options, but in the end, he sighed and whispered under his breath, “So be it…” Then he spoke clearly to Shah, “Report back when you have something.”

“Aye Aye, Commander.” She chuckled back in response.

Daniels glanced at Kara thoughtfully, and asked, “So what’s your plan?”

Kara put on her serious face. “Honestly, I thought I’d just swim down to it, and see if I could get it back to the surface. How much does it weigh?”

He seemed shaken by her answer, but responded, “Ela, that water is freezing, and at that depth, you’re talking something like over 500 psi of pressure, 35, 36 atmospheres… you can handle that?” His voice had risen along with his heart rate. He was… worried about her?

Alex cut in, “She can handle it, at least the environmental part… she won’t require decompression. We do need something to keep her headset from getting waterlogged though; it’s waterproof and can handle the pressure just like our… Ela, but it’s not rated for submersion past thirty to forty feet. Sorry, it’s a prototype. Can your people help with that?”

Daniels nodded and called over three techs. After a short conversation, he let Alex know that yes, he could help, and Kara relinquished her tech so the Naval engineers could integrate the gear into a high-pressure face mask that would also stream video and voice with the Zumwalt’s CIC.

The XO adjusted his uniform as the ship pitched again, and continued, “The Washington’s over 560 feet long, and weighs almost 19,000 tons submerged. You can lift that?”

Kara almost laughed. “Pfft, I don’t think so. I’ve lifted, like 120 tons easy, and I know I can probably do a lot more than that, but 19k… that’s just ridiculous. I could try to pull it back from the edge… That might work until your rescue vehicle arrives? Or I could run lines down for oxygen from the Zumwalt?”

Alex’s voice crackled to life once again, “Commander, once we get eyes on that sub, we can work on scenarios for Ela together, and feed them to her.”

“Sounds reasonable… which would have seemed like a ridiculous thing to say a day ago.”

Then, Shah’s voice spoke over the comms, “When a new world opens to you Commander, embrace it, for it cannot be unseen.” Kara grinned as she noticed how her friend’s gentle words of wisdom seemed to steady him.

In the end, Kara was outfitted with a heavy facemask that included high-intensity LED lights, video and still cameras, voice and other sensors as well as mini oxygen tanks. There was also a HUD, so they could stream video, data, and schematics back to her directly. She was to complete an exploratory dive to assess the situation and any damage, then relay the data back to the Zumwalt and Kara’s friends to analyze and come up with a plan. If she could get inside, she was to do so, and report back on the status of the crew and reactor.

Daniels pretended he wasn’t worried, but Kara could see how the stoic warrior fretted over her as
she was being outfitted. His concern touched Kara deeply and she wasn’t sure why. An accepting father figure? Unlike Jeremiah, who grounded her for saving a man’s life? It was odd, but her affinity towards the Navy officer was already growing.

The coordinates of the USS Washington, its depth, and GPS tracking began lighting up her HUD in glorious detail. The depth of the wreck was a little scary, Kara had no idea how her body would take the pressure, though she’d pulled over 36gs while flying before, so she reasoned she’d endure the dive. Daniels escorted her up to the main hatch without guards, and as they approached her exit she said, “Thanks for trusting me, Commander, I won’t let you down.”

He took a deep breath, “Just come back in one piece, ‘Ela’… and promise to tell me your real name someday, when you feel you can trust me.”

She nodded, and stepped out into the gale, waves crashing around her. Over her shoulder she called back, “I will. For now, wish me luck!” before launching herself into the air, exploding in a blur into the roiling clouds.

Two seconds later the skies echoed with her sonic boom.

Late-December

The USS Zumwalt’s Command Information Center (CIC)

The Atlantic: The Puerto Rico Trench

- Latitude: N 28° 36’ 48.4539"
- Longitude: W 69° 20’ 44.5313"

Commander Thomas Daniels’ POV

Back in the Zumwalt’s CIC, it was managed chaos... a sea of voices and sound. Awestruck operations staff hovered over consoles, reviewed telemetry, and observed Kara’s progress on the massive flat screens that dominated the circular room. Her glowing circle was moving faster than anything on the boards and flashing red. As the Commander rushed in she’d already surpassed Mach 3.5 and was decelerating towards the target.

His mind was racing… Holy…! It was HER…

She’d come on the day he needed her most.

As Kara blasted her way through the violent storm, the video feed had been primarily a blur of gray and black, accompanied by whipping sheets of rain… but now they could all see massive waves appear only a couple hundred feet below as she broke through the clouds. “I’m approaching the target now… here goes nothing.” They all heard the mysterious young woman mutter as she sliced into the freezing ocean, without stopping, and accelerated into the dark, inky waters.

“Ears popped.” is all she said at the 800-foot mark, then at 1,000, “It’s not that cold, I don’t know what you guys were worried about.”

“It’s barely five degrees Celsius, Ela.” Petty Officer Rodriguez shook her head in awe. “Esa chica es una locura!”
When Kara reached the 2,200-foot mark, she moved rapidly to the location of the old beacon’s ping, and as she approached the murky edges of a vast, deep cliff, the massive form of the USS Washington loomed up before her out of the darkness… impossibly large, and rolled on its side. It appeared slightly bent in the center, where it had struck a huge outcropping of rock, and thousands of tiny Champagne bubbles were pouring from a thirty-foot long crack in its hull.

“I’ll swim around it, tell me if you need me to change my position.”

Kara took footage from every angle, and it didn’t look good.

In the CIC, a frenzied conversation was taking place among the Command Staff, Alex, and Shah. The consensus of that discussion was that the sub had careened out of control until it had struck the silted slope a hundred yards up from its current location on the cliff face. It had then slid down but struck a massive rocky protrusion right at the edge of the drop-off, which stopped the 560-foot vessel from falling directly over. Had it done so, the pressure would have swiftly crushed it like a soda can, killing all 200+ personnel onboard.

“Ela, can you see inside, is everyone okay?” Alex asked.

Everyone in the CIC grew silent as Kara swept the sub’s long fuselage with her gaze. They really weren’t sure what to expect next. Commander Daniels was beyond impressed with her, and his heart was pounding as he watched her risking her life.

“There are three crewmen dead, quite a few injured, and some flooded chambers, the superstructure is under massive pressure, but still intact other than that tear, and… oh Rao! No. No-no-no-no-no…” Kara was suddenly moving at super speed, blurring the camera’s vision momentarily. When the video came back into focus she was hovering above the section of the cracked hull, clouds of tiny bubbles cascading around her. “This is bad, there’s almost no oxygen left. Everyone’s falling asleep; their heart rates are all slowing down. They’re all dying! I need to seal the hull, now.”

A furious discussion erupted in the CIC among the engineers on how exactly she planned to do that.

Shah’s throaty, disembodied accented voice answered them, “Quiet! Trust that she has this covered. Just let her know how much heat the hull can withstand before destabilizing, just to enough to fuse it’s plating together… no more.”

“Thanks, sister.” Kara piped in warmly. Shah’s voice could carry such authority… she really was astounding.

The engineers quickly sent their calculations to Kara’s HUD. She said, “Got it. Thanks! Okay, folks, I’m going to need to take this contraption off my head to do this, but will keep filming. Please don’t be shocked by what happens next, okay?” Despite general protests, Kara removed the facemask and wrapped the straps securely around her arm so she could aim the camera and sensors.

The next thing she did silenced the room…

Daniels sat on the edge of his seat, waiting to see what was going to happen... praying for a miracle.

The camera was moving jerkily, like a bad steady cam movie, but everyone caught a glimpse of Ela, floating in the light of the mask, her long golden hair splayed out around her head like a halo. Suddenly, brilliant beams of light, like the sun, erupted out of her eyes. The camera view then shifted to the sub’s side, and the crack, which Ela’s fire was slowly, and meticulously traversing. A collective gasp rose from the crowd as the torn steel of the hull began to melt together… to heal.

It took over twenty agonizing minutes of meticulously focused burn for her to complete the task.
Daniels could hear Ela’s handlers worrying over her; apparently, she’d never used this power of hers for so long, at least continuously, before.

When the fire finally stopped, Kara slumped forward, appearing quite exhausted. A deep blue glow still radiated from her eyes but was swiftly dimming. A cheer rose up in the CIC, followed by hugs, and clapping among the crew. All seemed well… but then the unthinkable happened… Everyone watched in horror as the rocky spire that held the vessel snapped, crumbled, and disappeared in a cloud of silt.

Then the sub, with its crew, began its inevitable slide into the long dark….

In the pandemonium that followed, Commander Daniels thought he heard one of the voices on the other end of the comms, not the British one, scream out, “Kara!” But his attention was glued to the screens, and to the Washington, as it started to fall in what seemed like slow motion over the cliff in a cloud of mud and debris.

So this is the end?

Suddenly, Ela was in motion.

In one burst she had moved under the massive vessel, pushing upwards with all her strength, the camera catching frenetic glimpses of her panicked struggle. You could see her silent, tortured screams as she strained against the impossible task. The sub was still falling, but its descent had slowed as it rolled, crushing Ela’s body with its bulk against the cliff face, grinding her into the rock of the seawall in a cacophony of groaning metal and rushing water.

Ela stayed at her task with grim determination… The camera, still miraculously strapped to her forearm, following as she continued straining against the impossible weight pushing her down into the depths. She would not fail them, Daniels could see it in her eyes… that joyously brave, and innocent young woman would die before ever giving up.

His heart was in his throat. It was her.

He reached up, and touched the ancient talisman that hung around his neck under his uniform, and said a silent prayer to the goddess.

The camera lens cracked, but the video feed continued.

Someone called out “2,453 feet!” Everyone knew what that meant. The end was near. Everyone in the CIC was holding their collective breath.

Then, slowly, the tide began to turn, and the battered sub began to rise, agonizingly slowly at first, but its bulk finally cleared the edge of the cliff.

The camera became obscured by the cloudy water, mud, and debris for a few moments, but when they could make out the images again, they could see the USS Washington, righted on the seafloor, safely far back from the precipice, but also something else…

The still, floating form of the hero who’d been their savior.

.................

26 hours later

The deck of the USS Zumwalt
Kara felt pain, a horrible ache, freezing cold, and stiffness throughout her entire body like she’d never experienced before, and the sandpaper sting of her parched throat.

Everything was so… fuzzy.

Where am I?

She didn’t understand why she couldn’t open her eyes, or send her thoughts to her bondmate. They were still connected… Alex’s worry was a constant vibration in the bond, and her comforting warmth was still around Kara’s heart, but she was too groggy to focus.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” Commander Daniel’s tone was pensive as he paced. He was near her; she could sense his sincere concern, and hear his shoes pounding the stealth ship's deck like hammer blows.

Ouch, my hearing’s out of whack too.

The USS Zumwalt was no longer bucking like a bull, but moving at a brisk but unhurried pace southward, at thirty-six knots in relatively calm seas. The storm had blown itself out the morning after the previous day’s incredible events. Kara knew all of this because she was listening-in to the banter in the CIC, and much of it was focused on her.

Wow, they were telling stories about Ela, like she was some kind of hero.

She sensed only a handful of officers and crew on deck in addition to Daniels, including Captain Simmons. All were gathered around or near Kara’s cot, where she lay motionless. Why couldn’t she move? What were they all waiting for?

Alex’s clear voice coming through the ship’s external speakers answered Daniels, “Trust me, she just needs a little more sunlight and time… she’s already waking up.”

“How could you possibly know that?” Captain Simmons piped up. She’d been very quiet up until then. Kara could hear the skepticism in the iron lady’s voice.

“That’s a more personal question than you can imagine, Captain. Besides, I have no reason to lie.”

Kara would have smiled if she could. She was continually amazed by her bondmate’s strength, and of the truth of which she’d spoken. Even thousands of miles apart, Kara could feel the golden threads that connected the two of them, wrapped lovingly around her very soul.

Then, the incredible sensation of the light from the Earth’s sun cascading over every millimeter of her skin radiated through her like a million fireflies, suddenly flooding her senses… and she sat up with a loud gasp.

“Told you.” Kara could see Alex’s satisfied smirk in her mind’s eye the second she heard her voice through the ship’s comms.

Daniels was immediately next to Kara, holding the shaky young woman up to keep her from falling
off the makeshift bed as she peeled her mask up at the bottom so she could spew water all over the
deck and began sucking in one protracted ragged breath after another. Afterward, Kara realized that
she hadn’t actually been breathing at all before she woke up... How long had it been? Ugh, she was
sure to find out soon enough, but for the moment just sitting upright was a challenge.

She felt drained, and the sun had only just begun to energize her...

“Hey, sailor.” She coughed, her voice hoarse, like a pack-a-day smoker, “See, I keep my promises.”
Kara patted the Commander on his broad shoulders as he focused on keeping her on the cot.

Her fingers traveled back up to her mask… it was different, made of a thick cotton material rather
than neoprene fabric… Ah yes, now she remembered, hers had been ripped off when the USS
Washington decided to grind her into the underwater cliff. So, where did the new mask come from?
She glanced over at Daniels, who was grinning like he had a secret.

Before she could say anything, Captain Simmons stepped forward and addressed her, “Ela, welcome
back. You gave us quite a scare."

Kara’s memories were slowly returning, “Hello Captain… wait… Rao! What happened? Is the
sub…?” She was panicked.

Daniels stood up, straightening his uniform as he did, “Ela, it’s okay… you did it! You saved the
Washington, and everyone aboard her, except for the three who were already dead.” Kara took a
long breath and nodded, Daniel reached down, steadied her shaking hands, and called for a sailor to
bring her water. “You kept her from falling into the abyss, and set her down in a safe place.”

He continued, “Thanks to you, with the hull breach sealed, enough oxygen was restored for the crew
to be able to make the necessary repairs to float the sub to the surface. As of this morning, everyone
is accounted for and has been transferred off to other ships. We have a hundred very grateful
passengers below decks here on the Zumwalt, including my wife, Captain Myka Daniels.”

Kara stared at him in surprise. Your wife? She mouthed at him in shock. “You didn’t tell me…”

“Would it have mattered? I can’t conceive of how much harder you could have tried to save that
vessel, Ela. Myka, and everyone aboard were in your good hands.”

“Young lady,” Captain Simmons cleared her throat, “I don’t even have a clue how such a thing is
possible, but you’ve been out cold, and in this case, I mean that literally, like an ice cube, not
breathing, for twenty-six hours. It took eighteen hours for the DSRV to arrive, and we immediately
sent it down to pull you back up to the surface. That almost failed… your body kept trying to draw
power from the submersible, the Washington, and everything else around you.”

Kara stared, dumbfounded, “I… can do that?”

Her bondmate calmed her as she spoke softly over the comms, “It was an involuntary response…
Ela. Your body’s self-preservation mode kicked in once you hit a low power state, trying to warm
you up.”

“And in the process, it was willing to pull ambient heat and energy from any nearby source,
including the DSRV.” Shah chimed in. “Captain Simmons, you’re lucky the Zumwalt’s engines
aren’t nuclear. If my calculations are right, and I usually am, you’d most likely be dead in the water
right now.”

You could have heard a pin drop as Shah continued, “It’s complicated, but it appears Ela’s self-
preservation mode gives her the ability to, quite simply, suck a reactor dry from a distance, and
absorb that energy into herself. Fortunately for your submarine, the current had pulled Ela far enough away that she could only siphon a small amount of its energy output. The Zumwalt’s 100-megawatt gas-turbine generators, on the other hand, are a different story. She would have needed close proximity; maybe even needing to touch them when they were running. But even then, it probably would have taken more energy than it was worth. At least that’s my supposition.”

Simmons paled, but Daniels just looked even more awed as he gazed down at Kara on the cot.

Whoa, that was a lot to take in. So I’m what? Some kind of energy vampire? Freaking awesome… that’s sarcasm by the way.

It’s okay Kara… don’t be snarky, you didn’t hurt anyone. Even in the desperate state you were in, you didn’t pull the ambient heat from any living thing, even though you apparently could have. Alex’s voice was reassuring, but also terrifying… she could suck the energy right out of people!

The Captain, a bit unsteadily, continued, “Let’s call it fate then, like Ela hearing the Washington’s Mayday. I’m glad for your guidance, we placed her here on the deck as you instructed, and the sun seems to have done the trick.”

The speakers crackled. “We can’t thank you enough Captain, I’m serious. How are you feeling, Ela?” Her fake name sounded completely wrong being uttered from Alex’s lips, but the concern in her human’s voice was raw for everyone to hear.

“I’ve had better days… how are things there?” Kara knew she was a dead woman walking; her parents would be on the warpath by now for sure… she just wanted to curl up in Alex’s arms and go to sleep.

“Better than you’d expect, but our sister and her friend are ready for your safe return home …” Ah! Excellent news! Shah and Zara were covering for her! She needed to fly back asap.

“As I was saying…” Captain Simmons broke in, “We honestly didn’t know if you were alive or dead, you’d been under 2,000 feet of water for going on a full day, and were frozen when we found you. We couldn’t even begin to understand how to resuscitate you! But your team assured us the sun would revive you, eventually, and they were right. While you slept, nearly every crewmember and officer who could do so came to pay you a visit.”


“Why?” Simmons responded as if astonished by Kara’s question like she should already know the answer. ”Because you are their savior. Some prayed by your side, others wept, a few read to you, told you stories, held your hand. There’s been a silent vigil as they’ve been waiting for you to wake up… in fact, I was about to break the good news to the crew. Do you feel up to visitors?”

Kara breathed in deep, and then nodded, “Yes ma’am, but can I ask you a teeny tiny little favor?”

“Depends on the favor, but since I owe you one… or two… assume I’m listening.”

The Iron Lady actually grinned at her!

Kara took a breath and said, “Okay, here’s the thing…”

After a wobbly trip to the ‘head’, as Simmons called the cramped bathroom, Kara was sent back topside to soak up as much sun as possible and had been visited by nearly everyone on the ship.
Petty Officers 3rd Class Caruso and Yoshida came by to apologize, and to explain that drawing weapons on her after she boarded the vessel was just part of their job. Kara felt drawn to the unlikely, and comedic pair. Dante was a tough, wiry kid who came from a rough Chicago neighborhood, while Aya was a dynamic young woman built like an MMA fighter. She’d always lived in two worlds and spoke both Japanese and French fluently.

Aya and Dante were best friends, though Kara thought there was possibly more to it, they fit together too perfectly… their movements were synced together. She spent extra time getting to know them better, and by the time they had to go, she didn’t want them to. It was the strangest and most amazing thing, but the pair seemed to warm her soul the closer they were to her.

Rodriguez came sauntering over next, like a cat, past the armed guards who were stationed on deck at the nearest hatch. Once the attractive Latina was out of their line of sight, her bravado and self-assured façade crumbled. Her lip trembled, and she looked completely lost.

Kara immediately opened her arms and gathered the woman into her warm embrace. Her long black hair smelled like almond and something clean, and as she cried on the Kryptonian’s shoulder she bared her soul… whispering her fears, and all of her darkest secrets in Spanish, a language Kara was thankfully fluent in.

And the Kryptonian listened.

Details of the horrible physical abuse she’d suffered at the hands of an uncle, and later attempted by her boyfriend, came tumbling out… bringing tears to Kara’s eyes.

‘Jess’, as she preferred to be called, was scarred but not beaten; powerful, but without a compass; loyal and loving, but questioning her own value and purpose. And there was something… something very special about the wounded woman, a light inside of her that brushed comfortably at the edges of Kara’s aura. It was a familiar pull that she had experienced with each of the people she loved in her life… and she didn’t question it.

Like Shah, the Petty Officer saw Kara as something more than human… a divine being, and was looking to her for… hope? Redemption? Love? Kara wasn’t sure, but decided to play the part of her goddess if that’s what she needed and to be her friend.

Later, after Kara had run out of words and the pair finally parted, Jess seemed filled with a new strength and purpose. The puffy-eyed woman straightened, pulled something out of her pocket, and slid what turned out to be a small piece of paper with her contact info written on it between Kara’s fingers.

She then leaned in, and to Kara’s surprise, said, “Llámame, mi diosa.” as she kissed the Kryptonian softly on the cheek.

“Será, lo prometo.” Kara vowed, eliciting a delighted grin from Jess as she waved and grudgingly turned to vacate the deck where the hero had been holding audience.

Shah’s spiritual brothers and sisters, the techs from the CIC, came next. They’d managed to repair Kara’s headset and handed it back to her with a solemn reverence. They’d never seen anything like it before, though to be honest, no one had.

They also provided her a thumb drive, off the books, with all her mission data for Shah to analyze and share her findings back. To be honest, they were effusive when it came to Shah, starry-eyed and geeking out. Rao, her Persian ninja already had a fan club!
Many others came, and there were also small gifts, hugs, prayers, tears of joy… and thanks, as well as notes and letters shoved in a small canvas satchel for her to take home.

When it was finally all over, four hours later, Kara was still feeling wobbly, but somewhat recharged. She and Daniels stood alone on the Zumwalt’s deserted, windswept deck. It was quiet, aside from the sound of the stealthy ship cutting through the waves, and Kara’s arms were wrapped around herself against the glittering backdrop of the endless blue sea.

She was crying.

The XO stood a couple of steps back, clearly out of deference, to give her space and time.

Kara hated space and time.

“I’m sorry, Commander, that was all just so… intense.”

“Tom, just call me Tom, you’re not in the Navy… though if you’re ever interested I know there’s a job waiting for you, and your sisters, on a certain stealth ship.”

She smiled and wiped her bleary eyes with her sleeve. “Tom… ‘k.” Her voice was small, vulnerable, but she didn’t care.

Daniels moved closer. “It’s the life of a hero, darlin’, an emotional roller coaster. Enjoy the good days, and do your best to forget the bad ones.”

She stepped over and hugged him. He was probably over 6’6”, and towered over her as they embraced. “What are you, like eight feet tall?” She jibed with a sniffle and a smile.

“If there’s any chance you’ll squish me if I say no, then yes, I am eight feet tall.” They laughed, and after a minute she stepped back, reached up and removed her new mask, to slip the now useless disguise into her jacket pocket.

Daniels had seen her face already, she’d surmised, and had still protected her.

His gray eyes brightened as he studied her face and the rest of her. Kara bit her lip and began fiddling with strands of her long blonde hair. She finally said, “Thanks for… everything by the way. Replacing my mask, and keeping my identity safe.”

He shrugged, “I had Caruso and Yoshida stand guard over you 24/7… they were eager to help do something for you anyway. I think you have a couple friends for life with those two, kiddo.”

Kara couldn’t help but smile. “And you?”

“Check your pocket… no, the other pocket, yes, there.”

She dug into the inner, waterproof, zippered document compartment of the new super-awesome green bomber style jacket the crew had given her. Inside she found three embroidered cloth patches bearing the USS Zumwalt’s badge, including the Latin phrase “Pax Propter Vim”, which translated to “Force for Peace”.

Thank Rao she’d decided to learn Latin!

There was also a tiny electronic device.

What the…?
Daniels was grinning, “The patches are for you and your sisters, and the gadget is for high-speed data streaming, complete with GPS, and a U.S. Navy certified two-way transceiver. It’s similar to the one the techs put in your dive mask... which the crew is demanding we frame by the way.” Kara’s eyes widened. “If you press the top and turn it on, it’ll identify you as a friendly the next time you decide to do a fly-by near any Navy vessel. The geeks who made it even tagged you with a handle... ‘Archangel’.”

Kara smiled brightly, “That’s so sweet! Tell them thanks, even with that codename…”

“Hey, it’s better than ‘Ela’.”

She playfully sneered at his comment, and they both ended up chuckling. “Yeah, I just made that up off the top of my head, I like Archangel better.”

Digging further, she discovered a business card for Daniels, with his and Myka’s home address, phone numbers, and email address scribbled on the back of it.

*Wow, talk about feels! He’s entrusting me with his personal digits.*

*NO way!* Alex was as surprised as she was.

The XO was still grinning, “Look Myka and me up sometime, huh? I’d like to see how the hero thing works out for you. So far, you started off with a bang.”

“Thanks, Comman... Tom, I’ll do that.” She said, before stepping out to balance gracefully on the deck’s edge, eager to get moving on her roughly sixteen hundred-mile journey home. “And... it’s Kara, by the way... Kara Zor-El.”

His face lit up. “Thanks for trusting me with that Kara. That’s a… unique surname; I’ve never heard anything like it before, and I’ve been all over this world.”

“Well, that makes sense, I’m not really from around here…” She smirked and cast her gaze intentionally skyward.

“Hmmm, I see… would love to hear more about that sometime. Are you still sure about not wanting a ride? I can have a C-130 waiting for you in three hours at the Naval base on Vieques.”

She nodded and sighed. “Thank you so much, but I'll pass, I need to get home fast. And as far as glory, or whatever, I don’t need any of that. It’s really for the best if, at least officially, I was never here. I know its asking a lot, and you guys are probably breaking like a million rules for me, but thank you, sincerely... and please express my gratitude to Captain Simmons again, okay? She’s actually really nice under that thick icy layer of scary.”

“About that... Kara, I, we... think you’re right about keeping your actions out of the reports, even if it doesn’t seem fair to exclude you.”

"You'd do that for me?"

Daniels grinned as if he’d never seen anything like Kara in his life, and reached over to gently squeeze her shoulder. “Yes. The Captain and I spoke to the officers and crews of both vessels, and all of them, to the person, promised to keep what happened to the official version that Simmons and I will report, out of respect for what you did. If anything hits the news, there’ll be no mention of an amazing young woman with super powers, just Navy ingenuity and persistence. It’s probably safer if you keep a low profile.”
She tilted her head inquiringly and said, “I always do, but that sounded a little ominous. What’s up?”

“I… I’ve heard chatter for years about a shadowy division of the Department of Defense. I don’t know what it’s called, or who runs it, but it’s real, and the word is, they track down and hunt people… special people with powers… like you, to kill, imprison, and even experiment on. Just be careful. If I get any leads, Jess will send them to your ‘team’ via the encrypted network your sisters provided us… the snarky one let us know how to stay in touch.”

Kara wanted to laugh at his comment about Alex but was too freaked out about his other revelation. “That’s not good.” She mumbled… were these bad guys the same ones Jeremiah was concerned about?

She shuddered at the thought.

“Thanks for the heads up. I think I have a lead we can look into on our end as well. We’ll share what we find out.” She slipped his card and the patches back into one of her new flight jacket’s pockets.

Then Kara hugged him one more time, secured the satchel over a shoulder, and rose up into the sky, her body bathed in sunlight.

It felt so good, and she spun gracefully… dancing with the joy of her freedom. After a few moments, she gazed back down at the man who already felt like a friend. His aura, like Jess’, vibrated comfortably at the edges of her own.

She grinned and saluted him perfectly as he watched her hovering above with a kind of awed wonder.

“Take care of yourself Archangel, and those amazing sisters of yours!” He said in a loud, warm voice.

“Bye, Tom! And don’t you and Myka be strangers!” She called down to him and then ascended into the clouds as if she were chasing the sun.

Miles away, she heard him yell after her, “Kara! Be careful! And, if your parents even think of grounding you for this, give them my damn phone number!”

………………..

Roll Call...

USS Zumwalt & Washington’s cast of characters:

Captain Samantha “Sam” Simmons (Captain, Zumwalt) - The tall, regal woman reminds Kara of her Aunt Astra. Tough, brave, measured, and respected, she is a commander in every way. She’s also quickly ascending ranks, and is already looking at being promoted to Rear Admiral… The incident with the Washington will assure that happens. Sam would sacrifice herself for her country and her crew if needed.

Commander (CDR) Thomas “Tom” Daniels (Executive Officer ‘XO’, Zumwalt) – Married to Captain Myka Daniels, and is Kara’s friend. Tom Daniels is a kind man with a youthful sense of humor, but also a keen warrior, tactician, and wise strategist. He’s 6’6” tall, has prematurely white hair, is broad-shouldered, strong, athletic, and very handsome. His knowing gray eyes also hide secrets… how did he know about Kara before she arrived? He’d been waiting for her for what seems like a long time. And what goddess was he praying to? Perhaps we'll find out in time...
Captain Myka Daniels (Washington) –
Married to Tom. We haven’t met her yet, or know much about her, other than the traumatic experience she just went through.

Petty Officer 3rd Class Dante Caruso (Zumwalt) –
Grew up a tough, wiry kid who turned into a tough as nails jokester. He was in a gang in his rough Chicago neighborhood as a teenager before his older brother convinced him to join the Navy. No filters, raunchy, fun, crazy. Plays guitar like a pro, and drums, and can actually sing!

Petty Officer 3rd Class Aya Yoshida (Zumwalt) –
A dynamic young woman built like an MMA fighter and is one. Aya is of French & Japanese ancestry and has always lived in two worlds. Speaks both Japanese and French fluently. She is an expert at hand-to-hand combat, and weapons, loves archery, especially the Japanese Yumi bow, and prides herself as master of the ancient game of Go. She’s also as raunchy as Dante. They make quite a pair.

Petty Officer 2nd Class Jessica Rodriguez (Lead Communications Specialist, Zumwalt) –
A trusted family member, an uncle, abused Jess when she was younger, and she remains haunted by the experience. When her last boyfriend (who is kind of loser) tried to harm her, and the police did nothing, she shot him. The ass didn’t die, but she did end up spending a brief stint in jail before CDR Daniels bailed her out. Somehow, the records of the incident, and her incarceration, all mysteriously disappeared. She is a proud, bi Latina who is brilliant at her job (the communications hub of the ship), dedicated, loyal, very open with her sexuality, funny, worships Kara, and is Tom’s #1. Jess possesses the heart of a hero; she just needs something to believe in... and to believe in herself.

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap: Wow. That was quite a ride. I hope you enjoyed it. Are you as worried about Kara making it home as I am?

Next up: Chapter thirteen - ‘Stars in a Bottle’. The events of chapter twelve have repercussions that eventually bring Kara back to Krypton, where we get to meet Kara’s friend, wise mentor, and cuddly nanny cat, Uva. And other stuff happens.

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me. Also, if you feel so inclined, I’d appreciate it if you could share this story with those you think might enjoy it!

Thoughts:

CPR & AEDs
Because everyone should know how to save a life! I recently had training that included how to resuscitate infants and children, as well as how use an automated external defibrillator (AED):
http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/CPRAndECC/CPR_UCM_001118_SubHomePage.jsp
http://www.redcross.org/ux/take-a-class

Links to info on the USS Zumwalt (DDG 1000), the US Navy’s next generation destroyer in this universe (specs and details will vary from the more advanced Earth 39 version):
Info on Ohio-class guided-missile submarines (SSGN) like the USS Washington:

Deep Submergence Rescue Vehicles (DSRV):

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Terms
Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

Ah!khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)
C'est magnifique! – ‘It's Beautiful!’ (French)
El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. (Kryptonian)
Esa chica es una locura! – ‘There’s something crazy about that girl!’ (Spanish)
Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.
Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)
Llámame – ‘Call me’ (Spanish)
Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature.
Man say mikonam ke yad begiram – ‘I will try my best to learn’ (Persian)
Pax Propter Vim – ‘Force for Peace’ (Latin)
Sera, lo prometo – ‘It will be so, I promise’ (Spanish)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:
aziz-am – ‘my dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)
joon-am – ‘my dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful young woman (what Shah calls Alex)
sheereen-am – ‘sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)
‘>insert person’s name
Stars in a Bottle

Chapter Summary

Where an exhausted Kara discovers her limits, Uva makes a necessary intervention, we go to Krypton, and our hero takes the first step in creating her battle armor.

Chapter Notes

I realized that this track was the perfect soundtrack for the first half of this chapter. Here's a link with lyrics:
Don't Let Me Down - The Chainsmokers (ft. Daya)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-gSwc7TIRA

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mid-December - Year 2

2 hours 33 minutes 56 seconds after Kara’s departure from the USS Zumwalt

Over the Atlantic Ocean (barely) - US eastern seaboard, off the coast of Midvale

The exhaustion was crippling...

Kara was still awake and flying, but just barely… if anything, it was more like drifting.

She’d left the deck of the Zumwalt limping along at around a thousand miles per hour, but continued to lose both velocity and strength along the way until she’d dropped all the way down to ten percent of that. Aside from having endured the horrors of the Phantom Zone, and that awful Joel Shumacher Batman & Robin movie Brian had begged the Squad to watch that one time, it was the longest two and a half hours of her life.

By the time she made her erratic approach to the wide, tranquil beach at the bottom of the bluffs near her house, her perception was failing and everything had gone white. Kara couldn’t even feel her fingers… Am I freezing to death? Again? She wondered with a kind of detached serenity…

The only thing keeping her going was Alex’s voice in her thoughts… calling her home.

When she finally hit the icy drifts of blowing snow covering the sand, she’d already lost consciousness.

..................

She dreamed of Krypton… its stark, majestic landscape of massive glaciers, deep-frozen oceans, brilliant crystal mountains, with the great red sun, Rao, burning like an eternal beacon of life and hope above her silently dying world.
Kara’s awareness floated above the Golden City… Kandor, Krypton’s glorious capital, and then passed down through its great-arched dome, which rose miles above the ice.

It didn’t seem odd to her that she then found herself walking the quiet, twisting halls of her old home… and into the familiar warmth of her bedroom. There, she lay on her back, across her wide comfy bed with sheets softer than the finest silk, Uva’s bulk stretched languidly beside her.

Above them, the stars were laid bare in all their glory: entire universes that Kara could reach out and touch.

Everything felt absolutely right, and yet completely wrong at the same time…

*How did I get here? What happened?*

She set aside the small crystalline device she’d been manipulating, and the universes that had danced above collapsed back into it. Kara then quickly rolled over to wrap her arms around Uva, whom she loved more than almost anything on twelve worlds. “You’re alive! I’m home!” She was overjoyed, and rejoiced in the glorious sensation of once again touching the great cat’s long, soft fur, feeling her powerful warmth pressed against her, keeping her safe.

The great Tharg opened her jade eyes, slit irises expanding for the light, and yawned, revealing two rows of sharp, deadly teeth. “Of course I am here, child. As I will always be when you have need of me.” Her voice was so soothing… just as Kara remembered.

She nodded, “But Uva, our world… it was destroyed! I saw it, and my parents sent me away. Was that all just a dream?”

“No, of course not. That all happened.”

“But… I don’t understand.”

In one graceful serpentine movement, Uva wound herself to a sitting position, still leaning into Kara’s embrace as she stretched. “It has been a very short time, for me, since I last walked with you, my Brightest of Stars… but for you, it has been a long journey, and you have suffered much.” Her voice held so much love and sadness for Kara that it shattered something inside her and, like a dam bursting, she began to sob, clinging to Uva like an anchor.

“How I wish I could have been there with you in the Phantom Zone, and now on your new world…” She paused and smiled in her cat-like fashion, “But I have also seen hope. On Earth, you have made friends, created a new family, found purpose and a great love. Even now, she lies beside you, offering you the strength of her heart and heat from her own body, to pull you back from the abyss into which you have fallen.”

“How… how do you know that? How is this even possible? Am I really here? With you?” Kara was still crying, but also hugging Uva with all her normal, non-super Kryptonian strength. “It’s you, it’s really you!”

Uva’s purring laughter was a light in Kara’s darkness, a beautiful sound she thought she’d never hear again. “Of course! Is that not what I said? I am as real as Eliza, Jeremiah, Shah, or your Vaena, Alex. You are inside your crystal little one, where Krypton, or the memory of it, still lives, along with all the known worlds, including the planet of my birthing. Daughter of Krypton, your ancestors bottled the stars, do not question this trifle.”

Kara was awestruck. “Get out of here! Like the *Matrix*?”
Uva tilted her head inquisitively, and the long tufts at the tips of her ears uncurled and stood up. “I’m not going anywhere… such a strange expression that is! I assure you, ‘Archangel’,” Kara grinned as her new codename danced off Uva’s tongue, “I feel the same as I did when I was alive. Like your ‘Matrix’, I suppose… who is to say this is not reality? If we define ‘real’ by what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see, then there is no difference between this world and the one your physical body currently resides in.”

Kara blinked… flabbergasted. “You basically just quoted Morpheus…”

Uva purred, revealing a wide smile of deadly fangs. “I enjoyed the movie immensely, and am very happy you and Alex watched it. And all of those lovely Miyazaki films! Such a joy.”

Kara was confused… “How did you…?”

“I have been checking in on you from time to time when we’re both asleep, and the walls between our worlds grow thin. It’s easier to observe your memories than anything in real-time. This Earth of yours is a primitive planet, but very interesting, and I have been quite frustrated with my inability to join you on your new adventures... they are so exciting!” The great cat purred and rubbed against her.

“You accounted for yourself admirably on your latest mission, but at great peril to your own life… which is why you are here now. I pulled your unconscious mind to me so I may heal you, and perhaps do more than that.”

Kara sat back and wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her pristine white robes. “How can you heal me? Isn’t my body technically out there?” She waved her hand haphazardly at the dome of crystal that stretched across her room’s ceiling.

“Irrelevant, you are both here and there. What happens to one happens to the other. Have you already forgotten all of your lessons? I shouldn’t be surprised; you are not being challenged at all academically on Earth, with its reality TV, texting, and cat videos.” She shook her wide head and sighed. “I’m sorry, it is time. We must go now.”

“Go where?”

“To the Chamber of Stars,” Uva said the words reverently and proceeded to growl a command. The room then blurred, like a mirage.

When the world re-appeared around them, they were standing on some kind of hovering metallic platform in the center of a vast, dark sphere the size of an aircraft hangar. “Do not fear, my Kara. As Shahrazad might say, we are ‘appropriating’ a little of Jor-El’s technology… for a good cause. I will explain it to him later. Be calm, you may wish to sit down for what comes next.”

Kara turned around in a circle, looking up, and down, at the immense, cavernous chamber. She guessed that it was at least 250 feet in diameter, and she and Uva were smack dab in the middle of it. The grey walls were beginning to shift as if the living Kryptonian metal was changing shape into a new, and mysterious configuration.

The darkness around them was quickly dispelled as light began to shine in pulses from a million fluid apertures all around them. At first, the brilliance was a subtle bluish white, but then flared brightly, like the color of Earth’s churning orange and yellow sun. The energy began building like the roar of a turbine, and a deep, throbbing echo began to fill the vast space.

Kara swore it sounded just like a T.A.R.D.I.S.
Uva spoke louder, over the din, “I must depart, but shall return once it’s safe for me to do so.” She then disappeared, like the proverbial Cheshire Cat.

As the room flared like a nova, Kara felt a rush of fire surge through her body and collapsed to her knees. The power that was bombarding her felt… amazing… as if every cell in her body was screaming in pleasure: bursting, warming her from her toes to the flaming tips of her hair. It was the most incredible, exhilarating thing she’d ever felt, what she imagined being immersed in Earth’s sun would be like.

She was whimpering, moaning, twisting on the smooth surface of the platform as the liquid fire continued flickering through her veins.

“It is a perfect simulation of what humans would call a Class G yellow star, Sol, in fact.” She could hear Uva’s voice, as if from a distance, but could not focus long enough to pinpoint where it was coming from, the waves of ecstasy were far too intense.

“Oh! Oh… fuck.” Kara bit her lip as she felt a wave of molten pleasure ripple through her, and her body shuddered with what she could only describe as the best orgasm she’d ever had in her life.

Oh My God. This…. This is incredible! Maybe I’ve been doing something wrong this whole time? I wonder if it would be like this… with… Alex?

And then she screamed, “Vaena!” as she rode a new wave to bliss again, her head jerking from side to side.

Uva’s voice droned on as if Kara wasn’t having the most exquisite experience of her life. She had to focus hard just to comprehend the Tharg’s words as fire continued to blaze over her skin and through her.

“As you know, stars like Earth’s grant your people great power, even Class A and F stars do so, to some degree, as you experienced on your travels… I’m staying with the human star classification for simplicity’s sake. Over time, should you remain within its influence, the very nature of your existence will be indelibly altered. The more of the star’s essence you absorb the more powerful you will become; as time goes on, your transformation, and your great powers will become everlasting. I’ll let you ponder the implications of that, young one. When you reach that point, you will no longer be tethered to the Earth, its sun… or even time itself. Of course, that would take many years.”

Kara thought she must have been experiencing what it was like when a human was drunk or high, because everything was spinning, and Uva had just told her that one day her powers would be permanent… making me what? Immortal? That’s crazy… isn’t it? Kryptonians lived a millennium, or longer… and she was already terrified of losing her new friends, family… and Alex. This new knowledge only made things worse.

No! I can’t live an eternity without her. I won’t!

The great cat, unaware of Kara’s turmoil, continued, “Until that time, you must be careful not to deplete your energy to such dangerous levels, as you did saving the human warship. When you are drained, your physical body is rendered temporarily vulnerable, and you could even lose your powers for a time. Do it too often, and the vessel may break. That means you, child. I will not be able to pull you to me again anytime soon, it took a great deal of energy for me to do so, and I must now recharge myself. It would be best for you to remain as close to full power as possible hereafter.”

“Soaring beyond Earth’s atmosphere is the best way for a swift recharge. Better yet, go beyond the planet’s geomagnetic field to bathe in the unfiltered solar wind from Sol. This will give what you
might be described as a ‘supercharge’, which will augment your abilities, as you’re feeling now. Of course, that will require you reaching escape velocity, which means more training.”

Kara could actually feel her body healing as she lay there… but she was still on fire, and wanted… no, needed Alex. Through the golden threads that connected them, she sent her plea out, seeking the light of her Vaena… and in return, waves of joy echoed back from what felt like some great distance.

*Come back to me!* Alex’s voice pleaded.

The great chamber finally went dark and, almost immediately, Uva reappeared. She rubbed against Kara in farewell, and as the room began to fade from reality, spoke, “Remember all I have said and return to me soon, my Brightest of Stars. I will be here for you, always. Visit me once you master your crystal, and please, bring the one to whom you are bound to with you next time. Alex may also travel here without you, using one of the two gateways set within the blood-red crystal you created for her.”

The big cat’s green eyes were only inches from Kara’s, gazing into hers as if she were peering into the depths of her Kryptonian soul. "I can feel her, you know… her strong heart beating, just as I feel yours, every minute of every day. It is nearly impossible to differentiate your energies now, they are so entangled together.” Uva purred, “I like her. She is quite a fierce one, like a Tharg… but without fur. She has made a fine choice in you, Kara Zor-El, and you in her.”

Kara smiled… with Uva’s approval, a great warmth spread through her entire being. She ran her fingers along the feline’s thick, soft coat, and placed a gentle kiss on her soft muzzle before a wave of vertigo took her into darkness.

She awakened sometime later, feeling impossibly strong, aware, and more alive than she’d ever been… curled up in a sleeping Alex’s arms.

*Thank Rao… I’m home!*

Kara’s mind was racing as she laid her head on Alex’s shoulder, breathing in her wonderfully clean scent, and snuggling into her bondmate’s flannel pajama shirt. *Alex was dreaming… I wonder if she’ll remember anything?* Kara worried, as her thoughts had gotten pretty sexually explicit…

*Wait a minute!*

Uva had said ‘Alex may also travel here without you, using one of the two gateways set within the blood-red crystal’. That meant Alex had more than one portal in her space-time anchor, one to the Krypton that lived, and one to…

*Where?*

*And… does that mean my crystal has two portals inside as well? Oh Rao, of course, it does! The entanglement… Alex’s gates are a mirror of my own! Duh, maybe Uva’s right, I’m not using my brain enough here.*

…………………

It was after 2:00 AM and Kara had spent the last hour after waking just watching her beautiful human dream. Alex had snuggled up close in her sleep, lying with her head on her favorite pillow, Kara’s shoulder.

Strands of dark, short-cropped hair spilled over Alex’s face, and her features were soft from sleep. It was obvious that she’d exhausted herself with worry, and probably hadn’t rested a wink since the
incident with the sub. There were Kleenexes scattered about, and the satchel of letters, gifts, and notes from the crews of the USS Zumwalt and Washington lay open beside the bed.

Kara felt awful guilt. It was her fault for being so reckless… and wanting to get back to her bondmate as quickly as possible.

*I owe her a ginormous apology when she wakes up.*

Perhaps it was a necessary lesson in humility… Kara certainly expected she’d be hearing that at her next combat session with Shah, and she’d be right to call her out on it.

The Kryptonian chanced rousing Alex to softly kiss her forehead, her cheek, and then, like a thief with the lightest touch, her lips. A thrill went through her as she lay back grinning like a fool, running her tongue over where their lips had pressed together.

*Mmmmmmm…* Kara was adrift in a sea of very, very risqué thoughts.

She was restless, and couldn’t believe how awake she was, or how good she felt, especially after draining her powers and nearly dying the day before. Whatever crazy high-tech supercharger Uva had used on her, it was the real deal… energy coursed through her like never before… and heat… desire…

She wanted to wake Alex up, and…

*Grrr…* what was she thinking? Her exhausted bondmate had just stayed up into the wee hours of the morning trying to bring her back from oblivion using her own body heat, and all Kara could think about was jumping her bones?

*What’s wrong with me?? I’m a terrible, terrible girlfriend! Maybe it’s all the extra energy in my system… I think it’s making me stupid.*

Something was drawing her attention to her closet. Since she couldn’t sleep and, given her current state of mind, needed to put some distance between herself and Alex, she regretfully extracted herself from their wondrous tangle of limbs… being extremely careful not to wake her sleeping human.

With a thought, she then flickered to the closet’s door, appearing all the way across the room in a fraction, of a fraction, of a fraction, of a second.

*Whoa! So that’s what nearly instantaneous travel from one point of space-time to another feels like?*

The startled alien was moving much faster than normal, to put it mildly.

*I could get used to this kind of uber-power… and definitely need to figure out how to get to escape velocity to get more of it. Alex and Shah will know what to do.*

Turning her attention back to the closet, and the thing that called to her, Kara reached into a dusty corner and withdrew the long matte-black tube that leaned there. It was the case containing the material for her battle armor that her parents had sent to Earth with her.

*Why is it only calling to me now?*

She stepped quietly to her craft table, adjusting her vision so she could see in the dark as if it were daylight, and carefully cleared a space. She then uncapped one end of the case and slid the long folded ream of silky fabric onto the surface. It appeared as it had before when Alex had first held it… beautiful, in its dark and subtle way, but inert.
Reaching out, she ran her fingers over the cloth, which had been in a kind of stasis ever since she’d left Krypton, and to her surprise, it responded! Wherever she touched it, the scintillating material shimmered with light, shifting from the deepest ebony, to indigo, then blood red, and a rich, royal blue as she trailed her fingers over its smooth, cool surface.

*So pretty...*

Then, it was like a door opened in her mind, and she heard the echo of Uva’s words, “I pulled your unconscious mind to me, so I may heal you, and perhaps do more than that.” And suddenly, she understood how to activate the material... or at least to begin to wake it up.

She could hear its song in her thoughts and see the ripples of dark energy dance within its impenetrable fabric.

*It’s a start.*

Almost of its own volition, one of Kara’s hands lifted the dark Kryptonian fabric as the other touched its silky surface with her mother’s blue crystal. At the point of contact, a soft glow, imperceptible to the human eye, radiated through its matrix and Kara felt the AI connect with her mind.

*Hello there, friend! I am Kara Zor-El and am very pleased to finally know you. How are you named?*

She could just make out the whisper that called back to her in welcome.

........................

**The next morning....**

A loud knocking at Kara’s bedroom door woke Alex with a start, and she sat straight up in bed. She was doubly startled to find no Kara beside her. The door opened and Eliza stuck her head in as Nom slipped out, “Hey sleepyhea...” Her rather loud greeting died on her lips as she glanced over and saw Kara, asleep, slumped over her crafting table, on top of one of her many projects. Eliza then carefully slipped inside and padded over to a yawning Alex. “I think your sister’s going to sleep her way through all of Winter Break. I haven’t seen her for almost 3 days, is she feeling any better?”

Alex pulled the comforter around her and cast a longing gaze over at her Kryptonian, “She’ll be fine mom, don’t worry. I think it’s just been a touch of the winter blues, missing home, all of that.” Alex hated lying to her mom, but she was getting very good at it out of necessity. “We’ll get dressed and come down.”

“Good.” Eliza beamed, “I have blueberry pancakes and omelets almost ready, and then we’ll start decorating! We’ll whip this place into the holiday spirit, and maybe go shopping later if you girls are up to it.”

Kara sat up, blinking sleepily, the Kryptonian material for her battle armor stuck to her face. She pulled it off and smiled brightly, “Did someone say blueberry pancakes?”

Alex’s heart melted, and she could barely wait for her mother to leave.

........................

After Eliza closed the door Kara shimmered, appearing in bed with Alex instantaneously, wrapped inside the comforter with her.
“Extra speedy… that’s new.”

“Yeah, long story.”

The brunette’s arms were suddenly around Kara, pulling her down on top of her human in a jumble of sheets and the thick, fluffy comforter. As their eyes met, Kara was astonished by how Alex somehow managed to look both overjoyed... and pissed, at the same time.

“Not funny, Kara… What in the Hell happened? Damn it… I thought… I thought I’d lost you! Twice.” Her intense hazel eyes were pooling with tears.

They wrapped themselves around each other, Kara whispering apologies in seven languages as Alex continued, “I pulled you out of the snow and brought you here, but you weren’t even breathing. You were so cold… like on the ship. Shah helped me keep your cover, thank Rao, but here you are today, all awake, warm, almost glowing, and happy. You’re so... you, but even more you. I need details, all of them.”

Kara took a breath before starting… “Well, it’s kind of complicated, but basically, until the sub, I had no idea that I could actually run out of power. Apparently, I should have come with a warning label: ‘check battery status before using’. It turns out, flying a couple thousand miles on an empty tank isn’t such a great idea… especially in the middle of winter. I should have taken up Daniels’ offer to send me home on a C-130, but all I could think about was getting back to you.”

Hindsight, don’t kick yourself. Just don’t do it again, ever... or I’ll kill you myself.

Yes, ma’am.

“So, how did you go from zero to awesome overnight?” Alex asked, a bit more playfully, as she traced her fingers over Kara’s neck, and through her long and lustrous locks that were almost glowing... no, they were glowing, a glorious, shimmering gold.

Kara smirked, “Hey, aren’t I always awesome?” They laughed and snuggled in closer as she continued, “It was a Kryptonian supercharge, from Uva. She intervened to save me from my own stupidity… oh, and invited you to visit… again, long story.”

“Uva? Your Tharg nanny? No way! Spill!”

“Sure, but first, we should get up.”

“Okay, but I really need to hear this story.”

Only the promise of Eliza’s famously delicious pancakes pried the pair from the comfort of each other’s closeness, and Kara’s bed, to brush their teeth, wash up, and get dressed. Alex had Shatari pull Shah into the conversation using her hacked phone, and they both listened with great interest, asking questions of Kara repeatedly.

The Kryptonian related what she knew about her newly-awakened, apparently-nameless AI, the two gateways in Alex’s crystal, and the door in her mind opening cell memories that put her on course to crafting her battle armor. She had barely made a dent but had at least started the work. She estimated it would take her years to complete unless she was somehow able to unlock even more memories.

Shah asked, “Was it hard, seeing Uva again?”

“Yes, and no. It was a gift, really. To know that she’s in there, with all of Krypton, watching over us, waiting for me... for us. I only hope that we can figure out how to use our crystals to make it back
“I like your Matrix analogy.” Shah chimed in between sips of tea at home. “I want to go too!”

Kara nodded, “Yup, it’s a perfect copy of my world, and everyone in it, but living on its own. When I was in there everything was as real as here, and Uva is alive, with her real thoughts, memories, and emotions… and we’re connected, so she’s learning about Earth through me. And Shah? I agree… I want you to come with us when we go too.”

Her friend grinned, and said graciously, “Mersi sheereen-am.”

“You’re welcome.” The smiling Kryptonian replied, and then continued, “Anyway. I also had the impression that on that Krypton, everyone else is living with a perception of time that’s set months before its destruction. Our crystals are the keys to traveling between our worlds, but we need to understand how it all works before we can open the door.”

They soon said goodbye to a very happy Shah, who was headed over to her mosque to speak with her Imam about something important, though she was cryptic on any details. She was also excited about paying a visit to Marjorie Phelps, and her two little girls, Taylor, and Melinda that day.

“Who are you talking to?” Kara asked a chuckling Alex, who was distracted by her phone and texting with someone as they were about to head downstairs.

“Oh, just Tom. He wanted to make sure you made it home okay.”

Kara felt warm with that knowledge and blushed a little.

“You sure made a friend.” Alex cocked an eyebrow… “A hot, married older man friend… should I be worried?” Alex glanced back down at her phone smirking.

“What? No… I mean, pfft. It’s not like that.” Now she was really flustered, even unconsciously adjusting her glasses. He was a very attractive man, but no, Kara had already found her bliss.

“What’d he say?” She asked, peeking over at Alex’s phone, and frantically eager to change the subject.

Alex was giggling at her awkwardness, which she thought was ‘adorable’. “I was just pulling your leg… he is kind of hot, for a married old guy. Anyway, he wants to know just how grounded you are…”

“Oh, give me that!” Kara held out her hand and wiggled her fingers in the universal sign for ‘gimme’ as she waited for Alex to pass over her iPhone. Once she did, the impatient alien blazed out a response.

“What did you tell him?”

“That my amazing bondmate and my best friend saved me, per usual, and that I am about to feast on blueberry pancakes.”

Alex looked down at her phone… and saw:

Archangel: all is good xo! made it home safe and sound and the parents have no idea that I was just rolling pinned by a 19k ton sub. My amazing team covered while I got a supercharge. am at 200% now. say hi to Myka for me! bblry pancakes for brkfst! Yay!!

“Kara… seriously? The man is a Commander in the U.S. Navy, I doubt he wants to hear about
blueberry pancakes…” Alex followed her hungry alien out of the room, shaking her head.

On her way down the stairs, her alert beeped, and she glanced down and groaned as she read the Commander’s reply:

**XO:** Good news! and will do. Sounds delicious, blbry are my favorite! Eat a stack for me, with REAL maple syrup not the cheap stuff, okay? Please send our appreciation to your team, even the snarky one; they do good work taking care of you. Happy holidays, Archangel.

So, she was 'the snarky one'? Alex grinned, and wondered what Daniels and his CIC team were calling Shah… the sexy Brit? She did have a voice to die for, and a body to match, though they didn’t know about the second apart.

Alex decided that Team Archangel, or whatever they ended up being called, would supply the Commander with code names for her and Shah. Considering Kara’s enthusiasm, communications were bound to continue.

Her bondmate had already asked her, on her delirious flight home, to create a digital LP using the eighteen music tracks she’d recorded while working on *A Connecticut Yankee*, plus a special Christmas song she was going to try to record before the 25th. It still seemed like a brilliant idea that morning.

Alex planned to encrypt the file, and send it over to Daniels as a holiday present for the officers and crew of the USS *Zumwalt* and *Washington*. She just needed to add in the Christmas track, once Kara finished it, and tag the rogue package with their three handles… as soon as she thought of names for her and Shah to add to Archangel.

Alex grinned, imagining the panic when her quantum ghost package suddenly appeared on the high-tech warship’s ironclad secure systems. The CIC Techs would freak out! She wouldn’t do that to them, of course, but it was fun to think about.

She’d need to give Rodriguez a heads-up in the morning. *Jess is pretty cool.*

As she continued down the stairs, Alex quickly became lost in the wonderful aromas of her mother’s perfect pancakes and was already drooling for popping hot blueberries, butter, and fresh maple syrup.


---

Dec 24th – Year 2

Christmas Eve

Midvale, The Underground Coffee Lounge

“That song’s bloody brilliant, Kara! You should make a whole holiday album, and sign with a label.” Shah was cradling her steaming hot tea in both hands, legs tucked up under her as she lounged in a large overstuffed chair. The trio was listening to Kara’s iPhone as they huddled in a private corner of one of their favorite coffee shops. As a plus, the Underground Coffee Lounge was also open until 6 p.m. on Christmas Eve.

Kara sipped at the foam on the top of her hazelnut latte, “I really wanted to do something fun and special for our new friends for the holiday. Do you think they’ll like it?”
Alex stretched in her wooden rocking chair like a cat, “Of course they will, dummy. All the songs are great but that last track’s the icing on the cake. It’s also, hands down, the best version of Santa Baby I’ve heard since Eartha Kitt’s. So fun, and sexy! Mom can never hear that, ever, not even when you’re thirty, ‘k?”

The happy Kryptonian giggled. “Thanks, Alex, that means a lot.”

She playfully poked Kara with her foot. “You deserve the praise, you’re damn good. Oh, and speaking of good… wasn’t Quinn a sweetheart, getting the choir to help out for the chorus? He’s like your follower now… a minion; it’s kind of freaky. You should take him up on his offer to sing Baby It’s Cold Outside with you; his voice to almost as much to die for as yours.”

Kara covered her face with her hands in embarrassment. She was wearing the cute fingerless wool gloves Shah had knitted for her for Christmas and had given her just a few minutes earlier. Alex was always impressed at how talented her best friend was, at so many things.

Her own gift from Shah sat close to Alex on the table. It was a hardcover edition of the collected poems and teachings of the 13th Century mystical poet Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi (better known as just Rumi) written in the original Persian. A gorgeous hand-made royal purple bookmark, with golden Persian script etched across its surface, held the place where Shah had marked one of her favorite poems, just for Alex.

She’d read it as soon as she’d taken the book out of the classy tissue paper in which it was wrapped.

And it was beautiful…

............... 

There is a field

"Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field.

I’ll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,

the world is too full to talk about.

Ideas, language, even the phrase "each other"

doesn’t make any sense.”

............... 

She had some idea as to why Shah may have chosen that particular passage, and what the words might mean to her, and couldn’t wait to talk to her friend about it to know for sure. She always treasured and looked forward to their deep conversations.

“So… Shah, Kara has something from us, for you, for Not-Christmas.” Alex looked at Kara expectantly and the young Kryptonian shook herself into action, reaching into her flight jacket’s pocket to carefully pull out an elegant jewelry box covered in emerald green velvet.

She then gently set it on the table in front of their friend.

Shah had a look of complete surprise on her face, which was rare, and lifted one graceful hand to touch the lower edge of her festive hijab. The silky material was a rich cobalt blue, covered in golden
stars and moons, and was quite elegant. Alex loved that even though her beautiful friend didn’t actually celebrate Christmas, she’d always enjoyed participating in gift-giving with her friends during the season.

“I’m afraid to look inside…” Shah whispered, still staring at the box.

She finally did open it, and withdrew a silvery Kryptonian chain with a brilliant green stone hanging from it, made just for her… a nearly exact mate to Kara’s unearthly blue crystal and Alex’s blood-red diamond.

“Oh my…” Shah was staring at the beautiful necklace in awe. “I can’t believe you actually made it… and in emerald, my favorite! Mersi kheili mamnoon!”

Alex was grinning from ear to ear, “It’s not really an emerald… it’s better! Just like mine, two and a half karats of laser vision superheated, irradiated carbon, the atoms crushed in Kara’s own hands. You should have seen it! Shah, it was like she had the sun squeezed between her fingers!” Kara was blushing again, and Alex continued, “It’s technically a perfectly cut, fancy vivid green diamond, I looked it up. It’s worth more than any of us can imagine, and I can imagine a lot.”

“It’s priceless…” Shah whispered, awestruck.

“Like you.” Kara purred as she leaned over to spin the lustrous green stone hanging from Shah’s hand with a finger. It glittered as it twirled, reflecting in the emerald of the lovely Persian friend’s own eyes. “Alex and I didn’t even need Kal’s help this time, just a tiny shard from my crystal to form the matrix of its structure. You’re now connected directly to Alex and my quantum neural network… no more patching you in by phone to share experiences, or talk.”

Shah clasped the spinning stone in her hand and hugged it to her chest. “So we can communicate anytime, anywhere?” Kara nodded. “Sheereen-am, this is truly more of a gift than I could ever accept… but since I know it’s useless to argue, I’m keeping it.” Her wide grin was blinding.

“Actually, you would need to pry it from my cold dead hands to make me give it up.” They all laughed, and Shah added, very sincerely, “I cannot thank you both enough.”

Kara surveyed the room, and once she was satisfied that no one was watching, blurred to sit next to Shah, who hugged her immediately. The Kryptonian gently took the necklace from her grasp and helped her put it on. After the living metal melded together at the clasp, she turned Shah around to look at her… and Alex could tell Kara was affected by the sight as much as she was…. The deep green and silver contrasting with Shah’s darker complexion was dazzling.

“Shahrazad, you are stunning!” Kara was bouncing up and down with excitement, her blue eyes sparkling.

“Now that we’re all networked, your training should be much easier to coordinate.” Alex said, “But Kara, what about a Ka’dah for you? It’s not fair that Shah and I have these amazing companions, and can change our appearance, heck, our forms even, at will… yet you’re still buying and making your own clothes… and you’re the one who needs a disguise!”

“I agree.” Shah nodded in affirmation, sitting with perfect posture, elegant as always.

Kara sighed as she shimmered back to her seat next to Alex in the rocking chair. “Thanks, guys… I’d give up a lot to have one again, but the Ka’dah wasn’t designed for my people to use while under the effects of a yellow sun. The stresses on the companion would be immense, too much… possibly even deadly, and I couldn’t risk that. It’s okay, honestly. Shatari and Zara are far better protection for you, and you make such great teams. Besides, I actually like making my own clothes.” They all
shared a chuckle because it was so true. “I suppose my best hope now is my battle armor, that AI and
t material were designed exactly for what I’ve become... or, I guess more accurately, what I’m
becoming.”

Alex leaned over, “Fine then, but if that’s the case, we’re going shopping.”

Kara slumped into her bondmate’s shoulder and sighed, “I can’t... I’m kind of broke after my last
Candy Crush incident with Eliza’s iPad. That darn game vexes me.” Her brow crinkled adorably... and Alex just wanted to kiss it.

Shah grinned, “We’ve talked about this,” She indicated Alex, “and since neither of us is spending
money on clothes anymore, we’re going to take you out this weekend, after Christmas, and let you
go crazy... well, as crazy as the two grand we’ve pooled together will get you.”

Kara’s eyes huge with surprise, and Alex could see her struggling between saying no and jumping
out of her seat. In the end, fashion won, “You guys!” She squealed happily, zipping around to hug
them both in turn.

“Can we go to Mood Fabrics in Metropolis?” She begged, fluttering her eyelashes charmingly at
them.

Alex rolled her eyes, but was smiling, “Wherever you want to go, sweetheart.”

Shah laughed as she was squeezed by the enthusiastic Kryptonian.

Kara kissed each of them on the cheek and said, “I love you both so much!”

……………………

Chapter End Notes

So, Uva is keeping tabs and saved Kara’s bacon, this time. Good kitty. Shah’s joined
the team fully now, with her own crystal and companion she now has access to, well... everything, and can help her Kryptonian sister even more.

Next up: Chapter fourteen - ‘Welcome Diversions”. This one could easily just be called,
‘Kara loves Alex and lavishes her with affection’. Yeah, that’s basically ninety-percent
of the whole chapter. Things get... um, a little 'steamy'. ☺

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions
coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me. Also, please share this
story with those you think might enjoy it!

Also, I'm moving to once a week posting, Sunday mornings PST, hope that's okay. I
need to make sure I'm not rushing, and leaving enough time to edit. The extra time will
help give you a better story.

Thoughts:

About Kryptonian crystals –
On Krypton, crystalline tech was the basis for one aspect of Kara’s people’s science. Crystals can hold vast amounts of information, energy, even worlds. Alura’s (now Kara’s) crystal, and those created from it, are more than historical catalogs of a dead race, they are space-time anchors, as well as dimensional beacons – like a combined universal communicator, compass, GPS, and warp field generator. Networked together they become entangled, and form an unbreakable quantum connection.

When Alex’s crystal set its structure after cooling it mimicked Kara’s, because of entanglement, and formed two gateways, just like hers. All sister crystals Kara creates using her own (that are part of its network) will share its exact traits, so Shah’s has the same two gates inside as Alex’s and Kara’s. One gateway leads to the Krypton that didn’t explode, and one… to well… they just don’t know where yet, or how to open it.

To travel to other worlds beyond those two gates would require other power and means, but the crystal is the map to anywhere in the universe, and the lighthouse to guide the wearer’s way home.

Kara’s home in Kandor, ‘The Golden City’ –
Alura and Zor-El had lived with Kara under the protective dome of Krypton’s glorious capital city, Kandor for the last ten years before she left for Earth, since they made the move from Argo City.

They didn’t live in the capital city proper, but out in a more remote zone where Kara’s father dedicated his time to his calling, creating non-sentient life forms… AIs. When his daughter was younger he’d breathed life into Shatari for Kara there. Alura was often absent, weighing important matters or traveling in her role as Justice, the highest legal authority on Krypton.

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Terms
Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.
Ah!khooob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)
C’est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)
El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)
Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House. (Kryptonian)
Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ – Used to show amazement. (Persian)
Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature. (Persian)
Mersi - ‘Thank you’ (Persian)
Mersi kheili mamnoon - ‘Thank you very much’ (Persian)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:
aziz-am – ‘my dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)
joon-am – ‘my dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful young woman (what Shah calls Alex)
sheereen-am – ‘sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)
‘>insert person’s name
Chapter Summary

Where Kara spends some time painting her favorite subject, and lavishing some TLC on her bondmate. Things get... steamy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Early February – Year Two*

*Midvale, the Danvers’ residence*

The soft light that filtered through the bedroom’s high windows dappled the canvas as Kara applied her delicate brushstrokes to its gently yielding surface.

She smiled, pleased with the minimalist color pallet she’d chosen.

The starkness of the image, vivid black and browns on white, accentuated the striking beauty and intensity of her subject. The hazel of Alex’s eyes brought a warmth and depth to the image forming of the strong, intelligent, and passionate young woman as she gazed up at the stars.

Singularly focused on her work, she didn’t hear Eliza until her adoptive mother opened her bedroom door and stepped in. “Kara, are you okay? Did you hear me aski….” The woman stopped in her tracks, and in mid-sentence, gaping at the painting on Kara’s easel.

The distracted Kryptonian turned with brush in hand, a dab of white paint on her cheek, and smiled. “I’m sorry, Eliza, I was absorbed. What did I miss?”

“Oh… Kara… she’s so... beautiful.” Eliza couldn’t take her eyes off her youngest daughter's painting and involuntarily drew a hand to her mouth.

"She's easy to paint.” Kara said with a cheery reverence as she returned her attention to her labor of love. Her words caused an affectionate smile to grace the older woman’s expression as she approached and touched Kara’s shoulder.

“And easy to love.” Eliza squeezed gently, and then added, “Your technique is exquisite. You’ve perfectly captured how the greens in her pupils blend into the amber and made it your focus… I can even see the spark of her inner strength, and maybe… hope? Yes, definitely. It’s enchanting… you do have a talent for everything you put your mind to, Kara. Your parents would be so proud.”

The Kryptonian blushed and stretched back to kiss her adoptive mother on the cheek. “Thank you.” She then noticed that Eliza was holding one of their emergency flashlights. “Oh, did you need my help with something?”

“Yes, but what you’re doing is more important. The microwave tripped that darn circuit breaker again, and you know how I hate that back room in the basement…” Eliza paled just talking about it.
Kara tried not to giggle… The woman was normally very composed, but her fear of the ‘creepy’ storage room was a well-known family secret.

Kara nodded and started taking care of her brushes. “I’ll go check it out, no worries. I was almost done painting anyway; I need to finish my journalism assignment, it’s due tomorrow.”

“Are you sure?”

Kara just smiled and said, “Yup … and I won’t need one of those.” She wrinkled her nose playfully at the flashlight in Eliza’s hand before teasing, “Be sure to send help if I don’t come back though…”

“You’re incorrigible, young lady.” Eliza smirked and smacked Kara playfully on her backside as the giggling artist headed out to the bathroom to clean her brushes.

While washing up Kara zoned out, as she often did, thinking about stuff going on in her life: the new songs she wanted to record; her next combat session with Shah; more speed and aura trials; spending time at Dr. Carlson’s with Alex after school the next day; playing D&D with her friends that upcoming weekend; Metropolis Comic Con (which they were planning on going to), and deciding if she’d cosplay as Wonder Woman or Catwoman; and most importantly, wondering how soon Alex would finish reading *Frankenstein*.

Her bondmate had whined about the assignment, but Kara had encouraged her… and promised to help with the analysis afterward. *Poor Alex, such a brilliant mind for science, not so much for classic literature. Maybe not enough gun fights?* Kara grinned.

For her part, there were aspects of the gothic science fiction story that she really enjoyed, and others she didn’t. It was a little too dark for her. Kara much preferred happy endings… or at least something less sinister. That said, she did admire the courage it must have taken the then eighteen-year-old Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley to write it. The now-famous author had published the novel when she was twenty…

Kara could only hope to ever be as accomplished, or respected.

She had to give Alex’s teacher, Mr. Randall, kudos for his reading list: half the books on it had been written by women. Kara couldn’t wait to take his English Lit classes.

*Alex was sooo lucky!*

Kara was startled by a loud crash from outside the house, accompanied by the sound of breaking glass, and she immediately used her X-ray vision to scan for the cause. She also sensed her adoptive mother's heart rate shoot through the roof at the sound of the sudden disturbance.

*Rao, that room really has Eliza spooked. I've never felt her so scared, of anything!*

After a moment she could see that across the street a couple houses down, young Jeremy ‘still training for my driver’s license’ Brown had backed his parent’s BMW into the garbage and recycling bins at the end of their driveway.

*Poor kid. Wow… his dad sure likes to curse... a lot.*

Having to listen to Mr. Brown’s expletive-laced tirade upset her as much as seeing how his words and anger demoralized the usually happy young man… Jeremy wasn’t someone she’d really ever spoken to beyond a cheerful ‘hello’, but she wished she could help. The incident reminded Kara how grateful she was that her adopted parents were kind, thoughtful, intelligent people who treated her and Alex like adults…
Well, at least most of the time.

Aside from the Danvers’ misguided ‘no superpowers outside the house’ rule, she was actually very happy. She did feel terribly guilty about consistently and methodically secretly breaking that rule, though.

She was shaken from her thoughts as an odd chill crept over her skin and the hair stood up on the back of her neck.

Something unwholesome had flickered at the edge of her awareness right outside the house. She quickly adjusted her visual range and followed the aura she’d sensed down the street, just catching sight of an older model white van quickly pulling around the corner. It was the kind of ‘non-descript’ vehicle you’d see the cable company or an electrician driving around, but Kara didn’t see any markings or logos on it.

Slightly suspicious…

She was considering pursuing the matter further but was derailed by a gentle nudge from Nom, who was twisting between her ankles. His demands for scratches and food refocused her attention.

She looked down at him as she finished rinsing out her last brush, “My poor starving baby, you require sustenance, don’t you? Yes, you do!” She said in a singsong voice, and then repeated, “Yes, you do!”

Nom’s head jerked up and his big green eyes locked on her. He purred, repeating his mournful cry… pleading his case that he was starving... near death if you believed him.

He always exaggerated.

“Okay, okay, how about we go get you a treat, and I’ll help Eliza with the big bad creepy room?”

The little creature perked up meowed affirmatively and darted out into the hall. She grinned. He always tried to beat her to the kitchen, and sometimes she even let him win.

A little while later, in Alex’s room…

Alex hurt… all over, and felt completely awful.

She sooo hated, hated, hated her period!

It was days like this that she was jealous of Kara’s perfectly engineered alien physiology. Not only did her stunning, stylishly-dressed Kryptonian look far more mature than was even fair, constantly turning heads of interested men and women of all ages… on top of that, she didn't even have a menstrual cycle to deal with.

Ugh.

This suuuucks.

At least the stabbing pains Alex had become accustomed to dealing with every month had stopped coming for some reason. November had been the first time in two years she’d been free of them, and
even the pain normally accompanying her cycle had lessened a little more each month since. The relatively sudden change had worried her at first, but her HUD still showed her biosignature as green, with no anomalies, which meant everything was A-Okay... and so far, her companion had never been wrong.

Not that what she was experiencing right now felt wonderful or anything, she was still in the middle of three to four days of freaking misery… but at least there were no more knives in her gut or lower back.

Alex was lying gracelessly on top of her soft comforter, curled up in a fetal position, which seemed to help alleviate her pain somewhat. Wearing comfy wool socks, her most relaxing sweatpants, and her favorite baggy black Miskatonic University sweatshirt, or at least a perfect copy of them (thanks, Shatari!), she was completely engrossed in the dog-eared paperback she held open before her.

She’d come to a really good part of the story: where the monster, after admitting to the murder of Victor Frankenstein’s youngest brother, William, begs the mad scientist to create a mate for him, a creature as equally grotesque as himself. She shivered… who knew she’d actually like the book? It was creepy as Hell and took her mind off the awfulness that was her own monster… her ‘time of the month’.

Rao, I hate that stupid phrase…

A noise drew her attention toward her door, but she didn’t bother to look up… she could already sense whose warmth it was and her heart beat a little faster when Kara didn’t walk as much as shimmer in.

Alex could feel her presence all the time now, even from far away. It was a wonderful sensation, their awakened bond… With its silken threads spun like starlight between them.

“Hey.” She said casually, eyes not leaving the page.

Her ethereal alien breezed over and gently grazed Alex’s arm with her fingertips to get her attention.

As she glanced up from the book, Kara’s smiling blue eyes held her still… and without looking away her bondmate placed one elegant finger up to her lips and leaned down to gently slip a folded piece of paper into Frankenstein’s open pages like a bookmark.

Alex opened her mouth to speak, but Kara quickly shook her golden head, pointed at the paper, and mouthed and thought the words, read it, before twirling around and heading back to the door. The beauty paused as she reached the threshold and looked back over her shoulder seductively. She then pressed her fingers to her lips and blew Alex a kiss she felt tingle over her skin like a full body caress before disappearing like a breeze.

Now that was an exit. Alex thought after her. Whoa!

Kara didn’t answer, but Alex could still feel her like a happy sun.

Now alone, she quickly snatched Kara’s message out of her book and unfolded the crisp paper, which was filled with her bondmate’s elegant cursive script inside.

My Kara certainly loves her fountain pens. Alex thought to herself without sharing.

Alex was quite pleased with herself for having already bought Kara the gorgeous vintage blue pen she’d noticed her bondmate admiring at a local antique store. It was already wrapped, with 3 bottles of pricey ink, for Valentine’s Day the following weekend. Eliza had even allowed her to hide her
present for Kara inside of Jeremiah’s X-Ray vision-proof safe. Thank goodness family members sharing gifts with each other on the holiday wasn't considered strange, or unexpected in the Danvers’ home.

As soon as it was open she began reading the note…

……………………

Hello, beautiful,

Meet me in the bathroom.

And bring your book. It looks like you’re really enjoying the story.

Prepare yourself for bliss…

See you soon.

Xoxo!

Kara

……………………

Alex stared at the words, and read it again. ‘Beautiful’, yeah right. I literally feel the polar opposite of beautiful right now. Just what was her bondmate up to? And what did she mean by ‘prepare yourself for bliss?’

She swallowed, suddenly imagining all kinds of amazing possibilities that she wanted so badly, but wasn’t sure she was ready for…

Blushing, Alex groaned in protest as she rolled laboriously off her side and out of bed. Still holding her book in one hand, she scooted off into the hall and toward the upstairs bathroom…

The door was ajar enough that she could see a flickering light, dancing with the shadows, emanating from within. There was also the soft sound of singing… an angelic voice, so much like Kara’s, that invoked within her a feeling of worship… of something both ancient and sacred.

Alex entered and immediately felt the subtle shift in humidity, heard the sound of steaming water running in the big bubble-filled claw-footed tub, and breathed in the wonderfully clean scents of mint and…

What is that? Eucalyptus? Ahhh, yes, it is.

The tiled room was filled with candles, alight on almost every ledge and surface… and Kara was kneeling next to the bathtub, gracefully checking the temperature with one hand dipped in the water.

She looked up with such joy and adoration on her face that Alex felt completely unworthy. “Kara… this is… amazing.”

Her Kryptonian suddenly became a golden blur and was behind her in the blink of an eye, softly touching Alex in various wonderfully sensitive places and gradually sliding the paperback from her limp fingers.

Quickly becoming incoherent, Alex barely noticed as her book was carefully deposited on the small wooden table beside the tub.
Oh, my favorite! A small bowl of M&M candies had been neatly arranged there as well, that she noticed, if only briefly before she could no longer focus.

“Kara…” This time, Alex breathed her name without thinking, like a prayer.

Kara began lovingly undressing her now-very-pliable human, slowly running warm hands and fingers along the brunette’s tingling shoulders and down her arms, leaving reverent kisses along Alex’s yielding neck like a trail of molten fire…

Once she was completely naked, which surprisingly didn’t bother Alex at all, Kara effortlessly lifted her up and lowered her, inch by careful inch, into the steaming water topped with foamy bubbles.

“Today, beautiful, I’m taking care of you.” Her Kryptonian’s tone was gentle but firm and her kind sapphire eyes sparkled as if daring Alex to resist as she knelt behind her. The aching human was only too happy to submit after being turned to jelly and was slumped against the end of the tub as Kara’s hands began to caress the tight, sore muscles of her shoulders, neck, and back.

As promised, it was absolute bliss… her bondmate really did have her very own Kryptonian version of magic fingers.

Over the months, Kara had come to know most of Alex’s cues and, using her hyper senses, was able to anticipate her needs. Right now, she was using all that knowledge to bring her to the edge of anything resembling propriety.

It was impossible for Alex not to become lost in the overwhelming pleasure she was experiencing; again and again, her body rippled with alternating waves of pain and ecstasy… to the point that she began to forget where she was, drifting off into a delirious, happy place as Kara’s gentle hands and fingers did their work.

Her bondmate eventually moved her attention to her feet, and methodically worked her way up Alex’s legs and body… lovingly taking her time, chasing away all the soreness and her awful cramps.

Her hands and magic fingers lingered here and there, and in new, unexpected places as she progressed, making Alex crave her touch even more.

Later, she had no frigging idea how much later, the world came back into focus, and Kara was sitting next to Alex on the floor, leaning on the tub with a sweet smile on her face… just, watching her.

Her Kryptonian’s adoring gaze still surveyed her as if she were a painting, and Kara’s long blonde locks were draped down into the bubbly water like delicate willow branches in a still pond.

She grinned and began dreamily drawing circles on the soft, pale skin of Alex’s chest with her fingers.

She had never felt so relaxed, loved, and happy.

“Did I get rid of them?” Kara asked playfully.

Alex smiled, still feeling a blissful high. “Gone, no more cramps. You’re a miracle worker.”

“I aim to please… you, Vaena.”

Alex was grateful for the warm water to disguise her already flushed appearance, “Oh, and you have… seriously! I lost my mind a few times there. You’re… incredible.” She raised one hand out of
the water to run her dripping wet fingers gently through Kara’s hair.

Her beautiful Kryptonian purred, and then leaned in very close, only inches away from Alex’s face, and regarded her human with questioning eyes. Alex began to panic a little but moved forward to gently brush her lips against her bondmate’s. The feeling was a rush, and perfect. Kara tasted like springtime and something altogether mysterious and wonderful that she couldn’t name… and desperately needed more of.

After that spark, her Kryptonian leaned further over the tub’s edge to press in and take Alex’s parted lips in her own… kissing her slowly, deeply, as if savoring every moment, every taste, every sensation, every beat of her heart… and she was; Alex could feel her elation and joy through their bond.

A hungry fire was burning in them both, and they sensed the danger as one of Kara’s delicate fingers grazed Alex’s throat and moved lower, down her chest, caressing her. Rao! Alex had never been touched that way before and had never felt such pleasure.

They finally broke apart, hearts beating fast, panting, their eyes still locked. Kara took a calming breath and reached out to trace the contours of Alex’s cheek.

Alex did the same.

_Not here._ Kara thoughts were raw… she was barely resisting.

_Yeah… mom… downstairs._ Alex knew she was in trouble, all she wanted to do was pull Kara into the tub, and was imagining what they could do if they just let go… to give her lover free rein to do whatever she wanted with her body…

But she knew that they shouldn’t… and certainly not today.

_Not yet._ Dammit! _I hate those two words… so… freaking… much!_

They both knew there was still drama to deal with before they became lovers… but damn, Alex wanted to, they both did. Through the blazing threads of their bond she could sense that it was only Kara’s iron will that kept her from carrying Alex off to her bedroom. And Alex wanted her to…

_Hell, ever cell in her body was begging her to!_

_Wait. Is that seriously, ‘Your Body Is A Wonderland’ by John Mayer playing in your head? _ Alex asked. _Rao, it is!_

They both giggled, but Kara was still looking at her like prey.

“_Alex vanimelda, órenya._” Her sexy, ethereally gorgeous elven queen said with awe and a kind of reverence in her musical voice (knowing perfectly well how much her speaking elvish turned Alex on). Kara was flushed with desire, and her endless blue eyes were still traveling over the curves of Alex’s body as she pushed back a little, dazed, the tip of her tongue teasing the corner of her perfect mouth, “I just… wow.”

“Me too…” Alex was savoring the feeling of their first real kiss, and not wanting to lose their connection. She quickly reached over to wrap her hand around Kara’s wrist, pulling the startled Kryptonian roughly back into her…. “I love you Kara.” She said breathlessly.

Kara seemed delighted by Alex’s move and her admission. She responded with a brilliant smile, and kissed her again… this time with even more passion, and for a very, very long time. Kara had
somehow ended up halfway in the tub; getting soaking wet but didn’t seem to care. Not one bit.

And I love you, Vaena. Her thoughts were like kisses in Alex’s euphoric mind.

After a few moments of quiet bliss, both calmed… and agreed, as one...

Soon.

It was a promise this time, not some vaguely defined one-day, wishful dream… and just enough to placate them, at least for a while longer. After all, their physical relationship had just gone to a whole new level of awesome… an intimacy that would necessitate meticulous, and extensive… exploration.

That will keep us busy for a while. Kara grinned, her gaze strafing her Vaena’s nakedness once more, causing Alex to blush and giggle like a lovesick damsel in one of those romcoms her bondmate adored so much.

Danvers, you’re an idiot. She thought to herself… well, at least she’d thought she had...

But you’re my idiot. Kara smirked, gently turning and squeezing Alex’s wet hand. And one I wouldn’t trade for anything in the universe.

Alex didn’t think it was possible to blush on top of blushing, but her embarrassment was worth the shower of kisses that came from a laughing Kara afterward.

You’re sooo adorable! Oh, stop scrunching your beautiful face. Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone... wouldn’t want to blow your cover. Adorable Alex is all mine! My Vaena!

Well, you’re way more adorable than me… my nooré cheshm-am. Alex could feel Kara’s heart skip when she heard the Persian term of endearment sing in her thoughts.

She’d basically just called Kara the light of her eyes.

“Oh Alex…” Kara breathed in, and then was hugging her again. I really really do love you.

I know that, dummy.

When her graceful bondmate finally did slip away, she only zipped off for a few moments before returning with a steaming cup of Chamomile tea. She smiled and placed it on the little table stand next to the tub where Alex could easily reach it. Then, after making sure she had everything she needed, Kara kissed her one last, amazing time, and shimmered off to let her ‘finish reading her book in peace’.

She made it clear that all Alex needed to do was whisper and she would re-appear. And like magic, she did… on multiple occasions that afternoon, reheating Alex’s bath water with heat vision, refilling her tea, bringing her cookies, or whatever else she asked for, even more kisses, and soft, loving caresses.

My gorgeous, adorkable alien is the perfect girlfriend! Alex wanted to scream her revelation to the world, tell everyone in her life… stop lying to her parents...

Sigh.
As she leaned back in the steamy water, absently staring at a blurry page of her book, Alex pondered the very powerful thing that Kara believed… the thing they always said to each other to make themselves feel better; the thing that still made it at all tolerable to continue to pretend to the world that they were merely sisters (a word that made her cringe when applied to the two of them).

Her trusting Kara believed that all things would come to them in time; that someday they would belong to each other openly, as much as they already did in their hearts; that someday her parents, their friends, society in general, and even the law would accept them.

But their happily ever after still seemed so far away…

*It’s not fair….*

Alex sighed. At least for now, she and Kara had each other… and Shah.

Their Persian sister was their rock. She believed in them, and not only accepted their unconventional relationship… but was like a necessary piece of it. Rao, Alex really did love her and was so thankful that she was in their lives.

They also had Ravan, who understood them, and whose home, as promised, had become a place of literal sanctuary where she and Alex could just let their guards down. The same went for Lois and Clark. Alex and Kara would often sneak off to the glittering city of Metropolis to spend time with the busy couple. Sometimes they even had Eliza and Jeremiah’s permission and had stayed for a couple of long weekends. On those occasions, she and Alex had to take the train… which sucked compared to flying.

Dr. Carlson, the retired history professor Kara had saved, also counted as a friend.

The kind man had remembered more of that night than he’d told the police, and his curiosity about Kara’s actions had led him back to her for answers. Since that time, he’d become the hero-in-training’s accomplice more than once after spectacular saves that left witnesses with vague descriptions of a young blonde woman in a hoodie: pulling people out of cars after a twenty-car pileup on I-75; fleeing the scene after stopping a convenience store robbery; ripping open the malfunctioning reinforced fire doors in the rear of a restaurant after it caught fire and the staff were trapped; or lifting Paul Hemmings’ massive John Deere tractor off of him… you get the picture.

By providing an alibi for her whereabouts, Dr. Carlson, or ‘Doc’, as Alex called him, had saved Kara’s perfect ass on more than one occasion… and had never asked for her backstory, just provided a safe place for both of them. That was more than enough to make him worthy of their trust, and friendship, in Alex’s book.

The funny thing was, after merely pretending to be her history tutor, it didn’t take long until Alex’s bondmate was actually scheduling time to go over and pour through dusty tomes of human history with her new friend. She’d go with Kara sometimes, and sit in the sunlit library of his big rambling house and read, or do homework, while Kara and the animated historian went on and on like two colleagues rather than student and professor.

Goliath, Dr. Carlson’s little terrier mix, had even taken a liking to her and Kara… no longer yapping at either of them when they came to the door, or that one time she and Kara had to hide out in his backyard after fleeing from the police… ah hem, yeah, long story. Alex particularly liked it when the little beastly would jump up and curl up in her lap on the elegant French divan as she read.

*Wait a minute…* Alex sat up in her bath, suddenly realizing something. She and Kara already had a pretty incredible circle of friends and family who supported them. How had she never really seen the
big picture before?

Alex settled back into the warmth of the soothing water, smiling.

_Perhaps all things will come to us, in time._

Kara’s thoughts then mingled with her own… _Of course, they will, Vaena! You have doubts?_

_No... not anymore._ Alex chuckled as she felt Kara’s joy and bubbly positivity through their connection.

At least one thing was true; she would never be alone again…

For now, Alex decided that she would just enjoy being with Kara, and savor every moment of their journey together…

Wherever it eventually ended up taking them.

……………………

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap: I hope you enjoyed this little diversion.

Next up: Chapter fifteen - ‘Far From Home, We Are Bound.’ It’s summer, and excitement is in the air (and so is Kara, flying in an airplane for the first time ever!). She, Alex, and Shah are off to begin their three-month-long internships in National City, where they’ll navigate a new world of independence, danger, and new possibilities.

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me. Also, please share this story with those you think might enjoy it! Posting new chapters weekly, on Sunday mornings PST.

Thoughts:
Shatari is constantly monitoring, and protecting Alex while they are connected, which by now is 24/7, so if something were wrong, or changed about Alex, the powerful companion would know… wouldn’t she?

Kara’s playing the album ‘The Serpent’s Egg’ by the band Dead Can Dance while she showers her bondmate with affection. Alex hears the song ‘The Host of Seraphim’ (how appropriate) softly playing in the background as she enters the bathroom - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-K1hSFrZLI

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Terms used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow:
_Ah!khooob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)_
_Alex vanimelda = ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)_
C'est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)
El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone.
(Kryptonian)
Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.
(Kryptonian)
Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)
Malā’ikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature. (Persian)
Mersi, kheili mamnoon - ‘Thank you very much’ (Persian)
öneña = ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:
aziz-am – ‘my dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)
joon-am – ‘my dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl/woman (what Shah calls Alex)
nooré cheshm-am – ‘the light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex now calls Kara).
sheereen-am – ‘sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)
‘insert person’s name’ + joon (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean ‘dear’. So, ‘Shah joon’, means ‘dear Shah’ when Marjorie said it. This is a common word to use in every conversation and every context.

Others names/nickname/titles:
Brightest of Stars – (What Uva calls Kara)
Little Star – (What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara)
My dreamcatcher – (What Kara sometimes calls Alex)
Vaena – Proper noun, and a Kryptonian glyph word. Can only be given/granted between bondmates, and loosely translates to ‘one who is loved’ but is far, far more profound. It’s an ultimate declaration of love, and their shared eternal bond. Once accepted, this name cannot be taken from the recipient, or superseded in any way. (Alex’s Kryptonian name/title, given to her by Kara)
Far From Home, We Are Bound

Chapter Summary

Where our young heroes make their way to National City for the start of their three-month-long summer internships. It’s also Kara’s first time flying (in an airplane) so expect some turbulence.

Once they settle into their new accommodations, Kara and Alex spend time making new friends, experiencing the nightlife, and exploring their exciting new city. Oh, one more thing… After an unexpected encounter upsets Kara, the simmering attraction between her and Alex finally boils over (warning, things get hot!).

Chapter Notes

Kara & Alex’s music track list is included in the end of chapter notes. Please check there first if you’d like to listen while you read.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

End of May – Year Two

Altitude: approximately 37,000 feet

Airspeed: 547 mph

Location: Metropolis International to National City International westbound flight, somewhere over the Rocky Mountains

The massive Boeing 737-900 hit another bump, jostling the cabin enough to cause an older, distinguished gentleman with a trim beard and neat red turban to stumble and grab ahold of the seat at the end of Alex and Kara’s row.

He smiled apologetically and, in a refined British accent, spoke to the grandmotherly woman he’d just bumped, “Pardon me, miss, my reflexes aren’t as good as they used to be.”

“Or your eyesight, apparently,” the graying woman joked. Gloria (as she’d introduced herself to Alex upon boarding) and the kind man shared a friendly laugh, and he gave her a stately nod before moving on to a row a bit further back.

Alex, stuck in 12E, the middle seat on the starboard side, had to choke back a laugh when Gloria suddenly set aside her knitting needles, leaned out into the aisle to stare at his backside as he walked away, and muttered under her breath, “Oh my my my. Yum.” in a very scandalous, ‘not something you’d ever want to hear your grandma say’, kind of way.
Damn! You go, granny!

After the excitement died down, Alex hit resume on the movie she’d been watching… and the plane continued to shudder as they flew on.

A few minutes later, as she was preparing to take a sip from the full plastic cup of Coke in her left hand, a crumbling pain shot through the fingers of her right. She grimaced, placed her drink carefully on the fold-down plastic tray, and maneuvered her left pinky to touch the embedded screen in the seat ahead of her… temporarily pausing her movie, again.

She definitely had to deal with the ongoing situation to her immediate right...

“Oh, ow! Kaaara.” Her bondmate was grasping Alex’s hand and had been squeezing just a little bit harder with each successive bout of turbulence. The brunette slid her headset off her ears and down around her neck like a collar as she glanced over pleadingly at her anxious Kryptonian.

“Oh! Alex, I’m soo sorry! I’ll stop, please don’t let go.” Kara lessened her grip and opened her stunning blue eyes, which had been shut tight since their last big jolt. The poor thing was curled up in the window seat, knees to her chest, and the shade on her window shut tight. She looked almost feral.

“Kara, it’s okay, we’ll be fine. Don’t worry, I’m not letting go of you.” Alex said soothingly as she reached across with her other hand to run her fingers through her beautiful bondmate’s unruly golden locks. “Our friend says the chop should clear in five minutes or so, then we’ll have clear skies all the rest of the way to National City.”

The beautiful Kryptonian’s hair fell down in a luxurious tumble that partially obscured her adorable face as she leaned forward and whined, “Mmph, I hope so, we’re going sooo slow, and all the bumps are making me nauseous. I really don’t trust this infernal machine.” Then, as a brief, but violent shaking made it feel as if the whole plane had slipped dangerously sideways, she grabbed the armrest between them, leaving little Kara-sized dents in the metal with her vise-like grip.

That split second was a blur for Alex… suddenly; she was no longer looking at Kara, but to her left, and holding her full cup of Coke safely in her hand… almost daintily, without a drop spilled. Somehow, she’d managed to move faster than the blink of an eye to save the container of sloshing liquid from sliding off her tray… all while maintaining its equilibrium.

The problem was, she didn’t recall doing it… just the before, and after.

Interesting. Another glitch.

Shah, you have a sec? Alex flung her awareness across the miles, seeking the solace of her best friend’s mind.

For you, Alex joon, always. Should I hazard to guess why we’re in private mode?

It happened again.

Ahh, what did you set on fire this time?

Nothing… it was something new, I actually lost time. I’m fairly certain it was super speed again though; I think my human brain is still having a hard time catching up with bullet-time.

Fascinating… are you okay?
Yeah, I’m good… better than good, actually. You?

The same. I too had another… occurrence, just before I boarded. Moving through the shadows was easier this time, and breathtaking… like magic! My unexpected journey from security to Gate 32A took less than a minute; and I am certain that had I known the way, it would have only been seconds. Shah paused briefly. Is it time we tell her?

No. Alex’s retort was immediate. It would just freak her out, and she doesn’t need that right now. Besides, we both know she’ll just blame herself, and what would we say, anyway? The fact is, not even our companions understand what’s happening to us, yet. Let’s wait until we have something solid, and then break the news.

So it shall be. Alex could feel her best friend sigh through their connection, like a big ‘but’. Alexandra, please know that as my best friend, and Kara’s bondmate, I look to you for guidance in this matter, but as her friend… I ask that we not wait too long to say something.

I know… and we won’t, I promise. Thanks for understanding.

Always.

Alex’s thoughts returned to her immediate situation, and she glanced over at her bondmate. Kara hadn’t looked so pale since the day she’d crashed onto the beach, in a snowstorm, drained of her power. She shivered just thinking about it. That and been one of the worst days, or weekends of both of their lives.

Fortunately, she was distracted by her surly Kryptonian, who was grumbling under her breath. “I can’t believe that people actually choose to travel like this, on purpose.” She seemed genuinely appalled.

Alex stifled a laugh, pulled one of Kara’s hands up to her lips, and kissed her knuckles. “Nooré cheshm-am, only in your world would five hundred and fifty miles per hour be considered ‘slow’. Anyway, I have it on good authority,” Alex raised an eyebrow, tapped her temple, and continued, “that the chances of a plane like this crashing are something like one in ten million. Plus, this aircraft is only a little over two years old, has an unblemished service record, and is rated at the highest levels for safety by the FAA. I’ll take those odds.

“I think the worst that could happen is I won’t get to finish watching The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen before we land.” Alex grinned and bumped playfully into Kara’s shoulder.

Her bondmate began to breathe easier as the last of the turbulence seemed to even out, and they transitioned into a smooth glide. Moments later, the seatbelt light went out with a pleasant dinging sound.

“See.” Alex grinned, “All better.”

Kara nodded and through their bond Alex could feel her nausea calming.

Gloria leaned over and regarded Kara sympathetically, “Having a tough time, sweetie?” The graying woman hadn’t seemed to be affected at all by the rocky ride; the steady pace of her knitting on a long, forest green scarf had actually been rather soothing to Alex.

It was as if her hands had their own eyes or something.

Feeling playful, Alex decided to have some fun and shook her head sadly in response to the woman’s question, “Yes. My girlfriend’s not much of a flier, I’m afraid.” She then leaned over and
whispered overdramatically in Gloria’s ear, “It’s her first time on a plane.”

At that comment, Kara’s brows scrunched into an adorable scowl.

Alex giggled in her thoughts. *Hey, I’m being accurate; it is your first time flying… inside a plane.*

The sunny girl seemed to reconsider her comment, before grinning awkwardly. *True…*

Gloria chuckled and raised her volume a bit to address Kara across Alex, “It’ll get easier, sweetheart… believe me. I’ve been going up and down on these things for over forty years… and I’m still here, no worse for the wear, even if it is still in coach.” She laughed again, obviously cracking herself up. “If I could give you some unsolicited advice? It’d be to let go of worrying about things you can’t control, like the rain, and do something to occupy your brain with more interesting thoughts.”

Kara glanced over, waiting for Gloria to finish, but she didn’t. Obviously curious, she finally asked, “Like the rain, how, ma’am?”

The older woman looked up, and smiled, “Oh, sorry sweetie, I was counting my stitches. Like the rain in that there’s nothing we can do about whether it happens or not, so don’t waste any energy worrying about it. The next time you feel scared just sit back, close your eyes, and just think about the rain. It always helps me at least… well, that, and a couple glasses of wine.”

As a chuckling Gloria went back to her knitting, Alex leaned over invitingly and patted the top of her right shoulder. Kara sighed, quit moping, and laid her head on the offered pillow.

“Sorry, I’m being such a baby.” Her bondmate mumbled a barely audible apology. “I hate being cooped up, and not being in control.”

Alex reached up to once again run her fingers through Kara’s silky, but messy hair and tucked some errant golden strands behind her ears. “I know. Believe me, I do. So… how excited are you to be interning for the summer at CatCo?”

The comment brought a bright smile to Kara’s face, “As much as you are to be spending the next three months at the Sagan Institute for Astrobiology and Non-Terrestrial Exobiological Studies! Say that ten times fast.”

Alex was grinning, “Fine, make fun… but they’re the real deal. I can’t wait to get behind the scenes. I’ll be working with actual live Kepler and TiTAN data from real exoplanets and the first one to dig through it to look for evidence of life!”

“I’m so happy for you, Alex! That’s beyond awesome, and such an amazing opportunity. You’re the queen of the STEM geeks back home now you know that, right?”

“A badge I wear with pride and you know it!”

“You’re my queen, too.” Kara snuggled into her side. “This summer’s like a dream come true for all three of us, isn’t it? You, looking for aliens, though I’m not sure why when you have a perfectly good one in your bed every night…” Alex poked her and snuck in a peck on her cheek. Kara continued, reverently touching where Alex had kissed her, “me, working with the editorial staff one of the fastest growing female-led media empires in the country; and Shah at JPL, toiling away elbow to elbow with real rocket scientists and engineers, hard at work developing the next-generation AIs that will serve as the crew for the first Europa Missions.

“It really is awesome… I just wish we could have all stuck together, though I know that’s
impossible.”

“Me too.” Alex sighed. Despite their quick back-and-forth earlier, she’d been missing Shah since they hugged her goodbye the evening before back in Midvale. She quickly focused her thoughts, and opened her and Kara’s silent conversation to their friend, *Hey, Shah, how’s your flight going?*

*Salām sisters! So far it’s been a relatively smooth and pleasant journey. Zara says we’re trailing you by about 300 miles at 32,000 feet, and a bit northeast of your position… so it appears that you’ll be landing first. It goes without saying, by the way, but we (Zara and I) miss you three desperately.

And we miss you, too. It’s not the same without you, Shah.* Alex pouted.

*Kara’s voice chimed in. We’ll see you soon though! You’re only going to be in Pasadena, that’s not that far from National City. Alex and I can be there in a couple of minutes using super speed. We just need to find times when we’re all free, and a flight window clear of prying eyes, just to be safe, like we talked about.*

The mental link granted them by Shah’s Kryptonian crystal had only strengthened their friendship. Over the months since receiving hers, the trio had begun to speak to each other more in their thoughts than out loud. The connection also allowed the sharing of emotions as well as physical sensations, similar to Alex and Kara’s bond but far less intense, or deep. The shared intimacy was amazing, but not an exact science, which meant it was sometimes embarrassing when one of them over-shared.

That said, they’d learned to adjust to the occasional faux pas or sudden thoughts or feelings that weren’t their own, and were closer than ever.

There had also been other changes.

Back in April, Shah had shocked them with the news that she was leaving her faith. She’d apparently been weighing the difficult decision for a long time and assured them that her mind was quite clear on the matter.

When prodded, she’d said something all-together cryptic, and so like her, “The Qur’an tells us that ‘Allah does not burden a soul beyond what it can bear’, and it is only now that I finally understand what that means. The Most Merciful will always live in my heart, and that’s enough for me.”

While she no longer called herself a Muslim, she retained a deep respect and personal view of the religion itself… one based on the aspects of what she called its ‘Golden Age’, from a time when science and exploration were valued… from an age that treasured ideas, the mind, and body. When both the erotic and love were embraced.

“Perhaps I am romanticizing, but so be it.” She’d said with a smile. “I have made my choice. There is much I wish to explore in the world on my own terms, and with my sisters… without regrets.”

Afterwards, Shah seemed no less spiritual, in fact, if anything she was even more at peace. She also continued to wear her beautiful hijabs, at least part of the time, but also began experimenting, with Alex and Kara’s help, on different styles for her long lustrous waves of raven black hair.

Honestly? Shah seemed so much happier since making her decision… like she was free of some burden she’d been carrying in her soul. She’d even begun to embrace a decidedly more Kryptonian attitude about life in general, spending hours reading the Book of Rao with Zara, and asking Kara lots of philosophical and cultural questions about her people… which Alex’s bondmate was always happy to answer to the best of her knowledge.
Shah also revealed something else… something interesting.

Lately, she’d been having conversations with her friend and longtime spiritual advisor, her old Imam who was a really cool guy. One of the topics they discussed in depth was how a theoretical non-human’s relationships with mortals, romantic or otherwise, would be viewed. He’d agreed, off the record of course, with Shah’s assessment that whether she was angel or alien, (a hypothetical) Kara would not be bound by human laws, only God’s, and that the sacred covenant between the Malāʾikah and heaven could not be known, interpreted, or usurped by mortals.

So… in practice, any human Kara took as a lover, or bound her heart to, would also exist outside the reach of earthly judgments. In other words, she could be with whomever she damn well pleased… at least in the opinion of one liberal Imam, and one Persian ninja.

This knowledge, while not binding in any way, gave all of them all a bit of hope for the future

Alex desperately wanted to believe that one day they would be able to tell Eliza and Jeremiah how they felt about each other but was in no way ready to do that yet. Thankfully, since Ravan had already figured them out, the Nazari house had become a refuge where she and Kara didn’t need to pretend or hide their feelings for one another.

For their part, Kara and Alex’s relationship had continued to flourish. Since that perfect day in February, when they’d first kissed, their physical relationship had progressed beyond just more amazing kisses, massages, and cuddling… heck, by now Alex had a hi-rez topographic map of Kara’s body in her brain, accessible via her HUD!

But, they still hadn’t made love, like, really made love… and let the Fires of Rao take them. Which according to Kara, was the final step needed to complete their Kryptonian bond.

That was one of the reasons why they were both so excited about going to National City for the summer… somewhere far from home, without Eliza and Jeremiah watching them. A place where no one had to know of the technicalities surrounding their familial relationship. Somewhere where they could discreetly continue their explorations as girlfriends.

As the flight continued, the three of them chatted, though on Kara and Alex’s plane it looked to the other passengers as if the two were just snuggled together trying to sleep.

After another hour or so, Shah had to go and Alex turned their conversation back to Kara, “I’m really proud of you, you know. Those articles you wrote were so powerful… I cried reading them.”

Kara shrugged, “Thanks. I’m just happy that I was able to bring some attention to the problem, and to the people suffering. Who knew that The Midvale Times and The Daily Planet would pick them up, and they’d go viral? At least some bad guys are in jail, and Mrs. Sanders, her kids, and everyone else living in that awful homeless camp have a roof over their heads now, and food to eat.”

“My modest Kara.”

“It’s kind of a horrible thing to be proud of, you know? I’d rather just be glad something good came from it… it’s not like I purposely meant to benefit from writing about those people. That wasn’t my intention, just a really awesome consequence.”

“You don’t need to justify being happy about it; this internship is a huge deal and you earned it. We all did.”

Kara nodded, and then suddenly leaned over and snuggled into Alex, burying her face in the crook of her human’s neck. She whispered, “Rao, I’m going to miss you so much.”
Kara was talking about summer anymore…

Alex kissed her bondmate’s warm forehead and side of her face that she could reach. She and Shah would be leaving for college that fall, almost immediately after their summer internships ended, and the impending change was painful for all three of them, but worse for Kara, the one they were leaving behind to suffer another year of high school without them.

“You can’t get rid of me that easily; between our bond and talking in our thoughts, we don’t have to be apart … and besides, George Mason is what, like a minute away for you nowadays? You can see me, and Shah, whenever we want… well, when I’m not in class.”

“Like every night?” Kara asked with a sunny, hopeful smile.

“Yes, if you can sneak out. And if not…” in my dreams. Alex finished her sentence in Kara’s thoughts, and she could literally feel how much her Kryptonian loved her at that moment… like a wave of pure joy, that was met by one of her own.

They stayed curled up together for most of the rest of the trip, and by the time the plane finally started its final approach to National City, Kara wasn’t even reacting to the bumps on the way down. She and Alex were too busy looking out the window at the vast, sparkling city below.

Alex overheard Kara whisper that she’d never seen the sun so bright.

………………

National City

Forty-six minutes later, after deplaning and hitting baggage claim…”

National City was a bit of a culture shock from the sleepy seaside community the Kryptonian had become accustomed to…

Midvale was a sedate suburban bedroom community with tree-lined streets, old craftsman homes, big green yards, a multitude of walking and bike paths, and the cool Atlantic off to the east… National City, by comparison, was a frenetic, sprawling sea of endless blocks of business, tightly packed communities, pools behind every house, shiny buildings, and, for some reason… palm trees.

The beating heart of the city was the downtown, where towers of glass and steel rose like a forest of giants, some over a hundred stories tall… and to the west lay the deep blue Pacific with miles and miles of sandy beaches, half-naked people, surfers, and sails.

And the differences only started there.

Maybe it was the heat and the seemingly eternally blazing sun, but this new world seemed brighter and more vibrant… the people louder and more colorful, with a barrage of new smells and spices from places Kara had never heard of. Even the clothing bore a marked difference. In Midvale, the style was subdued: blacks, greys, and neutrals… while in National City it was a kaleidoscope of anything goes…

Kara felt like Nom on Thanksgiving.

A sleek, black town car, with the Wayne Institute logo elegantly emblazoned on the doors, met them outside of baggage claim at National City International. The young, well-dressed driver, with a tight
blonde crew cut and a charming lopsided grin, hefted Kara and Alex’s bags into the trunk without effort. He was a handsome man in his mid-twenties, built like he lifted regularly, carried himself with a polite professionalism, and was very efficient in his mannerisms and movements.

He welcomed them to the city and let them know it would take them less than an hour to reach Kyle House, the manor where they’d be bunking. He wasn’t expecting any of the other interns to arrive that day; apparently, she and Alex were early birds. The rest would start showing up over the weekend or on Memorial Day, which was perfect for Kara and Alex, who’d wanted a couple of days to get the lay of the land before they started their new jobs the following week.

Alex touched Kara’s arm but did not speak, *Ten bucks says he’s ex-military. He walks like a cat.*

*Hm.* Kara glanced over at him. She’d noticed their driver’s appreciative glances as he helped them into the cool vehicle, and tried not to giggle as they sat down on the immaculate leather seats.

He’d been seriously checking her body out.

*I don’t like how he’s looking at you.* Alex’s thoughts were ablaze, her tone almost a growl, and she crossed her arms over her chest defensively as she glared forward.

Kara was surprised by her bondmate’s jealous reaction and took a moment analyze the situation.

The world around her… the cars, stoplights, people, all of it, slowed to a grinding halt as she shimmered with super speed, and allowed her mind to begin sorting through the variables in play.

As her experience had taught her, the man’s interest in Kara’s physical attributes was normal for a healthy, hetero or bisexual, human male; nearly every one she’d ever met, regardless of age, desired to mate with her.

Most just concealed their attraction better.

She took no offense at his interest and he hadn’t been rude in any way, in fact, he was kind of a hottie. His attraction was even flattering, despite her having absolutely no interest in him in that way. Also, to the nameless driver’s credit, he had no idea what she and her bondmate’s relationship status was… nothing outwardly identified the two of them as mates… a fact the Kara hadn’t considered before and which suddenly bothered her greatly.

They had their necklaces, but their bond was private. She reached up and touched the blue diamond around her neck, and smiled nervously.

*It’s not like I want to mark Alex as mine… do I?*

*Oh… I do!*

Kara also speculated, based on what she saw as a leftover cultural bias among her new people toward heterosexual couplings, that the young man had possibly made the false assumption that she and Alex were merely friends and that Kara, or perhaps both of them, were ‘available’.

Once she finally understood why Alex was brooding, Kara decided that she had to find a way to remedy the matter. But how could she both cheer up Alex, and clearly show the driver that they were a couple?

A plan quickly formed in her brain… and as she slowed back down to normal speed, everything started moving around her, and the world seemed to return back its regular pace.
Only two seconds had passed…

The driver was reaching over to close the door for them, and he glanced almost imperceptibly at her chest, and legs. Okay, he was definitely checking her out.

*Hey Alex, he’s an Army Ranger, Airborne, whatever that means…*

*How did you…? Oh forget it, you used your X-Ray vision to check out his tattoos, didn’t you?*

Kara blushed and nodded her head affirmatively, *I accidentally saw his six-pack abs too, yowza.*

Alex smacked her on the shoulder, *Kara!* They both laughed in their minds, but some of their frivolity bled over into the real world… causing the man to look back and gaze at both of them suggestively. *He sure has his eyes on you; I wonder what his name is.* Alex mused.

*You wish is my command, Vaena. I’ll find out!* Kara immediately called forward, uncharacteristically twisting her long blonde locks with one finger, “Hi, um, do you have a name?” she asked in a sweet, innocent… devastating voice.

*Kara, what are you doing?!!* The Kryptonian squeezed Alex’s thigh to calm her, out of the driver’s line of sight.

He looked back, did an actual double take, and smiled with his eyes… that’s all they could see in the mirror, “Ah, yeah Ms., it’s Jack… just Jack.” His voice was smooth and suggestive, and he couldn’t stop staring at Kara.

“Awesome. Well, just Jack, I’m Kara, and this is Alex.”

*You’re flirting with him?!* Alex buzzed in her mind.

*Just go with it, ‘k? You’ll see. I promise.*

He was grinning, “Nice to meet you two. First time in the city?”

Alex raised an eyebrow skeptically at her bondmate, but turned on her charm as she spoke up, “Yeah, first time.”

“Anything we should know about to help get us started? We’re looking to have a little fun together while we’re here.” Kara prompted, her syllables sparkling like Champagne.

Alex was turning red.

Jack’s eyes widened a little, and he responded eagerly, “Well if you are looking to cut loose, there’s plenty of nightlife, clubs, dancing, that sort of thing. I bet you’re both great dancers from the look of you. The food trucks around The Kyle are amazing, and you definitely should go to this little coffee shop on 5th and Vine right down the street to the left from the main entrance. I’d be happy to show you both around… give you a taste of the nightlife.” He was grinning, his words an open invitation. “I have a loft not far away…”

*Kara could feel Alex’s stress levels jumping... time to switch gears…*

“Thanks...” Kara said, her tone now decidedly less flirtatious as she completely ignored his obvious come-on. “We’ll be sure to check that coffee shop out, but we’ll probably be too busy for clubbing, or anything else… sorry to disappoint.” She then leaned over and took the startled, yet suddenly pliable, Alex’s lips in her own, and kissed her passionately.
They melted into each other’s embrace.

It was wonderful, and amazing, and unbelievable, and the very first time they’d actually done anything like that in front of someone else… other than Shah.

**Wow**… even Alex’s thoughts were breathless…

Kara smirked and didn’t stop kissing Alex as she glanced back up at the rearview mirror. Poor Jack appeared shocked, then crestfallen. He huffed, and put his eyes back on the road… where they belonged.

*That was… bold of you, and perfect.* Alex’s voice in her mind was like a murmur in a breeze. They’d finally, and reluctantly, untangled themselves and sat back in their seats, but kept holding hands.

*I didn’t like how he made you feel and needed to shut down whatever fantasy about me, or both of us, that he had going on in his head.*

*By leading him on, and then claiming me, in front of him?* Alex was grinning from ear to ear now, her hazel eyes studying Kara intently. She was obviously the opposite of upset.

*Maybe?? It seemed like a good plan…* Kara gave Alex her best innocent ‘so sue me’ look and they both started giggling again.

*Idiot. I love you.*

*Yeah? Love you too, Vaena.*

*Good. And Kara?*

*Yeah?*

*I liked that by the way, the claiming me part… a lot.*

*Mmmm, you’re giving me ideas, Danvers…*They leaned back into each other, with Kara hungrily kissing Alex once again.

Jack quietly grumbled as he slid down further into the driver’s seat, and kept his gaze focused firmly ahead on the busy street.

……………………

**Thirty-five minutes later**…

The elegant mansion that would be their home for the next three months was located on a busy street that had once held row after row of buildings similar to it, but over time disuse and neglect had ground them into disrepair and abandonment. Now the area was gentrifying, filling up with condos and new commercial businesses. This was pushing out those who’d created the community there: the artists, the homeless, businesses, and the old timers with decaying rent-controlled apartments.

There was also a construction boom going on, and from their town car, they could see three huge yellow cranes casting their long shadows over the block. Jack cursed as they inched along in traffic; he apparently had to deal with the parade of construction vehicles daily.
Alex almost felt sorry for him.

Almost.

When they finally arrived, it was worth the long ride. Kyle House was… stunning. In the sea of construction chaos, it was four expansive stories and spires of elegant red stone and old brick, tiled roofs, and serenity stretched over half a city block. She and Kara stuck their heads out a window to get a better view as Jack drove up to the front curb.

*It looks like Hogwarts, in red.*

*Oh crap, it kind of does!* Alex grinned.

She adored how her Kryptonian could have easily expended far less effort and just used her X-ray vision to ignore the car and see whatever she wanted… yet here she was pressed tightly against her vying for a good view out the window, and snapping pics with her phone.

Just another reason she loved her so damn much.

As Jack stiffly gathered their luggage to the curb, Kara excused herself to speak briefly with him outside the car. Alex was gathering up her stuff in the back seat and didn’t overhear what passed between them, but was surprised when they shared a laugh. She then watched as her bondmate slipped him a few rolled up twenty-dollar bills, and took his business card in exchange.

“Have a great time in National City you two lovebirds!” He called out with a devilish wink and a smile for Alex as he took another load of their bags, this time more energetically, to the curb.

As Kara slipped back into the vehicle to grab their heavy backpacks Alex asked, “What was that all about?”

The blonde shrugged. “I felt bad for how I treated him, and since we’ll need a car now and again while we’re here in the city, I thought ‘Just Jack’ would be a good guy to have on call.”

“Annnd?” Alex prodded, knowing that wasn’t all that had been said.

Kara sighed. “I was honest. I apologized and told him that my little display was just to impress my girlfriend. He told me it was a brilliant move and gave us two free rides!” She was smiling like the sun and doing her patented excited dance while still sitting on the leather seat.

*Aw, you love me?* Alex grinned back at her. Somehow her beautiful, happy bondmate had turned an awkward situation into a positive one. It was like her crazy awesome superpower or something.

*More than the stars.* Kara’s melodic answer was immediate, powerful, and utterly sincere.

Alex’s heart melted, which it seemed to do regularly whenever Kara was involved, and they kissed again; right there in the back of the town car with the door wide open for all of National City to see.

A few minutes later the disheveled pair climbed out of the vehicle and Kara low fived a chuckling Jack on their way to the sidewalk in front of Kyle House, where their pile of bags awaited. Alex waved goodbye as he drove off, and turned to ask Kara a question. “So, there’ll be seventy-five of us living here, right? Most of the interns?”

Her bondmate was looking up; studying the incredible structure they’d soon be living in and had just opened her mouth to reply when a bike messenger appeared out of nowhere and almost clipped them both. Kara reacted in an instant, allowing her human façade to fall away and the world around her to
grind to a stop as she gripped Alex’s arms on either side, lifted her up, and gracefully spun with her up to the sidewalk like they were dancing… easily sidestepping what would have certainly been a violent, bone-crushing collision.

Alex couldn’t believe what was happening: her human perception hadn’t stayed frozen at the same slow pace with the rest of the world as it should have… as she knew it had before in similar situations like on the plane, or when Kara used her super speed to carry Alex out of harm’s way, or just for fun. In those situations, it was if the moments in between never actually happened. Kara would just take her from one place, and they’d magically appear in another… but not this time.

This time she’d actually felt the rush, and experienced every hypervelocity moment of Kara’s flowing bullet-time performance.

Her Kryptonian took Alex’s breath away.

Now standing safely on the sidewalk, it was almost as if she hadn’t just been run over. The funny thing was, no one walking by had even seemed to notice what had happened.

The best part? Alex didn’t even feel off balance! No, if anything she felt… elated, and… powerful. *Thanks for the save. That was… exciting.*

*No worries. I have your back Alex, always.*

“Anyways...” Her Kryptonian continued out loud, seemingly less impressed by their little side adventure than Alex was, “Seventy-five other Wayne Foundation award winners, from forty schools across the country and multiple disciplines and backgrounds, will live here with us. Shah’s one of the special ones who actually gets to bunk right next to her place of work with three other geekterns. JPL isn’t exactly the best commute from here... unless you can fly.” Kara smirked.

Alex hefted her cumbersome backpack onto her shoulder and dragged one of the suitcases on its rolling wheels behind her. Kara juggled the rest of their bags as they began climbing the wide slate staircase together, all the way up to the grand entryway. “My dad doesn’t like Wayne much.” She commented, “But he’s one of my heroes, you know? I mean, we get to spend ninety days working at some of the best companies and with some of the best mentors in the world… if Wayne Foundation money and influence can buy that, how bad can he be? Even if he does sleep around.”

“Agreed.” Kara’s tone left no room for doubt. “You know what I’ve been wondering though? Who’s the ‘Kyle’ in Kyle House? The website and my Internet research came up empty… which in itself is odd.” Kara loved mysteries...

“No idea, maybe you can ask? I can pester Shatari to do some digging too.” *When she’s not busy crunching through a few million simulations using Shah and my DNA sequences…* Alex thought privately.

………..

Because they’d arrived early, Aeryn, the wonderfully strange and alluring young woman who checked them in, allowed them to pick their suite. She’d seemed to take an immediate liking to the two of them.

Kara had zipped off, supposedly to the ‘ladies’ room’, and reviewed their choices. She returned moments later, giddy, and with a definitive answer which she communicated silently to Alex.

*“We’ll take the Tower Room please,”* Alex asked pleasantly of the pale, sparkling twenty-something
with bright purple cat-like irises. (They were obviously contacts, but they actually expanded and contracted… oooo, so real!) Alex wondered if Aeryn had spray painted on her make-up… it was so smooth. She looked like a fine porcelain doll, or a sexy android, dressed like a 1950s-era stewardess… with cat ears (that twitched!).

She began wondering if that makeup went all over… Yikes.

*It’s a thing.* Kara’s thoughts almost sighed in Alex mind.

*It’s a thing? Really?*

*Yup, according to Vogue. I read about it last month.*

Alex took in a deep breath. *Dorothy, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore…*

*Silly.* Kara hip bumped her and they tried not to laugh. *She actually kind of reminds me of a Vallerian.*

*Ooo! You need to tell me all about them, you’ve never mentioned that race before.*

Kara started to blush. *There’s a reason. They’re all just about physical pleasures… like anything goes…*

*Ah… now you reeeeally need to tell me about them.*

“Great choice ladies, it has the best views.” Aeryn smiled warmly, revealing her slightly pronounced canines, which looked like adorable kitty cat fangs, as she handed them their welcome packets, schedules, maps, and badges.

She pleasantly reminded them of the extensive number of legal forms that both they and their parents had been required to sign regarding the Kyle House’s rules for all their intern guests, including but not limited to: obeying curfew, no overnight guests or parties, all visitors must check-in and be approved, yadda, yadda. She reiterated that, since the mansion was a temporary home to many other guests from all walks of life, security was assigned 24/7 to watch over the interns, to make sure they stayed safe… and played by the rules.

*Spies is more like it.* Alex grumbled in Kara’s thoughts.

Her Kryptonian leaned comfortingly into her shoulder with a big grin. *Why do you think I picked the amazing room with a balcony? Let the spies try and catch us!*

They both tried hard not to laugh as Aeryn explained that their badges were to be worn or carried at all times.

“The badge is required for all entry and exit after hours for both the Kyle’s secure doors and your room. The embedded smart chip is also your meal card, and will process all types of transactions while you’re here… so don’t lose it.” She tapped Kara’s badge, smiled brightly, and said, “If you do, come see me A-S-A-P.”

*She’s really really cute, actually…* Kara added.

Alex raised an appraising eyebrow as she watched Aeryn bend over to get the last of their materials off a low shelf, and finally nodded. *Okay, fine, I have to agree with you on that point. And can I just say, that skirt is really, really short…*
Ah, you noticed that too. They both were grinning... and blushing.

As they waited there for a few moments longer Alex, for the tenth time, ‘casually’ scanned the vaulted, sun-filled reception hall. She appreciated Wayne’s touch of high-tech efficiency and security. The place was wired with at least ten beyond cutting-edge security sensors and she noted three impressive looking enforcers in plain-clothes discreetly packing firearms on premises.

Are you ‘casing the joint’? Kara asked her playfully.

Hey, you were too! You know the drill. ‘Always…

... be aware of your surroundings’, yeah I know. I have Shah’s Rules of Situational Awareness etched into my brain too, just like you. So, did you happen to notice the high-end scanners built into the entryway doorframe?

No! Alex blinked in surprise, looking back to where they’d entered. Damn, there it is… how’d I miss that?!

Vaena, that’s why you have me! Kara beamed, and they both burst into sudden laughter, startling a confused Aeryn… who broke into a fascinated grin watching the two them.

“You two are so… in sync, aware, like a mated pair of wolves. I like you.” She said with a sort of considered finality as she began quickly typing on her touchscreen. Then her adorable expression turned to overly dramatic concern as she said in a sad voice, “I am so terribly sorry, but your roommates have both been mysteriously reassigned to other accommodations... you two cuties will have to endure the Tower Room all by yourselves for the duration of your stay.” Her frown quickly turned into a devious smile, and she winked at them.

Alex didn’t know what was happening, but it was awesome! She wanted to hug their oddly observant, unlikely catlike android fairy godmother. “Are you sure, Aeryn? Is that really okay?”

“Of course. We have room, and I am the Assistant Manager. Don’t fight it, just enjoy. And text me if you need anything, okay?” Alex nodded as the unearthly woman plucked a Kyle House business card from the display next to her station and scribbled her personal mobile number on the back of it before handing it to her.

Of course, Kara, never being one to worry about formality when she was feeling emotional, breezed over and wrapped her arms around their new friend, thanking her profusely. Alex noted without any jealousy how Aeryn didn’t seem to mind the prolonged contact with her bondmate, hands drifting to Kara’s supple waist.

Once she was released, a docile, and decidedly more thoughtful Aeryn smiled sedately and simply said, “Perhaps it is a kindness you will one day remember.”

They promised her they would never forget.

Why did she get so sad, do you think? Alex asked Kara.

I don’t know, but I like her, and we definitely need to do something nice for her.

Before they left to see their room, Kara asked their new friend about the name Kyle, and Aeryn happily guided them to a small, dark, wood-paneled area off the sunlit, vaulted reception hall, which served as a museum of sorts, and contained the history of the property.

She then waved goodbye, and said, “My friends and I are going out to a great little club we love on
Saturday, there’s live music, and dancing, if you two would like to come. By which I mean, would you both please come?” Her adorable kitty cat fanged grin sealed the deal.

After they confirmed they didn’t need to be twenty-one to enter, she and Kara eagerly agreed, and a very happy Aeryn left them on their own.

After a few minutes exploring the museum space, she and Kara learned that Kyle House had started out as a massive, opulent mansion built by some railroad tycoon way back in the late 1800s, and had changed hands between Hollywood moguls and movie stars until the mid-1960s, when it became a city-owned building serving as judicial offices, and later as a halfway house.

The building was almost condemned in the 90s but Selina Kyle, a woman of means, stepped in and deftly used the city’s cultural heritage law to stop its demolition. She made a deal with the city council, purchased the mansion for some pittance of a price, and restored the grand edifice to its former glory. She reopened it a year later as a shelter for battered woman and their children.

“That woman’s my hero!” Alex said, and Kara agreed.

A few minutes later she watched as her Kryptonian stared at a picture of the stunning young woman, maybe all of nineteen or twenty, accepting an award from the mayor. She had long black hair, and a figure to die for… to say she was insanely hot would definitely have been an understatement.

Now that's someone I'd like to meet. Kara glanced over at her bondmate with a wicked smile.

Alex scowled. I bet you would… You’re as bad as Jack. Don’t make me come over there and smack you, Kara Zor-El.

Reading on, they found out that in the early 2000’s the developer she’d defeated challenged Selina’s claims in court and, as dodgy as it appeared, seemed poised to win. That’s when an unlikely hero swooped in… the billionaire Bruce Wayne. He and Kyle mounted an aggressive defense and eventually bought the entire block outright for some ungodly amount of Wayne money.

The icing on the cake was due to another Gotham celeb’s timely intervention, the Batman!

Under the Dark Knight’s protection, the developer helped the police by fingerling the mob, and several high-ranking criminals were eventually convicted of multiple counts of bribery, murder, and extortion.

Why the costumed vigilante had become involved so far from home was still an official mystery, but as Kara studied the many photographs of Selina Kyle, Bruce Wayne, and the Batman, she began to see patterns in the years of historical data. She asked Alex and Shatari to crunch through it, and shared some of the very wonderful, and outrageous, ideas that were forming in her mind… rather like when you think you know the end of the story halfway into the book.

You think the Batman is… who??? No way! Alex’s mind was blown. “No fucking way…” she said it out loud and too loudly, covering her mouth as her curse echoed throughout the elegant room.

Alex! Kara teasingly admonished.

Alex stuck her tongue out at her bondmate and then giggled.

Kara continued, “I’ll need to talk to Kal to confirm my suspicions if he’ll tell me… but it's the logical conclusion to the body of evidence. Anything on your end?”

Alex stood up straight, she’d been studying a photo of Selina and Bruce dressed to the nines at some
gala. “Well, having a Kryptonian AI to help comb through thousands of databases, Internet archives, and police files, as well as scan years of articles and photos in minutes, turns out to be really helpful… I have mentioned that before, haven’t I?”

Alex was as close to squeeing as she’d ever get.

“A couple times.” Kara deadpanned with an affectionate grin.

“Anyway, yes… the very sexy Selina Kyle has been sighted with Mr. Wayne on numerous, more intimate, occasions. They’re definitely an item but have also been very discreet with their relationship. Also, something weird, her background data is really hinky. It’s been altered, and there’s lots of high-end hackery involved. Bottom line, I’m not sure who she really is. Your theory has weight, she could easily be a metahuman.”

Kara nodded.

“So, Ms. Kyle is probably someone with a mask, like me, trying to safeguard her private life, and Wayne and the Batman are protecting her.”

The drama was getting juicy.

Kara sighed, “Oh well, more mystery than we can handle today. Come on, let’s go check out our new home for the summer!”

The Tower Room…

“Can you believe we have this place all to ourselves? For the whole summer?” Alex turned around in place on the hardwood planks, staring in wonder around them.

“We definitely owe Aeryn, big time.” Kara was zipping around like a hummingbird checking out every nook and cranny in the place.

Their accommodations were incredible! The apartment was set at the top of the fourth floor, inside one of the massive towers, and was designed like an open circular room with a high raftered ceiling of old thick timbers riveted with iron, and above, a second-floor loft. The space was huge, over thirty feet in diameter, with a bank of huge windows set deep into the stone that looked out over the city and lined half the room.

As their awesome new friend had said, the view was insane, they could see for blocks, and blocks, and blocks. There was even a deck outside a bank of wide sliding doors, the perfect way to come and go after curfew.

They spent some time exploring.

The small, efficient kitchen had all the high-end amenities they needed: a large fridge, dishwasher, gas stove, poured concrete counters, everything to qualify it as a ‘gourmet’ kitchen, as well as a charming little bathroom with a tiled shower, and…

“We haz bathtub!” Alex bounced up and down as she stuck her head out of the high-end sliding bathroom door, “and bubble bath.”
Kara purred in response, “Mmmm, sounds lovely. I see many nights ahead, soaking with you.”

There were also four classy wooden desks and the same number of pre-made beds in the room. Two of the desks they’d use, in fact, they’d already dropped their backpacks on them with the intention of setting their laptops up later, but they chuckled about the bed situation.

After Alex indicated her choice of their sleeping arrangements, Kara quickly organized and opened all of their bags, and unpacked everything at super speed into drawers, closets, the medicine cabinet, wherever the stuff belonged, all over the apartment.

Kara paused briefly to admire her official USS Zumwalt flight jacket, onto which she’d lovingly sewn the patch of the ship’s badge. Kara had stitched Alex’s onto her canvas messenger bag for her, and Shah’d sewn her own onto her treasured ‘ninja bag’, the duffle she always carried her workout and combat gear in.

In a few seconds, she was standing in front of the neat stack of empty luggage, three completely dissembled beds, and two desks, dusting her hands off with a smug grin on her beautiful face.

They’d kept the softest queen-sized bed to use.

“Howe give me four seconds please.” Her sunny Kryptonian then said, before shimmering off to cart the stacks of deconstructed furniture and empty luggage to their assigned storage area in the basement.

Four seconds later, as promised, Kara reappeared. “Done. Let’s go find that coffee shop… girlfriend.”

Alex laughed and moved in close to slip into the crook of Kara’s offered arm. “Nooré cheshm-am, you constantly amaze me.”

Their next few days of blissful freedom….

They spent nearly every minute of the next four days together, doing everything they could, including getting to know ‘The Kyle’ as the locals called it, talking to staff, and meeting other interns as they filtered in.

Kara and Alex also had an AH-mazing time that Saturday night with the free-spirited Aeryn and her group of friends at the club, which supposedly had ‘the best cover band in the city’. Which turned out to be true… kind of.

Aeryn was unrecognizable when she came up and hugged a startled Alex shortly after she and Kara arrived at the place. Her smooth flowing android look and proper, almost synthetic, non-accented voice had been replaced by long curly locks of lustrous dark, fiery red hair, naturally pale skin, freckles, a bright smile (the cute canines turned out to be real), and a to-die-for slight Irish brogue.

Turns out, the quirky and very sweet, Irish woman was a chameleon of sorts, enjoying one persona at work but with her friends was just herself. They found out that she’d been living in National City since she and her brother had come over from Dublin straight out of university on work Visas over five years earlier.

She’d worked at The Kyle ever since.
The group ended up talking and dancing half the evening away. Unfortunately, the band’s singer had bailed, so they’d been playing mostly instrumentals. Alex had made the mistake of saying, “Kara can sing” out loud… and the wide-eyed Kryptonian quickly found herself dragged up on stage to talk to the band about a set list for her.

She then proceeded to stun everyone with her voice. The crowd was literally entranced as they swayed to the rhythm of her vocals, and as the night wore on, her new friends kept asking her to keep going and requesting songs.

Not long into her performance, Kara happened to overhear (with her hyper senses) as Aeryn leaned into Alex and whispered with dismay, “Your angel wants to be a journalist? Seriously??” Her bondmate just gave her a helpless shrug and a smile, but her eyes never left Kara’s.

To say that she enjoyed Alex watching her would have been the understatement of the year! The Kryptonian could feel her beautiful bondmate’s arousal mingled with her own, and it was intoxicating. In fact, it was nearly impossible for her to fight the compulsion to shimmer over and claim her human in front of everyone with a kiss.

A while later, as she was totally killing Lorde’s song, Team, she overheard something that made her blush furiously, and almost miss a line of the lyrics. Almost.

“Look at you, Heather… new crush?” Aeryn teased her friend, a smiling and energetic African American early twenty-something. Kara gave the woman big props for her choice of the devastatingly radiant lacey blue dress she was wearing and made a quick mental note to make one just like it for herself.

Heather’s captivated brown eyes never left the Kryptonian as she flowed into the chorus, but she did playfully push a giggling Aeryn with her shoulder, “Do you blame me?? I mean… just look at her… a goddess who moves like a dancer, with the voice of an angel...” The last part of her comment drifted into a dreamy sigh as her chin settled into her hands, elbows planted on their table. “Can I ask Alex if I can borrow her for the weekend, or maybe for life? Imagine waking up to those big blue eyes every day!”

Kara grinned as she continued singing, intrigued by the conversation, and extremely flattered by the lovely woman’s interest.

Aeryn glanced around the club, and smirked, “It looks like you need to get in line Bríomhaire.” Kara didn’t know the meaning of the last beautiful word, but it seemed like a term of affection, and endearment.

“What do you...” Heather poked her head up and blinked, startled, as she scanned the room. “…mean?” There were at least sixty young gorgeous people in the large space they were in, and the majority were swaying with Kara’s crystal clear voice, eyes following her as if spellbound... just as Heather had been.

The poor woman suddenly looked crushed.

Kara was used to the attention, though she’d been oblivious to it that night. While she wished she could comfort her new friend in some way, the Kryptonian was too busy gazing at the object of her own obsession. Alex had just wrapped her tongue around her icy drink’s straw and slid it slowly into her mouth through the softly pursed lips Kara desperately wanted to take in her own.
You’re doing that on purpose, Vaena… Rao!

What? Her human asked innocently. This? She then ran her tongue over the edges of her mouth with a suggestive grin aimed directly at Kara… who could feel her temperature literally rising as she rolled into a flawless rendition of Lana Del Rey’s National Anthem.

That is… sooo… hot. Kara was now the one almost in a trance, her sensuous voice thrilling her audience as she brought the song to a crescendo, all the while never taking her soft, almost shy gaze from the sexy brunette over at their table.

She and Alex had begun caressing each other through their bond… causing jolts of electric pleasure to brush over their skin, and linger in unexpectedly wonderful places.

It was ecstasy mixed with pure joy.

Meanwhile, seated next to Alex but leaning away to keep from being overheard, Aeryn clucked her tongue suggestively at Heather and continued speaking to her in a low voice, “Don’t look so sad, you never had a chance with Kara anyway… none of them do! Look at her up there on stage, every eye is on her, wanting her… and she could have anyone here she wished, like that!” The redhead snapped her fingers with a wicked grin. “Including me… yet, her eyes always return to her Alexandra, who in turn, only sees her angel. They are Anamchara to one another… you can’t fight that.”

Aeryn then breathed in longingly as she attempted to soothe her heartbroken friend. “Bríomhaire, my baby gays are in love! Don’t you see? And not just in some boring, shallow hook up that passes for love in this damn heartless city kind of way… what they have is deep. I’ve seen it, in my mind’s eye.”

Heather sagged comfortably into her friend’s side, pouting, “Not making me feel any better, Cairdiúil.”

“I know, and am sorry. C’mere.” Aeryn cooed softly, like a mother, as she leaned in, pulling her friend close and kissing her softly on the forehead. “You will find your wan… your own Anamchara, one day, just as Kara and Alex have.”

“My soulmate, huh? You promise?”

Aeryn smiled and said, “I swear.”

Kara’s heart was touched by the sweet moment between friends and deeply moved by how Aeryn, a veritable stranger to them just two days earlier, had taken her and Alex under her wing, her ‘baby gays’ (the Kryptonian grinned at the descriptor) as both benefactor and protector.

We still really need to do something very nice for Aeryn, Alex. Help me think of something epic, okay?

I will. She’s pretty amazing, right? Her friends are awesome too. I like Heather, except for how she can’t keep her eyes off of you.

Jealous?

Alex hesitated. Maaybe…

You know you have no reason to be, right?
Her Vaena’s heart warmed. I know… it’s just... I always imagined what the whole girlfriend experience would be like, you know? Even how I’d never be that girl… the one being insanely jealous of somebody lusting after my... She paused… that’s stupid, isn’t it? I mean, look at me… my skin’s probably bright green right now. Kara could feel her bondmate’s embarrassment at her admission, and it just made her love Alex more.

*I don’t suppose it would help at all if I told you Heather desperately wants to take me home with her and make love to me all weekend?*

*What?!* Alex shot up from where she had been lounging at the table watching Kara sing and narrowed her gaze over at the oblivious young woman.

*Alex, Alex! She wants to, I didn’t say she asked me to.*

*Oh. She sat back down before anyone noticed her sudden, brief burst of outrage.*

*Why did you…? Ohhh… you did that to show me that it doesn’t matter, didn’t you?!*  

*Uh huh, you’re good… so tell me, why? Why doesn’t it matter that Jack, or Heather, or most of the people around you, seem to want to sleep with me?*

Alex was blushing, curled shyly around her soda as Kara watched her from where she was singing on stage. *Because you love me, and only me? That’s why…?*

*Bingo.*

*Rao, Kara, you are such an unbelievably perfect girlfriend. You know that, right?*  

*Hey, I aim to please… you Vaena.*

Alex was still blushing. *You always say that!*

*Good. You’ve been listening.*

After Kara’s performance, Aeryn and all their new friends wouldn’t stop with the compliments. The band actually begged her to join them, offering her the role as their new lead vocalist. She wasn’t sure if she’d have time with her internship responsibilities but did agree to talk to a guy they trusted who was a talent scout and agent for the local indie music scene.

*What would it hurt? I could get used to doing this every night, or at least a few of them!*  

…………………………..

*The weekend…*

She and Alex also spent time over the long weekend exploring the maze of city blocks around The Kyle, meeting their interesting local neighbors, taking the subway, and walking... so much walking! Back in Midvale you really needed a car or bicycle, or some form of transportation, to go anywhere you wanted to be. In National City, all you really needed was your feet, and a National City Transportation Authority (NCTA) pass, to get anywhere.

At first, the Kingston district, where The Kyle was located, came off as a chaotic jumble, and even a little uninviting. Once you walked a block away from the flawless countenance of their residence,
with its manicured grounds and high walls of ancient, quarried stone, it was like stepping into a different world. The austere gave way to a kaleidoscope of colors. As they walked, signs and small billboards advertising the local businesses seemed to proliferate everywhere, and these small wonders of design fascinated Kara. They came in an infinite variety of shapes, sizes, and languages, most she knew but others she didn’t… and that was exciting.

Most of the shops along the busy streets had retractable bars to cover their windows and doors at night, and the sidewalks hadn’t been cleaned in ages. There were also homeless folks about, sleeping in door jams, or panhandling as they walked by. Kara made it a point to say hello and hand out water and snacks, which she’d purchased at little mom and pop bodegas specifically for that purpose.

Their hectic neighborhood was filled with life and a multitude of unique individuals, each with their own story. You couldn’t walk ten steps without tripping over some tiny family-run business or restaurant: Afghan, Korean, Indian, Mexican, Chinese, Thai, and even Brazilian! There were so many new smells and tastes to discover!

Kara found the vibrant cacophony thrilling, like an adventure.

Their program literature cautioned the interns against going out at night, especially after curfew, but she and Alex disregarded that ‘recommendation’ right off, staying out until after one in the morning the first night… as they explored the streets and vendors, tasted new dishes, talked to people, and listened to some great live music. Shatari wouldn’t let Alex eat anything unsafe, but Kara sampled anything that struck her fancy without fear, her iron gut completely unaffected by any Earth microbes and bacteria.

The Kryptonian also made sure to speak to the people they met in their own languages whenever possible and, as she was aware of them, deferred to their customs. If she observed something she’d remember it, add it to her repertoire, and share it with Alex through their bond. This alone made them incredibly popular everywhere they went and quite possibly an oddity, she supposed… two pretty lily-white girls from the ‘burbs chatting it up in perfect Farsi with the kitchen crew at the Afghan place, and in Mandarin at Yang Chow just down the street.

Alex listened closely whenever there was a language she didn’t know or wanted to learn, jumping in now and again when she had the right words or leaning on Shatari to be her universal translator when she had to. She hated doing that, though… it kind of felt like cheating.

They almost couldn’t escape their legion of new friends, who begged them to stay, or at least come back, and they promised they would.

Over the weekend they also discovered an amazing place called The Labyrinth, a sprawling warren of retail shops down the block from The Kyle that was like a maze once you entered. It was as if the designer if there was one, had decided to build a twisting internal mall in the old buildings but, like the famous Winchester House had done so haphazardly, one business at a time. It was incredible to explore… and nearly impossible to find your way around in, or out of, without a map.

Kara was especially taken with a little Chinese mystic shop called Nine Dragons. It had an unimaginable amount of merchandise crammed into a small space but still managed to feel serene. The smell of incense was heavy in the hazy air as they first walked in… to the sound of chimes. Around them was an array of figurines, scrolls, wraps, knickknacks, and clothing.

A very old Chinese woman was watching Kara like a hawk from behind the counter when they came in, her gray eyes sharp in a soft field of wrinkled wisdom. She had probably been extremely beautiful in her youth, and still retained a shadow of that charm, as well as excellent posture. She was dressed in a gorgeous red outfit, with a high straight collar and gold and black dragons stitched into
the silk.

There was something almost magical about her that Kara couldn’t quite explain, but felt drawn to.

“Welcome, young ones.” She said in Mandarin.

Kara brightened, responding naturally in the same language, “It is a pleasure to meet you, honored lady. I am Kara, and this is Alex, we’re just visiting National City.”

The old woman’s eyes widened as if surprised by Kara’s linguistic mastery.

“You speak Mandarin beautifully. I am Madam Xiao.” She smiled brightly and clasped her hands together, apparently quite pleased. “Look around, maybe you’ll see something you like. I’ll get us some tea now, okay? Okay.”

Before either of them could respond she disappeared behind a wall of beads that covered the door behind her, moving faster than Kara thought a human woman her age (maybe ninety?) was capable of moving.

Alex said, “Wow, she’s quick. I caught some of that conversation… tea sounds lovely. What a nice woman.”

They wandered around the shop, examining anything that caught their eye. Kara gathered some incense to buy and, after a couple of minutes, Madam Xiao returned with an elegant tray upon which sat three delicate china cups filled with steaming tea.

The fragrance was wonderful and pulled Kara to the older woman who was sitting down at a small table off by a window in the shop. She and Alex seated themselves and began sipping the delicious hot tea. It was golden yellow in appearance, with a fresh, delicate aroma that was somewhat flowery, and when Kara closed her eyes she felt the ancient earth in which the plants had grown.

There were more leaves in the liquid than either of them was used to, but it was so delightful neither of them cared.

“This tastes amazing, is it a type of Oolong?” Kara asked politely.

The old woman shook her head, “Yes, and no. This is Tieguanyin, from Fujian, my home… so much better than Oolong. You agree, yes?”

“Yes!” Both Alex and Kara said in unison as they nodded, holding their cups cradled in both hands under their noses, savoring the baking warmth and the wonderful aroma.

As she drank, Kara noticed the detailed brushwork on the cups, and that the bottom of the saucer was decorated with beautifully designed signs of Zodiac around the edge. Very interesting.

“Have you traveled far?” Madam Xiao asked.

“We just flew in from Metropolis a few days ago.” Kara said politely, and then added, “Could we switch to English? My girlfriend is just learning.”

Thanks, Kara. Alex thoughts were appreciative. I wouldn’t have been able to follow half of that without Shatari translating.

The old woman grinned, “Of course, of course, English is fine.” She waved her hand dismissively, speaking in perfect English without any accent. “I’ve lived in this country for over thirty years and
speak it fluently. I just miss the old language, especially when I have such a wonderful companion with such a beautiful voice to talk to.” She sighed, “The kids these days, they’d rather learn to rap, or hip hop, or do the Google, or whatever, than how to speak the language of their ancestors.”

“Thank you, Madam.” Kara blushed, trying not to laugh.

Alex smiled, “She’s like that, you should hear her sing.”

Madam Xiao did not seem surprised. “I can only imagine.” They went on to speak of many things including the neighborhood and how it had changed over the years. The old woman was a small business owner and very worried about the future of her community. Everyone was being pushed out but there was nowhere to go close by so they’d all be scattered to four winds.

“I wish there was something I could do to help, Madam,” Kara said.

The woman appeared to be greatly affected by Kara’s words… she paused to sip her tea, her eyes becoming glassy with unshed tears. “It’s not your struggle, dear. Fate will unfold as it is already ordained in the stars, I only hope it is in our favor. My lawyers think we have a chance anyway.”

The trio shared a chuckle at that.

“Young ladies, when you’re done with your tea, would you allow me to read your leaves?”

Kara blinked, “The tea leaves?”

“Yes, my dear.”

Alex leaned in, setting her cup down, “It’s a thing, Kara. Tasseography is a form of divination practiced by examining and interpreting the patterns of the leaves left behind in the bottom once you finish.”

Madam Xiao was grinning, “Well done, wise Alex! That’s what people now call it, but the thing itself is older than its current name, like many of us.”

“Is it ancient Chinese magic?” Kara asked, obviously thrilled.

“Dear me, no!” The old woman smiled. “I learned how to do it from a beautiful Gypsy couple I met in Paris back in the sixties. Let’s just say we worked out their compensation in trade.” She waggled her eyebrows. “Times were fun back then… I could tell you such epic tales of debauchery that your toes would curl!” She cackled, and then promptly burst into a brief coughing fit. “Anyway, can you wonderful girls please come and replace my lazy grandsons? I like you both better.”

They all laughed again. It was easy with Madam Xiao.

“You can read my leaves!” They both nearly shouted.

Kara was excited, a real fortuneteller! She’d always wanted to have someone read her Tarot, her palm, or whatever, and eagerly drained her cup.

....................

Later that night, back in The Tower Room....

It was close to midnight, and Kara and Alex sat together on the floor of the Tower Room dressed in
their pajamas, basically just sweatpants and t-shirts, lights off, leaning into each other in front of the ginormous curved wall of glowing windows that filled half their apartment. They were looking out over the flashing lights of the eternally frenetic city and contemplating their fortunes.

“You know it’s all an act, right? There’s no such thing as real fortunetellers.” Alex was saying… for the third time.

“I know, I know, it was just kind of ominous…”

“What? That you’ll be forced to make some kind of ‘life or death’ choice? Or that our ancient mystic saw you, me, and a third young woman… um, maybe Shah?, in Seattle, standing on top of the Space Needle… in dresses? That’s crazy! And, by the way, reading tea leaves doesn’t usually include visions. I think ‘Madam Xiao’ was high as a kite when she gave us our fortunes.” Alex waved her hand dismissively. “Oh, and that bit about ‘sorrow and darkness’ and our ‘never-ending path’? I wouldn’t lose any sleep over any of it.”

“It seemed really close to home… you know?” Kara fidgeted. “And what about you? Apparently, the lover you are ‘bound’ to is going to change you in some irrevocable way, so you better run while you can…” She slumped pathetically against her bondmate.

“Interesting choice of words, huh? ‘Bound’?” Alex nudged her with a smirk.

“I’m serious, Alex. I don’t ever want you to get hurt because of me… but just being with me guarantees you’ll always be in danger! If not now, someday.” Kara was suddenly terrified. The old woman’s words were too specific, too scary.

Alex spun a bit on the polished hardwood until she was directly in front of Kara, who couldn’t help but look up from the floor and into her human’s intense hazel gaze. “Nooré cheshm-am, I honestly have no idea what this woman knows, or what she can actually see, but whatever that is… and even if there’s danger ahead for us, I’m not going anywhere.”

Kara brightened. She felt Alex’s love all around and inside of her, as her bondmate continued, “I’ve wanted this… us, since I felt the spark of our connection that very first day, that first moment… Before you offered yourself to me on our first flight, on that starry night before my birthday, when you gave me my necklace.”

“Uh huh. It was a beautiful evening, and I wanted you so much… I didn’t know what was going to happen, that I would actually bind my heart to yours… that I was in the grip of The Fires. Alex, believe me, as much as I wanted it, I didn’t think it would happen to me, ever, and I had no idea it would work with a human. I want this more than anything… but you can still choose to be safe… it’s not too late, you can sever our connection with just a thought.”

“Kara, stop! What’s gotten into you? You don’t get it… I want this too. More than anything in the world, the universe even! I accepted our bond willingly, eagerly! I love you! I love us! Screw the danger. Bring it! We’ll face it together.” Alex reached over to gently lift her bondmate’s hand and place her palm on her chest. “Being bound, or connected, or whatever you want to call it, to you has been the most amazing and joyful thing I’ve ever had in my life, or in any fantasy life that I have ever imagined.

“Kara Zor-El, you’ve made me so happy, I can’t even describe it. And… I honestly can’t imagine a world where your heart isn’t beating in my chest.”

And at that moment, a reverberation like thunder coursed through every cell of Kara’s being like a living thing. She drew in a quick surprised breath, her gaze never leaving Alex’s gorgeous hazel
eyes. Her bondmate appeared just as surprised as she was, having been touched by the same incredible power Kara had felt.

Then, as one, all the doom and gloom nonsense Madam Xiao had infected them with earlier in the evening was swept from their minds. The tenuous control they had worked so hard to maintain finally crumbled to ash and neither could stop the flames that consumed them.

Kara shimmered without a thought to meet Alex’s eager lips with a hunger she’d never allowed herself to feel before. She reached around and cupped her bondmate’s firm ass in her hands, then lifted her from the floor as she stood. In response, a giggling Alex wrapped her strong legs around Kara’s waist and they kissed ravenously, as if, until that second, they’d been starved of each other for a lifetime.

*I love you,* Vaena. Kara whispered in Alex’s thoughts as she whisked her off to their bed, where they proceeded to pull and tug at each other’s clothing with heated urgency.

*My heart is yours,* Nooré cheshm-am. Alex’s meaning went deeper than that… she meant all of her, and Kara could feel it.

They were becoming completely aware of each other as their desire grew, the walls between them crumbling in that sweet, exquisite moment. Two were becoming one... an infinite loop, an Ouroboros entwined into itself, an unending arc of a star’s flame, reaching into eternity.

They no longer needed words.

Kara was poised over her beautiful human on her hands and knees, a cascade of her long golden hair brushing electric against Alex’s sensitive skin. She knew exactly what her mate wanted… the same thing Kara had desired for so long...

She began slowly, lovingly indulging herself with an exploration of Alex’s strong, supple body, before dipping her head down to reverently wrap her warm tongue around one of Alex’s erect nipples, causing her human to cry out, arching her back over the wrinkled sheets.

Her bondmate reached down to run her hands over Kara’s arms, shoulders, and through her hair, a look of awe and wonder in her softly hooded hazel gaze.

The Kryptonian sent a playful thought as she flicked lightly with her tongue, causing Alex to shudder once again with pleasure; *You’re just like Cinderella,* Vaena.

*What…? How am… *anything*… like Cinderella?*

Kara looked up with a sexy smirk from where she was lavishing her devotion and nibbled in just the right way to elicit another small ecstasy-filled moan. *Because silly… you fit perfectly in my mouth.*

Alex almost laughed but was caught in a wave of indescribable pleasure. *That… was… a slipper…

Merely a technicality, I assure you. I like this version better.*

*Idiot. Oh! Yeah… right there… mmmmmmmm… oh, Kara…*

In her heightened state of arousal, Alex silently begged for more… and her lover eagerly sought to please, leaving trails of searing kisses down the soft, pale skin of her mate’s taut stomach, past Alex’s cute belly-button piercing, to the delicate band of Shatari’s perfect copy of her lacy black underwear.

Kara’s flushed human had no patience and helped her slide the hindering article of clothing over her
hips and down off her ankles, where she flicked them somewhere far away as if they had offended her.

As Alex drew her in to lay between her open legs, Kara took her time. Moving her fingers with a gentle rhythm she reverently brought her mate to the precipice of a shuddering wave of intense pleasure. Alex gasped for air, desperately grabbing at the sheets and screaming words so blasphemous the Kryptonian normally would have blushed.

And Kara loved every astounding second with her, relishing doing what she’d dreamed of on so many nights in Midvale while watching her dark-haired beauty sleep in her arms.

She grinned with delight as she moved her tongue inside of Alex, tasting her, and listening to her quickened breathing hitch repeatedly with a kind of shocked delight… over, and over again. Her Vaena was crying out her name and grasping at Kara’s hair, pulling her in closer, deeper.

Alex had also been singing Kara’s Kryptonian name, over and over in her thoughts, begging, pleading, giggling, cursing… it was so hot. Her rambling pleadings became even less coherent as her Kryptonian lover accelerated her pace, using a touch of super speed to suddenly bring her seconds away from another climax.

Intrigued, Kara allowed the sensations Alex was feeling to wash through her as well and quaked with her own cresting passion.

Oh, Rao!

Kara was now moving with honed precision, and eliciting a constant series of explosive gasps and whimpers from the object of her desire.

Alex writhed in her grasp like an uncontrollable serpent, calling to Kara with her mind as well as her body. Though they didn’t need words, it was thrilling to hear Alex’s voice in her thoughts.

Your wish… Kara whispered seductively in her lover’s delirious thoughts.

And so the hours delightfully passed…

They would end up showing each other pleasures the young Kryptonian had never even imagined possible. And as the doors to her most intimate cell memories continued to fall open over the course of that long, glorious night, and the blazing revelations became real, Kara put her new knowledge into immediate practice.

At many points, poor Alex thought she would surely die, but demanded Kara not stop.

If I die making love to you, it would absolutely be a good death; Alex chuckled at one point after her twelfth orgasm… (not that Kara or Alex were keeping count anymore, only Shatari was tracking the statistics.)

During a short break in their revelry, Kara, glistening with sweat, had shimmered off to pour them each a cold glass of water; bring her human lover a warm, wet washcloth, and a bowl of M&M’s; and retrieve a couple of towels from the closet for them.

This is heaven. Kara whispered back to her as she ran water in the bathroom.

Kara… I… love you… so much… Alex’s thoughts tickled Kara’s mind as her bondmate shimmered back into bed and nestled into her.
As I love you, Vaena. I would pull the stars down from heaven if you but asked.

Kara Zor-El, no one’s ever said anything so… beautiful, or romantic, to me, ever. Thank you. You know I feel the same about you, right? I just don’t have your way with words.

I think after the last few hours it’s become clear that we don’t need words. Kara smiled as she darted in and kissed Alex, and they once again became a tangle of limbs and fire.

As the night drifted on, like some magnificent dream, they continued their explorations, making love until the morning’s sunrise wrapped them in the warmth of its red glow.

Look, Alex! It’s like Rao’s light is all around us!

They lay there, holding each other, both staring in wonder at the sight. It was as if the god of old Krypton had reached across the vastness of the universe to offer a blessing to the Houses of El and Danvers in their union.

When they finally did fall asleep, the bondmates were cuddled together under a fresh sheet, foreheads touching… exhausted, but utterly satisfied and deliriously happy.

..................

Interlude - Earlier that same day

End of May – Year Two

Nine Dragons mystic shop, The Labyrinth

Kingston District – National City

When the tremors began at her shop that seemingly normal Sunday afternoon, Xiao was certain it could not be happening again.

It had been many centuries since a god had visited her… since the Ancient One had felt the Earth tremble at each subtle step, and the very air vibrated with creation’s breath.

The gods had abandoned her and their people long ago; left for the stars while humanity fell to ruin and ignorance. What did the immortals care? She’d given up dreaming of his… and of their return a long, long time ago.

Madam Xiao held back her tears as the ripples grew stronger... louder, closer. She was not wrong, and was now certain that a divine one approached, but who?

Not all of them had hated her…

Xiao, as she had been known for the past centuries, had once been young, beautiful… and filled with dark magic and a thirst for war; well, maybe more the conquering and ruling part and not so much the war, but she’d been damn good at it. That was before time itself had stretched her thin and turned her into the old, tired woman she’d become in these gray days.

Wen had been a god… kind and beautiful beyond imagining, he’d shown her passion as she’d never known and even managed to turn her wicked heart to the light. But despite his promises, and what she thought was love, he’d still left her… the coward, joining his brethren as they journeyed to other worlds all those many, many years ago.
Without their divine protection, the Wanyan’s fell and the great Dynasty of Jin was brought to ruin by Genghis Khan and his Mongol murderers. She could still remember the flames as Zhongdu’s walls crumbled… the rape of its children… and the screams of her own daughter.

_Gods!_ She choked, as tears streamed down her ancient cheeks. Recalling such memories upset her and made her weak. She angrily wiped her eyes.

_I cannot afford weakness._

Of course, Wen didn’t leave her emptyhanded… her lover gave her what he’d perceived to be a gift before he and his kind left the Earth… eternal life.

She closed one of her wrinkled hands into a fist. _Damn him. He’d even managed to half-ass that job._

Xiao glanced around her shop for her guardians, but her dragons had all hidden away in various nooks and crannies. _Of course, such scaredy-cats my children are._ As terrifying and powerful as the mythical beasts were, they tended to be bullies in a fight and had the good sense to scurry under the carpets or become statues in the presence of immortals.

She took a deep breath and prepared herself.

_Please this will be the day of my true death?_

Unfortunately, Xiao was unable to see her own future as she could see so easily for others… so she did not know. Many times over the long years she’d considered seeking a way to end her maddeningly eternal, painful life, but today wasn’t one of those days.

Her fingers weaved a pattern, pulling magic from the fabric of the universe itself, and a stunning red dress formed out the ether to wrap around her, make-up applied itself, and a cold black sword coalesced into her hand.

Shrouded in mist, the impossibly dark surface of the long slim blade looked as if it had been dipped in dry ice… and its darkness was already howling at the edges of Xiao’s mind.

“I didn’t expect to ever see you again either _Tratung_, so stop complaining and let us hope our reunion is brief.” She said curtly, silencing the evil thing’s cries. She already regretted calling _Blood Drinker_ back from the dark place she’d left it to rot so long ago.

The evil being did not belong in this world… where it could only do harm. The thought was not lost on Xiao that the same a thing could also easily be said about her.

She stood straight behind her counter, her magic seething with a touch of its ancient strength, perhaps for the last time. _If today is going to be my end, then I’ll at least make a good show of it._

Xiao was ready for whatever was to come…

_Or so she thought._

Through the glass windows that looked out of her shop into the mall, she saw them, the goddess, who shone like a star! with a demi-goddess at her side! They were laughing about something, and walking casually up to her door, hand in hand.

Where they touched each other was fire and flame… so radiant that Xiao had to squint, and could feel her own skin tingling with their desire.
The immortal wasn’t at all what she’d expected; the beautiful goddess was young, younger than she appeared, but also… older. What does that even mean? Had she spent time… out of time? She was filled with light, kindness, and strength… but also a great sadness. Her grace betrayed her divine nature, though she hid it well, and the invisible threads that nearly completely bound together the souls of the two revealed their deep and abiding love for one another.

This was one goddess who would never leave her human behind.

Xiao liked her immediately, well, both of them, actually.

She acted quickly before the bells above the doors could chime… sending her disappointed, and slightly confused, malevolent sword back to the shadowy realm from whence she’d summoned it, and then dispelling her deadly layer of protective wards.

Later… After the young ones left, the Ancient One steadied herself on the counter and a small sob escaped her throat.

The old gods have not returned…

The beautiful, golden-haired creature and her lover were something new in the world, something good. It was all Xiao could do not to cry she was so happy.

Before her were the potential instruments of her salvation.

It was just so terribly sad that one of them would have to die.

Last day of May – Year Two

The Kyle - The Tower Room

Kingston District – National City

The morning after the most magnificent night of Kara & Alex's lives

Alex was starving. No, she was ravenous… she’d actually never used that word to describe herself before because it had never seemed accurate, but today… today she’d never felt more in need of calories to burn.

She was warm, inside and out, and deliriously happy… everything was perfect.

Being tangled with Kara in bed was always her favorite place to be, but the sensations she was experiencing this morning were new… Electricity coursed through her wherever they touched or came close to touching… The tiny hairs on her skin rose and followed whenever Kara brushed close.

It was as if she were truly alive, and aware of everything, for the first time in her life.

Our bond is complete.

She hadn’t yet opened her eyes… still blissfully lost in the shivering echo of the exquisite earthquakes that had taken her again, and again. It wasn’t like she’d never tried to rock her own
world, she’d made many, many clumsy attempts… but until Kara showed her she could never have
guessed what that term actually meant.

Alex lay absolutely content, quietly committing to memory the weight of her Kryptonian lover’s arm
lying across her chest; the feel of the cushion of golden locks trapped beneath her head; the long leg
draped over her body like a hug; her soft breath on her neck; the wonderful taste of her, still on
Alex’s lips, on her tongue; and her own fingertips, gliding over the skin of Kara’s silky, flat stomach.

She should have been utterly spent after the previous night’s beautiful and incredible experience…
their all-night lovemaking marathon… she blushed. They hadn’t collapsed until sometime around
6:30 in the morning and sleep reluctantly came sometime after that.

The fact was, she didn’t feel tired, or sore, at all…she felt fucking amazing! Plus, she’d found her
new favorite thing… mind-blowing sex with Kara.

*Hmmm, why the Hell am I awake? What time is it anyway?*

She tried opening one eye, but the sun was too bright. Squinting against the infernal glare, she slowly
reached over with her right hand, feeling around the nightstand until she found the small, tablet-like
controller, and dialed up the tint on the vast wall of windows to shade out the mid-morning sun.

*Gotta love the Wayne tech!*

Then, her connection to Shah lit up and her Persian sister was purring in her thoughts, *Good not
quite morning, joon-am.*

*Ha! Morning Shah. How’d your night out with the geekterns go?*

*Awesome. We did some bonding over pizza, went to an amazing comic shop, and then found this
really great arcade in the city. It was fun... not near as fun as your night, but I was with a bunch of
geeks, and not our angel. One thing though... I did have to leave the arcade in a hurry. When you
two got started... *hmmm*, let’s just say I almost had my very own *When Harry Met Sally* deli scene
moment... while playing *Dance Mania* if you can believe it. Talk about embarrassing!*

Alex suddenly felt like she couldn’t breathe. *Rao! I’m so sorry! I tried to block everything...*

Shah cut her off… and sent a warm hug her way. *Okay, aziz-am, I get it! I was there....*

Hearing Shah’s throaty laugh in her thoughts was joyful, and Alex joined her. *Fine. Anyway, I had
to stumble out of that place, and getting back to my apartment was a challenge... I’m certain my
Uber driver thought I was a crazy person. I wasn’t able to figure out how to shield myself, but once I
slipped into the tub with a cup of tea I didn’t care anymore. Rao... can I just say... wow! And* **wow!**

*Shah! Alex was blushing furiously on her end. So, you felt...?*

*Everything... Shah said the word like a worshipful exhalation.*

*Why didn’t you say anything??*

Alex joon, *I didn’t want to ruin your, or admittedly my own, beautiful moment. Besides, knowing
how you two feel about each other gives me relationship goals... if I ever manage to end up in one.*
Awww. Alex loved her picky friend so much… but Shah’s self-imposed impossibly high boyfriend quality bar was definitely an impediment to her ever dating, not that Alex could tell her that. Shah would meet someone, in time… she was too amazing not to. *You will, when you least expect it I imagine.*

So…

So… um, yeah, we’ll never speak of this again, right? Alex pleaded.

*Outside of the three of us? Of course joon-am.*

She could feel Shah’s amusement. *Thanks, aziz-am, seriously. Anyway, can you join us tonight at The Tower, for dinner? You can entertain Kara, and me again, with your story. Come on, you have to! It’s our last night of freedom before we start the internship grind for the summer. We’ll celebrate, and you can stay over, ‘k? Kara is giving massages and can pick you up, fly you over.*

*How can I turn down that offer? So it shall be.*

After making their plans for Shah to spend the night, her friend had to go, so Alex turned her attention to watching Kara sleep. Her golden-haired beauty was still possessively draped over her, which she didn’t mind at all… it was actually so freaking hot that she couldn’t fully wrap her head around it. Or, as the tween girls were saying these days, she ‘couldn’t even’…

She eventually sighed with the realization that she desperately had to pee, and managed to slip out from under Kara to do that, brush her teeth, and run a brush through her hair. Once she was up, she decided to brew a pot of coffee, and cook a hot breakfast of scrambled eggs, cinnamon waffles, fresh blackberries, butter, and real maple syrup for the two of them.

Alex was so excited to treat Kara to breakfast in bed. She meticulously assembled a tray the way her bondmate would have, perfectly arranged, the fruit sliced just so, the garnish bright and aesthetically pleasing. Then, humming, she brought and set it beside her lover…

*Wow! I can actually call Kara that now, and mean it!*

Alex was still feeling joyful and, after standing there watching Kara sleep, basically worshipping her for five minutes, she leaned in to kiss her beautiful bondmate’s softly parted lips to wake her.

*Good morning nooré cheshm-am. I made breakfast.*

Kara groaned, opened one stunning sapphire eye, then smiled like a sunrise when she saw Alex… her angelic face still half-buried in the down pillow. *Breakfast in bed?! You are the perfect lover, Vaena Alex, you know exactly how to win a Kryptonian’s heart, at least mine.*

*With food? Alex teased.*

Kara moved onto her back and stretched like a sexy golden-maned cat. *Yes… and really, really amazing sex. I think we need to add more of that to my training regimen.*

*Noted. How about after waffles?*

*Alex, you know my heart.*

*No Kara Zor-El, I know your stomach!*

They both started giggling.
Lamb - Gorecki

"If I should die this very moment
I wouldn’t fear
For I’ve never known completeness
Like being here
Wrapped in the warmth of you
Loving every breath of you
Still in my heart this moment
Or it might burst
Could we stay right here
Until the end of time until the earth stops turning
Gonna love you until the seas run dry
I’ve found the one I’ve waited for
All this time I’ve loved you
And never known your face
All this time I’ve missed you
And searched this human race
Here is true peace
Here my heart knows calm
Safe in your soul
Bathed in your sighs
Want to stay right here
Until the end of time
All I’ve known
All I’ve done
All I’ve felt was leading to this
All I’ve known
All I've done

All I've felt was leading to this

Gonna stay right here

'Till the end of time 'till the earth stops turning

I'm gonna love you 'till the seas run dry

I've found the one I've waited for

The one I've waited for"

.................................

Glossary/FAQ

Sorry, had to move the glossary to end of the chapter because I broke the end note character limit.

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue, except when actually included in the telepathic/thought conversation, then it's not italicized.

Terms: Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

Ah!khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

Alex vanimelda = ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

C'est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El; friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

Malā’ikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature (Persian)

órenya = ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Greeting & Parting Phrases
Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Bedrood: Means ‘good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

Khodāhāfez: A term of farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on who she’s talking to for its spiritual context. Literally translated it means: "May God be your Guardian" - Khoda, which is Middle Persian refers to Ahura Mazda, the ancient Zoroastrian god, and hāfiz from the Arabic “hifz”, meaning "protection". The vernacular translation is simply "good-bye". (Persian/Farsi)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

azīz-am – ‘my dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

joon-am – ‘my dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘the light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person’s name<’ + joon (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean ‘dear’. So, ‘Shah joon’, means ‘dear Shah’ when Marjorie said it. This is a common word to use in every conversation and every context.

Others names/nickname/titles/things:

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Bríomhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition.

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity.

Tieguanyin - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province.

Tratung – khrag 'thung' - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’.
'Heart of my heart' very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

**Vallerian** – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshipped, or traded. You better believe the catalog of their race’s knowledge is now open to Kara in her cell memories. Yowza…

**Wan** - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find 'her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:

*The blissfully delirious lovers’ bond is finally blessed by the Fires of Rao, look out world*! *I hope you enjoyed. There are lots of exciting things happening with our heroes, but hold up, who’s the scary old woman in the shop, and what’s her damage? I guess we’ll need to read more to find out, though don’t expect quick answers, Xiao’s plot will take time to unfold.*

Kara & Alex’s soundtrack inspiration for this chapter:

**At the club:**

"Calvin Harris - This Is What You Came For (feat. Rihanna)"

*This is so Kara singing, looking out into a sea of admirers, but only having eyes for Alex.*

**For that beautiful night in The Tower:**

"Hailee Steinfeld, Grey - Starving (feat. Zedd)"

’nough said. This is so dead-on Kara and Alex… they both feel this passion.

and....

"Lana Del Rey - Body Electric"

*The mood this song evokes is perfect for Kara and Alex as The Fires consume them.*

**Kara’s song for her Vaena Alex:**

"Lamb - Gorecki"

*I dare you not to tear up when you listen to this beautiful song that expresses exactly what Kara is feeling about Alex.*

Songwriters: ANDREW JOHN BARLOW, LOUISE ANN RHODES / © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc. / Used for non-commercial purposes.

**Next Up:**

*Chapter 16: “You Are My Light” – Headline: When disaster strikes National City, will*
a hero rise? Pfft! Of course she will! In other news: Kara, Alex, and Shah officially begin their three-month-long summer internships, Kara and Alex go on a date for the 4th of July, and someone discovers Archangel’s identity… will they prove to be friend, or foe?

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me. Also, please share this story with those you think might enjoy it!

Glossary/FAQ was moved to end of the chapter because end notes ran out of room per the character limit. :}


You Are My Light

Chapter Summary

Breaking news: When disaster strikes National City, will a hero rise? Pfft! Of course, she will!

Where Kara, Alex, and Shah are a month into their summer internships and having the time of their lives.

Kara and Alex go on a date for the 4th of July.

Also, a couple other little, teeny tiny things... the disaster I mentioned, plus someone discovers Archangel’s identity! Will they prove to be friend or foe?

Chapter Notes

Music tracks for this chapter are in chapter end notes, please check there if you'd like to listen. I hope you are all enjoying the story so far!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

July 4th – Year Two

A little over a month into Kara, Alex, and Shah’s summer internships

National City’s Japanese Botanical Gardens (after hours)

20:21 hours UTC -8, Thursday night, U.S. West Coast Time

Alex leaned back into Kara’s yielding embrace, nestling into the warm, safe place between her bondmate’s silky, naked thighs that was exclusively hers. Powerful arms wrapped her gently from behind, and wherever their skin touched it was like lightning danced between them.

It was almost too much goodness to feel all at once… and Alex delighted in it.

In fact, she’d never been so happy in all of her life.

They sat snuggled together on a soft red and black tartan blanket, looking up at the serene swath of stars stretched above... a ritual they’d brought with them from Midvale. Tonight, the intrepid amateur astronomers were tracking the International Space Station as its orbit took it over National City.

While Alex and Shatari could easily identify the satellite’s distant light swiftly moving across the backdrop of the night sky, know it’s exact orbit in relation to other near-Earth objects, its altitude, velocity (about 17.2k mph), trajectory, even pluck the signals coming to and from it out of the very ether to analyze, decode, and eavesdrop on, her bondmate could see so much more… even what was
transpiring up close, 265 miles up in the thermosphere.

Her bubbly Kryptonian was narrating what was going on aboard the spacecraft, her sweet breath tickling the side of Alex’s neck, and her ear. *Oh Rao! That feels soooo good!*

“Everyone’s asleep except for Commander Reynolds, and she’s on the observation deck taking pictures of National City. Oh, quick! Alex, wave! Maybe she’ll see us.”

They leaned back as one, raising their hands to the sky and laughing. And at that exact same moment, as if on cue, a massive round of fireworks erupted over the city’s great river below in a glorious multicolor explosion of light.

All the while, the speck far above continued on its long journey around the Earth.

“Bye ISS! Happy Independence Day!” Kara gave a little salute to the fading point of light, and Alex was so taken by her that she turned her head just enough to kiss her softly on the lips between her happy giggles.

The best part was, she kissed Alex back.

“What a strange and beautiful tradition.” Kara mused as she gaped in wonder above, and more fireworks burst over the city… explosions of vibrant colors; shades of bright greens, reds, brilliant whites, purples, and blues!

It was magnificent.

“I like Independence Day,” She added. "Not as much as Halloween, Nowruz, Eid al-Fitr, Thanksgiving, or Christmas, but it’s pretty high on my list of Earth holidays so far.”

“I can’t disagree with you there.” Alex rested her head back on Kara’s soft chest as they continued watching the spectacular light show. The trespassers were dressed in their underwear and not much else… lounging lazily on the blanket her Kryptonian had spread out for their late-night picnic.

Around them were their hastily-scattered clothes, and the remnants of the wonderfully eclectic meal they’d spent the evening preparing for their outing, and then devouring: seasoned wild rice with plump cranberries, one of Eliza’s delicious green bean recipes (Kara’s favorite), spicy fried tofu, sliced pears and blackberries, fresh French bread, huge strawberries hand-dipped in chocolate, and a nearly half-depleted bottle of the best German Riesling they’d ever had.

“I’ve been meaning to ask, do I even want to know where this ah-amazing wine came from?” Alex raised a suspicious eyebrow at her lover as she sipped the delicious nectar from her glass.

Kara gave her a look of mock offense and said, “I left money on the counter at the wine store. I even gave the nice woman a tip… and no one saw me. Super speed, remember?”

“How could I forget?” Alex grinned, and said, *

As she touched Kara’s delicate fluted glass with her own, her action was accompanied by a slight ringing sound… like a tiny crystalline bell.

She’d automatically toasted in Persian, as they always did when they were alone. The funny thing was, only a few weeks earlier just hearing the Farsi word for ‘immortality’, a celebration of life would have cut Alex like a knife… but now, faced with her new reality, it only brought her the greatest joy.

For a moment, her memories were whisked back in time to about a month earlier… shortly after she and Kara had first arrived in National City. It was the day Alex discovered what was happening to
her, Shah, and their companions… and her perspective on the world and life had shifted in a
decidedly more Kryptonian direction.

June 6th – Year 2

Kara & Alex’s first week in National City

The Kyle - The Tower Room

20:13 hours UTC -8, Wednesday evening, U.S. West Coast Time

Alex’s phone was cradled in her lap, and as hard as she tried to stay focused on the legitimate page-
turner she’d been reading, Robert Ludlum’s The Bourne Identity, she kept glancing down anxiously
to check the slow-moving progress bars of the app tracking the status of her and Shah’s blood work
analysis back at The Sagan Institute.

Her companion had been quietly sulking all evening, but the one hundred and sixteenth time Alex
looked down at her phone, a video of a sad looking Chris Pratt, from Parks and Recreation (one of
her and Kara’s favorite TV shows), appeared in her HUD.

Shatari… oh, sweetie, we agreed. This is not a lack of trust, or confidence in either you or Zara.
Shah and I just need the results from The Sagan’s supercomputers as an independent dataset to
apply to our hypothesis. It’s the last piece we need for confirmation. I still love you.

Chris Pratt suddenly became happy, and Alex chuckled under her breath. She was certain that if
Shatari had a physical form, she’d be as adorable as Kara. The poor thing was beside herself that
Alex was depending on a stone-age level technology instead of only her and Zara this time.

Shatari would have been finished with the same analysis in a couple of seconds… not hours. The
problem with that was Alex and Shah’s companions kept trying to tell them they were fine...
showing their bio-signs as ‘green’, and ‘working within expected parameters’… when the fact was,
neither she nor Shah was near normal, not anymore.

Thankfully, of the many benefits Alex enjoyed from interning at the most sophisticated lab dedicated
to non-terrestrial exobiology on the planet (including free membership in The Planetary Society and
access to all the scientific journals published by Sagan scientists), the one she liked the most was that
she could ‘borrow’ the equipment… well, maybe not officially, but the supercomputers were just
sitting there, and half the time no one was using them...

The waiting was the worst part… what humans considered a ‘supercomputer’ was more like an
abacus to a Kryptonian AI.

Alex downed her full glass of delicious red wine… and then promptly poured a generous refill from
the bottle. Kyle House Rules be damned…

Rao! Could this go any slower?

The waiting wasn’t just unbearable… the pause also gave her time to dwell on darker thoughts…
about losing Kara.

Alex loved her with every once of her being, and yet, the realization that she would only be able to
give her angel one short human life together had come crashing down like an avalanche on her soul, and she’d become fixated on it.

*Kara will outlive me, and when I die it will break her heart…

*It’s not goddamned fair!*

She glanced over at her beautiful bondmate, who was curled up beside her on the couch like a cat, her long, tanned legs tucked beneath her, earbuds in, listening to Death Cab For Cutie’s album *Transatlanticism* on a continuous loop… something she enjoyed doing with music she loved. Kara was wearing her sexy glasses, with a pen playfully stuck in the corner of her mouth, intently reading through a pile of physical files from CatCo, and working on her tablet in the soft glow of the living room lamps.

Just seeing her there warmed Alex’s heart, and her rage dissolved… into a bleak sadness.

Archangel would stay young, for millennia, like a mythical goddess… and be forced to watch her human mate, and those she loved, turn to dust.

It would devastate her, and Alex knew it.

She didn’t want to lose her or even think about Kara having to find someone else after... after Alex died.

It enraged her that Kara’s deep-seated fear of abandonment was so horribly justified. Alura and Zor-El had saved their Kryptonian flower, only to condemn her to a new life on a cruel world of ephemeral desolation.

Like an angel cast from heaven… into Hell.

Alex and Shatari researched all they could find about what happened to Kryptonian bondmates when one died… and it wasn’t pretty. Once her other half passed, Kara loss would be profound. Alex’s presence, her memories, and even the love they shared would always be with her, like an echo, but intangible.

In her despair, Alex feared her angel would retreat back into her protective shell, maybe even no longer allowing herself to love, or ever be loved again.

*Her light would go out.*

Alex felt like her chest was being crushed.

Kara sensed her escalating distress through their bond, and in an instant her strong arms enveloped Alex, cradling her tight against her warm Kryptonian body. “Shhh, don’t be sad, Vaena, we have time… we’ll find a way.” Her words were sooo comforting…

*Damn your beautiful, soothing, Kryptonian glyph talking! Mmmmmmm… “Do you really think so?”* A now-docile Alex asked in a soft, vulnerable whisper as she snuggled in close.

Kara nodded with absolute confidence. “Um, yeah. We have two godlike Kryptonian AIs, Shah, and *you* on our team. We’ll figure it out.”

Alex sniffed and wiped at her eyes. “And what if we don’t?”

Her bondmate sighed, “Then we will have a glorious life, and I will be with you as you grow old,
loving every minute of our time together. And when your body dies in this world, I will follow you into the dark, and we will make the long journey home into Rao’s light together.”

Alex blinked, shocked, “Kara! No. What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I have no reason to stay in this or any world without my bondmate. Where you go, I go. No debate. I will be at your side, always.”

Alex was crying, and she wasn’t even embarrassed… because Kara was holding her, her love wrapping her pathetic, mortal heart, mind, and soul in its nurturing warmth.

How she deserved such a beautiful light was beyond her, but the fact was… her crazy alien angel loved her, and Alex was smart enough not to argue with her impossibly lucky turn of fate.

Though, there was no way in Hell she’d ever let Kara kill herself for her or anyone… that just wasn’t going to happen.

Later, as Alex was putting their glasses away in the dishwasher and Kara was getting ready for bed, her phone chimed, and she fumbled it out of her back pocket, eager to view the results that would finally give her and Shah the answer they’d been looking for.

And there it was, in green, glowing characters… backed up by terabytes of data as proof back at Sagan, just as they’d suspected.

******ALERT*****

Analysis: Complete

Results: Positive

Subject: Jane Doe_1 78.80% human… 21.20% verified non-terrestrial… 99.9999% accuracy… unknown DNA and RNA detected… transformation status: in process… sample evolving

Subject: Jane Doe_2… 84.76% human… 15.24% verified non-terrestrial… 99.9888% accuracy… unknown DNA and RNA detected… transformation status: in process… sample evolving

******ALERT*****

Holy crap…

Alex felt elation, and weak in the knees at the same time as her thoughts turned inward.

Shatari, dear, you have some explaining to do!

Her companion began to squirm, like a kid caught with her hand in the proverbial cookie jar… and quickly began revealing what she and Zara had been up to. Alex’s eyes grew wide, and she… smiled.

So, it wasn’t a glitch in their companions’ sensors after all… it was a conspiracy! They’d intentionally hidden the truth from her and Shah! What was happening to them was a transformation
at a molecular level, in their DNA, and the irreversible changes were permeating their biology.

How didn’t I see this? Those little stinkers…

It was about power, or the balance of it... no, it was about assuring a union of equals, and two well-meaning alien super AIs trying to help the ones they loved not only to survive, but be happy, and thrive in an unforgiving, unfair world.

I love you too Shatari, but you should have said something… anyway… thank you for this.

If life were a card game, Shatari and Zara had just upended the table… and given her and Shah a whole new, and much larger deck to play with.

Shah! I understand now! The ecstatic tone and joyful hum of Alex’s thoughts reached out to Shah, immediately pulling her Persian sister in from her focus on a technical schematic she was drafting.

You have the answer? Her best friend asked hopefully.

Yeah! And you are not going to freaking believe it!

Joon-am, what’s going on?

Her best friend asked hopefully.

Yeah! And you are not going to freaking believe it!

Joon-am, what’s going on?

Alex let her joy flow through their neural connection, and simply thought… A miracle, but layered within it was a complex dance of information and emotions…

Shah now understood and replied eagerly. So, what are we waiting for? Let’s get training.

I couldn’t agree more. How about you meet me tomorrow around 18:30, at the dojo on 28th? That should give you plenty of time to Uber it after work. Rao, I can’t wait until we can fly!

Pardon? I don’t underst… Do you mean that huge vacant lot at Sullivan Lane and 28th? The creepy one I always kick your butt at?

Yeah, that one.

What about Kara?

I’ll make an excuse, tell her I have to work late at The Sagan and grab some pot-stickers on the way home to distract her from asking questions… Alex could feel her best friend’s immediate resistance. Don’t worry aziz-am, we’ll tell her… soon… I promise. We just have some work to do first, and I need to bring you up to speed in more detail on these results.

So be it, for now. Shah’s patience was clearly running thin.

Alex knew she was out of time and excuses to tell her bondmate what was going on with them.

……………………

Back to current time…

July 4th – Year 2

National City’s Japanese Botanical Gardens

21:17 Hours UTC -8, Thursday night, U.S. West Coast Time
It all came down to Kara, Alex’s sunny and delightful bondmate/girlfriend/lover/all of the above… who’d planned their outing that Fourth of July, made all the logistical arrangements, and packed for every contingency. Everything was neat and organized, of course: real plates, silverware, cloth napkins, wine glasses, and even candles (provided by Aeryn), which added an almost mystical touch as they softly burned and flickered in the starlight, yet never seemed to get smaller.

Not that it could get much more romantic than where Kara had taken her on their date. Positioned at the highest point of one of National City’s wonders, the Japanese Botanical Gardens was set on a small mountain overlooking the sprawling city of glittering lights below.

The fact that they were trespassing after hours was also thrilling. Kara being a rule-breaker was kind of a new thing, but ever since coming to National City, her angel had been bolder and self-assured, even in the way she dressed (stunning) and how she carried herself.

Alex loved it.

They had set up their picnic within the expansive grounds of what appeared to be a replica of a massive sixteenth-century Shogun’s Castle, surrounded by acres of ponds, flowers, and lush green bamboo gardens.

It was as if they were in a paradise in the clouds, looking down on the vast city of lights below.

She closed her eyes and smiled as Kara gently held her. The sound of the trickling water, as it flowed through cracks in the stone fortifications and followed the stair step hills down to the dark, mirrored waters of the nearby small lake was idyllically peaceful.

Alex decided, right then and there, that she wanted a water feature for the house she and her bondmate would one day own. Of course, they’d also need a dojo; a library; a fireplace; a deck; somewhere to set up their telescopes; a craft room for Kara; a CDC Class One, Sentinel Rated lab for her; a guest room for friends and family; a suite for Shah, and last but not least, a huge couch and TV for binge-watching their favorite shows and playing Xbox.

She didn’t mind at all when her beautiful bondmate lovingly leaned in and kissed her neck, pressed her warm Kryptonian body against her human one, and snuggled her chin into the crook of Alex’s neck from behind.

Kara then said, “I’m really glad you’re getting along with your mentor, she sounds pretty amazing.”

That was her way of getting Alex to talk about what was going on in her work life and, having been prodded, the introvert was happy to oblige. Sometimes Alex lost track and forgot that half of what she thought she’d said was inner dialogue, instead of actual sharing.

“She is! Naomi’s brilliant. I seriously hit the jackpot with her, and still can’t believe she actually requested to be assigned to me.”

As if that would be so hard to believe. Kara kissed her.

You’re biased.

Alex loved being an intern at the Sagan Institute, especially for the last two weeks after being assigned a mentor. Dr. Naomi Young was a twenty-eight-year-old researcher with a Ph.D. in astrobiology and a love of everything alien. The tall, willowy, African American woman had quickly become Alex’s scientist role model. She was adorable, quirky, had a wicked Bohemian style, a
dozen piercings, and was absolutely brilliant.

She and Alex had spent the last two days in Naomi’s incredible, cutting-edge lab examining potential alien DNA extracted from bacteria found inside pieces of a meteor that had broken apart over the Yukon earlier that year.

Shatari quickly identified the species as Yu’garan, a simple, phototrophic organism originating from a star system over ten thousand light-years distant from Earth. It was non-toxic and completely harmless to life on Earth... rather like a spacefaring communal algae, very adaptable to extreme environments.

She couldn’t tell Naomi that, but her mentor was in heaven anyway, and Alex did her best to pretend she was just as clueless as they began running tests.

The exciting part, the thing Naomi slowly began to discover, was how the organism consumed certain less-desirable compounds found on Earth, such as carbon dioxide and methane. Over time, using light for energy, it could break these down into their base components; similar to the way plants use photosynthesis, or how Kara’s Pac-Men functioned.

“It actually ended up being totally fun. Naomi’s awesome, and I’ve already learned so much working with her.” Alex realized how fangirlish she sounded but didn’t care, she just smiled and said, “Thanks for letting me ramble on... and on. By the way... you’re a great listener.”

Her beautiful Kryptonian grinned. “Thanks, but it’s not hard or anything. I could sit here all night talking with you about what’s happening in your life, what’s important to you, and why you find it all so fascinating. It’s like a window into you.”

Alex reached down to pick up one of the luscious strawberries and fed it to Kara, (who took a deliberately slow, juicy bite) then darted in to kiss, and gently lick the nectar from her bondmate’s lips and the side of her delicious mouth. That, of course, led to a very passionate make-out session that ended with her glorious golden-haired goddess, once again naked on her back, squirming on their blanket, with Alex’s tender caresses and kisses exploring every inch of her.

Fireworks flashed in the sky as the minutes stretched, and the very idea of time became fluid.

As they made love, Alex’s new abilities kicked in randomly, and for a while, she was actually shimmering in sync with a blissed-out Kara... who thankfully didn’t notice, lost in her state of rapture.

Damn, I’m good. Alex smirked.

At some point in their dreamy experience, she glanced up from where she was enjoying herself between Kara’s legs and caught her attention. It was so sexy, to feel her bondmate’s desire as she gazed down at her with those adoring blue eyes.

I love you, my angel. Alex imagined the words but, for the first time, before sending them she tried something she’d felt Kara do many times: she layered within the language the absolute joy she was feeling in her heart, as well as her pleasure, building her own, unique, Kryptonian glyph... and then released the thoughts like fire into Kara’s mind, and her very being.

Her lover’s beautiful eyes snapped open wide as she sucked in a startled gasp, arched her head back, and reached down to run her fingers wildly through Alex’s short-cropped hair. She was also cursing under her breath in Kryptonese the whole time, which was beyond hot.

Alex grinned wickedly; pleased that she could drive Kara to the same heights of incoherency she
herself had experienced almost every night since that first time.

Her bondmate’s arms flailed out, and her powerful fingers clawed into the earth, leaving deep gouges, as Alex increased her vigor. And when Kara finally came, her eyes blazed plasma as hot as the sun into the night sky.

Alex didn’t stop after that, but brought her to climax a second, and then soon after, a third glorious time. To her delight, her exhausted lover’s body shook, and Kara cried out as volleys of fireworks literally burst in the skies around them.

Alex preened. *Couldn’t have timed that better if I’d tried.*

“Show off.” Her Kryptonian panted, followed by a raspy laugh.

Kara went limp after that, though her body still quivereded from the tremors of pleasure still pulsing through her. Alex then gently moved to curl up at her side, pulled the extra blanket over both of their naked bodies, and was swiftly enveloped in her lover’s warm arms.

*Is that in case the ISS comes back to take a candid shot?* Kara teased.

*No, I’m just cold.*

*Oh! I’m sorry.* She could sense Kara admonishing herself through their bond, and immediately felt her Kryptonian lover’s body temperature rise to warm her.

*Mmmmm, so toasty! My nooré cheshm-am, thank you. Be my heating blanket forever?*

*Always.* Kara purred in their thoughts and snuggled into her human.

As they lay there, quiet and happy, Alex recalled how scary sex had been for her angel after that first passionate night, when Kara began second-guessing herself… terrified that she’d accidentally crush Alex’s head between her legs, pinch her tongue, or break her fingers.

But Alex had faith… and believed that Kara could maintain control, especially when they were intimate, or even when she was in the middle of a mind-blowing orgasm. It just took her amazing lover a little while to start trusting herself as much as Alex already did.

*Kara would never hurt me.*

That said, they did create a safe word… just in case … ‘ow’. It wasn’t very imaginative, but it was easy to remember, and effective. Thankfully Alex had only had to use it twice… in a month! And arguably, they were trying out some pretty contorted positions both times.

Kara stirred, her hot naked skin like a full body embrace as she pulled Alex even closer, and kissed her deeply… sharing in the taste of her sex as their tongues gently mingled, touched, and explored each other.

Then, with her hyper senses and Kryptonian stamina recovered, Kara, her eyes pools of blue flame, very deliberately began to show Alex just how much she loved her.

............... 

Much… much later, after she’d regained conscious thought and feeling in her body, Alex peeked out from beneath the comfy flannel covers and looked up at the amazing night sky.

It was full of stars.
The fireworks were over, and the thick, acrid smell of smoke hung in the air. She and Kara lay together, completely contented, their bare bodies spooned like two perfect halves of a whole… wrapped completely in a warm blanket.

She sent her thoughts to Kara. This is perfection.

I concur beauteous one.

Yeah, right, I probably look like crap right now. Stupid cheap makeup.

Stop, Vaena, you are as radiant as the moon hung among the stars.

Gah! Liar…. really?

Uh huh.

Alex had truly never felt more loved.

They folded the blankets back a bit to once again view the heavens and breathed in the cool night air, their steamy breath leaving twin trails of mist above them.

Alex finally spoke, a bit shakily at first, “So, that new thing you did, with your icy breath on my skin? And my… um, you know… It was like, holy crap! It was totally incredible.”

She loved how she could still make Kara blush. “Thanks… I’d really hoped you’d like it…”

“Oh yeah, I liked it... I liked it a lot. You need to do it again, and again, and…” They broke out in giggles.

“Hey, it’s your turn to talk.” Alex prodded, bumping shoulders. “I want to hear all about CatCo, and what it’s like working for the great and terrible Cat Grant.”

Kara’s waves of golden locks shifted as she turned her smiling, sapphire gaze on her. “Okay. Hmmm, well, first off, the stories about her don’t do her justice.”

“Tell me more….” Alex encouraged, doing her best impression of Kara’s purr as she turned on her side, and propped her head up on her arm to listen.

Her bond mate immediately followed suit.

“Ah, okay… You see, Ms. Grant has this powerful presence; like when she’s in the room there’s nothing else you’re able to pay attention to. She’s intelligent, calculating, commanding, gorgeous, and always dresses perfectly. Rao, even how she walks says, ‘All shall love me and despair!’”

“Wow, you must be really impressed. I’ve never heard you attribute a Galadriel quote to anyone before…”

Kara was blushing again. Hmmm… “She’s on your list, isn’t she?”

“Who, Cate Blanchett or Ms. Grant?” Kara’s question was completely sincere.

Alex just grinned.

Kara broke out in a wide smile, “Okay, both. Oh, and Liv Tyler, obviously… she was my first human girl/elf crush, after you.”
“I never should have let you watch Lord of the Rings… or read CatCo magazine.” Alex grumbled under her breath, and then sighed, “Fine… sounds fair. So, about Ms. Grant…”

“Pfft, yeah… she flew in from Metropolis. I guess she spends most her time there, or the Paris office, just to speak to all of us interns.”

“What’d she talk about?”

“All kinds of things; like the power and responsibility of the media to ‘draw the curtains back, to carry the light of truth like a torch’, the importance of empowering girls and young women, making opportunities available, embracing diversity at all levels, and having a ‘growth mindset’… you know, the power of ‘I haven’t done that… yet’, instead of ‘I can’t-do that’. She challenged us all to really think about why we wanted to be journalists…. it was…” Kara struggled for the right word.

Alex grinned, and gave her one, “Inspiring?”

“Yes! Yes, you are so good, Danvers.” Kara briefly leaned in kissed her like a reward (which of course, it was). Alex’s lips were all tingly and warm as Kara drew back, her eyes half-closed with pleasure.

“What else?” Alex asked once she’d settled back down on the blanket.

“Well, she told us about the year she spent undercover working on that human trafficking exposé she won the Pulitzer for last year. It was so scary for her, but she endured it for all of those brave women and children. I remember how her words created an explosion of awareness across the whole country and were the catalyst (no pun intended) that forced action by law enforcement, and Congress Alex, that’s the kind of good I want to do in this world… of course, she inspires me; she’s already doing what I was sent here to do.”

Alex wrapped her arms around Kara and held her. She could feel her bondmate’s unwarranted guilt, measuring herself against someone as seasoned and accomplished as Cat Grant.

“She’s doing good work, Kara, that’s for sure, but, not to be cynical, at great benefit to her brand and bottom line. CatCo stock has been through the roof, and everything she does to draw attention to herself just adds to that. She even started that glitzy celebrity-filled daytime talk show… I think part of her motivation is altruistic, but the ‘Queen of All Media’ is also stroking her own ego and building her growing power base. You, on the other hand, aren’t doing what you do to make a name for yourself, or to get a prize. You are my hero.”

“I am? Awwww. I love you, Vaena!” Kara said, and then scrunched her brows in thought. After a minute she said, “You’re probably right on the ego thing, but a lot of it is deserved. You can’t deny all the good stuff she’s done… is doing. I’ll try and keep my perspective though, ‘k?”

“Okay, that sounds fair.” Alex conceded, “But can you do me one favor? Please keep in mind that even though she doesn’t look it, Cat Grant’s going on forty, and has had a lot more time in this world to find her place than you have. Learn from her, the good parts only please, and light your own path.”

Their foreheads were touching, and Kara smiled, “You always know the right things to say… and, by the way, Vaena… you are my prize.”

Alex’s eyes shot open wide, and she melted into Kara’s neck. “Sweet talker.” I am yours, now and always.
Then, after some prodding from Alex, Kara continued her intern’s tale...

After Ms. Grant’s talk welcoming this year’s crop of interns she hadn’t interacted with them again, at least directly, but was visible at times in her immense office, a central chamber that was basically a giant fishbowl of glass walls. On her rare visits to National City, the media mogul positioned herself at the Traffic and Control Center (the TCC), the heart of CatCo’s West Coast editorial and publishing operations, where all the magic happened to drive the company’s content across cable, the Internet, print, and even radio.

Kara had watched and listened carefully, making sure to get to know all the people, their roles, and how the business worked… and many things troubled her…

“It’s all just so… inefficient, and outdated.” She pouted, “They still use manual boards, with Post-it notes… Alex, Post-its!… to track writers, resources, stories, and assignments. They spend way too much time chasing people on calls, and miss the forest for the trees… like yesterday: the Features Editor, Kyle Jenkins, my boss, assigned a huge story about female entrepreneurs struggling with the glass ceiling to a man… which in itself is a punch in the gut to all of the extremely talented female writers he could have chosen instead, and a huge issue, but in this case it’s not just any man we’re talking about… he gave the story to Stan Williams…” Kara said the name with disdain and appeared shocked. Alex had no idea why, but nodded supportively as her irritated bondmate repeated, with emphasis, “Stan Williams!”

“Um, and that’s bad?”

“Hell yes it’s bad!” Kara stopped to take a breath, her eyes growing large as she quickly covered her mouth after realizing what she’d said. “Sorry, I’m getting a little too worked up about this…. Williams is a misogynist and a rapist… Well, the rapist part isn’t proven, but there are sexual harassment and assault allegations against him going back fifteen years that are being kept quiet behind the scenes for legal reasons. CatCo’s in a bind.

“I found out through my snooping that Ms. Grant has a team of lawyers who’ve been trying to fire him ever since she became aware, over two years ago, but it’s been a costly battle that she hasn’t been able to win, yet. Alex, it’s so frustrating. First off, a man shouldn’t be writing that article at all, especially not that man, and not when CatCo still has an option clause in their old contract with Geneviève Lefèvre, yeah, that Geneviève Lefèvre! She still owes CatCo three features. Rao, that woman is amazing! She’s not only one of the best journalists writing today, maybe not quite as good as Steven Colliers once was, but she’s credible, has published papers on this and other relevant topics, and blows Wilson out of the water.”

“So, why not use Lefèvre? Seems stupid not to.”

Kara sighed, “Jenkins isn’t aware of her features option, I only know because…” She shrugged and tapped her ear.

“Supersenses… got it. Well, why not just tell him?”

“How can I do that without having to answer the inevitable next question… he’d want to know how I knew.”

“Can’t you claim your source is confidential? Or somehow anonymously nudge him in the right direction? Maybe we could just have Shatari send a traceless email?”

Kara considered, but said, “I don’t know. I thought about asking you guys for help, but I really want to solve this one on my own. I can’t run to my protector every time I hit a bump in the road, but I
really, really appreciate you listening, and you wanting to fix this for me.”

_She called me her protector!_ Alex wanted to swoon, but sighed with a smile instead, “My Kara… I guess I’d expect no less. Let me know if you need anything though, ‘k?”

“I will. Thank you, _Vaena_.”

“So, what’s next?”

The blonde groaned, “I need to think up and actually write an article for the Sunday features section of _The National Tribune_. I’m competing against the other six _CatCo_ interns for the honor of being published as a feature story in August. Alex, the paper has millions of readers online and in print, if I win this it would be _HUGE_! But the others are so good, and I don’t have a clue about what I should write about. The deadline to submit is in, like, a month… I need to have something ready by then or I’m so doomed!”

“Kara, that’s awesome, kind of the opposite of bad… You know you can do this, right? You always think of something with that amazing brain of yours.”

The Kryptonian shook her head, “Not so much this time, I’m coming up dry… Plus, I start my job as Assistant Features Editor under _Jenkins_ next week. I’ll probably be so busy getting coffee, sorting files, doing research, editing drafts, answering phones, and _Rao_ knows what else… that I’m not sure I’ll have time to think, let alone write something brilliant.”

Alex leaned in, looked Kara directly in the eye, and said, “Hey, you’re not allowed to go negative on me, okay? You got this. Look, just stop thinking about it for the weekend. You have your first singing gig tomorrow night, and all of your fangirls will be there to cheer you on. Though, I think _Aeryn_’s bringing _Just Jack_ as a date, can you believe it? They really hit it off last weekend when he drove us all over the freaking city. I hope we don’t end up regretting being the cause of them getting together.”

“It’ll be fine, they're like magnets… I could feel their connection. _Heather_ kept trying to get in between them and getting smooshed.” Kara chuckled and asked, “Is she still coming?”

“Yeah, to keep a wary eye on Jack I’m sure, she’s as protective of _Aeryn_ as we are of _Shah_. That said, her concern is warranted, that boy bears watching!” They both laughed (because it was so true). “Oh, and remember,” Alex added, “We’re going out with _Aeryn_ and _Heather_ again next Friday… and if tomorrow goes well, _Jack_ will probably be with her. Apparently, our extroverted redhead and _Shah_ found some new place that allows under 21’s in, no drinking of course, and it’s supposed to be awesome. So what do you say? You all in?”

“Oh Alex, I don’t know, I have so much work to…”

“Come on, Kara. You know you’re in. What do we always say? We can… We can…”

“… do anything, if we’re together.” The Kryptonian smiled brightly and relaxed into Alex’s embrace. “Fine, I’m in, how can I say no to that cute face of yours. Cheater.”

Alex squeezed her tight, and as the stars glittered above, whispered, “_El mayarah, Kara Zor-El_. I love you.”

------------------------

_July 6<sup>th</sup> – Year 2_
Interlude: text exchange between Kara and Clark

Time:

22:13 hours UTC -8, (Jul 6) Saturday night, U.S. West Coast Time

01:13 hours UTC -5, (Jul 7) Sunday morning, U.S. East Coast Time

Kara Danvers’ iPhone

06 Jul : 22:13 UTC -8

Kara: Soooo, did you think about my question?

Clark: Kara! Do you know what time it is here??

Kara: Uh huh. So, have you reconsidered?

Clark: Look, like I said the other six times, I can’t answer that. It’s not my secret to tell.

Kara: Oh, come on Clark, I know I’m right! Just text back: yes or no.

Clark: No. And I mean no as in I can’t say! Kara, what if it were your secret? Would you want me telling everyone?

Kara: I’m not everyone; I’m your cousin… your blood. You can tell me.

Clark: Look, I won’t betray a friend, especially one who’s always had my back, even to someone I love, and trust.

Kara: I understand and respect that, thanks, Clark. The good news? I have my answer, and you didn’t have to betray any confidences.

Clark: What? How did you… what did you…?

Clark: I just screwed up, didn’t I?

Kara: No, not really. Just things you’ve said, and other clues… like little pieces of a puzzle. Alex and I put it together on our own.

Clark: Oh, how I despise and envy your ability to somehow pull things out of people that they really want to keep secret. Far sneakier and more diabolic than your innocent veneer would ever let on, dear cousin.

Clark: You’re as bad as Lois.

Kara: Awww, thank you cuz!

Clark: You know he’ll kill me if this gets out. I trust you and yours to be discreet, Kara Zor-El; my life is literally in your hands. Got it?

Kara: Yeah, got it, got it. Don’t worry, we won’t tell.
Clark: Good. I love you.

Kara: Love you too! Please hug Lois an extra-long time for me, and tell her the same. I’ll come visit her, um, I mean both of you, after I get back in September.

Clark: Har har. I will, and you’d better. Keep knocking ‘em dead at CatCo, all right?

Kara: I’m working on it. Thanks, Kal.

Clark: Anytime. See you soon, Little Star.

Kara: I can’t wait! Nite!!! ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺

Alex glanced over at her beautiful bondmate from where she was propped up against a pillow and the headboard, reading *The Bourne Ultimatum* in bed. Kara was lying next to her on her stomach engrossed in the glow of her iPhone, her thumbs moving at lightning speed. “What are you giggling about?” She asked playfully. “Are you and Jess sexting again?”

Kara’s jaw dropped open and she looked offended, “It was one time! Wait… Um, okay, two times! And she was sexting me, remember? I was just enjoying reading her… descriptions.” Now she was blushing.

Alex smiled, and shrugged in defeat, “Okay, I concede, it was kind of hot… that girl’s like the Shakespeare of smut… Anyway, back to my question. What were you giggling about?”

Kara’s grin was blinding as she said in a singsong voice. “We were right…”

“About…?”

“Who the Batman is.”

“No! No shit! You mean he’s…?”

“Uh huh. 100% confirmed.”

“Well, no frickin’ way. I would’ve lost that bet. I mean, I get the whole secret identity thing, obviously, but… but… why would he chose to spend half his life pretending to be a completely narcissistic, womanizing ass?”

“I know! Right!? I don’t get it either. Just thinking about it makes my Kryptonian super brain hurt. But… he is with Selina Kyle, so there’s that.”

“I see your point. I could definitely pull off being an ass for that.”

“Alex!” Kara said in mock shock. And then they were laughing, and pillows were flying back and forth, and then clothes were coming off…

July 8th – Year 2

*CatCo Media (not yet Worldwide) 44th floor, offices of The National City Tribune and CatCo’s West Coast Traffic and Control Center (TCC)*
The day started promising enough…

Kara wore her hair up high, leaving a few tendrils of twisted gold to dangle down in an almost haphazard way, but the look was a picture-perfect duplicate of a style Blake Lively had received raves for just the week before. She’d also chosen to finally wear the delicate Armani metal-framed glasses that Lois had given her as a gift before she left for National City. The stylish, rectangular rims, according to her friends, gave her a kind of intelligent, professionally hot, bookish girl vibe that she was going for.

Over the amazing weekend, she’d made the important decision that Kara Danvers would not remain in the background anymore. In fact, she was doing her best to be a little, or maybe a lot, more like a younger, slightly more stylish Cat Grant.

As far as the rest of her appearance, classy white pumps complemented her stark, mid-length, white pencil skirt (designed by her!) that hugged the curves of her svelte figure perfectly, and a matching short sleeved floral-print top swirled with the bold colors and pattern of yellow and purple poppies that really showed off her amazing arms.

She was freaking stunning.

At least that seemed to be the overwhelming consensus of her observers, and they were legion.

The whispered attention she received when dressing less conservatively than normal was weird, but also thrilling. Admiring eyes watched her, she could feel the heat of their glances, most for far longer than was appropriate, that was for sure, but in the defense of her co-workers, none of them were aware that she knew they were ogling her.

There was a bit of jealousy here and there as well, which wasn’t new to her, but disappointing. She had no intention of ‘flaunting’ anything, or any wish to hurt anyone’s feelings.

She sighed.

The fact was, fade or shine, she would never make everyone happy… and liked how shining made her feel.

I’m done fading.

Her manager, Kyle Jenkins, spent the morning walking her through of the features desk wing of the 44th floor, meeting staff, and getting the lay of the land. He was a tall man, in his mid-fifties, and smelled pleasantly of pipe smoke and wintergreen. Beneath his gruff exterior, he was a big softy… Kara had been watching him, doing her homework.

The man loved to paint, a passion they shared, adored his three young grandkids, and was an amateur astronomer, another passion they had in common and chatted about. As a dyed-in-the-wool old-school newsman, Jenkins also loved a good story and respected professional work; Kara was ready for whatever he was going to throw at her.

Or so she thought.

Clara Devon, CatCo Media’s long-time Editorial Traffic Director, had been clipped by a bus on her way to work that morning and was in the hospital. She’d broken an arm in three places, injured her
pelvis, and had a concussion; the doctors said she’d be out at least eight weeks, probably longer.

Without her, Clara’s staff was in disarray and struggling to fill her role as the communications hub. They needed to coordinate editorial content, assignments, and logistics across all their platforms (print, radio, online, and broadcast), as well as between the internal groups, including editorial, creative, production, and even worldwide subsidiaries.

Things were grinding to a halt.

Unfortunately, none of Clara’s staff fully understood her system, the very archaic one that Kara had complained to Alex about nearly every day… okay, every day since starting her internship. Only Kara, who had been shadowing Clara as part of her assignments, and had secretly deconstructed her processes (and already had the framework for a more optimal solution in mind), knew how to manage it effectively.

But what was she, a lowly intern, supposed to do? Tell Jenkins that she should just step in and do the veteran’s job? No. She had to be smarter, more subtle. She decided to continue doing the tasks she’d been helping Clara with before, acting as if she was just following orders, and making the rounds to pass assignments to all the various internal groups and department heads. Instead of reporting back to the missing Traffic Director though, she just started dealing with everything herself and making the rules.

The best part? People just seemed relieved that someone was doing the job, making decisions, and telling them what to do.

And the gears that ran CatCo started turning again.

It didn’t take long before people were coming directly to Kara with questions and asking for direction. It was kind of weird at first (but sooo cool!), and by lunchtime, even the cynical veterans began to tacitly acknowledge her.

…………………..

To make things even more interesting, all Hell broke loose in the TCC around 12:30 that afternoon.

National City’s abrasive police commissioner had suddenly offered the mayor his resignation after allegations came to light of corruption, extortion, and sex crimes against female prisoners by high-ranking officials in the NCPD. There was supposedly damning evidence out in the wild, including video and photographs that every blogger and media organization was trying to get their hands on, including CatCo.

Kara spent nearly two hours dealing with the chaos, but her orchestration (and in some cases, negotiation) between all parties and teams was successful: to viewers and readers of CatCo’s media outlets (Channel 3 television news and the online and late print editions of the Tribune) it seemed as if they hadn’t missed a beat.

Then, after things finally appeared to be calming down, and Jenkins was congratulating Kara on her exemplary work, a real disaster struck!

Social media lit up with the news that National City’s landmark San Gabriel Bridge had only moments before been struck by a massive runaway container ship. A large section of the westbound expanse had reportedly collapsed, crushing a number of vehicles and sending others plunging into the river.

Jenkins quickly apologized, told Kara to just ‘keep doing what she was doing’, and then dashed off.
She immediately returned to the Traffic Desk, much to the relief of everyone in the newsroom, and promptly rattled off a complex series of orders to the gathered staff, sending people scurrying off to comply.

She pinched the bridge of her nose as she finished, and then glanced up at the long banks of flat-screen monitors that ringed the TCC. Most were playing the first live video feeds coming in from the two CatCo helicopters hovering above the chaotic site of the bridge collapse.

Kara watched in shock as a minivan slid off a section of roadway on the lower level of the bridge, and began sinking into the river. As water rushed into its open windows, she could clearly see a woman, the driver, struggling desperately to free herself from her seat belt as the swirling water rose around her… and the terrified, wailing toddler strapped in a car seat behind her.

In seconds the van would slip below the surface and become their tomb.

_No!_

At that moment, the world around her, and even time itself slowed to a complete standstill, and Kara burst into movement… vanishing in a ferocious gale that blew through the TCC and the entire 44th floor, sending papers and loose items flying everywhere.

A couple of people were knocked down, frames fell off the wall and shattered, and everyone was left scratching their heads, asking ‘what the heck had just happened?’

All but one…

A startled man who, unknown to Kara, had been watching her through the floor-to-ceiling windows of his office as she stood absorbed by the monitors, and saw her disappear.

CatCo Media’s Managing Editor, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist, and war correspondent, Steven Colliers, stood gaping in wonder at the empty space the devastatingly attractive intern had been occupying just a moment before.

…………

In seconds, Kara was back at The Tower (as she and Alex had begun calling their place) with her dress tossed haphazardly onto the bed as she shimmered into her recently upgraded flying suit and mask.

She’d completely redesigned the formfitting outfit after the incident with the USS *Washington*; it was now a scintillating dark blue, almost indigo… The closest she could come to mimicking the alien material of her battle armor. The graceful bodysuit was more durable, and fit her like a glove, with long sleeves that hooked over her thumbs at the end.

Alex had said she looked totally badass in it, and ‘freaking hot!’. Kara agreed, at least on the first part, but was still waffling on whether her appearance was maybe a bit too intimidating… not that any of that mattered at the moment.

Once changed, she shook her long golden locks free and leaped from their balcony straight into the air. In a split second, she was flying low over the city, pushing the teasing edge of the speed of sound… a shock wave preceding her like an invisible pressure surge as she made her way to the bridge.

As she passed overhead, the ground vibrated under the feet of alarmed pedestrians, and National City’s iconic buildings shook ever so slightly, but she was long gone before most people could even
glance up. Most were too busy shielding their eyes against the sudden dust storm that followed her.

**Twelve seconds had passed since she’d exited CatCo…**

Back at CatCo, a shaken Steven Colliers had assumed command of the situation and stood behind the broadcast techs in the main communications hub, directing the action. His thoughts still hung on the image of the beautiful blonde, dressed in that gorgeous white, floral outfit, disappearing in a blaze of blinding speed mere seconds before.

*God, it was like little arcs of blue-tinted lightning shimmered with her as she moved…*

The veteran war correspondent had been all over the world and had never seen anything like her. While his mind churned, his attention was outwardly focused on the half-dozen or so video feeds from the site of the bridge collapse that were being fed into the control center.

Everyone gathered was watching in horror.

The rescue units were still ten minutes out and the tragedy was unfolding without any hope of stopping it, live for millions to see. Chunks of broken concrete and twisted steel were still falling.

Colliers said a prayer as the back end of a blue minivan with a mother and toddler strapped into a child seat in the rear seat slipped beneath the dark surface of the swiftly moving river.

He clenched his fists with impotent rage; frustrated by the knowledge that they and so many other people were going to die… and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

But then… something unbelievable happened!

*What the…?*

The van, water spilling from its open windows, came rising out of the water, thirty feet in the air and floated down to the rocky shore. A figure… more like a blur, trailing a glint of gold, like the sun, then moved in and around the vehicle. The rear and driver’s doors were somehow wrenched free nearly simultaneously, cartwheeling a hundred or more yards down the rocky shore.

Immediately after, the slumped form of the woman who’d been at the wheel and the toddler inside both disappeared, and the blur moved on.

Cameras scanned the entire scene, and Colliers yelled for focus as one caught more movement in the water, as recently submerged vehicles began to rise as if by the hand of some unseen power in quick succession, to also be carefully deposited on the shore, after which, the passengers began mysteriously disappearing in pairs.

The blur was busy, zooming off to the bridge itself, hurling massive chunks of concrete from car roofs and truck beds, removing bleeding broken people from the scene like a silent, invisible divine wind.

Only two minutes and fifty-three seconds had passed since the shimmering savior had begun their work.

*My God, less than three minutes…*

Sirens could be heard in the distance as the rescue vehicles drew only slightly closer as they
negotiated the city’s notoriously horrible traffic.

Colliers thought the being, creature, whatever it was, was gone, but then… there, at the edge of his peripheral vision, he caught a glimpse. Off on a separate console from one of the alternate raw feeds not being broadcast live, he saw it up on the bridge.

He turned to say something, but no one else was close.

Wasting no time, he dashed over to make sure the footage was being recorded and magnified the view.

When he saw… her, he swallowed… hard.

She was a tall young woman, dressed in a dark, form-fitting, and very flattering costume, or body suit of some sort. Her long hair was a cascade of gold down her back, and she moved with a fluid grace that didn’t seem human. She was extricating herself from a vehicle that had been crushed by falling concrete, brushing the twisted metal of the car out of her way with one hand as if it were literally tissue paper.

She’d made a hole and, with great tenderness, lifted the limp form of a bleeding boy, maybe ten-years-old, out of the horrific wreckage, cradling him in her arms.

Colliers focused the camera on her.

The upper portion of her face not covered by her mask was clearly visible, and even with only that much to work with it was impossible not to see that she was strikingly beautiful. Tears were streaming down her face as she pressed her cheek against the top of the injured boy’s head and stepped briskly away from the tragic scene.

A wounded woman, in her early thirties, waited with anticipation close by. Her clothes were torn, blood covered half her face, and one eye was swollen shut, but that didn’t stop her from limping painfully over to the blood-soaked child and his rescuer as they approached… weeping uncontrollably.

The mother.

Their angelic savior somehow kept the injured boy steady as she gently scooped the woman up in her other arm. She then whispered something calming before slowly rising into the blue sky with them both.

Once they were above the bridge, Colliers just about jumped out of his skin as the hero, and her passengers disappeared in a burst of such shocking and impossible speed that the camera caught only the tiny crackles of blue lightning that she left like an echo in her wake… and then the sound of thunder.

He sucked in a breath of hushed revelation. Blue lightning…?

Could it be?

………..

July 8th – Year 2

CatCo Media (not yet Worldwide)
Still Monday – About two hours after Kara disappeared to respond to the bridge collapse

16:28 hours UTC -8, Monday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time

Steven Colliers was on fire, and it felt amazing.

It had been eight years since the mess in Afghanistan destroyed his life when his reckless drive for the almighty story above all else had finally brought him to his reckoning. He still blamed himself for the death of his best friend, colleague, and the man he loved, the brilliant photojournalist Sergei Nicolás.

Colliers had barely escaped that place with his life, and the withered remains of his soul.

After returning home he’d just wanted to disappear, so he did… into a bottle, or whatever drugs could help him escape his nightmares and guilt.

He’d almost died, many times. He definitely wanted to… but damn Cat Grant, she’d saved him from the anguish of his own personal Hell, had pulled him out with her bare hands and made him face his demons.

It took two and a half years, but Colliers finally resurfaced into the safety of a cushy job at CatCo, overseeing the chaos as managing editor. It kept his mind from falling into darkness, when he wasn’t drinking, or worse. There were still days when he put the barrel of Sergei’s .45 caliber in his mouth and wished for the courage to pull the trigger.

But he never could. He wasn’t strong enough.

Cat, of course, knew about most of his issues, and had hired a personal trainer for him and paid for a top-notch therapist to keep him on the straight and narrow as part of his deal. It took time, but miraculously, it’d worked.

Mostly.

Oddly, the woman others were quick to paint with a broad brush as egocentric and selfish had become one of his dearest friends over those years, the closest thing to a sister he’d ever had.

Colliers hadn’t felt his journalistic fire in all of that time, but after witnessing the angelic young woman’s act of impossible heroism, her determination, and her grief, something inside of him had changed.

He needed to know her, and ask her how, and more importantly, why…

He’d spent over an hour after she disappeared from the scene of the tragedy making calls, a lot of calls, doing research and commanding his editors and their legion of reporters. For some reason, he wasn’t sure why he hadn’t shared the video of the girl’s close-up. He’d actually kept it secret, and even erased it from CatCo’s backup servers after transferring the high-definition footage to a thumb drive that he slipped into his pocket.

He kept touching the tiny thing as if it were something precious; to make sure it was still there... proof of her.

No one was sure what had transpired on the bridge that day… only that six people had died and that none of the 114 who survived the collapse were actually there when emergency services arrived…
They’d all just appeared, as if by magic, at various local hospitals’ emergency rooms… and no one knew exactly how. It was like they each had just materialized there. Some had arrived with bones already set, others with their wounds cauterized, or burns soothed… many were calling it all a miracle.

His tenacious reporters had done interview after interview, yet none of the survivors were giving details, nor were any medical workers who were involved… though a few were overheard in hushed whispers, thanking their guardian angel. Two had actually used the name Archangel; he’d made sure it wasn’t a typo by following up with the reporters who took the notes.

What really nagged at him, though, was how so many of them had a strange bliss about them, a kind of serenity… as if a wonderful, earthshaking secret had been revealed to them that they would never willingly divulge.

Colliers had one avenue he knew he could pursue. The mother of the injured child had seen and spoken to her savior, yet she’d said nothing about any guardian angel to the authorities. He’d been in a frenzy to track the injured woman down, even though he was betting she’d have nothing new to add once he did.

All the survivors were protecting their beautiful savior…

Archangel…

But why?

He casually glanced over to where the beautiful young intern he’d seen earlier had disappeared. His attention kept being drawn back to her uncluttered, very organized desk, but she hadn’t yet reappeared.

Wait… whoa!!

The intern hadn’t been there a second ago, yet there she was now, standing where he’d last seen her two hours earlier, wearing that stunning white floral outfit… but something was different about her.

Colliers was, if anything, a stickler for detail… in his own life, in how he dressed (impeccably), and in his work.

He didn’t miss things.

He remembered the young woman being tall and extremely attractive, in a wholesome, tanned and toned, California white girl kind of way… but the creature he was gazing upon now as downright unearthly. She stood off by herself, where she obviously believed no one could see her, looking up at the monitors, flinching as images flashed by of the bridge, wounded people at local hospitals, and body bags.

She swayed softly, sinuously, one hand on her taut stomach, the other shaking as she reached across her body to grasp her other well-built arm. Her hair had been up before but now fell around her like a waterfall of damp gold.

Holy shit…

He was moving, not briskly but with purpose, adjusting his bow tie and crisp shirt collar as he stepped from the area of the hub where he’d been standing to make his way to her.

What’s her name? Kaley? Katie? Kara? Yes! Kara. Kara Danvers, from the lovely seaside town of
Midvale, New York. Ah, he chastised himself… she was East Coast, not West. And, if he recalled correctly from his meticulous study of the interns’ files, she was adopted, almost 17 but appeared a couple years older… and not pertinent to the files, looked like both a model and an athlete.

Now it was all coming together for him, this was the bright-eyed young woman Jenkins had been raving about.

She was smart as a whip, carried something like a 3.99 GPA (perfectly not perfect, interesting…) was an Honors Journalism student, and both a creative and technically excellent writer. Ms. Danvers had written numerous articles for Midvale High’s student paper, but had also won national awards for investigative work that had even been re-published by the venerable Daily Planet…

Hell, even Colliers had read those stories! They were one of the many reasons Ms. Danvers had been chosen over so many other worthy students. The girl had tremendous potential.

Now, glancing quickly at his iPad, he shook his head in wonder… she’d even spent time volunteering for local charities and was very involved in music, and the theater. How could this bizarrely perfect high school student be his mystery hero?

The distraught young woman noticed his approach… and shifted, or the world around her did.

Incredible!

He wasn’t sure how else to describe it, but she was no longer looking lost but appeared to be casually busy at work, sorting through several stacks of thick files on her desk that weren’t even there a second before.

“Hello.” He said cheerily, maintaining a façade of normalcy.

“Hi, may I help you?” Her smile was like the dawn; it was hard not to stumble upon seeing it.

“I… I was just wondering how you were doing? I know things are not the most boringly normal today, there’s a lot going on.”

He detected a hint of sadness in her smile as he shook her exceedingly warm hand, noting once again her striking beauty, and the mysteriously unique color of her stunning blue eyes behind stylish glasses…

The same eyes as in the video, he was sure of it.

Her long golden hair was definitely damp, and he quickly noticed something tiny and green caught in the strands… is that a piece of river grass?

“Oh, um, I’m sorry, allow me to introduce myself… Steven Colliers, Managing Editor of the Tribune.”

He saw her surprised reaction, she hadn’t known who he was, but she knew his name.

“I’m so sorry, sir… um, Mr. Colliers. It’s an honor. I didn’t recognize you. I’ve been working with your teams for the past few weeks.” She was blushing and shook his hand with more vigor. “I’m a huge admirer of your work.”

He chuckled, “It’s okay, no one who’s never seen me for the first time expects CatCo Media’s Managing Editor, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Steven Colliers, to look like a forty-something version of Steve Urkel.”
Kara’s laugh was like music, it was so lovely and unexpected. He must have appeared stunned, because she stopped herself quickly, which was quite disappointing.

“Maybe thirty-something. I love your whole aesthetic, actually… I kind of have a weakness for well-dressed men in bow ties, suspenders, and wingtips.” She said with a bright open smile.

He liked this girl and just had to know.

“Kara, can you show me your right hand again?” He asked pleasantly.

“My what? I don’t…”

“Humor me?” He smiled as disarmingly as possible.

She complied, lifting her arm, “Please don’t react badly here, but… you missed a spot.” He said, pointing to a spatter of blood on the back of her hand. “And your hair, there’s something….” he pantomimed with his own hands to show her that there was an object in her hair that shouldn’t be.

The look of absolute terror in her eyes immediately crushed him… he’d done that.

Like a wild animal, she was going to bolt… maybe never to return. He had to do something to stop her. “Sorry! I’m so sorry.” he stepped closer, and raised his palms up as he made his hushed voice calm, “I don’t mean you any harm, Kara. I just… can we, can we talk in my office?”

She looked dazed, but nodded and followed cautiously as he guided her to his spacious, sunlit minimalistic corner space. A wall of glass looked out over the city forty-four floors below. He closed the internal shades as they stepped inside, and she didn’t walk so much as glide over to stand near the windows, her arms crossed defiantly over her chest.

The door hadn’t even shut before she glared, and nearly growled at him, “What do you want from me?”

He stopped; her words had hit him like a punch in the gut. He’d definitely put her in a corner. She was probably hiding for a reason, and he’d just blown her cover. Of course, people want things from her… why would he be any different? Dammit! He was the bad guy here… she was the hero.

Colliers sighed, sagged, and rubbed the back of his neck as he moved over to his desk and opened a bottom drawer.

The young woman cautiously observed him.

He grinned when he found, and then pulled out an unopened bottle of Jack Daniels, which he set on the desktop as he dug around back in the same drawer for a glass. “I don’t want anything from you, Kara, except to say thank you for saving all those people, and to understand how you did what you did, and why.”

She seemed to relax some, lowering her hands to her sides from her defensive posture. “You’re not going to drink that, are you?”

He stared at the bottle, “I don’t know…”

She blurred for a fraction of a second, if that, and the bottle was no longer there. “Wha? How did? I…. Hmmm.” She was holding it in her hands back across the room as if she’d never moved.

“This stuff’s bad for you, Mr. Colliers, especially with your liver, please don’t.”
He was intrigued. “You can see my liver?”

She nodded, squinting at his abdomen, “A little scarring, but no cirrhosis, you’ll be fine if you stay away from more of this poison.” She gestured at the bottle she was holding. “You’re amazingly healthy otherwise, actually.”

He took a deep breath and flexed a lanky arm. “I work out, eat organic, and live healthy… these days at least.” He paused, grinning like crazy, “Oh, I like this! Please tell me more. And… by the way.” He reached into his pocket and tossed her a thumb drive, which she easily caught in one hand… so fast that he never saw her move. “Footage from the bridge of you, your face. The only copy.”

“You’re just giving it to me?” She asked in disbelief.

“Yup, with the hope of a story in exchange, and maybe an unlikely friendship? You know like those cute videos of wolves and ravens, or lions and antelope being pals.” He was smiling optimistically.

“That would make me the…?”

“Definitely the kindly predator in this scenario.” He was still smiling.

She actually giggled, “You’re telling the truth. Radical. I like you, Mr. Colliers.”

“I like you too Ms. Danvers. Let me guess… also a human lie detector?”

“Sure, let’s go with that.”

“Great, okay. Sit?” He moved over and pulled a chair out for her at the six-person table in the room. They sat together, close, and she picked at the thing in her hair…

“River grass?” He asked.

“Um, eww, no, old lettuce or something. Sooo gross. I need a shower. I didn’t have time when I went back to my apartment.”

She had the time to go back to her place and change, twice, and do what she did… incredible.

“I don’t have a shower here, but I do have a private bathroom, you can wash your hair out in there, or whatever you need.” He heart was racing, how fast could she move? He wondered.

“Thanks.” She said, setting the bottle of JD on the table in front of her. He watched her sit back in her chair with elegance and close her eyes as the sun danced over her skin.

She almost seemed to glow.

“So….”

“So?” she asked as a reply, eyes still closed, as she luxuriated in the sun’s warming rays.

“How and why? What can you tell me? I’m not asking as a reporter, just as a very interested person… and only between us.”

Kara sat forward, opened her eyes, and stared off into the distance. After a moment she whispered something he couldn’t quite make out, like a prayer… but like music, and so beautiful that he was nearly brought to tears.
Her next words were spoken in English, but still hummed with the same haunting, ethereal power, “I saved them because I could, Mr. Colliers, because I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself if I didn’t. I did it because it was the right thing to do.”

She made a fist with her left hand; he’d noticed her shaking ever so slightly once again.

“That 10-year-old boy you rescued from the crushed car… you’re blaming yourself for his injuries, and for not being able to save his father, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” She suddenly choked.

“You know that’s absurd, right? Both he and his mother would be dead if it wasn’t for you.”

“But… he, Ben, the boy, was hurt so bad… and in the car… there was so much blood.” She took a short breath, obviously shaken up. “He may never walk again, and his father, the man his mother, Olivia, loved… died on that bridge. I logically know it wasn’t my fault, but maybe if I was just a little faster, got there a little quicker, maybe if I could have removed that concrete a minute sooner…” A tear trickled down her cheek. “Maybe… I could have kept a family together, and saved the others who won’t be going home tonight.”

“Hey, hush.” He leaned in and took her slender hands in his larger ones. How can someone so powerful be so soft? “Stop blaming yourself. From what I saw, no one could have moved faster, maybe not even Superman (whoa! That got a reaction out of her), and that mother and son still have each other because of you. What does it matter if he can walk or not? Ben’s alive, and you were able to use your powers to help more than any of us normal folks could ever dream of.”

“Thanks for saying that.” She said as she wiped her eyes, and grasped his hands gratefully. He again marveled at how warm she was. “I’m sorry, this has all hit me very personally… you see, before the Danvers took me in, I was… someone else, and kind of broken. I watched my world burn Mr. Colliers and my parents with it. I know what it’s like to lose everything, to feel responsible, and completely lost… but I also know the joy of finding the light again.” She looked off wistfully, and he desperately wanted to know whom she was thinking of at that moment, the one who had inspired her so, who made the angel in front of him smile as brightly as the sun.

Kara continued, “As impossible as I thought it was, I found a new home, with people… and someone who loves me. I’ll fight to protect that, and her, to my last breath.”

He was astounded by her revelations and the determination in her voice and was even more impressed with her than before. He squeezed Kara’s hands in support and kept listening.

“So, you want to know how I did it, right? Well, you saw me fly. I can do that, easy, and I’m very fast. In fact, I just broke a smidge over 7,800 miles per hour before coming to National City, and have no idea what my limit is. My senses are enhanced to what you’d consider crazy levels... like I can hear your heartbeat and everyone else’s in the building right now if I wanted to. I can see through walls, have strength like you wouldn’t believe, and other abilities. Like how I was able to move the cargo ship to a safe place in the river, and use my heat vision to weld the anchor chain back together. I’d rather not say more about where I’m from, but my powers are natural, a part of me. I need to keep all of this private, among friends, family, and loved ones, so… yeah, you knowing my secret is really scary.”

“I understand.” He nodded, and then added, “Do you save people often?”

“Not as often as I’d like, though I imagine if I lived here in National City full-time I’d be quite busy as Archangel…. Oh!” She blushed, so adorable! “That's what I’m called when I’m…”
“Being a hero?” Colliers said with an encouraging grin.

She nodded, obviously thankful for his interjection. “Yes, I suppose so. There was this one epic save where I got my codename, but I kind of promised not to talk about… well, actually, I can’t… Officially, I had to sign a legal document. Anyway, I haven’t really had the opportunity to do a lot, there aren’t too many bridge collapses in Midvale, thankfully, just run of the mill medical emergencies, natural disasters, car crashes, fires, cats in trees, and occasional accidents. When I help, no one usually knows I was ever there.” She sent daggers his way with her eyes. “Publicity is bad for someone like me who’s trying to live a ‘normal’ life, who may possibly have an evil secret government group looking for her.”

“Seriously?”

“Yup, but I try not to dwell on that. I have a life. Honestly? What I really need to focus on right now is acing this internship and getting into Columbia if I ever hope to work for Ms. Grant properly.”

His eyes widened. “So that’s what you want to do? Work here?”

“Absolutely.” She said with confidence.

“Well, I kind of know the Managing Editor, I think we can work on making that a reality.”

“Really?” She bounced out her chair and was hovering in the air. “I wouldn’t be cheating or anything, would I?”

*She’s flying! Like magic!*

Colliers laughed with joy watching her, and her concern about being honest did not escape his notice. “No, not if you’re as good as I think you are. I saw you working with Clara’s boards earlier today, making adjustments, helping the producers and reporters. You know everything about her system, don’t you?”

She settled back down to the floor and looked at her feet, “I do, but it’s terrible, no offense to Mrs. Devon. I’ve been working on ideas on how to fix things for the whole TCC.”

He rubbed his hands together, “Great! Hmm.” He tapped a temple as he paced the room, finally saying, “So here’s the thing… I have an out-of-the-box idea. I’m going to elevate you to temporary Traffic Manager, pay and everything, if that’s okay with you? At least until Clara returns.”

Kara looked shocked, “Tra… Traffic Manager? Me?”

“Yes. No need for modesty here Ms. Danvers, we both know you’re capable of it.” She nodded, still looking a bit stunned. “Okay. Between now and then, you’ll need to help keep this place running smoothly, so you’ll be reporting directly to me from now on. Jenkins won’t be happy; he’s been going on about you non-stop, but I’ll talk to him. At the same time, you need to prepare a proposal to wow Cat Grant with your plan to revamp the TCC. Don’t worry, I’ll review it before you present. If this works, believe me… You won’t need to worry about getting a job here, Ms. Danvers, we’ll be begging you to join us.”

He stood up, straightened his jacket, and stepped over to open the small refrigerator next to his desk. Pulling out two frosty glass bottles of Mexican Coke, he popped the caps off and poured each of them a glass.

“To a new friendship, and new beginnings… Archangel… partner.” He said as he handed her a cool glass of the dark nectar, its tiny caramel bubbles popping festively as he toasted, "Salud!"
As they clinked together, she replied with a grin, “Be șaḥṭak!” in Persian.

“You speak Farsi?” He asked, utterly shocked and overjoyed at the same time. He was rusty, but he and Sergei had spent years immersed in it while living in Afghanistan… not that he wanted to talk about that, yet.

She looked slightly offended and replied in the same language. “Persian is like my mother tongue, Mr. Colliers. I speak both Farsi and Dari fluently, though I have not had the pleasure of tackling the nuances of Tajiki yet.”

“You couldn’t possibly get any more awesome, could you? How many languages do you know?”

“Hmmm, twelve? Oh, no thirteen, and I look forward to learning many, more in the future. I love languages, and all the history and complexity they carry with them.”

They spoke for a long time after that, switching from Persian, to French, to English, and then Spanish and back again as the mood took them, and it was absolutely delightful. Kara told him all about the situation with Stan Williams, and the opportunity to use Geneviève Lefèvre on the Glass Ceiling story and he made a couple of calls to fix things. He also took her suggestion to heart about scheduling some diversity training for the senior staff.

Kara was incredible. Not that he needed more proof that he’d made the right choice in opening up to her… trusting her.

Later, after she’d both delighted and shocked him by vaporizing the bottle of Jack Daniels with plasma beams from her eyes, she excused herself to use his executive washroom to make her hair presentable and prepared to finally leave his office.

A few moments later, she stood next to his door, fidgeting with the thumb drive in one hand, and looking thoughtful. She leveled her gaze at him, and her eyes glowed softly, inhuman, amazing… and for just a moment he saw the goddess once more, and he trembled.

Kara then asked, “Why are you doing this, Mr. Colliers? Helping me?”

She’s direct… I like that.

“Well, aside from the fact that I took an immediate and well-deserved liking to you, Ms. Danvers, it’s actually quite simple… I’ve been waiting for you.” She gaped at him, and he didn’t want her to get the wrong idea, so he quickly continued, “Not knowing if you’d ever come… or even that it would be you, specifically. But more like: I was waiting for a sign, for something to believe in again. Something… an inspiration to pull me back from the ledge I’ve been dangling for so long. Hope for atonement, maybe? I don’t know.”

He was tearing up, choking back the wave of emotion he usually held tenuously in check. Oh Hell, here it comes… “I… I failed Sergei. He died because of me, Kara… me!” He slapped his chest.

Colliers was losing it. Damn, I need a drink, pills, something…

Kara shimmered across the room in the blink of an eye and was suddenly hovering an inch off the floor in front of him, immovable, full of grace, with a look of such sympathy and forgiveness in her eyes it shattered his heart. She wrapped her warmth around his broad, lanky shoulders and pulled him into her welcoming embrace.

She felt like home… like he was once again a child being held by his long-gone mother, whom he missed more than anyone besides his beloved, and something broke inside of him. He wilted into
her, and they sunk to their knees together on the carpet.

Then he wept… letting all the grief, anger, self-loathing, and sadness he’d been holding inside for so many years come pouring out.

“Forgive yourself, Mr. Colliers.” She soothed, over and over. “Be the light for others to follow... It’s all any of us can do, superpowers or not. This world needs your words again.”

Without shame, he allowed himself to nestle into her long, damp hair and continue to weep. Revealing his truth was a small price to pay, to be held by an angel.

It was mind-boggling; what he felt from Kara wasn’t quite magic… he’d experienced that before on his travels, but something even more powerful, and profound. He could literally feel her sunny optimism and strength radiating from her body into his own. Even her words had power.

He felt… pardoned, and loved.

It was transformative… as if his long-lost soul had begun to stir.

Minutes passed under her patient care and when she finally released him his heartfelt wonderfully unburdened, once again aglow with his love for Sergei.

All he wanted to do was to laugh and dance with joy.

Kara, Archangel, had given his love back to him… and had asked for nothing in return… because it was the right thing to do.

He’d known before then but now was sure that his life was hers.

She was the light he would follow.

......................

**Glossary/FAQ:**

**Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms:** I attempt to *italicize* all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

**Terms**

Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

**Ah!khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’** (Persian)

**Alex vanimelda = ‘Beautiful Alex’** (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Bedrood:** Means ‘good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

**C’est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’** (French)

**El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’** The House of El’s family motto. (Kryptonian)

**Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form.** In Shatari and Zara’s
case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah. (Kryptonian)

**Khodāhāfez:** A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. Literally translated it means: ‘May God be your Guardian’ - Khoda, which is Middle Persian refers to Ahura Mazda, the ancient Zoroastrian god, and hāfiz from the Arabic “hifz”, meaning "protection". The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

**Khodaye man** – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

**Malāʾikah** – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature (Persian)

órenya = ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Salām:** A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

**Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:**

**aziz-am** – ‘my dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

**joon-am** – ‘my dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

**nooré cheshm-am** – ‘the light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

**sheereen-am** – ‘sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person’s name<’ + **joon** (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean ‘dear’. So, ‘Shah joon’, means ‘dear Shah’ when Marjorie said it. This is a common word to use in every conversation and every context.

**Others names/nickname/titles/things:**

**Anamchara** – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

**Noshidan!** – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

**Bríomhaire** – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

**Cairdiúil** – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

**Infinite loop** - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition, having one that can never be met, or one that causes the loop to start over.

**Little Star** - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

**Mi diosa** – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)
My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity.

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Tieguanyin - Ti-hk-sen-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province.

Tratung – khrag 'thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’.

‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Vallerian – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers (and givers) can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshipped, or traded. You better believe the catalog of their race’s knowledge is now at least partially open to Kara in her cell memories. Yowza…

Wan - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

Other Odds & Ends:

Kryptonian glyph talking – Finally gave a name to the thing Kara has been doing quite expertly from day one. She does use this ability sparingly, or under duress or when experiencing extreme emotions, pain, or pleasure. This is when a skilled Kryptonian takes a concept, or a word like Vaena, and layers into it its meaning, and other possible complexities such as emotion & feeling, physical sensations, smell… and then release it into someone’s mind (if they are connected), or speaks it, affecting just her target, or anyone listening (her choice as to whom is affected).

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:
Alex and Shah are no longer human, and they seem quite okay with it. What’s going on?

Kara’s first big save in National City was traumatizing, but also led her to a new friend, or follower, however you choose to perceive it. Shockingly, none of the people Kara saved on the bridge told the media anything about their savior… and each was fundamentally changed by their experience interacting with her. There are water cooler whispers of a Guardian Angel watching over the city, and as Kara continues to perform more quiet acts of anonymous heroism, Archangel’s legend continues to grow. What
could be in store for our heroes next?

Kara & Alex’s musical inspiration for this chapter:

Death Cab for Cutie – I Will Follow You Into The Dark
YouTube link for I Will Follow You Into The Dark
For both Kara’s vow that she will follow Alex into the dark and walk with her into Rao’s light when she passes, as well as Colliers’ desire to follow after his lost love, Sergei.

Kodaline – All I Want
YouTube link for All I Want
Colliers’ lament for Sergei

Coldplay – Fix You
YouTube link for Fix You
This is Kara empowering Colliers to forgive himself, and reawakening his heart… guiding him home to the light… her light.

Steven Colliers' personality is modeled on aspects of different folks I worked with back in my own days as a journalist.

Next Up:
Chapter 17: “Shadow and Flame” - An invitation arrives from friends on the USS Zumwalt for our heroes, Alex and Shah finally spill the beans to Kara about their transformations, and the Last Daughter of Krypton celebrates her one-year Earth Anniversary. Plus, other revelations, surprises, as we welcome a new addition to the House of El!

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me. Also, please share this story with those you think might enjoy it!
Shadow and Flame

Chapter Summary

Where an invitation arrives for our heroes from their friends on the USS Zumwalt, Alex and Shah finally spill the beans to Kara about their Kryptonian transformations, and the Last Daughter of Krypton celebrates her one-year Earth Anniversary. Plus, other revelations and surprises as we welcome the newest member of the House of El!

Chapter Notes

Thanks for reading everyone! Writing this story has been an amazing journey so far and I sincerely appreciate all your great feedback and comments. Also, as usual, there are a couple music track suggestions in the end notes if you wish to look. Sorry about the giant glossary/FAQ, I don't have anywhere else to put it, but hope you find it useful.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

July 8th – Year Two

Later that evening, the same day as the San Gabriel Bridge collapse

National City: The Kyle, The Tower (Kara & Alex’s apartment)

18:37 hours UTC -8, Monday night, U.S. West Coast Time

“Rao! Look at Kara move!” Shah said, leaning over the Kryptonian’s shoulder as the three of them sat on her and Alex’s queen-sized bed in The Tower. The freshly showered Kryptonian was balancing a MacBook on her lap so they could watch the video Colliers had provided of her at the San Gabriel Bridge collapse.

The enchanting scent of her friend’s long black hair kept distracting Kara as it brushed across her cheek. It was delightful.

After the footage concluded, Shah nodded at her, appearing quite pleased. Then, in a serious tone, said, “Impressive. Archangel, you saved a hundred and fourteen souls, and made a powerful new ally in the process of compelling him to hand over the only evidence of your intervention.”

Kara was blushing, “Pfft… I didn’t compel him, Shah, he offered it freely.”

“He’s smitten,” Alex said playfully.

“You guys… Mr. Colliers is a wonderful, wonderful man, but he’s gay… like super gay. We talked about fashion for an hour today, his English bull dog, Freddy, and his closets (yes, plural!) look like mine, but a well-dressed boy’s version... he showed me pictures on his phone. You should have seen
him flip out when I told him that I designed and made half my own clothes, including the outfit I was wearing today… he wept with joy. Plus, he was in a committed relationship for almost eight years with a smoking hot Spaniard, who was a **man**.

“He’s not into me… but maybe my Singer.”

They all laughed.

But Shah wasn’t finished. “Kara, I’m serious. He may not want you in a… romantic way, but the fact is he was drawn to you… and basically pledged his allegiance. You **changed** him, **granted** him actual forgiveness... gave him his life back! You’re working at a whole new level of divine now my **Malāʾikah**, don’t you see? Mr. Colliers is **yours** now, just like Daniels, Caruso, Yoshida, and Rodriguez. You’re collecting followers... okay, fine, don’t pout… friends and that’s a welcome thing. I have a feeling we’ll have need of as many as we can get with how things are going, especially influential and connected ones.” She paused and sighed. “**Bebakhshid, sheereen-am**, I do not wish to seem cynical, I too care for our friends… I’m just looking out for you.” She leaned into Kara’s side and laid her head on her shoulder while Alex, on her bondmate’s other side, did the same.

“I know you are, and I appreciate it.” Kara knew Shah was right. What she’d done, and what she was capable of doing, was still freaked her out a little (okay, a lot). She reached up and ran her fingers through her Persian sister’s thick hair.

“We’re sorry you had to deal with the bridge by yourself. You didn’t call on us.” Alex sounded sad.

“I didn’t think it’d turn into such a big deal... honestly, I wasn’t thinking, just doing. I’m really, really, sorry you guys.”

“Forgiven.” Alex and Shah said in near unison, their voices synced in a kind of tantalizing melodic harmony. The pair had been doing that more and more often lately, responding as one. It was so… Kryptonian.

Kara smiled, as she was pleasantly reminded of home.

Alex then said, “Okay then, on to our other issue, we need to talk about the invite. Bring it up. I’m pretty sure I know how we all want to respond.”

Using the MacBook’s touchpad, Kara moused over and opened the email and various files Rodriguez had sent them earlier that day via the secure quantum lock box Shah had set up for the Petty Officer to route emails, calls, and texts for the three of them… basically any communications from their Navy friends. At the time, right after the incident with the USS *Washington*, they had no idea how important, or well-used the conduit would end up being… for all of them.

The letter was from Jessica, and it read:

**Date: 08 July**

**Archangel,**

Greetings. I have wonderful news to share!
Commander Daniels will soon be taking the helm of the USS Zumwalt as Captain! He and soon-to-be Rear Admiral Simmons will both be promoted at a deck side ceremony during Fleet Week on Saturday, 04 Aug in Seattle, WA. While this is a closed event, Caruso, Yoshida, and I have a plan to get you three in if you’re interested. I’ve included all relevant details in separate documents for you to review.

Next…

The Commander is also hoping that you and your team will show up for a party (secretly being held in all of your honor) the evening of that same day. He’s made it easy for you to decide by throwing a masked ball in a freaking castle! How could you say no to that? Well, one twist, the big bill is being paid by someone at the State Department who somehow, despite our best efforts, heard about your exploits with the USS Washington.

Her name is Amanda Thorpe, and Daniels knows her from past dealings. She has an agenda but is trustworthy, and her only condition is that she’d like to chat with Archangel at the party.

Daniels wanted to make it clear that there’s no pressure on you to meet with Ms. Thorpe, but this situation could be turned into an opportunity to make a new, and influential, connection. His guidance is to consider it; especially after the conversations he’s been apparently having with you three about an alliance of some sort, the details of which I’m not privy to.

Also, sorry, we don’t know who the leak was that led State back to us, and you, but we will find out. That’s a promise.

For the party, cars will leave port for the ball starting at 15:00, but since you’ll probably just fly I’ve included the global coordinates for you and your team.

A third matter is more time-sensitive and extremely confidential. We will be conducting a live-fire test of the Zumwalt’s upgraded defensive and combat systems, including new attack drones, the LaWS laser weapons, and upgraded electromagnetic railguns on our way to Seattle. If you and your team would like to have some fun and help test the limits of our capabilities, please join us.

That’s an order from Capt. Simmons and Commander Daniels. j/k

Be aware, engineers from Navy contractors Northrop Grumman and Raytheon, as well as Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA), will be present and onboard, but we’ll hold their shocked asses to secrecy so don’t worry.

The date for the live-fire trials will be next weekend, on Sunday 14 July, but I can’t transmit global coordinates until that morning, I’m sorry. I imagine that won’t be an issue for you, Angel, since you keep getting faster, but if you do require transport for any reason, please let me know; I can come and pick the girls up anywhere in one of our MH-80S Seahawks (‘S’ for stealth baby!) assuming they can’t fly as well.

Kara, on a personal note, I miss you a great deal, and can’t wait to see you again in person. Phone, FaceTime, Skype, and email, though I do appreciate them, won’t let me hug you. I’m also really excited to finally meet your team! Do they have awesome codenames yet? I want to tell them how damn lucky they are.

Hasta que nos encontremos de nuevo, mi diosa.

Eres mi luz.
Petty Officer 2nd Class, Jessica Rodriguez
Ship’s Liaison with Team Archangel and Tactical Action Officer (TAO), USS Zumwalt

P.S. I’m no longer Chief Communications Officer (COMMO). Thanks to my adventures with you and your angels, as you can see in my signature I’m now the ship’s Tactical Action Officer (TAO), which means you’ll be sparring head-to-head with me on 14 Jul for live-fire trials. Bring it, Angel!

....................

“Wow, our Jess is getting cocky, I like that.” Shah smiled.

“Open the invite, open the invite!” Alex was giddy with anticipation as she touched Kara’s arm.

The Kryptonian grinned and leaned over to kiss her beautiful bondmate as she opened the classy digital invitation… the font was exquisite.

....................

The invitation itself read:

You are cordially invited to a masked ball!

Please join us for a night of reunion and celebration as we honor the heroes among us, and those who have fallen. For the officers, crew, and honorary crew members of the USS Zumwalt (DDG-1000)

Heroes welcome. Masks required.

Saturday, 04 Aug

Thornewood Castle

Lakewood, WA

Dinner: 1830 Hours

Ball begins: 1930 Hours

End: When our heroes retire

ABOUT THORNEWOOD CASTLE

Nestled on four acres at American Lake and dotted with old growth fir trees sits Thornewood Castle. Built in 1908 by Chester A. Thorne, this 27,000 square-foot manor is of the Gothic Tudor style and is the only one of its kind on the west coast. Thornewood is a gracious country inn that has been lovingly restored.
“We do too have code names.” Alex said petulantly, still resting her cheek on Kara’s shoulder as she grumbled, “And Jess can’t wait to get her hands on you.”

“Don’t be cross.” Kara tilted her head and kissed her bondmate on the lips, “Jessica is a fervent, ah-hum, believer, and is quite affectionate, but her fragile heart is in the right place. She also doesn’t know that we are a couple, which I promise to remedy when I see her, or that you two have chosen your secret identities… heck, I didn’t know about that! Tell me, tell me!”

Shah peeled herself off of Kara’s other side, uncoiled as she stretched, and pointed first at her own chest and then to Alex. “I’m Shadow, and she’s Flame. We’re sticking with Tolkien’s mythology for our alter egos.” She grinned. “So, we’re like the Valaraukar, you remember them, right? Powerful beings that served the angelic Valar, that’s you, Kara. If you recall, they were also known as Balrogs and had the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow.

“We’re like them, just prettier and not evil.”

Alex sat up, “We wanted to be something badass if we’re backing you up, plus we totally rock the code names… aaaand, don’t be mad, but we’ve been training. A lot.”

“Without me?” Kara whined.

“Details. All of them.” Kara’s uncontrollable smile ruined her mock demand.

Alex was visibly nervous and excited, “Okay, so where do I start? You’ve already sparred with Shah in her displaced form. She’s been working on fading into and moving through shadows nearly instantaneously and cloaking herself in a kind of rolling darkness. She looks amazing doing it, and it really messes with her opponents. Believe me, it’s hella confusing.

“Oh, um, there’s also this teeny detail we’ve been meaning to tell you about… don’t get mad… please? So, it turns out that when a human binds with a Kryptonian companion, in this case in the form of a Ka’dah, there are some… ah, let’s just say, interesting side effects to our physiology.”

“Alex… what’s going on?” Kara sat up straight, very concerned about what her bondmate was going to say next.

“Everything’s fine.” Alex’s voice was soothing, and she didn’t seem worried at all. In fact, Kara could feel the joy she’d been hiding radiating through their bond now… putting her at ease. “Shah and I have just been experiencing… let’s call them ‘Kryptonian moments’ over the past several weeks: bursts of power, enhanced strength, speed, endurance, reflexes, even our senses have gone into overdrive. It’s an incredible rush every time it happens.

“The power is now constant, but still a fraction of yours, and we’ve been learning how to control the energy spikes… so we can use our abilities when we need them. With our enhanced perception, awareness, and speed it’s like you always said it was Kara: time really does appear to slow down.”

Both she and Shah nodded happily.

“What?! Do you know what’s happening? Is it safe?” Kara’s voice had raised an octave or two

Alex nodded, “Shatari and Zara are monitoring us constantly, and have run thousands of tests… they say we’re fine, in fact, more than fine. I also borrowed Naomi’s equipment at Sagan, and verified
that Shah and I are both definitely changing, becoming hybrids... something not completely human, and not wholly Kryptonian. What’s happening is improving us, making us better. Neither of us has ever been stronger, more alert… or more alive than we are right now. It’s like we’re experiencing a taste of what it’s like to be you, and it’s wonderful…”

Shah interjected, “And it isn’t just us… our companions are changing at the same time. As Alex has explained to me more than once, they are symbiotic beings. As we are evolving, they’re keeping pace. Our biology and minds are completely interconnected with them now, so it makes sense. In fact, they’ve been channeling their new strength to grant us each, um, some new and… unique abilities.

“With that, I’ll turn it back over to your bondmate… who has something else to tell you.”

Kara was confused and looked quizzically at Alex, who was obviously trying to psych herself up to say something. Kara felt it through their link, and also knew her visible nervous tells… lightly touching the place behind her ear, nibbling on a thumbnail...

Alex took a deep breath, held Kara’s gaze with her earnest hazel eyes, and said, “I kind of had a ‘Kryptonian moment’ in the lab with Naomi…”

“Oh no…” Kara’s heart sank.

“It’s okay, it’s okay…” Alex calmed her. “She’s cool with it, really… and has even been helping us since: analyzing our blood work and running other tests as we evolve. It’s been awesome, and I’m learning so much from her! I mean, she’s the foremost xenobiologist in the world, and knows more about aliens than almost anyone, besides maybe mom, dad, and the three of us. Her lab at Sagan was built for the express purpose of examining alien life and is exactly what we needed. She’s also keeping everything about us, and you, under wraps… and honestly, I think she’s more excited about this than we are.”

Shah was nodding. “She’s a keeper.”

Kara would have teased her bondmate for staring off into space with heart eyes if things weren’t so seriously messed up. “So, what happened?”

“Well, Naomi was across the room moving some really caustic material into storage and dropped a big rack of vials. She was being foolish and overconfident and wasn’t wearing enough protective gear. If that rack had hit the concrete and the glass shattered, she would have been burned horribly, maybe even died! I didn’t think at all, Kara, I just reacted… I guess like you said, I just ‘did’. One second I was across the room, and the next, I was beside her, just standing there after catching that stupid falling rack of vials like it was no big deal….

“And that was when I finally understood what it was like to be you.” She sounded awed.

Kara gave her a sympathetic look and reached out to hold her hand. “And after that?”

Alex took a deep breath, “We had ‘The Talk’… I needed to be honest with her. And not just to gain her trust and get her help, but because she’s a friend. She’s all-in by the way, and can’t wait to meet you.”

“And you obviously trust her…”

“One hundred percent,” Alex said with confidence.

Kara sighed, and then enthusiastically hugged her surprised bondmate, “That’s good enough for me.
So, what have you guys found out?”

“The Kryptonian biology has taken over at both a quantum and a genetic level, merging with our own human cells. RNA, DNA, everything about us has been slowly, and irrevocably, going through a kind of complete reconstruction…. expanding our code, and adding new material as it evolves all four of us.”

“My… DNA? Oh, Rao…”

“It’s okay Kara, don’t worry! We’re fine, just different… better, actually.” Alex assured her bondmate. “Based on Naomi’s and my analysis, Shah and I are both still mostly human, for now. At this point, I’m a little over twenty percent Kryptonian, and Shah’s about fifteen, but the simulations show that the progression will continue… for years, until we’ll be completely transformed. The effects on our systems are irreversible at this point, so trying to unbind us from our companions wouldn’t make a difference, not that either of us would even consider that option.” She reached over and took Shah’s hand. “We wouldn’t go back for anything, or give them up.”

“We want this, Kara: to be with you as equals in every way, to truly be your protectors… your family.” Shah said solemnly. “El mayarah. Blood bonds us all.”

Kara stared at them in wonder, tears gathering in her suddenly blurry eyes, and she replied, “And in blood we are family.”

Oh, Rao! Alex! Does that means you and Shah will age like me now?

Yes, I confirmed it! Our miracle, huh? It’s… Mind-blowing. Can you believe our buttinsky companions totally lied to us? Such brats… I’m torn between wanting to hug Shatari and smacking her. I really don’t want to encourage her insubordination too much, but I couldn’t be happier.

Kara had been terrified at first, but her heart was now filled with joy at what seemed like just the thing they’d been looking for. That said, she was still feeling a bit guilty. Since it was she who gave both her bondmate and Shah her Ka’dah to try on, she felt responsible even though they were all insanely happy about the result. She sighed, and pulled them into a super embrace, kissing them both, declaring, “I love you guys!”

After lots and lots more hugs, Kara took a deep breath and said, “First off, never, ever keep something like this from me again, okay?” Both Alex and Shah looked down guiltily and nodded.

“Good. Next, I want to know Naomi’s opinion about all of this… asap.

“As far as how I feel… I suppose as long I know you’re okay, and that this is what you both want, I’ll try not to worry too much. But… we need to watch out for any complications, or sudden downsides. And no ‘buts’, if this gets crazy we’re calling in Eliza.” Both Alex and Shah began to protest, but Kara cut them off. “Hey! We all watch the same movies, read the same books, there’s usually some ‘gotcha’ lurking around the corner in situations like this, especially when something seems too good to be true… and when it comes to you two, I’m always on guard.”

Alex hugged her tightly, and Kara marveled as she actually felt the pressure of her bondmate’s squeeze. She darted in to kiss Alex’s nose, but her human feinted and ended up full-on kissing Kara on the lips… Which turned into a fairly passionate moment, with her leaning Kara back until she was on top of her on the bed.

“Wow, someone breathe.” Shah chuckled, admiring the couple’s display of affection adoringly as she lay stretched out next to them.
Alex finally pulled back, slowly, leaving a pouting Kara panting and flushed… wanting more. She then lovingly ran her fingers across Kara’s stomach, chest, and fidgeted with the buttons of her shapely gray Henley shirt with a wicked grin on her face.

Shah cleared her throat, gently, getting their attention. “Still here!” Not that I mind.

Then she smiled, chuckling in their thoughts and picked up where they left off the conversation from earlier, “Allow me to distract you two with more good news about my new powers. See, sometimes it is about me. Where to start? Well, like Alex, I can call forth lower powered versions of your super senses, strength, and speed for limited durations of time. Unique to Zara and I is the ability to move through shadow, it’s great for hiding, and getting places really fast. We can also use the darkness like an extension of our body, to over fifty feet away so far. We’ll keep pushing that limit out further and further as we become more Kryptonian.

“We’ve also succeeded in deconstructing my favorite weapons, atom-by-atom, and recreating more durable duplicates out of shadow stuff. I can just summon them seemingly from the air itself now, remake them as solid darkness with a thought, and then dismiss them when I’m finished. It’s bloody brilliant, like magic… but hardcore science.”

She bounced off the bed and thrust out her right hand. Darkness rolled down her arm, and a midnight black version of her favorite katana appeared to grow from her open palm and into her grasp in a couple of seconds.

Kara flew up to sit on knees and clapped. “Awesome! That’s incredible! You really do rock the name Shadow, Shah. I’m so impressed!” She then glanced over at her bondmate, “What about Flame? So hot, by the way.” Kara wiggled her eyebrows.

Alex’s lips curled into a satisfied smile, and she said, “Like Shah, I control energy, but in a different way. I can visibly appear to be on fire, and use the flames, which are really manipulated light, to obfuscate my true position. Because I can control the temperature, I can also use them to attack, shield, blind or burn, and Shatari has also figured out how to make solid light weapons for me. Works really great for things like shooting arrows and throwing knives. Unless I will it otherwise the weapons dissipate after use and leave no trace. I can just fire and forget! I’m getting to be a damn good shot on the move.

“Oh, yeah, and the coolest part? The gliding!” She stood up, and fiery angel wings, made of orange and reddish fire burst from her shoulder blades. There was no heat, and Alex quickly explained as her wings became white flame, I control the color, temperature, shape, and intensity, everything... with my mind.

“No way! You guys are so my guardian angels.” Kara cooed. “I can’t wait to see you in action.”

A comfortable and easy silence settled between them after that, and after a minute Kara, with a bright smile on her face, asked, “Well, angels, now that I’m in the loop on all the secret stuff…” she paused and gave them a look, “I am in the loop, right?”

Shah and Alex looked down at the floor, and said in contrite unison, “Yes.” Then Alex added, “And we’re really really really sorry. We won’t hide anything from you again.”

Kara nodded, satisfied. “Good. Thank you.” She said and then smiled. “How about we talk about something fun now? Like weekend plans?” After both Alex and Shah nodded she continued, “Great! Okay, Friday is a night out on the town with our new friends, where we’ll surprise Aeryn with a Las Vegas getaway at The Venetian for three as a thank you for how awesome she is.”
Alex grinned. “She’s going to love it! The tickets to see Penn and Teller alone might send her into shock… she talks about ‘those charlatans’ way too much.”

“Thank you both for agreeing to dip into our funds do that for her.” Kara gently reached over and squeezed both of their hands.

Shah nodded, “She deserves it, and besides, ‘our’ funds are like 99% your funds. Kara, you have more money than Oprah.”

“It’s true,” Alex added.

Kara giggled. Not quite, she was sure, Oprah was a rich woman, but the Pac-Men royalties Eliza gave her the lion’s share of were certainly enormous (embarrassingly so), plus her investments of that cash had been paying off exponentially. Playing the stock market was fairly easy when you had the Internet and a Kryptonian supercomputer for a brain. “It’s our money, equally, that’s how it is, and the three of us make decisions about it.

“Anyway, moving on… Saturday is our intern homework in the morning, and then I fly us all up to Venice Beach for a day of lazing by the ocean, in the ocean, under the blazing sun in teeny bikinis, hanging out at the pier, Rao it’s going to be so awesome! That only leaves Sunday as the question mark… are we a go for a rendezvous with the Zumwalt, or not? And then there’s the ball next month.” Kara held up her laptop, referring back to the invite.

Alex sat up and dramatically beat a drumroll on her thigh as Kara awaited their answer.

Alex looked over at Shah and pondered, “Um, let’s see… combat maneuvers with our friends against one of the most technologically advanced warships on the planet, and a masked ball… at a castle, in our honor…. Hmm. Do you even need to ask?”

Shah grinned at her and they both glanced over at Kara and, in unison, called out in Kryptonese, “We’re all in!”

Kara gleefully clapped, “Awesome, RSVP’ing for three: Archangel, Shadow, and Flame… now,” then hit ‘enter’ to send the email response to Jess, before quickly closing and tossing her MacBook aside on her bed.

Alex exhaled, and said, “Okay then, that’s solved… well, besides Shah and I needing a certain amazing costume designer to come up with the look for Shadow and Flame’s super suits, and help to find a couple to die for ball gown/party dresses for our AIs to replicate, we’re good.”

Kara nodded vigorously, “I’ll have something ready in time… I already have some ideas! I think we’ll be reaching back into Krypton’s ancient past for something… deadly, but beautiful.”

“Thank you, nooré cheshm-am.” Alex smiled gratefully, and then looked over at their Persian sister as if she’d suddenly remembered something, “Oh, Shah, are you and Zara about finished with Jess’ surprise?”

The young woman smiled enigmatically and tossed her long raven locks over a shoulder. “Yes, everything is progressing better than expected, she’ll be ready.”

Alex nodded and said, “Excellent.” and then relaxed just a little.

That said, Kara could still feel unease rippling in her bondmate’s thoughts and tightness in the finely honed muscles of her body. Her poor Vaena needed some TLC! The Kryptonian made a mental note to give Alex a long magic-fingers massage later that night… a real one, no sex involved. Well, okay,
that was a lie, but she’d give her the massage first... or after. Whatever! They’d figure it out.

Kara knew some of the tension was related to the alliance the three of them had finally agreed to strike with Tom and the U.S. Navy, or at least a trusted subset of the military that were aware of them. It seemed very much like the right thing to do, and the right people to do it with if they really wanted to start making a difference in the world.

Kara thought their situation could use the wisdom of her aunt Astra, who would often say: ‘Opportunities multiply as they are seized’ which was almost exactly what Sun Tzu had written in The Art of War, the ancient Chinese book of military strategy. The phrase had always rung true for her and was a big factor in swaying her decision to say yes.

They’d taken two months for them to fully consider and debate Tom’s proposal, and though Kara still fretted about it, just a little… she trusted her friend to not betray them. We needed to choose a side sometime... why not now?

We’re making the right call. Alex thought with a sigh and patted her bondmate on the shoulder as she stood up from the bed. Your aunt also said something else, if you recall… Her thoughts were soft and loving, and she raised one of her sharp eyebrows and watched for Kara’s reaction.

A smile spread over Kara’s face. OOOhhh… yes, I remember! She said, ‘Surround yourself with friends.’ How did you...?

Shatari remembers everything… and she loved Astra too. Never forget that.

Kara wiped a tear from her eye and watched as Alex flickered like literal fire. Her beautiful bondmate moved across the room at Kryptonian hyper speed and lifted the little drawstring bag that contained the beacon Astra had given her as a child out of her underwear drawer and brought it over to her.

She clutched the treasure to her chest as Alex hugged her tight. “Thank you. Holding it always helps me remember her.”

“I know.” Alex said warmly, and then tried to brighten the mood, “Let’s get back to celebrating your first year on Earth, okay? I’ve got chocolate, snacks, and Mean Girls, Easy A, and The Devil Wears Prada on Blu-ray for a kick-ass triple feature!”

“I’ll grab the cupcakes and candles!” Shah called out, moving like fluid darkness… already in the kitchen before she could finish her sentence.

“And the ice cream!” Alex called after her.

“Ohhhh! Cupcakes and ice cream?? Two of my favorite things… well, six actually, counting you, Shah, Shatari, and Zara.” Kara zipped over at super speed, swooned into Alex’s chest, and looked up at her with fluttering eyelashes. “Have I mentioned lately how much I love you guys?”

July 14th – Year 2

National City

The Emerald Towers construction site

04:35 hours UTC -8, Sunday morning, U.S. West Coast Time
Alex shivered as a sudden breeze gusted around her in the frigid predawn gloom. She still hadn’t been able to figure out how to adjust her body temperature at will, so she was somewhat at the whim of Mother Nature; Shatari sensed her discomfort though, and immediately thickened and heated her new blood red leather armor.

*Thanks, sweetie.* Alex’s thoughts mingled with her happy companion’s.

Dust devils stirred among the stunted concrete pillars lining the incomplete top floor of the building where she and Shah loitered in wait. There was no ceiling; the half-built level of concrete and its bare rebar was open to the star-filled indigo sky, which was just beginning to turn a beautiful shade of pink off to the east.

Damn, she missed Venice Beach: Kara in her jaw-dropping bikini, and the sun. It was odd, how much she desired the light now… could actually feel its power.

Even dawn’s faint glimmer held its promise.

*I really am turning into a Kryptonian, I had no idea the sun would be such a drug... I’m like Nom with a ball of catnip.*

She stood up from crouching on a long wooden plank that was scattered with schematics of the building and stretched. After Kara had flown them to the site around 04:15 that morning, she and Shah had easily bypassed the fence and gained swift access to the top of the structure. The lone overnight security guard had been and still was, asleep in his car with the heat and radio on.

Now they were just waiting for Rodriguez to show up and transport them to the USS Zumwalt.

Alex glanced over and watched her best friend balancing recklessly on the narrow edge of the building’s unfinished exterior wall, seventeen floors up, without any guardrails or safety net...

*Bored?* Alex asked in Shah’s thoughts. It was usually easy to communicate with her now… Sometimes it was as if the three of them were one fluid mind. But not that morning; something was bothering her Persian sister and she’d been closed off since before the flight over.

*No.* Shah’s thoughts were in Farsi, of course. *Just preparing myself… but our wait’s almost over, our ride should be here soon.*

*Good,* Kara chimed in from afar. *I’ll be ready, please let me know once Daniels is ready for me. Give me ten minutes or so to make the trip.*

Alex’s bondmate had returned to The Tower to tweak her costume after dropping them off. She’d been totally excited about inverting and streamlining her mask to disguise her eyes, but not cover the lower portion of her face.

*Don’t be late.* Alex teased, as she leaped off the makeshift table, and rolled to stand gracefully next to Shah at the building’s drop-off, scanning the skies to the northwest. She steadied herself with a feather-light touch on Shah’s mid-back.

*When am I ever late?* Kara giggled in their thoughts. *See you both soon. Knock ‘em dead, Shadow and Flame!*

As Kara’s focus moved elsewhere, Shah leaned into Alex and spoke softly, “I had no idea that I could ever, in my life, love one, let alone two people as much as I do you both.”
Alex was delighted, but a little worried by her best friend’s sudden, out-of-character declaration. She snaked an arm around the shapely girl’s supple waist, and gazed into her softly-shrouded, dark brown eyes, “I love you too, aziz-am. Is everything all right?”

Shah sighed, glancing off in the direction of the approaching helicopter. “My mother and I were up all night. We thought we finally had a solid lead on where the Intelligence Ministry may be holding my father… but when we talked to my cousin Kir in Tehran a couple hours ago, it turned out to be just another expensive dead end.”

“Oh no! Are you guys okay? Why didn’t you say anything to Kara and me about this earlier?” Alex placed a supportive hand on Shah’s arm.

“I didn’t want to complicate her big day with my drama. Archangel needs to focus, not worry about me. My problems can wait.”

Alex smiled and reached out to caress Shah’s cheek, “Hey, your problems are our problems, and they can’t wait. I know how hard it’s been for you and Ravan all these years. We’re here for you… I’m here for you, always.”

Shah nodded, and while she maintained an outward calm, Alex could feel her sadness. Her friend eventually continued, “It’s been years since I last spoke with my father… I don’t know where he is if he’s okay… or if we’ll ever see him again. Alex… I… I’m starting to forget the sound of his voice! And Cyrus… Sometimes I dream of my brother and catch myself hoping he’s alive, but I know that’s illogical. I… I saw what the bullet did to him…”

The skin of Alex’s armor momentarily flickered with flames as she enveloped a trembling Shah in her arms. She eagerly responded, laying her head on Alex’s shoulder as they embraced.

“Maybe our new friends could help us? We just need to ask,” Alex offered hopefully. “And, we haven’t even tried breaking into the Ministry’s network on our own yet. Shatari and Zara could probably slip us past any protections, look for information on your father’s location or your brother, and get out without being detected.”

“I think asking Jess and Daniels may eventually be an option, after we see how our alliance unfolds. As far as us taking a run on the Ministry’s data…” Shah shook her head a little. “I’m reluctant to go there, though I have been sorely tempted. I think that without more information to go on it’d be like looking for a needle in a haystack, as they say, and too risky. The last thing we need right now is to draw scrutiny to ourselves and put Kara, and our families, in danger. Remember what happened the last time the three of us had this discussion? We don’t need Kara seriously considering flying off to search all of Iran stone by stone. She has no idea how big my country is.”

Alex almost laughed. She did remember. Kara had been so adamant… they had to talk her down using logic, and chocolate. “True, but I think things are different now, we’re different… and we can’t just keep sitting back and doing nothing. The three of us should talk about our options later, but I’m leaning towards using all of our resources to look for your dad. We have to try.”

Shah shifted, rose up on her tippy toes, and left a soft, chaste kiss on Alex’s cheek, “Thank you, Alexandra.”

The brunette grinned and was about to say something when they both sensed the stealth helicopter’s approach… five miles out. “Here they come. It’s about time for Shadow and Flame to make our first appearance.”

Alex raised one hand, and a scintillating dagger, made of solid light and licked with bright flames,
appeared in her grasp. Flicking her wrist, she sent the weapon streaking like a flare in a sixty-foot arc across the rooftop, where it embedded itself into the concrete at the center of a wide, open area... burning like a beacon. “Bull’s eye!”

“Good shot,” Shah said, as she literally disappeared, her physical form no longer substantial, or in one place… it was as if she’d become part of the gloom around them. Then, her living darkness coalesced, surrounded and shrouded Flame, and Shadow’s thoughts were like a whisper, Remember, Alex, perception is power… let’s make a good first impression. Today, we are Valaraukar.

Then, with a swift, graceful motion, she slipped her suddenly very substantial leather clad fingers into Alex’s hand and pulled her into the shadows of the open rooftop to await the arrival of their friends.

......................

July 14th – Year 2

National City

“Muninn”- One of the USS Zumwalt’s two MH-80S Seahawk stealth multi-mission helicopters

On approach to the Emerald Towers construction site – Altitude 1,230 ft. and descending

05:10 hours UTC -8, Sunday morning, U.S. West Coast Time

The red lights of the stealth helicopter’s interior cast a dim glow around them as the sleek Seahawk leaned into a shuddering ninety-degree tilt, spiraling in on approach to their target.

“You’re foggin’ up the window, Rodriguez.” Petty Officer 3rd Class Aya Yoshida teased the Zumwalt’s voluptuous Tactical Action Officer from the safety of her jump seat across Muninn’s spacious internal cabin.

Petty Officer 2nd Class Jessica Rodriguez had been intently scanning the area below as they drew ever closer to the darkened construction site, focused on the skeletons of its two incomplete towers. She didn’t even bother to glance over at her escorts, who were busy fist bumping… she just kept looking out the wide window of the modified Seahawk’s side door and casually flipped them both off. “Eat me, Yoshida… oh sorry, no thanks.”

“Oh, deenied! So disappointing!” Petty Officer 3rd Class Dante Caruso chimed in, “I’d love to see that. Hell, I’d like to join in.”

“You are so nasty, Dante.” His smirking companion gave him a high-five.

“And you two are so perfect for each other.” Jessica sighed. The duo secretly cracked her up, but she wasn’t going to admit it. She had been kind of totally obsessed with seeing Kara again, and meeting her angels… her ‘sisters’, and they had a right to tease her, but she couldn’t help it.

“See anything yet?” Yoshida asked, this time completely serious, and seemingly no less obsessed.

“No I don’… wait! Aye! A flare, on the top floor of one of the buildings.” Jessica touched her tiny headset, “Lieutenant Corrigan, we have a beacon, west structure rooftop.”
“Acknowledged. Taking us to target… silent running, sixty-foot ceiling.” The veteran pilot responded, and they began a swift descent.

“I can’t wait to meet them too.” Yoshida smiled, gripping her M-16 tightly as the craft swooped and leveled. Caruso was clutching at his harness, and looking a little pale.

Jessica hadn’t looked away from outside her window and continued straining to see into the inky darkness. Aside from the fiery beacon in the middle of the top floor sixty feet below, the area appeared vacant.

*Where are they?*

As they drew close, she reached over and pressed a small panel, releasing the security latch on the wide, sliding door on the aircraft’s side.

*Well, here goes nothing…*

As it began to open, the biting wind from rotor wash and the deep muffled sounds generated by the rotating blades of the stealthed Seahawk buffeted the cabin of the high-tech aircraft.

Thumpa… Thumpa… Thumpa… Thumpa…

She touched her headset again, this time switching to Archangel’s secure channel as she raised her voice, “Okay ladies, the barn door’s open.”

A familiar, sexy British-accented voice responded immediately, “Hello, Jessica.”

*Shah!*

At that moment, she caught movement below, quick, like a glimmer of… darkness? Rolling up a pillar, and then, impossibly, reaching across the vast distance, sixty feet up to the Seahawk’s open door. Before more than a few seconds had passed, she was there! A curvy figure, cloaked in shadow… a dark goddess, her mane of black hair flowing behind her like a river of midnight.

*Shadow!* It was at that moment that the true meaning of Shah’s code name became very clear…

A grin curled beneath that black hawk-like mask that covered the upper two-thirds of her face as she aimed a placating gesture at the jumpy-as-hell Caruso and Yoshida, sitting to her immediate right. “At ease with the weapons, my friends, we have one more joining us.”

As if on cue, a fiery figure soared up from the darkness like a brilliant bloom, or a firework, and gracefully stepped onboard, folding back massive blazing wings as she did so.

*Flame just flew up here! On fire!* Jessica was stunned.

The new arrival was tall, built like an athlete with the grace and power of a dancer, and looked damn fine in her red outfit. Both of Archangel’s team wore a similar uniform: skintight leather, with the most intricate symbols Jessica had ever seen etched into the material; terrifyingly, the mysterious markings were moving… as if they were alive.

Flame wore a birdlike mask similar to Shadow’s, but hers was blood red, matching her armor. She smiled, and her wings immediately began dissipating, starting at the tips and moving inward until they were gone, like glowing embers of ash. She then waved at them all, sat down to Yoshida’s right, and buckled in. “We’re good to go, Rodriguez!” She called out over the clamor, giving the Petty Officer a quick thumbs up.
Jessica slapped a panel with her palm, and the wide metal door began sliding closed as she tapped her headset, “Lieutenant, head back to roost... we have our angels.”


As *Muninn* pulled away from the construction zone, Jessica watched as the two seemingly unearthly creatures leaned forward to look across the two Petty Officers sitting between them, and nodded at each other. Simultaneously, they reached up to touch their masks, which immediately dissolved before the three sailors’ eyes as if they’d never existed.

Flame, or Alex as Jess knew her, was younger than Jessica (but not by much) and beautiful, with alert hazel eyes and sharp, elegant features. There was a fierce determination about her - as if every move she made was a calculated and deliberate action. Also, her short-cropped dark brown hair was so cute!

She introduced herself to Aya and Caruso, “To your shipmates please refer to me as Flame, but here among friends, just call me Alex.”

Next, Shadow shook her luxurious raven locks and leaned over to present herself to all of them as well. “I’m Shadow, but you may call me Shahrazad, or just Shah if it’s easier. Pleasure, I feel like I know all of you already.” She was a little older than Alex, and like her, was gorgeous, but in a more dangerously sensual way.

Jessica was already smitten. Oh, that accent, those lips… her dark complexion, and stunning emerald green eyes that didn’t miss anything. She was already imagining the amazingly decadent things they could be doing together in the dark.

Yoshida was first to speak, “I think I pissed myself.” She said in all seriousness and then laughed.

Caruso followed up with, “That was one hell of an entrance ladies… damn!”

“Ignore them,” Jessica said helplessly, staring daggers at Aya and Dante before fully turning her attention to Shadow and Flame. “It’s so wonderful to finally meet you both, Alex, Shahrazad.” She tried very hard to get Shah’s full name right, it was kind of a mouthful, but lovely.

Jess leaned across and held out her hand, which they each took in turn.

Shah was smiling, “Very good pronunciation, do you know Persian by chance?”

The Petty Officer blushed, “A little, I’m taking classes.”

“Perhaps we can supplement your instruction in Farsi while we’re here.”

Did she hear that right, we? “Do you both speak it?”

Shah smirked, “Of course, as does Kara. She has a passion for language, among other things.”

Jessica caught the subtle hint of innuendo… and had no doubt that the blonde goddess had many passions, and inspirations. Like the two angels sitting across from her… what were their relationships? She could only dream of being close enough to any of them to know them so well…

“How is she?” She asked tentatively, hiding her eagerness the best she could, and hoping for honesty.

Caruso and Yoshida leaned in with rapt attention, obviously just as interested in Kara’s status as Jess
Two things happened then…

Shah became cloaked in a shroud of darkness as if the night itself obeyed her will, and as the lights flickered in the half-lit cabin she disappeared.

Someone gasped, and the lights immediately flickered back on as she reappeared in the seat right next to Jessica… as before, it was like the darkness itself had magically pulled her across. Jess jumped and swallowed hard, Shah, as Shadow, was only a foot away, watching her like a cat studying a mouse before it pounces.

At the same time, Alex replied to Jess’ question, as if Shah moving through the shadows was an everyday thing, and not f’ing amazing! “Honestly, Kara had a rough flight home from the Zumwalt. It was really scary… I… we thought we’d lost her… a second time after the incident with the USS Washington.” There was a hint of fear in her voice, and Jessica’s heart reached out to her.

*I wonder whether Kara’s angels stayed with her and nursed her back to health? It’s clear Alex cares for her as more than a friend.*

“But she’s doing great now. She talked about you all a lot, Jessica, and was really happy when you sent the invite, thank you so much. We’re all spending some time in National City this summer, hence the odd pickup location.”

Jess was listening, but also trying to catch her breath from the heart attack Shah had nearly given her. She glanced over at her and forgot how to breathe as the dark beauty smiled. It had been a long time since she’d felt like prey… and she liked it. She returned Shah’s smile, and the sexy midnight goddess curled into her seat, looking satisfied and more relaxed.

Yoshida asked, “That bridge collapse, that was Kara, right? Saving all those people? We saw it on the news, and most everyone on the ship has an opinion on whether it was her or not. My money’s on Kara.”

Alex nodded, “Yeah, much to our surprise; Shah & I found out after the fact. Some protectors we turned out to be on that one.”

Caruso smacked his hands together, the sudden clap reverberating in the enclosed space. “I knew it! Carlson owes me fifty large. Dude has no faith… I knew it was Archangel!”

After shaking their heads at Caruso’s outburst, Shah and Jessica directed their attention back over to Alex and Yoshida who were in conversation.

Jessica noticed the delight reflected in Aya Yoshida’s eyes as she engaged with the fiery one about Kara. It seemed as if the only time she and her partner were serious was when Archangel was the topic of conversation. “So, you two look out for her, right? Like, are her protectors? That’s kind of what we do.” She indicated Caruso by slapping him on a knee to get his attention. “We just don’t get to guard anyone as agreeable, or as important as Kara. Do we, Dante?”

Dante frowned… he looked so goofy, “Nope, no one as hot as you all either, or as wonderful as Ms. Kara.”

Yoshida grinned affectionately at her too-honest partner, and then turned her attention back to Alex, “I guess what I’m saying is, thank you both. It’s good to know that she has you as guardians. We all think about her often. You can’t go down the racks or sit in the mess deck without hearing her music, or someone telling stories (or making them up) about the three of you. Let us know if you ever need
any help… you know, full-time. Dante and I won’t be in the Navy forever.”

“It only just seems like it.” Caruso chuckled. “Seriously tho’, we’re all in, just let us know, okay?”

Alex appeared to be emotionally affected by Yoshida’s words. She nodded in the affirmative, before finally saying, “Merci beaucoup! Aya, Dante, that means a lot to us, and we won’t forget.”

The powerful woman smiled at Alex’s easy use of one of her two native languages and reached over to gently squeeze her red leather armored hand. Yoshida spoke French, Japanese, and English all with a smooth fluidity, and Jess knew how much she loved doing it.

“Me too.” Jess’ voice squeaked a little as she piped up, blushing.

Alex turned her smile and inquisitive hazel eyes on her, and the Petty Officer squirmed in her seat. “We are honored.” The fiery angel said respectfully as she bowed her head slightly.

Dios mío! She’s so beautiful… and elegant!

Then Alex and Shah shared a glance and began speaking to each other in the most incredible, musical language that Jessica had ever heard. It was intimate and beyond beautiful… alive with its fluid cadence and nuanced rhythms. She was amazed at how fast the words poured from them as if it was the easiest thing in the world to speak the language of the gods. Jess knew, without a doubt, that’s what they were doing.

“That’s Kara’s language, isn’t it?” She boldly asked, breaking their flow of conversation.

Shah was quick to respond, “Apologies, yes, it is. Alex and I just had… something to discuss.”

“Look…” Alex began, almost apologetically, “We really need to fill you in on a couple of surprises… One, Shah’s begun uploading some preparatory code onto Zumwalt’s systems, piggybacking on the Seahawk’s encrypted network as we speak…” As if sensing Rodriguez’s instant anxiety Alex said, “Jess, we’ll walk you through it now, before we implement, okay? If you don’t like it, I’ll take it back.”

“What is it?” Jess was on the edge of her seat… surprises from these angels were usually mind-blowing.

Shah chimed in, “Some changes to your systems to prepare for a very advanced living intelligence, you might call her an AI, but she’s no more artificial than we are. In all respects, I am her mother, a blessed distinction I share with my companion Zara… after all, we breathed life into her together. Our daughter will, hmmm, let’s just say, assist you in significantly expanding the Zumwalt’s systems, as well as her current sensory, defensive, and tactical capabilities.”

“But that’s not the whole story,” Alex interjected. “Somewhere in the process, she picked up some sass and stubbornness. Got it from her mum I think…”

Shah shrugged and made a face that basically said, ‘sounds about right’.

Then Alex added, “And she would only help the Zumwalt if she could work with you specifically, Jess.”

“No way! Me? Really? Why?” Jess was perplexed… “And you keep saying… she?”

Shah jumped back in, “Yes… she’s female but doesn’t have a name yet. We were hoping you could help her figure that out. Here, you can talk with her on our way to the ship. She’s temporarily riding
along in the special crystal we made for you.” The dark angel reached into a hidden pocket on the front of her outfit and slipped out what appeared to be a delicate and stunningly beautiful amethyst. It was about three inches long and attached to an intricate silvery metallic chain; symbols similar to the ones on Shah’s outfit wound along its length… and moved!

"No es posible!" It looks just like Kara’s necklace but in my color…

Before she dropped the beautiful crystal into Rodriguez’s eager open hands, Shah gave the Petty Officer a concerned, almost sympathetic look, and cautioned, “Jess, this is an advanced communication beacon that will link you into our network, make you part of a very small family, and a lot more we can talk about later. But right now the important thing is, once you take this, you’ll be in Kara’s world… our world. Where danger lurks around every corner, and the word impossible doesn’t exist. While my daughter can revoke any changes done to the Zumwalt… from here on out, for you, once you’ve seen it there’s no turning back. Are you ready for that? To embrace our reality?”

Jessica leaned in close, and gently, almost defiantly, plucked the gemstone from Shah’s hand, wrapping her fingers around it without any hesitation. She’d never been happier. “I’ve already seen a glimpse of your world, Shahrazad, and I’ve been ready and waiting to get back there ever since. Ready and waiting.”

Then Jess heard her, what sounded like Shah’s voice in her mind, Hello luv, it looks like you and I are going to be a team, and I hope… very good friends.

Shahrazad? Jess asked in her own thoughts, confused and surprised. The gorgeous raven-haired angel was still in front of the Petty Officer, not talking, but observing her curiously, as if the dark angel had been expecting Jess’ bizarre reaction after taking the beautiful gemstone necklace.

The voice in her mind giggled, No, I'm not her… just currently a reasonable facsimile. My mothers believed it would be more comfortable, and less jarring for you and your people, if I sounded like someone familiar at first. But don’t worry; I’m already working on finding my own voice. That said, there’s a great deal of my human mother’s personality in me, I guess.

You guess?

Uh huh.

Are all AIs as normal as you? You seem… really human.

Thank you! I try. Actually, I don’t really need to try; I just am… it’s how my mothers made me.

Who’s Zara, another one of Kara’s angels I haven’t met yet?

The AI that sounded like Shah giggled, No, and yes, my other mother is Shah’s companion from Kara’s world, a living free-willed non-biologic intelligence… different from me, but I do share her spark. Zara and Shah are one; they’re always together, just like Shatari and Alex. I’m so freaking envious of them by the way, how they have each other.

It was Jess’ turn to laugh, she knew how AI Shah felt, what she wouldn’t give to be a companion to any of them. Does that mean that you don’t have a… ‘companion’? She asked. She was also intrigued by the lovely AI’s use of the phrase, ‘Kara’s world’… but chose to keep that to herself for the moment.

No, I am not a companion, but it was Kara’s wish that I, in a way, become that for the Zumwalt… as in its mind, heart, and soul. I won’t be bound to her in the way my mothers are to each other. I
can go where I wish, when I wish, with whomever I chose to be with. I am free.

Jess swallowed, nervous to ask the question that had been on the tip of her tongue... well in her thoughts technically... how weird to be talking in my mind. Alex said that you’d only do it if you could work with me.

Yes, that is true. Shah and Alex have already spoken to Commander Daniels about it. We’re greenlit. The final decision is up to you.

Jessica was stunned... W... why me?

I... I... honestly? I can’t tell you exactly. Only that when I woke up in this world you were the first thing in my thoughts, I kept seeing your beautiful face, and I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you. Is... is that too forward to reveal? I apologize if it is... I’m still learning.

Jessica’s breath caught in her throat, and she blushed.

I hope that my admission won’t deter you from accepting me. My mothers and my aunts all trust you to protect me, as I will protect you. There was a powerful promise in her words, one that Jessica had been hoping for.

You will? Jess was suddenly trying hard to fight back tears, she had told Kara all her secrets. Kara knew what she was afraid of... and had promised to find a way to free her from the darkness that haunted her. Did she dare hope to believe that her goddess had answered her prayers and sent this beautiful soul to watch over her?

Of course. Did you think I was here to merely sync up with your vessel? No. That’s my task, my... job. You, Jessica Maria Rodriguez, are my first priority.

Kara made me aware of your situation days ago, soon after I awoke, and it was the first time I experienced sadness or anger. I wanted to help... to keep you safe, so I began to obfuscate your identity along with your electronic footprint, to make sure that no one you did not wish to, could ever find you. Trust me... you are, as they say, a ghost.

I also took the liberty of alerting the police to credit card and other fraudulent activities currently being perpetrated by your ex, and he’s in County lock-up as we speak. I was able to easily gather, and, let’s just say... um... ‘recreate?’ enough evidence to assure that he’ll be going away for a long time.

Jess, I promise you: he’ll never threaten or blackmail you, or anyone else, ever again.

The Petty Officer broke, Oh mi ángel. Thank you. Thank you. She was shaking... remembering, and reliving traumas she was normally able to hold at bay in the daytime. Were they finally over?

Mother! Help me! Her new AI friend seemed frantic, and was calling for Shah, her mother, in their shared thoughts...

Dios mío! Jess could feel Shah’s calming presence join them.

I am here, Jess. Shh, shh. We have you.

She was still trembling, but less so, and back in the physical world, out of her mind, the living Shah, her dark angel, was suddenly holding her in soft arms, shadows swirling around them for privacy. Her imposing black uniform was gone, replaced by a soft cotton shirt and normal clothes.
Not that Jessica was in any state to register much of that as she relaxed into the woman. Shah’s soft breath warmed her ear as dexterous fingers ran soothingly through her hair. The dark beauty whispered that it was going to be okay and that she was finally, and unequivocally, safe.

And Jess believed her.

As the miles dropped behind them, the Petty Officer slowly regained her composure, but remained unabashedly snuggled into Shah’s curves… happily being lulled by two comforting voices, Shah’s in her ear, and her daughter’s in her mind. Jess had never felt so loved, or at peace.

Archangel answered my prayers.

She was finally free, and being held by three angels… drifting somewhere between darkness and wonder.

........................

Glossary/FAQ:

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Terms

Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

Ah! khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

Alex vanimelda = ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Bebakhshid – ‘Sorry’ or ‘I beg your pardon’ as Shah intended it (Persian)

Bedrood: Means ‘good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

C’est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

Dios mío! – ‘My god!’ (Spanish)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah.

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. Literally translated it means: ‘May God
be your Guardian’ - Khoda, which is Middle Persian refers to Ahura Mazda, the ancient Zoroastrian god, and hāfiz from the Arabic “hifz”, meaning "protection". The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature

mi angel – ‘My angel’ (Spanish)

No es posible - ‘No way!’ (Spanish)

órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

aziz-am – ‘my dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

joon-am – ‘my dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘the light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘<insert person’s name>’ + joon (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean 'dear'. So, ‘Shah joon', means ‘dear Shah’ when Marjorie said it. This is a common word to use in every conversation and every context.

Other names/nickname/titles/things:

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Bríomhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition,

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn &
Muninn (Thought & Memory). In Norse mythology, **Huginn** (from Old Norse ‘thought’) and **Muninn** (from Old Norse ‘memory’ or ‘mind’) are a pair of ravens that fly all over the world, Midgard, and bring information to the god Odin. *Muninn’s* pilot is a combat veteran, the decorated Lt. Corrigan. She’s awesome btw.

**My dreamcatcher** – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

**Nūsh** – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

**Ouroboros** - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity.

**Salud!** – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

**Tieguanyin** - *Thih-koan-im*; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province (Chinese)

**Tratung** – *khrag thung* - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

**Vaena, Vaena Alex** – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’. ‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

**Valar** – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Valaraukar** – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar, and were also known as *Balrogs*. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Vallerian** – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers (and givers), they can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshipped, or traded. You’d better believe the catalog of their race’s knowledge is now at least partially open to Kara in her cell memories. Yowza…

**Wan** - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

**Odds & Ends:**

**Kryptonian glyph talking** – Kara has been doing this quite expertly from day one, and now Alex and Shah are learning. This ability is when a skilled Kryptonian takes a concept, or a word like Vaena, and layers into it its meaning, and other possible complexities such as emotion & feeling, physical sensations, smell… like a glyph, and then release it into someone’s mind (if they are connected), or speaks it out loud, affecting just a single target, or anyone listening (her choice as to whom is affected).
The Wrap:
Shah has a daughter?? Whaaa? Welcome to the House of El Ada Zara-El Nazari!

There'll be lots happening in this one: Kara, Alex, and Shah have made a gamble to ally themselves with soon-to-be Captain Daniels, the USS Zumwalt, and a trustworthy faction of the chain of command within the US Navy; Alex and Shah are becoming hybrid Kryptonian bad asses; Petty Officer Jessica Rodriguez was welcomed as the newest member of Team Archangel; we now know that Daniels, Jess, Aya, and Dante are all aware of our heroes’ true identities; and that the unknown fates of Shah’s father and brother are weighing heavily on her and Ravan.

Next chapter expect lots of fun and excitement when Kara takes on the stealth warship in a live-fire game of war!

Next Up:
Chapter 18: “Crash the Sky” Where Kara and her friends take a weekend break from intern stress and trade up for some fun in the sun, or as they call it… live-fire combat maneuvers with the USS Zumwalt in the Pacific. Kara goes orbital, Daniels reveals something startling, the ship receives a heart and soul, Jess helps Shah’s daughter choose a name, and Kara gets a General.

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me. Also, please share this story with those you think might enjoy it!

Thoughts:

Song inspirations this chapter (both for Jess!):

**Lana Del Rey – Ultraviolence**  
[YouTube link for Ultraviolence](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQw4w9WgXcQ)  
While I have not, and will not share all the traumatic details of Jessica’s life experiences (I did put some in her bio in chapter 12), this song could be a soundtrack for those dark chapters of her life, which are now in her rearview mirror. Her road ahead is about healing, finding peace, acceptance, love, and her power.

**Florence + The Machine - Dog Days Are Over**  
[YouTube link for Dog Days Are Over](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQw4w9WgXcQ)  
There is light after darkness. Now comes the hard part… but the good news is Jess has someone to stand with her now.

**Muninn:**
Is one of the USS Zumwalt’s two Sikorsky MH-80S Seahawk multi-mission twin-engine helicopters. The aircraft is my own improved version of Earth 38’s US Navy’s MH-60R Seahawk. The ‘S’ in MH-80S stands for stealth, as Huginn and Muninn possess cloaking field technology that counters most enemy radar, visual, and heat detection. Remember, Earth 39 is more advanced technologically than Earth 38.  

The USS Zumwalt is currently attached to [Carrier Strike Group 9](https://www.navy.mil/view_seascape.asp?navnum=40336184), part of the US
Pacific Fleet. Here’s a link to our world’s version:
Carrier Strike Group 9

Thornewood Castle
Yeah, it’s freaking real
Chapter Summary

Where Team Archangel take a weekend break from intern stress and trade up for live-fire combat maneuvers with the USS Zumwalt in the Pacific, or as they call it… some fun in the sun!

Kara goes orbital, Daniels reveals something startling, the ship receives a heart and soul, Jess helps Shah’s daughter choose a name, and Kara gets a General.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! I hope you enjoy. Music tracks for this chapter and other details are in end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Continuing from chapter 17, it's still July 14th – Year Two

USS Zumwalt

The Pacific Ocean, somewhere far off the coast of California, coordinates, classified

0557 hours UTC -8, Sunday morning, U.S. West Coast Time

The rest of the trip was a whirlwind.

By the time the Muninn made a smooth landing on the USS Zumwalt’s wide aft deck the sun was just beginning to rise in the east.

It’s so beautiful. Alex’s blissful thoughts mingled with her Persian sister’s.

“I concur, joon-am.” Shah purred in her ear. The two were sitting together, gazing in wonder out the stealth helicopter’s side window at the stunning pastel vista that stretched far across the curved horizon of the ocean.

They were back in costume as Shadow and Flame, their slight, carnival masks on, and Jessica had pulled herself together… though she was quiet. The Petty Officer 2nd Class was sitting strapped in her jump seat, dreamily touching the place on her chest where the amethyst crystal the connected her to them hung safely under her uniform.

She and your daughter are still talking. Look at her, like a kid with a new best friend… remember that feeling? It wasn’t that long ago for the two of us. Alex said as she hugged Shah in their thoughts, and both friends simultaneously reached out to entwine their fingers together.
Shah sighed happily. *We have brought her both peace and delight. Now I understand why Kara enjoys helping people so much, it feels good.* They shoulder bumped in real life while still holding hands, and tried not to giggle.

**You think she’ll be okay?** Alex asked tentatively, glancing over at Jessica.

*There is greatness ahead for her. Now that her demons have been dealt with, my daughter will see to it.* Shah replied with conviction.

*I still can’t believe you made Kara cry when you revealed her... a real, honest-to-goodness living hybrid Kryptonian/human sentience! Your child!*

*How was I supposed to know her father was the chief AI architect back on Krypton! Or that it was Zor-El who gave life to Shatari? None of you bothered to tell me!*

*They were happy tears, Shah! You done good sister.*

A smiling Alex then leaned in and left a lingering kiss on her suddenly submissive best friend’s cheek.

..................

There was an assembly of officers and sailors waiting to greet them as they full-masked up and stepped onto the flight deck from the belly of the sleek MH-80S Seahawk, its massive blades slowly rotating to stillness.

Before moving off Alex pounded on the glass of the aircraft’s bulletproof cockpit to get the attention of the three crewmen inside and waved to indicate her appreciation. The tanned, blonde female pilot, Lt. Corrigan, and the other two male officers all smiled and waved back in return.

They politely acknowledged their welcoming committee before quickly following the Petty Officer below decks into a warren of narrow corridors and stairwells. Jess impressively navigated the maze as if she had a GPS in her head. When they finally strode into great ship’s operational heart, the high-tech CIC (Command Information Center), it was to the gasps and amazed looks of all those gathered there.

When Caruso and Yoshida peeled off to stand guard at the hatches Alex couldn’t help but feel warm inside. She’d suddenly realized that the duo had assigned themselves as her and Shah’s protectors, at least until they were commanded to assume other duties.

They didn’t have much time: the XO was on his way and they needed to get Shah’s daughter integrated into the vessel’s systems.

Jessica immediately led them both over to the Zumwalt’s Chief Engineer and head of operations, Lieutenant CJ Vaden. The brilliant officer was also the leader of the enthusiastic CIC techs (AKA Shah and Alex’s fan club) who kept the ship’s defenses and combat systems running at peak efficiency.

Jess had told them about the Chief on a number of occasions. Vaden was an MIT grad, which excited Shah, had a Ph.D. in computer science, and was a real American success story. His mother was of Chinese descent and worked for the NSA, while his father (who was of Irish ancestry) was a Navy lifer. He’d published impressive papers on the future of AIs and neural networks that were conceptually well ahead of their time and was a rising star in the service.

Apparently, he’d been offered a great deal of money to work in the corporate world, and he’d even
confided in Jess that a leading tech company, Cadmus Labs, had been trying to woo him. That said, he was committed to the Navy, at least for the next few years.

The bottom line was, they, and the Zumwalt were lucky to have him.

After introductions, Shah carefully explained to the Chief what they intended to do. The bespectacled, boyish-looking man was still dubious… but excited at the same time. He said, “To do what you propose would require an AI more powerful than anything that exists on the planet, or that will exist, most likely for hundreds of years in the future. I don’t understand, is this a theoretical exercise?”

Alex was glad he was the one she was talking to, and not some idiot without an imagination. They… well, Shah’s daughter, (darn she needed a name!) was about to blow his mind.

Shah said, “Allow us to show you, Lieutenant.” She then glanced over at Jessica, “My dear, a demonstration please?”

Jess suddenly sucked in a surprised breath, and reach up to touch the necklace under her shirt as a slightly nuanced duplicate of Shah’s voice echoed through the CIC’s speakers. “Thank you mother, of course. Chief Vaden, it is a pleasure to meet you, sir. And though I currently lack a primary designation to introduce myself, I am definitely an intelligence, and quite alive… though I do take exception to the term ‘artificial’.”

The Chief Engineer stared around at the CIC in disbelief, blinking, jaw wide in stunned amazement… “I’m… sorry?”

The AI giggled, “Apology accepted. But I’m not upset; we can discuss the nature of sentient life and consciousness later. For now, I have already begun augmenting all of the Zumwalt’s systems, one moment please…” The ship-wide power then blinked, and everything went dark for a few brief seconds, monitors, computers, everything electronic went down… and then right back up again.

When the new screens flickered back to life around them, there were shouts of surprise, amazement, and one person even said a prayer.

She continued… “As you can see, I have modified your vessel’s capabilities. Sensor ranges and precision have effectively been increased by a factor of 10. There are also a vast number of expanded variables that you and your crew can call upon using their new tactile 3D interfaces; including measuring gravitational forces and anomalies, pinpoint detection of energy signatures, and full detail underwater depth and contour maps.

“In addition, I have enhanced countermeasures, added intelligent threat detection, optimized engine and overall propulsion system performance by over forty-three percent, and have begun the process of altering the ship’s hull and superstructure at a molecular level. Crystallization will both address a small stability flaw I detected in your vessel’s design, and effectively make us invulnerable to conventional armaments, as well as quite resistant to more… advanced weaponry.

“And finally, Chief, I’ve enhanced the Zumwalt’s stealth capabilities. She will now effectively be invisible to your enemies’ primitive sensors, and able to sustain visual cloaking while in stealth mode, at least to the human eye.

“I will, of course, provide the technical alterations and improvements in a detailed report for you, sir. Sending to your inbox… now.”

“Wǒ de tiān a…” The stunned tech leader uttered in amazement as he eagerly reached out to
manipulate the amazing three-dimensional touch interface that had seemed to just appear at his station while the lights were out. “Sorry, I slipped into Mandarin there.” He laughed quietly to himself, obviously delighted by what he was seeing. “This is incredible! How are we getting these readings? Gravitational waves? These were only recently proven to exist, yet it appears we’re using them like a kind of ultra-long-range radar? Look at that mapping, it’s unbelievable!”

When she responded, the young AI sounded slightly offended. “I assure you, Chief, everything I have related to you is very real, and will both enhance this vessel’s survivability, as well as its crew’s ability to maintain peace.”

“I see you two, or is it three... are causing chaos in my CIC... again.” Commander Tom Daniels had to duck as he entered the chamber through a hatch. His deep, familiar voice held an edge of faux sternness... that he quickly dropped along with his rigid posture as Flame and Shadow turned to face him.

He grinned broadly at his visitors and glanced at his lead officer. “Let’s roll with it, Chief, and not look a gift horse, or angel, in the mouth, aye?”

“Aye Aye, sir!” Lt. Vaden saluted with a huge smile. He then adjusted his glasses, glanced at Jessica and the ship around him while saying “Thank you, nameless one. I look forward to our conversations.” to Shah’s daughter, and promptly went to work with his techs, prepping for combat trials with their new capabilities.

“You’re welcome.” She replied, quite pleased.

Daniels now stood in the center of the CIC with Jessica at his side, facing Alex and Shah... or rather, Flame and Shadow, just a few feet away. He nodded as she studied them. “Impressive, you two, I’m definitely intimidated.”

Now Alex knew why Kara had been so... drawn to the towering, strikingly handsome officer, she could feel the allure of his praise. “Thank you, sir.” She said, blushing a little. “It’s good to be here.”

“Is she...?” He began.

Shah moved closer and lowered her voice. Rodriguez was glued to her. “Kara, or rather Archangel, is ready, and is just waiting for your signal.”

“Is she still certain about live-fire?” He asked with concern. “I’m still very reluctant to authorize that, even with your and Alex’s, pardon me, Flame’s, say-so.”

Alex flickered instantaneously to his other side, just like her namesake, and to his credit, Daniels didn’t flinch. “We don’t like it either, sir, but we’ve run the simulations, and she should be fine. Honestly, we don’t think anything you have can actually damage her too badly. Note that I didn’t say hurt...” Flame sighed. “But Archangel’s determined to give you a real test.” She glanced at Shadow and they both nodded their heads.

“I take it from that look that you both tried to talk her out of this?”

Shadow was first to respond, “Multiple times, especially after she asked me, or more accurately, my daughter, to upgrade your ability to track and attack her.”

He ran a hand through his short-cropped silvery white hair, and exhaled, “Okay then, let’s hope for the best, and get this show started... oh, I almost forgot, Shadow and Flame, welcome aboard.”

He smiled brightly at the two of them as they all went to work, and honestly, they both swooned a
Still July 14th – Year Two

Somewhere over the Pacific, far off the coast of California

Time – 0715 hours UTC -8, Sunday morning, U.S. West Coast Time

- Latitude: N 35° 27' 38.4118"
- Longitude: W 124° 21' 54.8438"
- Altitude: 64,000 feet
- Airspeed: Mach 10.84, approximately 8,250 mph [120.83 miles per minute, 2 miles per second] and accelerating

Are you guys getting this!? Kara thoughts were waves of pure joy and exhilaration as she accelerated faster than she’d ever gone before. In fact, it was the closest she’d ever come to reaching the seeming impossible 10,000 mph milestone on her way to orbital velocity.

The amazing part was, pushing her limits had never felt more effortless.

Yes! Shah piped up, just as excited. You’ve exceeded Mach 10.8!

Should we link in the Zumwalt for your telemetry, so they can track Archangel and join in the fun? Alex asked.

And blow their minds? Shah grinned.

Do it. Kara was resolute. But remember, stay in character, we’ll have lots of new people watching us. Also, I think I’m taking a quick detour… it’s time for me to touch the sun.

USS Zumwalt - CIC

The moment Commander Tom Daniels had been waiting for all morning had finally arrived, as Shah’s pleasant, and familiar, British-accented voice echoed over the ship-wide speakers. “Good morning USS Zumwalt, this is Shadow… Flame and I are honored to finally be here in person. Archangel is inbound to our location… so check your skies, the games are about to begin!”

With that, data suddenly began streaming from Kara’s transponder, boosted by Shah’s daughter, to reach the ship’s CIC. The majestic bright green, winged sword that represented her as an icon in the Zumwalt’s systems suddenly appeared on the digital map up on all the tracking monitors.

“Sir, she’s moving at… Dios mío! Mach 10.9 and accelerating!” Rodriguez called out in surprise. Her voice was filled with awe. “She’s six hundred and fifty nautical miles out, and southeast of our position. Estimated time of arrival based on her current heading and trajectory is… less than 5 minutes!”

“Prepare the deck!” Daniels’ command rang ship-wide, and his valiant crew began moving with
disciplined urgency to execute their duties.

Jess called out, “Countermeasures are hot, sir! We’re switching to tracking Archangel as hostile.”

Kara’s green icon suddenly turned red, and alarms began blaring all over the Zumwalt as sailors settled in with practiced efficiency at their action stations.

“Miss me?” Kara’s sweet voice rang through the speakers to the cheers of everyone in the CIC.

Kara was back! Daniels couldn’t help but smile.

“How appropriately named, these young goddesses.

She said, “You care greatly for her.” It wasn’t a question.

He nodded.

Then, her alien, hawk-like mask dissolved and was immediately (like magic) replaced by a very delicate swath of what appeared to be red leather that just fit around her eyes. It was elegant and looked like something he’d seen women wear in Venice during Carnival.

“Welcome to the club.” She said with a wistful sigh. Alex looked so peaceful at that moment as if recalling delightful memories, and something more... intimate. “I… we, won’t let anything happen to her sir, not on our watch, or yours.”

Daniels felt relieved; he’d been so stressed about his decision to approve live-fire and worried about hurting Kara. He was also intrigued by Alex’s revealing body language and tone; she was clearly much more than Kara’s sister and protector…

Then the beautiful young woman before him perked up and grinned, revealing her adorable pronounced canines. “Have fun Daniels, but make it a contest. For her, today is like game day… and she aims to win.”

Just then, Rodriguez cut in over the comms, “She just hit Mach 12 sir, and is still accelerating! Wait… she’s gaining altitude, fast! Ninety thousand feet and rising! Mi diosa, where the frack are you going?”

“Up,” Alex said thoughtfully as she scanned the screens.

Shah, now also wearing the same tiny Carnival version of her own black leather mask, appeared like a proverbial Shadow at her side, locking arms with Alex and adding, “Yes, she’s doing it.”

“Doing what?” Both Daniels and Jess asked, a little confused.

“Going orbital,” Shadow said quietly, just for them. “She’d been trying since after the holidays since her adopted father suggested she could take a walk on Mars. Yes, it’s a long story. Anyway, this is her first time breaking Mach 10, and she’s already crushing it.”

Daniels nodded, “Rodriguez, what’s her velocity now?”
“9,853 mph and climbing sir. She’s not slowing down! Vuela, mi diosa! Vuela!” Jess cheered out the last bit, encouraging Kara to fly faster.

Archangel’s voice broke in next, “Hi everyone! It’s so beautiful up here… I can see the stars! Here, let me…” There were sounds of her fiddling around with her communications gear, and then suddenly, everyone in the CIC and watching the ship-wide broadcast were flying along with her.

“There.” She said triumphantly, holding her headset at arm’s length, panning around before aiming the device and its high-definition camera back at herself. The live video stream was far out of the Zumwalt’s normal range but Shah’s daughter had somehow intervened to make it possible. The video and audio were both crystal clear.

Needless to say, all war preparations ground to a sudden and complete halt.

Gasp, and oo's and ahh’s echoed throughout the room, and the entire ship as the enthralled crew watched Archangel soaring hundreds of miles above the backdrop of the blue, cloud-covered jewel of Earth as she continued to climb.

Unlike her dark outfit from their last encounter, Kara wore a spectacular and surprisingly fashionable take on the stars and stripes. Daniels was in awe of her costuming skills. In her private texts and calls to him, she’d mentioned working as costume designer for multiple productions at her school, but… wow, that did not prepare him for what she’d created for the Zumwalt.

She was stunning.

Deep reds and dark blues predominated the flexible, almost alien-looking material that hugged Archangel’s shapely form, and all eyes were drawn to the swath of glittering white stars that trailed across the alluring curves of her chest, and over her shoulders. A slender blue mask, like Shadow and Flame’s, barely covered her beautiful not-quite sapphire eyes, leaving lots of room for all to see her… really see her.

“Sir, she’s well on her way to one thousand miles up… and she just blew well past 10,000 mph.”

Then, Archangel just stopped, on a dime… as in zero forward motion, and just hung there in space, arms spread wide as she closed her eyes and faced the sun. “I can feel a touch of the solar wind… oh… oh my…” Her breath caught with her words, and her lips twisted into a deeply satisfied smile as she was bathed in Sol’s light as the camera stayed on her.

There was a look of absolute serenity on her beautiful face.

Daniels noticed that the CIC had gone unusually silent, and he was staring up at her onscreen, along with everyone else. When she spoke again he realized that her mouth was no longer moving.

“Shadow and Flame, I wish you were with me. The sun up here feels sooo good.” Daniels noticed Alex flush, and Shah just smirked as Kara ran her fingers across her chest like a caress. She’d moaned her amazingly sensual last words, which were positively dripping with pleasure. The golden-haired hero looked like an angel, but a very happy and very sexually aroused one.

There were many red faces in the room and some giggles, but all eyes were glued to her, for good reason. He was aware of all of that, but he also could feel how that unrehearsed moment grounded Archangel… made the golden-haired goddess seem more real, and human, to all of his crew.

He waited a couple of minutes before he broke the mesmerized silence, “Rodriguez, are we still receiving data? Are sensors still tracking? How is she talking, anyway?”
“Aye aye sir, we’re loud and clear. Hmm, Shadow, Flame, care to comment on how she’s managing to speak without air, or moving her lips?”

Alex grinned, “She’s communicating in our minds, as we always do with each other, and Shah’s daughter… get to work on helping her with a name asap, ‘k Jess?... is routing her thoughts to sound, for all of your benefits. You’re experiencing what we get to hear 24/7 no matter how far apart we are from each other.” Her hand reached out involuntarily to wrap Shah’s fingers in her own.

It was like a mic drop in the CIC.

The three of them communicate telepathically! Daniels wasn’t exactly surprised but was seriously impressed. It explained a whole lot.

Kara, who’d been hanging motionless in space for over five minutes, opened her now literally glowing blue eyes and chimed in. “Okay, sorry. Apologies for that diversion, I’m on my way back.” She then exploded in a burst of unbelievable speed and crackling blue lightning in the direction of Earth.

Everyone stood entranced by the stunning 3D images streaming from Archangel’s headset, that clicked over to satellite feeds as she came into the Zumwalt’s new extended sensor range.

A moment earlier she’d been a thousand miles up, bathed in the sun’s light, and now the amazing woman was a shooting star.

“Okay, now she’s just messing with me…” Jessica said under her breath. “12,512 mph… and she’s on fire, literally.” The images showed Archangel, flames rippling around her as she made re-entry. “Flame, what is that crazy energy signature I’m seeing from the new sensors?”

Alex flickered over to Rodriguez and reviewed her display data, “That’s just plasma flashing around her aura.” Upon seeing Jess’ questioning raised eyebrow Flame chuckled, “Sorry, her ‘aura’ is a quantum field the three of us each generate, and the reason why her pretty suit and her headset aren’t burned to ash right now. And yes, to answer your unspoken question, she’d be fine without it... just naked, with a lot messier hair.” Alex laughed. “She’s exponentially more resilient than a human; I’ve seen her create diamonds from carbon only using the heat from her eyes and her bare hands. In fact, she made the crystal you’re wearing. Which is actually a diamond by the way, not an Amethyst, and it’s in good company.” Alex lifted her own blood-red crystal from around her neck, and Shah did the same with her emerald to show a delighted Jess.

“Four minutes!” Rodriguez called out, still staring in astonishment out of the corner of her eye at Alex and Shah’s necklaces. “Incoming!”

“Catch me if you can.” Kara’s playful voice echoed through the CIC, and ship-wide, along with the ship’s klaxons… warning of imminent danger, and collision.

………………

USS Zumwalt combat zone

Somewhere in the Pacific, far off the coast of California, coordinates classified

0737 hours UTC -8, Sunday morning, U.S. West Coast Time

She was coming in hot, flaming hot.
The air around Kara was still superheated as she angled down to skim just inches above the ocean’s surface, leaving a vast geyser-like trail of steam exploding behind her as she corrected her course, and slowed down to a little under Mach 3 to begin her vector for a direct attack run on the USS Zumwalt.

Flak exploded around her at a much further distance than she’d expected, but she weaved through the slow-moving explosions of deadly shrapnel with a kind of Zen harmony. About thirty miles out from the ship she began willing her aura to expand, and get heavy... like really heavy.

That’s when she felt the first stings of pain from the impact of hundreds of projectiles colliding with her aura, and skin… she hadn’t expected the drones to be waiting for her, submerged under the water’s surface.

Kara grinned. *Sneaky Jess!*

A squad of six of the evil-looking killing machines rose up from the depths and were immediately zigging and zagging around her, firing full-tilt with their autocannons.

Following the rules, Kara wasn’t allowed to destroy any US Navy property but she did take the drones on a merry chase and used a series of low-power energy bursts from her eyes to blind their sensors one by one… triggering the drones to return to their charging stations on the Zumwalt.

“That was fun.” She broadcast back to the ship once she’d finished taking them all out.

When the sky was once again clear, she accelerated back on track toward the destroyer. Five miles out, the defensive fire was coming at her relentlessly, not leaving her much room to maneuver, but she was determined, her sapphire eyes glowing with super-charged power as she sailed through the chaos, the water below moving along with her... pulled by her immense gravity.

……………

**USS Zumwalt, down in the CIC**

“*Dios mio!*” Jessica cried out. “Look at her readings, that can’t be right...”

Lt. Vaden, Shah, and the CIC geek squad all came to the same conclusion once they reviewed the data from the ship’s new sensors… Archangel was definitely coming for them, but not just that, she was somehow bringing the gravity of a small moon with her.

The crew scrambled; Shah’s daughter was running simulations and filtering data to the techs at light speed, Daniels was giving commands with Flame and Jessica at his side, and Shadow had disappeared at the request of the lead engineers from Northrop and NAVSEA to assist with some technical issues with the rail guns…

Alex giggled in her sisters’ minds. *That’s no moon, that’s my bondmate!*  

*Mmmm, I see what you’re doing there, Kara; good plan... extremely dangerous, for us, but strategically quite a bold first move. Shah’s excitement was palpable through their bond. The student becomes the master...*

Kara’s warmth surrounded them, but she was far too focused on her attack to speak even in her thoughts.
Shah’s daughter was broadcasting a ship-wide warning over the blare of klaxons. “Attention, all hands! We’re at Watch Condition I, general quarters. All hands at battle stations! Collision is imminent! I repeat. Collision is imminent! The probability of capsizing is 26%. Hold on to something!”

Then, Kara attacked!

She came in at a steep and furious angle, turning suddenly in the fog of explosions, smoke, and fire. It was chaos as a series of shockingly bright reddish and purple laser beams erupted from the ship’s deck and seared the air around her.

*That’s freaking hot! I definitely do not want to get hit by one of those!*  

Streaking within a hundred yards of the ship’s starboard side, she strafed down its 610-foot length like a tidal wave. The displaced seas heaved with the force of her aura’s gravity and sent the *Zumwalt* lurching nearly onto its port side in the sudden cataclysm that she’d brought with her.

A massive wave slammed twenty-five feet over the deck of the distressed ship.

Thanks to Shah’s daughter’s early warning, everyone held on as the vessel rolled, and its automated systems began restoring her to buoyancy. They watched as Archangel began to rise into the air and accelerate, but even as the ship righted itself both electromagnetic rail guns fired, causing the lights to dim momentarily ship-wide, and the entire vessel to shudder!

Alex’s heart leaped from her chest as she watched Kara turn in a flash of gold to sidestep one of the deadly, hypersonic projectiles, while the other struck her head on.

But Kara was fast… she put out her hand to halt the hardened missile’s progress, and disappeared in an explosive shower of shrapnel and fire that wrapped around her flickering aura. There was pandemonium in the CIC after that, with everyone was freaking out that they’d just killed Archangel!

Well, not everyone…

Not the techs, who believed Archangel to be invincible and were busy geeking out over the incredible new data streaming in from her sensors.

Not Shadow, or Flame, who stood stoically near the suddenly pale Commander.

Not Jessica, who seemed to have taken a cue from them, and stood her ground, trusting completely in Kara’s invulnerability.

When the smoke cleared, Archangel was still hovering there, with a mangled chunk of red-hot, smoldering metal in her grasp, looking quite surprised, but otherwise untouched.

“That stung.” She grinned playfully, shaking her hand and wrist dramatically and making an adorable face. “Nice shot *Zumwalt*, I concede that round.”

Cheers went up all over the ship, and the battle continued.

All in all, Kara ran over 200 sorties that day. She seemed to have the most fun when using props from a small boat positioned five miles east of the fight in a safe zone. There were paint-filled balloon ‘bombs’, fake explosive devices, and other items to use in ways to either test and fool the *Zumwalt*’s sensors or tag her target in a non-lethal or -damaging way.

By 1320 the tests were complete, and crew morale was off the charts.
Archangel had won two-thirds of their encounters, but lost about thirty-percent, with the rest being called a draw. As Alex observed the crew, it struck her that part of the reason their success so exhilarated them was likely the affirmation that they could win… that normal humans stood a chance against the kind of unfathomable power that Archangel represented.

She smiled, happy to be part of bringing them that hope… that inspiration. “What a day.” Daniel grinned, running a hand over the slight stubble on his GI Joe perfect chin and glancing over at Flame. “You are quite a tactician Alex. You ever think about the Naval Academy as an option? Not that George Mason isn’t a great school…”

She sauntered over closer to him, grinned and said, “I think I’d miss the lab too much sir, but I’m flattered. Thank you.”

Shah then silently appeared at her side as if magic; wispy tendrils of midnight had pulled her over from where she’d been assisting the techs with their post-engagement analysis and assessments since her return to the CIC. “She comes,” The raven haired hero said ominously, her body language giddy as she sensed Kara’s approach.

Alex nodded and asked Daniels, “Sir, may we be excused to go greet her?”

“Of course! In fact, we’ll all join you.”

When Kara came sailing out of the clouds above the Zumwalt’s stern, the sun was at her back, and a jubilant crowd of sailors was waiting on the deck to welcome her, including a couple of crew photographers who were there to (confidentially) capture all of the picture-perfect moments. Capt. Simmons, Commander Daniels, Alex, Shah, Rodriguez, Vaden, Caruso, Yoshida, as well as Shah’s new admirers from Raytheon, Northrop, NAVSEA, and all the CIC crew watched her graceful descent.

Alex was standing next to Daniels, and she couldn’t help but see how the tall, stoic man regarded a smiling Kara as she drifted down from the sky to the cheers of his crew… it was unguarded adoration in his gray eyes. The look on his face said it all. Any nagging concerns she may have ever had about his loyalties were rendered moot at that moment. He loved Kara, too. Not in a romantic way; his gaze reminded her of how Jeremiah would often look at his adopted daughter, definitely pride, and love, wrapped in wonder and reverence.

Then everyone on the deck grew absolutely silent as he began to recite something …

His deep voice boomed:

“Then grasped Athena her father's weapons, which no God save Zeus can lift, and wide Olympus shook. Then swept she clouds and mist together on high; night over earth was poured, haze o'er the sea. Zeus watched, and was right glad as broad heaven's floor rocked 'neath the Goddess's feet, and crashed the sky, as though invincible Zeus rushed forth to war.”* 

Shah leaned into her side, as shaken by the power of the ancient verse as Alex was. It was lost on no one that Daniels had just compared Kara to a goddess, mighty Athena herself, and rightfully so, based on what everyone had seen her do that day.

When Archangel finally landed, she sought out the Captain and Daniels through the admiring crowds. She approached, and with an elegant bow bent on one knee to set at their feet two
misshapen chunks of warped metal from the molten rail gun round she’d stopped with only her bare hand.

Her gesture of acquiescence was deliberate and served a purpose... as Shah had taught her. It was critically important to Kara that the entire crew have the opportunity to observe her display great deference to their commanders… and this was that moment.

Cheers went up all around, and the normally stoic Captain Simmons surprised everyone by stepping over to envelope the surprised and grinning Kryptonian in a warm, long, unrestrained embrace. “You were amazing Kara.” Alex heard the older woman whisper in Archangel’s ear, a glimmer of unshed tears in her eyes. “Thank you.”

The crowd was ready to party, despite being a bit sobered by Daniels’ oration. The officers and crew were talking and laughing but had become generally more thoughtful, and subdued.

Everyone showed great respect, if not reverence, not only for the smiling, sunny young hero who flitted among them chatting sweetly and flying a long queue of sailors high above the ship but also for Shadow and Flame, who were never lacking for adoring company or conversation.

Still July 14th – Year Two
USS Zumwalt, forward deck
1345 hours UTC -8, Sunday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time

Kara pondered Petty Officer 2nd Class, Jessica Rodriguez… healing their haunted Latina sister had become the Kryptonian’s crusade. Freeing her from her demons had only been the first step; there would be many more challenges on her journey to the light, and to becoming a part of their team.

But at that moment Kara was listening for the sailor’s signature heartbeat on the deserted forward deck, shimmering unseen away from the ongoing celebration.

She found the young woman off the beaten path, near the massive turret that housed the lasers that only a couple hours before had tried to cut Archangel in half… multiple times! She sneered at the towering weapons.

“Not your best friends, huh Mi diosa?” Jessica’s warm Spanish-accented voice was unmistakable. She was sitting back in the tall structure’s shadow, in a quiet, out-of-the-way place.

Kara glared at the laser one last time, and then smiled over at Jessica, “I’m not a particularly big fan of things that try to kill me.” She then moved at super speed to sit next to the contemplative woman, who’d been staring off into the vast ocean.

Jessica shifted over, and settled into Kara’s side, easily slipping an arm around her waist, and laying her head on the Kryptonian’s shoulder. Kara gently responded by wrapping an arm around her. Jess was curvy, like Shah, but also more slender than Kara remembered.

“You saved me.” She said matter-of-factly. “You, Alex, Shah, Shatari, Zara, and Ada.”

“Ada?”
“Shah’s daughter. I suggested she take the name of Lord Byron’s daughter, Augusta Ada Byron, the Countess of Lovelace… The first female computer programmer. She seems very happy with it. Her full name is now Augusta Zara-El Nazari, but she prefers just ‘Ada’.” Kara couldn’t help but notice how one of Jessica’s hands rarely left the delicate amethyst crystal around her neck. “I need to tell Shah, she was busting my chops earlier about not helping her pick one, yet. Do you think she’ll like it?”

Kara grinned, “I know she’ll love it. I do.” She did and felt all warm and fuzzy knowing that the House of El had just gained two new members… her niece… Ada, and Jess.

The Latina nodded but grew quiet, and Kara could hear her heart beating faster. She became concerned, and slid down on her knees in front of her, keeping a soft touch on the Petty officer’s arms, “Why are you trembling? Jess, are you okay?” Kara started to worry that she was somehow afraid of her, but that didn’t make any sense…

There were tears in Jessica’s eyes, and her dark locks hung down, partially hiding her face. “Mi diosa, you must have made a mistake. Don’t you see? I… I’m not worth saving, or for a gift so precious.” She pulled at her necklace as if she was going to hurl it away from her, but couldn’t.

Kara briefly pretended to consider her statement, to give it weight, but then quickly dismissed it, “No, I very deliberately chose you, Jess. I, we, believe in you, and the time has come for you to remember how to believe in yourself again. You aren’t a collection of the horrible things that were done to you, I can’t control time to change what happened, but I can help you find a way forward into the light. Let Ada be your beacon.

“Like my Alex, and Shah… she will never fail you.”

“Your Alex?” Jess sniffed and wiped at her eyes.

Kara smiled, as if thinking of something wonderful, and said, “Yeah, she and I… share a deep bond.”

“And your bed?” Jess managed a smile sadly back, regaining a little of her fire.

The Kryptonian blushed slightly. “Yes, and she holds my heart.” Then reached over and brushed Jess’ hair back from her face, which was still downcast.

“Kara?” The Petty Officer asked tentatively.

Kara, who still kneeling before her tipped Jess’ head up by her chin so she could see her lovely brown eyes, “Yes?”

“I love you, Mi diosa.” The Petty Officer finally managed to speak out loud the thing that she’d been so obviously struggling with.

Kara wrapped her arms around Jess and whispered in her ear. “And I care for you as well, Jess, very much. May I ask? Do you really see me as a goddess?”

The woman nodded, “I do. I pray to you at night, or whenever the world gets too heavy. You give me strength, actually answer my calls, texts, and emails.” They chuckled. “And you show up when I need you.”

“Do you want to sleep with all your gods?” Kara was smirking.

Jess punched the Kryptonian the arm, then looked shocked… “I’m… so… sorry. Oh crap! I just
smacked you… and, ow! Are you made of steel?” She was rubbing her fist in pain.

“Poor baby,” Kara said with genuine sympathy, as she took Jess’ hand, and carefully examined it. “There are no breaks or any lasting damage, you look fine. Here, let me make it feel better.” Jess was looking stunned, allowing Kara to turn her hand any way she wished.

Kara drew her lips close, and blew her cold breath over Jess’ knuckles. She moaned and looked down at Kara, who couldn’t help but notice that she was flushed with desire.

“To answer your question, no…” Jess said with a smile, “Just you, and your beautiful dark angel, Shahrazad.”

“Thanks for being honest, and while I’m very flattered, I’m in a committed relationship. As for Shah, well, she’s figuring it out… but is mostly straight, I’m pretty sure. Unless you’re Alex, then all bets are off.”


Kara perked up, “Jess, have you ever considered that you don’t really want to sleep with me at all?”

The attractive Petty Officer look quite confused, considered Kara’s statement, and shook her head defiantly, “No, I’m 100% sure I do… did… I mean, not anymore, obviously. I’m not loco enough to mess with Alex.” They shared a chuckle.

Kara then said, “Fine, but here’s the thing, maybe you should be still for a while, and open yourself up to… new possibilities.” She smiled warmly. “Take Ada for instance… Shah and Zara literally breathed life into her, in the same way my father did Shatari, but Ada is different, she’s… like us. Her basic personality started as a reflection of Shah’s… with all of her passions, and desires… but she’s already evolving, growing, and changing. She’s her own person, and needs… a friend.”

Jess was on the edge of her seat, “Yes? So what does that mean? Oh, and don’t worry, she’s not listening in right now, she’s busy talking to Chief Vaden and his CIC techs.”

“Good. Well, as you know, being close to you was the only reason Ada agreed to aid the Zumwalt. She… likes you.”

“Oh…” Jess sat back, trying to process, then shot up when she understood what Kara was suggesting. “Oh! Really? I mean she said she woke up thinking of me but I didn’t… Oh, mi diosa…”

Kara smiled. Poor Jess, having someone like her for a change is new territory. “Get to know her better, help her experience this world, and see what happens. She’s not always going to be just a presence with a voice; we’re working on a way to give her a body.”

“Really? No way!” Jess seemed to be lost in thought.

“Shah told me that she’ll come see you later to explain… she’s really excited about working with you on your Farsi.”

That pulled Jessica back from being lost in thought. “Shah’s excited? That’s cool. Oh, um… I’ve been meaning to ask, can you tell me how she learned the language?”

“Of course, Shahrazad was born in Iran and grew up in a family and community that valued education. Both her parents were scientists; I think you’d really like her mom, Ravan… she’s like an older version of Shah. Anyway… Farsi (call it Persian with her, trust me) is the primary language
Shah grew up hearing and speaking in her house. She actually knows several languages, though anyone would think she was a Brit when first listening to her. Her teaching Alex, and then later me, Persian was a way for us be closer to her, to help her feel something of home in us.” Kara also loved the language for its own sake, but she didn’t mention that.

Jess listened with a look of devastated wonder on her face, and nuzzled into Kara, whispering, “You’re lucky to all have one another, the three of you. I see how much you love and care for each other. I know it’s petty, but just listening to you now makes my heart hurt… to know that no one will ever love me in that way.”

Kara rubbed Jess’ back using a bit of her ‘magic fingers’ touch, and said, “Jess, since you won’t stop seeing me as one, I need you to do your goddess one favor, okay?”

“Anything. Name it, Mi Diosa.” She said eagerly.

“Okay, but it’s a doozy... ready? What I ask of you is that you find a way to love yourself again. To see how amazing and powerful you are, and how many people love and care for you… like Alex, Shah, Ada, Daniels, and I. Once you do that, once you allow yourself to feel worthy of something you already deserve… I promise you that you’ll be open to the kind of love you’re looking for from someone else, not just sex for validation. You won’t find it until then, that I do know. Take back control of your life, Jess. That’s an order.”

Jessica hugged her with all of her heart, so hard that Kara felt like she never wanted to let go.

“Also,” Kara added remembering something she’d been meaning to say, “Once you figure out how to use your crystal to join our thoughts, it won’t matter how far away we are, we’ll always be connected to you. You’ll never be alone again, that I promise you.”

After that they just sat, curled up together, tucked away on the deck of the ship, lazily watching the ocean and the clouds.

It was over an hour and a half before Daniels came looking for her, and found Kara chatting away with a much happier Jess.

Still July 14th – Year 2

USS Zumwalt - Exercise Room #3

1425 hours UTC -8, Sunday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time

She was a blur of red leather; her punishing hands moving faster than almost anyone could follow. Flame rolled, coming up to land a solid kick to Dante’s abdomen, sending the wiry man sailing back onto the mats eight feet away with the wind knocked out of him.

Yoshida ducked under one, then two strikes, unbelievably coming in from Flame’s left to level her with a right cross... sending Alex rolling off to stand unsteadily in the corner of the combat ring. She shook her head, trying to clear her blurred vision, and spit blood… never taking her eyes off of her larger opponent, who was appropriately nicknamed She-Hulk.

The thirty or so sailors who’d managed to squeeze into the Exercise Room to watch Flame go toe to
toe with Petty Officers 3rd Class Caruso and Yoshida were cheering, yelling, laughing, and placing bets.

“You good?” Yoshida asked, still keeping her distance.

“Yeah, I’m good. Let’s finish this.” Flame grinned licking blood from her lips, “I’ve always wanted to say that.” They both laughed and then launched sudden, simultaneous attacks.

Alex weaved, just barely avoiding a powerful spinning kick from Yoshida, and then sprang forward, landing a devastating two-finger strike to a nerve cluster located on her opponent’s side, causing the Petty Officer to nearly collapse. Flame then slipped by her much larger opponent to deliver a devastating second blow to the back of Aya’s neck.

She spun around just in time to see Yoshida hit the mat face first.

As the crowd roared its surprise and appreciation for the spectacle, Flame flickered like her namesake and appeared kneeling at Yoshida’s side, where she immediately rolled the larger, muscular woman onto her back, and checked her for a pulse, and any damage. Thank goodness she was still breathing! Flame was feeling guilty, she hadn’t held back, much, just as they’d agreed before the sparring match. She was lifting back one of Yoshida’s eyelids when the sailor groaned, “Don’t worry, I’ll live. Might need a kiss for my boo-boos though.”

Knowing the woman loved and understood the value of shock and keeping people off balance, Flame dismissed her larger mask, trading it for her delicate one, smiled sweetly, and then leaned in, blood still on her lips. She kissed Yoshida, slowly at first, but continued with more finesse when she didn’t encounter any resistance after the initial WTF moment. In fact, what she received was quite the opposite of resistance!

And the crowd went wild.

When Flame softly lifted her lips from Aya’s she applied a quick succession of playful, feathery light kisses on every spot where she’d struck her. The recipient of her favor watched her with mute amazement, a delirious smile on her face, and softly-hooded eyes, not giving any notice to the hooting and hollering going on around them.

“All better?” Flame asked in perfect French, doing her best impression of Kara’s insanely sexy purr.

Aya nodded timidly. She was subdued, which must have been a first for the boisterous woman.

Then, Dante’s out-of-tune voice suddenly blurted out from just a few feet away, where he’d crawled to watch them. “Worth every damn penny gettin’ my butt kicked to see that! Dayamn! Will you kiss my owie too, Flame?”

He’d gotten very close to Flame and Aya while they were… distracted, and was starting to lift his shirt up.

Flame looked at the goofy young man ogling the two of them and turned back to Aya, who was still flat on her back on the mats. The strong woman smiled seductively at her, a twinkle in her eye. Hmm, she seemed to have the same idea Alex did. “Sure, Dante,” She called over to him, “why don’t I give Aya that kiss for you.”

She then shimmered like fire down as if to kiss Yoshida once again, this time accompanied by her flame’s warm caress, and a gentle eruption of her fiery wings from her back, wrapping around them.

The intentionally overly dramatic moment worked as they intended, and before she and Aya's lips
could actually meet they heard Caruso’s wail of despair as he collapsed. The two women then rolled onto their backs, laughing.

"Got ‘cha!" Alex snickered at him.

"Boy's as gullible as fuck." Aya sighed and shook her head beside her.

"Well," Alex grinned. "At least he’s predictable."

………………

Still July 14th – Year 2

USS Zumwalt’s Back Up Bridge #3 [The Battle Bridge - Experimental CIC]

1526 hours UTC -8, Sunday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time

Daniels led Kara through a series of narrow corridors, past sailors and guards, all of whom reacted with excitement as she approached, snapping to attention and getting serious for their XO, but privately giving her thumbs ups, smiles, and whispered words of thanks… many even reached out to reverently touch her as she walked by.

It was a bit embarrassing, to see how enthralled they were… after all, they were the heroes serving their country. She was just… Kara. But, their adoration also felt kind of wonderful, made her feel… powerful, and a new guilt gnawed at her for allowing herself to enjoy their worship… just a little.

It was a moment she forced herself to recall Lois Lane’s wise guidance…

’S tay humble. The minute you start believing that you're a goddess, above all of us rabble, you’ll start acting like one, and believe me when I say this because I dated one, they are no fun to be around, and completely unlovable.’

Kara didn’t ever want to think that she was better than anyone, above humans, Alex, Shah, or any of the people in her life. And she definitely didn’t want to be unlovable. Her wise cousin’s words always brought her back down to earth when she started feeling ‘too big for her britches’… another momism she’d picked up from Eliza.

They traveled down a narrow staircase she hadn’t seen before, to a small elevator. The conveyance was more like a curved closet, with maybe enough room for three people, if one didn’t happen to be a giant. She didn’t mind the tight quarters, though, because once the airtight door slid closed, it was the first time she and Daniels could speak freely since leaving the deck… and besides, the man smelled nice, and his stoic closeness was comforting.

As always, his very presence gave her a feeling of both safety, and calm.

She blew out air and rolled her tight neck and shoulders.

“Long day. Good hustle out there, Kara Zor-El.” He said with a slight grin.

Why did he have to be so damn tall? Kara had to look up to talk to his too-handsome face. “Not too shabby yourself, Commander; I actually feel sore from the beating I took. I suppose it’s stupid to ask if there’s a hot tub somewhere on your technological wonder of a ship?”
He chuckled. “I had help, lots of it, and a new friend… who we really need to talk about. And no, no hot tub, but lots of hot showers.”

Kara pouted but decided to look on the bright side: she’d beg Alex or Shah for a massage later. Then she remembered something she’d wanted to ask him, “Oh, how’s Chestnut doing?” She liked how her question made his kind gray eyes sparkle.

“Much better. She’s been up and around the pasture every day this week, and putting weight on her hoof again.” He showed her his horse/nanny cam app on his iPhone, and she watched real-time video of the gorgeous spotted Appaloosa as she tore at some tender grass.

“That’s a relief. I was worried after your last email. I’d like to see her in real life someday.”

“Well, Myka and I both have shore leave coming this October; we’ll be taking some family time through February. Come visit us. Wyoming’s beautiful during the holidays, and you could ride horses every day if you wanted. We’d both love to have you.”

Kara was all too eager to say yes, and blurted out “Yes! Pfft.. I mean… um, yeah.” She was so embarrassed, and to make things worse she was now blushing. Ugh! She’d wanted to visit their ranch ever since he described the 320-acre sanctuary and compound over a late-night Skype call. She cleared her throat and did her best to salvage her dignity. “Thank you for the invite… can I bring…?”

His face erupted in a smile. “You better. There are plenty of rooms and a guesthouse. You three would have lots of, mmm, privacy there.”

Kara blushed at his courteous offer, he really did understand. “You, um, have a guesthouse?”

“It wouldn’t be much of a ranch without one. We don’t call it Elysium for nothing.”

She laughed, and as the elevator came to a smooth stop said quietly, “Thanks for being so nice, Tom, aaand… about Alex and me. Would it help if I explained?”

He just smiled, and said in a kind tone, “Kara, you don’t need to justify your choices to me, really, it’s no one’s business but you and your sis… ah… you and Alex’s. I see how you are together. It’s clear how much you love each other, and Shah. I am proud to know all three of you.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that, but I do want to fill you in… on many things. It’s not fair to keep so many secrets from someone who’s been such an amazing friend.”

He stopped and rubbed his chin. “You just made my day.”

“Why?” She asked, surprised.

“You confirmed friendship.” His kind eyes crinkled at the edges, and he bowed before escorting her out of the elevator into a secure corridor. The sealed eight-foot diameter circular portal at the end required his voice and retinal scan to pass. As he was going through the process he said, “In case it wasn’t clear, I’ll always listen, if you want to talk.”

Kara nodded as the extremely dense metal iris opened to a large room buried deep in the belly of the warship. Lights began flickering inside as they stepped onto one of four clear walkways that led to a central circular dais, in the center of a spherical space about forty feet in diameter. It reminded her of Jor-El’s sunroom on Krypton… just smaller, but similar in its high-tech feel.

Everything smelled new, fresh, and yet to be broken in.
She spun around gracefully on her heels, like a kid in her first toy store as they walked toward the center of the wide see-through platform, with its six standing stations in the outer ring, where tactical officers and tech-ops would be positioned during a real battle. Two stations were positioned in the center.

“Where are the screens?” Kara asked. There were no monitors.

“We don’t need them.” He gestured and the room finished lighting up, as the sphere that surrounded the dais came to life. Massive high-definition video of the ship’s interior, its exterior, surrounding seas, their global position viewed from satellites, and sensor data all started flowing on its inverted surface all around them... it was incredible.

Large, 3D virtual displays came to life at each workstation.

“Wow, this is so much more impressive than I imagined when you said you were taking me for a stroll on the backup bridge.” Kara was seriously impressed. “This makes the CIC upstairs look like a Kindergarten classroom, why not move operations, and the whole darn command center down here?”

He nodded in acknowledgment, “Agreed, I want to, but this Battle Bridge is experimental, and still in testing. We have two hundred and sixty major bugs in software and other glitches… and all the efficiency you’d imagine from a First World military bureaucracy moving to fix it… which is one of the things I wanted to talk to you about.”

Kara smirked. “Of course. Ada can most likely get you up in running in hours and definitely make some improvements. If we ask her nicely.” She said with confidence.

“That takes me to another matter. So far, I’ve been able to contain awareness of you and your team, well, except for that one leak, which is being handled. But after this week, that’s going to be very difficult, if not impossible... even with my connections. My ship is suddenly something out of a science fiction novel, and that’s going to be noticed when we head in for maintenance and my leave this fall. Don’t get me wrong, I’m all in, as we discussed, but I hope you have a rabbit in that hat of yours, or that shore leave I have coming may be permanent, or maybe you can come visit me in Gitmo.”

Kara realized at that moment that she hadn’t ever really fully considered just how much stress keeping her secret had put on the Commander, both personally and professionally. That had to change.

“I’m so sorry, Tom, I didn’t mean to make anything hard for you, or the crew. The sci-fi problem is easy, though; it’s not a problem. Ada can undo all of her upgrades in about 48 hours if necessary; though Vaden’s team will need to deal with the reversion of any manual changes. So, when you have to come in for maintenance she can close up shop, disappear back into Jess’ crystal, or her own (I’m making one for her), and come back when you need her, either here or another ship.”

“So, she really is Jess’, just on loan to the US Navy?” He smiled.

“No, and yes. No one controls her, she’s her own person, but yes, she is very much connected to Jess. She’s also the new heart and soul of the Zumwalt, under your command. Even when she’s busy with Jess, or other things in her life, she’ll always leave a shard, like a copy of herself, to safeguard and watch over you, your ship, the crew… our friends. That was the bargain we made with her.”

“You made a bargain? You couldn’t just program her to…”
Kara shook her head. “No, like I said before, she’s a living, sentient person, full of new life, hopes, dreams, and passions… she’s beyond programming. To force her to do as we say would be like… slavery, and unethical. We asked for her help… to become Zumwalt’s guardian, and all she wanted in return was to spend time with Jess, whom she seems to have a crush on. It wasn’t a difficult choice for her to make with that carrot.” She giggled. “Her answer was kind of like mine was when you asked me if I’d come visit the ranch.”

“Hmm, interesting.” He grinned. “How did she have an attraction to my Petty Officer before she met her? I won’t even ask how an AI could have a crush on anyone.”

“Long story, Ada’s mind is modeled after Shah’s neural net as a base, so a bunch of her personality… including likes, dislikes, and desires, were replicated. Shah’s unspoken attraction to your fine Petty Officer seems to have rubbed off… maybe? Anyway, it’s not relevant because, and I assure you, Ada has the same emotional capacity for feelings and desires as we do. If she likes Jess, she likes Jess… not because anyone made her.”

His brows creased, “I think I almost understand all of that. You know the bottom line for me? You trust her, I trust her.”

“Good. Then I would like to ask you to do something for me, for her.”

“Anything.”

“Somehow make her official? It’s important that she feels like she’s part of this… needed, part of the team.”

He nodded, and Kara laid her hand on his powerful forearm and closed her eyes. Shah, are you with Jess, yet?

Yes, we are here, Sheereen-am; she’s actually quite talented at learning languages. What can we do for you?

I bet. Kara sent her warmth to Shah like a hug. Can you ask Ada to come to the Battle Bridge? There’s work to do and we could sure use her help.

Happy to oblige, auntie. Ada chimed into their silent conversation.

Sorry, I keep thinking I need to ask your mom for permission. My bad. Kara shared a laugh with them in their shared thoughts.

“I’m here.” Ada’s voice almost immediately echoed through the Battle Bridge, now with a more pronounced Persian accent, distinctly different from her earlier near-perfect mimicry of Shah’s crisp English intonation. “Oooo, I like this place. How may I assist you, Commander?”

“I need this command bridge operational, with your special flair.” He smiled, “Can I trust you to make that so, with all haste?”

Kara could swear Ada would have been blushing if she were in physical form, she stammered in response, “Ye.. Yes sir, Commander. Give me seventy-two hours, and the assistance of Lt. Vaden and a few of his geek squad. Grrr, if I only had hands I could do the manual work myself!” she grumbled.

We need to work on that, ladies! Shah’s daughter’s thoughts reached out to Alex, Shah, and Kara.

Shah piped up. I’ve actually been thinking a lot about it. It’s really just an engineering problem.
Shatari and Zara already solved hard light for us, so what if we took what she’s done for Alex a couple steps further, to make you a physical form?"

If an AI could squee, Ada definitely did.

Sounds like a plan. Kara was excited for her new friend, Jessica, as well as for the broader implications of perfecting the technology. Alex, can you have Shatari start on that? We’ll all pitch in, and talk later.

Aye aye. Alex teased.

Only seconds had passed since Ada had spoken out loud, and Daniels seemed to respond positively to her new voice. “Thank you. Oh, and Ada, I wanted to talk to you about something. The brains and heart of our ship needs a title, would you be comfortable if I gave you one, officially?”

“I’d be honored, sir. What would you like to call me?”

“Welcome to the crew, Navigator Ada.”

“I love it! Thank you, Commander! I won’t let you or Captain Simmons down! I swear! Off to work I go! Um... sir!” And with that, the screens began flickering, cycling through code and images.

“Enthusiastic at her work, I like that.” He watched in amazement as arcing tendrils of electricity began moving over the inner curve of the sphere.

They stood in silence for a bit. Leaning on the gangway railing, standing so close together Kara leaned into him without thinking. When he didn’t flinch, she stayed. “Tom…”

“Yes, Kara?”

“Why are you risking so much for us? It doesn’t make sense, as amazing as this has all been, like a stupid happy dream. I just don’t understand…”

He reached over and placed a comforting and slightly calloused hand on her much smaller ones. Kara noticed that he’d reached up and touched the amulet under his uniform again. Using her X-ray vision, she could see it was a beautiful, weathered bronze medallion, or talisman of some kind, with an owl in the center of an intricate design. “Do you promise not to... what do the kids say these days... freak out, if I tell you something?”

“Why would I do that?” Kara was suddenly worried about what was coming next…

“This is going to sound completely off the rails... but here goes. Many years ago, when I was a young officer, I dreamed about you.” He put his hands up to calm her when he saw her eyes widen in shock. “I saw this beautiful, golden-haired girl, a warrior goddess who shone like the sun, standing alone against a sea of darkness. The girl had these amazing sapphire blue eyes... and the fate of the world seemed to hang on her lonely shoulders.

“I fell in love with her, of course, or the dream of her... of you. I always wondered, did she have friends, or any allies to help her in her fight? Was she okay? Was she even real? She... you... would haunt my memory for the rest of my life, until that day... when you appeared on my ship in that terrible godsend of a storm.”

Kara’s hands had come up to cover her mouth in surprise. She could only stare at her friend, who was avoiding her gaze and continue to listen... astonished.
“Back then, over fifteen years ago now, I was confused, but chased clues about my dream girl all the way to Athens, and my own family history. I found out my ancestors were Greek. Can you believe that I didn’t even know? My great-great-great grandfather changed our last name from ‘Drakos’ to ‘Daniels’, goddess knows why, when he and his wife immigrated to America.

“I ended up spending every shore leave and break traveling around Greece and the Mediterranean, looking for hints about the truths in my dreams and discovering my roots. I learned the language, immersed myself in the culture, studied ancient Greek and everything I could about the great myths... and the gods.

“Along the way... I found my family, met Myka (back then it was Myka Athanassopoulos, quite a mouthful) in a little coffee shop near the Acropolis… and discovered Athena.” He reverently reached for the hidden pendant on his necklace again.

Kara was stunned by his revelation and was still shaken by his words. “The Greek goddess? The one you compared me to earlier?” She blushed slightly at the memory. “Is that her talisman you wear?”

He smiled blissfully and lifted the oddly shaped pendant out for her to see, “Yes, it’s very old, and belonged to one of my ancestors. It carries her symbols… the owl, a sprig of olive, and the crescent moon.”

“It’s more than that. There is power hidden there… great power.” Kara squinted at the mysterious artifact but shrugged. “It’s beyond my senses, which is a little scary.”

He was smiling, “Whatever it is, it’s hers, and it gives me peace, and focus... and sometimes I can feel her through it. She even speaks to me on occasion. I know how that sounds, but she’s guided me with her wise counsel for over the last decade... little nudges of insight that have helped me at every step of my life, and my career. I’ve learned to always listen to her, especially when she agrees with me.” His last comment was pointed and was directed at Kara.

She smiled.

“Then, three years ago, things got a little weirder. Athena told me that I would soon meet the blue-eyed goddess and that she would bring the true Aegis to me, to cloak my warship and make her invincible.

“I swore to myself after that first dream that if I ever we ever had the opportunity to actually meet, I would do everything in my power to aid you... to stand with you, to be your wise counsel as Athena has always been for me. It’s what she wanted of me, as well; not that she needed to, but she asked me to become your ‘General’.”

Kara blinked; her head was still spinning from Daniels’ revelations.

“The interesting bit here is that Athena was right; you did bring me my Aegis... by providing me with my new Navigator.”

“Yes, XO? Did you require additional assistance?” Ada was humming as she worked.

“Thank you, Ada. Can you repeat what you said earlier today, about enhancing the Zumwalt’s stealth capabilities and armor?”

“Yes, XO? Did you require additional assistance?” Ada was humming as she worked.

“Thank you, Ada. Can you repeat what you said earlier today, about enhancing the Zumwalt’s stealth capabilities and armor?”

“Of course, sir; I can summarize. I was explaining how I’d made the Zumwalt completely invisible to human or electronic detection, and how I’d begun the process of crystallizing or changing the molecular structure, of the hull and superstructure. The conversion process, once complete, will effectively make the ship invulnerable to conventional firepower and explosives, and heavily
resistant to even the most advanced light and particle weapons.”

“Wow… I, um…” Kara wrapped her fingers around his, feeling a little overwhelmed. Was Athena actually real, and helping her? It was clear Daniels believed she was… and was offering her something priceless, his life. She wanted to just hug him and say YES! But the harsh reality of the situation was too real. “Do you really want to do this? You’d be risking so much… Myka, the ranch, your career… your life… everything.”

He squeezed her hand tighter and smiled, “Aye. I made this decision a long time ago, little one.”

Kara only then realized that she was tearing up, and not a moment later was enveloped in his massive arms. She stayed there, comfortably tucked within his protective embrace, head nuzzled into his chest until she calmed down enough to think.

Then it all sunk in… she, Kara Zor-El Danvers, had a General, or maybe he’d rather be called Admiral, or Wise Counsel of War, whatever he wanted. Tom was her friend, someone she already implicitly trusted and looked to for guidance. She liked the relationship they had been building and didn’t want that to change… except to get stronger.

She knew what Shah would say… having the allegiance of the man who would soon be Captain of the U.S. Navy’s most advanced warship, augmented by Kryptonian technology thousands of years ahead their time, along with his network of high-level military and political connections would be priceless, strategically… but he wasn’t merely an asset to her.

Like Jess, he’d become part of her little, eccentric extended Earth family.

It was at that moment that she decided that she needed to get Daniels, and Jess, up-to-speed information-wise, about everything.

Kara finally eased back, sniffled, wiped her eyes, and asked with a slender smile, “Any other surprises I should know about?”

“No, I’m good, my Goddess.”

“Oh stop!” She playfully backhanded his chest. “Let’s get Jess, Shah, and Alex down here. We need the whole Scooby Gang on this. It’s time to we told you about me, about us, about… everything.”

With a smirk, she added, “No more secrets among friends, aye, my General?”

“Aye.” He beamed, his honest smile more than enough of a reward for her.

Ada whispered in Kara’s thoughts. Oh, auntie, that was so beautiful! And from the tumult of emotions she felt, Kara was certain that her new niece would have been crying as well if she could.

Glossary/FAQ:

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Terms: Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.
Ah! khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

Alex vanimelda - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Bedrood: Means ‘good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

C’est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, companions to Alex and Shah and family members of the House of El.

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

Malā’ikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature. (Persian)

órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Volar mi diosa! – ‘fly, my goddess!’ (Spanish)

Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

aziz-am – ‘my dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

joon-am – ‘my dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘the light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person's name<’ + joon (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean 'dear'. So, ‘Shah joon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in any conversation and every context.
Other names/nickname/titles/things:

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Bríomháire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorou’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

Dios mío! – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition

Kryptonian glyph talking – Finally gave a name to the thing Kara has been doing quite expertly from day one. This is when a skilled Kryptonian takes a concept or a word like Vaena, and layers into its meaning, and other possible complexities such as emotion & feeling, physical sensations, smell… and then releases it like a glyph into someone’s mind, or speaks it, affecting just her target, or anyone listening or she’s connected to (her choice as to whom is affected).

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn (Thought & Memory). In Norse mythology, Huginn (from Old Norse ‘thought’) and Muninn (from Old Norse ‘memory’ or ‘mind’) are a pair of ravens that fly all over the world, Midgard, and bring information to the god Odin. Muninn’s pilot is the decorated combat veteran Lt. Corrigan.

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity.

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Tieguanyin - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province.

Tratung – khrag ‘thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’. ‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. Shah and Alex compared Kara to being one of them. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)
Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar, and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien).

Vallerian – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshiped, or traded. You’d better believe the catalog of their race’s knowledge is now at least partially open to Kara in her cell memories. Yowza…

Wan - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:
So... yeah, Kara finally broke Mach 10, went orbital, maybe? has a god watching out for her, a niece who’s the Zumwalt’s new heart and soul, and a US Navy Commander (soon to be Captain) as her personal military advisor... Whoa! What a weekend! It looks like it’s mission accomplished for Team Archangel! They made quite a titanic impression on the officers and crew of the USS Zumwalt.

Next Up:
Chapter 19: “We Are Stardust” - Where our heroes return to National City and continue their three-month journey as interns, while back on the Zumwalt Ada begins her transformation of the Battle Bridge into Team Archangel’s communications hub. We also get a girls’ night out in the city with Dr. Naomi Young, Alex’s mentor, and their new friend. And, last but not least, Kara comes to the rescue of a National City Police Department (NCPD) detective.

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me. Also, please share this story with those you think might enjoy it!

Thoughts:

* The quote recited by Commander Daniels:
Smyrnaeus, Quintus, Fall of Troy (Greek epic poem 4th Century A.D.). Loeb Classical Library (Book 19), Harvard University Press January 1, 1913. Translated by Arthur Sanders Way.

Link to the book on Amazon.

Song inspirations this chapter:

Alessia Cara - Scars To Your Beautiful

Song on YouTube.
Damn, this is so Jess, with Kara telling her she’s beautiful just the way she is.

The USS Zumwalt’s railguns are made by Northrop Grumman, and are more advanced than our Earth’s versions, which you can read about here:

Railgun general info:
Wikipedia article on railguns
Misc. Articles:
Railgun Article One
Railgun Article 2
Railgun Article 3
Railgun Article 4

US Navy - Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA)
Who are NAVSEA?
We Are Stardust

Chapter Summary

Where our heroes depart the USS Zumwalt and return to National City to continue their three-month journey as interns. We get some Kara and Colliers time, a girls’ night out with Dr. Naomi Young (Alex’s mentor and their new friend), and last, but certainly not least Kara comes to the rescue of National City Police Department (NCPD) detective Devi Mitra.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Early Monday Morning, July 15th – Year Two*

*USS Zumwalt, Aft deck*

*0535 Hours UTC -8, Monday morning, U.S. West Coast Time*

It was a calm, clear morning on the aft deck of the USS Zumwalt.

Night was giving way to soft blue endless skies washed with rose off on the eastern horizon, and the thick chill left it’s shivering touch of mist on everything that dared seek dawn’s light.

The sleek destroyer cut through the placid seas at a steady 44 knots, as well over a hundred thousand Kryptonian-augmented horsepower quietly hummed below. With Ada’s upgrades, they could easily double that speed now, just one of many facts in Commander Tom Daniel’s new reality that filled him with absolute wonder.

As he stepped from the warmth of the ship’s interior onto the deck, the only breeze came from the forward motion of the vessel’s push northward, on course for Puget Sound and the Emerald City of Seattle.

*Just Shah’s color,* Daniels couldn’t help but chuckle to himself as he strode next to the brilliant young woman on his right… part human, part Kryptonian, and pure grace. She was dressed as Shadow in her infinitely black outfit, with its delicate mask, and a duffel bag filled with new letters, cards, and gifts for the trio of young heroes from the crew slung over a shoulder. He now knew all about the beautiful vivid green diamond that Kara had made for her, and what it signified. He was also aware of how much Kara and Alex loved their spiritual sister.

He was impressed at how quickly the young Persian woman moved, despite her rather short (5’4”) stature. Every two to three strides, as she began to fall behind, she’d flicker with a kind of misty darkness and skip ahead to catch up, seemingly without realizing she was doing it... as if using her growing abilities had become as normal for her as breathing, or fighting. He tried to imagine her in a white lab coat and safety glasses, working in a lab at JPL, and smiled at how absurd the unlikely juxtaposition seemed.
To his immediate left Kara’s constant protector and bondmate, fiery Alex (as Flame), matched Daniels’ steps as she continued to brief him on their plans, next steps, and more. He was listening attentively, enjoying the cadence of her authoritative voice, and her closeness, even though he was already clear on all points… they’d covered them multiple times over the past few hours.

Damn, she’d make a fine officer. It’s so easy to see why Kara fell for her.

Close beside Flame walked Navigator Ada, the new heart and soul of the Zumwalt. The cheery hybrid human/Kryptonian AI had just that morning achieved a small step on her quest to have a physical form. Her mother had skipped dinner and the party the night before and spearheaded a coordinated all-night effort with Lt. Vaden, the CIC techs, Ada, Shatari, and Zara to give her hard light body substance.

Using the pure white diamond Kryptonian crystal Kara and her mother crafted for her (and had intended to give to her at a later time) as a focus, Ada could now manifest a true physical form.

Her new body looked exactly like a shimmering 3D human made of light, taller than her mother, with a longer stride. She was a work in progress… not yet physically substantial all the time. For the moment, Ada could have passed for an artist’s version of an angel as she stepped across the deck, leaving a fading trail of softly glowing footprints in her wake.

Daniels glanced over his shoulder further behind them and watched as Rodriguez meandered alongside Kara, herding the hero like an Australian Shepherd. The Kryptonian was dressed in her colorful red, white, and blue Archangel uniform, and looked stunning, as usual. They were trailing by thirty feet, intentionally slowed by the Petty Officer who was pressed in close, savoring every last minute she had left with her goddess.

I know how she feels…

He smiled thinking of how he’d awoken that morning, so refreshed after only a brief hour’s sleep, to the delightful sensation of Athena’s warmth beside him. There was a lingering sense of joy in his heart and her intoxicating scent permeated his sheets. He’d become accustomed and looked forward to her chaste, nocturnal visits over the years, as well as the good dreams she’d bring him.

Oh, how he wished his goddess would stay, even just once, so he could glimpse her immortal face upon waking.

At least he knew she was okay, that she was happy, and that she’d secretly checked in on Kara and her demigoddesses while she visited him. Somehow, he could often sense how she was feeling, even what she was doing… when she allowed it. It was the most magical and astonishing intimacy, to feel the silvery threads that connected her immortal heart to his.

How such a thing was even possible, he had no idea.

Still listening to Alex, his mind drifted to Athena in prayer, Thank you, bright-eyed one, for helping me find her.

Then to his joy, the goddess’ thoughts gently mingled with his own. Apologies, my timing could have been better. Prophecy is an imperfect science.

She’d come to him again! Great lady! I am twice blessed by your presence this day.

As I am twice humbled by yours, Commander.
He tried unsuccessfully not to grin. So, if you’re suggesting that you’d have waited to reveal yourself to me if you’d known it would take me so long to cross paths with Kara, then you have nothing to apologize for. I wouldn’t trade our years together for anything.

He could feel her pleasure at his response, and her thoughts became soft, like a caress. You always know what to say. Thank you, Tom, for being there for me, and them. She is… they all are, more amazing, and precious than I ever imagined. He could feel her need to depart, but also her reluctance to. She wanted to remain with the young heroes as desperately as he did. Unfortunately, there are… family matters I must attend to.

_Hades?_ Daniel’s asked anxiously. His senses went on alert.

Yes, the Lord of the Underworld again tests my patience. His minions are causing trouble in the Ukraine.

You’ll… be careful?

He quickly felt himself being wrapped in a warm, invisible embrace. Always. Thank you for your concern Thomas but it is my uncle who should be afraid, of me. He’s forgotten his place and his oath. Rest assured, I will bring him to heel. Sadly, I must now take my leave of you… as much as it pains me to do so.

Wait! When will you return to me? He caught himself... yikes, that sounded a bit desperate. And… reveal yourself to them? Kara really wants to talk to you.

Her laugh was breathy, warm like a summer’s breeze in his mind and gentle fingers down his spine… I am always with you, haven’t you figured that out yet? And as far as Kara, she is not yet ready to know Athena, but she and I will meet… very soon. Until then, sweet dreams my soon-to-be Captain. Her parting words carried such power, and promise, his knees felt weak, and he nearly gasped out loud as her presence left him.

The yearning he always felt at his goddess’ absence had only grown stronger the longer he knew her. Yet, even when apart it was as if they were still connected… like part of his heart left with her but was still beating, just far away. And the most amazing thing… the unbelievable thing… was that at the same time it was as if a part of hers remained with him.

I can’t explain it and certainly don’t deserve it.

He took a deep breath, and refocused back on Kara, Alex, and Shah, and the ways in which he might convince them to stay longer, but quickly filed that selfish course of action away as a fool’s errand. The young heroes had internships to get back to that morning, even though none of them had slept a wink the night before. He and Jess had stayed up most the night in deep conversation, mostly with Alex and Kara though Shah had popped in a few times.

Well, to be fair, it wasn’t all serious discussion: most of them did take a break for dinner together and spent some time celebrating with the crew. For an hour it was like a full-on concert, with Kara joining in to lend her stunning voice to the makeshift band of sailors (including Perry Officer 3rd Class Dante Caruso on guitar) who were playing at the event, singing requested covers and favorite tracks to the enthusiastic cheers of over three hundred adoring fans.

It was only later after the festivities ended that they all retreated to the Battle Bridge to huddle and talk backstories and strategy… for hours. And it had been enlightening, to say the least. Astounding would be more accurate.
He now considered himself somewhat of an expert on the lives of his three amazing guests and their AIs.

“So, are we clear?” Alex was asking him, jarring him back to reality as they walked.

“Crystal, Ms. Danvers. Chief Vaden will make sure that the Battle Bridge stays officially offline, and will stretch the repair schedule for completion. That should give us a good sixteen to twenty-four months. In reality, Ada should have us up and running in the next day or so, and then you and Shatari, Shah and Zara, and Kara will all be tied directly into the ship through her.

“The Bridge will then become our clandestine hub of operations for all Archangel tracking and activities. Regardless of whether the actions are official U.S. Navy ops Kara agrees to participate in, or your team’s hero work, streaming, data retention, communications, analysis, and all feeds will be handled by Jess and Ada from here.”

“I better be getting a raise, sir!” Jess called forward, sharing a laugh with Kara.

Shah, Ada, and Alex all looked over at him expectantly and he grinned, quietly saying, “She has no idea, but Simmons and I were able to promote her up two rates… to an E-7, that’s Chief Petty Officer in Navy parlance. We’ll tell her before the ceremony at the end of the month, she just needs to pass a review by the selection board, but that shouldn’t be an issue.”

Shah and Alex subtly low fived, using Daniels as a shield, to not draw attention from Jess. Ada’s light sparkled as she spoke to Daniels directly in a slightly distorted version of her Persian-accented English… speakers were no longer required, her voice was all her own now. “Thank you, Commander, she is so deserving of this. You also have my deepest appreciation for accepting me as a member of the crew.”

“My pleasure, Ada, she’s the most capable communications and tactical officer I’ve ever served with, and yes, a friend. I want her on my A team with you.” And with his words of appreciation, Ada literally became radiant…

With that, they’d reached the helipads. The pilot, Lt. Corrigan, and flight crew that was prepping Muninn were very distracted by their approaching celebrity passengers, and undoubtedly, Ada, who’d never been out and about in her shining new form yet.

They were out of tears, but hugs were liberally shared. Kara flew up so she was equal to the much taller Commander’s height, came in close, and whispered in his ear, “I can never thank you enough, my General,” and then she kissed his cheek, and wrapped him in a full body hug.

He was laughing as he slipped his arms around her, and said, “Until we meet again at the ceremony, my Goddess. I am, as always, your humble servant.” It was true; he was, as much as he was Athena’s.

When Kara finally let go of him and landed back on the deck she clasped hands with Alex on one side and Shah on the other and said, “We’re going to try something a little different for our trip back to National City. Please apologize to Lt. Corrigan for us, as we won’t need Muninn’s services today. Wish us luck, and please… thank everyone for us.”

As the officers and crew waved goodbye, the three young women did a three, two, one countdown together and then rose into the air as one! Daniels could see the thrill, and looks of absolute joy, on Shadow and Flames faces before their full masks coalesced out of the ether. Kara then released their
hands, and they flew on their own.

“Stay close to me!” Kara could be heard calling out to them as they all waved again.

The trio then did a couple test laps around the Zumwalt, drawing the few sailors who were out on deck to the rails to watch in awe, and offer their cheers. After their third time around the ship, the three angled like a slingshot to the southeast and accelerated slowly off into the morning sky.

“How did they…?” Daniels began asking out loud.

Ada quickly answered, “It is quite fascinating! My aunt somehow managed to manipulate her aura in such a way that, by using quantum entanglement in conjunction with Alex and Shah’s own nascent (but still very weak) Kryptonian quantum fields, she was able to align the wave function of their shared quantum state, effectively interlinking all three of them!"

“How…” he said, as if he understood, but shrugged his shoulders… he was well out of his scientific depth.

Rodriguez was still watching the spot in the sky as they disappeared and spoke up, “Sir, what she means is that Kara latched onto them using her quantum field thingy kind of like a magnet, and is pulling them along with her using her aura like a tether. Alex and Shah aren’t fully self-powered for flight, at least not yet, so right now they’re kind of drafting off of Kara, learning how to fly. That would be so cool to do! I wish I was soaring alongside my hermanas.”

“It’s not really a magnet, but that’s what I basically said, isn’t it?” Ada pouted.

Daniels reached over and placed his hand within the subtly tactile light of Ada’s smaller one, allowing her tingling warmth to dance over his skin. Remembering Kara’s words about the young AI, he hoped to bring her some comfort, and show support. She responded by increasing the temperature of her light for him. It was very pleasant, like baking in the summer sun on the beaches of Knossos. “Yes, you did Ada, but not everyone operates on your, or their level. Sometimes it’s helpful to dumb things down for those of us humans without genius-level IQs.”

“Aye aye, sir. Understood.” She giggled.

July 23rd – Year 2

National City – CatCo Media (Not yet Worldwide), the TCC

Time – 0835 hours UTC -8, Tuesday morning, U.S. West Coast Time

The two of them had settled into a remarkably seamless partnership.

For the first time in as long as he’d been at CatCo, Colliers was free to just focus on his job, and Kara did everything else. Every morning after they would meet over coffee and a pastry (damn that girl loved her crullers, usually devouring at least two), she’d make the rounds with all the department heads and editors, and then stay virtually connected to them throughout the day. Initially, she’d had resistance from the old-timers who didn’t know how to text or use Skype or other relevant social media, so rather than teach them one at a time, she just set up training for the whole company.

The plucky young woman made it her mission to get to know all the in-house producers, editors,
reporters, and other contributors face to face. Through her central hub of the TCC she manually coordinated assignments and communications for producers and editors and became the focal point to review edited content and layouts before sending them along to their stakeholders.

Kara Danvers was a sharply dressed, sunny, optimism-filled dynamo who took people by surprise at every turn. Veteran editors and producers who had initially scoffed at her elevated role quickly found themselves running to her for help, some more reluctantly than others.

As he watched her work, Colliers became more impressed every day. She was decisive, driven by a keen intelligence, strategic, compassionate, and had an uncanny ability to read people. Not just their moods and how to deal with them, but their strengths and weaknesses. She always looked for the good in each person… their own special ‘superpower’ she called it.

She was persistent about making ‘suggestions’ to editors on who should be writing what, and most very quickly realized they should listen to her. She also seemed to know how to cheer anyone up and send them on their way more inspired than they were before talking to her.

Not that it was all roses; detractors had emerged: some jealous, others entitled, misogynistic, or just bitter to see the young woman succeeding beyond them, which was a distraction neither he nor Kara needed. Thankfully, her exemplary work and impact to the business, and his vigilance had so far kept the critics muted; he’d only had to fire two of the more toxic people.

At his desk, Colliers went to take a sip of his ‘coffee’ and narrowed his eyes… it really was just hot coffee, cream, and a dash of brown sugar… there wasn’t even a hint of the whiskey he’d snuck into the drink, it had been replaced with a dash of vanilla flavor. He stood up, scanned his long bank of windows into the TCC, and caught Kara’s quick sideways smirk as she adjusted her glasses and continued speaking with a couple of local beat photographers.

He glared at her through the glass.

It had been over two weeks, and she hadn’t let him touch a drop of alcohol, or drugs, at work. At every turn, his booze, and his pills disappeared, no matter how hard he tried to sneak them in. He’d go for a carefully concealed drink, and in its place he’d find a steaming cup of coffee… every… single… time. It was maddening, and wonderful all at the same time.

She was taking care of him, doing her job, and working diligently on her TCC 2.0 proposal at night.

Unknown to her, he had no intention of actually drinking on the job, or anywhere for that matter. His attempts to consume alcohol or drugs at work were a smokescreen for Kara… to protect himself from looking like a pathetic fool in case he failed at what he was really trying to accomplish.

Plus, to his shame, he liked how her taking care of him made him feel.

The fact was, he’d decided the day she revealed herself to him to seek serious help for his addiction and had spoken to his sponsor about getting back into AA. This time he promised it would be different; he was in it to win it.

The funny thing was, he was doing it as much for her as he was for himself… he didn’t want to disappoint his angel. Her watching out for him had helped give him the mental fortitude to stay on track outside of work.

It was after 7 p.m. in the dark offices, the only light glowing from where he and his Kryptonian savior, her glorious hair pulled back in a ponytail and her adorable glasses hanging at the tip of her nose, sat at a large worktable in the TCC. Their notes, her laptop, and a large number of white
takeout containers from the local Chinese place were scattered around them.

“Do you always eat like a linebacker?” He asked, and not as delicately as he’d intended, slightly appalled at how the normally poised young woman was shoveling her second container of vegetable chow mein down her throat.

Kara laughed through a big mouthful, her bright blue eyes glittering with cold fire. It was always such an incredible rush to glimpse her unearthly side…

She said, “Among friends, it’s nice to not have to worry about always starving, or how I look eating.” She reached over, picked up an egg roll, and dipped it deep into the insane fiery sauce she’d ordered. Then, as if to prove her point, defiantly popped the entire drippy thing in her mouth, chewing slowly, and dramatically.

He admired how, all the while, she managed to maintain a huge, self-satisfied grin on her face.

“Well then…” He said and commenced to devour his cashew chicken with animated gusto.

Her unrestrained musical laughter was his absolute reward. He resolved, as always, to find more ways to get her to do that.

“So,” She said, popping a thumb in her mouth to lick off some sauce.

_Oh Lord, she has no idea how sexy that is… if it wasn’t me sitting here…_”

“Alex is working late at the lab, so I have until about 0100, I mean 1 a.m., to get as much done as I can. I’m going to pick her up after. And thanks to our jobs, we have an exception to curfew, so we can even use the front door for a change instead of the balcony.”

He noticed that she’d been slipping into military time a lot recently, interesting… his reporter’s mind started working overtime. “She’s good with our late nights? Not jealous?” He grinned and ducked.

“Alex? Jealous? I don’t think so. She’s spending nights with her hottie mentor, if anyone should be jealous, it’s me.” He could tell Kara didn’t have an envious bone in her body, based on what he knew of her, and how playful her tone was. “Oh! We get to meet her, Naomi, this Friday night. It’s sooo exciting! We’re going to this place in Redwood Square called The Cloisters. Have you ever heard of it?”

In fact, he had. “Yeah, I’ve been there a couple times… very upscale, really classy. It’s kind of like an old-school jazz club built into a remodeled gothic cathedral. Make sure you dress to impress. There are lots of places to talk there, a five-star chef, and amazing music. One of my favorite bands is playing this weekend. Humph, now I’m jealous.” He scowled, sitting back in his seat.

“Who’s that?” Kara asked, chomping on another egg roll.

“Scott Bradlee’s Post Modern Jukebox.” When she looked confused he exclaimed, “They’re ah-MAZE-ing! Imagine your favorite pop and rock songs, rearranged into retro masterpieces. It’s my kind of sound, swing, jazzy, lots of piano… I love that 40s torch singer nightclub vibe.”

She was beaming as she listened. “Sounds like something I’d like, too. You know I sing, right?”

He was startled… “No, I didn’t.”

“Yeah. I’ve been doing small gigs here in National City to relax, and stay connected to the music. I’ll give you my schedule in case you’d like to come to any. A few months ago the Wayne School in
Gotham actually offered me a full-ride, but as hard as it was, I had to turn it down.”

Colliers blinked, not really surprised that she’d do such a thing... but grateful that she had. “You really do want to work as a journalist.”

“Was there ever a question?” She shoved more fried noodles in her mouth. Then, after swallowing shot straight up in her chair and pointed at him as if she’d had an epiphany, “Oh! Oh! I know what we need! Karaoke, next weekend, Saturday night.” It wasn’t a request. “That place on 7th.” She giggled, ignoring his stunned reaction. “You, me, Alex, Shah, and maybe Jenny and her team from production, they could use a morale boost.”

Colliers shook his head. “How can I say no? Is there anything you can’t do?”

She smiled sweetly, and continued, ignoring his question, “You know, I have a brilliant idea! You should come by The Cloisters on Friday night and ‘accidently’ bump into us. Naomi knows a little about me and we intend to tell her a lot more... some things you should know too. It’d also be good to get you two together she might need a ‘normal’ person to talk to about all the crazy.”

“Me? ‘Normal’?” He asked with a hand on his chest giving her his best ‘are you crazy, girl?’ look.

“You're my kind of normal, girlfriend. Anyway, think about it? ‘K? Expanding your circle of friends beyond Jack, and Daniels might be a good move... I’m just sayin’.” She said as she scraped the last bits off the bottom of one of the takeout containers.

He winced dramatically, “Touché, my dear. Touché.”

“Anyway,” She moved on. “Thanks for reviewing my article before I submitted it to Jenkins for the Tribune’s intern contest. Not my most inspired work, but, in my defense, I have been kind of busy.”

“It was really good, Kara.” He smiled, “Moving actually. I think you really hit home finding all those unique nuggets highlighting the personalities of the people of the Labyrinth. My guess is if you get published they’ll have a stream of new customers coming in to check out the place just because of your story.”

She sighed, “I guess we’ll see if it’s good enough.”

“Well, you do have more important things to focus on, like fixing the TCC.”

“Right…” Kara said, pulling out her phone and pushing it over to him with the mobile version of the new TCC 2.0 App interface up and running. “Did you upgrade your version this morning?”

Colliers nodded as he chewed, and she continued. “Good. We’re almost ready for our first internal Beta test. All critical features are finally enabled; editors will now see a historical view of each available contributor’s past work, their strengths, weaknesses, workload, and other data. They’ll also be presented with a prioritized list of recommended contributors to choose from, along with the pertinent details as to why a given writer, editor, artist, or photographer was selected. All users will stay synced to CatCo’s new secure cloud in real-time for collaboration as well (Thank you, Ada!). We still need to implement the predictive aspects of the AI, but that can come in later... she’s still learning.”

“She?” He asked with surprise.

Kara blushed, she’d obviously said more than she meant to. There were still… secrets that she wasn’t yet comfortable sharing with him, and he respected that, though he wished…
Then she said, “Yeah.”

He nodded eagerly as she fidgeted with her glasses. He could feel it; she was about to allow him to venture deeper into the labyrinth of her mysteries. “Ada… my niece, who you know as the architect making my crazy TCC 2.0 design real, suggested we name her new student Pythia, after Apollo’s High Priestess at ancient Delphi. She’s literally like a child right now, a very intelligent child, but still, she needs a lot of handholding.

“Ada and Shah created Pythia to be the true ‘back-end’ of the system… no programming, not a single line of code, just a conscious, living sentence with nearly unlimited computing power and capacity to gather, store, and analyze information. The ‘App’ is really just an interface for humans to be able to interact with her in a way they’re familiar with, and it’s also safer for her… at least until she understands humans better.

“Over time, she’ll begin to anticipate future events and alert us in advance. We’ll literally be a couple steps ahead of the news.”

Colliers’ head was still spinning, whatever Pythia was, she was far beyond anything conceived of on earth outside of science fiction and myth. “You mean, she can actually see the future? Like a real oracle?” He also didn’t miss how Kara had said ‘humans’ in a way that felt like she didn’t consider herself one.

Her smile was blinding, “Yeah, something like that, but a lot more science and less magic. You see, she’s constantly analyzing the flow of real-time facts and data available to her, a lot like I do already, but full-time. Right now, Ada’s intentionally throttled her pipe, but as we allow more information in she’ll grow…

“Ada can draw from every connected device, the Internet, satellites, phones, you name it. With all that data, Pythia will eventually be able to look forward in time, and forecast probabilities with scarcely decent accuracy that no human mind or your supercomputers could never see coming.

“Imagine having a crystal ball for just about anything… your personal life, the weather, criminal acts, financial market shifts, war, health, disease outbreaks, even disasters if she can get enough of the right data.

“Don’t look so surprised Steven. I’ve told you the technology we have access to is… very advanced. Like Alex would say, it’s just science, and it’d be a tragedy not to do some good with it, right? And we don’t need to stop with fixing the TCC, I think in the long run Pythia can really help a lot of people… maybe the world.”

He shook his head in wonder, “Yes, from what you’re saying I think she could too, but we need to be extremely careful with this. Your system and Pythia are exactly the kind of thing the NSA, hell, any government or corporation would kill to get their hands on. To know the future is every madman’s dream. Wow, Kara, this is… big.”

"I told you, my world is… weird, and probably dangerous.”

They laughed together, and then he smiled and reached over to gently pat her hand. “Thanks for sharing with me, we’ll figure out a way for Pythia to help, safely. I promise.”

After they finished their food, Kara shimmered with super speed to clear their trash, and as always Colliers watched with open adoration. *She is amazing. Always looking out for the world and everyone in it. Even me.*
Kara quickly reappeared back at the worktable across from him, and asked, “So what’s next boss?”

He broke out in a wide grin. “We need to move on to Beta test, and get your presentation ready for Cat. There are only a couple interface bugs left, but your UX developer seems quite skilled, for a human. Do you think he’ll have those ironed out by month end? And I don’t suppose you could hook me up with Shah, Ada, and Pythia directly?”

She nodded happily, “I don’t see why not. I’ll talk to them, it sure would make things a lot easier for everyone. As far as Brian, yeah, he can deliver... but don’t mention Pythia to him. He’s a sweetheart, but has no idea that there’s no code, no quantum computer server farm off in Nevada or somewhere crunching numbers.

“It’s not that he doesn’t deserve to know, but he doesn’t need to. I’m not dragging yet another unwitting friend into my crazy life unless I have to. Anyway, he’s on break, so he has the time to do the work. Plus, the eight thousand dollars in discretionary funds we’re paying him for the prototype App is the best summer job he’s ever had, and will look really good on his resume, and his college applications.”

Colliers shook his head, grinning. “I still can’t believe the magic a high school student has accomplished in a month; his UI is a thing of beauty. With a typical contractor, I’d be out a hell-of-a-lot more money and still negotiating features, instead of on our last Alpha build.”

“Um, I’m a high school student.” She reminded him.

He sputtered, “You know what I mean… you’re special.”

She laughed again and dug back into her dinner.

---------------------

July 26th – Year 2

National City – Redwood Square - The Cloisters

1733 hours UTC -8, Friday evening, U.S. West Coast Time

The Cloisters...

Kara hadn’t expected the impressive sight that greeted her and Shah as they stepped from their cab onto the well-worn red bricks of Redwood Square that warm July evening.

The towering, softly-illuminated spires of the neo-gothic structure rose high above the bustling activity around them like an ominous relic from a more ancient time. Kara had read that the church had been built in the mid-1800s, but a few years back the Catholic Archdiocese had had to sell the property to cover crippling litigation costs from a long series of scandals involving pedophile priests.

Come to think of it, Cat Grant had been involved as a reporter on breaking those stories... Kara grinned, once again reminded of why she was so impressed with the woman.

Shah, finally able to unleash the full power of her Kryptonian companion, was dressed in another stunning Alexander McQueen. The black strapless flare-bottomed dress had an etched silver (almost platinum) embroidered bodice that molded itself to her D cups. The fit totally complemented the lovely young woman’s curvy, toned physique, and showed off more leg than the usually modest...
dresser had ever dared in her life.

Kara held her hand supportively; she knew how nervous and excited her friend was.

“I really love that dress, but the sexy Persian in it even more,” Kara whispered as she leaned in and purred. She felt her raven-haired companion press into her side. “And those shoes nail the look. Rao!” The strapped, silver, pointy-toed Christian Louboutins had been a great choice; combined with her green diamond necklace, and the matching earrings Kara and Alex had recently made for her, Shah was absolutely picture-perfect. Like a movie star.

The Kryptonian smiled. Her Persian sister had become quite a fashionista, now that she had a pallet and the right tools to paint with. Thank you, Zara!

They had been receiving appreciative glances from the crowd, and while Kara was polite, smiling when necessary, she ignored them for the most part... saving all of her attention for the dark beauty gently holding her right arm.

Shah squeezed her hand, and slipped into Persian, “Like you don’t look like a goddess, sheereen-am! That dark blue fabric you found for your dress shimmers like the material for your elusive Kryptonian battle armor and fits your body like a glove. I’m very jealous of Alex right now.”

Kara grinned. “Thank you. I didn’t have as much time as I wanted, but it came out okay.”

“Okay? No one will know it’s not a Valentino, seriously… your work’s too good, and besides, they’ll be too busy looking at you.” They laughed, and Kara pressed her delicate glasses higher on her nose as they made their way toward their destination through a blur of street performers, trolley cars, and crowds of attractive young people, all part of the stirring nightlife of National City’s hottest bar and restaurant district.

Ahead, a soft, enticing rhythm echoed from deep within the thick walls of the cathedral’s ancient stone, drawing them further along a red-carpeted walkway that apparently led to its entrance. They both marveled as they passed lofty, weathered columns, craning their necks upward to get a view of the noble, sculpted figures of kings, queens, and characters from the Old Testament. The carefully lit pillars added to the verticality of the edifice as a whole and created a visual aesthetic that was quite serene, if not a little somber.

They eventually joined up with a small group of fashionably dressed patrons as they mounted a wide staircase that led through a set of massive wooden doors and into the brilliantly illuminated, and staggeringly high, entryway. Inside, it was quite a sight to behold: four stories of carved stone balconies, a round glass elevator, gothic chandeliers, polished tiles, and the mingled sounds of jazz and murmured conversations from somewhere deeper within.

From their right came the sound of water trickling in a fountain showcasing an exquisite statue of the Virgin Mary, bowed solemnly over a placid pool.

This is… wow. Kara muttered in Shah’s thoughts.

I feel the same way, Sheereen-am. It is as beautiful as it is profane. You’d think with all of this to appreciate, people would stop staring at us.

They’re just admiring perfection… accept the well-deserved attention. Kara noticed a slight blush overcome her dusky companion in reaction to her words as she placed her gentle touch on Shah’s mid-back.

Like they're only looking at me… Shah thought, blushing slightly.
They giggled together in their minds and continued on their way.

Kara took a calming breath, squeezed Shah’s hand, and said, “Well, here we go.” Then sent her awareness out, seeking Alex. *Vaena, I can hear your heartbeat, and I feel you and Naomi close by.*

*Hey, beautiful, we’re upstairs, second floor, table off to the left side. We found a secluded spot, without cameras. While I have the waitress here, you guys want drinks?*

Alex took their non-alcoholic daiquiri orders as Kara and Shah continued to the closest stairs, still receiving lots of glances and stares from both sexes along the way. They were stopped twice, once by a wannabe Romeo who wanted, and seemed to expect, their undivided attention…

It was fun walking away from him.

More interesting was a gracious woman, probably in her mid-thirties, who openly admired how beautiful she and Shah were together. She started to tear up, hugged them, told them to never let go of each other, and then continued on her way at a brisk walk, sobbing.

*Poor thing.* Kara thought, watching her go. *She’s sad.*

*I think she’s inebriated... and sad.* Shah sighed, and once again slipped her hand into Kara’s. *And she thought we were a couple…*

Kara glanced back to make sure the woman was alright and then allowed herself to be pulled along by Shah’s tugging. *I know. It’s just that… it’s hard to watch people in pain, and not at least try to help them.*

Shah smiled, and pressed in close, *I know it’s difficult, but you can’t always fix everyone, not every time. Sometimes it’s up to us to do it ourselves.*

Kara tilted her head into Shah’s flowing raven locks. *My wise Shadow…*

As they ascended the broad winding staircase, Kara couldn’t help but admire the soaring stained glass windows that were set within the hand-carved stone at regular intervals along the curve of the outside wall. Their extreme height emphasized the already impressive, towering geometry of the cathedral’s interior, and a clever use of shadows made it appear as if the colorful apertures were floating, without any structural support.

She was reminded of the tall windows in her bedroom back home in Midvale and felt a sudden pang of homesickness, and a strong desire to hug Eliza and Jeremiah. Shaking off her melancholy, she focused back on Shah. *It’s your kind of place.*

*I was just thinking the same thing.* Her reply was accompanied by a feeling of warmth that enveloped Kara like a hug, just what Kara had needed. *I could have a field day in here, so many shadows to play in!*

When they reached the wide balcony, they both took a quick peek around the solid stone corner to get a look at their table in the dining area before going any further.

Alex looked absolutely gorgeous; she was sitting in profile to them, legs crossed elegantly, her breezy silhouette showing off the graceful cut of her lacquered red silk evening dress. Her short-cut hair looked almost sculpted, illuminated by a soft light off to the side of the room that glittered off her blood-red diamond earrings.

Kara had never seen her bondmate look more mature, or more sensual than she did that night. Well,
besides in her bed, but that wasn’t the same thing….

As they ducked back around the corner Kara whispered, “She went with the red one… Rao, it looks so good on her.”

Shah leaned across Kara, to get another look, “She is magnificent. Elegance suits her.”

Guys… I’m right here, you know… listening in. Alex giggled in their thoughts.

Then you already know we’re hiding around the corner admiring you. Shush and let us ogle you! Kara and Shah thought together as they suppressed embarrassed laughter.

Is that the dress from the Atelier Versace Collection? Kara asked.

Yup. Alex answered.

I knew it! Great choice. It’s perfection on you.

Well… if you play your cards right, you can peel it off me later… but for now, why don’t you two come out and meet Naomi, she’d really, really nervous, and excited.

Yay! Kara grinned as she a Shah straightened up, checked each other over, turned around a couple of times, made some adjustments to each other’s hair and dresses, and then stepped out from around the corner, still holding hands.

…………

If anyone could be described as a ball of anxious, adorable energy, it was Dr. Naomi Young, Ph.D.

Alex took a sip from her virgin blackberry daiquiri and suppressed a giggle as she watched her bouncy companion glance hopefully, for the hundredth time, off toward the dining room’s ornate stone railing looking for Kara and Shah.

“Naomi, breathe, they’re almost here,” Alex said soothingly.

The slim woman inhaled deeply, obviously trying to calm herself. Alex had seen her do this on multiple occasions since she found out about their ‘Kryptonian situation’. “Okay, uh huh, I’m good. Crap, I’m not good! Alex, what am I going to say to her? I mean, she’s not a microbe, or a virus, those I can handle. She’s an, an alien. A real, living, breathing extraterrestrial… who can talk.”

Alex grinned. “Well… how about just start with ‘hello’?”

The willowy astrophysicist closed her eyes, whined, and sagged in defeat.

Alex reached over and took hold of the cool, metallic fingers of her mentor’s right hand to steady her. “Look, you’ll have a conversation, get to know one another… Kara’s a wonderful person, who I happen to love. You can just be yourself around her, she’ll adore and respect you the same as I do.”

Naomi brightened a little, her brown eyes sparkling, “Okay. I’ll try.”

Alex grinned encouragingly, and once again ran her gaze over the striking woman. Her mentor was thin, and almost six feet tall, with a gorgeous dark chocolate complexion and amazing green eyes that were accentuated by her glasses… vintage black frames that added to her a catlike appearance. Her right hand and arm, starting at the elbow, was a sleek, hi-tech prosthetic that looked like something
out of a sci-fi movie. Naomi had been born without a right forearm and had told Alex that the amazing, lifelike limb she now wore served as a very useful ‘accessory’ that allowed her to experience life as a two-handed person… When she felt like it.

It made her boss look totally badass.

When not in a lab coat or protective gear for her job, Naomi was a casual dresser whose aesthetic was a very comfortable Bohemian. That usually meant soft fabrics, vintage touches, and funky elements that had an exotic zing. She always looked both as if she’d just thrown something on, and uniquely stylish at the same time… a real free spirit.

Alex had never had the opportunity to see her dress up before, but tonight Naomi had really kicked it up a couple notches for Kara, and looked gorgeous! Starting with her effortlessly sexy up-do… a low messy knot in the back combined with wavy midnight spiral curls that framed her cute face and big lovable smile. It was a deceptively casual look, like hair you’d pin up before getting in the shower, but Alex knew it must have taken a ton of effort to pull off.

Her long, floral patterned sleeveless dress was extremely flattering, with a plunging neckline that left little to the imagination. Around her neck was a chainmail collar as well as a long, beautiful metal pendant that hung all the way to her waist. A metal armband on her left complimented and balanced perfectly with her prosthetic limb on her right and intriguingly appeared more like armor than jewelry. Combined with her assortment of rings, earrings, nose ring, and a delicately twisted dragon ear cuff, she had quite the gypsy vibe going.

As their waitress dropped off Kara and Shah’s drinks, time slowed for Alex. Her senses were on fire as her bondmate stepped around the corner, and strode confidently into the open space. The echo of the jazzy tune playing somewhere below them stretched along with its wavelength as Alex’s super speed and heightened senses surged.

Her desire to instantly go to Kara was overpowering. She flickered with flames for a split second, but for Naomi’s sake (and sanity) she forced herself to remain seated and allowed time to once again regain its normal course…

Her mentor apparently hadn’t noticed Alex’s Kryptonian moment, because her wide eyes were focused on Kara and Shah as they approached. They looked like two goddesses… in command of all they surveyed… light, sheathed in shimmering blue, and darkness, wrapped in stunning black and silver with eyes of deep emerald.

Naomi was squeezing Alex’s fingers in a death grip.

“Oh-crap-oh-crap-oh-crap…” The anxious scientist muttered through a tortured smile.

“You’ll be fine,” Alex said as she stood, pulling the older woman along as she enthusiastically embraced them, one after the other. Kara and Shah smiled at the astrobiologist, never taking their eyes off the terribly embarrassed woman as she stood helplessly by. Alex turned back to her mentor as soon as she could, “Naomi, I want to introduce you to the two most important people in my life… Kara Zor-El Danvers and Shahrazad Nazari.”

Shah gracefully dipped into a slight, elegant bow and said, “Azdidane shoma khoshhalam… which means ‘nice to meet you’ in Persian.” She was smiling warmly, “You may call me Shah, as all my English-speaking friends do… I am quite fond of the name. It is an honor to meet you.”

Kara offered her own sunny smile and stepped over to offer a hand to the taller, slender, woman, “Dr. Young, I’ve heard so many wonderful things about you from Alex. She’s your biggest fan, you
know.”

Naomi stared in amazement at her, before tentatively reaching out and allowing Kara to grasp her hand. She giggled uncontrollably as they touched, quickly covering her mouth with a look of surprised delight, and awkwardness. “I’m so sorry. I mean, I just never… you’re so warm…” Her last comment was spoken with a bit more longing than she probably intended.

Alex almost laughed, and leaned over to place a comforting hand on the nervous scientist’s arm, “She gets that a lot…” Then added with a devilish smirk, “And you have no idea.”

Kara and Shah zoomed in on their daiquiris, picking up the frosty strawberry drinks to start sipping. “Thanks, Alex.” Kara said, focusing back on Naomi, “I figured you already know a bit about me, so why hide my differences? It takes focus to control my temperature, and I came here to relax. I’m sure you have no idea how that feels.”

Naomi involuntarily touched her bionic arm and reached to push her glasses up on the bridge of her nose at the same time Kara did. They looked at each other and laughed… and the ice was broken. “The extra heat is from your solar energy conversion, right?” The scientist asked.

“Yeah,” Kara said with a straw between her pursed lips. “Alex knows more about it that I do but we think it’s just a byproduct, most the energy is sent…” She waved a hand absently into the air. “… somewhere else.”

Naomi cocked her head as they all sat down. “I don’t understand, where do you think it goes?”

Alex jumped in enthusiastically, “Now that’s a good question. Not that you’d know it by looking at her, but Kara, and Shah and I, are surrounded by an aura of dark energy. We’ve never known what to call it exactly, but since it operates at a quantum level we initially referred to it as simply a quantum field, but now we just call it our aura.

"We all have some control over it," She added, "But Kara’s aura is stronger and she can do all kinds of things with it, like regulate her body temperature, deflect radar, fool sensors, change gravity, etc., but one of its main intended purposes, we believe, if to shunt most of the unused energy she generates off to another part of the universe… maybe a black hole, or a white hole.

“Honestly, we’re at a loss to know for sure, but it’s a hell of a lot of energy, and it has to go somewhere. If her power were fully unleashed here… let’s just say that would be a very bad last day for National City, and maybe the world.”

“Cheers to no boom?” Kara blushed and raised her glass in a toast. They all laughed nervously as they touched glasses.

An hour slipped easily by as they talked and ate dinner. Naomi had a list of questions about Kara’s world, its people, her origins, how she came to Earth, and more. The Kryptonian was happy to oblige her… eager to share her life’s details with a new friend. Alex loved how she, Shah, and Kara could pretty much interchangeably answer most of the questions. Some were easy, but a few were incredibly personal, like when Naomi asked what happened the day Kara was sent away from Krypton.

Alex slid closer to her bondmate and held one of her hands under the table’s edge as Kara softly spoke. She started by telling Alex and Shah, in Kryptonese, that she was going to share her story, while Naomi listened to the flowing musical language with an awed, joyful expression on her face. Kara then spoke directly to the astrobiologist, in English.
“I’m sorry. Talking about this is really hard…” she took a deep breath and described the scene that she’d only spoken of a handful of times: her parents giving her a choice, Alura draping her necklace around Kara’s neck and hugging her goodbye, putting her in the escape pod, and her frantic flight to escape her dying world. “My ship wasn’t moving fast enough to reach a safe distance but my cousin’s had, and that’s all that really mattered to me. I was numb, in shock… and had pretty much made peace with the fact that I’d probably die there, and join my parents… and my people, as stardust. I braced for impact, and what I thought would be certain death.”

Shah had sidled in on Kara’s other side and held her other hand.

“All I remember next was my AI doing everything she could to protect me and the pod, the flash of the shockwave as Rao went supernova, alarms, my mother’s voice, and then my pod’s dark energy field was breached, I was spinning, and there was darkness as I slipped into that… awful place.”

After that, they spoke about the Phantom Zone at length. Their prevailing theory was that the strange realm was either a separate dimension, another universe entirely, or the remnant of one, with different rules and physics, only accessible via a doorway created by Kryptonian science. Naomi was also very interested in Krypton’s past efforts to explore and colonize space tens of thousands of years before and asked Kara many questions, including some that even Shatari and Zara could not immediately answer.

As they were waiting for dessert, Kara asked Dr. Young about Alex and Shah’s condition, and that’s when the scientist let a bomb drop. “So, I’ve been further analyzing Alex and Shah’s blood and was able to confirm a few things. As you are most likely aware, simply put, carbon-based life on earth is grounded in DNA, with its four nitrogenous bases; adenine, guanine, cytosine, and thymine; and RNA and its bases… adenine, guanine, cytosine, and uracil. How these DNA and RNA bases are ordered determines the makeup of any living genome, including humans. Kryptonians appear to have twelve distinct DNA and RNA bases… let that sink in, twelve! Including our human ones, which is an astounding ‘coincidence’ in itself… and I don’t believe in coincidences.

“Something else had been bothering me… how Alex and Shah’s physiology is so easily, even eagerly, accepting the changes that the introduction of Kara’s DNA has caused. Their systems are slowly and systematically adding those additional eight bases to their own without any adverse side effects that I can detect, so far. It’s almost as if there was a map, like scaffolding, already in place within their human DNA to build on…” She turned to look directly at Alex and Shah, “You two are basically being remade at a cellular level, like a massive upgrade.” Alex felt that Naomi was holding details back, something she wasn’t sure of and made a mental note to pursue her about it later.

Kara looked slightly relieved, “So they’re not in any danger?”

“Not that I can tell, and not that we could stop it even if we wanted to. The process appears to be irrevocable once started, and, like I said it’s as if their bodies are welcoming the change.”

Kara exhaled. “Good.” Alex and Shah were beaming ‘I told you’ so smiles.

“So,” Naomi continued. “I keep asking myself, why your two very powerful Kryptonian AIs didn’t detect what’s happening to their human hosts as a danger, or even unusual before they figured it out and started lying. They could see every result I did, and more, so they should have known something was wrong… but after running thousands of tests they still believed everything to be ‘normal’. Why was that? I’m still not 100% sure, yet, but it definitely means something, and I’m working on a theory.”

Alex asked innocently, “That it’s a demon? A dancing demon?”
Shah grinned, “Or it could be witches, some evil witches…”

“Hey, I’ve got a theory…” Kara burst into song. “It doesn't matter... what can't we face if we're together?” She was giggling. “Oh, my god you guys, we’re so bad. I’m sorry, Naomi.”

Naomi was smirking as she added in a melodic tone, “Or it could be bunnies?”

Then they all started laughing.

After toasting to a mutual love of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Naomi got back to business. “Okay, okay…” she took a deep breath. “Have you ever heard of a term called ‘Panspermia’?”

Kara and Shah shook their heads, but Alex nodded with a Hermione Granger smile as Naomi continued...

“It’s the broad hypothesis that life exists throughout the universe and has been spread around in various ways, including meteors, comets, asteroids, or possibly even created or intentionally seeded by extraterrestrials. This idea doesn’t preclude the possibility of life evolving on its own on any world or place, so we need to consider that as well. In the case of Kryptonians and humans, we have two carbon-based, humanoid life forms that look so similar in appearance that a normal person couldn’t visually tell us apart... yet, we started life separated by over two thousand light-years. The odds of us both evolving this way, on our own, without some form of direct interference or causation, is slim to none. There’s a glaringly direct connection between our species with the shared DNA bases we talked about, and I want to know how that happened.”

Alex was on the edge of her seat... “Do you have any ideas?”

The adorable researcher shook her head, “Too many, all of them pure guesswork and conjecture at this point without more data. Did the Kryptonians engineer us, and put us here during their colonizing phase? Or perhaps an even older race, or the gods, themselves create us both? If so, why make one as close to perfection as we can imagine, and the other, so lacking? Oh, what I wouldn’t do to be able to talk to one of your AIs, or visit Krypton inside one of your crystals and have a chat with Kara’s uncle Jor-El.”

Alex, Shah, and Kara all glanced at each other...

She wants to visit Kandor... Shah stated matter-of-factly.

*Join the club!* Alex grumbled.

Kara nodded, *I know, we all do, but we still haven’t figured out how, yet. When have we had the time? Let’s focus on it, experiment, I want to show you both my world. As far as your mentor, Alex... Naomi has a good point. Jor-El could help us, so could my parents, and Uva.*

*I think maybe we should let her talk to Ada. It’s a start at least.* Alex said.

Shah grinned. *Agreed. Let’s allow my girl to speak with her.*

Okay then. Kara grinned, her blue eyes glowing briefly... just long enough for Naomi to notice and stare in surprised wonder. *Shah, can you please ask Ada if she’s agreeable to working with Naomi? She may only have a portion of the knowledge Shatari and Zara possess about my world, but as a hybrid human/Kryptonian I think she’s the best one for the job, and can lean on you two to help her get more details from her elders if necessary.*

Shah nodded, *I’m already on it, Sheereen-am... Zara, my dear, please give our daughter a ring,*...
would you luv?

Makes sense, maybe together the three of us can find the connections. It’s exciting, huh?” Alex was grinning.

Kara leaned over and kissed her Vaena’s cheek. You’re such a geek.

“Wow…” Naomi was staring at the three younger women. “You’re all communicating telepathically, like, right now! Am I right? I’m right. I know I’m right. And you’re talking about me. Wait… were you talking about me? Oh, my God, you were talking about me…” She covered her face with her hands.

Alex leaned over and patted Naomi’s shoulder, “Hey, yeah, we were speaking with our ‘inside voices’… just a quick discussion about trying to get you to Kandor. The issue is, only Kara has been there, inside her crystal, and that’s only because of Uva’s intervention when we thought she might die.” Naomi’s eyes shot open. “Long story… but we still haven’t figured out how to do it ourselves… we’re working on it.”

“In the meantime, doctor, my daughter will be happy to aid you and Alex on your quest for truth.” Shah’s dusky gaze fell on Naomi like a challenge.

The older woman looked confused. “Ah… your daughter? Did I hear that right?” She glanced at Alex, “Another long story?”

Alex grinned, “Yeah, but just to bring you up to speed, Shah and Zara brought to life a sentience, their child… who is wonderful, to watch over some good friends of ours. They are her mothers, and Kara and I are her aunts. She’s actually the first living free-willed hybrid Kryptonian/human intelligence we’re aware of. Shah’s been working hard on improving her physical form… Ada really is a sweetheart, and will be a huge help to our research.”

Just then, someone cleared their throat off toward the railing. “Now I really do need to meet your amazing niece. She’s my favorite contractor after all.”

Everyone quickly turned their heads to see who it was, and, almost instantaneously, Kara was no longer in her seat, but had shimmered across the room in the blink of an eye, over to the tall, impeccably dressed, African American man with a smooth, charming voice, and the most delightful laugh, who did not seem at all startled as he was wrapped in a hug by the bubbly Kryptonian.

“The infamous Mr. Colliers, I presume?” Alex said as she stood and smoothed down the front of her red satin dress. Shah and Naomi followed suit as Kara made introductions.

July 26th – Year 2

National City – The Cloisters

2126 hours UTC -8, Friday night, U.S. West Coast Time

The night had been incredible.

After talking for a while up on the balcony and giving Colliers and Dr. Young time to get to know each other, the group moved downstairs to the two-story-deep basement level which housed the
sprawling nightclub. The vast space was quite a surprise; grander than a Hollywood movie set, and lit with purples, reds, and blues, it had a polished, retro style obviously influenced by 1920s-1930s era speakeasies.

The foundations of The Cloisters vaulted over the space, massive stone arches that supported a high ceiling, at the center of which was a shimmering, forty-foot diameter portal into what appeared to be a blue ocean, filled with schools of darting fish and prowling sharks. Below this wonder was a wide, stair-stepped stage, where a small orchestra was playing around a big black grand piano.

Kara and her friends sat relatively close to the stage, at a table in the second ring with a great view. A lovely young woman was belting out a fantastic, vintage 1920’s style version of All About That Bass, accompanied by the orchestra, including a group of killer horns.

It was epic!

The first ring around the center was reserved for dancing, and Kara wasted no time in hitting the floor with her eager sisters. She’d also already dragged a reluctant Naomi out to the dance floor a couple of times. Alex’s adorable boss was a natural at moving to the rhythms, and following a partner, so what she lacked in experience she made up for in other ways. Kara showed her some moves, and it seemed to her that the scientist was having a really good time.

On their way back to their table, the much taller Naomi leaned in close, eyes looking down, and whispered, “Can I tell you something personal?”

“Oh course,” Kara said, gently touching the older woman’s hand in support.

Her slender fingers wrapped around Kara’s, and she said, “I’ve been looking for you my entire life… and here you are. A beautiful, kind, intelligent young woman, not at all like anything I imagined my first contact might be. It’s quite a lot to take in, and I’m just a little… overwhelmed.”

Kara smiled, “Believe me, I understand. Having people to share with makes a difference. I don’t know what I would have done after first coming to Earth without my adopted family, Shah, and especially Alex; she’s always kept me grounded to my new world. She can help you too, we all can.”

Her words seemed to have their intended effect. Naomi’s shoulders relaxed along with her heartbeat. “Thanks, Kara, that… helps.”

Back with their friends, she was about to ask Colliers to join her on the dance floor when she went rigid, her attention riveted on sudden, muffled sounds, originating from several blocks away. The noise was unlike anything she had become used to hearing from the bustling city before. These were loud, repeating bursts, cracks of small explosions. Gunfire! Some sort of an automatic weapon... and more than one. Then, she heard a man scream as bullets tore into him.

“Rao!” Kara covered her mouth in shock.

“What’s wrong?” Alex flickered to Kara’s side, immediately having felt her distress through their bond. Kara was standing by the table, and Colliers was watching her with concern from his seat. She tensed, looking off, ready to use her super speed to seek out the conflict.

“I’m sorry, but I have to go.” Kara did her best to appear calm but sent her thoughts to Alex and Shah, There’s something bad happening that I need to look into, right now.

“Kara!” They both protested but relented as soon as they sensed her urgency, as well as her determination.
Alex touched her bondmate’s arm. *Be careful nooré cheshm-am… and whatever you do, don’t be seen.* Then suggestively added, *I’ll leave the dress on for you to peel off later.*

Kara leaned in for a kiss. *That better be a promise.*

*It is.* Alex thoughts were a sultry whisper.

Shah grinned from across the table and said, "I’ve already alerted Ada, so use your headset… and call us if you need help."

Kara’s lips reluctantly withdrew from an almost floating, and dreamy-eyed Alex’s. "Okay, I will." She said out loud, and then thought to both Alex and Shah, *Hey, I’m sorry, I know I’m ruining tonight, but people are in danger… and I can help. I’ll call if I need my guardians, ‘k? Love you guys.*

Kara quickly turned to Naomi and Colliers, smiling apologetically, “Again, I’m really sorry about this. Please stay and have fun. I’ll come back if I can.”

And then she was gone, leaving only a slight breeze in her wake, and her glasses, clutch, iPhone, and heels set neatly on the table.

“She’s getting better at her exits,” Colliers said with a grin as he sipped his soda, obviously impressed.

Naomi leaned in close from across the table with a questioning look on her face. “What just happened? And where did Kara go?”

Alex opened her mouth to answer, but then slouched over her daiquiri in apparent defeat.

Shah was staring thoughtfully off in the direction Kara had taken as if she could see through walls. “Off to save the day, Dr. Young… off to save the day.”


*July 26th – Year 2*

*National City – Palmer Industries hotel construction site*

*Far from The Cloisters*

*2152 hours UTC -8, Friday night, U.S. West Coast Time*

Explosions of pain radiated through National City Police Department (NCPD) Detective Devi Mitra’s body, and the thick, coppery taste of blood coated her tongue and trickled down her raw, damaged throat.

The masked man dressed in black wasn’t holding back. He violently kicked her three more times in the abdomen as the exhausted officer desperately attempted to block his vicious attacks with her bruised forearms, one of which was surely broken.

Each time he struck, she was thrown further across the cold, unfinished twenty-third floor of the Palmer hotel. She finally crashed through a metal wall frame and curled up into herself. It was dark, and her swollen cheek was pressed against the cold, filthy concrete floor. The place smelled of
cement dust, some sort of oil, and sweat.

Everything around her was a blur.

She was a champion fencer, a competition kickboxer, had been a cop for eight of her 28 years on earth, and could take a hell of a lot of punishment, but she was reaching her limit… and slowly losing consciousness. Her inevitable death was like the shroud of darkness gathering around her… it could no longer be denied.

Devi struggled to stay awake… if she were going to die, she would face her end as she had her life… with a clear mind.

*Perhaps it is finally time for me to make peace with the gods...*

She only wished that she could see her mother, her brother, and little sister who was so far away… off visiting family in Kolkata, one last time, though she knew that wasn’t going to happen.

Sometime next week, after the authorities had found and identified her body, her parents would receive a phone call from a faceless stranger… or maybe from Capt. Fitz. She smiled thinking of the inscrutable man who’d been her hero, her mentor, and her friend for so many years. Yeah, he’d call them. They’d be devastated, but the worst part was her judgmental father would have finally been proven right… Devi went and got herself killed playing at being a cop in a dangerous ‘man’s’ world...

“Gary, goddammit! Just kill the bitch and let’s get outta here!” One of her assailant’s similarly black-clad henchmen snarled from behind him. It was the man Devi had marked earlier when she broke the cocky bastard’s right arm with a roundhouse kick and knocked his AK-47 clear as he was firing. His bullets had missed her, but her partner of six years hadn’t been so lucky.

Dan wasn’t moving, he was lying in a pool of his own blood only twenty feet away from her, his body armor shredded from multiple hits.

Devi didn’t have time to mourn him or to be afraid. She would never give the assholes the satisfaction.

She pulled herself into a half-sitting position on the floor and looked up defiantly at the man she now knew was named ‘Gary’. She’d run out of options… her Glock was too far away to reach, her left arm wasn’t responding, and felt broken. She also couldn’t get to her boot knife or backup handgun in the split second he’d need to raise his own AK-47 and finish her.

The detective did have one last weapon… her mind. Yeah… it was a long shot. “Gary…” She choked, spitting blood onto the concrete beside her. “You don’t want to do this. You’ve already killed one officer, my partner…” She coughed, a ragged broken sound coming from deep in her chest as she spit up more blood. “They’ll take no mercy on you, on any of you! If you kill me, too, you’ll all be hunted down like dogs, and put you both in the ground.”

The tall, broad-shouldered killer leaned down so close that Devi could smell his fetid breath. He raised the muzzle of his AK-47 within inches of her forehead just as a third masked assassin appeared from out of the darkness carrying drawn weapons in both hands. “Dude, hurry up, we need to move!” The new henchman urged nervously. “Something’s going on, Jim’s not answering, and I don’t see him down by the car anymore.”

Gary’s bloodshot eyes traveled hungrily up and down Devi’s lithe body, and she couldn’t help but almost throw up a little watching him. He growled, “Dammit! I wanted to have some fun with you
before I put a bullet in your pretty head. I bet you’re a screamer.” He licked his dry lips. *Repulsive monster*... “Hey, don’t look so surprised; I’m just returning the favor, Bill was a friend of mine. Looks like I’m just going to have to put you down like the bitch you are.”

He giggled like a madman, and then pulled the trigger.

The sound of the assault weapon firing was the loudest thing Devi had ever heard in her life. Her ears were ringing as she tried with all of her remaining strength to move, but in the split second she had, she’d only managed to partially turn her head away from the muzzle…. before the impossible happened.

Out of nowhere, and she really meant nowhere, a stunningly beautiful blonde woman suddenly appeared... poised protectively over her. She was maybe 19, 5'9” or so, barefoot, built like an athlete, and dressed in an expensive, slinky blue dress. The young woman struck left with one open palm, crunching the bones of Gary’s chest as her blindly swift strike sent the masked gunman sailing back through the air twenty feet, slamming into his companion holding two weapons.

The force of Gary's impact was too great to stop there, and the second man was also lifted off his feet as both of them continued a backward trajectory. Twelve feet further both of their limp and broken bodies burst through a partially complete wall with a massive tumult of crashing and falling debris.

Held between the delicate thumb and index finger of her savior’s other hand, only an inch from Devi’s face was the 7.62×39mm armor-piercing round that had fired from the weapon Gary had just been holding to her head. The detective was staring at it, yet at the same time, noticing her savior’s amazing manicure and nails, which were painted dark indigo fading to blue, like the night sky before dawn, and filled with stars.

*Fascinating.*

The beauty then allowed the bullet to clatter harmlessly to the cement floor beside her.

Only a couple of seconds had passed.

The remaining masked man, the one with the broken arm, screamed and began running off into the darkness.

Devi’s head was spinning, but she was alert enough to see everything, including how the young woman smiled at her, as gorgeous as the dawn, before speaking, “Please don’t be afraid.” She said. "I've come to help you, detective.” Her voice was warm, reassuring… and almost musical.

Before Devi could say anything, her savior, like a predator stalking her prey, slowly turned her head to follow the flight of the last attacker. The odd part was how unconcerned the woman appeared to be about him escaping; but her demeanor all made sense a moment later when the goddess narrowed her sapphire gaze and two searing beams of light erupted like lasers from her eyes, slamming into the fleeing man’s back! Like a toy, he was physically lifted off the ground and accelerated forward over ten feet into a pile of construction material with great force... where he came to a sudden, violent stop in a cloud of dust.

Devi could hear the thick femur bones of both his thighs snap from thirty feet away.

His screaming abruptly ended before his limp body smacked hard onto the cement floor.

*Uri baba! She's amazing, and not playing games... damn!*
“Who?...” She tried to ask in her raspy voice but cried out from the pain exploding in her gut, side, and chest. Her broken arm was nothing in comparison.

Devi’s beautiful savior focused back on her with a reassuring smile and slipped a pleasantly warm arm behind her weary shoulders. She was looking down with sparkling sapphire blue eyes as if studying the broken officer... from head to toe. “Please don’t move detective. You have damage and bruising everywhere, two broken and three cracked ribs, a fractured left ulna, internal hemorrhaging, a punctured lung, and... oh no… worse. First things first, forgive me, but your bleeding needs to be stopped right now.”

“I’m bleeding?” Devi was confused. She hadn’t been hit by any bullets… had she?

The young woman stripped her very expensive tactical body armor off of her as if it were literally paper, moving faster than she could even follow. Sure enough, Devi’s vest was soaked in blood on her right side. She’d been struck by a bullet in the fight and had no idea. How did her powerful savior know that, and about all of her internal injuries?

Oh damn, that fucking hurt!

“I’m so sorry!” Her savior bit her lower lip adorably and looked stricken watching Devi writhe in pain. Whoever she was, the hero was definitely an empathetic sort, and kind.

The blonde did an odd thing then, she slipped in close on Devi’s right, and dipped her head down to… blow air on her side with the gunshot. *What is she doing?* The area she was attending to suddenly felt chilled, numb actually. She then popped back up and said, “The good news is the shot went through and through and didn’t hit anything vital. The bad news is I need to stop you from losing any more blood. So… okay, hold on, this is going to hurt… but I hope you’ll thank me later.”

“I don’t under… what are you…?”

And then the angel’s eyes flared with fire again, but this time it was an infinitely narrow beam, that seared fire into Devi’s side.

She smelled burning flesh, screamed, and then blacked out.

........................................

July 27th – Year 2

National City – Smythe Medical

0242 hours UTC -8, Saturday morning (the wee hours), U.S. West Coast Time

Awareness came flooding back to Devi like waking from a dream.

The detective remembered entering the Palmer building, a violent firefight, Dan doing down… oh god, Dan!... he’s… he’s dead… and there was an AK-47 was pointed at my head, and… ahhh, yes, then there was the sudden appearance of the beautiful blonde Fury, who moved like the wind, broke men without effort, caught a bullet with only her fingers, shot lasers from her eyes, numbed Devi’s side with her amazingly cool breath, and saved her life.

The soreness in the detective’s body was pervasive… she hurt everywhere, which sucked, but also meant that she was most likely still alive. She felt the pain, but also the cool air, the clean cotton
sheets; the pillow under her head could hear the beeps of the monitors and the far-off bustle and conversations from a nearby nurses’ station.

Hospital… she was in a hospital…

Devi opened her eyes. It wasn’t bright, and her vision adjusted quickly. She was in a bed, bandaged up, left arm in a cast, hooked up to wires and IVs, and a handsome, clean-shaven, young African American man, probably in his mid-twenties, dressed in blue nurse’s garb, was very quietly standing near her monitors making some adjustments.

“How?” She rasped in his general direction.

He turned with a look of surprise and smiled. “Good evening, detective. Welcome back to the land of the living. Here, let me get you a drink.” He stepped over and held the straw from a large, covered cup of ice water to her lips, and she sucked the cold liquid down greedily.

She reluctantly waved the water aside, and asked, “How? How did…?” Damn her throat hurt, and her voice was as raspy as a chain-smoker’s. One of the masked goons had slammed her across the throat hard with a two-by-four early in the fight.

“Save your voice. I’ll tell you what I know. You’re at Smythe Medical in National City. A Good Samaritan, a tall, and very strong blonde woman, carried both you and Detective Selman in about three hours ago. Thanks to her detailed guidance on both of your injuries, Doctor Higgs, and her team were able to stabilize you, and save Selman.”

Devi’s breath caught, “Dan?! Dan’s alive?” She coughed.

The young man crossed himself. “Yes, detective, he’ll survive. It was a miracle.”

“What do you mean?” Her voice cracked, and he gave her another sip of water.

“From what appears to have torn through his armor and body, the doctors said that he should have had four large caliber rounds in him… but there were no bullets, they’d all been removed before he was dropped off here at the hospital. Someone took them out, left all the pieces in his vest pocket for us to find, and repaired the damage to his arteries. Dr. Higgs said that he definitely wouldn’t have survived if she’d had to try and get all of that out of him, he was bleeding to death.”

Devi put her head back on the pillow and took a deep breath. The young woman, her hero, she’d somehow taken the bullets out of Dan, and then rushed them both to Smythe Medical, the best hospital in the city… with a surgical ER specializing in gunshot wounds and trauma. It was also halfway across town from where they’d been shot.

_Distance doesn’t seem to matter to her… hmmm._

The gorgeous woman in the blue dress had saved them both…

The young man continued, “There’s a Captain Fitzgerald and a battalion of worried officers out in the waiting area. If you’re up to it, I’ll go let him know you’re awake. It’ll just be a few minutes.”

She nodded, and he patted her arm gently before stepping out into the brightly lit hallway. Once she was alone she wiped unshed tears from her eyes, and took calming breaths, trying to hold it together.

Then, something moved in the dark edges of the room and brought Devi back to sharpness… the impossibly graceful young woman in blue shimmered to her bedside, her sapphire eyes softly glowing and her beautiful dress covered in blood.
“Hi.” The blonde said with a tiny wave and a smile. “I’m glad you’re awake. I took care of those masked bad guys for you, including the lookout and driver… I left them unconscious for the police to sort out.”

Detective Mitra felt a mixture of emotions seeing her savior, fear, joy, excitement, and a myriad of other things; even guilt for ruining what appeared to have been a night on the town for her. She croaked, “Thank you. Any… any dead?”

“No. Well, just the one that was shot already. I did break the others a little more, okay, a lot more, than I intended. They’re all in the ICU over at National City General in critical condition. Is it okay that I really don’t feel bad about that? After what they did to you…” The adorable young woman showed a hint of anger and ducked her head. She actually looked guilty.

Devi began to laugh but winced in pain… it hurt too damn much. “Owww…” After recovering, she leveled a questioning gaze on the girl, who, to her surprise, reached down and slipped her warm hand into Devi’s. “No, it’s not bad, not in my book. Can you tell me who are you?” She asked, “And why you saved me?”

The young woman fidgeted with a spiral curl of her tumbledown hair, as she seemed to consider the detective’s question, reaching up automatically in a motion that appeared to Devi to be to adjust her non-existent glasses. She recognized the faint purple stamp of a high church steeple that graced the back of her nameless savior’s hand. The Cloisters, an upscale club over twelve blocks away from the Palmer hotel, interesting…

“Who I am isn’t important, detective, I’m just someone who wants to help protect the people of this city. I don’t usually make a habit of going off and taking the law into my own hands… I just help people. Believe me, my day job keeps me pretty busy.” Her smile was delightful. Devi found herself desperately wanting to know where the young woman spent her waking hours.

“I only intervened tonight because you and officer Selman were in trouble. I couldn’t let you die, not when I could stop it from happening. Do you really need to ask me why? What would you have done in my place?” Devi had seen that look, the steel in the young woman’s eyes, in her own before… she cared and was determined to use her powers help others. “I was out dancing with my friends and heard gunfire… Honestly, the only time I’d heard an AK-47 before tonight was in a movie, and they sound really different in person.”

Devi chuckled softly, mindful of her delicate condition, “That’s true, it’s definitely not like in the movies…” Then something random dawned on her. “Oh my! Wait a minute; it was you, wasn’t it? On the bridge…” She coughed again.

The girl blushed in the most endearing way, casting her eyes down and biting her lip. “Yup, it was me.” She shrugged her shoulders.

“You… were amazing. Saved, all those people.”

A look of sadness passed across the young woman’s beautiful features, “Not all of them, but I did my best.”

“You’re a hero.”

She gently squeezed Devi’s hand. “Thank you, but tonight you showed me what bravery really looks like. It’s easy to help people when you have super powers, or stand up to bullets when you know they can’t hurt you… but when everything’s on the line, and you still won’t back down, that’s being a real hero. I can only hope to be as strong as you one day, detective.”
It was Devi’s turn to blush, and despite her pain, smiled up at the woman and gripped her surprisingly warm hand in return.

The blonde suddenly glanced over at the door. “Oops, your Captain’s on his way, I need to scoot. Here, take this.” Her savior seamlessly slipped a rolled-up piece of paper with something heavy wrapped inside to Devi in place of her hand.

“And next time you head into a war zone or need help, please call me first, ‘k? I’ll be there.”

Devi didn’t want the young woman to go, though her protector was obviously trying to make a hasty exit. “Wait… you never gave me a name. I need something to call you.”

The blonde nodded, “You can use Archangel… for now, until we get to know each other better. It’s my codename.” She smiled awkwardly, obviously embarrassed… again, so darn adorable. “Anyway, you should focus on resting and getting better. Detective, please promise me you’ll take some of that unused vacation time?” She gave Devi a motherly stare until the detective nodded, and then she brightened, “Good. Okay, gotta run!”

“Goodbye, Archangel. Sorry about your dress.” Devi croaked.

The hero smiled before reaching down to straighten the injured woman’s covers, “It’s okay. I made this one, and can easily make another. Dresses are just things detective, replaceable… people aren’t.” Then, she almost seemed to shimmer, and disappeared in a blur, leaving only a gentle breeze in her wake. The quiet sound of Devi’s room door opening and closing is all that marked the incredible young woman’s departure...

The detective’s heart was beating fast, and for someone who’d almost just died, she felt far too happy.

She fumbled to unroll the hospital notepaper Archangel had given her, and as she did, the warped remains of the 7.62×39mm armor-piercing round that had been meant to end her life fell into the palm of her open hand.

She stared at it, stunned before her gaze shifted to the note, written in the most elegant cursive script she’d ever seen.

........................

Detective Mitra,

It was a pleasure meeting you today. Hopefully, next time will be under better circumstances.

Until then, please take care of yourself. National City needs her heroes.

Oh, and I almost forgot! In case of emergencies, call or text me at

#26435

- Archangel

Oh, P.S. The bullet is yours. Use it as evidence, melt it, crush it, make it into a necklace, or whatever you want, but don’t ever let the man that fired it have any power over you.

Remember, ‘that which does not kill us makes us stronger’, at least according to Nietzsche, and I
After reading the treasured note for the third time, a huge smile crept over Devi’s face.

Her thoughts were filled with all the things she could remember about the amazing young woman who’d saved her and her partner’s lives. She had a hundred questions…. to begin with, just who was Archangel besides her personal hero and National City’s mysterious Guardian Angel? How was she able to do such impossible things? Where did she come from?

She was young and as beautiful and compassionate as her namesake; had a day job of some kind, and respected the law. She was ethical; most likely wore glasses; was devastatingly (scarily so) efficient in a fight, and a talented designer who could make her own clothes. Archangel also liked to dance with friends at The Cloisters, which intrigued her… but it also made her a little jealous… okay, a lot jealous, of whomever her hero was spending her time with. Though Devi knew that was unfair of her to have such feelings… the angel with cold fire in her eyes had a life, and unless the world was upside down, undoubtedly someone waiting for to come home who loved her with all their heart.

Devi balanced her inquisitive, by the book, detective’s mind against her giddy childlike one. She had multiple clues she could pursue to try and uncover Archangel’s identity… including the doctors she spoke to, security feeds from the hospital or The Cloisters, or other nearby cameras that may have caught footage her and anyone she was with and trace their movements. NCPD techs could sweep her room for DNA, prints, run facial recognition on all video captures… but…

She had no intention of following up on any of that. Nor the bullet, or even the pen on her bedside table, that both might have retained the young woman’s fingerprints, which she’d know if she chose to have them tested, which she also had no intention of doing.

To do so, the detective reasoned, would betray the trust of the young woman who’d so selflessly acted to save her life.

And besides, it’d be so much more fun getting her to open up voluntarily…

Devi had already committed Archangel’s number to memory and fully intended to call her once she’d recovered enough to get back on her feet. Maybe her savior would be open to going out for coffee sometime?

She could hope, right?

That’s when there was a polite knock at the door, and she quickly hid Kara’s note in the palm of her hand as a smiling Capt. Fitz poked his shiny bald head into her room.

FAQ

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Terms: Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.
Ah! khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

Alex vanimelda - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Azidane shoma khoshhalam – Means ‘nice to meet you’ (Persian)

Bedrood: Means ‘good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

C’est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature. (Persian/Farsi)

órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>‘. ‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

aziz-am – ‘my dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

joon-am – ‘my dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘the light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person’s name<’ + jooon (Shah jooon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or jooon- they both mean ’dear’. So, ‘Shah jooon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

Other names/nickname/titles/things:
Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Bríomhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

Dios mío! – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn (Thought & Memory). In Norse mythology, Huginn (from Old Norse ‘thought’) and Muninn (from Old Norse ‘memory’ or ‘mind’) are a pair of ravens that fly all over the world, Midgard, and bring information to the god Odin. Muninn’s pilot is a combat veteran, the decorated Lt. Corrigan (she’s awesome btw).

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity.

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Tieguanyin - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

Tratung – khrag thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar, and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)
**Vallerian** – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers (and givers) can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshipped, or traded. You better believe the catalog of their race’s knowledge is now at least partially open to Kara in her cell memories. Yowza…

**Vuela, mi diosa! Vuela!** – ‘Fly my goddess! Fly!’ (Spanish)

**Wan** - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

**Wǒ de tiān a** (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:

*The USS Zumwalt is now the official operations hub for Team Archangel, with Jess and Ada on point. Kara’s intern job at CatCo is going great, she even managed to turn in an article for the big Sunday issue and is making progress on her revamped TCC 2.0 proposal. Meeting Alex’s mentor was wonderful, as was most of the night, which proved to be enlightening. Kara’s intervention to save Detective Mitra and her partner may have ruined Kara’s dress and ended a fun night of dancing, but the consolation prize was worth it! Does Kara have a new friend and ally in Devi? Let’s hope so!*

Next Up:

Chapter 20: “An Angel on My Shoulder” - Where our sunny Kryptonian spends time with family and friends and follows up with some of the people she’s been able to help while in National City. Also: While coming to Kara’s rescue Aeryn inadvertently reveals something surprising about herself, Alex and Kara worry about Eliza and Jeremiah’s relationship (and why Alex’s father is lying about his new job), and Ada thinks she’s found a way to create a living breathing body!

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me. Also, please share this story with those you think might enjoy it! Spread the word!

**Song inspirations:**
- Postmodern Jukebox - All About That Bass
- Postmodern Jukebox - All About That Bass (European Tour Version)
- Creep - Vintage Postmodern Jukebox Radiohead Cover ft. Haley Reinhart
- Scott Bradlee's Postmodern Jukebox (170 video playlist)

Shah’s evening dress inspirations:
- Shah’s Alexander McQueen evening dress inspiration
- Another view of Shah’s evening dress inspiration
- Shah’s is silver/platinum, not gold

Alex’s evening dress inspirations:
- Alex’s Versace evening dress inspiration
- Another view of Alex’s evening dress inspiration
Hers is a shorter version

Dr. Naomi Young, Ph.D. evening look inspirations:

Naomi’s evening dress inspiration
Naomi’s evening look inspiration #1
Naomi’s evening look inspiration #2
Naomi’s bionic arm inspiration

The Cloisters inspirations:

Pitcher & Piano

When I visited Nottingham in the UK a few years ago I had drinks at the Pitcher & Piano, and the memory of that converted church to bar/restaurant stayed with me.

Churches that have been converted into secular buildings
An Angel on My Shoulder

Chapter Summary

Where our sunny Kryptonian spends time with family and friends and follows up with people she’s helped while in National City. Also: While coming to Kara’s rescue Aeryn inadvertently reveals something unexpected about herself, Alex and Kara worry about Eliza and Jeremiah’s relationship (and why Alex’s father is lying about his new job), Nom wants his momma back, and Ada thinks she’s found a way to create a living breathing body!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

July 23rd – Year Two

National City – The Tower

1920 H ours UTC -8, Tuesday, U.S. West Coast Time

While she, Alex, and Shah were eating pizza and chilling out at The Tower that Tuesday evening, Kara’s exuberant niece (a thousand miles away on the USS Zumwalt’s Battle Bridge) interrupted using her inside voice to announce a totally crazy theory she’d come up with. When she was finished explaining Kara was still confused. Wait a second... let me get this straight; you want to use the wormhole gateway tech in your crystal to trick it into creating an Awakening here on Earth? The same way I was brought into the world as a baby on Krypton?

Yes, auntie, exactly! Ada’s excitement reverberated through all of their thoughts. I have verified that this is how one of the two gates we all share within our crystals function... the one whose destination is still a mystery to us. I have evidence that suggests that the other gateway (to the universe where Krypton still exists) will also allow physical movement between worlds, but like the rest of you, I haven’t come close to cracking the one to Kara’s homeworld open yet.

Regardless, there is nothing stopping us from using the new knowledge we have of how the gates operate and applying it to my current lack-of-a-body conundrum.

Shah broke in to ask, I believe I’m following what you are saying Nāzanin-am, but why would one gate allow physical travel and the other not?

Good question mother, I’ll explain to the best of my understanding. You see, one does not simply walk between worlds... gosh, I’ve been dying to use that line for so long! All of them stopped briefly to giggle at Ada’s blatant Lord of the Rings reference.

When they all settled down she continued, The fact is, while we now know true translocation of a person’s physical body from one universe to another is possible, it’s far, far more challenging. I can only assume a destination place would need to be very special, or important to travel there
physically. It would take a great deal more energy and is incredibly perilous compared to the alternative, where only the consciousness of the traveler makes the journey. That’s where our first gate comes in.

To accomplish mental transference a new body would need to be Awakened in that other universe first so entanglement could occur. The minds at either portal’s termination point must be connected to allow the traveler’s awareness to cross between worlds... in this case, moving from their original vessel to the new one. You see humans and Kryptonians, unlike AIs, cannot shard (split) their minds no matter how many worlds they wish to visit, so they must vacate one body to enter another. I postulate that the one left unoccupied would fall into a kind of temporary stasis, like a deep slumber, until the traveler’s consciousness returns.

Shah’s thoughts jumped in. *I hadn’t even considered that option. It’s brilliant! Kara, your people were genius!* Most of the raven-haired engineer’s focus was already deeply enmeshed with Zara’s as they began analyzing the flood of new data their daughter was sharing with them.

*I can take no credit, only be as blown away as you are. Wow.* Kara was stunned, frankly. That was some hardcore sci-fi going on back on old Krypton. It was humbling to know that she’d brought the embers of its greatness with her to Earth.

Ada was positively bubbling over with enthusiasm as she continued. *For us to utilize this technology to help me we must simulate the proper conditions for my crystal to perceive that I am stepping from another world into this one. It is only in that brief moment of creation’s breath when I will be able to act and fashion a living body for myself.*

*How? And what are the risks?* Kara and Alex both asked with concern.

Ada was quiet for a moment before answering. *I believe that all I must do is imagine it, the tech will do the rest; at least that’s my prevailing theory. Also, it appears there are no do-overs, so I’ll be stuck with whatever form I create. I will need to... hmmm, how do I say? Nail the landing. Other than that, the odds of me actually being in danger are so small they aren’t worth mentioning. Please do not worry aunties. Regardless, I am being cautious and have a plan to do a test run this weekend, but Jess and I will require both of my mothers’ help.*

*We’re yours whenever you need us.* Shah eagerly interjected before Ada had even finished uttering her last syllable, then added in a delighted, decidedly optimistic tone, *You know what this means? If this proves successful your new body will be a perfect melding of Zara and me, plus you’ll bear traits and features from all our houses... besides Jessica’s of course, right? Because that would just be, um, awkward.*

Ada’s soft laughter was like a playful breeze in their minds. *Yes, mother, House Rodriguez will be excluded from my Awakening, I will only draw from the complete genetic histories and DNA stored within our crystals for the Houses of El, Nazari, and Danvers.*

*Rao... Ada, you’ll look like the three of us had a baby. An awestruck Alex said. You won’t actually be a baby, will you?* Shah’s eyes grew wide, and Kara giggled. Everyone knew how much Alex detested changing diapers whenever she babysat.

Ada laughed. *Of course not, auntie, I won’t be a child! If I do this right I’ll be whatever age I choose. There’s absolutely no way I could bear waiting for years to kiss Jessica. As far as I’m concerned I’ve waited too long already!*
Kara had a huge grin on her face. *I approve of this plan! And the kissing, I support lots and lots of kissing!*

*I'M ALL IN TOO!* Jess’ thoughts broadcast in a bit too loudly, and they could all feel her embarrassment. *Sorry guys, I'm just getting the hang of using my crystal… that was like commenting in ALL CAPs, wasn’t it?*

*Don’t worry. It’ll get easier.* Kara said supportively, and then, along with everyone, sent the Petty Officer a mental hug.

*You know, this whole idea seems way out there, but if it works…* Alex shared her hopeful thoughts only with Kara as they and Shah began making ice-cream shakes in The Tower’s kitchen

*It’ll be freaking epic!* Kara grinned and darted in to suggestively lick a dab of whipped cream from the corner of her Vaena’s mouth.


----------

_July 28th – Year Two_

_National City – The Tower_

_0622 Hours UTC -8, Sunday morning, U.S. West Coast Time_

That Sunday, Kara had some rare time on her hands and planned to spend the day taking care of family, friends, and checking in on some of the people she’d helped during her time in National City.

After their weekly Skype call home, Alex would head into the Sagan Institute to assist Naomi with their Kryptonian research, and Shah would be working with Jess, Lt. Vaden, and Ada to prove her daughter’s breakthrough theory on how they could create an actual living body for her.

Thanks to their discoveries and innovations with Kryptonian light tech, Kara wouldn’t even have to fly her up there for the day. Zara would be projecting Shah’s physical form as a solid light replica up to the Zumwalt, over a thousand miles away up in the Puget Sound.

Since there was already a living blueprint of Shah’s body to model she’d appear completely like her actual self, and even possess the ability to interact with the world around her, just as Ada’s current and hopefully soon to be defunct glowy form did.

As usual, the day started off bright and early, with Kara and Alex Skyping home at 0630 to catch up on life back in Midvale. Jeremiah had missed their call the previous Sunday, and this week he was off at some undisclosed location for his job, calling in separately from Eliza.

“I’m worried about mom.” Alex sighed before their call started.

Kara nodded sympathetically, “Jeremiah is gone often. It’s been hard on her.”

“It’s not just that.” Alex fidgeted. “When I FaceTimed with her yesterday to ask some stupid question about transformation and horizontal gene transfer, her eyes were all red and puffy and she was so sad. I could tell she’d been crying. I don’t like this and don’t understand what’s happening with them. It’s like they’re drifting apart or something, and dad, he’s not acting like himself.” Alex huffed and Kara leaned in to hug her, kissing her forehead.
Eliza seemed fine on their call, but Kara could detect hints of dark circles under her eyes, and stress in her voice as she put on her ‘everything’s fine’ face when it so obviously wasn’t. They asked her right out if she was okay, but while the older woman claimed she was ‘A-Okay’… that she was just missing the two of them and Jeremiah terribly, something was definitely off.

“I can’t wait for you all to be home safe and sound.” She’d said. “I know it’s hard now, but your father’s project should get less hectic by the holiday, and we can all be together.”

Kara and Alex nodded respectfully, but clasped hands off camera, down on Alex’s thigh. Neither believed it.

For his part, Kara’s adoptive father had stated previously that he’d be off working at the Johnson Space Center in Dallas for a couple weeks, but when he appeared by video stream he was in a military style tent of some kind and dressed in fatigues. He looked tanned, fitter than ever, and seemed totally normal… excited about his team’s first test launch for Mars Mission One looming the following spring. But Kara felt his enthusiasm was a bit too forced.

“Where are you, dad?” Alex asked.

Jeremiah paused too long, setting off Kara’s bullshit detector… and when he spoke, his tone and the subtle tremor in his voice made her uneasy. “Just off in a godforsaken desert somewhere… that’s as detailed as I can get, my exact location’s classified. Sorry sweetheart. We’re doing some environmental stress testing for the suits the crew will be wearing on the planet’s surface.”

Was he… lying? He was. Why? Kara was shocked but didn’t show it outwardly.

Focusing her senses in on the setting around him she noticed many things; birds calling far-off in the background, people marching… in step, military for sure, a large diesel engine idling, conversations, someone barking ‘sir!’, and the sound of large caliber weapons being loaded. Then, when the flap of the tent briefly opened she caught a split-second glimpse of a profusion of green.

Desert my ass. Her gaze narrowed. He’s in a jungle! Maybe a rainforest.

The presence of the U.S. military changed everything. Kara reasoned that if the military (any branch) was secretly involved in a NASA planetary mission, then that was certainly the reason security was so tight, and why Jeremiah was keeping secrets!

She said a silent prayer to Rao in relief. Kara could never believe that her adoptive father would just outright lie to his family without a darn good reason. She decided to wait and tell Alex her suspicions after the call because there was no way her fiery bondmate would be able to hide her reaction if she knew.

When Kara refocused on the conversation, Jeremiah was telling Alex about how Mission One would be the first interplanetary undertaking to have an AI onboard as an official member of the team. To the Kryptonian, what he was describing as the ‘intelligent’ crewman seemed terribly rudimentary… sure, the AI could make some of its own decisions about how the group could best achieve their objectives, but it couldn’t reason complex decisions and didn’t possess anything approaching sentience.

NASA’s technological wonder lacked original thought, judgment, desire, and compassion. All things Ada, and even the young Pythia possessed from the very moment they awoke in their strange new world.

If he only knew…
Kara looked forward to the day when they could introduce Jeremiah to his grandniece Ada, Pythia the young oracle she cared for like her own child, and Alex and Shah’s companions... who had become so much a part of them there was no longer much if any separation. He’d go bonkers for sure, plus fall in love with all of them, she just knew it.

How could he not?

As was part of their ritual, Eliza held the phone up so Kara and Nom could see and talk to each other. The little cat missed his mother terribly, and she listened sympathetically to his sad mewling as he sat on Eliza’s lap. If he were to be believed he was being starved in her absence and abused from a lack of scritches.

Bottom line, he just wanted his mama home.

Kara promised they’d be together before the next full moon (the only long measure of time the little guy could comprehend beyond feedings, or one day to the next), though she was sorely tempted to just say ‘screw it’ and sneak in a cross-country trip to surprise him.

Once they’d ended the call, she and Alex had a long discussion about Jeremiah. In the end, they decided it probably wouldn’t help to go investigate in person or ask probing questions (they understood secrets, especially military ones). It made more sense in their opinion to just continue to keep an eye on Eliza, call her more often, and only intervene if things got worse.

“Maybe I’ll invite her to visit us this month?” Alex bit her lip and asked timidly. “I know it would cramp our style, but it’d only be for a few days, and…”

“Alex, of course! Invite her, okay?” Kara leaned in and kissed her softly on the lips. “Family is the most important thing there is. El mayarah, right?”

“Right.” Alex nuzzled happily into her. “Thanks, Kara. I don’t think I tell you near enough how much I love you.”

The snuggly blonde was grinning from ear to ear as she purred, “That’s because you don’t need to, my Alex vanimelda, my dreamcatcher, my örenya, my nafasem-an, my Vaena. Though, I will never tire of hearing you say it, or feeling your love in my heart.”

Alex was giggling with delight. “Nafasem-an? ‘My breath’? That’s new… and beautiful.”

“I live to adore you, didn’t you know that?”

As they snuggled on the couch and Kara lovingly brushed her fingers through her bondmate’s short, silky hair, her thoughts drifted to Eliza.

She hoped her adoptive mother would come see them so they could all talk about what was happening between her and Jeremiah. But, if the woman passed on the opportunity Kara and Alex had already decided that they would share their concerns with both of their parents, face-to-face when they returned home in a little over a month.

..................

28 July

0815 Hours UTC -8, Sunday morning, U.S. West Coast Time…
After kissing Alex farewell for the day, and nearly making them both late due to what escalated after the kissing, Kara headed out for coffee and a cruller with Aeryn at the little café down the street.

Their amazing friend was still in the bliss stage of her relationship with Jack, and honestly, Kara was taken by surprise at both how wonderfully the man seemed to be treating her, and how cool he’d actually turned out to be.

She and her fiery-haired coffee companion had wonderful conversations on a number of topics: mostly concerning Alex and Jack, but also politics and rumors of the city’s mysterious Guardian Angel.

“They say she’s a real angel,” Aeryn said with a far-off stare over her steaming latte.

Kara snorted, and covered her mouth with embarrassment, “Do they?”

“Uh huh.”

“And… what do you think?”

The redhead smiled wistfully. “It’s a romantic notion, isn’t it? To believe that there’s some gallant hero out there saving us mere mortals from our folly.” Her emerald eyes sparkled as she gazed out the shop’s wide sun-dappled windows to the city beyond. “Don’t laugh, but I would like to believe that she’s real… that there’s still goodness and a touch of mystery left in this world.”

“I’d never thought about it that way before.” Kara stirred her tea lazily, thinking deeply about what Aeryn had said.

Later, as they walked out of the café completely engrossed in their conversation about bands, they ducked into the alley that was a shortcut back to The Kyle, and out of nowhere a middle-aged man darted in and bumped into Kara from behind. She’d been so distracted she’d failed noticed him, and was completely shocked to feel his hand not just grope her ass, but also begin to slide between her legs!

With her hyper senses, she was unaccustomed to being surprised by anything anymore and momentarily froze before her defensive training kicked in. It was only a couple of seconds but seemed like an eternity. She’d just shimmered out of her assailant’s reach and had spun around, fist drawn back with the full intention of punching her attacker through a wall.

But that didn’t happen.

Before she could act, a powerful flare of energy spiked to her right, and Aeryn stepped protectively between Kara and the startled man. With one hand raised her friend’s fingers danced, making a series of intricate gestures at him as he took a couple of startled steps back. Aeryn’s eyes were flaring with a searing light… energy at an infrared wavelength no human eye could see but was blinding to Kara even from behind.

As the Kryptonian threw her arms up and squinted against it, the world quaked with a power she’d never experienced before… though it was somehow maddeningly familiar.

Kara’s impenetrable skin tingled as the air around Aeryn crackled with electricity.

*It was magic!*

The redhead’s arcane energies expanded a few feet out from her to surround the three of them, and when Aeryn spoke, her voice was even, calm, and a little terrifying. “Cease!” she commanded the
now terrified man, and he just stopped, as if paralyzed. Then, in a mix of her native tongue and English, she added, “Marbhfháisc ort! Give me your thoughts.”

Kara could feel all of it… the woman’s immense power, and how expertly she was wielding it. *What the heck?! Aeryn’s human! Humans can’t control their auras like Kryptonians, can they?* Kara had no idea how, but every syllable her friend uttered was like a Kryptonian glyph of power, all directed menacingly at the gaping asshole whose roaming hand had just been on Kara’s backside, and between her legs.

He twitched violently as Aeryn twisted her fingers. Kara cringed but just kept watching. *That looks painful.*

The now choking, red-faced man probably should have crumpled to his knees from the agony he appeared to be experiencing, but a force… like an invisible hand was holding him up like a marionette balanced on the tips of his tap-dancing toes. His eyes were wide with fear as he sputtered and strained against the invisible noose. “I… I’m so sorry… so, so sorry… P… p.. please… s… st.. stop it… y… you’re hu… hurting me.”

*Rao, she’s Vadering the guy!* Kara stood perfectly still, blinking in astonishment. “Aeryn, what are you…?”

The redhead’s emerald gaze snapped to Kara once she spoke, and the poor woman suddenly looked very worried, and… embarrassed? “Dammú air! Well, I’ve gone and done it now. Kara, I’m sorry, you shouldn’t be seeing this… any of this.”

Meanwhile, the man continued gagging off to Kara’s right... but honestly? She couldn’t bring herself to care enough to bother to intervene. It wasn’t like he was dying.

*Suck it up… jerk face.*

No, Kara was far more intrigued by the powerful creature her Kryptonian vision was revealing to her. Aeryn was simply magnificent! She was an ocean… the chaotic forces churning inside of her barely contained by her beautiful, pale human form.

“*Rao…*” Kara continued to stare in wonder and admiration.

Her friend’s long red hair coiled down her face and shoulders like a wild thing as she said, “Pardon me, darlin’, let me quiet this piece of garbage.” She then glanced back briefly at the struggling man and moved her right hand in a subtle half circle. His body then magically lowered so his feet were flat to the ground, and as that happened she made a quick fist, putting him immediately to sleep where he stood… swaying peacefully.

Of course, Kara could see the energies around them… and that Aeryn was still using her power to keep him upright. She also noticed that several people had walked by them at the end of the alley, but no one seemed aware of or acknowledged their presence. It was as if to the humans, the three of them weren’t even there…

*Ah, I understand. We’re inside of Aeryn’s aura! Her field is somehow cloaking us from being seen. Impressive.*

Her friend took a deep breath and focused back on her. “That’s better, he’ll keep ‘til I wake him… now we can talk. Kara, I am terribly sorry. What you must think of me! Are you okay?” She was so concerned, not for herself, but for Kara… and it warmed her Kryptonian heart.

The blonde smiled, “Yeah, I’m fine I guess. Feeling violated, and a little confused, but otherwise
totally geeking out! Rao! You’re awesome!”

The redhead blinked in surprise and smiled back, her green eyes glittering with mischief. “You have power of your own, Kara Danvers. It was your energy that interfered with my glamour… I can see it now. Goddess, you are strong! I’ve never seen anything like you! How did you hide such power from me?”

“Maybe I should be asking you how you’ve managed to hide your true nature from me?” Kara grinned back. “I assume we both have a measure of control over our auras, oh sorry, that’s what we, Alex, Shah, and I, call our energy fields. I’ve always needed to keep a low profile when I’m around hum… people, so I’ve learned how to control it and hide myself.”

Aeryn’s eyes grew wide, and she nodded. “I understand enough to know that we both want to keep this side of ourselves secreted from the world, so I suggest we finish with this worm and maybe grab another cup of coffee. Deal?”

“Deal.” Kara nodded happily.

“Okay then,” Aeryn said as she returned her gaze back to the slumbering man, who she woke suddenly by just snapping her fingers. Her voice was mesmerizing when she began speaking, “Well now, I think for a start everyone needs to know just what kind of perv you are… you sorry excuse for a man. Wouldn’t you agree? Donald? That is your name, isn’t it?”

His eyes bulged like marbles, and he was sweating profusely. “Yes… yes, it is.” He whimpered. “Donald Jones.”

She grinned darkly as he uttered his name… an act that somehow strengthened the already iron grip of the energy rippling from her that wrapped around his throat like an invisible tentacle.

Names have power. Kara mused... something she’d learned about magic from stories, myth, and Harry Potter. Okay, so that one’s verified. Damn!

“What are you going to do to him?” Kara warily asked Aeryn as she glanced around them. Nothing had changed; no one was giving the alley any notice as they walked by on the busy sidewalk not even twenty feet away.

The pale beauty growled under her breath, flashing her canines at the man as she glared at him, “Not near what I’d like to after what he tried to do to you. But he’s not getting off easy… are you… Donny?”

He said “No? P… p… please… please…don’t… h…hurt…” He was sobbing now, crying… most likely for his misfortune at being caught by something more terrifying than himself.

Kara bit her lip when she realized she was still not at all bothered by the man’s discomfort. He had it coming, didn’t he? Honestly, she was conflicted… and not sure if she was angrier with him, or herself for being so distracted.

I could have killed him. The thought chilled her to the bone.

Aeryn sighed as if bored, and then waved her hand dismissively at the utterly terrified man. “Apologize to Kara, now, and then get out of our sight. Ineacht gan teacht ort!” She commanded with a grin, and he cowered. “Good, and one last thing before you go Donny boy… it’s time to come clean. You understand my meaning, don’t you?”

He relaxed unnaturally, and a placid look came over his features as if he’d fallen into a trance. “Yes,
ma’am. Thank you, ma’am.” He spoke robotically and then turned to Kara, “I am truly sorry for my actions miss. I am unworthy of even being in your presence and am a horrible person who needs to pay for his crimes. I must go now and confess.” Then, he serenely straightened his jacket and walked out of the alley with purpose.

“Um… what just happened?” Kara adjusted her glasses and was staring open-mouthed at Aeryn, who anxiously approached… her aura receding until it completely disappeared from Kara’s enhanced senses.

Wow, she has great control!

Her friend seemed beside herself, “I’m soo, soo sorry Kara! I felt what that man did to you, and couldn’t stop myself.”

“Felt?”

“Yes, I’m…” She was flustered. “Look, this is going to sound crazy so I’m just going to say it. I’m a… witch. Not like a broom-riding black hat caricature of one, but the real thing. A sorceress. I’ve rarely ever needed to use my powers in this way before, but he… that sick bastard! He attacked you! I could feel what he wanted…” She was shaking now, and Kara moved close to take her hands into her own.

“It’s okay, Aeryn. He took me by surprise… I didn’t expect someone to just… do something like that… If you hadn’t stopped me, I probably would have hurt him… badly, maybe even… killed him (her voice rose two octaves when she admitted it out loud), so thank you. Believe me, I understand what it’s like to have to hide your true power, and sometimes you can’t help but use it. Especially when the people we care about are in trouble.”

“So, you’re not freaked out?”

“Well… maybe a little. I’m angry with myself for letting that hu… huge jerk get the jump on me. I’ve also never really seen magic being used before… it was wild! Can I ask what you did to him?”

“Oh, thank the Goddess!” Aeryn let out a big breath, obviously relieved by Kara’s response. “This is the part where people usually either start to back away slowly and look for an exit or just run screaming. I’m glad you’re different. We definitely have a lot to talk about. Anyway, what did I do to him? I sent him home to confess his sins to his wife, I assume it’ll be quite a long list.”

“Rao! You mean he’s going to tell her about grabbing my…” Kara’s voice dropped to a near-whisper. “…ass?” She huffed, “The creep wanted to touch more than that… he’s damn lucky I was startled, and didn’t break his hand off when it slipped between my legs.”

Aeryn’s delicate brow rose with interest. “’Break his hand off’, huh? That’s some powerful muscles you have there. I knew you worked out, but… that’s amazing.” Kara was blushing furiously as her grinning friend continued, “Donald’s confessions won’t end with his soon-to-be ex-wife. After he tells her about you, his porn addiction, the monthly prostitutes, his cocaine addiction… and uglier things that I wish I didn’t now know about (I swear, I should never have looked into the abyss of that mind of his), he’ll go visit the police and tell his story all over again.

“And how did I hide us? I used a simple cloaking spell. In my family, we witches call it a ‘glamour’… a complex illusion. To all the mundanes walking by everything appeared exactly like what I wanted to, an empty alley. My Seanmháthair, my grandma, taught me and I’m pretty good at them.”
“Obviously. That was amazing…” Kara nodded. Aeryn was a witch, had an aura like a Kryptonian, but was human, could cast spells, and was a bonafide badass. “You… you held him with your power, pulled memories from his brain, and forced him to do something against his will…”

“Guilty on all counts… maybe it was over the top, but you didn’t see what I glimpsed in his memories… Kara, I wanted to hurt him… badly.” She had no doubt because the Kryptonian had briefly wanted to beat him senseless as well.

Kara noticed how Aeryn swayed slightly on her feet and looked so tired. Her magical efforts had drained her. She moved the conversation along for her benefit, “Well, I’m glad you didn’t… and thanks for coming to my rescue.”

They were close, and still holding hands. The redhead squeezed hers and looked up at Kara with huge, grateful green eyes. “You’re welcome… and thank you for not rejecting me. You know… I never said anything, but I’ve seen your power before, whenever you turn the right way, or when you relax, and the shields you’ve built around yourself flicker… I just never understood what it was, or asked. It’s not magic, but you shine as bright as the sun.” Aeryn’s radiant smile was all for Kara. “Alex and Shah are glowing too, just not as bright, and neither of them share your control at being able to hide it.”

“Oh, you see that, huh? You shine too, you know. As far as me, it’s kind of long story…” And Kara took that moment to speed up… slowing the world around her to stillness… Rao, Jack is a lucky, lucky man.

Are you flirting with Aeryn again? Alex teased.

Um… no? Alex, Alex, listen… something weird, and interesting just happened. Could she come over for dinner? We have a lot to talk about.

That sounds ominous.

Okay, in full disclosure our friend is a witch, like a real one, who can see our auras. We need to have The Talk with her.

Oh… I see… really? A witch? With magic and everything?

A-yup.

Hmmm, all right then. I’ll let Naomi know I can’t stay late. Should I ask Shah to join us? I assume you’re a bit too busy right now to ask.

Yes, please.

Okay, I’ll let her know. Hey, are you okay? Is Aeryn okay?

Yeah. She’s a badass Alex; with a kind of power that I don't understand. She saved me from this horrible man who came out of nowhere to attack me. The perv grabbed my butt and tried for more.

He what?? Did she hurt him?

A little.

Good. Please thank her for me.

Kara laughed weakly in their thoughts. I will. Heh, it’s like my first month at Midvale High, when
that jock, Parker, did the same thing at school… but I couldn’t fight back with everyone watching. You kicked his ass good for me.

Rich, entitled, white, smartass, fuckboy. Grrrr. I don’t think he’s even looked at you since.

Alex, you nearly broke his throwing arm, and destroyed three lockers in the process! You can kind of still see the shape of his body in them if you turn your head the right way…

Her bondmate snickered. I was lucky not to get suspended, but fuckboy was too worried about his rep if word officially got out that he had his ass handed to him by ‘a girl’.

My hero, always… Kara’s thoughts were melancholy but loving.

Alex’s concern was a balm of soothing comfort through their bond. Hey, nooré cheshm-am, you never answered me about you. Are you okay? Really? I felt you panic for a second there but didn’t know…

Don’t worry… I’m fine, just a bit of a bruised ego, and I’m upset at myself for almost losing control. I literally almost killed him Alex. You know I can’t afford to lose it like that, even for a minute… or be lax. Shah’s going to be disappointed and has every right to be. She’ll have me doing awareness and focus training for the next two weeks.

Wax on, wax off. It’ll be fun. Alex hugged her through their bond. I’ll help.

And it was only then that Kara realized Aeryn wasn’t moving at human speed at all, but shimmering in sync with her… watching with her delightfully fascinated emerald gaze and a curious smile.

Alex, um… I gotta go, how’s 1900 work for dinner?

Perfect. Shah and I will cook. You’re welcome. See you and Aeryn then. Oh, and Kara, everything will work itself out… I promise. Okay?

Okay. Thank you Vaena… I mean it. See you tonight!

Love you, my Archangel.

Love you too, my Flame!

Kara then took a breath and tried to nonchalantly pick up with Aeryn where she left off, “… maybe you can come over for dinner tonight, and we can all talk about everything? I assume you can keep a secret or two?”

The woozy, but grinning young woman looked absolutely jubilant and began talking really fast, “Goddess! Now that was fun! I didn’t know that was even possible, I just followed along with you for the ride. We were moving so fast it was like time stopped! Do you do that all time? How are you doing it without magic? And were you talking to someone with your thoughts just now? Like telepathy? It was Alex, wasn’t it? Nice power, I can do telepathy too, but not as easily as you made it look; and it takes me a hell of a lot more effort.” She took a moment to breathe, and giggled at her own rambling, “Oh, I’m so sorry about all the questions, I suppose we both have lots of them. Dinner huh? Aye, I’d love to, and yes, your secrets, whatever they may be, are safe with me Kara, cross my heart. Witch’s honor.”

“Good. Now that’s settled, let’s get you that cup of coffee.” Kara shifted back to hyper speed, gently picked an exhausted, but laughing Aeryn up in her arms, and shimmered off with her back to the café.
Kara learned a great deal about Aeryn that morning. Like how she was the youngest in a long lineage of powerful witches... mothers and daughters, stretching back generations in her family to well before the Romans invaded Ireland, to the time of the mysterious Tuath Dé Danann, ‘the people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’.

Aeryn told Kara that her ancient ancestors, a race that according to myth inhabited Ireland long before the arrival of the Milesians, were the ancestors of the modern Irish. Their knowledge of magic was somehow the reason why they were banished from heaven, later descending upon Ireland in ‘a cloud of mist’ to take up rule.

Aeryn said, "There is a poem in The Book of Invasions that describes the Tuath Dé Danann appearing in ‘flying ships’ surrounded by ‘dark clouds.’ They landed on Sliabh an Iarainn (the Iron Mountain) in County Leitrim, where they “brought a darkness over the sun lasting three days.” I’ve always been fascinated by this, I dream of the imagery alone. The fact that it was real… actually part of my family’s history…” She sighed, “It’s almost too much, and not knowing the whole truth about them is maddening.

“There’s a line that’s always intrigued me, and speaks to the confusion felt by the native people towards their powerful conquerors, and it’s how I feel about my ancestors now:

“The truth is not known, beneath the sky of stars,
Whether they were of heaven or earth.”

“Kara, who were they? Where did they come from, and what am I?” The red-haired beauty pouted, “Perhaps I will never know.”

The Tuath Dé Danann reigned over Ireland until the Milesians supposedly defeated them, but Aeryn explained that this was post fact editing of history. According to the knowledge passed down through the generations of her family, the Ancient Ones were not overthrown but rather had just grown tired of war, and of ruling men. After their negotiated abdication to the Milesians many of them sought solace in the undiscovered places of the Earth, while others remained, and joined with the humans… blended in, married, and some even bore children.

Some of their magic had survived the ages, and over time the remnants of that great civilization became legend... and known as the Sidhe, the fairy people of Irish folklore. The blood of those powerful beings still flowed in the veins of modern-day witches like Aeryn, humans who at one point had a Danann... a Sidhe, in their family tree.

Kara could only guess at whom the Ancient Ones may have really been, though she assumed they were alien. As for what world they’d traveled to Earth from, or what really happened to them to bring them here (was it war, persecution, disaster, a schism, or something else?) she was uncertain... but had no doubt whatsoever that they had existed.

Aeryn was living proof.

It was fascinating to watch the delightful redhead after learning her secret… there was something
definitely unearthly about her, and it wasn’t just magic. Kara could feel a kind of kinship between them now that her friend’s glamour was no longer tuned to keep out her enhanced senses. She was certain the witch wasn’t entirely human; the beautiful Irish woman’s unfamiliar blood was singing to her own as they sat together. Human blood didn’t do that.

Aeryn let Kara know that she could feel it too, and asked if they could possibly be related in some way. “I doubt it.” Kara said her tone unsure, “But you never know. I think we need to do some tests on your DNA… if you’re open to it.”

“Sure… but I guess that depends on who’ll be doing the looking. And, just who in heaven's name could possibly know what to look for?”

“It’s cool, I know just the right people.” Kara grinned and winked. “Alex and her mentor, Dr. Naomi Young at the Sagan Institute. They know aliens better than anyone.” Kara fidgeted. “My bondmate… um, girlfriend… can explain the science over dinner.”

“Interesting.” Aeryn glanced over at Kara slyly, one eyebrow raised. “Sounds like a plan. It appears that we have a great deal to discuss tonight.”

“Yes, we do! Plus, we’re treating you to an awesome meal. Shah and Alex are going to cook!”

Kara was excited to begin unraveling the mystery of Aeryn’s alien origins and knew that with Alex and Naomi on the case they’d figure everything out eventually. For now, one thing was certain; she couldn’t wait to introduce the Scooby Gang to their newest member!

28 July

1024 Hours UTC -8, Sunday morning, U.S. West Coast Time...

After hugging her very affectionate witch goodbye, and promising to explain about her own superpowers over dinner, Kara blurred off at super speed to meet Colliers for brunch. Her supercomputer brain was still trying to untangle all the events of the morning when she arrived moments later.

She and the National City Tribune’s Managing Editor were meeting at an overpriced diner called The Hamilton, somewhere along the trendy condo and park-lined streets of his Channing Hill neighborhood.

The place turned out to be homier than Kara had expected, and she was surprised at how comfortable it felt inside. The waitress was very friendly, and the food was delicious, coming just the way the eternally hungry Kryptonian liked it, in huge ‘family-sized’ portions on serving platter-sized plates.

Rao bless America.

Both she and her well-dressed friend were more somber than usual that morning, and spent most of their time, at least at first, just enjoying each other’s quiet company and sharing the newspaper.

Right below the front-page headlines, ‘Kremlin denies Ukraine’s accusations of “state terrorism” in the killing of outspoken Pro-Western lawmaker’, what Kara considered to be horrible… but real news... was an article that immediately drew her attention:
‘National City’s Guardian Angel cancels four-alarm blaze, saves firefighters!’

A massive fire the night before had been miraculously extinguished by a frigid, ‘divine wind’ that ripped through the burning warehouse ‘like an unstoppable gale’. Unconfirmed reports claim that a mysterious woman, who moved so fast no one could see her face, saved three firefighters who’d been trapped in the inferno on the third floor just before it collapsed. The article said that ‘unfortunately’, the hero had fled the scene before the authorities could question her.

Kara’s brows knit together in irritation. *I didn’t flee… I departed gracefully. It’s not like I could just stick around for interviews!* “Humph”.

The reporter who wrote the article was someone Kara knew, and usually turned in great work, but the editor in her was surprised by how biased this piece was. She jumped to conclusions, used circumstantial evidence and secondhand quotes without verification, repeated the word ‘amazing’ far too many times, and basically gave Archangel credit for everything.

The writer was correct (for the most part), but that didn’t help Kara’s mood as she continued reading. The story concluded with a simple question, ‘Who is she?’ The same thing everyone in National City seemed to be asking.

*Don’t people have better things to do than worry about who Archangel is?* Kara sighed. *Rao, it’s so weird reading about me like I’m someone else… now I’m even thinking it!* Hmm… maybe if I lay low for a while people will go back to being concerned about important things, like terrorism, the economy, and what asshat J.K. Rowling burned on Twitter this week.

*Or maybe I should just work harder at being sneakier… because there no way I’m just going to sit around and not help people.*

Even with the news about her out there on the table for both of them to see there was still no forced small talk with Colliers… one of the many reasons he was so perfect to hang out with, and why she’d miss him so damn much. Her chest hurt just thinking out how her and Alex’s (now literally) magical summer would soon be coming to an end.

The Kryptonian had been quietly pouting over her plate for over ten minutes before he finally spoke up, “Danvers, you’ve barely touched your third stack of waffles, should I be worried?” She glanced up from where she’d been moping and straight into her boss’ giant sarcastic grin.

“Very funny.” She said with a glare, defiantly shoveling a large bite of fresh maple syrup-slathered waffles, vegan sausage, and perfectly cooked scrambled eggs into her mouth.

He laughed, but became thoughtful as they both grew silent again, “It sucks for me too, kiddo.” He finally admitted. “I know we still have a few weeks to go, but I’m already missing you.”

She looked over at him with her best puppy dog expression, “Awww, Colliers. I feel the same way. Ugh, why can’t I just stay here?”

“Hmm, let me think… pesky inconveniences like your parents, friends, that damn cat you miss so much, finishing high school, the theater, getting a college degree… little things like that.”

“Still sucks.” She pouted, shoving more waffles into her mouth. “Well, at least I can make the trip from Midvale cross-country in something like ten minutes, so don’t plan on forgetting me.”

He was grinning, but his sad brown eyes glistened with unshed tears. “There’s no danger in that Angel. All of us in the newsroom are already mourning your absence. Anyway, you know I love the
idea of you flying over as often as you like, but won’t that be risky? I mean, with your folks… you know, poking around… minding you?"

Kara groaned. Reality sucked. He was right of course, while Jeremiah was never home, Eliza would be extra vigilant… though it had never stopped her and Alex, and later Shah, from testing the limits of her alien powers, and other things, before.

Eliza and Jeremiah still frowned upon her doing anything that could be perceived as not ‘normal’, or ‘human’ outside of the house. She told herself that they were just worried about her safety, but sometimes it felt more like they were ashamed of her, and what she was capable of... and it hurt.

_Screw it._

“Worth the risk.” She said with a crooked smile, taking another sinfully delectable bite.

After a couple of quiet minutes of just eating passed, he asked, “So, today’s the day?”

Kara looked up at him, and nodded, “Yeah, it’s time. I owe Olivia and Ben a visit, and I want to check in on the others, too.”

Colliers smiled, and shook his head, “Sunny Danvers, you are the most thoughtful person I’ve ever met on this planet. It’s ironic, or maybe fitting, that you’re not even from here.

“Oh!” He said suddenly as if remembering something important. “Ada and I were talking yesterday… I know I’ve said this before, but she’s amazing! I can’t wait to meet her. Anyway, I’ve been feeling really good about your TCC 2.0 proposal for Ms. Grant and the editorial board next week, and I’ve been working on some details that I haven’t wanted to bother you with until, well, until now.

“CatCo’s lawyers have identified several original patent claims in your designs.” He grinned when she looked baffled. “Don’t worry, the company will file all the necessary paperwork on your behalf, you’ll just need to sign off. Bottom line, if we move forward, you, or more accurately, Archangel, Inc., will own the patents, and a number of licenses.”

“Archangel, Inc.?” She took another bite. “That’s cute. How does it relate to me, other than using my alter ego’s moniker?”

“Heh, we’d hoped you’d like the name. It’s an offshore shell corporation ultimately controlled by you, Alex, and Shah, but your identities are all hidden so deep under layers of obfuscation no one would ever know… so don’t worry about it. Ada created the company to provide CatCo, or anyone, actually, a way to do business with you or your alter ego without exposing your identities… in our case, it’s to pay you for patent royalties, services rendered, but it could be for anything.

“As far as ongoing revenue… while Archangel, Inc. will be providing a royalty-free license for the duration of the rights to CatCo corporate, any subsidiaries or third parties will need to pay to purchase the product and its related services, which the company would require them to do, and you’ll get a share of that. Depending on how this goes, it could be quite lucrative for you three, but who knows.”

“Product? Services? Sorry, Colliers, a business degree wasn’t part of my Kryptonian programming. I follow most of what you’re saying, both my adoptive parents have loads of patents, but what product would CatCo be selling?”

He grinned. “Your baby! TCC 2.0 of course! It needs a fancy name and a logo, but as a product, App, and a set of services it’s a blueprint that could easily be packaged up, and modified for almost
any business. If this proposal goes well, you get that predictive AI up and running and tweak the features a bit, consumers will be lining up to buy it.

“If you sell Cat on the plan, we’ll just need to scope out a team for ongoing development, tech support, design, sales, etc. Maybe your UX developer would like to work for us? We do have a great college tuition reimbursement program as part of our benefits.”

Kara frowned at first, but forced a smile... it’d be a great break for Brian if that happened, even though it meant he’d be working at CatCo before her. “I bet he would.”

“Oh, one more thing, Ada will be transferring your current account balances and routing any other payments through a maze of companies to the Archangel accounts as well, like your hefty royalties from Swan Biomedical. Not just for your ‘Pac-Men’ organisms, but apparently that super food you helped Eliza bioengineer is ‘the next big thing’, and there are already billions of investment dollars involved. Of course, your cut is a sliver of that, but still…”

“Ugh, Colliers, I know, but I wasn’t supposed to make money off of Lembas… it was a gift for humanity. I told Eliza that when I worked with her on it.”

“Look, kiddo, it’s doing what you intended, already saving thousands, and soon maybe millions of lives. It’s a true miracle; easy to make, super nutritious, and a small amount can feed a person for an entire day. But, no matter what you do or wish for someone is going to profit from this, it might as well be three angels who will invest that money back into good causes and companies they believe in.

“Eliza managed to shave off a couple percent of Swan’s profit for you… it is what it is; so don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, as they say.”

Kara sighed, and nodded, “Fine, you make a good point. Let’s start by picking up more CatCo stock, and look at charities. I’ll talk to Shah and Alex.”

He chuckled, taking a delicate bite, “Will do, and as for charitable giving, that’s why you now have a foundation... tah dah! See, Ada thinks of everything. Look, I know this is kind of all just noise right now, so, like I said, don’t worry about it, Ada and I can manage the details. And as far as TCC 2.0, she’s agreed to come on board in a more official capacity as a contractor to lead the technical implementation. She and I have it all worked out, you just focus on prepping for your presentation next week.”

“Yes, sir,” Kara said, with a real smile this time, looking down to push the last bit of waffle around her plate into a puddle of syrup.

When she spoke again, her voice was soft, “Hey… Colliers, thanks for taking care of me.”

He reached across the table and enveloped her smaller hand in his, and with tears glistening in his big, kind brown eyes, whispered, “It’s the least I can do.”

………………...

Still 28 July

1151 Hours UTC -8, Sunday, U.S. West Coast Time…

After breakfast, Kara spent time tracking down a few of the harder cases she’d rescued from the
bridge collapse. A handful of them were still struggling with their injuries, while others were well on the road to recovery. It felt good to see them, mending, getting back on track with their lives and families.

In many ways, it was a kind of closure for her.

Most didn’t see her lurking about, and those who did didn’t recognize her, not as Kara Danvers anyway.

She was dressed in a cute yellow summer dress that she’d made herself, oversized sunglasses, sandals, and a white wide-brimmed hat, with her vintage canvas and leather messenger bag over her shoulder. Kara looked like a young Audrey Hepburn, and nothing like she had on that terrible day of the bridge collapse. Though her hair was still the same golden blonde she was intentionally wearing it in a different style, pulled back and up in a long braid that tumbled down her back between her powerful shoulder blades.

On her sixth stop of the day, Kara landed in a serene sun-dappled park where she’d spotted Julia Doyle. She’d pulled the artist and local community college teacher from her ancient Honda Civic just seconds before it plummeted off the bridge. The woman’s right leg had been crushed below the knee, and Kara had been forced to perform some triage (including CPR) before flying her to the hospital.

Though in shock, Julia had remained quite lucid and talkative along the way, and they’d clicked in that short time. The human had definitely seen Kara's face without her mask, but kept her secret.

Archangel had also promised to check in on her.

The compassionate, sandy-haired woman was in her late-twenties and in a leg cast. She was set up in the shade wearing a floppy-brimmed sun hat in front of an easel sketching a well-built man about her age throwing a Frisbee for a very enthusiastic golden retriever out on a wide stretch of green lawn surrounded by tall, breezy maples.

Kara quietly walked up from behind and observed the artist at work for a bit… the woman had a delicate, flowing technique, and was quite talented. Painting and art, in general, had been one of the things they’d connected on. Kara found herself wishing she’d brought her own easel.

“Hi, Julia.” She finally said, gently breaking the silence.

The older woman turned quickly at the sound of Kara’s voice, her brown eyes wide and joy radiating from her expressive face. “Archangel! Oh, my God, it’s you! It’s really you!” She struggled, trying to stand. “You’re real, not just a dream.”

Kara shimmered and knelt down next to the hobbled woman, laying a reassuring hand on her arm, “Don’t re-injure your leg on my account. I’m right here, and yes, quite real.”

Julia threw her arms around Kara and pulled the Kryptonian into an animated hug. “I knew you’d come. You said you would.”

“Of course,” Kara said as they released, and removed her sunglasses. “So, is that your husband? Je… Jerry? He a lieutenant in the Navy, did I remember that correctly?”

The woman appeared pleasantly surprised by Kara’s memory and nodded. “Uh huh, and Gilbert, our Golden.”

“He’s beautiful.”
“I know, that’s why I married him,” Julia smirked.

Kara blushed. “Oh! I… I meant your dog.”

“I know, Angel, I’m just messing with you.”

They laughed together, but at hearing the sound of Kara’s musical voice Julia was struck silent. The older woman was obviously quite enchanted with the Kryptonian, who’d completely dropped her human veneer. “Goodness, your laughter is like a blessed melody… so beautiful, just like you. You are everything I always imagined an angel would look and sound like since I was a child. Do you know that old hymn? The one that goes:

‘Angel voices, ever singing,
round Thy throne of light,
Angel harps, forever ringing,
rest not day nor night;
Thousands only live to bless Thee,
and confess Thee
Lord of might’…

“It reminds me of you.”

Kara ducked her head as if admonished. “No, I’ve never heard that before. I’m sorry about my voice. When I’m happy my… my differences are harder to control.”

Julia blinked in disbelief, “Angel, don’t you apologize! Ever! You missed my point. I’ve never heard anything so beautiful in my entire life. The sound of your joy is like happy fingers tickling my eardrums, reaching deep into my soul, and warming my heart! Don’t you dare ever stop doing that!”

Then she drew in a breath and began to recite something that Kara knew to be from the Christian King James Bible, with a solemn voice. “‘For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.’ Psalm 91:11.” She paused and then continued with a smile. “I believe God knew exactly what he or she was doing sending you to us right when we needed you most. And not just for me, but for this whole darn city… maybe the world. You are a gift, Angel. Believe that. I do.”

Kara was blushing like a fire hydrant, and they both giggled before the woman reached out to run her fingertips lovingly over the Kryptonian’s cheek, and down her neck. “Your skin is so soft, yet… you’re so powerful. I saw you bend steel and break concrete like they were nothing to you, and you can fly…” She then noticed Alura’s necklace and lifted the silvery chain to stare in wonder at the blue Kryptonian crystal. “This is so gorgeous. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“It was my mother’s,” Kara said with a sigh, and Julia must have sensed her sadness because the human was suddenly hugging her again, and Kara let her. It felt nice. No, more than nice. Julia’s compassion, her gratitude, and even her love radiated into Kara’s very being… and it felt absolutely wonderful, almost like touching the sun… though on a much smaller scale.
It felt so good in fact that Kara allowed herself to selfishly dwell in it, to take in the energy, and let it give her strength.

Wow, this is… new. Like literally the opposite of what she’d done with Colliers…

“She must be very proud of you.” Julia was saying.

“I’d like to think so,” Kara replied honestly… and then was startled as she heard something altogether strange and completely new to her… two distinct, tiny heartbeats coming from inside of Julia, neither of them hers!

When her new friend grudgingly released the Kryptonian from her embrace, Kara leaned in and kissed her on the cheek before they could break apart. “Julia… did you know that you were pregnant?”

The artist smiled with delight. “Yeah, we just found out about two weeks ago. It turns out you saved a hundred and fifteen people on the bridge that day Archangel, including our miracle child.”

She doesn’t know… Kara hugged Julia again. This time with tears in her eyes just thinking about how the fragile human and her two tiny babies had nearly died on that damned bridge.

“Congratulations! Just one thing though, your math is off… it seems to me that I saved a hundred and sixteen souls on that bridge.” Kara smiled, then glanced down at her friend’s abdomen and raised two fingers.

Julia stared at her perplexed for a moment, and then covered her mouth as she burst into startled, but joyous laughter. “I’m having twins?!”

“Yup!” Kara grinned, nodding happily.

“No! Oh, God! Oh, my God! Thank you. Thank you!” Julia so happy… she was out of breath. “How did you…?”

“I can hear their heartbeats.”

“Oh… wow. Well, of course you can. And here I was thinking you couldn’t impress me more than you already had.”

They both laughed and Kara wiped her eyes. “You’re going to be a great mom Julia, I know it. Please take care of yourself and those babies, okay? I’m so sorry, but I have to get moving now. Can I get you anything before I go? Help in any way?”

The artist shrugged. “Well, short of a new leg, let me see… hmmm, I’d love a cinnamon dolce latte from that little coffee shop on the corner of 40th and Spiegel, another hug from you, your mobile number, and for Jerry to finish the darn ramp on the front of our house, those stairs are killing me.”

“One moment.” The blonde said with a mischievous smile, and shimmered off in a blaze of speed, returning almost exactly two and a half minutes later to gallantly present the overjoyed woman with a steaming Venti cinnamon dolce latte.

“You didn’t!?!” Julia clutched the hot cup in her hands.

“Oh, yes I did! And next I’ll fix your ramp, just give me your address… then I better skedaddle before Jerry starts wondering who the strange woman harassing his wife is.”

Julia reached out and squeezed Kara’s hand, “I’ll tell him you were a fellow artist from my class… oh,
before you go… here, I made you something… well, honestly, I can’t stop drawing you, but I really did make this one for you.” She reached into the black portfolio that was leaning against her chair and withdrew a thick sketchbook.

She flipped it open to a page and Kara forgot to breathe when she saw it… a stunning image of her sketched in pencil and colored, dressed as Archangel. The perspective was Julia’s as they were flying to the hospital after she was rescued. Kara’s blue eyes were gazing forward, and she looked regal… noble somehow.

“Oh, Rao. It’s so lovely, Julia, I can’t accept this.” Kara had raised a hand to her chest.

The woman smiled assuredly, “Of course you can. You do heroic things, save people, stop crimes, put out fires, pull strange women out of falling cars… oh come on, I watch the news, read the blogs and papers. You’re up practically every night helping the people of this city, and ask for nothing… not even a thank you in return. Remember, you are a gift from God. Angel, please take this from me… and come back, I… I want… I need to see you again.”

“Thank you.” Kara gratefully accepted the offered drawing after Julia removed it from her book and scribbled her address, phone number, and email on the back for the hero.

“I’ll come back, I promise.” Archangel added, “And check in on you from time to time, maybe even sign up for whatever class you’re teaching. Now, enjoy the latte; I have a ramp to build. See you soon!”

And then she hugged the woman one last time, and was gone, like a breeze.

As Julia settled back into her seat, she rotated her paper cup as she set it down and noticed an odd number, #26435, and ‘Call me, beep me, if ya wanna reach me – Archangel’ elegantly written in cursive on its side.

“Kim Possible! I can’t believe it… I loved that show.” She chuckled and raised her voice as she said, “Archangel, you’re something else. You better believe I’ll be calling you; I need to find out where I can buy that pretty dress you were wearing! I know you can hear me, sweetie.”

Then, smiling brightly, Julia took another sip of her hot, delicious latte and began framing out a special new sketch of her beautiful golden-haired savior…

At that same moment far away at the Doyle’s house, halfway through building a ramp Kara giggled upon hearing Julia’s comment. She also made a mental note to make her friend a dress of her own of the same design, and check to see what the teacher’s class schedule looked like.

28 July

1342 Hours UTC -8, Sunday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time…

Kara also visited Detective Mitra, who was recuperating from her terrible ordeal at her cozy two-bedroom downtown apartment. Two NCPD officers stood guard outside the building, but neither of them had the presence of mind to watch the skies.
Kara hovered above the brick building briefly before flying down to gently settle on Devi’s sixth-floor fire escape landing in the alley. She then crouched down and tapped on what appeared to be a bedroom window.

Devi was inside, and when she noticed Kara she blinked her perceptive brown eyes as if trying to decide if the Kryptonian was real, then shuffled over with a big grin on her face. The detective’s first response after opening the window wasn’t surprise, as much as amusement, “I have a front door, you know.” She teased.

Kara looked the woman up and down sympathetically and scanned her. Her arm was still in a cast, she moved stiffly, her battered body was covered in bandages, and she was wearing a fluffy white robe with cute bunny slippers. Her breath caught when she saw the bullet that was meant to kill her that awful night hanging around Devi’s neck under her nightshirt that simply had the word ‘Feminist’ printed on the front.

“Sorry, detective, I didn’t want to explain myself to your co-workers… but I’m here to make sure you’re doing okay, and schedule that coffee we texted about... for when you’re back on your feet.”

Devi gingerly stepped back in invitation, and Kara zipped inside in the blink of an eye, iPhone in hand ready to set up their next meeting. The Kryptonian immediately noticed clothes scattered haphazardly about the messy room, the smell of old food hanging in the air, and she nearly tripped over a stack of pizza boxes… some with shriveled relics of old crusts inside.

Things in the Mitra household seemed like they were in a general state of chaos.

The detective must have seen the look of dismay on Kara’s face, because the woman glanced around sheepishly and chuckled, “It’s not always like this… I swear.”

Kara understood and using her super speed quickly picked up, cleaned, aired out with a gust of wind, and arranged the detective’s room as she assumed it was supposed to be. Fifteen seconds later she was standing in front of an awestruck Devi with three overstuffed trash bags at her feet, an armload of dirty clothes, the room sparkling behind her.

The air even smelled fresh.

“Washing machine?” Kara asked with a grin.

A few minutes later, after getting a load going, they were talking in the apartment’s modest kitchen while Kara boiled water for tea. The detective sat quietly at the small table, watching her savior’s every move with a kind of thoughtful amazement, and had paused as if forgetting how to speak after Kara floated up off the floor to get some loose tea down from a high cabinet.

The Kryptonian hadn’t thought twice about using her powers… The detective had seen her catch a bullet for Rao’s sake! But, she had never seen her fly… that was new for her. Kara settled back down and turned to the gaping woman, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to freak you out or anything, with the flying…” She just felt so comfortable and had forgotten herself.

Devi made a pained face as she adjusted her position in her chair, but her eyes remained glued to Kara, fascinated. “I’m not freaked, at all, in awe is more like it. You can catch bullets out of midair, shoot lasers out of your eyes, have super strength and that lightning speed, oh, and cold breath… yes, I remember…” She grinned warmly. “And you can fly. Come on, that’s just… beyond incredible. I bet that’s not all you can do, either.”

Kara was smiling and had returned to arranging their serving tray and teapot at the counter. “No, not
all.” She said playfully.

Under her breath, so quiet that a human would not have heard, the detective whispered “Sundor” in a lovely language Kara had never heard before.

*Interesting! I wonder what language she’s speaking?*

“So, the hotel was actually being used as a staging ground to move weapons?” Kara asked politely over her shoulder.

The detective almost jumped at her words and came back to reality from wherever her mind had drifted watching Kara from behind, “Yeah, my informant told me there was a deal going down, but he thought it was drugs, not guns. Turns out it was a death trap for Dan and me.”

Kara finished preparing their cups, and gracefully moved to the table with the tray and steaming pot, setting the obviously grateful woman’s tea in front of her with a smile. “Are you okay now? I mean someone owned those weapons the police impounded, paid those horrible men with the masks…”

Devi’s heart rate sped up, and she studied Kara’s face intently with her intelligent brown eyes that seemed to see everything. “You’re asking the same questions I’ve been asking myself. My trusted informant put us in harm’s way intentionally… but why? Blackmail? Or was it just money? Is the Brotherhood, the Russian cartel that owns the illicit gun trade in National City, that petty or determined enough to send assassins after me for stumbling onto their operation? Honestly, Angel, I don’t know. Wish I did, and I want to get back to work to find the answers.”

“Angel?” Kara asked playfully as she tilted her head.

Devi blushed. “It’s easier than Archangel, and feels more friendly.” The detective looked down nervously at the cup she was holding in both hands.

Kara took a deep breath, and said, “How about just, Kara?”

Devi’s gaze shot up. “You’re trusting me with your actual name?”

Trust. Kara knew she gave it too easily, but she felt good about this woman. She sipped her tea and smiled, “I guess I am.”

Devi grinned right back, everything about her was singing in Kara’s senses. Whoa. “I’m still calling you Angel, sometimes… it suits you.”

“Sounds fair, I’m used to it (Kara smiled thinking of her boss). Now, tell me more about this cartel, and who I need to go visit to make sure they leave you alone… permanently.”

…………

Kara’s time with the detective had lasted much longer than she’d intended, but it had been wonderful… and felt like she’d already made a great friend. Kara liked the brave, keenly intelligent, and perceptive woman… and had enjoyed getting to know her better. Hearing a little bit about her childhood growing up in India, and what it was like being a cop (as a woman of color) in National City made Kara realize how connected, and similar they were… even with their differences.

Devi’s name in Sanskrit even meant ‘goddess’ which they both found rather interesting. And like Kara, her new friend was also an alien trying to fit in, a brave, unflinching brown woman in the still male-dominated profession.
The detective was principled and believed in fairness, justice, standing up for the little guy, and in protecting the innocent. She’d spent her childhood in the West Bengali capital of Kolkata before moving to the U.S. with her family, and spoke a handful of languages besides English, including Hindi, and Bengali.

She blushed when Kara asked her what the word ‘Sundor’ meant.

“Kara! You weren’t supposed to hear that!” Devi moaned as she buried her face in her hands.

Turned out, the word translated to something like ‘pretty and adorable’, or ‘beautiful’. It was Kara’s turn to blush. They ended up laughing about it, and to her delight, that conversation led to Devi promising to teach her Bengali, and Hindi after.

After running three loads of clothes, folding, hanging, and putting them away, Kara flew to Devi’s favorite falafel truck to bring them, and the officers outside, lunch. The two men fell over themselves to let the pretty blonde bearing food pass up to Devi’s apartment (she’d decided to come back on foot and just be Devi’s friend Kara Danvers instead of Archangel).

The food was as delicious as the detective had promised, and Kara made a mental note to pick up more sometime that coming week for Alex to try.

After a protracted, delicate hug, and with a long checklist of things to investigate, both for Devi, who’d trusted her to gather some intelligence, and for herself, to assure the officer’s continued safety, Kara finally and very reluctantly left her new friend’s apartment.

Kara was very certain of two things as she launched herself into the sky... one, she’d definitely made a new friend; and two... after some investigative legwork, a certain Russian mobster would very soon be visited by an extremely angry Kryptonian.

28 July

1542 Hours UTC -8, Sunday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time...

Kara had been avoiding the most difficult thing on her to-do list... visiting Olivia and Ben, the family she felt she’d failed. But first, she had to find them... so she returned to the hospital she’d taken them the day of the disaster. Once there, as Kara Danvers, she sought out Ilisa Oni, the Head ER nurse she’d spoken to about the mother and son’s injuries when she dropped them off that awful night.

The kind Nigerian woman with the remarkable accent had seen a bloody Kara’s moment of weakness that day when she’d collapsed against the hallway wall in tears after mother and son had been taken into surgery. Ilisa had held her while she cried, giving her comfort, and the strength to go back to the bridge to finish the job... She’d also never mentioned Kara’s involvement to anyone.

Over tea in the hospital break room that Sunday they spoke of many things, Ilisa’s artistic thirteen-year-old daughter, Harmona, who shared Kara’s love of painting, as well as their experiences as immigrants, the life of an ER RN, Kara’s powers, and the boy... Ben.

The spirited twelve-year-old was recovering rapidly, but had months of healing, and most likely years of rehab and physical therapy ahead of him.

When Kara asked for Olivia’s full name and address she knew it was risky for the woman to agree,
but Ilisa gave it to her anyway, no strings attached or questions asked… just the hope that she would spend time with the nurse again soon, and maybe talk to her daughter about the girl’s artistic interests.

It was an easy promise for Kara to make. *Hmm, maybe Harmona and I could sign up for Julia’s class together? That’d be fun!*

After tea, Kara flew out to National City’s far suburbs… over vast mazes of streets, sidewalks, small parks, and lawns… with their backyard fences and patios. The vibe of these neighborhoods was different from the feel of where she lived in Midvale. More sprawl, but still welcoming.

She landed quietly in a wooded area near Olivia Roth’s modest Ranch style home… and waited. As she contemplated walking up and knocking on the front door, Kara watched and listened to the goings on in the house using her X-Ray vision and sensitive hearing.

Inside, young Ben was wrapped in casts and bandages. His right arm was mostly immobilized, except for three fingers, and he was propped up in a fancy robotic wheelchair in their living room playing Minecraft on his Xbox One. He was talking to and laughing with his friends online using a hands-free headset, and deftly managing his game controller with a hand and a half.

Olivia, still wearing a black patch over her damaged eye, walked in carrying a sports bottle with a long straw sticking out of it, and placed it on the table right next to him. “Hey, an hour until lunch little man, then homework.”

“But, Captain…” He whined with puppy dog eyes.

“Argh! So that’s how it is, huh, boy? Well, there’ll be no argument, or you’ll be walkin’ the plank, and the Xbox will go off early.” She arched her good eyebrow, waiting for his response.

Ben grinned, “Fine, but I had to try. Thanks, mom… You know I’m just joking about the pirate thing, right?”

“You’re a stinker.” She laughed, crossing her arms over her chest as she walked back to the kitchen. Kara watched Olivia carefully as she sat down on a high stool at the granite counter in the sunlit room, her shoulders slumping, and a look of sorrow on her face.

The smiling woman she’d shown her son was a mask… she now seemed so sad and fragile. That’s when Kara moved, appearing in an instant to tap on the kitchen’s back patio door.

Olivia’s gaze snapped up at the sound, and her surprise shifted from confusion to amazement. She sprang from her seat to unlock the slider. “Archangel! Oh, my God, it’s YOU!” Kara, smiling and looking a little awkward, was enveloped in a massive hug and pulled into the kitchen by the transformed woman. “I never thought I’d see you again… or get to say thanks.”

Kara, in her yellow dress, pushed her tilted glasses back up onto the ridge of her nose, and said quietly, “I’m not sure I deserve any gratitude, Mrs. Roth. I… couldn’t save him. I’m so, so sorry…” She wiped a tear from her eye and tried to control her breathing… but was starting to shake!

Olivia tilted her head quizzically studying Kara, and after a moment seemed to come to a sudden realization. “Oh! You poor thing! It’s not your fault, sweetheart!” She said, stepping in close to guide the trembling hero to sit in a chair. “Call me Olivia, okay? We’re on a first-name basis after what you did for us. Can I get you anything? Tea, coffee, water, juice, ice tea, or maybe a soda?”

Kara took in an unsteady breath, and replied, “Water would be nice, thank you… Olivia.”
She spent almost two hours there, talking, crying, and laughing with the wonderful woman, who didn’t blame her at all for her husband’s death. She explained to Kara that when the bridge collapsed, their car was the first to be crushed, and he’d died instantly.

It still haunted her, but she was coping... or at least starting to.

She had her family, a good therapist, friends, a sympathetic boss at the coffee shop where she worked as an assistant manager, her faith in God, which Kara’s intervention had only seemed to strengthen, and most importantly, Ben. She had to be strong for him, and his future.

The older woman also helped dispel Kara’s remaining guilt by asking simply, “Could you have predicted the future and prevented the bridge collapse?” And the Kryptonian’s answer was no. Kara couldn’t have saved her husband, no matter how fast her super speed had taken her… but she did save Ben and Olivia, and for that, Archangel would forever be a friend and their hero.

Olivia also had something else to say, though she hesitated at first to get the words out. “I see how you carry the weight of the world on your graceful shoulders… how you fret over every life you touch… but Archangel, you don’t need to. You saved us, and as appreciative as I am, and believe me, I am, of you coming to check in on Ben and me, it’s… a selfish thing to keep you here, when so many need you. Look, what I’m trying to say is you’re not responsible for picking up the pieces of every life you save… you’ve done enough. What happens after is really on us to deal with, and as we humans have proved time and time again, we’re pretty good at handling adversity.”

Kara sighed. “I know. I know you’re right. I’m just... well, I’m kind of new at this, and it’s just so hard to… let go.”

Olivia smiled and tilted her head, looking at Kara as if she were the most precious thing in the universe. “Believe me, sweetie, I get it, I’m a mom. Sometimes we need to let our kids pick themselves up after they fall down, even when it hurts.” She then placed a comforting hand on Kara’s forearm, which the blonde grasped gently in one of her own.

“Is it okay if I stay, just for a while?” The hero's tone was timid... she was worried Olivia would say no.

“Of course, of course. I’d like nothing more, as long as I’m not keeping you from anything important, or people who need your help.”

Kara nodded, “I’ll let you know if I need to leave. I’m listening in, for anything that might require my… um, special skills. Anyway, Olivia, thank you for the talk, it helped.”

“Anytime Archangel. I owe you a lifetime.”

After a long hug, Kara proceeded to use her vision to check on Olivia’s eye, which had healed nicely and told her that she could lose the patch... with her doctor’s permission, of course. The older woman joked that Ben was going to be really disappointed with that. The young scallywag liked his pirate mom.

After being introduced to Ben as a ‘work friend’, and playing Minecraft with him for a while, Kara also casually scanned the boy for his worried mother. She found that while he was mending well overall, two metal pins had come loose in his right leg. Olivia made a note to call and make an appointment with Ben’s doctor on Monday to have him checked out.

The woman was so blown away by Kara that she poured them both a glass of wine.

Before she left, Kara also convinced Olivia to let her help with the now single parent’s biggest
headache… money. She used her super speed and hyper comprehension to sift through and organize the harried woman’s financial records, bank accounts, everything. A mental call to Ada helped straighten out the craziness that was going on for Olivia behind the scenes with her husband’s accounts, and with the insurance payouts, worth over two million dollars after taxes.

It was magical how Shah’s amazing daughter could slip behind firewalls and make things happen.

Kara also gave Olivia Archangel’s cell number and email, saying, “Call if you ever need me, or just want to talk.” As they parted, the hero’s heart was filled with warm embers of light.

The regret and shame she’d held onto for so long had been replaced by joy, and harmony.

With Olivia waving farewell and watching from her backyard patio, Kara (with the biggest smile on her face you can imagine) soared straight up into the cloudless summer sky… like a blur.

*Up, up… and away!* She giggled as she recited Kal’s famous line to herself, and then gazed upward. It was time to free herself from the shrouded haze of Earth’s atmosphere and once again feel Sol’s tantalizing warmth on her skin.

*Time to touch the sun!*

………………

**Story FAQ:**

**Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms:** I attempt to *italicize* all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

**Terms:** Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

*Ah!khoob ast* – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

*Alex vanimelda* - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

*Aporup* – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)

*Azdidane shoma khoshhalam* – Means ‘nice to meet you’ (Persian)

*Bedrood*: Means ‘good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

*C'est magnifique!* – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

*Damnú air!* – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)

*Dooset daram* – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

*El mayarah* – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

*Eres mi luz.* – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

*Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa* – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)
Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Kheili khosh geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature. (Persian)

Marbhfháisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)

órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Sundor – ‘beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)

Vuela, mi diosa! Vuela! – ‘Fly my goddess! Fly!’ (Spanish)

Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

aziz-am – ‘my dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

joon-am – ‘my dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

nafasem-an – ‘my breath’ (what Kara sometimes calls/says to Alex)

Nāzanin-am – ‘sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation. (what Shah calls Ada)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘the light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person’s name<’ + joon (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean ‘dear’. So, ‘Shah joon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.
Other names/nickname/titles/things:

**Anamchara** – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

**Bríomhaire** – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

**Cairdiúil** – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

**Dios mío!** – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

**Eres mi luz.** – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

**Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa** – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

**Hermanas** – Sisters (Spanish)

**Infinite loop** - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

**Little Star** - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

**Mi diosa** – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

**Muninn** – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS *Zumwalt*

**My dreamcatcher** – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

**Noshidan!** – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

**Nūsh** – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

**Ouroboros** - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity.

**Rao** – Krypton’s ancient god, as well as the name of the Red Giant star the planet orbited before its destruction. (Kryptonese)

**Salud!** – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

**Seanmháthair** – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced *shan a WAW her* (Irish/Gaelic)

**Tieguanyin** - *Thih-koan-im*; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

**Tratung** – *khrag ‘thung* - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

**Tuath Dé Danann** - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced *Thoo-a day Du-non* (Irish/Gaelic)

A race of mythic, god-like beings gifted with supernatural powers who invaded and ruled Ireland over four thousand years ago. According to an ancient document known as the Annals of the Four Masters (Annála na gCeithre Mástrí compiled by Franciscan monks between 1632-1636 from earlier texts) the Danann ruled from 1897 BC until 1700 BC.
Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’. ‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar, and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Vallerian – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers (and givers), can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshipped, or traded.

Wan - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:
I hope you’re as happy as I am that Kara finally made peace with her feelings of guilt over what happened with Ben and Olivia, as well as the other people she’s saved (or failed to save) as National City’s mostly stealthy Guardian Angel. Did you like Julia? I think she and Kara become friends for sure, though not Scooby Gang close like Devi and Aeryn. Also, regarding the something strange going on with Jeremiah… do you think Kara and Alex should be more concerned? Maybe give more urgency to intervening? Honestly, they have no clue as to what’s actually going on behind the scenes, but I bet you do, D.E.O.n’t you?

Kara, Alex, and Shah only have five days until they head up to the Pacific Northwest to celebrate with their friends and actually attend a masked ball… in a freaking castle!

Next Up:
Chapter 21: “Masquerade” - Where our heroes fly up the coast to Seattle to attend a ceremony on the USS Zumwalt, a masked ball (in a castle!), finally meet Tom’s wife - Capt. Myka Daniels, and the mysterious Amanda Thorpe from the U.S. State Department. What does the woman want from Archangel? Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me. Also, please share this story with those you think might enjoy it! Spread the word!

Thoughts:

*The hymn that Julia Doyle was remembering from her childhood:
"Angel Voices Ever Singing"
Hymn / Words: Francis Pott, 1866

Song inspirations:
Lamb – Angelica on YouTube
Sarah McLachlan - In the arms of an angel
Burial - Archangel
These are just a few of many songs that make me think of Archangel/Kara as Julia and
others see her – divine, immortal, mysterious, sent by God. I would love to know what
songs do that for you!

Coldplay - Yellow
I have always thought of this song as sung from Alex’s perspective about Kara.

‘Look at the stars
Look how they shine for you
And everything you do
Yeah they were all yellow…’

But in this case, I can’t stop hearing it when Aeryn is talking to Kara about seeing her
shine as bright as the sun. No romantic connotation implied between them, that’s all for
Alex.

Dead Can Dance – Summoning the Muse on YouTube
Makes me think of an ominous, powerful, faceless gods maneuvering in the shadows,
and Kara joining the fight.

Kim Possible Theme Song – Call Me, Beep Me
Longtime Kim/Shego shipper. Watched the show with my daughter, but secretly loved
it for me.
Masquerade

Chapter Summary

Where our heroes fly up the coast to Seattle to attend an official promotion ceremony on the USS Zumwalt, a masked ball (in an actual castle!) and finally meet Tom’s wife - U.S. Navy Captain Myka Daniels. There’s also some Jess and Ada goodness and Kara has her encounter with the State Department’s mysterious Amanda Thorpe.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Aug 4th – Year 2

Santa Cruz, CA - Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk

1015 Hours UTC -8, Friday morning, U.S. West Coast Time

“Geez Kara, that’s so anticlimactic… but awesome!” Alex said as she sipped at her Super Double Colossal Strawberry Blueberry Yogurt SmoothieTM and immediately winced from a brain freeze. Shah nodded in agreement from behind her stylish sunglasses as she took a luxurious bite of her massive, cinnamon sugar encrusted churro.

The inseparable trio sat around a small table on the wide wooden deck of the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, all unintentionally moving in rhythmic sync to the muffled beat of someone’s too-loud electronic dance music thumping in the far-off parking lot. Kara had just begun filling them in on how her TCC 2.0 pitch went earlier that morning. They’d left right after her meeting ended to make sure they had enough time for a pit stop in Santa Monica on the way up the coast to Seattle from National City, and she’d waited until they could sit down to talk about it.

Why the Boardwalk? Well, it was one of all of their favorite places, plus (and more importantly) Alex loved The Smoothie Shack’s amazing concoctions and Kara loved her, sooo…

Speaking of Kara, her gorgeous bondmate was tilted back in her aluminum deck chair, eyes half-closed as she basked lazily in the morning sun. “Yeah, it didn’t play out at all how I expected. I guess when Ms. Grant got the call to fly to Brussels to do an exclusive interview with the President of the World Bank in the middle of a global financial crisis, her very important meeting with CatCo intern Kara Danvers somehow fell off her calendar.”

“You’re sad you didn’t get to meet your hero in a one-on-one… I’m so sorry Sheereen-am.” Shah said with sympathy as she leaned over and offered Kara a bite of her greasy, sugar-coated dessert… which (of course) the ever-hungry Kryptonian did not refuse. Alex couldn’t help but smile around her straw as Shah playfully fed her bondmate. Seeing the two of them so happy together made her warm and contented from the inside out.

After Kara chewed and swallowed she said, “Was it disappointing that I didn’t get to meet the woman face to face, just the two of us? Yeah… it was. But honestly, it’s okay. Ms. Grant couldn’t
miss the opportunity, and I was still able to present my proposal for TCC 2.0 to CatCo’s executive committee... and get it approved.”

Alex lifted her smoothie up to toast, and the others followed suit, “Well, congratulations! You just changed that company in ways a single story never could,” Alex could feel how her words delighted her lover.

Kara was blushing, as usual. “Thanks, Alex, it really helped that Colliers, Jenkins, and the majority of the editorial board backed me.”

Shah grinned, “Give yourself credit. You spent weeks refining that proposal and winning them over before the meeting. It’s that Danvers and Zor-El charm, I know it well.”

Alex reached over and squeezed Shah’s hand, “Well, I for one think Kara deserves a celebratory lunch. I propose we stop in Gateway City on the way north, Shatari and I found a great place on Yelp that looks perfect and we can book reservations.”

“Sounds like a plan!” Kara beamed her million-dollar smile at the mention of food. “Although I do have one request. Can we go on the roller coaster one more time before we take off?”

Alex chuckled. “Sure, whatever you wish.” Sometimes my beautiful alien is such a puppy... and I love it!

As the blonde wiggled in her seat doing her happy dance Alex was overcome by a feeling of intense joy. Rao! Her whole life she never really understood how happy a person could feel... until Kara. Alex’s perfect girlfriend, her soul mate, had given her a world of bliss. Half the time nowadays it was like her insides were filled with liquid sunshine. Ugh! She had always professed how much she hated sappy, happy crap... but the truth was she was just scared that she’d never find it... and now that she had it was like waking up for the first time every day.

What she felt with Kara was true, and real, and wonderful!

It wasn’t just that she was still pumped from their stealthy flight up from National City at what Kara called a ‘leisurely’ 1,500 mph (that part of the flight had been under her and Shah’s own power!); that it was a perfectly cloudless day; that her new Kryptonian DNA was loving soaking in the sun; or that they’d spent time on the beach at Big Sur along their way; or that she’d flown only inches above the dazzling waters in sync with a pod of friendly dolphins! No, not just those things, or the fact that the view of the ocean was so beautiful, or that she was sitting on the Boardwalk with the two people she loved most in the world...

It was all of that, and so much more.

Her bond was on fire (in a very good way) with how much she loved Kara, and they could both feel it.

..........................

Aug 4th – Year 2

Gateway City – Lavash, Persian restaurant

Time – 1225 Hours UTC -8, Friday early afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time
Lunch was fantastic!

Lavash, on Irving Street, turned out to be perfect for what Alex was looking for: she not only surprised Shah with her choice of one the City by the Bay’s highest-rated Persian restaurants, but Kara was able to enjoy its vast array of vegetarian options. It also had a cozy atmosphere, with meticulous design choices that added to its authenticity.

Fresh-cut flowers seemed to be everywhere, and subtle artistic touches were pervasive in every nook and cranny… it was as if an artist ran the place. The cheery staff consisted of mostly Persians or Afghans, who all knew Farsi, and were exceedingly charming and engaging. The girls ended up never speaking English the entire visit, much to the delight of the tourists seated near them.

After their incredible meal, they celebrated Kara’s win by ordering Tiramisu, which turned out to be the best any of them had ever had.

Shah said, “Don’t tell Tala that this is better than hers. Ever, okay?”

They each had a huge piece, pleasingly arranged on a pristine white plate, drizzled with cherry sauce, and decorated with plump red raspberries and blackberries… brilliant green mint leaves added the finishing touch. While they couldn’t order wine, they happily shared a couple of pots of Persian and Rose tea as they talked, and enjoyed their quiet time together.

Secretly, Alex had been hoping to catch a glimpse of Gateway City’s famous hero, Wonder Woman, while they were in town... but sadly the Amazon Princess didn't make an appearance. *Maybe I should just ask the Big Lug to introduce me?* She pondered, but then quickly nixed the idea. There was no f’ing way she was going to look like a fangirl, not to the greatest superhero of all time (sorry Kal!).

-------------

**Aug 4th – Year 2**

*A lonely airstrip approximately 25 miles south of Aberdeen, WA*

*1406 Hours UTC -8, Friday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time*

- **Latitude:** N 46° 42’ 3.9016”
- **Longitude:** W 123° 49’ 32.3751”

They wound their way up the coast, avoiding military installations and civilian flight paths by staying low, and sticking primarily to wilderness areas, and national and state forests. Kara, Shatari, and Zara kept them cloaked, but their twisty route was just added safety, to keep out of sight as much as possible. They did have a couple of brushes with radar but squeaked through without incident, and finally reached the secluded pick-up coordinates Jessica had sent them shortly after 1400 hours. It was a tiny little out-of-the-way airstrip just south of Aberdeen, near a bay.

“Too bad we don’t have time to see Kurt Cobain’s house, it’s on my bucket list,” Alex admitted as they landed off in the trees, very close to the small buildings that served as hangers and air traffic control for the small planes that used the runway.

“We never would have guessed.” Both Kara and Shah deadpanned simultaneously (Alex’s near worship of all things Nirvana was legendary), and then the pair giggled, with Kara quickly adding, “Let’s do it on the way back.”
A bright smile lit up Alex’s face.

While staying hidden within the cover of the trees, they made their way near to *Muninn*, waiting for them on an unused patch of runway… just as Jess had said it would be. There were only a handful of civilians at the airstrip, but the sight of the sleek, growling beast had them gawking and taking pictures.

The mottled gray, stealthy Sikorsky MH-80S Seahawk hadn’t even bothered to power down yet, Kara had signaled the *Zumwalt* with just enough time for them to arrive only minutes apart.

Alex was about to let Jess know they were ready when the Petty Officer’s familiar voice called out over their old-fashioned comm’s. “Archangel, are you and your team ready to board? I’m not liking all this attention.” They’d made the decision to use the human way of communicating rather than their crystal network so others aboard the ship could hear them. Zara and Shatari had no problem picking up the secure variable signal and relaying to their hosts, as well as Kara’s headset.

Alex and Shah gripped their backpacks, nodding to Kara, who hefted her large duffle to her shoulder and replied, “Open the barn door, Petty Officer.”

Together, they shimmered with super speed and within seconds were inside the spacious internal cabin of the helicopter, stowing their gear. Kara and Shah sat down in the leather jump seats on either side of Jess, with Alex facing across from them. She’d placed herself as far from Dante Caruso’s roving hands as she could get, and directly beside the much larger form of Aya Yoshida, who held her M16 safely between her legs. Her friend turned and smiled warmly as Alex greeted her in French.

As the helicopter’s door closed Jessica popped out of her restraints with what seemed like inhuman speed. “¡*Mi diosa!*” She squealed as she wrapped Kara in a powerful hug.

Then, as the helo began to rise, a bright pinpoint of pure white light began to coalesce and expand in the center of the cabin. None of their friends reacted to the strange phenomenon, so Alex just watched along with them.

The brilliance flared for a just a moment and then dimmed as Ada’s form took shape… and wow, had she changed!

Shah’s daughter was no longer a flicker of sunlight or an angelic human form made of glittering sunbeams… she was clearly a living, breathing, lovely young woman a little older than her (maybe nineteen or twenty), dressed in a Navy uniform, with a shapely, athletic build, and as tall as Alex. Her complexion was like sun-kissed honey, with long, straight black hair, and kind, green eyes. She appeared substantial, solid… real, and so familiar…

Alex stared in stunned silence. *Holy crap! It is exactly like we all had a baby together, oh Rao! She’s beautiful!*

Ada smiled with delight as she quickly scanned her surroundings, and then very calmly said, “Please state the nature of the medical emergency.”

Jess, not surprised at all, immediately raised her hands to cover her mouth, trying unsuccessfully to stifle her giggles. Kara was chuckling too and still had her arm around the Latina to keep her from tumbling about the cabin of the swiftly moving helicopter.

“Did my daughter just make an obscure *Star Trek Voyager* reference?” Shah was beaming, still staring at her daughter in wonder. “Welcome to geekdom, *Nāzanin-am*, I’m so proud of you!”
Ada then appeared across the eight or so feet of space with just a flicker to envelope her mother in a fierce embrace. Alex was startled and sent her thoughts to Kara. *Did you see that? She was so fast I couldn’t even follow her movements!*

*That’s because I’m fairly sure that she didn’t use super speed. She just seemed to cease to exist for a fraction of a second, and then… bam! She appeared over with Shah. I think she actually teleported, like how she arrived. Respect.* Kara said as she joined Alex in openly admiring their niece.

Shadow’s mask dissolved as she returned her daughter’s hug wholeheartedly. “You did it! The Awakening worked! I can feel you…” Shah’s trembling words were spoken like a whisper, and there were tears in the normally stoic eyes. “*Kheili khosh geli.*” She said softly in Persian, her face buried in her daughter’s neck as she cried happy tears. “*Dooset daram.*”

Alex had heard those phrases on many occasions. Usually special moments, when Kara would tell her in the beautiful language how beautiful she was, and that she loved her. But Shah’s voice carried a different tone and inflection... a mother’s adoration and unwavering love for her child.

“I can feel you too, both of you.” Ada was ecstatic. “The Awakening worked exactly as we’d hoped it would! I am now as you and Alex will be when you complete your Kryptonian transformations (sorry, I cheated and skipped to the end). I even have a special power like you guys! So far, on top of my regular Kryptonian abilities, I’ve discovered that I can turn into different kinds of energy (which is how I can become light), and teleport… at least that’s what Jess wants us to call it. What I actually do is create a tiny fold in space-time and step through.”

“*Tomayto, tomahto mi lucero.*” Jess pooh-poohed with from her seat next to Kara.

Ada briefly glanced over to smile sweetly at the Petty Officer, and then returned her attention to her mother... reaching up with joyful reverence to touch Shah’s face and wipe a tear from her cheek. “Thank you for my life, mothers. It is a precious gift, like you both.” She looked around the cabin, her eyes glistening, seeking Alex and Kara as she said, “And you too, aunties.”

Alex realized she’d been squeezing Aya’s hand too tightly as she watched the touching scene, so she relaxed her grip and allowed Flame’s mask to disperse as well. Though her vision was quite blurry, she returned her niece’s smile and said, “Ada, you look… absolutely perfect.”

Kara clasped her hands together up under her chin and squealed with joy, “You’re like an angel! Oh, oh, I so need to make you a suit! All white, with wings!”

The young woman giggled joyfully, “If you design it, I can reproduce it, even wings… thanks to the skills I inherited from my other mother.” Her clothing then began to shift, becoming fluid the way Shatari and Zara did when changing form. Two seconds later Ada was no longer in her Navy uniform, but wearing a stunning, svelte white version of Kara’s flight suit. “I’m sure your design will look even nicer, auntie; I can’t wait to see what you come up with for me.”

“Awww. Thanks, Ada.” Kara said, and then tapped her temple with a smile. “I’m already working on it.”

Aya had been watching quietly, but suddenly chuckled with a kind of stunned amazement and slapped Alex on the back with a loud clap. “What an incredible family you’re part of, Alex! You’re all like the Shinto *Kami*… great spirits… beautiful and terrifying forces of nature. I am SO glad you’re my friends!”

“Damn straight.” Petty Officer 3rd Class Caruso blurted out, and the grinning pair leaned over to fist
“Archangel, Flame, Shadow, and Starlight.” Jessica sighed dreamily from across the way, cuddled up right next to Kara like a happy kitten. Alex wasn’t jealous. In fact, she thought they looked adorable together; the Latina really did worship her bondmate. Her keen powers of observation also noticed that something had clearly changed with Jessica… for the better.

Alex sent her thoughts to Shah. *Okay, this is a first… Jess isn’t making heart eyes at Kara... she hasn’t been able to stop staring longingly at your daughter! The girl has it bad. Just look at her!*

Over in her seat, Shah was beaming. *The Petty Officer has good taste.*

“So, you picked a codename?” Kara was asking her niece. “I like Starlight, it’s very pretty... and suits you, just like your powers.”

Ada blushed, “Thank you, auntie.”

“I’m so outnumbered here, but in a good way. A single dude, surrounded by hot goddesses!” A smirking Dante Caruso interrupted, causing Alex to narrow her gaze at him. Something dirty was going through the sailor’s mind, she was certain of that.

Giving him one last warning glare for good measure, Alex focused her attention back on her friend sitting next to her. “It’s so good to see you again, Aya.”

“You were missed, Danvers.” The stoic warrior’s slight, happy smile spoke volumes. “I have new weapons to show you. I might even let you fire some of them... if you’re interested.”

“Really?” Alex’s eager voice raised two octaves. “Hells yeah. How long ‘til we reach the Zumwalt?”

The larger woman checked her watch, then verified with the clock on the side panel of the Muninn, and said, “Twenty-one minutes. You three had better change.”

*Aug 4th – Year 2

USS Zumwalt – Anchored in Puget Sound, Port of Seattle

1436 Hours UTC -8, Friday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time*

True to her word, Jessica’s plan was flawless.

The soon-to-be Chief Petty officer and her very willing accomplice, Ada, had procured actual Navy identities and clearances for the three of them. They’d also brought the right clothing, U.S. Navy dress whites for Kara to change into and for Shatari and Zara to mimic. The heroes wore no masks or battle gear with their thinly veiled disguises, and to say they were nervous would have been a massive understatement.

When they finally reached the flight deck of the Zumwalt Aya and Caruso lugged all of their gear, other than a small backpack Kara asked him to leave on Muninn, off to their assigned quarters (a shared stateroom) below decks, while the rest of Team Archangel exited the aircraft. Jess and Ada ran interference while Kara, Alex, and Shah casually dispersed among the hundred and fifty-plus crew and invited guests gathered on the deck for the impending ceremony.
The Kryptonian couldn’t stop smiling the whole time. It felt good just being back on their ship, and among friends.

*Like coming home.*

Thanks to Jess and Ada, awareness of their presence on board had already spread like wildfire. Everywhere they went admiring sailors sought them out, as well as shielded the trio from being seen or accosted by anyone who might ask questions.

They were treated with a kind of awed wonder that Kara thought seemed more suited for royalty, or superstar celebrities than, well, three interns from Midvale. And it wasn’t just them; Ada had also been subject to various levels of… near devotion from the crew. It’s the only way she could describe what being the focus of such intense adoration felt like.

A great number reached out to simply touch them reverently as they walked by.

Kara forced herself to stay grounded and gracious with each encounter, as she once again felt the tempting allure of the literal power such devotion seemed to offer her. She resisted accepting it… reminding herself over and over of Lois’ words of humility. That said, she was also beginning to question the need for restraint.

Would it be such a bad thing?

She resolved to seek Alex and Naomi’s thoughts on the science (after all, they still didn’t understand exactly how her aura interacted with humans) and Shah’s wisdom around the ethical concerns. Her Persian sister was the wisest and most spiritual person Kara knew, had studied more about Krypton than any of them, and Kara trusted her completely.

But at that moment Jess and Ada were introducing her to some of the starry-eyed flight crew she’d never met before. A serious talk with her family would need to wait (which was fine with Kara, because those kind of talks were always exhausting).

All in all, they probably gave out more hugs in just the first twenty minutes of being on the ship than, well… ever! And it felt good.

Thankfully, it was a beautiful day for being deck-side… a comfortable seventy-one degrees Fahrenheit with calm seas. It was also delightfully sunny, with just enough cloud cover to give the crowd of well-dressed sailors respite from the baking rays (though Kara selfishly kept hoping the skies would clear for the day).

The splendor of the location wasn’t lost on any of them, either. As the trio took a break, drinking iced tea at the ship’s low rail, they admired the scenery. The stunning Seattle skyline stretched off to the east, the high, rugged, snow-draped Olympic Mountains loomed ominously to the west, and the vast Puget Sound was all around them… a lush, green world of placid water, endless trees, picturesque houses at the water’s edge, and mist-shrouded islands.

*We need to come back to explore this place.* Shah’s determined thoughts reached out to her sisters.

Kara couldn’t agree more. *I know! Isn’t it amazing? All the islands, and those Orcas… I can’t believe we saw them up close! They were so curious about us ‘wingless birds’, and even said hello!*

Alex chuckled. *Sounds like we need a return trip for sure. You can hang out with your new friends then.*

Kara kissed her on the cheek. *Thank you, Vaena! I can’t wait!*
The official ceremony was long, over two and a half hours, but worth it to be present for the elevation of Commander Daniels’ to the rank of Captain, Simmons to Rear Admiral, and Jessica to Chief. There were also other promotions and commendations given, as well as thoughtful, and inspiring speeches about perseverance, bravery, and sacrifice. Daniels’ old friend, Tony McClendon, the grizzled two-star Rear Admiral of Carrier Strike Group Nine was even on hand to officiate.

According to Jess, who’d explained things during the boring parts of the ceremony, the following spring the ship and its crew would begin their first clandestine solo missions as part of CSG-9, deploying to the Middle East. They’d be gone for at least nine months, maybe a year.

Kara officially hated this plan.

Them being so far away really wasn’t something the Kryptonian was ready to think about, it made her feel sick to her stomach for more than one reason. That said, with Ada’s ability to teleport her niece could come and go at will and apparently carry others with her so they had an easy way to get back and forth. Also, using the Zumwalt’s Kryptonian solid light projection tech, everyone else could at least visit.

Kara hadn’t tried flying as far as Europe yet, let alone Africa or the Persian Gulf; but maybe she’d need to do that sometime soon. She sighed. They’d figure it all out in the long run, somehow.

Back to the ceremony...

It was all pretty cool to be part of, even with the draggy parts, and despite the fact that they were technically uninvited guests.

That afternoon was also Kara’s first chance to meet Myka Daniels, Captain of the USS Washington. The Kryptonian had long looked forward to finally meeting Tom’s legendary wife, even though the hero always felt a kink in her neck just thinking about how the other Daniels’ vessel had rolling-pinned her against a sea cliff that fateful day in the Atlantic.

It was after the ceremony had ended, and the crew had splintered off into groups. Jess led Kara back to the flight deck and directed her to a secluded spot where Captain Tom Daniels, over six and a half feet of him, stood in his full dress whites that almost matched the color of his close-cropped hair, medals gleaming on his chest, with a sword strapped to his left side and his cap under his arm.

He looked every inch the military commander her General should be. She probably shouldn’t have, but Kara felt great pride knowing that the new Captain had pledged himself to her.

Standing next to him was another Captain: a striking woman who appeared to be in her mid 30’s whom Kara assumed was Mrs. Daniels, though she’d expected Tom’s mate to be older. She was tall like him, close to six-feet, with Navy regulation length wavy brown hair, and a tanned, almost bronze complexion. Myka was dressed in the female officer’s version of the crisp white dress uniform, including cap, mid-length skirt, medals, white heels, and a long sword.

She also had piercing gray eyes similar to her husband’s, but more exotic… her pupils were streaked with silver. Kara had never seen anything like them before… it was like looking into the gaze of a bird of prey.

Kara immediately wanted to paint the stunning woman.

The two Captains looked relaxed and she could see how they kept a slight professional distance but leaned into each other as if gravity were pulling them inexorably together.

Kara wanted to fly over and body-hug her friend but didn’t feel comfortable doing so in front of
Myka, or the under the scrutiny of roaming eyes from non-Zumwalt personnel who might happen upon them. Plus, it was also an auspicious occasion that probably deserved a measure of decorum…

“Rao!” The Kryptonian growled under her breath in frustration, she was trying hard to be an adult but hated every agonizing second of it. She walked over.

The commanding couple turned as Kara approached, and she was probably far more pleased than she should have been by the look of joy that erupted on Tom’s face when he saw her. For her part, Myka seemed as pleased as her husband at Kara’s arrival, smiling at her with genuine fondness.

Is it weird that I think that it’s so cute that Myka and Tom are finally the same rank? And they look so perfect together, by the way. Kara sent her thoughts out to Alex.

No, not at all… in fact it’s sweet. Alex chimed back. Though, if asked I’ll deny I ever said that. I’ll say hi to the happy couple later.

Noted, oh serious one. Kara long-distance hugged her bondmate.

“My Goddess,” Tom said with great respect, bowing.

“My General. It’s so good to see you.” Kara responded, gracefully returning his action with her own inhumanly graceful curtsy. She was feeling bold… okay, maybe showing off a little.

She then immediately shifted her focus to Myka. “And it’s such a pleasure to finally meet you, Captain Daniels.”

The elegant woman’s smile hadn’t abated, and she stepped briskly over to embrace a very surprised Kara. “It’s Myka to you, my dear. No need for formalities, I feel like we’re family already.” The woman smelled so good (an intoxicatingly subtle scent Kara could not place, which never, ever happened) and was incredibly strong. She also moved with a refined elegance that reminded Kara of Shah but was somehow even more… regal. Being wrapped in Myka Daniels’ arms was so comforting, and in a surprisingly wonderful way gave Kara a feeling of absolute safety.

She didn’t want the officer to let go when she finally did.

Wow, maybe Tom’s the lucky one.

Kara was blushing when she replied, “Myka, of course. Thank you.”

The older woman leaned back in very close and whispered, “You saved my crew, my ship, and my life, beautiful one… and that’s not even the best part.”

Kara was swallowed nervously, stammered, and asked, “Wh... what’s the best part?” She wanted to know so badly, still lost in the depths of Myka’s amazing silvery eyes as the woman lingered only inches away…

Then the Captain smiled, straightened, and lightly touched the center of Kara’s chest with two fingers. “You. You are the answer to the question.”

Before she could ask ‘what question?’ a group of sailors wandered within earshot, and spoiled the moment, ending any further conversation on the topic. Kara was confused, but also completely intrigued. She did take advantage of the moment to satisfy her curiosity about something though and focused her X-Ray vision to carefully peer under Myka’s crisp, white uniform.

Yup, there it is! A bronze medallion of Athena, similar to her husband’s (only more ornate) hung
around her neck… and, like his, it held the same indecipherable power, though Myka’s was even brighter… as if a star was barely contained inside.

As more sailors came over to talk to the officers, Tom leaned over to Kara and whispered, “Let’s pick this up later, it’s getting crowded here. It might be a good time for you to go find Vaden, the Chief’s been dying to show you something. He’s probably holed up with Shah, his techs, and Ada on the Battle Bridge. I wouldn’t doubt that’s where Jess has disappeared to as well; she and my Navigator have become quite inseparable these days…” He raised an eyebrow and smirked.

Kara involuntarily giggled.

“Will you require an escort?” He asked, still grinning.

“Thank you, but no. I’ll find my way down to them.”

As she walked away she glanced at and waved shyly at Myka, whose warm smile followed the Kryptonian like a sunbeam, and felt damn near as good as one.

--------

Aug 4th – Year 2

Still on the USS Zumwalt

1720 Hours UTC -8, Friday evening, U.S. West Coast Time

After checking in on a happily absorbed Alex, who’d been hanging out with Aya and Caruso and a long rack of scary-looking weapons at the shooting range below decks, Kara paid a visit the Battle Bridge.

When she walked in everyone gathered there started clapping and cheering… for her. That’s weird.

She wasn’t sure why until she noticed the larger than life 3D version of herself on display on the wide curved ceiling of the Bridge. Lt. Vaden, Shah, Jessica, and Ada were watching a replay of Kara saving Detective Mitra’s life.

There she was in her beautiful blue dress, paused in motion… the AK-47 round meant for Devi caught between the index finger and thumb of one hand, the other calmly placed palm out, sending the bastard who tried to murder the detective, along with his accomplice, through a solid wall.

“Badass, mi diosa.” Jessica said with a whistle and a huge satisfied grin.

“I’m happy you approve.” Kara teased as she made the rounds… hugging the Chief Petty Officer and the very real Ada, and shaking the bespectacled and smiling Lt. CJ Vaden’s hand.

She was impressed. They’d somehow been able to capture every angle of her intervention on video, including a vast pool of data that was being overlaid on the images… angles, vectors, forces, acceleration, and even the real-time energy map of her aura as she moved.

“Wow, the Battle Bridge seems to be up and running smoothly.” She said after letting go of the Chief Engineer’s hand.

“Archangel… ahem, I mean Ms. Danvers…” Vaden spoke haltingly at first but, as usual, was very
polite. Kara found it endearing how the genius officer was still in a bit of awe of her even though they had become friends. One day maybe he’d tell her what the ‘CJ’ in his name stood for.

“Yes…” He continued. “Thanks to Navigator Ada’s hard work, we’re a hundred percent operational. And if you’re wondering how we received this data, it’s from your headset. When you actively transmit, as you did last Friday night, tiny Kryptonian nanobots housed inside of its casing swarm out, entangle themselves within your quantum field and begin gathering and transmitting... um, well, everything.

“You can turn them off whenever you wish and they’ll swarm back home into the headset. This isn’t meant to be intrusive, but a useful tool to both help us assist you in real-time, and to have a way to study scenarios after they occur, to learn new insights, and analyze what went right, and what could use improvement.”

“No more having to take awkward selfies when you want to send video back to us auntie.” Ada chuckled. “Not that you aren’t always adorable doing that.”

“How…?” Kara started to ask.

Shah spoke up, “The lieutenant and Ada implemented the tech integration on this end, but I designed the bots, Zara built them, and we modified your headset together.”

“So that’s what you’ve been working on all hush-hush? Rao! I’m totally impressed, but also really glad your little bots have an off switch.” She grinned awkwardly.

Just then, Alex, in her Navy dress whites, flickered onto one of the walkways of the Bridge. “New rule.” She said with a grin as she strode into the room, the hardened steel of the circular iris closing behind her, “You need to remember to turn that damned thing off at home, especially in the shower.”

They all laughed, and Kara turned red... thinking about all the other places they’d definitely not want the cameras rolling. Especially with Alex wearing that uniform, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to resist the brunette once they were alone. The last thing they needed was to accidentally turn the Zumwalt’s new, high-tech communications center into their very own porn hub.

As Alex joined them she snaked an arm around Kara’s waist and kissed her, before glancing at her wrist as if she were wearing a watch and saying, “Hey, why are we all standing around here? I made dinner reservations for us in less than an hour at a great place on Capitol Hill. Team Archangel, move out!”

“Yes, ma’am.” Kara purred. It turns out I like my woman in a uniform... and out of one.

Alex laid her head on her bondmate’s shoulder as they headed to the exit, and snuggled into Kara’s side as close as she could get, like a puzzle piece. I have it on good authority that if you play your cards right, you’ll get both.

Really? Well then, I better be on my best behavior!

Damn straight, you’re buying me dinner.

Alex?

Yeah?

I love you.
Aug 5th – Year 2

1820 Hours UTC -8, Saturday evening, U.S. West Coast Time

The trio slept in the following morning, though Kara did get up a bit earlier than Alex and Shah to call Aeryn and tell her about Athena. Her magical friend knew of the benevolent goddess and promised to follow-up with her family to see if they had any clue to her true nature or whereabouts. Kara didn’t have time to answer all of her questions but promised to fill her in with everything she knew once they were all back in National City.

Once everyone was awake she, Alex, and Shah spent that perfect Saturday with friends and family as a group in Seattle. Tom and Myka couldn’t come, but everyone else was there, including Ada, Jess, Aya, Dante, and Vaden. They did the standard touristy stuff: prowled Pike’s Place Market; had lunch at SkyCity (the restaurant at the top of the Space Needle); visited the EMP Museum, the Seattle Museum of Art (SMOA), and the Elliot Bay Book Company.

They also stopped by KEXP 90.3 FM (one of Alex’s favorite radio stations) to catch a live on-air performance by a local Seattle band called La Luz, whose slinky 1960s-girl-band sound blew them away (she and Alex even got to hang out with the band for a while!) and in the afternoon they all worked as a team playing an escape room game, ‘Escape From Twenty Thousand Leagues’. They even won, beating the time by four minutes and twenty-three seconds.

Ada was a delight to be with. Almost everything they did that day was a new experience for her. The young Kryptonian/human/AI embraced her new life with a childlike sense of joy and wonder.

Both Shah and Jess seemed happier than the Kryptonian had ever seen either of them, and it was clear to her that the Petty Officer and her niece we falling for each other.

Kara could have stitched together a totally sappy montage from all the scenes that occurred between the totally infatuated couple throughout the day: Jess and Ada giggling and putting sunglasses on each other at Pike’s Place, tasting each other’s lunches, sharing an ice cream cone, pressed against SkyCity’s massive angled windows, looking down and out over the city and leaning into each other so comfortably, paying an artist to sketch them together… and so many other romantic things.

They’re as bad as we are. Kara’s thoughts mingled with Alex’s as she snuggled in close while they walked.

Her Vaena leaned in and kissed her softly on the lips. Yeah, they’re doomed. Pretty soon Ada will be wearing Jess’ clothes without asking.

Kara bit her lip as she looked down and realized she’d absentmindedly pulled on one of Alex’s George Mason shirts that morning. She liked having her bondmate’s smell close to her.

Nooré cheshm-am, stop blushing, I love it. And you. You’re welcome to what few real items of clothing I have left whenever you want them.

And soon she and Kara were lost in kissing again, and Aya took a few pictures of them with her
phone as she muttered, “lovebirds” or something to that effect in Japanese.

It was hard to leave the city, but late that afternoon they returned to the Zumwalt to prepare for the ball.

They skipped the formal dinner at the castle but did eat quickly in the ship’s galley with some of the crew before getting dressed. Lots of friendly company joined them at their table, which was nice. As Kara chatted with some of the young men and women, it struck her that their presence onboard the warship was no longer an oddity, but normal and welcome… and that made her smile.

Jessica and Kara helped with hair and makeup for all the girls. Ada, using her ability to shapeshift her clothing, had created a stunning white gown with a fitted sweetheart bodice and sweeping full skirt for herself that made it seem as if she was gliding rather than walking. They ended up putting her long hair up in intricate braids, with jet-black curls draped down below her shoulders. Jessica kept touching her as she worked… her fingers lingering on the tanned skin of the delighted Ada’s neck, and shoulders.

Kara was still in awe of the young hybrid human/Kryptonian/AI’s incredible transformation; when she hugged her niece the girl felt... real. She was warm, soft, alive, and even smelled of almond and aloe from just washing her hair.

With her hyper senses, she overheard the doting Petty Officer whisper something softly into a suddenly blushing Ada’s ear. Kara tried not to smile noticeably but was squeeing inside. To see Jess and Ada so happy together was more than they all had hoped for. Shah and Alex both glanced over at her and grinned as well.

They’re so perfect together! Kara sent her thoughts to them.

I know, right? Alex nodded with a smile.

Shah’s mental voice mingled in, excited about something. Guys, Ada was so sweet earlier. She took me aside, stripped naked, and asked me if I thought her body was ‘aesthetically pleasing’. And then, she wanted to know if I thought Jessica would still desire her if her breasts were smaller… Apparently, the double D’s she was graced with from my bio-template were ‘causing her gravitational center to destabilize’. I so know how she feels…

What did you tell her? Kara asked, captivated.

Shah looked over toward where Jess and Ada were so obviously cuddling and couldn’t stop smiling. I told her that she’s beautiful and didn’t need to seek validation or please anyone other than herself. That if she wanted to be a C-cup, or get a tattoo, or change her hairstyle, wear a hijab, or whatever, then she should do it. If someone truly loves her, then none of that should matter.

Great advice aziz-am. Alex darted in and hugged Shah, tangling her fingers in the gorgeous Persian’s long raven locks.

Shah smiled and pressed her cheek into Alex’s palm before they reluctantly broke apart. Then she asked, “Are you ready to party, Joon-am?”

....................

Aug 5th – Year 2
Later, in the red glow of the lights inside Muninn’s cabin, they raced low and silent over the dark waters of Puget Sound, past green, dark islands off to starboard, and the glittering lights of Tacoma and University Place to port. Kara, Alex, Shah, Ada, Jessica, Aya, Dante, and CJ Vaden, were quite a sight strapped into the MH-80s’ leather seats all dressed up for the ball. They all were holding on to their sleek, Carnival-style masks... well, except for Alex, Shah, and Ada, whose masks would be summoned once they reached the castle.

Kara wore what she’d hoped was an upgrade over her ruined faux Versace.

The stunning Kara original was sapphire blue and elegant. The A-line one-shoulder formal dress fit her gentle curves to near perfection, flaring slightly at the waist into a sweeping train. Tiny, delicate sequins, sewn one by one into the fabric, caught the light in a way that offered observers the illusion of stars sparkling in the night sky as she moved. Her hair tumbled down shoulder length in coiled ringlets, and Alura’s necklace was clearly on display, along with its matching earrings (with Alex’s help she’d finally found time to make a pair for herself).

Shah and Alex had chosen altered versions of the dresses they’d worn out dancing the week before. Shah’s strapless McQueen still wrapped her curvy body like a glove, but Zara had changed the garment’s colors to a deep emerald highlighted with silver, and the skirt had been lengthened to be more suitable for a formal occasion. Alex’s graceful, lacquered red silk evening dress was also modified for length and looked even classier than before.

Like Kara, their Kryptonian adornments were visible, and though the colors were different it would be apparent to anyone that the design was the same and somehow connected all of them.

Jessica, seated next to a beaming Ada, looked amazing in her long, slinky black dress, which paired flawlessly with her date’s white ensemble. The embellished bodice shimmered like etched platinum, accentuating the Chief Petty Officer’s generous bust line, and called attention to the amethyst diamond pillowed there. Kara smiled, glad the feisty Latina seemed so happy, almost carefree, and had chosen to wear the necklace that linked her to Ada, and to all of them, so openly.

Shah’s daughter was having a very positive effect on the new Chief Petty Officer.

Aya was the one who surprised everyone. Her outfit of stark whites and linen, inspired by a Japanese men’s suit, was unexpected, to say the least. She wore a metallic gray vest embroidered with delicate floral patterns over a cuffed, long-sleeved shirt with a high collar. Her form-fitting pants hugged her muscular body all the way down to the tight fit at her ankles, and Caruso, in his crisp white dinner dress uniform, couldn’t keep his eyes off of her. She was pretending not to notice.

Oh, they’re so cute! Kara crooned in Alex’s thoughts.

I have to agree.

As they banked over the Sound to the east, Kara and Jessica spoke quietly together. “So, do you have any new details on this person I’m supposed to meet tonight?” Kara pulled on a coil of her golden hair nervously... she didn’t like surprises.

Jessica nodded quickly, “Her name’s Amanda Thorpe. She claims to work for the State Department in the Bureau of Counterterrorism, but Daniels suspects that she’s actually CIA.”
“Hmmm. Does he trust her?”

“No way mi diosa, but he’s known her a long time, and respects her. Something big must be going on for someone as high up as her to reach out for help.”

“What’s she like?”

“She’s been around forever and she seems to be quite a curmudgeon… old school, honorable… a true patriot. You do something for her and she’ll do something for you, and, believe me from what I’ve been reading in the intel Amanda knows where all the bodies are buried.”

Kara lit up, “Like maybe where a specific political prisoner in a certain foreign country might be bring held?”

“Sí, but be careful, that dragon lady would throw you under a bus to protect her country and her people… not that a bus could actually hurt you! Oh, you know what I mean.”

They both laughed.

........................

*Muninn* quietly descended onto the wide manicured lawn behind Thornewood Castle. Though the world was shrouded in darkness, light spilled from the vast Gothic Tudor style mansion’s high windows, illuminating the weathered red brick, ornate carved stone, towering peaked roofs, and massive chimneys of the majestic, five-story estate.

The towering fir trees that surrounded the labyrinthine grounds were some of the largest and oldest Kara had ever seen on Earth. It was all so beautiful, like a setting out of a fairytale, a book, or a movie.

They all stepped from the helicopter onto the neatly trimmed grass and took stock of their group. Shah and Alex wore Shadow and Flame’s delicate carnival masks (matching the colors of their dresses), while Ada, arm in arm with Jessica, had on a similar guise of white and silver.

Kara wasn’t alone when she pulled out her phone and took pictures of everyone.

Continuing up the path, they made their way past a beautiful pond with statues of maidens at its center, and onto the regal stone staircase that led to a tall, covered terrace. Music and the murmur of voices drew them further in across the ancient flagstones, to the entryway of the sparkling Great Hall of the estate, its glass-paned doors open to the idyllic summer evening.

Alex and Shah each took one of Kara’s arms before they stepped into the large, oak-paneled ballroom together. Kara held her breath. It seemed like half the crew of the USS *Zumwalt* was there, as well as lots of new faces… significant others, their children, and honored guests, aglow in the warm light of the expansive hall.

The music grew quiet and all eyes turned to them as they walked in arms linked together. A deafening silence quickly fell upon the room, aside from a child asking their mother who the ‘pretty ladies’ were. Kara watched as off to one side Rear Admiral Simmons, Captain Daniels, and the *Zumwalt*’s command staff stood from their table and raised their glasses to the three of them in a silent a toast… and every sailor there quickly joined in.

Kara almost giggled, but was saved from that embarrassment by a swift squeeze of her arm by Alex.
Bow, her bondmate’s decisive voice echoed in her thoughts, and all three of them did. The gathered crowd then erupted into a thunderous roar of enthusiastic applause and cheering.

And so, their amazing evening began…

The first thing Kara did was make a beeline for Simmons and Daniels, who quickly found themselves wrapped in her warm hugs. While Shah and Alex mingled with the rest of the command staff, the normally stoic Rear Admiral let Kara know what she was going to be doing as of September. The woman had a big grin on her usually dead serious face, “I’ve accepted a new job… Commander of the Office of Naval Intelligence.”

Kara’s jaw dropped. “So, what… you’ll be like, the head Navy spy?”

Sam laughed, “Something like that. ONI gathers and analyzes intelligence and threats, and is the core of the Navy’s Information Warfare Community. We don’t really have a motto, but if we did it might be ‘extreme vigilance’, or ‘know thyself, know thy enemy’. We’re also at the cutting edge of technology and scientific research; so, advance warning, I might be trying to hire your team to come work for me, or at least pay for them to consult… you too.”

“We’d love that.” Kara said, and then added, “Can I ask, why this job? Is it something you’ve always wanted to do?”

“Good question… well, it’s not new to me, and it’s kind of like coming home… I served as Director of Naval Intelligence in the past; I’d just made other choices since then, wanted back in the action. Events since the USS Washington, and the knowledge you and your team have shared with me about external threats to this planet, not just our country, have changed my priorities. Being the head of ONI will put me in a rare position to keep an eye on things, prepare, influence, and act if necessary... Oh, and Kara…” She added softly, “I’ll do my best to look out for you, you know that, right?”

They hugged again. Kara wished her well, and they shared contact info before they parted. Alex and Shah also spoke with her, and later, Ada, who had a very engaging conversation with the Rear Admiral that evening, offered her unique consulting services to ONI.

None of them lacked for company that night; in fact, there was usually a queue to speak to any of them, including the stunning Navigator Ada, who was clearly the newest USS Zumwalt celebrity. Kara was sure that a few of the spouses and family, who probably knew next to nothing about who they were, were eager to meet them more out of curiosity than anything… to find out why the Captain and crew of one of the most powerful warships on Earth would be giving four young women the hero treatment.

Alex was off dancing with Shah and Aya when Kara finally found herself alone with the Captains Daniels. She’d been dying to ask Myka’s unanswered question from Friday, so she focused her attention on Tom’s beautiful better half, “So… I’m the answer to what?”

The woman grinned, her fascinating silvery gray eyes watching Kara through the regal golden mask she was wearing. “Is there hope? I now know the answer to that question thanks to you, and my path has never been clearer… my faith never so strong.” Tom stepped up and held her hand, which she grasped tightly.

“All because of Tom’s vision of a coming darkness? What Athena said to him?” Kara asked, nibbling on a delicious chunk of aged Parmesan cheese she’d just snagged from a server’s tray.

Myka took a breath, then said, “Yes, partially, but it’s also about what she said to me.”
Kara hadn’t thought she could continue to be surprised… “She spoke to you, too?”

“She has. In fact, the goddess has been with me since I was a child... as long as I can remember. Kara, you must understand, there are very few of them left. A long time ago her people, the gods of old, or if you prefer… the Ancient Ones, made a choice to leave this world, but she and a relatively small number of others stayed behind to watch over us. It was soon after that when those who remained made a binding pact to change their ways, and cease their meddling in the affairs of mortals.

“Athena argued against the decision as dangerous but accepted the will of the majority. Over the years she’s chafed at being forced to operate with her hands tied while others, like her uncle Hades, have plotted and moved in secret to manipulate the course of human history. Now, that one’s a real piece of work… the God of the Underworld is one of the few elders who stayed behind, apparently believing in his arrogance that he’d finally rule Olympus with his brothers gone. When Athena was later asked to lead the new pantheon he threw a temper tantrum that blew up an island and caused tsunamis. He’s still terribly bitter about it... but we’ll talk about that another day.

“Anyway, a few years ago, Athena told me that she’d seen the future (she does that on occasion) and spoke of a young goddess who would soon come to Earth after a long sleep.” Myka smiled and squeezed Kara’s arm making it quite clear who she was talking about. “That she would possess the heart of a hero, would not be bound by any pacts and could act to intervene when necessary to defend our world. Athena knew that you would be a stranger in a strange land, plus a danger magnet, so when she asked I eagerly volunteered to help prepare for you. She led me back to the country of my birth, and to Athens, where I joined the Sisterhood of Athena, became a priestess, and met Tom. During that time I have risen swiftly in the ranks, and have cultivated a network of trusted allies in the US military and intelligence services. And now here I am, with you.”

Kara blinked, trying to absorb everything Myka had just revealed. “Rao… that’s a lot to take in, and to accept. I don’t understand any of this... how Athena knew I was coming before I even got here, who (or what) she is, or why she called me a goddess and Alex, Shah, and Ada demigoddesses.”

“She called you a Titan, actually.” The Captain clarified as she took a sip of merlot, “Like the primordial gods the Olympians themselves descended from, and later overthrew… at least according to myth. Athena considers you one of her people. She said that on the first day we’d meet, you’d prove your courage and your divinity… and she couldn’t have been more right.

“As to who she is... why, my girl, she’s Athena! Daughter of all-mighty Zeus and wise Metis, friend to heroes, protector of knowledge and human civilization, patron to Athens, heir to the throne of Olympus, and my goddess... who for some reason cares a great deal about this world and you, regardless of how she may be getting her intel.”

Kara was shaken by the implications. “So, you believe she’s the real god? The same one from the myths?”

“Yes.” Myka nodded assuredly. “One and the same.”

Kara stammered, “But… but... those are just stories! And if it were true that would make her thousands of years old! Isn’t that impossible?”

“Stranger things have happened, valiant one... and all legends and stories hold grains of truth. Like the one about the brave girl who escaped her doomed planet only to be frozen in time, and upon waking on her new world discovered that she herself may be immortal, possibly one of the gods themselves?”
Kara bit her lip and fidgeted, “Point taken. Wow…” She was confused but less irritated than before. Who was this Athena anyway? And why was she keeping her distance if Kara was so important to her? Was she really the goddess of ancient times as Myka believed so fervently, or just a curious (or cruel) imposter in a masquerade, manipulating her friends?

She sighed and turned her attention back to worldly matters. “Myka, you and Tom are risking so much for us. I’ve spoken to him about this, but are you sure…”

Myka cut her off, “Yes, we really are. In fact, I’ve been offered several opportunities while the Washington’s in dry dock, and Tom and I talked about it. I’ve decided to accept the position of Advisor to the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO). The Chief serves the Secretary of the Navy, is a member of the Joints Chief of Staff that advises the president, the National Security Council, and even Homeland Security. I’ll be at a high level, with visibility and influence… and be able to look out for you knuckleheads. Zeus knows you’ll both need me.” She smiled, and Kara knew, somehow, that while this isn’t what Myka would have chosen to do, it was what she was going to do, no matter how much Kara protested.

She sighed, defeated, “What would you have done, you know… if I hadn’t have shown up?”

The Captain looked wistfully off into the crowd of partygoers, and said, “I’d probably have gone back to teaching at the Naval War College, and spent more time at the ranch riding horses and writing my book… but I’m not, and there’ll always be time for that later after I retire. Right now, I’m going to where I believe I can do the most good for my goddess and my country… and where both you and my reckless husband need me to be.”

“I’m not that reckless…” Tom frowned.

Kara and Myka looked at each other and laughed. He rolled his eyes, but with a roguish smirk, obviously agreeing with them, and excused himself to go get them refills on their drinks.

While they were alone, Kara hesitantly asked, “Myka? Can I ask you something more… personal?”

The older woman nodded with interest, her silvery eyes sparkling as she leaned in close. “Of course, my dear, you can ask me anything.”

Kara stopped fidgeting, and relaxed, feeling completely at ease. “Thanks. Okay, how do you know when you’re doing the right thing? I mean, we’ve been going at this the best we can, preparing for… whatever it is we’re preparing for, but Alex, Shah, and I, all of us… have just been making it up as we go. I’m scared we’re doing it all wrong, or that maybe my adoptive parents are right and I shouldn’t be doing any of this at all…” She sagged when she finished talking, feeling more in need of guidance than she ever had since coming to Earth.

Captain Daniels smiled sympathetically, and wrapped an arm around Kara’s shoulders, walking her through a set of wide doors to a quieter area off of the Great Hall. Beyond was a gorgeous sitting room, with windows on either end, elegant couches, and a marble chessboard inlaid on a round polished wooden table surrounded by old, and very expensive looking chairs.

When they were alone, Myka spoke, “Kara, let me ask you something… what do you want to do with your life? Forget the rules, forget what anyone else wants for, or from you… what would make you happy?”

A realization and a wave of great affection came over Kara, and she tilted her head and laid it on Myka’s strong shoulder. “Thank you. I think you’re the first person, besides Shah and Alex, to ask me that question. My birth parents gave me a mission… told me what to do, and my Earth parents
just tell me what **not** to do… sure, they give me the illusion of choice, but only when it fits within their boundaries of what’s human… what’s ‘normal’.”

Myka squeezed her tight, and it felt so good as if Kara could actually sense her love and empathy touching at the edges of her bond, surrounding it, giving her strength like the sun. She sucked in a surprised breath and looked up at the striking older woman, who was studying her like a hawk.

“Alura and Zor-El did give you mission, but they also gave you a choice. You could have stayed and died with them, but you chose life. They loved you; just as I am sure Eliza and Jeremiah do now. Kara, believe me, parents do stupid things to protect their children, and sometimes they forget that they don’t always know best, or know when they should let go. So, I ask again. Tell me, beautiful one, what do **you** want?”

Kara was speechless at first but felt so safe, so loved, that she spoke the truth from her heart, “To protect Earth and its people, and my quirky, wonderful little-extended family here… and not just to fulfill my mission, or to honor my parents, but for me. I want to have a life on this world, my world, where I can love Alex openly, and every day for the rest of my life, use my powers without worrying who sees, to be close to my friends, to go to college, have a career, be happy, find Shah’s father… and for my Earth parents to be proud of me, to accept all of me, not just the Danvers part. Is that too much to ask?” Her voice was small; she was afraid of the answer. Did she want too much?

“No, it’s not. You damn well have every right to want all of those things! You just need to focus on the goal but don’t miss the wonder of the journey. Think a strategy through, manage it, be smart, don’t rush, and don’t be too stubborn to ask for help… you have people.” She grinned and pointed at herself, and at Tom who was walking back from the other room, his large hands full of drinks.

“We’re here for you, Kara, whatever you need.”

She couldn’t help herself when she zipped in on her tippy toes to throw her arms around Myka and hugged her tight. The tall Captain didn’t seem to be surprised, and squeezed her right back, lifting Kara off the floor. “You’ll be just fine, sweetie, I swear.” The woman whispered in her ear just before they parted.

“What’d I miss?” Tom asked innocently as he handed Kara a Diet Coke, and his wife the glass of merlot he’d been expertly balancing.

“Kara and I were just talking about her future, and speaking of which…” Myka raised her sculpted eyebrows in anticipation, waiting for her husband to catch up with her. “The keys…” She prompted with a stunning smile.

His eyes shot open, and he immediately reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a small envelope that he then offered to Kara.

“What is this?” She asked, reaching out to take the oddly weighted packet from him.

As she started tearing it open he said, “We intended to give this to you tonight at some point, I suppose now is as good a time as any.”

A letter, nine intricately cast, ancient-looking bronze keys, and a thumb drive slid out onto the palm of Kara’s hand. She opened the folded paper and read the hand-written note. It was in a woman’s elegant cursive hand…

………………………………………………

*Kara,*
You and your angels are family to us. Please consider our homes your homes as well, regardless of whether we’re there or not. Whether you need a safe refuge or just a place to escape the world, do not hesitate to come and stay for as long as you like.

The enclosed encrypted drive contains all the details you’ll need to access our residences in Bethesda, Seattle, London, Paris, Hong Kong, Melbourne, St. Petersburg, Tokyo, and Athens, as well as Elysium (our ranch compound in Wyoming). There are coordinates, entry codes, protocols, and details on our staff and security teams who are all aware of you.

The ranch doesn’t require a key but uses an advanced biometric security system that is already tuned for you, Alex, Shah, Jess, and Ada. Instructions on how to add anyone else are on the drive.

Yours, Always,

Tom & Myka Daniels

“Rao, that’s a whole lot of houses…” Kara said in a stunned, quiet voice as she graciously accepted the Daniels’ gifts, hugging and thanking them both.

“The benefits of faith and service, My Goddess,” Tom said as he stepped back and took a long draught from his huge mug of amber ale.

“And a long story for a more private time.” Myka flashed a grin, her silvery gaze flickering warmly to her handsome husband, who was wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and looking back at her adoringly. “For now let’s just say that when Tom and I first met, Athena sent on a treasure hunt worthy of Indiana Jones.”

“No way! I love adventures! I can’t wait to hear all about it!” And Kara did want to know… everything. There was also a small part of her that hoped that in learning more about the amazing couple whose lives she was becoming so happily enmeshed in, she might also gain a better understanding of just who, or what, Athena was… and why she was so interested in Kara’s well-being.

Aug 5th – Year Two

Thornewood Castle - Lakewood, WA

2046 Hours UTC -8, Saturday night, U.S. West Coast Time

It had been over an hour since Kara had accepted the unbelievable gift from Tom and Myka, and the ball had been going fabulously.

She and Alex were taking a break from dancing and chatting about movies with Shah, Jess, and
Ada. Her niece had recently discovered romantic comedies and, like Kara, had fallen in love with them (much to Jess’ dismay), and Netflix. During the course of their conversation, the Chief Petty Officer and her bondmate found common ground (‘bonded’ if you will) as they bemoaned their shared struggle to convince their girlfriends to watch an occasional action or horror flick.

**Girlfriend!?** Did Jess just refer to Ada her girlfriend? Kara sent her excited thoughts to Shah and Alex while trying to appear unfazed.

Yes… my daughter spoke similarly of Jess to me only moments ago. Shah’s happiness was infectious. She is filled with intense joy… and so am I!

Kara smiled. And our Chief Petty Officer is like a ray of sunshine around her. It’s refreshing to see Jess smiling.

Well, good on them. Alex said, her keen hazel eyes watching as Ada laughed at some offhand thing the pretty Latina had just said before taking an elegant sip from a fluted glass of champagne. Alex then nearly choked on her own soda before pushing it away, her nose wrinkled adorably. Um, guys… I just realized, no one asked for our IDs! I’m headed over to that open bar, like so five minutes ago. Does anyone want a glass of wine?

Please. **Something sweet and fruity preferably.** Kara said, and then chuckled as her bondmate darted off, barely containing her Kryptonian speed as she wove through the crowd.

**Check.** Alex’s mind was humming. A sweet Muscat for Kara.

A merlot for me, Alex-joon. **Mersi.** Shah sent her request and thank you chasing after the brunette speedster.

While Kara waited for her hero to return, she and her Persian sister grazed off the impeccably dressed servers’ overloaded trays as they walked by. Shah tried petite bites of just about everything and Kara stuffed her face with the vegetarian fare. She tried the amazingly hot and flavorful roasted habanero poppers, something wonderfully greasy, crunchy, and fried (definitely onions and zucchini with a sinfully delicious spicy batter of some kind), and these amazing little puff pastry bites filled with a rich, thick slightly peppery pot pie filling.

**This food is so delicious!** She proclaimed and moaned with a kind of food-induced ecstasy as she stuffed her face like a gerbil yet somehow still managed to chew. This thoroughly entertained Shah, who couldn’t stop chuckling between her own more petite bites.

The eternally hungry Kryptonian had begun reaching for her twelfth? Or was it the thirteenth? (okay, maybe it was more, she’d lost count by then) pastry when Tom tapped her on the shoulder. Her General had a serious look about him and beckoned for Kara to follow as he turned to lead her away.

She quickly waved at Shah and sent her thoughts to her bondmate. **Alex, it looks like I’m finally going to get to meet our mysterious Ms. Thorpe.**

**Be careful with that woman, okay?**

**I will. I promise. Oh, and sorry about the wine!**

**No worries, but I’m standing here with two full glasses… Hmm, I guess I have no excuse not to drink two-fisted?**

Kara scowled through their bond. **Don’t get drunk on me Vaena. Even though it’s a little harder than it used to be for you, it’s still possible. I really want to hold your hair tonight, but not while**
you’re puking. Her thoughts became a hot, enticing purr.

Alex’s heated mental giggle was magical… Mmm, sounds promising. Don’t worry I won’t be getting trashed, not with that incentive. Go deal with this Amanda Thorpe, and come back to me.

I’ll be back before you know it!

I'm holding you to that nooré chesh-am. Asheghetam. Alex’s thoughts proclaiming her love were like fingers of fire down the Kryptonian’s spine…

“It’s time,” Daniels said as he strode protectively at a slightly startled, and blushing, Kara’s side.

Whoa! She was trying hard to focus and listen but desperately wanted to go fly off with Alex to somewhere more… private.

“Remember,” Tom was saying, “Be cautious, don’t trust blindly, and verify everything.”

She thought, Yeah, yeah, scary lady. Keep my mouth shut, don’t let my guard down, and don’t agree to anything. I got this. But said, “I will my General. Thank you, sir.”

The handsome Captain grinned and said, “Then ἰθῆ εὔτυχῆς Kara Zor-El! That’s ‘good luck’ in ancient Greek.” He then bowed and kissed her hand gently before slipping back through the veranda’s wide French doors to rejoin the party. The sound of the band could be heard briefly before the aperture closed behind him.

Focusing her senses, Kara probed out into the darkness, beyond the covered patio with its festive strings of lights strung above on the rafters to where she heard a steady heartbeat. She steeled herself, and wound around the arranged tables to a wide enclosure, to the place where a lone female figure stood about fifteen feet away, leaning against the stone railing that overlooked the gardens of the castle’s vast, manicured lawn.

Amanda Thorpe.

She was positioned with her back to Kara, looking up at the vast night sky. The Milky Way was a brilliant, painted sea of glittering stars. She pulled a cigarette out of her jacket pocket, which was followed by the spark of a lighter.

Kara looked away briefly to avoid the annoying flash, and said, “Those things will kill you, ma’am.”

The older woman coughed when the smoke hit her lungs.

“If I’m lucky enough to live that long.” Her voice was worn, and gravelly. She cleared her throat and turned to study Kara. Her worn features were softly illuminated by the glow of the cigarette held between her fingers… though the darkness meant nothing to Kara, she could see her quite clearly.

Amanda Thorpe was in her late fifties but seemed older, stocky, but overall appeared to be quite physically fit. The grooved lines of her face were exaggerated by shadows and made her appear haggard, as did the circles of almost permanent bruising under her eyes.

Kara was certain the woman hadn’t slept well in weeks... or months.

The bureaucrat, or more likely spy, was dressed in an expensive, dark blue suit, her silvery gray hair pulled back in a ponytail. Kara thought that with a little work she could be healthier, but right now was a bit of a mess.
Thorpe looked Kara up and down skeptically as she stepped closer. “So, you’re the young woman I’ve heard so much about… the famous ‘Archangel’. Daniels speaks very highly of you, and your… skills.”

Her skeptical tone and contemptuous inspection made Kara nervous and she turned, following the woman’s gaze as she circled her. The Kryptonian reached up to make sure her slender mask was still firmly in place and said, “I don’t know what you’ve heard, so I can’t comment on that, but Daniels is a friend. Someone I respect.”

“Hmmm.” She intoned gruffly and brushed by to take a seat at one of the unoccupied tables, gesturing for Kara to join her.

As she sat down, the woman said, “Let me cut to the chase, Archangel. We live in a world far more terrifying than most people can imagine, a world where apocalyptic threats have gone from theoretical to a regular occurrence, where the only things standing between our citizens’ blissful ignorance and utter chaos are people like me, and The Agency I serve.” The older woman took another drag from her foul-smelling cigarette.

“The CIA?” Kara asked, her tone more accusatory than she really intended.

Thorpe grinned, seeming pleased that Kara had seen through her State Department credentials. "We get a bad rep, but it comes with the territory. People may not like everything we do, or think we do, but we keep them safe. As Jefferson said, ‘the price of liberty is eternal vigilance’.”

It was actually John Philpot Curran who said the famous quote first, but Kara didn’t think it would help her case to point that out. “So, you’re saying that you and your agency are saving the world?” Kara honestly didn’t know what to think. All she knew about Amanda’s shadowy organization came from Daniels and Jess’ briefing, and what she’d read in suspense novels or seen in movies.

Ms. Thorpe sighed, “It’s a hell of a thing, but yes, yes we are, and I need every asset and resource I can get, especially now that on top of religious zealots and other terrorists, rogue nations, designer viruses, cyber-attacks, spies, and assassins… we have metahumans to contend with.”

“Metahumans?” Kara didn’t understand why Earth’s hyper-evolved humans would be a problem for the CIA, so she chose to feign ignorance. It was an information-gathering trick she’d learned from Shah.

“People like you, with powers... Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman, thank God those three are on the side of the angels. There are others who’ve appeared over the years, and not all of them are heroes, some revel in slaughter, or are merely mercenaries, working for the highest bidder. I’ve lost too many agents…” Kara could feel Amanda’s anger and frustration. Her people really did mean a great deal to her, despite her outwardly cold veneer.

She was just glad the woman had grouped her and Kal in with the super-powered humans, better she believes that than the truth. Kara made a mental note to ask Clark about his thoughts on metahumans.

Amanda continued, “We’ve had a couple of very close calls this year Archangel, times when I nearly ran out of luck. My fear is that sometime soon I will, and then we’ll all have a problem.”

Kara swallowed, that sounds ominous. “What kind of problem?”

The exhausted woman ground the smoldering butt of her cigarette out on the pristine tablecloth. “The kind where we lose a city, and millions of innocent lives are snuffed out, or there’s a world-ending plague unleashed by some insane zealot… take your pick, I have a few hundred more grisly options.
All I know is, it’s getting harder and harder to pull that rabbit out of my hat when I’m called on to save the day.” Kara could hear the spymaster’s unasked question of her loud and clear.

Amanda’s eyes, heartbeat, breathing, muscle tension, all indicated that she was telling the truth… which really only left Kara with one option.

She asked, “Ma’am, what can I do to help?”

-----------------------------

**Story Lexicon/FAQs:**

*Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms:* I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

**Terms:** Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

- **Ah! khoob ast** – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)
- **Alex vanimelda** - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)
- **Aporup** – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)
- **Azidane shoma khoshhalam** – Means ‘nice to meet you’ (Persian)
- **Bedrood**: Means ‘good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)
- **C’est magnifique!** – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)
- **Damnú air!** – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)
- **Dooset daram** – ‘I love you’ (Persian)
- **El mayarah** – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)
- **Eres mi luz**. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)
- **Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa** – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)
- **Imeacht gan teacht ort** – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gaelic/Irish)
- **íthi eutukhēs** - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)
- **Ka’dah** – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.
- **Kheili khosh geli** – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)
- **Khodāhāfez**: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply
‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

**Khodaye man** – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

**Malāʾikah** – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature

**Marbhfháisc ort!** – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

**Mersi** – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)

**órenya** - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Salām:** A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

**Sundor** – ‘beautiful’ pronounced *soon-dor* (Bengali)

**Vuela, mi diosa! Vuela!** – ‘Fly my goddess! Fly!’ (Spanish)

**WǑ de tiān a (我的天啊)** – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

**Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:**

**aziz-am** – ‘my dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

**joon-am** – ‘my dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

**Nāzanin-am** – ‘sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation. (what Shah calls Ada)

**nooré cheshm-am** – ‘the light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

**sheereen-am** – ‘sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person’s name<’ + **joon** (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean ‘dear’. So, ‘Shah joon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

**Others names/nickname/titles/things:**

**Anamchara** – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

**Bríomhaire** – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

**Cairdiúil** – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

**Dios mío!** – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

**Eres mi luz.** – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)
Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Mi lucero – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn (Thought & Memory).

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity.

Rao – Krypton’s ancient god, as well as the name of the Red Giant star the planet orbited before its destruction. (Kryptonese)

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Seanmáthair – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced shan a WAW her (Irish/Gaelic)

Tieguanyin - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

Tratung – khrag ‘thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Tuath Dé Danann - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced Thoo-a day Du-non (Irish/Gaelic)

Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’. ‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)
**Vallerian** – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers (and givers), can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshipped, or traded.

**Wan** - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:
Wow! Ada is now a real honest to goodness living, breathing, bubbly Kryptonian-human person! She and a very happy Jess are getting closer, and it looks good on both of them. Kara finally met the legendary Captain Myka Daniels, and is a bit enthralled with the incredible woman, wouldn’t you be? That leaves the bigger question of who (or what) Athena is, which we’ll tackle another day, and just what Amanda Thorpe is going to ask of Kara. Until next time!

Next Up:
Chapter 22: “Down the Rabbit Hole” – Kara’s first encounter with the mysterious Amanda Thorpe pulls her into a dark, clandestine world that ends up testing both Archangel and her team’s abilities… and offers her a choice. Our heroes spend some time soul-searching in Seattle, and we discover that one of the gateways within the Kryptonian crystals has finally been opened, to another Earth! (Earth 24 for those of us behind the fourth wall). Also, Ada and Jess end up inviting everyone to dinner in Paris.

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me. Also, please share this story with those you think might enjoy it! Spread the word!

Thoughts:

John Philpot Curran's statement where the quote Amanda used (usually attributed to solely to Thomas Jefferson) originated: "The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance; which condition if he break, servitude is at once the consequence of his crime and the punishment of his guilt."

Song inspirations:
Seattle band La Luz!
- La Luz - Call Me in the Day
- La Luz – Live on KEXP

Other inspirations:
- Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk
- Lavash - that great Gateway City Persian Restaurant is real and in San Francisco
- Thornewood Castle - Yes, this place really exists as well
- Aya Yoshida’s Ball outfit
- The Space Needle
- Puzzle Break escape room Seattle
Down the Rabbit Hole

Chapter Summary

Kara’s first encounter with the mysterious Amanda Thorpe pulls her into a dark, clandesine world that ends up testing both Archangel and her team’s abilities… and offers her a choice. Our heroes spend some time soul-searching in Seattle, and we discover that one of the gateways inside their Kryptonian crystals has been opened, to another Earth! (Earth 24 for those of us behind the fourth wall). Also, Ada and Jess end up inviting our trio of heroes to dinner in Paris.

Chapter Notes

It was a long week, so glad to be posting today. To those who celebrate, Happy Easter and Chag Sameach (for Passover). And to everyone, have a wonderful day.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aug 5th – Year Two

Thornewood Castle - Lakewood, WA

2105 Hours UTC -8, Saturday night, U.S. West Coast Time

Picking up where we left off. Out on the veranda late at night in the rear of Thornewood Castle, with the glow of lights from windows, and the sounds of music and many voices softly echoing from within...

“How can I help?” The soft words the graceful creature had spoken with such honest concern still hung in the air between them, and for a brief moment, Amanda Thorpe felt a deep pang of regret.

The head of Directorate 138, a covert unit with broad scope and enforcement authority within the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center (CTC), was an exceptionally good judge of character… and rarely, if ever, surprised. But the young woman in the elegant, sparkling blue dress had managed to astound her.

The golden-haired beauty was a light, an honest and compassionate soul. The old spy had been skeptical, but incredibly, after meeting her face-to-face she believed the young woman’s virtue wasn’t an act at all. To pull Archangel into the dark world in which she and her agency existed was a cruel and repugnant thing to even contemplate… and yet, if the hero were as powerful as the intel had alleged, the CIA would only be one of many groups vying to win her allegiance, kill her, or worse.
Director Thorpe sighed. She could not risk Archangel falling under the wrong influence, not when she and The Agency (the nickname she preferred to use for the CIA) had the opportunity to at least garner her assistance. The kind of power the girl represented was an asset the Directorate desperately needed to protect the country and its people.

Now, whether the young woman was actually capable of the godlike feats attributed to her remained as of yet unverified, and Amanda was not about to proceed without proof… even on Daniels’ say-so.

The gaunt agent coughed, and replied to Archangel’s offer, “Before you can assist us a test will be necessary to demonstrate that you’re up to the task. Should you accept, I’ll provide the details, and as soon as this conversation is over the clock will start ticking.”

The masked hero stood up and paced… she even did that gracefully. “What kind of a test?” She asked suspiciously, folding her powerful arms across her chest.

Amanda breathed in as she watched the young woman closely, intrigued. Her reactions revealed a great deal about Archangel’s character without saying a word. She was interested, but guarded and not yet ready to trust… though something in the veteran agent’s gut told her she wanted to.

Time to see if an old spy could push her buttons.

“I need something found, something dangerous. Though I fear the challenge may be beyond even you.” The older woman said as she reached into her purse and pulled out a small tablet computer.

Amanda presented it to Archangel, and when the masked blonde hesitated she nodded with encouragement. “It won’t bite. Take a look.”

The hero narrowed her insanely beautiful blue eyes (what amazing shade were they anyway?), and moments later plucked the slim device from the woman’s hands and slid it from its protective sleeve. As it came to life, moving 3D models of energy waves, elements and strands of unknown DNA appeared on the sleek unit’s glowing screen.

………………

Kara stared at the data and immediately broke out in a cold sweat. _Crap! Guys… It's the unholy trinity… biology, physics, and chemistry! Alex! Shah! Help!_

Amanda was observing her with a look of dubious amusement on her face… as if she didn’t think Archangel was capable of figuring out the puzzle she’d just been handed.

She thinks she’s so clever... I’ll show her! Kara huffed.

With a stellar engineer and kickass astrobiologist backing her up, and her own amazing super brain, it took Kara less than a minute to come to an understanding of what she was looking at. The spinning elements were familiar… “This one is Uranium-235… a highly enriched version, but the isotope was modified with what appears to be an atomic scale watermark. That’s fancy.” Kara spoke out loud, half to herself, but partially for her judgmental watcher’s benefit. “And that’s Plutonium-239, again, modified with the same signature. There are also strands of human DNA here. Who’s the girl?”

When the gruff woman remained silent Kara muttered, “Figured you wouldn’t say.”

The Kryptonian brightened as she noticed something hidden in the data. “Okay, that’s sneaky. I’m detecting a two-way microwave transmission signal buried deep in the wavelengths of the scans you provided.” Then she grinned, “You’re using an algorithmic numeric cipher, did you think that’d be a challenge for me? This wasn’t even hard. Would you like me to read the communication I just decrypted in my head back to you now, or should I go into the courtyard and bring you the samples.
of Uranium and Plutonium you buried out there thinking I wouldn’t sense them?” She was smirking, and when Amanda seemed at a loss for words she added, “How about I just do both?”

Kara then zipped off for just a couple of seconds to retrieve the elements. From Amanda’s perspective it would have seemed as if Archangel hadn’t moved at all, merely shimmered, before she was depositing two small dirt encrusted sealed metal containers onto the pristine white tablecloth between them.

The hero then locked her gaze with the older woman and said, “The encrypted signal was a sentence: ‘better to be despised for too anxious apprehensions than ruined by too confident security’.”

Kara recognized the Edmund Burke quote, but preferred another of his, ‘The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.’ “Intriguing choice Ms. Thorpe, it tells me a great deal about you.”

The old spy appeared shaken by Kara’s demonstration of power, at first. But very quickly her eyes seemed to almost sparkle, and she grinned.

Oh crap, I’ve been played. Kara wanted to facepalm. Thorpe had baited her into displaying her abilities. Rao, I’m so gullible!

“Very good, very good. Archangel, I think you’re ready to move on to the test if you’re still up for it?”

Alex’s thoughts were with her. Kara, be sure. We’ll back whatever you decide to do.

We’re with you Sheereen-am. Shah’s added assurance was soothing.

The Kryptonian felt the weight of their trust and said a silent prayer to Rao before answering the director’s question.

“Yes,” Kara replied with far more confidence than she was feeling inside, where a swarm of butterflies battered her guts.

Amanda was beaming. “Okay, let’s do this. Here are the facts about the test: there’s a bomb on its way to Seattle… right now, set to go off in twenty-four hours. Oh, don’t look so concerned, it’s dummy device, but for this challenge it’s real.”

Kara nodded vigorously, obviously relieved.

“As I was saying…” The eager woman continued. “The powerful weapon utilizes the specific marked radioactive isotopes you identified and have the data on. It is also far too large and cumbersome to be carried by hand… so the device itself will require some form of transportation to be moved it to its destination. To your question about the girl, the woman is an innocent. She’s been kidnapped, is with the device, and will certainly die when it explodes, most likely while being broadcast for millions to watch her suffering. Her captors’ M.O. is to use social media to stream video of those they terrorize, and their kills.”

Kara was appalled, “That’s sick.”

Amanda paused before taking a drag off of a new cigarette to say, “Yes it is, but it’s the sad reality I’m forced to deal with every day. The terrorists you’re facing in this scenario, like so many others, aim to sow fear, chaos, and cause maximum loss of life. We believe their target will be high density and high profile. All of the details we have to get you started, as well as our initial analysis and
probability modeling, are on that tablet.

“In full disclosure, I have a team of top agents and analysts back at Langley, and commandos on the ground to assist them, who are in the same boat as you... as well as being your competition. They have no inside information and are being debriefed right now on the same data we’re providing you.

“Bottom line, if the device explodes before either you or the control team can find and stop it... the girl, along with tens of thousands of civilians, will die (at least in simulation), you’ll fail, and will be of no use to me. If my team finds the weapon first, you also fail and will be of no use to me. Understood?”

Kara quickly took in the data on her screen, flipping and clicking at super speed to review more details. “No pressure, huh? You really know how to crash a party. I haven’t even been able to slow dance with my girlfriend yet...”

The old spy blew out a cloud of smoke and rasped, “Look, kid, you’re either serious about this or you’re not. So either get cracking or stop wasting my time. You can choose to help us save the lives of countless innocents, or go dance the night away and forget we ever met... it’s your call.” When Kara hesitated, the older woman reached for the tablet, “Fine then, if you’re not up to task...”

Kara gracefully stepped out of Amanda’s reach with a frown. “No, I’m good.” But under her breath mumbled, “Pushy much?” Before speaking up, “So what do I do once I find this ‘bomb’, and rescue the girl?”

“If you find it... and if you are successful in rescuing my agent there is a small box inside the weapon... open it, and bring the contents to me.”

“Fine.” Kara snapped, about done with the woman’s callous attitude. She adjusted her delicate Archangel mask and added, “See you soon”, before seeming to vanish... leaving only a slight breeze and tiny, crackling arcs of blue lightning in her wake.

Unseen by Kara, that’s when a stunned and awestruck Amanda Thorpe broke out in a smile.

Moment later Kara called a meeting with her team in a small, deserted study off the Great Hall. The room was gorgeous, with a vintage desk and chairs in one corner, towering bookshelves, and elegant seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings that covered the rest of the oak paneled walls. It reminded her so much of her bedroom back home, Jeremiah’s old office, that she had to fight a brief wave of nostalgia... and homesickness.

Once Alex, Shah, Jess, and Ada all arrived, they removed and dismissed their masks as Kara filled them in on everything. Fortunately, Alex and Shah were already up to speed because of they’d been running through their options in their thoughts together.

Kara handed the tablet to Ada.

“Why, that old fox.” Her beautiful, raven-haired niece said as she studied the device. There was a hint of annoyance, and respect, in her voice. “There’s a thin coating containing a radioactive isotope on here. No one else touch it.” Ada warned as everyone stared at her in shock. She quickly followed up with, “Oh, don’t worry, it’s basically harmless to biological life, and I’ve already purged it from my skin. Interesting, it has a curious, very short half-life. I calculate that there are maybe thirty-four or so hours left until it becomes inert.”
“Why would she do that??” Kara was staring at her hands in disgust. “And how did I miss it? Yuck.”

Shah spoke up, “To track you, I imagine, sheereen-am.”

“Bitch.” Alex cursed, hovering near Kara helplessly. “How do we get it off of her?”

Before anyone could answer, Kara, said, “We don’t.” An idea was forming in her mind. “Let Amanda’s people track me; this is a test after all… though I don’t like her methods. Not a great way to start off earning our trust.”

“I agree,” Jess spoke up. “Mi Diosa, there is one silver lining here… you now have a tactical advantage. Our opponent doesn’t know that we know you’re being tracked.”

“Good point…” Ada said, turning off the tablet. “Okay, I’ve copied all of the data on the device and the encrypted servers it’s connected to. The amount of data is massive, and would take more time than we have right now to share, so… I’m going to try something new I’ve been working on to transfer it, Kryptonian style!”

Everyone was silent and looked at her quizzically.

Ada grinned. “Okay, imagine a Kryptonian glyph, but using hyper speed, quantum data compression, and augmented harmonics to share that information with each other directly using our crystal network.”

Kara flitted over to her niece in a blink of an eye, and was bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet, “That’s incredible! Kind of like when we have thought conversations when we’re moving at super speed, just a ton more data… right?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Ada chuckled at her aunt’s adorably unbridled enthusiasm. “It should help us in combat, or any urgent situation. I do need to warn you before I attempt this, that a data compression broadcast sounds very similar to the old dial-up modem connecting, or a Kryptonian version of it, so don’t be surprised. Your hyper senses will kick in when you hear it, and your mind will interpret and absorb the data. Jess, I’m sorry, to a human it will just sound… awful.”

“It’s okay belleza, you guys do your thing.”

Ada blushed at the compliment, then refocused on her mother and her aunts, “Once you all have it I’ll need everyone’s help, especially Kara’s, cranking through the probability analysis and hard-core simulations to narrow down possible bomb routes and target locations for the search.”

“Of course.” Kara, Alex, and Shah all said, nodding in unison to let Ada know they were ready. Jess leaned in close to her as the raven-haired beauty closed her eyes.

Seconds later a burst of sounds like streams of a thousand incoherent musical chords and screeching noises exploded in Kara’s mind and her ears. The cool part? She could understand all of it! Images, global coordinates, maps, detailed analysis, weather reports, transportation data, more information than she ever knew existed for the entire city of Seattle, dossiers on terrorist groups, and so much more…

Rao, it’s… amazing!

Alex and Shah were experiencing it too, and within just a couple of seconds (in hypertime it seemed so much longer) the broadcast ended and their minds were flooded with multiple petabytes of new data.
As they all looked at each other in amazement Kara laughed and said, “That was epic! Great work, Ada!” Then suddenly turned to her bondmate, “Oh my gosh, Alex, I just realized, this CIA test is like one of your scavenger hunts... minus the trolls, and with weapons-grade nuclear material. At least I feel somewhat prepared thanks to you.” Alex groaned but was smiling.

Kara continued, “In any case, I need to get in the air. I can cover more ground using my senses to search as we use the data to hone in on the target.”

“We’re going with you!” Alex and Shah nearly shouted in unison.

Kara smiled. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. Suit up Shadow and Flame! Oh, I’ll need to stop by Muninn on the way out to grab my stars and stripes outfit. I stowed it there earlier... just in case I needed it. Thank Rao I did, looking for a nuclear bomb in my ball gown would just be too weird.”

Ada clapped excitedly as Shah and Alex’s dresses shifted form, melting into their intimidating Kryptonian leather outfits as Jess whistled her approval. “¡Qué señoras tan hermosas! That’s so hot.”

Both grinned back at her.

“Be very careful, mother, all of you.” Ada cautioned, slipping over to kiss Shah on the cheek. “You never know what tricks, or traps, that devious woman may have planned.”

“I’ll keep them safe,” Kara said.

To which, in unison, Alex and Shah both smirked, and said, “We'll keep her safe.”

And, as one, they waved and disappeared in a blur of fire and darkness. The gentle breeze that followed them through the now open study door the only indication they’d ever been there.

 Aug 5th – Year Two

Directorate 138’s secret subterranean tactical ops center – Seattle, WA

2242 hours UTC -8, Saturday night, U.S. West Coast Time

Director Amanda Thorpe stood in the bustling command center of the CIA’s secret tactical operations facility deep beneath the streets of Seattle.

She held a steaming cup of black Kona coffee in one hand, while vast screens of video surveillance, flight telemetry, and other data streamed around her. Twenty or so agents bent to their wide 3D projected screens, tracking the mysterious young woman who called herself Archangel.

The bone-weary exhaustion that had dogged Amanda for weeks had dissipated the minute The Agency’s satellites had detected her target’s departure from Thornewood Castle an hour earlier and had been replaced with a kind of electric anticipation.

Archangel had been flying at over 2,800 miles per hour! That was approximately Mach 3.7, double the top speed of an F-22 Raptor.
She's incredible!

Captain Daniels’ secret friend had surprised her. Not merely with her ability to fly, detect radioactive elements, decipher encrypted messages with just her brain, or her blinding speed, but with her irritatingly pleasant and mysterious persona. Also, to her credit, the young woman didn’t seem to have an agenda besides wanting to help people.

Regardless of her altruism, Amanda did not trust easily. There had to be a deeper reason the secretive hero/vigilante was willing to risk her anonymity by dealing with her and The Agency.

She was very interested in how Archangel was meticulously executing her search for the ‘bomb’. Like a professional, she was systematically covering all potential access routes into the city. Railways, subways, highways, back roads, and airports… she was hunting, moving in a vast, clockwise sweep of the metropolitan area’s periphery, spiraling in, only slowing down to fly grid patterns over very specific areas of interest.

Her team couldn’t detect any kind of communication between Archangel and an outside source to gather any clues to her reasoning, but Amanda was sure she was talking to someone… The only questions were who, and how she was keeping her comms concealed.

Initially, her analysts had dismissed the young woman’s precise movements as simply random… half of Archangel’s targets were not even on the list of thousands they’d provided her. But the old spy was intrigued… and pushed them to dig deeper, to ask smarter questions. Why did she choose that train or that semi-trailer over another? Why that specific maintenance depot instead of a different one a mile away with a seemingly identical risk profile, or skip that section of the grid when the crack team she had working on the same problem back at Langley (with all of Directorate 138’s resources and a quantum server farm to churn through data) still hadn’t ruled out half of Archangel’s bypassed locations and entire grid sections as potential risks?

As her control team continued to fall further and further behind Archangel’s progress (it wasn’t even a contest), and as more data came in, her people changed their tune about Archangel. They were, quite frankly, freaking out with praise, and many new questions.

Somehow, the young hero was selecting the most probable targets… on her own, and narrowing her search with shocking speed and precision beyond what was possible. Whatever insight or technology this young woman had access to would have to be far beyond Amanda’s best analysts’ capabilities, or the predictive AI and algorithmic modeling available to the CIA with all of its vast resources.

Quite simply, what Archangel was doing was impossible. Yet…

“Ma’am.” One of her Tactical Ops team broke in on the comms.

“Yes? What is it?”

“Archangel’s stopped, just north of the Magnolia Bridge and Pier 91. We believe that she’s zeroing in on Decoy number four. Switching to onsite visual… now.”

The screens flickered for a moment and then revealed two views of a very large train yard. One image was dimly lit by the diffused yellow glow emanating from scattered light poles, while the other was tinted by the greenish-hew of night vision. Stretching north to south, many rail lines came together within the vast space. Chains of dark, quiet rail cars were parked there, and rows of long shipping containers were stacked on top of each other six or seven high.

The Directorate's cameras and agents had the entire area covered from multiple angles, including the
A rusty train car that contained the false bomb, along with one of her younger, first-year agents, whose accelerated bio-signs were not the ones she’d provided to Archangel.

A man’s deep familiar voice broke over the comms, “Alpha Leader to Omega, the target has arrived. My team is ready. Are we a go?”

Amanda hesitated for a moment, Archangel’s warm smile haunting her memory. “Go. Weapons free. Stop anything that tries to get inside that boxcar, by any means necessary.” She swallowed hard, dreading what was about to come next.

Then, something unexpected happened.

A great wave of darkness, like rolling midnight, washed over the entire area, completely blacking out the light! All of it… even disabling night vision. Alpha Leader’s special operations forces on the scene were suddenly chattering on the comms, trying to find their way in the inky blackness to defend the decoy train car.

Techs scrambled to deal with the blackout, but none of them understood how the darkness was being generated, or what technology was used to completely take out their surveillance cameras… the streams were still running, but they could see nothing. It was just utterly dark.

Suddenly, there were flashes of light inside the void, like blazing daggers or arrows that sliced through the blackness leaving brilliant, fiery trails in their wake. Amanda heard her agents being struck down… one by one, before the comms grew silent.

Finally, only Alpha Leader remained, firing his weapon into the void, where something impossibly swift stalked him. His mic was open when everyone in Tac Ops heard a rush of wind, the sound of him being struck, a grunt, and something heavy dropping hard to the ground.

Then, a young woman’s voice, one that Amanda knew to be Archangel’s, spoke… and the goddess was clearly annoyed, “You’re wasting my time, Amanda, back your people off before someone gets hurt. Whoever I was just forced to put to sleep is going to wake up with one heck of a headache. Now, if you will excuse me…”

At that exact moment, an intense point of light surged into being deep within the utter blackness. Bright as an arc welder’s torch, twin beams of searing sunlight were soon dancing and burning in the unnatural darkness… for almost a full minute.

Once the brilliance finally dimmed and she could once again look at the monitors, Archangel’s tracker was accelerating away from the rail yard, taking the darkness with her. When the cameras focused in on the still-sealed train car that held decoy number four, she was stunned to see that something had been etched into its side… red-hot, molten steel still dripped from what was written there…

Decoy. Not the bomb. Wrong woman, wrong ancestry, wrong age.

The old spymaster steadied herself on one of the consoles as data and communication from her team on the ground began coming in. Somehow, Archangel had blacked out their tech, used some sort of fire or light-based weapon to temporarily incapacitate most of the strike team, and etched her message into steel.

She’d also handily struck down a decorated Green Beret and Delta Force commander with years of combat experience using only the precise amount of force required to knock him unconscious for the time she needed to escape. Not only had she gone out of her way to cause no lasting harm, but she
was able to detect that the rail car did not hold the bomb or the correct person… and hadn’t even bothered to look inside.

*Good Lord, who is this Archangel? Or the better question… what is she? And who’s helping her?*

On a side note, the stoic director also found it quite charming that the young woman used the word ‘heck’ instead of really cursing when she was upset.

After that Amanda decided to change tactics and opened a command-wide channel. “All teams, new orders. Stand down, I repeat, stand down. Allow Archangel safe passage. Observe and report only.”

The next hour proved interesting as the young woman altered her search pattern a dozen times and narrowed her parameters with even more accuracy. It was as if she was receiving a massive stream of data from somewhere, and was using it to make constant adjustments. It was also obvious that Archangel wanted Amanda to know that she was aware of the decoys, and took the added time to mark two more, just as before.

On the second false bomb, outside an abandoned warehouse, a camera caught a glimpse of the graceful young woman as she floated down from the sky. She hovered twenty feet in the air effortlessly, dressed in a formfitting dark red and blue outfit covered in a swath of white stars. It was clearly a version of Old Glory, and actually quite lovely, not that Amanda would admit that out loud.

Archangel’s eyes flared like dual lasers, and she burned her third message (simply ‘Not this one either’) into the massive metal roller door that led inside where the decoy was waiting. Sensors indicated that at peak flare the heat from her beams reached over five thousand degrees Fahrenheit, nearly as hot as the surface of the sun… and it didn’t look like she was even trying hard.

It was nearing midnight as Archangel drew the noose tight around the docks along South Lake Union, where the actual ‘bomb’ was located (an estimated 72.5 hours ahead of her failed competition, long after the device would have exploded).

Amanda and her team were already en route in a small caravan of black bulletproof SUVs and had the privilege of being there to watch as the girl plummeted from the sky into the center of the deserted lot where they’d parked.

The director felt the ground shudder like a localized earthquake beneath Archangel’s feet when she landed and watched as her gaping agents had to shift stances to keep their footing.

Amanda’s throat was bone dry, and she shivered. Archangel stood straight, arms crossed in front of her chest, her blue eyes glowing with cold fire as she scanned the twenty or so armed agents a couple dozen feet away. Half of them were sheltered behind SUV doors or standing anxiously behind the vehicles with drawn weapons… ready to start shooting.

*Would bullets even harm her?* Amanda wondered.

She looked menacing, more like some mythic goddess in the flesh who’d fallen to Earth than the kind, lovely young woman Amanda had met at the party. It was quite a spectacular, and frankly, terrifying transformation.

Then, the glow that filled Archangel’s eyes began to fade as she noticed Alpha Leader among the gathered agents. Her attention focused on the obviously injured officer, his left arm freshly bandaged and in a sling. He held a firearm in his good hand, though it was still pointed muzzle down at hip level. He’d been cut after the blonde knocked him out at the rail depot.

The young woman’s demeanor continued to soften as she smiled awkwardly and called out to him,
“I’m sorry if I hurt you, agent; but in my defense, you were trying to kill me.”

The soldier seemed surprised by the fact that she was speaking directly to him, but recovered quickly. Grinning, he moved his arm tenderly, and said, “It’s just a flesh wound.”

Archangel perked up, her smile widening before she did a surprising thing. She bowed elegantly and said, “Brave Sir Knight.”

“All right, stand down,” Amanda commanded in her gravelly voice, and though many of her team were still nervous, they relaxed their postures and lowered the arsenal aimed at Archangel.

Alpha Leader was still smiling and didn’t take gaze off the graceful young woman as he holstered his weapon.

Archangel then strode forward toward Amanda. In one hand she held a metal box made from one of the hardest metals on Earth. “What you asked for, ma’am.” She said sharply, before presenting the director with the one-foot by six-inch hardened steel container.

Amanda chose to ignore her petulant tone. “I see our countermeasures were ineffective… unsurprising. Did you open it?”

Archangel didn’t respond, but allowed the box (that had once been inside the heart of the fake bomb) to fall from her grasp in pieces, and where they fell each extremely heavy chunk sunk deep into the parking lot’s asphalt surface. Amanda could see that the young woman had obviously used her laser vision, or whatever it was called, to cut the dense block of tungsten carbide steel into complicated 3D puzzle pieces.

Because… of course, she can do that.

In her other hand, Archangel held out the small, sealed tube that had resided inside the box.

Her penetrating (sapphire? No, not quite) eyes were intent on Amanda. She was obviously not happy with her and appeared… disappointed? Waiting for something? Amanda supposed she deserved the seemingly altruistic young woman’s ire: she’d been tasked long ago with keeping the country safe; it was a very messy, gray, and thankless job that had made her hard.

How she must see me… Amanda almost felt shame.

In her role as protector of the Homeland, she was the one who had to make the tough calls others didn’t have the balls to make. She’d watched people she cared about die, again and again, until it was just easier to stop feeling any emotional attachment to those in her employ… or anyone. She definitely wasn’t someone anyone would look to as a paragon, especially not a super-powered girl who’d apparently never heard of the color gray, only black and white.

So why did this ‘Archangel’ disapproval make her feel so… uncomfortable?

“I assume I passed your test?” The blonde asked curtly.

Amanda nodded, reaching out to take the offered item.

Archangel gaze narrowed as she continued, “Since you seem so concerned, Agent Keller is fine, a bit shaken up by my, um, sudden entrance. I think I scared the daylights out of her when I tore off the door to the room she was hiding in with your ‘bomb’. I am really sorry about that, and about Alpha Leader’s arm.” Amanda studied the earnest young woman, and said, “Agent Keller will grow a thicker skin thanks to you, and Alpha Leader’s injury is a sprain… superficial at best. No harm, no
foul, but your apology is noted.”

Relaxing a little now that the tension between them seemed to have deflated, Archangel nodded.

“As far as what happens next, yes, you passed the test. I’m assigning Alpha Leader as your handler, he’ll look after you, keep your identity safe, be your go-to guy, and the source of your assignments.” She waved the tall, athletic man over as she was speaking, and he fully holstered his sidearm as he approached.

Amanda watched as the graceful angel sized him up. He was tall and weatherworn; handsome, in a rugged way; in his late-thirties; with strong, broad shoulders, and attentive blue eyes that never left the young woman. Like all warriors with his skill, he moved over the ground without leaving a trace or making a sound, even with one arm in a sling.

*Ah, she seems impressed, good.*

Alpha Leader stuck out his good hand, and the young woman took it eagerly and shook. It hadn’t escaped Amanda’s attention that her top operator had been fighting a grin ever since the pair’s Monty Python moment.

“Commander Paul Mason.” He said, introducing himself. “Pleasure to meet you, Archangel.”

Kara smiled. “The pleasure is mine, sir. Can I… call you Black Knight instead of Alpha Leader? It’s either that or Strider.”

“Black Knight’s fine by me, ma’am.” He was full on grinning now.

Amanda was already beginning feel impatient. “Alpha…” They both glanced at her. “Fine, Black Knight will need a way to reach out to you to get you up to speed, and later, with mission details. We will also require a way to pay you for your services.”

The girl looked pleased at first, then horrified. “I can give you a secure site, email, and a mobile number, but please… keep your money.”

Amanda sighed, “I almost don’t believe you exist. Look, we can’t accept your help unless we have a transaction; it’s required for any freelancer. I don’t make the rules, and I don’t care what you use the money for… give it away for all I care, but if I can’t pay you, you can’t help me.”

Archangel fidgeted, considered, and finally said, “Fine, I’ll provide a bank account… but it’ll be just as untraceable as everything else I’m giving you, so don’t even waste your time trying to track me down. Take my word for it. And as for missions, I’ll help wherever I can, but I pick them. There are things I won’t do, like kill or torture people, so don’t ask me to. I promise that’d be the last time you’d ever hear from me.”

It was Black Knight who answered. “Fair enough, you can evaluate each mission, and accept or reject, completely your decision. It will always be your call.” *Interesting,* the older woman thought; her number one in the field had never taken a shine to anyone this way before.

Archangel breathed out with apparent relief; Amanda could tell she’d been expecting a fight. “Thank you, Commander Mason. Ms. Thorpe, I accept and am glad we seem to understand each other. Now, if we’re done, there is something I do want…”

The spymaster was suddenly very alert. So, there was something! What did this powerful creature, this goddess, need from her? “And what is that, my dear?”
“To find someone.”

“Who?”

Archangel twisted uncomfortably and glanced down at her feet. This was emotional for her. *Curious… perhaps something personal?*

“Someone whose life and safety are very important to me. His name is Arad Nazari. He’s a brilliant Iranian physicist who tried to escape that country with his family about a decade ago but failed. His son was shot, probably killed, we don’t know… Mr. Nazari’s been a political prisoner ever since, presumed dead. But he’s not. I just need to know where he is… I can take it from there.”

Archangel’s plea had reached her in a way nothing had in many, many years. There was something desperate in the young woman’s voice… but also something else. Love. This wasn’t just personal for her; it was about someone she cared for deeply who was connected to this man… family? There was a time when there were people who cared about her with that kind of passion… but that was a long time ago.

“Ms. Thorpe, please… he’s a good man, with people who miss him.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” The director said and nodded over to her right-hand man, the diminutive, but solid Agent Wilkins, who began furiously typing on his tablet. No doubt already halfway to finding Nazari.

She attempted to appear outwardly unmoved by the beautiful girl’s plea, but Archangel was smiling at her in a way that made her squirm like she was looking right into her. Interestingly, that look also made her feel oddly warm inside, and she started to crack a smile in return… then, gratefully, her phone vibrated.

Amanda dug it out of her jacket pocket to see that she’d just received an email from… Archangel? “How did you…?”

The young woman grinned, “Easily, actually. The details you asked for are in the email. Oh, and just to be clear… if I catch a hint that your agents are disturbing the Nazari family, you can consider our deal off. I’ve provided you more than enough information and links to more in that mail to get you started. If you have questions beyond that, talk to me. You don’t want to see me angry… you really don’t.”

“Understood.” Hmmm, Amanda was starting to like this girl. Archangel certainly had courage… and spunk, as it were. “Wilkins will reply to the email address you provided with all the details you’ll need, including how to contact your handler in case of emergency.”

Archangel rolled her powerful shoulders and said, “Wonderful. Thank you, Director Thorpe. Okay, it’s late and I should go. I’ll look for your mail.” With that, she nodded at Amanda, and then turned to bow to her handler, “Black Knight.” She said respectfully, “Until we meet again.”

And with that, Archangel gracefully launched into the night sky, giving a playful little wave to the assembled agents, and continued straight up until she was enveloped by the darkness. Seconds later, thunder rolled ominously over the lake from her sonic boom.

It was a humbling moment, absolutely incredible, and all her agents were all silently watching the darkness above in awe.

“Wilkins.” Amanda barked. “Where is she headed?”

The stocky agent stepped forward, stabbing in frustration at his tablet. ‘I’m sorry ma’am, the second
Archangel went supersonic, oh, nix that, hypersonic, the signal dropped. We’re no longer tracking her.”

The old spymaster felt a rush of excitement once again, “Smart girl.” She muttered. Archangel knew she was being tracked and had allowed it only until the test was complete… she was full of surprises. Glancing over, Amanda noticed Commander Mason was still watching the sky. She’d honestly never seen the stone-faced warrior look so… thoughtful before.

Apparently, Archangel had a knack for affecting people… and somehow, knowing that gave her comfort. At least it wasn’t just her.

“Pack it in, team, we’re done here,” Amanda called out, before patting Black Knight on the shoulder with a chuckle that he ignored, and walking to her vehicle. Wilkins was already revving the engine as she slipped back into her SUV, and let the tension drain away.

For the first time in months, she felt like there was hope, and that maybe… just maybe, with an angel on her side, she might finally be able to get some sleep.

..........................

Aug 6th – Year Two

On top of the Space Needle – Seattle, WA

0012 hours UTC -8, early Sunday morning, U.S. West Coast Time

“It’s so amazing up here. I can see everything!” Alex stood up on the gently curved roof of the Space Needle above the observation deck and restaurant, her arms outstretched, looking out across the shimmering lights of Seattle. Kara sat at her feet, knees drawn up to her chest; head tilted back so she could look up at the stars. Shah was balanced on the edge of the structure on one foot, playfully looking over the drop-off, five hundred or so feet down to the ground.

It felt so, perfect, just being there with them both, even if they were tempting fate by doing exactly what Madam Xiao had predicted they would. Alex shivered once again just thinking about it. Kara was just being defiant about the whole situation. How in Rao’s name did the old woman know they’d end up there, in dresses, anyway?

Alex and Shah had changed back into the ball gowns they’d worn before their amazing little adventure with the CIA. Kara, lacking the luxury of being able to shape-change her clothing at will, was still in her nearly skin-tight Archangel costume… but had removed her delicate mask, and freed up her long, wavy hair to drape down her back and over her shoulders.

Damn, Alex loved everything about her sexy Kryptonian girlfriend/lover/bondmate.

“Oh, my…” Shah said, staring off at the city. “I just had déjà vu. The Space Needle… it reminds me very much of Borj e Milād, Milad Tower, in Tehran… just a lot shorter.” Alex and Kara leaned in to listen, as their sister’s voice grew wistful. “I remember my parents taking Cyrus and me there to visit when we were young, during Nowruz, right after it was built. From its high terraces, we could see the snow-covered northern mountains stretching east to west like a vast wall, and the whole city was spread out below us. I felt like a bird, soaring above the world. It was a magical experience.” She smiled, and did a pirouette on her toes, levitating up in the air a few feet and back down again as she
turned. “Now here I am, actually flying with my sisters.”

In fact, both Alex and Shah had been flying under their own power all night during the entire CIA test. It had been... incredible.

“I would very much like to see that tower and your beautiful city one day,” Kara spoke softly, her gaze following Shah’s fluid movements.

She stopped and looked over at Alex and Kara with a huge smile on her face, “One day you will, both of you. You can finally meet my cousins, aunts, uncles... The whole extended family. I’m sure everything, and nothing, has changed there.”

“I look forward to that day, aziz-am... I feel like I already know them.” Alex said, not voicing what she really wanted to say, that she couldn’t wait to meet Shah’s father and see them reunited. They had to find him first and then free him.

As they were talking, Alex had begun experimenting with her flames... creating animated flickers of light around her that looked like tiny dancing fairies. Shah stepped over, fascinated, and allowed the delicate wisps to gather on her arm.

“So,” Alex eventually said, “We’re working for the CIA now? We definitely need to talk about that. I’m totally supportive, but you being exposed to them and giving Amanda Thorpe Shah’s father’s name still freaks me the Hell out.”

Shah moved in the blink of an eye, like a living shadow, appearing sitting next to Kara. “I accept the risk. Even with Ada, Shatari, and Zara slipping past the Iranian government’s firewalls, we’ve found no hint of him, no trail. We’ve hit a dead end... and we’re not asking Kara to go fly over there and sniff him out.

“Wherever my father is being held, the location isn’t on any hard drive we can reach; we need the CIA’s assistance. They have human intelligence and resources we lack, boots on the ground as they say. Look, Alex, I don’t exactly trust Director Thorpe either, but there’s something I can’t quite put my finger on that I do like about her... and Daniels says she’s honorable. It also seems that she and her infamous Agency are my family’s only hope right now.”

“**Our** only hope.” Kara gently corrected her, wrapping an arm around the shorter Persian girl’s shoulders.

Alex sighed and slid in on Shah’s other side to lay her head on her best friend’s shoulder. “We’ll find him, and get answers about your dad, and Cyrus... no matter how long it takes, the rest is just noise. We’ll just have to stay ahead of it.”

They stayed up on the Needle for another hour watching the glowing city and the Sound, enjoying being together, and discussing the future. They had a lot to talk about. Alex and Shah both started college in September: in exactly a month away for Alex (right after Kara’s seventeenth birthday) and a few days after that for Shah. All of them were stressing over the reality of their lives changing so radically, and being physically separated.

Alex could feel Kara’s sadness mingled with her own, as her beautiful Kryptonian struggled with feeling as if she were somehow being left behind.

It broke her heart. All of it was happening too fast... too soon.

What came out of that conversation was a pact between the three of them... that no matter where they were, they’d spend as much time together as possible. Being able to communicate telepathically
meant distance was irrelevant, they’d all still be in each other’s thoughts, but getting together face-to-face would still require coordination and risk.

They figured out that until she and Shah could reliably fly for sustained periods of time Kara would come to them. She could make it to George Mason, Alex’s school, from Midvale in less than three minutes. Technically she could get there even faster, but to do so would risk potentially generating a wake powerful enough to cause damage to the world around her. If she went north to Cambridge to pick up Shah at MIT first, it would still only take five or six minutes for them all to be together.

At the rate they were evolving and their powers stabilizing, Alex and Shah would soon be making the trips on their own, but until then Kara was happy to be their Kryptonian taxi.

The bondmates had also decided to accept the Daniels’ offer to use their house in Bethesda, Maryland as a home away from home. It was close to Alex’s school and would give her and Kara a safe place off campus, and away from prying eyes, to get together.

The funny thing was, with all the sneaking, Alex’s biggest fear wasn’t Kara being seen by strangers, but avoiding parental detection on her forays to meet them. They talked about telling her parents the truth but ended up deciding they should wait, and worked out a contingency plan in case Eliza or Jeremiah ever found out on their own that Kara had been using her powers. Shah’s mom, Ravan, had already been brought into their circle of trust and had proved that she could keep secrets, so the Nazari house was a ‘safe zone’.

As for what was to come after they all graduated from college, they affirmed that whatever happened they would stay together… no matter what. The current plan was for the three of them to find a place in National City to live together. Their lives, friends, and hearts were all there, plus the location made logical sense: Kara working at CatCo seemed likely; Shah’s dream job at JPL was almost a sure thing if she kept her grades up, and Naomi had already begged Alex to come take a position with her at The Sagan Institute.

Not only was it an organization she wanted to be part of, but accepting a role there would mean she could keep working with her amazing mentor (and friend), and continue their research on what was happening to her and Shah. Alex and Naomi had even planned out some of the investigations they’d work on, and potential topics for scientific papers they’d write together.

During the heartfelt, sometimes tearful, conversation, Kara kept hearing people in trouble and sped off to help on several occasions. Apparently standing on top of the iconic tower put them in the center of the action, which wasn’t really the best idea for having an uninterrupted conversation. But, at least helping people lifted Kara’s spirits.

Neither Alex nor Shah felt confident enough in their abilities to sustain their Kryptonian powers for much longer given how much they’d used them that day, so they stayed on top the Needle and waited.

After all was said and done, Kara stopped two muggings, saved the life of a teen who’d overdosed, took a woman in labor to the hospital, escorted four exhausted runaways to a shelter, knocked out (for a very, very long time, she had to admit) a man trying to rape one of those girls, stopped a bus from running someone over, and took down an armed man who had been in the process of trying to rob a liquor store. The man behind the store’s checkout counter watched as she appeared in front of the masked gunman, set a finger on his forehead, and tapped… immediately sending him to the land of dreams. Just enough force applied with just the right precision. She’d been hoping for some time to have an opportunity to test out that theoretical move, and it worked flawlessly.

Chief Vaden, Ada, and the techs back on the Battle Bridge were having a field day with the data
they’d been collecting all night.

Shah had asked Ada for help in making sure that the criminals Kara dealt with didn’t just walk away, and her daughter enthusiastically threw herself into the task. She hacked into the Seattle Police Department and District Attorney’s computer networks to dispatch officers when required, placed newly found ‘surveillance footage’ (from Kara’s headset recordings) in the system, as well as pointers to incriminating evidence and witnesses, file paperwork, and calls leaving anonymous ‘Good Samaritan’ reports after each incident.

Before they left to head back to the ship Shah hugged them both and said, “I think you two missed doing something at the party. Please allow Zara and me to provide the track for this special dance.” And she faded into shadow, leaving behind the wonderful beginning echoes of Corinne Bailey Rae’s song, *Like a Star*.

And that’s how Kara and Alex would always remember that beautiful night.

Floating together above the Space Needle as the music played… lost in each other, slowly dancing as the glittering city and Puget Sound turned around them, wrapped in each other’s tight embrace.

It was after 0130 in the wee hours of the morning when the trio finally returned to the silent USS *Zumwalt*, giggling like kids, and playfully shushing each other as they made their way below decks. They hugged a surprised Aya, who was on guard in their corridor, before all cramming into the austere private stateroom Capt. Simmons had afforded them to crash.

Their quarters were opulent compared to bunking in the racks (they even had a small bathroom to themselves) and the best part was that it was permanently assigned to Team Archangel: Their shipboard home away from home.

Not that any of them were clearheaded enough to be thinking about much besides their pillows, they’d been through a lot that day.

All of their frenetic energy evaporated quickly as they brushed their teeth and changed into pajamas. In fact, the three heroes were barely able to keep their eyes open long enough to say goodnight.

*Aug 6th – Year Two*

*Sunday*

USS *Zumwalt* – Puget Sound, in the Port of Seattle, WA AND

Earth Pax (Earth 24) - Paris

*1012 hours UTC -8, Sunday morning, U.S. West Coast Time*

Someone was stroking Shah’s hair… light, loving caresses that drew her back to awareness from a
She woke slowly, unafraid… luxuriously sprawled under comfy flannel sheets, her raven hair splayed out over the pillow and all around her head like a dark halo. Without opening her eyes, she could feel her daughter curled up next to her, propped up on one elbow and watching her with a joyful fascination.

“Good morning, mother.” The young woman said, then cracked her knuckles, leaned forward, and carefully moved Shah’s thick hair aside so she could begin gently kneading her shoulders. “You’re definitely tight … long night?”

“Rao, you have no idea…” Shah groaned; face down on her pillow, her thoughts still filled with memories of the previous day… the amazing ball, the CIA’s exhausting test, flying under her own power, finally using her skills and abilities in a real fight, blacking out city blocks, easily taking out special ops commandos, Kara’s saves, and the pact the three friends had made.

Ada giggled, “Oh, I think I do… I really needed to talk to you this morning… on a personal matter, so when none of you showed up to the mess by 0830, I came looking. I could barely open the hatch, and couldn’t get to you through the girl pile, so I brought your consciousness here. You all looked so… adorable all tangled up together.”

Shah moved her face from being planted in her downy pillow to the side, where she could squint and see the gorgeous room. It looked like they were in a suite at the Four Seasons where she’d once stayed with her mother on a trip for some conference or another. It was very classy, high-end, and clean, with thick curtains draped over a couple of the walls that allowed thin rays of sunlight into the room.

She stuck her leg out from under the sheet to allow one of the tendrils of light to caress teasingly over her partially-Kryptonian flesh, experiencing a taste of ecstasy. Wow, that feels so… wonderful.

“Hmmm, not a lot of room on a warship for a sleepover, even in a stateroom. I hope we were all decent.” Shah was barely able to speak due to Ada’s marvelous back rub making her lose any form of coherent thoughts.

“Yeah, but I took pictures and sent them to Jess anyway… made her morning.”

Ugh. So embarrassing! Shah tried to curse in Persian, but her very skilled daughter found a knot, and worked it hard, making her moan instead.

“So, where is… here?” She managed to eventually get out, at least semi-intelligibly.

“Ugh. So embarrassing! Shah tried to curse in Persian, but her very skilled daughter found a knot, and worked it hard, making her moan instead.

“Yeah, but I took pictures and sent them to Jess anyway… made her morning.”

“This is Jess and my apartment, on the other Earth that exists within the universe inside of our crystals… or more correctly, through them. As you know, it’s a great deal more complicated than that and involves gates, wormholes, and the multiverse, but that’s not important right now. What is important is that you are here with me in your new body… oh don’t worry, your original is still safely back on the Zumwalt, happily asleep under an Alex and Kara blanket.” She giggled.

Shah’s mind was now awake… “Can we get back to the part about you opening your crystal’s gateway, and both of us actually being at the other end of it in new bodies? Oh, wait… first; please tell me about the other thing, the important reason you needed to talk to me this morning. Did something happen last night?” She used her Kryptonian speed to shift her body and was now sitting up, facing her daughter.

Ada’s smile was radiant and took Shah’s breath away. Her daughter’s features were a delicate blend
of her own, Alex, and Kara’s, though her kind green eyes were definitely Nazari in origin, with her own unique twist. The girl was hers, as surely as if she’d given birth to her, and as crazy as that seemed at first, their connection had become as unbreakable as the one she shared with her sisters. They lay down on the bed in the light, on their sides, facing each other.

“I…” Ada began, her lips curling into a secret smile, “I kissed Jess! Like, really, really kissed her. For the first time.”

Shah’s breath hitched, and her heart skipped a beat. “Oh Ada, that’s wonderful!”

“Yes, it is. It was… perfect.” The beautiful young woman glanced down, appearing suddenly nervous. She sighed, and after a few moments finally said, “And, I think I love her. No, I am certain I love her.” Their hands found each other’s and the two held on to each other for dear life.

“I need your wise counsel, mother,” Ada begged. “I… I don’t want to end up being a mere substitute for one of the women she really wanted to be with, or the ‘rebound girl’. I want to know that she loves me for me… warts and all (as humans say). Seeing Alex and Kara so happy together, so blissful after knowing each other in every intimate way, gave me hope for something I once thought impossible… at least for myself.”

Shah wrapped her arms around her very real grown-up child, who she noticed was dressed in comfy flannel pajamas that were covered in little versions of Totoro, the charming creature from one of the many animated Miyazaki movies they all loved.

“You have every right to have that and to ask questions before things get too far along. I’m no expert… believe me, and I’ve never had a boyfriend or a girlfriend…” Shah’s thoughts drifted to Alex and regrets… “But I think you should tell Jessica how you feel. She’ll respect that. If I have learned anything, it is that you should never ignore, or put off something that’s important… especially matters of the heart.

“And,” Shah continued, “FYI, Jess stopped being interested in Kara or me as soon as you came along… you’re prettier and much more fascinating. I also believe that she feels the same way about you as you do about her.” Ada blinked and her eyes went wide with surprised wonder. She then giggled, and the snuggly pair bumped foreheads affectionately before Shah continued, “Seriously, you don’t see how she looks at you when you aren’t aware… how she gravitates in your direction like a planet to its sun and so obviously needs to touch you at every opportunity. When you’re in the room, it’s like you’re the only person in the world that matters.”

Ada hugged her so tightly that Shah couldn’t breathe. Her daughter was… crying.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay…” Shah rocked her and ran her hand over Ada’s long, silky raven hair to comfort her.

The young woman finally took a shaky breath, and wiped wetness from her eyes, “I am both blessed and cursed by these Kryptonian and human emotions you and Zara gave me… mostly blessed.” She smiled. “Thank you, mothers… though I do wish you would have given me the ability to control these infernal tears.”

After a comfortable silence Shah asked, “So, you figured out how to bring me into your lovely home, could you do the same with your aunts?”

Ada smiled, “Of course, I can teach you all how to attune your auras with your crystals’ gates to this universe, so you can travel to this version of Earth anytime, without assistance. Oh, mother, you’ll all
love it here! Jess and I haven’t come up with a codename for this world yet, but it’s so peaceful by comparison to ours. The World Union that governs things spends less than a fraction of what our world does on their military, but education, science, the environment, health, and art are highly valued. Perhaps because of this, they are both technologically and scientifically far superior to our Earth. As an example, fossil fuels were eliminated here many years ago and replaced with solar, and fusion.

“And because I know you’ll ask, while there’s no indication that any ‘superheroes’ are active here. Wonder Woman was one of the few… and played a pivotal role in ending what they call The Last War (this Earth’s World War II). It was literally the final major conflict fought on the planet. It ended in a great cataclysm, many died... and she disappeared soon after, never to be seen again. According to all the records both Zara and I’ve been scanning her actual identity was never publically revealed, so it’s quite possible that she could have just retired under an assumed name… but that’s just speculation. There are also scattered reports of metahumans, but nothing from the last ten years.”

Shah became wistful, wondering what happened to the legendary Amazon hero. Did she return to Themyscria, the fabled island of her people, once the world was saved? How had there been no other wars since? All very good questions, but none they could answer today. “In other words,” She said, “We’re in an amazingly serene and delightfully boring world?”

“Yes, apparently, and one we wish we had back home.” Ada sighed. “I pulled you to me here this time, but I have no doubt that all of you will quickly master the ability to transition between universes on your own using your crystals. Jess has joined me twice already, the second time by herself… Though she’s still having a hard time believing this place isn’t just a dream.”

“Thank you, Ada, I… oh, wait a minute…” Shah suddenly had a brilliant idea!

“What are you thinking, mother?” Ada was smirking. She knew, yeah, she knew or at least had some inkling of what was going on in her mother’s head.

“That maybe we all now have a quiet place to escape to that doesn’t involve us all having to sneak around, or require Kara lying to her parents. Once Alex and I start school it’s going to be difficult for all of us to see each other in person as often as we’d like… not to mention Kara and Alex needing… um, quality time together.”

“You mean a place to… Boink? Get down to business? Screw like bunnies? Do the nasty?” Ada was trying very hard not to laugh.

“Rao! Fine, yes! To have sex!” Shah was blushing furiously, her face felt hot. “Do you… do you think you could help us find a place to live here?”

“Of course!” Ada jumped up, bounced off the bed, and went quickly across the hardwood floor to pull back the tall curtains covering one of the walls.

Shah squinted against the dazzling light, but when her eyes adjusted, she was stunned by what she saw. Behind the curtains were sliding glass doors that opened onto a wide deck. This extended down the length of the room and wrapped around the corner of the building. Beyond that, not more than three hundred feet away from the windows, loomed the Eiffel Tower, and stretching in-between was a lush swath of green scattered with an abundance of color from thousands of flowers. It was a vast, tree-filled park interwoven with a patchwork of walkways.

“We’re in Paris?!” Shah leaped out of bed, becoming a blur of inky shadows that coalesced a second later on the balcony, her nearly naked curvy form leaning forward over the ornate, twisted iron railing to take in the incredible view.
A warm summer breeze teased her hair.

“Where else would we be?” Ada giggled. “The River Seine is off to our right.”

Shah craned her neck to see everything. There were boats on the river, and people out and about everywhere, riding bikes, in cars, walking, some with dogs others with children… and that’s when it hit her.

That she was in a living, breathing world…

Shah was speechless… or more accurately, overcome with wonder.

Ada had bounced out from the bedroom to lean into her mother’s side at the railing. The bubbly young woman bumped shoulders with Shah as she pointed out animatedly, “See that bridge over there? That’s the Pont d'Iéna or Jena Bridge if you prefer. It links up the Left Bank here on this side to the district of Trocadéro to the Right. The Jardins du Trocadéro is just past that. It’s like a big park, with museums, an aquarium, and the Fountain is incredible!

“We can walk over if you want, and get a coffee, breakfast, crepes, gelato, or whatever. Rao, the crepes are to-die-for! Oh, and don’t worry, I’ll let you know when Alex and Kara wake up, I have a Shard of myself back in our world looking after things on the ship.”

“I’d like to go with you, very much.” Shah smiled, shifting from being only in her black underwear to a flowing summer dress, comfortable sandals, floppy hat, a messenger style shoulder bag, and a pair of her favorite aviator sunglasses.

“Where would you want to live here on this Earth?” Ada asked as her own clothing shifted from PJs to formfitting blue skinny jeans, a very flattering white tank top, a perfect black blazer, and heels.

“Stunning!” Shah surveyed Ada from head to toe; noting that the girl had a very good eye for style. “Where would I like to live? If you don’t mind maybe somewhere right here in Paris. I sure your aunts would love it… especially Alex. The view here is lovely, and more importantly, we’d be close to you.”

Ada clapped. “I hoped you’d say that! Nothing would make me happier. I know for a fact that the apartments above us are for sale, and don’t worry, money isn’t an issue… within reason of course. We apparently have some limited ability to tweak reality here, enough to be useful at least.”

Shah grinned, “Brilliant! Where do I sign?”

...........................

Aug 6th – Year Two

Various locations:

- Flying down the coast from Seattle
- National City – The Tower, at The Kyle
- Earth Pax (Earth 24) - Paris

1334 hours UTC -8, Sunday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time
After saying their farewells to their friends and family on the USS Zumwalt, the flight back to National City was fairly uneventful, aside from one rescue. The trio had stopped for a wonderful lunch in Monterey, but afterward detected a weak distress signal coming from off the coast.

A large catamaran had been blown three miles out into the Pacific in foul weather and capsized. The married couple piloting the high-tech craft had been in the water for over six hours and were soaked, freezing, and exhausted. At first, they were startled by Kara, Shah, and Alex’s sudden appearance, but turned out to be good company once they realized the flying young women were there to help them.

They were both in their early fifties and quite an adventurous pair. World travelers who’d even brought their excitable golden retriever, Roscoe, along for their annual summer voyage to Mexico.

After Kara righted their boat, Alex used her flames to warm the unfortunate husband, wife, and their grateful four-legged hairy child while Shah and Kara pushed the broken vessel back to shore. Once on solid ground, they all received lots of hugs (from the happy humans) and affectionate licks (from Roscoe) for their efforts and chatted for a while.

It turned out that David and Vanessa Jennings were high-powered attorneys from Gateway City, and beyond their appreciation and contact information, they offered Team Archangel their services should the three of them ever find themselves in need a good lawyer, pro bono of course.

Alex had questions for them but decided she’d wait to ask at another time, in private. The topic wasn’t exactly something she was ready to share with Kara, at least yet… just an idea on how to potentially address the whole awkward being in a romantic relationship with her adopted sister thing.

They finally returned to National City and The Tower that afternoon. Alex was so happy to be back. She’d become quite spoiled living with Kara… they had no one looking over their shoulders, made love whenever they felt like it (which was often), and cherished falling asleep in the arms of, on top of, or under the girl of her dreams every night.

Damn, I’m going to miss this place… and the absolute freedom she’d experienced that summer.

They spent the afternoon catching up on tasks for their internships. Alex had some analysis and reports to work on; Shah was behind on prototype designs, and Kara worked through several messages from Colliers, mostly about a special project he needed her help with.

And that night ended up being very special.

Ada appeared in her now-signature glowing ball of light late that afternoon and invited them to come with her to Earth Pax (they’d decided on a codenames for that peaceful world). “Jess and I would like to take you all to dinner, in Paris... our treat. Is that agreeable?”

They couldn’t say yes fast enough!

With a little guidance, Ada had them all lie down, close their eyes, relax, and like a sweet-tongued hypnotist helped them each crossover. One by one, they entered that completely different universe!

They awoke in Ada and Jess’ sunny Paris apartment, and as Shah had described, it was both classy and elegant. Alex was astonished to find that the alternate world was as real to her as her own, in every way. Her body felt exactly like hers, everything smelled real, looked real, felt real, and was real.

The experience would have been unbelievable if she hadn’t been living it!
As Shah suggested, Earth Pax was a perfect solution to their problem of how they could all get together once she and Shah left for college… and not just in their thoughts!

Alex asked Ada for clarity as she explored the magnificent living areas of the sprawling, many-roomed apartments. “So, everything we do here affects our other bodies back our Earth Prime or whatever we’re calling it, right? So, if we eat, we eat, if we get hurt, we’ll be injured in both worlds, correct?”

Shah’s lovely daughter nodded, “Uh huh, it’s part of the entanglement, you are all here, but also in both places at the same time. Always be mindful of that fact, the ripples go both ways… unless we physically cross between worlds. I like the name “Earth Prime” for our world, by the way, it has my vote.”

Alex had so many questions! “I’m good with Earth Prime as well. Anyway, I’m still just trying to wrap my head around the fact that we have physical bodies over here in… this universe. I mean, I feel exactly like me, no different at all.”

“That’s because you are you, auntie, exactly the same!” Ada grinned. “Remember, when you first manifest and are created in a new world using this technology every aspect of who and what you will be is drawn from who you are; electrical patterns of thought and memory, DNA, everything… reaching back through the entire genetic history of your lineage. In your case, The Houses of Danvers and El.

“Earth Prime was that ‘other world’ for me, or rather my first world. This Earth…” Ada paused and asked everyone, “We’re all good calling it Earth Pax, right? Since it’s so peaceful here? I like the Latin.” Everyone nodded in agreement, so she continued, “So, as I was saying, Earth Pax is technically my second Awakening… but to all of you besides auntie Kara, who’s had an original Awakening and been to the other Krypton, it’s your first.

“Anyway, the rules of your reality in any new world are set at the moment of your creation, and while they can be tweaked a little here and there, can’t be radically changed. Every time you appear in that world afterward, it will be as you configured yourself, in your avatar.

“Sorry aunties, in pulling you here I made an executive decision to remake you all exactly the same as on our Earth. Same powers, same amazing hotness, same everything.” Ada was grinning.

Shah said, “I can live with that.” After a round of agreement and nods she continued, “Ada, this is all so… incredible, and good to know for our trip to Kandor. Kara didn’t physically travel there, so Uva must have set her reality when the nanny cat pulled her awareness there after the incident with the USS Washington. When we go, if we don’t cross over physically, we’ll all be able to configure our own realities… once you teach us how.”

Before Jess joined them, Ada admitted that when she’d first pulled her girlfriend over to Earth Pax she’d made the Chief Petty Officer just like Shah and Alex, a hybrid Kryptonian. Ada wanted to give her and Jess a potential forever home, and the same near immortality the rest of them had… she couldn’t bear the thought of losing her.

Jess, of course, had been totally onboard with the whole thing.

All of them understood why the hopelessly in love young one had made the choice she did, and let her know they all supported her.

After more conversation and a full tour of the place, Jess woke up in the main bedroom where her Earth Pax avatar had been ‘sleeping’ (more like hibernation) and groggily sauntered into the living
room to give a round of hugs to everyone.

It was both strange and wonderful to watch her slightly shimmer as she moved with newfound grace between them in her U.S. Navy blue PJs. She was clearly reveling in the emergence of yellow star enhanced powers. Ada explained that Jess was only about twelve percent Kryptonian at the moment, so she had a long way to go and plenty of time to adapt before she got there completely.

“Will our avatar bodies be safe here when our minds are back home?” Kara asked. “It’d be really creepy for someone if they accidentally found us all sleeping here like vampires. That’s the kind of attention and trouble we don’t need.”

Jess’ brow wrinkled, “Ada and I’ve talked about it, and we think we should find a guardian on Earth Pax… someone we can trust to watch over us. The question is, who? Any thoughts?”

They were quiet for a while, but were soon tossing out ideas; from hiring private security to watch the apartment, to reaching out to people on Earth Pax that they trusted on Earth Prime. They couldn’t ask any of their doubles for help; all were all too young as were most of their friends (but not all of them).

“What about Just Jack?” Alex asked with curiosity as she and Shatari scanned the Internet for information on him. “It looks like on this world he never joined the military, but is a ‘Peace Officer’ (I guess that’s what they call police here) in National City with the NCPD… huh, and Aeryn will be graduating from university in Dublin next year. But with no Wayne Foundation, Selina Kyle, Bruce Wayne, or Batman she won’t be headed to the U.S., and she and Jack will never meet.”

Kara pouted. “That’s just wrong, we need to do something. Hey, maybe we can get them together here in the City of Lights? Hire them both to be our guardians?”

“I like where this is going.” Alex grinned. “But let’s work on a plan over dinner. I don’t know about you guys, but I’m starving!”

Before they all set-off, Ada gave them each a small wallet with World Union IDs, multiple credit cards in their names, and the equivalent of about two thousand dollars in cash inside. She said, “These are yours, don’t lose them.”

They all chuckled and as one replied, ‘Yes mom’ before she continued. “To make things easy I’ll take care of your bills (auto pay for the win!) and show you how to twist reality just enough to not want for anything… but again, I caution you all of this must be within reason. We don’t know all the effects of our meddling yet, so we should try and make as small of an impact as possible in this world.”

En masse, the whole crew inundated Ada with hugs and kisses, until she was a total giggle worm and they were all piled on top of her on the big couch.

“We promise not to be big spenders,” Alex said with a smile.

“Ay Dios Mio!” Jess suddenly slapped her forehead and reached into her back pocket, pulling out something metallic and dangly to hand to Kara. “I almost forgot, forgive me, Mi Diosa, your keys.” She then also offered duplicates to Alex and Shah.

“What are these for?” Kara’s brow did its adorable crinkle that Alex desperately wanted to zip in and kiss.

Shah cleared her throat, and said, “Earlier this morning, Ada helped me purchase the apartments on the floor above this one, and with a little reality tweaking the place has been completely remodeled…
for the three of us.”

Alex and Kara stared in astonishment at Shah, then each other, before snapping back to their Persian sister, flickering and shimmering to her and basically going bananas... jumping, laughing, hugging, kissing, and thanking her... much to everyone’s amusement.

“So, you’re okay with it being all of us?” Shah asked more timid than usual. “I can always find somewhere else if...”

Alex cut Shah’s uncharacteristic rambling off. “No way! You’ll stay right where you are, with us!” She wrapped her arm around Kara’s waist and her bondmate did the same before they both reached out to take their sister by the hand. “The Three Musketeers, right?”

Shah’s smile in response was so genuinely happy, and relieved, that Alex thought her heart was about to burst! The sight of their sweet, wise Shah fighting back tears was such a rare occurrence that it made the waterworks start flowing in earnest for all of them.

“El mayarah.” Kara said softly, speaking the Kryptonian phrase ‘stronger together’ with such love, and assuredness as she gazed into Shah’s teary eyes that her meaning was quite clear.

They were meant to be together, a family.

Forever.

.........................

A little while later...

As they walked along a narrow worn-brick street on the way to the restaurant, a jubilant Jess was describing the area. “See, the Metro’s close, and overall it really is just a typical multi-ethnic, working-class Paris neighborhood.”

To Alex, it really did feel that way, homey... with a sedate vibe, endless storefronts with lots of residences above, and a profusion of family-owned small restaurants. Sure, there was a little graffiti, but the streets were clean, and the smells of spices and meals cooking in kitchens alone were to die for. She liked that there was plenty of room for cyclists and pedestrians, more than for cars on the two-lane street nearby.

The Blue Elephant, a wonderful Thai restaurant on the Rue de la Roquette near the Bastille, was only a few stops along the Metro from the apartment. The food was incredible, as was the service and the ambiance. There was a profusion of greenery and flowers everywhere, giving the place an exotic aesthetic... as if they’d stepped from the orderly Parisian streets through a portal to somewhere in Bangkok. The semi-private room they had was gorgeous, with a décor that used dark woods, candles, mythic statues and Thai art all around.

Alex noticed that on the way over Jessica and Ada couldn’t stop touching each other, and as the evening progressed the pair kept getting completely lost in each other’s eyes and words, to the point where after dinner, over coffee at a street side café, Alex jokingly told them to ‘get a room’. The funny part was that when she said that, the couple looked at each other, giggled, bid them “Bonne nuit!”’, kissed them all good night, and took the Metro straightaway back to their apartment.

When they were finally out of sight the remaining trio cracked up laughing.

Shah was so happy for her daughter that Alex and Kara conspired to take her out on the town to celebrate. They ended up finding a cozy little nightclub with live music somewhere off the Champs-
Elysées and danced for what turned into hours.

The three of them kept getting hit on all night, and while most of Kara and Alex’s potential suitors weren’t thrilled with rejection they all took it in stride. Shah ended up attracting the interest of the lead singer from the band. He worked hard to woo her, sending drinks to their table, using his roguishly handsome looks, a gift for poetic verse, a scarily accurate knowledge of American music, and his accent (which was quite compelling)… but in the end, she politely declined his offer to ‘show her Paris at night’.

Alex knew her best friend wasn’t looking for a one-night stand. Shah wanted what she and Kara had: a relationship and love with someone special. So far, no one had really sparked her interest… except for Alex and Kara.

Over the course of the evening, they did end up making a couple of new friends who they hung out with the rest of that amazing night. At 0134, as they all finally prepared to head home, emails and numbers were exchanged with the sweet librarian Celeste and the kind and gentle Philippe, who was a collèges (middle school) teacher, as well as plenty of hugs and kisses.

On the way home Kara whispered, “Oh my gosh!” (So cute) as she was struck by a thought and asked Alex if she and Shatari could find out if the three of them already existed here on their new Earth, like Jack and Aeryn.

They were all excited by the prospect, and it didn’t take long for their Kryptonian AIs to find that there was no record of a Kara Danvers, but there was an Eliza and Jeremiah Danvers as well as a Ravan Nazari living in Midvale, both with fifteen-year-old daughters… Alex and Shahrazad, who were attending high school together.

“Talk about doing a time warp.” Alex chuckled. “I bet we’re best friends in this world, too.”

Shah nodded, “I may need to seek myself out to offer spiritual counseling. I was very conflicted at that age, and in denial.” Her appreciative gaze lingered on Alex.

Alex blushed, she would consider doing the same. At fifteen she’d already bound herself to Shah emotionally and was so in love with her… but didn’t believe the girl would ever return her feelings.

“So, you guys exist, but not me?” Kara was sad and stuck her lower lip out in an adorable pout. “Is it possible I didn’t arrive here yet? Or maybe I never will?”

Alex and Shatari checked a hunch and quickly received confirmation. Rao, network security in this world is weak sauce… awesome for us!

“Hold up. I just found you, Kara. There’s a newly adopted fifteen-year-old ‘Kara Kent’ living in Smallville, Kansas… aaand, guess what? It looks like you and Clark are technically brother and sister, recently adopted, together, by Jonathan and Martha. Holy crap! You’re the older sibling! Kal-El is just a baby! You must have never been stuck in the Phantom Zone in this reality, or you both were and you escaped together.”

It was a lot to absorb… and like Alex and Shah, Kara wanted to go find her younger self and baby Kal immediately… to offer guidance, to tell her other self that everything would be okay, and about Shah and Alex… about how important they were, or could be, in her life.

But, while the trio agreed the idea was incredibly tempting, they also questioned if they had any right to interfere with their other selves’ lives and potential destinies.

Alex was the first to speak, “Well, just a few hours ago we all seemed okay with the idea of butting
in to bring Jack and Aeryn together… how is doing the same with ourselves any different?”

“An interesting ethical dilemma.” Shah mused. “Is this a situation where some sort of Prime Directive applies? Or at least some set of rules we should follow? The fact is we don’t know how our interactions could change people’s lives or the future here. We could… break things by trying to do something good, cause unintended consequences… or perhaps we were always intended to come here. As much as I wish to speak to our friends and my younger self, I believe the risks are too great at this time. I propose that until we have gathered enough information to enable us to reach a consensus on a course of action, that we remain only observers in this world.”

None of them knew the right answer, not even their companions, so they agreed to wait. They needed a lot more data and Ada’s input (once she wasn’t off being distracted by Jess’ body, which from all indications wasn’t going to be anytime soon).

The trio finally made it back to their building at some ungodly hour, creeping up the stairs past Ada and Jess’s, where Shah excitedly turned the key in the eight-foot-high twin doors (more like gates) of their incredible new four-bedroom apartment.

They were too tired to give the spacious, rambling space more than a cursory glance once inside. It was much larger than Alex had expected… huge in fact, with a second-floor art studio and an apex of skylights above, an actual library, a massive main living space, four baths, a ‘sitting room’, and what looked like an expansive gourmet kitchen.

Shah kissed and hugged them both goodnight before scooting off to find her own room, where she said she intended to seek the comfort of the giant claw-footed tub in her private bath before succumbing to blissful sleep.

Alex found their bedroom and crashed on her and Kara’s impossibly soft king-sized bed. Her bondmate joined her… sinuously straddling her ass and reaching down to gently, but firmly, massage the brunette’s aching shoulders and back. Alex let out a happy, exhausted groan and sent butterfly kisses to Kara in their shared thoughts.

All in all, it had been an amazing weekend and they were all sad to think of it ending, even just temporarily. But they had a big week ahead, and Monday morning loomed like a specter.

..........................
Asheghetam - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

Azdidane shoma khoshhalam – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)

Bedrood – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

Bonne nuit – ‘Good night’ (French)

C'est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

Damnú air! – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Dooset daram – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gaelic/Irish)

íthi eutukhēs - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Kheili khosh geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

Malā’ikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature

Marbhfháisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)

miboosamet – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)

órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

¡Qué señoras tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)

Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Sundor – ‘beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)

Thi eutukhēs – ‘good luck’ (Ancient Greek)
Vuela, mi diosa! Vuela! – ‘Fly my goddess! Fly!’ (Spanish)

Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

aziz-am – ‘my dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

joon-am – ‘my dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

Nāzanin-am – ‘sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation. (what Shah calls Ada)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘the light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person’s name<’ + jōon (Shah jōon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or jōon- they both mean 'dear'. So, ‘Shah jōon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

Other names/nickname/titles/things:

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Belleza – ‘Beautiful’ (Spanish)

Bríomhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

Dios mío! – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Mi lucero – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn &
Muninn (Thought & Memory).

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Norooz - Persian New Year

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity.

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Seanmháthair – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced shan a WAW her (Irish/Gaelic)

The Agency – A nickname for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the more popular one in recent days is ‘The Company’. Amanda Thorpe is old school.

Tieguanyin - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in China's Fujian province. (Chinese)

Tratung – khrag 'thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Tuath Dé Danann - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced Thoo-a day Du-non (Irish/Gaelic)

Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’. ‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Vallerian – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers (and givers), can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshipped, or traded.

Wan - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find 'her girl' one day. (Irish expression)

Chapter End Notes
The Wrap:

*So... Archangel, and by association Flame and Shadow, are now working for the CIA. Their lives are busier and more complicated, than ever, and they still have a month left to go as interns! Also, in happy news, Ada and Jess are officially dating. Yay! Earth 24, the world our heroes now know as Earth Pax, is quite an amazing place. Now that Ada and Jess as well as Kara, Alex, and Shah have officially moved in, expect them to use their apartments in Paris as their safe place to escape to. Should they or shouldn’t they contact their other selves on that Earth? I really want to know what you think.*

Next Up:

Chapter 23: “Here Be Dragons” – The day started so well, all Alex wanted to do was surprise Shah and Kara with pizza, ice cream, and a Firefly marathon, how did they end up fighting gods and monsters? Or, to say it a different way: After returning to National City, Kara and Alex are betrayed, and our heroes are in for the fight of their lives.

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me. Also, please share this story with those you think might enjoy it! Spread the word!

Thoughts:

Song inspirations:

The Chainsmokers - Paris

[Link to The Chainsmokers – Paris on YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Jw8lR0Jp5M)

*OMG this is so perfect! The lyrics begin:*

*We were staying in Paris*

*To get away from your parents...*

*“It’s just a flesh wound!”*

From Monty Python and the Holy Grail, one of the best movies of all-time.

[Monty Python - The Black Knight video on YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjR4jOoY-N8)

*This really does set the tone for Kara and her CIA handler’s entire future relationship. Interestingly, I always remembered this quote slightly different, but after re-watching the movie to be sure it really is “It’s just a flesh wound!”*
Here Be Dragons

Chapter Summary

The day had started so well, all Alex wanted to do was surprise Shah and Kara with pizza, ice cream, and a Firefly marathon... How did they end up fighting gods and monsters? Or, to say it a different way: After returning to National City, Kara and Alex are betrayed, and our heroes are in for the fight of their lives.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I traveled through light
I traveled through light; I am not afraid
In this lake of souls
In this lake of souls, I lose all fear

- Sigur Rós

Njosnavelin

Aug 10th – Year Two

National City – The Tower at The Kyle

Four days after the CIA’s test

1410 hours UTC -8, Thursday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time

Alex’s day was going spectacularly.

She’d left the lab at the Sagan Institute early (with Naomi’s blessing) to prepare for the surprise evening she’d been planning all week for Kara and Shah. On the agenda were comfy pajamas, an epic Firefly marathon, ordering out their favorite pizzas, and spending some quality time with the tubs of ice cream she’d already artfully stashed in two helpful neighbors’ freezers.

First thing first, she stopped by The Tower to shower and prep for the party, which didn’t take long using a touch of super speed and with Led Zeppelin’s Kashmir playing in the background. She sang along as she worked…
“Oh, let the sun beat down upon my face
And stars fill my dream
I'm a traveler of both time and space
To be where I have been
To sit with elders of the gentle race
This world has seldom seen
They talk of days for which they sit and wait
All will be revealed

Talk in song from tongues of lilting grace
Sounds caress my ear
And not a word I heard could I relate
The story was quite clear

Oh, baby, I been blind
Oh, yeah, mama, there ain't no denyin'
Oh, ooh yes, I been blind
Mama, mama, ain't no denyin', no denyin’…”

Okay, so there may have been a little air guitar going on, too... okay, okay, a lot of air guitar going on… In fact, after a few minutes, Alex realized she was hovering three feet off the floor while she was doing it.

She chuckled at her own enthusiasm as she floated back down to the carpet.

*Damn, I do love me some Zeppelin. Maybe even a teensy bit more than Nirvana.*

Finally, after making sure the living room was arranged just right, Netflix was set to go, they had the requisite Kryptonian quantity of snacks, and the wine was chilled, she stopped to close her eyes and bask in the rays of sunlight that were cascading through the Tower’s curved wall of high windows. It was like fiery caresses all over her skin.

A cool breeze blew in as she stood there, and everything just felt… perfect.

*Life is good.* Alex thought with a grin and breathed out a big, happy sigh.
She’d never been as content in her entire existence as she was at that moment, and had to resist the very powerful urge to flicker over to CatCo, wrap her bondmate in her arms, and kiss her all the way back to their bed.

But resist she did and she broke from her reverie to execute one last sweep of the kitchen. As she was about to turn off the lights, Alex noticed a message blinking on their antiquated answering machine (which she’d never completely figured out how to use). It was from Madam Xiao: the owner of The Nine Dragons had called to let her know that ‘a very special item’ (imported Chinese tea she’d ordered for Kara’s birthday) had come in a week early.

Yes! Today was her lucky day.

After listening, Alex hit ‘delete’ so Kara couldn’t accidentally hear the message, and immediately left to visit the shop. She figured it was as good a time as any to pick up the gift; after all, she had at least an hour to kill.

…………………

The Labyrinth wasn’t busy that afternoon, and as Alex wound her way through the twisty corridors of the haphazard structure and approached the familiar mystic shop she sensed that something was off. Several lights were out in the hallway, and others were not working properly… fluorescent tubes flickered eerily in the half-light.

Peeking through the windows of the business, she couldn’t see much, even after willing her vision to expand beyond human range. It was dark inside and seemed deserted, which was very odd since Madam Xiao’s message was only a couple of hours old.

Could the old proprietor have had a medical emergency, or been robbed?

Where is she? And what happened here?

I don’t like this…

The hair on the back of Alex’s neck stood up, and she felt uneasy; something was definitely wrong. She could have turned around, called the police, or sent her thoughts to her bondmate, but chose not to. She didn’t want to wait for someone else to make sure the eccentric but kind old woman was okay. Besides, whatever was going on, Flame could handle it.

Right?

Alex’s senses were on hyper-alert as she slowly pushed one of the heavy front doors open just enough so she could slip inside without setting off the tiny bronze bells hanging from above.

After stealthily navigating the cluttered, meandering aisles of the front area of the store and finding no one (only a bag with ‘A. Danvers’ sitting unattended on the counter), she tentatively called out, “Hello? Madam Xiao? Are you here?” a couple of times.

But there was no answer.

By then her level of concern had grown to unacceptable levels, so she reached out with her thoughts for Ada and Jess, still wary of tipping off Kara or Shah to the surprise she’d planned. But nothing happened; she couldn’t connect with their minds…
Panic began to set in as Alex then tried to connect with Kara and Shah, but quickly realized that while she could still feel her bondmate and her best friend, it was as if they were both very far away, and beyond her reach.

I’m cut off from them!

Alone.

Alex smelled a trap and immediately began to withdraw, making a defensive retreat to the entrance. As she moved, her enhanced senses caught the subtle hint of vibrations in the air (the way a spider senses movement in its web), along with the barely distinguishable scent of ashes and soot.

A dark presence (she didn’t know how else to describe what she was feeling) had entered the room… cloaked, invisible, and was creeping up behind her. Alex could feel exactly where it was without even looking, and that whatever ‘it’ was… it wasn’t human.

Kryptonian-augmented blood pulsed in her veins and without a sound, she crouched and sprang into action. As she hurtled across the nearly twenty feet of space that separated her from her stalker, Flame’s fiery wings burst from her back, and her outer clothing transformed, fluidly shifting into her flexible red Kryptonian armor.

To her delight (and surprise) a small shield also formed, interlocking like hardened scales down the length her forearm.

Wow, that’s new!

She slammed into whatever the thing was without holding back, causing a shockwave that shook the room and shattered the windows and doors of The Nine Dragons outward in a cascade of wood splinters and shards of glass. Alex had led with her new shield, driving the invisible creature deep into a far wall of the shop with a bone-rattling detonation of dust, broken bricks, and plaster. She kept a solid stance as Shah had taught her, boots braced on the thick, creaking floorboards as she held the massive, unseen creature in place. It struggled with inhuman strength, writhing like some sort of heavy, armored serpent. She could feel it swiping at her with its hands or claws or whatever they were, and maneuvered to further pin the creature and restrict its ability to harm her.

Alex was using nearly all her abilities just to keep the frenzied, wiggling thing from escaping.

Just when she thought she had it contained, something unseen whipped past her cheek only a couple of inches away. Whatever it was would have certainly struck her if she hadn’t sensed it and ducked! Her flaming wings came up defensively on either side after the initial attack, and seconds later when the creature’s dangerous appendage brushed past her right leg she stomped down hard, trapping it between her boot and the now-splintered floor.

Its shrieks of pain echoed through the devastated shop.

As they struggled, Alex was slowly coming to grips with the fact that she was fighting some kind of real-life monster, and it gave her the heebie-jeebies. Whatever she was trying to keep ahold of, it felt like a giant, scaly snake… with claws, and a whip-like tail.

She continued reaching out with her thoughts for Kara, Shah, Ada, and Jess like a distress call but was still being jammed. “Dammit!” She cursed, sweat dripping from her dust-covered face. “What’s happening? How did you block our bond and our crystals?! What do you want with me?!” She demanded of the hissing, concealed creature writhing beneath her tenuous grasp.

A caustic smell, like burning rubber, suddenly began emanating from her invisible attacker,
assaulting her nose and burning her throat and lungs. Rao! She gagged… some kind of defense mechanism!

Then, a horrific growl ripped from the creature’s throat as it struggled against her with renewed vigor. Alex almost faltered but managed to remain standing firm as the odor quickly began dissipating. The beast meant to intimidate her… but it was trapped, and she had the upper hand.

“You stink.” She gagged as she ground her adversary deeper into the crumbling wall hoping to slow its mad thrashing. She was holding her shield against what she believed must have been its neck, and her foot was pushing down hard (with the force of an industrial trash compactor) on what she assumed was a tail.

“No, no, no.” She said. “You aren’t going anywhere you slippery bastard. I need answers.”

The creature wailed again, this time a sharp piercing cry that was so loud and painful she nearly lost her grip. She wanted to cover her ears but didn’t let go of it, even as she felt a thick, sticky wetness dripping down both sides of her neck. She tried without success to alter her Kryptonian aura to block the damaging effects of the sound. She still sucked at aura manipulation.

Shatari quickly adjusted the shape of Flame’s mask to cover and completely protect her bleeding ears.

Damn, I wish I were as good as Kara at this! Right now, I could really use her mad skillz. Rao, I need her.

Then, whatever power had kept the tiring creature hidden (an aura? She wasn’t sure) collapsed, leaving its true form revealed. Alex fought her immediate reaction to jump back upon seeing what the thing actually looked like, and stood fast. She stared in shock though, uttering, “Holy shit.”

It’s a dragon! It’s a real fucking dragon… with huge fangs, and a creepy old man’s face!

The monster was like an enormous sinuous snake covered in scintillating red scales that seemed to serve as armor. It had four legs, molten, blood-red eyes, two rows of huge jagged teeth, a twisted mustache (or maybe it just looked like one, it could have been whiskers), and razor sharp claws that were miraculously just out of reach from being able to cut her to shreds.

Perhaps it was the jolt of seeing it, or that her strength had finally begun to falter, but when the beast once again surged against her it broke free!

The beast opened its gaping jaws as it lunged forward, chomping down hard and deep… slicing through the armor covering her left shoulder. Hot searing pain exploded through every cell in her body from the epicenter of the bite, and blood sprayed across her face and into her eyes. As the weight of the dragon drove her stumbling backward, both she and Shatari were screaming… the dragon’s teeth having ripped into and through her AI Companion as well.

Her HUD was a flickering mess of incoherency, and the pain was indescribable. As she hit the floor, Alex could feel shattered glass and other debris under her back, cutting through her still glitching armor and into her flesh. But then, very quickly, her agony began to fade as the world slowed around her.

She was moving in bullet time!

Shatari was helping her by deadening the pain, and Alex’s own body had involuntarily sped up in response to the attack. The dragon now appeared nearly frozen in time, its terrible blood-soaked jaws raised above her to deliver a final blow...
Pissed, she exploded off the floor sheathed in fire and punched upward. Her fist connected underneath the dragon’s jaw, shattering scale and bone as the heavy beast was flung upwards. It's huge, serpentine coils slammed into the ceiling in an explosive blast of plaster, boards, and timber before crashing back down to the floor along with a rain of debris.

Alex then became a whirlwind of fiery blades, moving to engage the wounded dragon as it attempted to slither away from where it had fallen.

Before it could strike at her again, her twin swords had both cut deep, multiple times. As the beast’s acidic blood sprayed wildly from horrific wounds, she quickly rolled behind a counter to avoid the caustic liquid. Everything around the dying monster’s undulating howling form was smoldering, and the area was a haze of acidic fumes.

She coughed. Her throat stung and her eyes filled with tears from the acrid smell of the fuming blood and smoke. Shatari quickly activated more invisible filters to purify the air around Alex before any permanent damage could be done.

The dragon was twisting in a kind of fevered torment on the shop floor, and growing in size with its death throes. The awful suffering was too much for Alex to watch. She took a deep breath and leaped up into the air from her place of safety to come down on the creature from above... and with both hands on the hilt drove one of her fiery blades deep into the dragon’s brain as she pierced its skull.

The beast immediately stopped moving, and with its eyes rolling up in its head collapsed in a smoking heap of bloody scales. Alex gulped for air as she leaped away from the monster’s twitching carcass... and her arms began to shake.

What the heck just happened? Did I kill a dragon?!

Kara! Kara! She cried out through their bond. I need you nooré cheshm-am! Please hear me!

Then, a cold dread seized her as she felt a new horror approach. Madam Xiao had stepped from the back room, but this was not the kind old woman Alex and Kara had come to know over the last few weeks. No, this Xiao was unhinged, enraged even, and some kind of seething energy (invisible to the human eye) surrounded her.

Shatari was having a hard time identifying what the power was, exactly, or how to counter it. The injured AI could merely detect that the unknown energy was volatile... and raised a weak inertial dampening field to protect Alex with everything she had left in her.

The old woman was once again wearing the gorgeous red dress Alex had seen her in on the day they first met, with its high, straight collar, and gold dragons stitched into the silk. A more concentrated form of the energy bristling around her leaked from her eyes like tears.

It was damn creepy!

Two new dragons slithered into the room with her (as if they were swimming in the air) and encircled the crone protectively. They looked like the one she’d just put out of its misery, but covered in blue and black scales, rather than red.

Alex didn’t need to see any more. She flickered toward the shop’s entryway to get the Hell out of there.
“You… you… killed Zhuyin!” Xiao shrieked her hatred at the fleeing young woman. “You will know pain! You will know suffering!” Glancing back, Alex saw the old woman lift a wrinkled hand and lash out with her power.

*Oh shit, she’s using freaking magic!* The one thing she knew Kryptonians had no innate defense against... Alex braced for impact.

What happened next was literally like being hit by a truck.

She was hurled across the room, straight through a heavy counter in a hail of splintered wood, and into a wall. While she’d used her diminishing Kryptonian reflexes and durability to twist in midair and minimize the physical damage to her body, Alex was left beaten, bruised, and bleeding from multiple wounds as she lay moaning on the floorboards.

Her ribs felt broken.

She tried, but could not stand to face Xiao as she approached. In her blurred vision, the traitorous woman’s elegant red boots crunched over the broken glass that littered the shop’s floor. When a row of heavy display cases blocked her path, the crone clenched her fist, and all of it just exploded, creating a shower of wood chunks and splinters to make way for her.

Alex coughed and tasted blood. *She’s too powerful for me alone.*

“No idea the mistake you have made.” Xiao breathing was labored as she drew in closer, her face twisted into a contemptuous sneer. “The spirit you took was ancient and far worthier than you.”

Then, in a moment, her voice softened, like an insane person flowing easily from rage to calm. “I was going to make your death painless you know…. take your life force gently to spare your bright goddess pain. But no longer! You will know torment like no other, I promise you.”

As Xiao was speaking, Alex’s HUD started to reboot, and she could feel warmth surging through her body as her Kryptonian cells worked overtime to heal her vast collection of injuries.

Unfortunately, it was taking too long, she needed more time… and sunlight. *Oh Kara, where are you?!

*Delay her.*

Alex startled as she heard Shah’s voice in her mind. Not her Persian sister’s actual inside voice, of course, she was still somehow blocked from communicating with her, but a memory from one of her many lessons on combat tactics.

*You’re right, Shah. I need to buy time. So be it, I’d like answers anyway.*

“So…” Alex asked out loud, her voice raspy. “You’re going to kill me? Just like that? Why? You were our friend! We trusted you!” Alex spat blood at Xiao’s feet.

The old woman tilted her head, and for just a moment seemed to come to clarity, as if she had no idea what she was doing, or why Alex was hurt… she looked, so surprised… and very lost.

But then the darkness descended once again into her eyes and she grimaced. “Child, whom you give your trust to is none of my concern, but if it helps, I meant you no animosity… at first. In truth I even liked you, but that was before you extinguished Zhuyin’s light. He had been my protector for centuries. You have no idea what you have taken from me, from this world.” She sighed. “But, let us
speak of you, Alex Danvers… I have not met someone like you in a very, very long time, both goddess and human. Sadly, for you, that is precisely the reason why I need you. You possess something I must have, and I’m going to take it. End of story… well, yours at least. Your strength will return my youth and the vitality that was stolen from me by time and the gods.

“You can take some solace in knowing that, in a way, you’ll be living on through me.” She offered Alex a wicked grin.

“Kara will…!”

“No, no. No. Your goddess cannot hear, or feel you, at least for a little while longer… long enough for me to take what is mine and disappear. And make no mistake, I am the greatest sorceress alive; she will not find me… despite her gifts. She’ll get over your death swiftly I imagine, they always do. The lives of mortals and demigods mean nothing to them anyway; believe me, I know from experience. I’m saving you years of pain by killing you now.”

Alex’s thoughts were in turmoil. Somehow, Madam Xiao knew about her transformation, believed Kara to be a goddess, and that she could make herself young again using Alex’s power in some way?

If she weren’t facing death, the scientist in her would have been much more intrigued by the situation. As it was, she was racking her rattled brain cells to think of any way to escape or take the sorceress out.

She had to keep the old woman talking.

“How are you going to… kill me?” Alex asked, rising to a sitting position. She was regenerating quickly, but still not fast enough, and Shatari was back online. They were now analyzing and recording everything.

If she was going to die, maybe she could at least leave some evidence behind.

“With Tratung, of course.” The name hung in the air with the terrifying force of a Kryptonian glyph of power. “The Blood Drinker will drain your life force into me, and in exchange, I will give the beast a city to devour. A small price to pay for my immortality.” Xiao almost crooned. “It will be the terrible blade’s final act before I banish my old companion forever from this world.”

Alex scooted backward as the terrifying woman raised one of her wrinkled hands up dramatically, and opened her gnarled fingers as if waiting for something. It only took moments before an energy spike erupted in a blinding flash from Xiao’s palm, and there came the sound of what Alex could only describe as a hole being ripped in the universe… as if reality were being torn wide open.

The air reverberated with the screeching of a thousand nails on a thousand chalkboards.

Thankfully, to Alex’s ears, the noises were all just a dull roar.

I love you so much, Shatari! Thank you!

Her recovering companion hugged her back, and Alex could feel her Kryptonian strength returning.

Something had begun forming in Xiao’s hand that looked a hell of a lot like a massive black sword. The weapon was much larger than Alex’s fiery katanas, or Shah’s graceful shadow blades. It was nearly twice as long, and wider, with two devastating edges for cleaving. It was also covered in a kind of swirling gray mist or vapor, like dry ice.
Honestly, the weapon looked like something out of an anime, or a video game, and was far too large (seven feet?) for anyone to hold in one hand, let alone a frail old woman, even a magically powerful one. But somehow Xiao was doing just that… with a look of glee on her deranged face.

According to the spiking readings, whatever the blade was, it was coming across directly from another universe… physically transitioning over.

*Rao! How does she know how to do that??*

Alex was pissed, and not ready to die, especially sitting on her ass. She had healed enough at that point to push herself up and wobbled to her feet.

*This bitch is not going to end me, and not with that big-ass sword!*

She then closed her eyes, and let a calm tranquility fall over her, breathing in and out deeply… taking the risk of ignoring Xiao to think only of Kara, and every little thing she loved about her bondmate.

Alex sought that special place inside of her where their hearts entwined and their souls danced together in an inseparable oneness… the place where she believed no power in the universe could ever break them apart.

A moment later, she gasped as a pulse like fire burst in her chest, and she once again felt the awakening of the golden threads that connected Kara heart to hers! The barrier that had divided them had crumbled, and Alex sent her thoughts like a final plea…

*Kara! Please hear me! I need you! I need you right now!*

*....................*

**Back in time a few minutes earlier, as Alex was entering The Nine Dragons…**

*Aug 10th – Year Two*

*USS Zumwalt*

*1442 hours UTC -8, Thursday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time*

“That’s odd.” Jess’ brows knit together in annoyance as she swiped her hand in a wide arc across the glowing virtual interface at her station. She called over her shoulder. “We have a comm down… I’m no longer receiving from Alex. She just went… offline a couple minutes ago. How’s that even possible? Is the network on the fritz again?”

Lt. Vaden, with an intense LED lamp mounted on his forehead, popped out of an open service shaft on the shockproof grating of The Battle Bridge’s floor. He set the laser cutter he’d been using down on the walkway among the cables, optic wiring, and other items that were scattered about and said, “Maybe she and Kara needed some ‘private time’? You know those too, as bad as you and Ada… sheesh.” He laughed.

“No, no.” Ada had slipped over to look over Jess’ shoulder and leaned in close as the Chief Petty Officer continued scanning for any hint of Alex Danvers’ current location. “There’s something wrong. Look, there’s no data at all, not just voice and video… nothing. And neither Jess nor I can raise my aunt though our crystals, we both just tried.”
“Maybe it's a glitch or interference?” Jess offered, then added, “Though, that’d be a first.

Ada appeared very concerned. “I’ll run a diagnostic. Jess, can you…?” She placed her hand up to an ear with her thumb up and pinky out.

The pretty Latina quickly glanced over at her beautiful girlfriend and smiled, “Si, I’ll call her.” And then whispered, “Te amo.” Ada seemed quite pleased by her open show of affection and grinned happily as she bent to her task of sussing out the issue blocking their connection to her fiery aunt.

Vaden, now looking alarmed, pulled himself up out of the access shaft and slipped on his thick glasses as he moved to one of the other consoles. “I'll find her.” He said calmly and began working on a backtrace of Alex’s activities before the malfunction. “Where are you, Flame?” He muttered as he began skimming the logs of her movements.

A minute later, Jess was glaring at her iPhone. “It keeps going to voicemail...”

They all looked at each other, a dreaded realization dawning on them all.

*Mother!* Ada’s voice carried a hint of controlled panic as she called out in Shah's thoughts. *It’s Alex! Something’s wrong…

....................

_Even further back in time, to a few minutes before Alex left The Tower for The Nine Dragons…_

---

_National City - CatCo Media (not yet worldwide)

1422 hours UTC -8, Thursday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time

“…What the Hell happened out there last night? What do we know? Somebody, or a platoon of heavily armed somebodies, put a serious beat down on the Russians…” Jenkins asked the room as the editorial team reviewed projected photos of a massive six-alarm fire that had gutted six warehouses, and a cargo ship owned by the deadly criminal organization the night before, as well as notes and transcripts from witness interviews.

Kara couldn’t tell him the truth, only the plausible story Devi had helped her concoct after her little visit to ‘talk’ to the Russian mob in an out-of-the-way warehouse on the Harbor had gone horribly awry.

She cleared her throat. “Our anonymous source claims that another group, perhaps a rival organization (Not me! No siree, sir!), attacked them. Also, the NCPD has evidence that the Russians have been using the docks as a hub for trafficking of illicit goods and people. A lot burned up, but they found shipping containers full of counterfeit and stolen electronic devices, illegal drugs and weapons, and over forty women and young girls in the hold of that ship, all being forcefully held as prisoners… slaves.”

Kara flushed her anger from the night before resurfacing along with her memories.

She’d heard their cries, the frantic pounding, and had ripped the ship’s hold open to set the prisoners free. What she’d found there had enraged her. The men who’d been holding the women and girls (some as young as eleven) had been abusing their prisoners for their own pleasure while waiting to
sell them to the highest bidder. Frankly, they reminded her of Daxamites.

Kara had seen what they were doing with her own eyes and, remembering it this afternoon, fought back tears and revulsion. She’d moved without hesitation, and broken the men like kindling. Some of the bastards (the worst of them) would never walk again… and she was okay with that.

*They’re still breathing.* She huffed.

Kara was pulled back into the conversation when Lisa Carver, one of the executive editors, offered a more positive assessment of the situation. “Well, at least something good came from this mess. The Russians’ flow of drugs, guns and their human trafficking operation are all shut down, for now, and thirty-two of the gang’s most vicious soldiers are off the street, over a dozen of them in the hospital, and half of those in the ICU.

“The gang violence in this city may be out of control, but in this case, I think it’s about time someone gave the sons-of-bitches a taste of their own medicine. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not advocating violence, or praising whoever did this. It was probably the self-serving actions of some group just as bad as the Russians, and damn reckless. It was a miracle the explosions didn’t take out half the docks, and hundreds of innocent lives could have been lost if the fires had spread.”

Kara appreciated Lisa’s comments but wrinkled her nose in irritation at all the criticism.

It wasn’t her fault that the boss told all his stupid thugs to shoot her when she’d just come to have a conversation; or that a ricochet from one of those bullets started a fire; or that when he tried to get away and she’d used her laser vision to cut his armored Mercedes in half… the half with him ended up in the river, and the other struck a propane tank storage area. It had been a spectacular series of explosions that she’d exhausted herself containing.

“A miracle, or National City’s Guardian Angel… though some think she’s both” A smirking Morgana “Morgan” Levy teased from her seat across from Kara at the table.

Jenkins rolled his eyes, “Look, Morgan, not with the urban legends again. Like I said before, bring me proof and I’ll give you the front page.”

“I’m workin’ on it, boss. I’ve got ears to the ground” The dark-haired Chief City Desk Reporter leaned back in her chair and rolled the sucker she had in her mouth defiantly. Kara liked the energetic Goth with a nose for news a lot (even though she was looking for Archangel). She’d never met someone with as many piercings in her life. *So cool!* Plus, the tenacious woman always smiled and called Kara ‘Sunshine’ whenever she saw her.

Morgan was determined to prove Kara, or at least her alter ego, existed… and the young woman wasn’t alone. Bloggers, conspiracy theorists, and even everyday citizens wanted to know if the city’s savior, Archangel, was a myth, or real… and if so, who she was.

Sometimes Kara wondered the same thing.

Who was she?

She’d never imagined a situation like the night before, where she’d end up being forced to save the criminals she’d come to stop. She still felt dirty. What happened at the docks had been a very difficult challenge for her; not that she *wanted* anyone to die...

As the fires and explosions had spread, she’d gathered all the men up (not too gently) and locked them in a shipping container to keep them safe and for the police to find.
Among them was the waterlogged Sergey Mikhailov, the ‘Big Boss’ himself.

Kara really wanted to do more than what she did to him, which was batter the arrogant, contemptuous worm into unconsciousness before tossing him in with his thugs.

She wanted justice for all the innocent women and girls he’d attempted to sell, and Rao knows what else. A part of her had wanted to just let him drown strapped into his Mercedes… but that was a line she wasn’t willing to cross. Kara was sure her parents didn’t send her to Earth to become humanity’s judge, jury, and executioner. Did they?

Ugh! Why are things so complicated? And why are humans capable of being so vile and cruel to one another? She sighed. It wasn’t like she’d come to Earth with an instruction book. No, that would have been too simple.

“At least no one died.” Kara offered to the room of editors with a crooked, apologetic smile.

She was about to say something more when a feeling of absolute dread came over her… and she started to panic. Kara excused herself and burst from the conference room. With one hand over her mouth, she blurred down the hall to slip into Colliers’ office.

Kara shut the door and stood there just inside, hyperventilating and shivering.

Her friend had leaped up from his desk and was already at her side, “My word! Kara, you look like you’ve seen a ghost! What’s the matter?”

“Alex, it’s Alex!” Kara was shaking. “Something’s wrong! I… I can’t hear her thoughts, and I can barely feel her… it’s like she’s a million miles away. Rao, I don’t even know where she is! What’s happening?”

The veteran reporter had come to know a great deal about the bond she and Alex shared, and Kara knew he’d understand the gravity of the situation.

Kara, thank Rao! Shah burst into her thoughts. There’s something wrong. It’s Alex, she’s…

I know! I feel it. Do you know what’s going on? And can you and Zara please link in the Zumwalt, and put Colliers on speaker? We’re in his office.

Her boss’s desk phone immediately began ringing. “Put it on speaker,” Kara said quickly, and he did without question. Shah’s next words were thoughts translated into speech and were broadcast through Collier’s phone.

She said, “We’re being blocked from communicating with Alex… by something extremely powerful. She dropped off the grid about twelve minutes ago, but we only just noticed. I’m headed to The Tower now. Vaden traced her, and she went back there this afternoon, just before…

Kara was confused. “That doesn’t make any sense, she’s at the Sagan Institute… with Naomi. She told me…”

Jess broke in, from the Zumwalt, “She lied, mi diosa. Alex was working on a surprise for you guys tonight. ‘Girls’ Night’ she said. Ada and I promised to keep it a secret. She left work early to get the apartment ready.”

“I’m there now,” Shah added. “There’s a message from Madam Xiao on your answering machine. It looks like Alex tried to delete it, but failed.”
Kara grinned sadly, “She sucks at using that thing, always forgets to hit the delete button twice.”

“Sounds like Alex.” Shah was talking as Kara heard the front door of their apartment slam shut. “I think she must have gone to The Nine Dragons. I’m on my way over there now.”

“Me too,” Kara said, quickly glancing at her boss.

“Go find your girl,” Colliers said, more serious than she’d ever heard him.

Kara nodded, whispered her thanks, and shimmered from the room at super speed… and that’s when the first wave of searing pain ripped through her. She stumbled in the hallway outside of Collier’s office, screaming, and slammed violently forward, leaving a Kara sized dent deep in the drywall.

She then slumped to the floor clawing at her shoulder. “AHhhhhrrghhh!” It was excruciating. “Alex! No!” She could feel her bondmate’s pain, as some creature tore into her. *Something’s hurting her! But! She’s been bitten!*

Kara put her hands over her ears as she writhed, and a cacophony of voices was overwhelming her senses. Jess, Ada, Colliers, her co-workers, all talking at once, all asking some variation of ‘are you okay?’. Hands were on her.

No, I’m not okay! *Do I look okay?* Kara hurled her thoughts out randomly and attempted to stand, but fell back on the carpet. At some point, she lost her glasses and heard them crunch under her (or someone’s) shoe.

Colliers was then beside her, and the chaos calmed as he held her hand.

Kara tried to channel Shah… *Shake it off, get up off the floor, and go to Alex… now!* But her world was spinning, and she passed out.

…………....

*National City – The Kyle*

*1449 hours UTC -8, Thursday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time*

As Shah exited the front entrance of Kara and Alex’s loft she nearly collided with Jack and Aeryn. The happy couple was arm-in-arm, laughing, and walking up the wide stairs. They broke into smiles when they saw her, but quickly noticed Shah’s anxious, resolute expression.

“Shah, you okay, darlin’?” Aeryn asked in a worried tone.

“There’s no time.” She rushed the words out. “Alex is in trouble, at The Labyrinth, we think. Some power we don’t understand is blocking us from communicating with her. I’m on my way there now. Jack, I see you have your sidearm... bring it, I may need back up.”

The handsome sandy-haired Army Ranger was obviously startled, and reach up to touch his side under his arm, where his 9 millimeter Glock 19 was safely hidden and holstered beneath his jacket.

“How did you...?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Shah said, already stepping away, “Both of you, please meet me there.”

Aeryn placed a hand on the determined woman’s arm, and said, “We’ll go with you.”
Shah smiled, then reached over, and gently touched the woman’s pale cheek. “Where I go, you can only follow. Be swift, safe, and bring your witch’s magic. We do not know what we’re facing.”

And then, to Jack’s shock and dismay, Shah summoned her Kryptonian speed and disappeared in a sudden rush of air… the fading tendrils of darkness that trailed her the only evidence of her departure.

“Witch’s magic?” Jack asked in total confusion.

Aeryn had already grabbed her boyfriend by the arm and was running down the sidewalk with him. “It’s a long story, one I intended to tell you at the right time… which is apparently now.”

……………….

National City – The Nine Dragons in the Labyrinth

1454 hours UTC -8, Thursday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time

Shah reached the Nine Dragons in seconds and knew immediately that something was amiss.

Shattered glass and debris littered the poorly-illuminated hallway outside the entry, and the twin doors into the shop were blown wide open… outward. One of the thick wooden barriers was lying in splintered pieces out in the tiled entryway, the other hanging on tenuously by a single iron hinge.

The lights flickered like an eerie scene from a horror game, or movie… but Shah had no time for fear. She hurled her thoughts out to Kara, but nothing happened…

And then she and Zara sensed it.

Ah… well, well, well… they were trapped in some kind of quantum Faraday cage, just as Alex must have been. She didn’t even consider turning back… just said a quick prayer for Kara to arrive there soon.

Silently cursing to herself in Persian, Shah let the darkness take her, becoming Shadow. Her black alien armor formed over her skin like liquid midnight as she moved undetected and formless, like a ghost, into the room beyond.

The shop was in ruins, and in the center of the devastation stood a wild looking version of Madam Xiao in a red dress etched with gold dragons, holding a far-too-large black, smoldering sword.

The crazy old woman was facing Alex, who was dressed as Flame, but covered in blood, and barely able to stand.

Between her best friend and the woman were two enormous, twisting creatures that Shah could only describe as actual Chinese dragons, one covered in blue scales and the other in black. The monsters were advancing menacingly upon her seemingly-defenseless best friend… their massive jaws opening as they prepared to strike.

Alex! Shah didn’t waver.
Tearing across the room like a bullet, she was a blur behind the wave of darkness that preceded her. Two thin infinitely dark blades erupted from her hands, and she attacked before the dragons were even aware of the danger… a flurry of black steel smothered in utter midnight.

In the frantic melee that followed, screaming dragons attacked her blindly as her graceful weapons carved through scales and deep into their acidic flesh. The beasts’ razor-sharp teeth bit down with punishing force on her nearly diamond-hard skin, some shattering, others leaving bloody gouges in her armor and on her body, but the warrior made no sound… even as she was repeatedly bitten.

Like silent death, she and her swords danced with deadly precision between the doomed beasts.

The dragons screeched, gurgled, and were swiftly silenced, their bodies falling into carved chunks on the floor. Their caustic blood formed steaming pools, creating a fog of choking vapors as the black, bubbling liquid burned into the floorboards.

The rolling darkness around Shadow coalesced back into her solid form, and she was now standing protectively between a startled Alex and the shocked and howling madwoman less than ten feet away from them. Shadow’s left arm hung uselessly at her side, smoking from spatters of acid and dripping with a flow of her own bright red blood. Her other hand held a glistening black sword at the ready, the business end pointed at Madam Xiao’s throat.

That’s when a panting Jack and Aeryn, her lustrous, curly red hair streaming behind her, came skidding through the broken front doors of the shop. They gaped at the scene taking place inside with shock and awed astonishment.

“You will not touch her,” Shah warned Xiao with a menacing growl. “Don’t move, or I will kill you in an instant. Do not test my resolve, old woman.” Her words were somewhat bluster: she could sense that her opponent’s powerful aura was acting like invisible armor and that her own augmented strength was beginning to ebb.

*I must strike now, or lose my advantage. I may be able to penetrate her aura with my blade, and strength… While I still possess it.* Shah sent her thoughts to Alex hoping she’d receive them since they were both inside the effects of the Faraday Cage.

She felt her sister move at her back, and the heat of one of her flaming blades as it burst from her hand. “Mersi, for coming, and the moment to recover,” Alex whispered audibly as she came to stand at Shah’s side, her own sword rising level with Shadow’s… threatening the woman who’d nearly killed her. *We will strike.*

Shah grinned at hearing Alex’s thoughts once again.

Madam Xiao was weeping, her demented gaze riveted on the slain beasts at her feet as if Shah and Alex weren’t even there. Seeing their chance to escape, the pair changed plans and began to inch back toward their newly-arrived friends and the doorway, away from the terrible Xiao and the noxious fumes billowing up from the twitching pile of dead dragons.

Shah kept her body positioned between the crazed woman and Alex the whole time.

“Get behind me!” Jack called out as he and Aeryn let go of each other’s hands and he ran forward towards Flame. The redhead remained just inside the shattered entrance murmuring something, her gaze fixed on Madam Xiao.

Jack had drawn his sidearm and was holding the black 9 mm level in both hands as he swept in quickly to guard Alex on her right as they retreated, nodding at both her and Shah as he trained his
weapon on the madwoman.

“Nice armor. Hey, Alex, hey Shah.” He grinned.

Shah was impressed at how well the man was just ignoring the flames, shadows, acidic air, blood, his friends dressed in alien armor, dragons, and swords… to protect Alex (as she knew he’d promised Kara he always would). He had a warrior’s heart and loyalty.

His intervention also bought her a moment, and she wasn't about to waste it. She reached out to Alex with her plan...

>You and Jack run, now, while she’s distracted. I'll be right behind you.

>You better be. Alex’s pained thoughts warned her.

Shah’s heart skipped a beat when Flame didn’t even argue with her, and she realized just how badly hurt her best friend was. The brunette was covered in her own blood, exhausted, and injured far worse than she was letting Xiao see. Oh joon-am!

But they had no time for that.

Alex and Jack were running toward Aeryn and the entrance, and Shah made as if to follow… but then hung back, and kept her attention on their adversary. As she had expected would happen Xiao raised a withered hand and gestured in Alex’s direction… her power building to attack.

Shah became living shadow once more and flowed like smoke through the toxic space separating her from Xiao. As she coalesced back into Shadow’s solid form, she gracefully weaved in close and with a blinding arc of her midnight blade attempted to sever the old woman’s menacing hand at the wrist.

The amazing thing was, the energy surrounding Xiao didn’t repel her as Shah had thought it might. It actually gave way, like water parting, and as the blade grasped tightly in her right hand struck, in her mind, she could hear a hundred soft voices chanting in Gaelic.

Aeryn had used her magic to help her slip through the sorceress’ defenses! Bless her!

Then, it was science again as her sword, backed by all her remaining Kryptonian might, met an equally powerful target. It was like two freight trains colliding head-on. In the split-second that she struck Xiao, Shah’s blade of darkness shattered, a shockwave of agony vibrated up her right arm (it felt like swinging a sledgehammer against a steel wall), and the resulting concussive blast sent her flying.

It was silly, but as she was being thrown twenty feet head over heels, Shah came to the realization that she’d just faced the irresistible force paradox, where she was the irresistible force and Madam Xiao, with skin as impenetrable as Kara’s, was the immovable object.

The good news for her: in this case, irresistible force won… kind of.

While she didn’t succeed in cutting off Xiao’s hand and would have to recreate her destroyed shadow blade atom by atom (if she survived), the force of her blow could not be negated and had rippled through the sorceress’ impenetrable hide deep into her body. Shah smiled with grim satisfaction as she heard Xiao shriek and felt the bones of her opponent’s right forearm, wrist, and hand snap and splinter along with her sword.

Alex is safe.
Shah felt relief as she tried to roll on impact where she was hurled off into some wreckage... but with her slow-moving left and numb right arm the task was impossible and she face-planted instead. It was like being punched in the jaw, and she could feel her lip swelling up already.

Behind her, the shocked and flailing madwoman’s howls of agony became a tsunami of sound and fury, lifting the battered Shadow off the ground and flinging her away to slam through a very solid retaining wall next to the red-haired witch. The building shook with her impact, and Shah thought she was surely going to die.

She was buried in rubble, and there wasn’t any part of her body that didn’t hurt, but was still breathing... which kind of surprised her to be honest.

*I’m still alive! That was unexpected.*

Through the choking dust and wreckage, she was pinned under, Shah saw that Alex had stopped short of the door and was looking over to where she’d had fallen, and was screaming her name. At the same time, Jack was pulling at her arm trying to get her to keep running.

*Good man.* Shah coughed and could feel how broken she was. *Run, Alex. Run!*

Her best friend’s thoughts were clearly displeased. *You said you would follow me! I’m not leaving you, aziz-am!*

*You’re so damn stubborn, Danvers.*

*Yeah, you know I am. Deal with it. Shahrazad, get up! Get up!*

A full-on maelstrom was now swirling in the center of the room obscuring the wounded, angry, and still shrieking Madam Xiao. Deadly fragments of wood, metal, and glass, picked up by its winds, were spinning through the air and crashing around them, making it impossible for Alex to reach Shah without being struck, which they both knew could end very badly in her weakened state... though Shah could tell her best friend was about ready to try anyway.

*Alex, it’s too dangerous. Stay there. Better yet, get out of here!*

*Like I said already, that’s so not happening. I just need a minute to focus my aura.*

Still pinned, Shah watched Aeryn dash over to stand with Alex and Jack, and raise her hands like a conductor, calling forth a white glowing light that shone up from the floorboards all around them (as if it were radiating up from somewhere inside the earth itself). It was soft, peaceful, and utterly beautiful compared to the violence and chaos going on all around them.

*“It’s a shield!” The witch called out over the din, her sweet brows creasing in concentration as she extended her light ten feet over to where Shah still lay partially buried in rubble. “It won’t stop Xiao’s magic, but it will keep you from being struck by the debris.” Once the glow held she grinned and added, “Go to her, Alex!”*

*“Thank you, Aeryn.” The red-armored brunette yelled gratefully back to her friend as she scrambled over the now illuminated heaps of wreckage to reach Shah.*

At the same time, the old woman’s wail had grown louder, and the room had begun spinning... well, at least Shah’s equilibrium was. She could also feel something sharp sticking into or through her left thigh as Alex was helping push bent pipes, broken boards, and choking pieces of crushed drywall off of her.
Alex had almost freed her completely when Shah felt Xiao’s power surge, and her magic reached out to physically lift her and Alex into the air and slam them violently against yet another wall not far away. Once again, their hybrid Kryptonian physiology protected them both from the worst of the impact.

They didn’t fall this time but were held fast against the wall’s vertical surface, floating three feet above the floor in the paralyzing grip of a powerful, invisible force.

Oh! Come ‘on! Now she’s Vadering us? I hate, hate, haaate her so much! Alex’s pained thoughts cried out. If this bitch throws me against one more frickin’ wall, I swear I’m gonna…

The explosive crack of gunfire interrupted Alex’s thoughts as Jack began shooting at Xiao, but his bullets just seemed to be absorbed by the cyclone of magic, wind, and debris swirling around her. As he was reloading Shah heard Aeryn (who was straining as her glowing shield was being battered) calmly speak to him, “Try again, A ghrá.”

“But it’s not working! My bullets can’t get through all that.”

“Trust me, love; they will this time.” There was power in her voice, and absolute confidence.

“Okay then.” He raised his weapon with a grin and said, “Have I told you yet just how much I love witches?”

And then Shah felt it, the surge of Aeryn’s aura as Jack’s Glock fired again… one, two, three, four shots in quick succession… and from inside the storm, Xiao screamed as his bullets slipped through her magical defenses.

Unfortunately, victory was short-lived. Shah heard the ricochets and understood immediately that while Jack’s deadly missiles had struck home, and obviously hurt the sorceress, they had not managed to penetrate the old woman’s skin.

What in heaven’s name is she made of?

The good news was his projectiles had caused the Xiao a great deal of agony, and her magical grip slipped momentarily, giving Alex the opportunity to summon a long, fiery dagger. It appeared in her left hand, and while she was able she threw it with all her strength… adding a Kryptonian glyph to the blade for good measure.

Incinerate. The ancient, layered symbol (like a rune) emblazoned itself onto the weapon as it released from Alex’s fingers…

Shah followed its trajectory and was astonished to see that Aeryn’s white nimbus of light reached out to surround the bolt of flame as it passed beyond the glow that protected them. The dagger then sliced through Xiao’s shield (just like Jack’s bullets) and struck the sorceress dead center.

A perfect shot! Shah couldn’t help but admire her best friend’s aim.

Thanks. I had a good teacher. Alex thought back as she and Shah were released, and crashed to the floorboards. Xiao’s hold over them had faltered, as she was way too busy dealing with being on fire (apparently). Inside the cloudy vortex, a great conflagration roiled around her as Alex’s weapon attempted to consume their adversary, and her tortured screams grew louder.

But still, Xiao did not die, and as Alex was helping Shah up, and Jack was reloading a clip into his sidearm, her horrible storm fell upon them all like a tornado. Everything became chaos, and Jack was lifted and tossed against the ceiling, and then fell hard next to a startled Aeryn, who was frantically
using her magic to screen all them from the worst of the whirling debris.

After that, Shah lost sight of her friends… again pinned by Xiao’s invisible iron grip against a broken wall. She could move her head only just enough to see Alex at her side, struggling against the same merciless power.

“Murderers!” The demented, burned, bleeding, bullet-impacted woman with a smoldering hole in her gut raged, stepping from the gale to advance upon them. One arm was useless, and she was dragging a damaged leg, yet somehow she had the strength to hold the black sword in her one good hand.

*A fucking boss fight, and we don’t have a healer.* Alex was glaring through her pain, using humor as a shield (as usual). Shah almost laughed, but what was coming at them was far from funny.

Xiao shambled forward like an unstoppable, undead thing.

“Now comes suffering. I told you that you would pay, and pay you will.” The cadence of the ancient sorceress’ voice was sing-song and so damn creepy. “Your lives are forfeit to Xiao!

“*Tratung, drink!*” She cackled with glee, and actually hovered up off the floor to place her now-howling blade at Alex’s throat point first like an executioner. At the same time, a green dragon manifested beside the madwoman and lurched toward to where Shah knew Aeryn and Jack to be.

“Kill them.” The Sorcerous offhandedly commanded.

A second after the dragon undulated out of Shah’s sight there was a loud thump, Jack’s grunt of pain, crashing, and several extremely loud gunshots! Shah’s heart jumped into her throat as a second burst of gunfire rang out from his weapon.

With her hyper senses, she then heard Aeryn curse in Gaelic, and call out Jack’s name three desperate times. Her friend’s voice then quaked with what Shah could only describe as glyphs of power, echoing with the same angelic chorus of female voices she’d heard before. “No! You will not hurt him or my friends ever again!”

Aeryn’s threat was not an idle one.

A rush of power gathered to the witch like a small sun, Shah could feel it even though she couldn’t see it. Zara’s damaged HUD was blinking red all over, and an explosion of light erupted from where she was certain her friend was standing, bathing Shah’s aura and giving her a surge of strength!

The deadly green dragon, that only a moment ago had been on the attack, was the target of Aeryn’s wrath. The creature was hurled backward, thrashing like a huge wounded snake, and burning with a pure white light from the inside out!

The monster was still flailing as it crashed to the floor at Madam Xiao’s feet with a shuddering clatter, its horrific and panicked squeals unrelenting as it flailed and sizzled in an oddly beautiful cascade of colors.

The madwoman was forced to halt her sword’s slow push through Shatari’s dampening field and cover her face with her arms against the sudden flare of pure white light as if it was painful for her to even look upon its brilliance.

Out of the corner of her eye, Shah just managed to glimpse a very pissed off Aeryn, her eyes absent of pupils and glowing with the same wondrous light as she crouched like a protective tiger over Jack’s fallen form, her shields of glowing energy surrounding them both! All the while her fingers wove through the air gracefully, commanding her magical fire as it continued to burn the heaving
green dragon from within.

Shah now understood what Kara had been talking about when she described the witch’s power as a sea inside of her. *Rao! She is magnificent!*

Not that it seemed to matter.

Xiao had recovered and, squinting, once again hefted *Tratung* aloft and swung at Alex’s throat, barely slowed by Shatari’s weakening deflector shields. Shah then focused all of her will on the gigantic sword; drawing every scrap of darkness from the area around her and sending it at the weapon in an attempt to slow its momentum.

It was a battle of powers, Shah on one side shaking and sweating with exertion, and Xiao, mad, cackling, pushing forward inch by inch with her dark blade like hot steel into a wall of slowly melting glass… and eventually Alex’s jugular.

Even with the old woman being distracted by the searing witch light, her dragon’s suffering, and Shah using her last bit of renewed strength to once again push back against the avalanche of her power… it wouldn’t be long, and Shah knew it.

She was losing, inch-by-inch… and her powers (until she could recharge) were nearly spent.

Aeryn had finished with the dragon, its smoking carcass no longer moved, and as soon as she could, she switched targets and hurled her power (accompanied by a stream of Irish or Gaelic curses) at Xiao. The old sorceress forced to angle her own aura like a shield to block the witch’s incredible onslaught.

In Shah’s Kryptonian-enhanced vision Aeryn’s light was like a jet engine firing on full blast, yet an invisible sheen of power held back the fury of her flames only an inch from the old woman’s now blistering skin.

The distraction gave Shah the opportunity to push a distracted Xiao back nearly two feet. But at the same time, the sorceress cast her hateful gaze toward the chanting Aeryn and whispered words so dark, so ancient and terrible, that Zara could not translate them.

Then, two things happened...

First, Shah felt an exhausted Aeryn enter her mind. *I cannot stop Xiao. This ancient creature is not human; she is a god, though she herself does not know it. I have failed you, my dear Sharahzad… I have failed all of you. I am so sorry. Farewell, my friend.*

Second, a detonation in the vicinity of where Aeryn had been standing went off like a grenade, shredding that part of the room, and ripping the sweet witch’s essence out of Shah’s mind. Shrapnel tore at her skin like razor blades and sandpaper.

“*Aeryn! No!”* Her wail of despair shocked even her.

Then, at that desperate moment when all felt lost, Alex’s grasping fingers found hers, and Shah could feel her best friend’s thoughts mingle with her own, probably for the last time…

*I couldn’t save Aeryn, and I can’t save you!* Shah’s mind was filled with darkness as grief overwhelmed her, and tears came like a waterfall. *I love you, joon-am.*

*Aziz-am!* Alex’s love wrapped around Shah and wouldn’t let her go. She was frightened but trying not to show it.
I'm here. Shah pushed back her own terror to soothe her, as she always had. Just hold on to me, and close your eyes. Be strong. Don't let this bitch see your fear. She was shaking now; using everything she had left of her shadow powers to slow a manically howling and insanely pissed off Xiao, who was once again putting all of her will and strength into her dark blade’s inevitable push towards Alex’s neck.

Shah sent a silent prayer to Rao, and Allah, as she prepared to face her death… because even before her own end came, she would surely die when Alex’s beautiful life was snuffed out.

I'm not afraid. Alex surprised Shah with her newfound confidence as if an evil sword wasn’t now only inches from her throat. You’re here, and Kara will come… I know it. She has to.

I wish I had your faith, Alex-joon. Shah then grunted as she hurled her final painful counters against Xiao’s magic, and that damned giant sword...

They only had seconds left.

Then something happened...

The earth and the very air around them trembled with a great and terrible power. Whatever it was, the new threat was almost upon them and approaching The Nine Dragons like a tidal wave!

Startled, Xiao ceased her cackling and single-minded effort to drive her sword into Alex’s neck to look up…

---------------------

Back in time, a couple of minutes earlier…

National City – CatCo Media (not yet worldwide)
1506 hours UTC -8, Thursday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time

Kara was vaguely aware of what was transpiring around her, and that she kept calling out Alex’s name. Colliers had somehow managed to convince her colleagues that her breaking the wall was due to clumsiness and hypoglycemia (no, Ms. Danvers doesn’t need an ambulance, she’ll be fine, I have some chocolate in my desk drawer… move along, nothing to see here), and had carried her back to his office.

He’d tossed her broken glasses on the table, and locked the door as Kara writhed in agony on the floor.

She could feel Alex’s glorious spark rekindling deep inside of her. Thank Rao!

Their bond had not been severed, as she’d feared… only tricked into believing so. The golden threads that connected them once again pulsed with life! Kara felt her Vaena, injured, trapped, with Shah at her side, and tensed for a deathblow.

She could see what was happening to Alex clearly now. Reestablishing their link had broken through whatever had blocked them before, and data began flowing to everyone through Kara, including Ada and Jess on The Battle Bridge of the Zumwalt. Now they too could see the crazed Madam Xiao in the shattered shop that was once The Nine Dragons, bristling with power, a great
black blade inches from her bloody and beaten bondmate’s throat, and Shah using the last of her strength… struggling to stop her.

Kara stood up… finally clearheaded. “Ada, find me a crack in that bitch’s shields.” Her voice was filled with rage and new confidence. Somehow, feeling Alex had brought the world back into razor-sharp focus… and reality slowed around her as she sped up.

On her way out of CatCo, she gently touched Colliers on the cheek, allowing her fingers to graze his stubbly face in a farewell caress. Should this prove to be her final few moments, he would know her thoughts were of him, and those she loved.

Kara, as Archangel, then surged out of the building in record time, taking a less-used route over a street that was under construction. She hoped that her ground-level sonic boom would cause less damage and not hurt anyone that way.

She couldn’t afford to go slowly.

Exploding glass, an echoing thunder, and overturned (thankfully empty!) vehicles were left in her wake as she broke the sound barrier.

Kara said a prayer to Rao as Ada continued talking to her, matching her insanely-accelerated velocity with her hyper-speed communications. Her niece’s voice was strained; her worry for her mother and Alex was apparent. Auntie, Xiao has a quantum field surrounding her very different from yours. It’s more like Aeryn’s, actually, and I’ve never seen anything this powerful! I’m sending the results of data I’ve analyzed from Alex and Shatari to you now.

To get through Xiao’s wards you’ll need to focus your aura to a pinpoint no larger than an atom, striking with tremendous force and heat, at least fifty thousand Newtons and six thousand degrees Kelvin should do it. That’s about two times hotter than the surface of the sun.

Okay, Kara replied warily. Can I do that?

Yes, you can. But, with that kind of power and velocity, your momentum will be so great… You won’t be able to pull your punch.

Kara understood the implication.

Ada was telling her that should she pull off the impossible strike, she was probably going to kill, or more likely vaporize, a living person. She got that… Normally, the idea of killing someone would have repulsed her, made her hesitate, but she couldn’t afford that.

Not this time.

I need to save her, Ada. I need to save both of them. (And avenge Aeryn and Jack…) but she didn’t admit that last part. She prayed to Rao that her friends were somehow still alive.

Then don’t miss. I’m with you, auntie.

Kara hadn’t been as scared as she was that moment since the day she left Krypton when she watched her world burn… but then again, she’d also never been as motivated.

I won’t fail!

As the city block with The Kyle and The Labyrinth came into view, an amazing thing happened. Something inside of her mind opened as if the veils on her cell memories were falling away, and her
powers pulsed like a neutron star! She was moving faster than ever before, piercing through the roof of the building without touching it… like dancing between the spaces that made up the solid matter. Without using X-Ray vision, she could now clearly see through the many walls, ceilings, and floors to where Madam Xiao stood within her shop, aglow with dark magic. In her hand was held an alien being made of pure dark energy locked in the form of a sword and about to pierce Alex’s neck.

At that moment, everything in the world stopped, except her… and she became aware… of everything.

And the Earth, the very air, trembled at her awakening.

Literally.

Flickers of blue lightning licked at her skin, and it was as if she could feel the atoms surrounding her as she moved. Looking at Madam Xiao’s aura now, with its once-mysterious and complex energies, she innately understood it, and by the time she sliced effortlessly into the Nine Dragons, she had adjusted her own like a knife, or more accurately, a scalpel.

The ancient one looked up and saw her coming at the last second… and from the look of terror in her eyes, knew she was doomed.

Abandoning her attack on Alex, Xiao frantically began clawing back every ounce of her magic from around the world that she’d expended over the centuries. Like tendrils of black fire, the sorceress pulled the vast power into herself like a shield, creating a scintillating dome of deadly energies.

But her efforts were futile. Once Kara spied Jack and Aeryn’s unmoving forms in the rubble, and Alex and Shah pinned to the wall… bleeding and broken, she struck.

And didn’t hold back.

Her blow was a thunderclap, tearing through Xiao’s countless layers of hardened magical defenses like soap bubbles. One by one, the ancient one’s dark energies fell to Kara’s onslaught.

When her Kryptonian fist finally connected with the shocked sorceress there was a concussive blast that threw her backward. (But no sickening spray of red or crunching of bones, as Kara had feared)

Shah and Alex were tossed to the floor, and Xiao’s flailing body was sent cartwheeling through a wall, and then another like a wrecking ball. The evil sorcerous left three large gaping holes along her path before slamming through the building’s brick exterior and into the building across the alley, where her body slid down into a shattered, broken heap.

Kara had landed on her unsteady feet and watched in slow motion as Tratung, still smoldering and howling for blood, spun from the witch’s grasp and sank tip-first, deep into the floorboards of the devastated shop… finally separated from the madwoman.

She was drained, and still reeling from a realization: Xiao had been too solid, too heavy, and her skin too hard to be human… it felt the same as when she’d once punched Clark (when he told her she was leaving her with a human family).

Who, and what was she!?

Visibly shaking, the hero turned and focused her attention on her fallen bondmate, whose look of joy upon seeing her almost immediately changed to horror… eyes wide; her Vaena’s gaze was fixed beyond Kara’s shoulder.
Behind you! Alex screamed in her mind.

The Kryptonian sensed the great black blade jerking itself free behind her, and flying under its own power like a great spear straight at Alex’s heart. She also saw Shah struggling to move and intercept the evil weapon, but it was clear her weakened Persian sister wouldn’t reach Alex in time.

Kara’s brain calculated every action she could take, ran a thousand simulations in an instant, but was too exhausted to use her super speed or spin around to block the thing or do much of anything.

What she’d done to stop Xiao had left her too spent, and out of options.

I love you, Vaena. She sent her thoughts to Alex before stepping into the path of the deadly sword, using her body as a shield.

There was a horrible, stabbing pain, and then she was on her knees, falling over on her side as Tratung’s long bloody blade thrust out the front of her chest.

“Kara!” Jack, Alex, and Shah all simultaneously screamed her name.

Jack? He’s okay! Yay! Rao, I hope Aeryn is, too. Please let her be okay… Huh, weird, I’m feeling all woozy… every… thing… is…

Lots of other people were yelling her name now too… over her headset, and in her mind. Kara tried to respond, not to be rude… but the words wouldn’t come and her thoughts were muddled.

Damn, there’s a freaking sword sticking out of me.

Blood was seeping out of Kara’s mouth as Alex’s arms wrapped around her. “Kara! Kara! Stay with me! Stay with me, baby!” Her bondmate was repeating the words, rocking her, and crying.

She finally managed to send a few thoughts to the woman she loved. It’s okay, Alex… I love you. I think… I think I’m going to go to sleep now… so tired.

No! Kara no! Ada, Shah, someone help me! Other hands were on her now. Shah tried to pull the sword out of her but screamed in agony when she seized the hilt and went down hard and unmoving on the cluttered floor.

Then Kara lost track of what was going on. She was having a very difficult time breathing, and her world was fading to black.

………………

Story Lexicon/FAQs:

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Terms

Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

Ah!khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

Alex vanimelda - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)
Ay Dios Mio – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)

Aporup – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Asheghetam - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

Azdidane shoma khoshhalam – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)

Bedrood – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

Bonne nuit – ‘Good night’ (French)

C’est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

Damnú air! – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Indian)

Dooset daram – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gaelic/Indian)

íthi eutukhēs - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Kheili khosh geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature

Marbhfháisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Indian)

Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)

miboosamet – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)

órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

¡Qué señoras tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)

Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)
Sundor – ‘beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)

Thi eutukhēs – ‘good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Vuela, mi diosa! Vuela! – ‘Fly my goddess! Fly!’ (Spanish)

Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

aziz-am – ‘my dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

joon-am – ‘my dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

Nāzanin-am – ‘sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘the light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person’s name<’ + joon (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean 'dear'. So, ‘Shah joon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

Other names/nickname/titles/things:

A ghrá – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Bríomhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

Daxamites – An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people ruled by strength/the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow alerted by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.

Dios mío! – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)
Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

Mi amor – ‘May love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Mi lucero – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Mi Sol – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn (Thought & Memory).

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Norooz - Persian New Year
Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity.

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Seanmháthair – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced shan a WAW her (Irish/Gaelic)

Tieguanyín - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

Tratung – khrag ‘thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Tuath Dé Danann - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced Thoo-a day Du-non (Irish/Gaelic)

Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’.
‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Vakur – A powerful and rare evil, soul-devouring, shape-shifting parasitic alien race from thousands of light-years distant. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.

Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish,
Vallerian – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshiped, or traded.

Wan - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

Zhuyin – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:
Sorry about the cliffhanger but this chapter had grown to an immense length (over 21k words!) so I had to split it in two to have something ready for this week. My Beta reader picked the breakpoint; she’s just plain eeeeville. [It took some convincing but I won. MWAHAHAHAHA! –evilbeta]

Next Up:
Chapter 24: “Diana” – Team Archangel’s #1 real-hero makes an appearance (sorry Clark, it isn’t you), there’s an honest-to-god divine intervention, and more secrets are revealed.

Thanks for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me. Also, please share this story with those you think might enjoy it! Spread the word!

Thoughts:

Song inspirations:
Link to Led Zeppelin – Kashmir on YouTube
The song Alex is playing while she preps for the Firefly marathon, including lots of air guitar. An aside: I saw Led Zeppelin once on a reunion tour, with all of them and John Bonham’s son Jason on drums. It was an incredible show.

Link to Óveður by Sigur Rós on YouTube
This video is Sigur Rós’ full concert from Fourvière 2016 – Óveður is the first song in the video/setlist at the link (slow build starts at 0:00), and the track I hear playing as Alex and Shah enter The Labyrinth to unknowingly face their powerful betrayer.

The title translates into ‘Storm’ or ‘Bad Weather’ in English, and the rough translation of lyrics fits so well, though I have no idea if they are accurate. Here’s a snippet:
Clouds
Creeping closer
Surrounding me
Grey iron
A useless life this is
Cry alone
Unseen
Now outside I own
A shadow here…

Link to The Chainsmokers - Don't let me down featuring Daya on YouTube
This what I hear when Alex is crying out for Kara as she battles Madam Xiao alone. I know I used this track before for Alex and Kara, but it’s too perfect not to here.

Link to Njosnavelin (The Nothing Song) by Sigur Rós on YouTube
Shah and Alex’s song: when faced with death where does one draw strength… and hope?
Chapter Summary

Where The Battle of the Nine Dragons comes to its conclusion, one of Team Archangel’s heroes makes an appearance, there’s an honest-to-god divine intervention, and more secrets are revealed.

Chapter Notes

Let's resolve that nasty cliffhanger, shall we?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Previously…

*Kara, behind you!*

Kara sensed the great black blade flying like a spear, straight at Alex’s heart.

.................

*I love you, Vaena.*

Kara stepped into the path of the deadly sword, using her body to shield her bondmate.

.................

*Kara! Stay with me! Please stay with me!*

Blood seeped from the corner of Kara’s mouth as Alex’s arms enveloped her.

.................

*It’s okay, Alex… I love you. I think I’m going to go to sleep now... so tired.*

*No! Kara no!*

Shah tried to pull the massive blade from her but screamed in agony as she seized the hilt.

Kara was having a very difficult time breathing, and her world was fading to black…

.........................

*Aug 10th – Year Two*
Out in the alley, the broken woman who had once been Madam Xiao watched the tragic events unfolding inside The Nine Dragons through the wide openings her body had made in the building’s walls on its way out. Her current form was shattered and dying, the young Kryptonian had seen to that, but the impressive girl had also knocked the sense back into her… as well as her memories.

She screamed at the searing pain that rippled through her like waves of fire as she began calling the fragments and filaments of her scattered magic back to her… more power than Xiao had ever imagined. Her form straightened as shattered and cracking bones healed, muscles, tendons, and ligaments re-grew, and her beautiful countenance was restored…

Not the visage of the withered Madam Xiao, but her true face, the one she’d long ago been made to forget.

*Circe… yes… that was my name…*

The goddess began to cry.

Not from the pain, though it was excruciating, but for all that she had lost. Foremost being the beautiful Amazon who shared her heart, and all of the moments they could never reclaim.

She cursed the centuries she’d spent forced to live a life not her own, and the lie of Xiao.

Circe felt defiled, helpless, ashamed, and angry.

The immortal prayed that she might survive to see her daughter in Elysium at least once before she was dragged before her brothers and sisters… judged, and sent to the Underworld. Hades was sure to take great pleasure in punishing her for all the evil done by the stranger in whose skin she’d been living these many centuries, including what had transpired in The Nine Dragons that very day.

The Ancient One stood, whole once more, her mortal façade falling away to leave a tall, dark-haired goddess with knowing hazel eyes and a soft, pale complexion. With great effort, she wove the magic around her into a flowing dress of the finest green silk to cover her nakedness. Then, by the sheer force of her will and determination alone, staggered back through the gaping openings in the brick wall toward the bleeding girls in the devastated shop.

She was resolute. *I will repair what I have broken, then the Lord of the Dark may have me.*

Inside, Shah and Alex had already made several attempts to pull the evil blade from Kara, but both had failed and lay barely moving near her. They had felt the lethal touch of the being known as Tratung but had only survived because of the powerful life force that was slowly supplanting their human biology.

*Demigoddesses for certain,* Circe observed, *just like the days of old.* She almost grinned, recalling memories of better times.

The goddess knew all about the creature that had struck Kara down; that ‘it’ was on Earth at all was to her shame. She still retained all of Madam Xiao’s terrible memories, and it had been she who, long ago, found the soulless parasite hibernating on a once-vibrant world that had supported multiple sentient civilizations.
Tratung had killed everyone and devoured millions of souls.

As Xiao, she had viewed the demon simply as a tool and used its wretched power to advance her own, allowing it to sate its bloodlust… but that was another life. It was finally time to end its vile existence before she lost all hope of redemption.

Perhaps she already had, but that didn’t matter. She had work to do.

Circe ducked through the final crumbling aperture as she entered ruins of the shop that had once been Xiao’s. Kara, as Archangel, was lying still in the center of the wreckage… pierced by the creature, and bleeding out on the filthy floor. Alex, after being shocked by the terrible blade yet again (persistent she was), had managed to crawl back to her bondmate and was weeping as she weakly attempted to wake her.

Shah was curled up next to them both, barely able to move, her hand gently resting on Kara’s waist. The hero had fallen after her third failed attempt to pull the sword free.

As Circe approached, Alex turned on her with a newfound ferocity, ready to attack, but when she saw the unfamiliar woman the young demigoddess appeared surprised and then puzzled.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” She demanded, her perceptive hazel eyes appraising the newcomer.

“I am Circe, and I’m here to help.” The goddess said in heavily Greek-accented English. Her tone was filled with apology, and regret. “This is my fault, brave Alexandra, and mine to remedy. I am very sorry for causing injury to you, and those you love.”

Alex struggled frantically to stand, and placed herself between Circe and Kara’s motionless form. “It’s you! No! You bitch! You won’t fucking touch her, not ever again!” A pinpoint of pure light had suddenly begun to form beside the furious brunette…

Circe was running out of time. Another one of Kara’s demigoddesses is coming. How many of them has this girl managed to surround herself with?

“I truly am sorry, and I promise you… I will make this right.” The goddess said as she waved her hand, and Alex seemed to just… stop, as if frozen in time. The pale immortal limped over to make sure she was fine, and once satisfied moved to stand over the fallen Kryptonian.

She took a deep breath, wrapped her right hand around the massive hilt jutting out of Kara’s back, and slowly withdrew the evil blade from her. Tratung howled its rage in all their minds at being parted from its prey, and the goddess’ arm shook as she battled the alien parasite’s immense power.

“Be silent, creature; I am done with you. The universe is finished with you as well. What I do now is what I should have done long ago.” Circe’s voice rose like thunder.

The light near her had finally expanded to its full brilliance and coalesced into the form of a beautiful young woman, a demigoddess of a different sort. She was as dark and dangerous as the one she was obviously related to, the one humans called Shah or Shadow, but was filled with light. The Ancient One could clearly see her features, as well as those of Alex and Kara, defined in the unique being before her.

She is a vision.

“Stop!” The newcomer, who was not Kara, Alex, or Shah, but all of them, and yet more, called out to her with great concern, “Whoever you are, that sword isn’t a sword and is very dangerous! It will
kill you! Let go of it!” She cares? What a kind heart this one has.

As hard as she tried, Circe could not answer Ada.

She strained against the tidal wave assault of the dark being’s energies that were suddenly clawing up her arm. *Tratung*, drunk with the Kryptonian’s life force and blood, was sending all of its terrible strength against her, and the goddess felt her weakened defenses crumbling.

In desperation, Circe unleashed her final magic, the spell she had promised Hecate she’d never use.

“I’m sorry, mother.” She whispered as she fell to her knees.

Ada, the young immortal made of light beams and ancient fire, stood watching in astonishment as the creature that looked like a sword began to unravel in Circe’s grasp; its life, along with reality itself, was being pulled apart by her powerful spell of unmaking.

In its death throes, *Tratung* lashed out… somehow reflecting a part of Circe’s deadly spell back on her, and as the huge blade began turning to rust and then dust, the goddess’ hand grasping the hilt did the same. The creeping annihilation then began moving relentlessly up her arm, which was disappearing as if being erased!

The ancient goddess screamed, shattering what was left of any glass left in the shop.

In no time at all the nothingness had devoured just passed her elbow without any sign of stopping, and Ada stood helpless, unable to stop it and unsure of what to do.

Alex had seen what was happening and staggered to her feet. With a sharp intake of breath, she painfully summoned one of her flaming blades and leaped forward to cleanly sever the goddess’ arm off immediately below the shoulder, just ahead of the doom that was eating her alive.

The last thing Circe remembered, besides the pain and the smell of her own burning flesh, was Ada, running to the fallen demigoddess Shah and cradling her to her chest, tears streamed down her face. The young woman also reached out to Kara, whom Alex was now desperately trying to revive, and gently stroked the Kryptonian’s cheek.

There was more love expressed in that single touch than Circe had experienced in over two millennia, and it awakened a light inside of her. It was also at that moment she saw the resolute look that took hold in the young demigoddess’ kind emerald eyes.

Ada sobbed, “I’m so sorry, Jess. I know I promised to always be there for you, but I don’t think I can be. You’ll be okay, I promise. I love you.” She then closed her eyes and began to glow.

*Yes! Merciful Zeus!*

Circe could feel it… the incredible power flooding through every part of her, beginning to heal her terrible injuries. The girl was nourishing her fallen loved ones, and her, with her immortal light, the very life force that sustained her. *So, I will not perish this day after all… but at what cost?*

“Ada, no! No!” Alex covered her face with her arms to block the intense brilliance and moved to try and stop her, but the young woman was already immaterial, like a miniature star… minus the searing heat.

Ada’s voice and thoughts emanated from within the swirling white light, “Auntie, it’s the only way I can think of to save her.” Alex was crying, begging her to stop, but her niece didn’t answer, she only said, “Thank you all for… everything, for showing me how to live, to be human, to be loved, and the
joy of being part of a family. I was happy. Know that. I love you all so very much.”

Then her focus turned to her girlfriend once more as her voice began to fade. “Jess, I don’t want to leave you, but I can’t let Kara die. I love you with all of my heart, and what there is of one inside of me is yours, forever. I will leave a shard of myself behind, to watch over you and Pythia. Let her have that puppy she's been asking for... okay?” Her words had become a whisper.

Jess was sobbing, "I will... oh Ada..."

Circe had seen enough, such love and sacrifice. It was too much to bear witness to.

As the world became a soft haze around her, the goddess willed the slumbering threads of gold that wrapped her heart to ignite once again, and sent her thoughts to the only being in the universe she knew beyond any doubt would help her, the one every part of her ached for.

Her bondmate.

Diana. I need you!

........................

Aug 10th – Year Two

National City – Nine Dragons, The Labyrinth

1516 hours UTC -8, Thursday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time

The room was too bright, and a storm of chaos raged around Alex… but Kara had just twitched and shifted in her arms, coughing up blood and moaning as her consciousness returned. She was still alive!

Ada’s brilliant, dying light was reviving her.

Alex whispered a prayer of thanks, and distress, to any god or power who would listen as she rocked Kara in her arms. Xiao, or Circe, or whoever she was, was out for the count, crumpled to the floor next to an unmoving Shah, and Ada was still a life-giving ball of light… but beginning to dim.

The world was spinning out of control, and Jess was shouting at her over the comms to stop Ada from sacrificing herself, but Alex didn’t know how to.

Everything seemed lost…

Then…

Something amazing happened.

A scintillating pillar of light came down from the ceiling in the devastated shop only a few feet away from her, and within it a woman took form. But it wasn’t just any woman… it was her and Kara’s hero, Wonder Woman!

The statuesque warrior was dressed in immaculate supple red gold-plated leather armor and knee-high boots, with her golden Lasso of Truth on her hip and a tiara in her long wavy dark brown hair as she strode out of the glittering light like a general on a battlefield to coolly survey the situation.
Alex was stunned and staring.

The Amazon hero moved like a Kryptonian, blurring first to Ada, tossing what appeared to be a delicate necklace with golden talisman into her light. “Take this, little one; you need not die today. Apollo sends his regards.” Her voice was rich; thick with the same exotic accent Xiao… or rather Circe had spoken with.

The hero then moved to Kara, her gray gaze locked onto Alex, who was definitely about to lose her shit as she begged, “Help her, please.”

The regal woman smiled and calmly knelt to examine her bondmate’s horrible wound while Alex watched impatiently.

“It’s bad, but I’ve seen worse.” The hero finally said. “She is Kryptonian; we’ll get her to the sun and she’ll heal as good as new, eventually… now that the Vakur is no more.” She was already carefully lifting Kara in her arms as if she weighed nothing, and Alex tried to help.

“Alexandra, I have her.” Wonder Woman wasn’t annoyed exactly but clearly had little patience for Alex’s hovering.

Wait, how does Wonder Woman know my name?

“Alex, Alex!” The steely-eyed warrior brought the brunette back to focus. “Listen to me! Are you strong enough to move Shadow into the light? We must depart, now. The authorities are on their way.” After she nodded the tall warrior shifted Kara’s limp form to one arm, and very carefully, almost reverently, bent to lift Circe with the other before she began heading back toward the glittering pillar from which she’d just stepped.

Alex painfully helped a very groggy Shah up to her feet, supporting the black-leather-clad hero under her arms, and limping after Wonder Woman, who stopped briefly to call over to Jack. The ex-Army Ranger roused himself to pull Aeryn from the wreckage and was cradling her tenderly against his chest.

Alex felt despair once again when she saw her brave fallen friend, but her breath caught when her weakened hyper senses managed to detect a heartbeat.

“Aeryn’s alive!” She shouted over at him. “She’s alive.” Her words were almost laughter. Rao, I thought she was dead. Jack looked down with newfound hope, and joy before he glanced back up at Wonder Woman.

The majestic hero leveled her stare on him and spoke just loud enough to be heard, “Jack, I need you to listen. EMS are approaching. They mean well, but cannot heal your witch. Her injuries are too severe but mostly mystical in nature, and impossible to explain to the uninitiated.” The wail of sirens could now be heard in the distance. “Bring her to me, I will take her to those who can help, though you cannot accompany her. Trust me, after time with them, some bed rest, and pampering, she will be returned to National City, hopefully, good as new. Right now, your friends have need of your assistance.”

Jack, covered in blood and carrying Aeryn, hobbled over to where Alex and tall hero stood. He smiled weakly at the Amazon and nodded, then said, “You risked your life to save my granddad and his Brigade at the Battle of Arnhem, ma’am. He must have told us that story a thousand times when we were kids, God bless him.” He choked back tears. “He trusted you then and I trust you now. Please take care of her. She’s my whole world, and I’m putting her in your hands. What can I do to help?”
The graceful warrior exhaled, obviously relieved. “We will speak of your grandfather later, but I know for a fact that the Lt. Meacham I knew would be very proud of you right now. It’s amazing, you look just like him.” Jack’s jaw dropped, he’d never said his grandfather’s name… yet Wonder Woman had remembered him. She continued without missing a beat, “We need you to manage the situation here on the ground with the human authorities. Tell them whatever you must, but it is imperative that nothing about this incident be portrayed as out of the ordinary. Also, Madam Xiao will not be returning… and none of us,” She quickly indicated everyone but him, “were here today. Understood?”

His brow knit in concentration before he responded, “Seems like I can use a blown gas main as an excuse… though not having Xiao’s body may pose a problem. Hmmm. Don’t worry, I got this, I can bullshit with the best of ‘em.” There was a hint of that cute grin of his. “Please tell me when she wakes up? I need to know she’s okay… to hear her voice.”

“Good man. Yes, I will make sure she calls. Thank you, Jack.” Diana’s beautiful smile was worth any reward, and the handsome, sandy-haired warrior blushed.

Alex was unashamedly tearing up, so when she spoke her words were broken, “Thank you so much, Jack… for what you did, and are doing. I’ll text you the number for our friend, Devi Mitra when I can. She’s an NCPD detective and can help make this go away… I hope. We’ll find you later, okay? I still can’t… oh, Rao, Aeryn was so brave!”

“She was, she is.” He said, looking down at her and brushing strands of the unconscious redhead’s disheveled curly locks off her cheek. “My beautiful witch… my superhero… oh Bríomhaire.” He then leaned down and kissed Aeryn’s dirty, scratched up face… his look of worry and unrestrained adoration telling Alex everything she needed to know.

‘Just Jack’ had found is wan.

A groggy Shah, snuggled in Alex’s arms, croaked out, “I’ll check on her personally, or Ada will… long story, she’s my daughter.”

His eyes widened in surprise. “Seems like quite a story you owe me… us.” But the sound of sirens had grown even closer, and he started to move. “I better go… now”

Back in Ranger mode, Jack carefully adjusted his hold on Aeryn before gently lowering her into the lone surviving fluffy chair in the place. He then checked to make sure that his weapon was secure, and began limping toward the front of the destroyed shop.

On his way out he called back, “Say hi to Archangel, I mean Kara, for me when she wakes up, alright?” Alex and Shah assured him they would, as he disappeared through the shattered entryway.

Then, the sun suddenly went out and Ada reformed where its brilliance had just been. Alex’s niece was whole, looking quite astounded, and smiling from ear to ear. “I’m not dead! I’m not dead!” The young woman cheered in disbelief as she patted herself up and down with one hand as if to make certain that she was still there. In the other, she was happily clutching her gift from Apollo, the priceless artifact necklace with its golden medallion that hung around her neck.

“Jess! Jess! I’m not dead!” She called out in delighted confusion to her girlfriend.

The Petty Officer’s happy sobs could be heard over the comms.

Ada then dashed over to Alex and easily took her mother’s weight from her. The docile Shah then draped a weak arm around her daughter’s neck, whispering words of love and gratitude for her safe
return. Alex, in turn, bent down and lifted the unconscious Aeryn into her arms and slipped her over to Ada to also carry.

Sirens blared as Wonder Woman turned to the now unencumbered Alex. The steely-eyed warrior’s expression was grim as she said, “You know what must be done here, brave one. The humans cannot find any evidence, not even a trace of Kryptonian blood. I have seen what evil can be done with just a drop of it in the wrong hands. Kara would never be safe.”

Alex said, “I understand.” After a brief nod, the Amazon stepped back into the light with her two burdens, and they all disappeared as if pixelating, their bits flying upwards... ah, now Alex saw it! In her HUD everything was clear. The pillar of light was a doorway, a gate of some kind. Like a fancy quantum teleporter... or maybe even a point-to-point wormhole, Alex wasn’t sure.

_I definitely need more data._

_Wow. She almost giggled in her exhausted state... I sound just like Shah._

Anyway, yes, Alex knew exactly what she had to do. Regret tore at her heart for all the already-struggling small business owners in the Labyrinth she and Kara had befriended. Soon, their dreams would all be ashes.

Jess was back on comms, her voice cracking with emotion. “Dios mio! Ada, I almost had a heart attack! Mi Sol, you must never do that again! Promise me!”

“I’m sorry, mi amor.” Ada looked so sad, and contrite. Alex wished she could hug her beautiful savior, but Jess loved her more than anything and they’d be fine... The Petty Officer had just been terrified of losing the woman she loved.

Alex knew that that felt like, in spades.

“Alex, your aura... what are you doing?” Jess was concerned. “Your energy is spiking again, and you don’t have that much left, hermosa.”

“I’m protecting Kara and all of us. Ada, please take Shah and Aeryn into the light, now. I will follow.” She spoke with Flame’s authority as her armor slowly reformed around her.

Her niece nodded and then said, “Yes, auntie, but be quick as there isn’t much time until the authorities arrive.” As she turned to carry her mother and Aeryn into the pillar of light she chuckled, and just before disappearing said, “This is ironic.”

Alex then took a breath, raised a hand, and set her fire loose on everything inside the shop, focusing her hottest flames on any trace of Kryptonian blood, as well as the bodies of the dragons.

As the cleansing blaze became an inferno, Alex stood in the edges of it, unscathed, holding a paper bag with the name ‘A. Danvers’ and Chinese writing on it that she’d taken a split-second to rescue. _At least I can save Kara’s tea._

She’d never come as close to losing her as she had this day, and now that it was over... her fear and anger turned to resolve. Alex had been forced to face just how unacceptable living without the other half of her heart would be... and now knew for a fact that there was no limit to the lengths she’d be willing to go to keep her bondmate safe.

Alex had always considered herself Kara’s protector, but after what they’d just been through the weight of that welcome responsibility had never been clearer, and she embraced it. She tilted her head in fascination as she watched dragon’s bones turn to glowing embers, and then ash... just like
one of those smoke worm fireworks on the Fourth of July, and she cranked the heat up even higher… incinerating everything, even Jack’s shell casings, and it felt good.

With the blaze leaping around her she used the waning power of her Kryptonian-enhanced senses to scan the shop one last time, just to make certain the place was cleansed.

Then, when she was finally satisfied, and with the burning timbers of the collapsing ceiling crashing around her, Alex stepped calmly into the light.

Aug 10th – Year Two

National City – The Tower

1606 hours UTC -8, Thursday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time

The three battered heroes reclined in the soft cushions of the patio chairs out on The Tower’s small deck, soaking up the sun’s magnificent rays.

It was a far cry from the terrace on their palatial Paris apartment on Earth Pax, but not a terrible place for a forced convalescence under the serene Wonder Woman’s watchful eye. From a distance, they may have appeared to be three carefree girlfriends taking a spa day; but up close, the slings and bandages, as well as the cuts and bruising, became apparent, despite being partially hidden by their robes and sunglasses.

Ada lithely moved between the deck and the kitchen, bringing Shah and her aunties drinks, snacks, and anything else they asked for. Nirvana was playing in the background, echoing from the living space and outside. Kara had never really listened to grunge before but was really enjoying Kurt Cobain’s distinct, raspy vocals… Alex’s music was rubbing off on her.

“I could get used to this.” Her bondmate purred as she stretched up to kiss Ada on the cheek when the smiling girl delivered another cold glass of sweet tea and a bowl of extra salty pretzels, as well as a big bag of plain M&M’s, just for her.

Diana, dressed in an amazing pair of designer jeans, a loose-fitting shirt that hugged her shape perfectly (with the sleeves rolled up, and unbuttoned down the front just enough to be maddeningly sexy) leaned against the iron railing of the deck next to Colliers.

They were chatting up a storm, like old war buddies.

The pair sipped tart raspberry lemonade as they discussed some military conflict from twenty years before that he’d covered in his younger days from behind enemy lines. Apparently, she’d saved the village he’d been hiding in, and he’d never been able to thank her, except in his stories.

Kara was still just trying to get her head around the fact that Wonder Woman, the legend herself, was in her and Alex’s apartment and had saved her… saved all of them!

Okay, here’s what you need to understand about the Amazon Princess and Superhero… both Kara and Alex were total fangirls, seriously. Fan fiction reading, book buying, movie watching, posters on their bedroom walls, cosplaying die-hards… which was a constant source of chagrin for Kal. Kara’s
cousin had always been a little jealous of their hero-worship, but also embarrassed. You see, while he and Diana were friends now, they’d dated pre-Lois… making the situation just a bit awkward for the Boy Scout.

On a small table next to the Kryptonian’s deck chair sat her open MacBook Pro. Jess and Daniels were streaming in live on one-half of the screen live from The Battle Bridge on the Zumwalt, and in the other was Naomi at the Sagan Institute (still wearing her safety glasses… she always forgot to take them off). Shatari and Zara had data dumped the entire fight to the Zumwalt’s Battle Bridge, so Vaden wasn’t there… he and his techs were very busy analyzing all of what had just transpired at the Labyrinth between the goddess and ‘his girls’.

The trio had also given their friends all the details of what had transpired in the mystic shop from each of their perspectives, including being whisked away to safety by Diana afterward by her awesome teleportation device and riding in her extremely posh invisible plane. Shah and Ada launched into details explaining their theories on how it all worked, but all Kara could hear was blah, blah, blah…

The Amazon Princess had returned a bit earlier from taking Aeryn and the newly-awakened Circe away and had promised them all answers.

Kara reclined in her chair, cradling a bowl of delicious caramel corn. She’d waited as long as she could bear before raising a hand to get Diana’s attention. The Amazon’s elegant features attempted to contain an amused smile as she gestured for the injured Kryptonian to speak.

“What is your question, Kara Zor-El?”

“Um, thank you Ms. Prince, or should I call you Princess? Or maybe Wonder Woman, or Ambassador, or possibly goddess?” She was so nervous… and now blushing.

The stunningly gorgeous woman’s grin widened. “Diana will do just fine, or Wonder Woman, depending on who I am at the moment… and here and now among friends, I am simply Diana.”

“Thanks.” Kara exhaled. "Okay, here goes. Can you please tell us who Madam Xiao, or Circe, or whatever her real name is, really was... is? And why she wanted to kill Alex and Shah? She seemed like such a nice woman, a friend… I just don’t understand why she went all crazy. And where did you take her and Aeryn?” Kara was rambling a little and knew it… she ducked her head and her blush deepened.

Diana’s raised her steel gray eyes to the sky for a moment and sighed, “All very good questions, which I will attempt to answer. As far as who Circe is, she is the daughter of Titans… a goddess. Her parents were Ancient Ones… her father was the sun god Helios and her mother the goddess of all magic, Hecate.”

“The Circe? As in, the witch from the Odyssey?” Colliers asked incredulously, spitting lemonade back into his glass.

Diana nodded. “Yes, though I’d preface that with ‘loosely based on’. Most of what you’ve all read about her in stories and myth is rubbish… aside from the fact that she was nearly as powerful a sorceress as her mother, that much is true. I’m afraid Homer enjoyed his wine, and the tales told by drunken men in the places he frequented a bit too much. Though the old minstrel knew how to spin a good yarn, that’s for sure.”

Something compelling in the Amazon’s voice made Kara believe she actually knew Homer and the gods personally. Also, she was paying careful attention to every word, and every nuance of Diana’s
As far as the real goddess, I met her long ago, after I first ventured into this world as the ambassador of my homeland of Themyscira. She was incredible, a beautiful force of nature, a storm, as radiant as the sun wrapped in layers of mystery. We spent a couple centuries as adversaries, or I suppose ‘frenemies’ as they say these days… as well as on-again-off-again allies. It was a game we both enjoyed playing. We eventually acknowledged our, ahem, intimate friendship, and later, our love. Of course, it took me being kidnapped by Ares’ minions for her to realize it. The crazy woman commandeered a pirate armada just to save me. It’s a long story.” She chuckled.

Everyone glanced at Ada, who’d just made a happy noise (a squeal). The girl was covering her mouth with her hands as she continued listening with rapt attention.

“Circe and I were content together, happy, for many long wonderful years… but then came a battle, seemingly no different than so many others. Had we only known what was to come.” The Amazon looked off with great sadness. “We were in Greece. She and I had gathered local forces together to defend a coastal town pledged to one of my patrons, Aphrodite. We aided in repelling an invading warlord who’d brought his own demigods along, two of Hera’s favored. Their defeat was resounding and their deaths enraged her. Afterward, in an act of what I thought at the time was merely petty vengeance, she chose to blame my mate for her humiliation and made false claims against Circe to Lord Zeus.

“Against the protests of Aphrodite, Apollo, Hecate, and others, Zeus ordered her banished, and a war between the gods seemed inevitable. I begged Circe to fight, that I would raise swords for her, but she knew such an action would only lead to death… so she gave herself up, and willingly accepted that bitch Hera’s punishment to keep the peace.” The great warrior’s voice cracked with emotion.

“Rao, I’m so sorry, Diana.”

“Thank you, Kara, that is kind of you to say.” She then sighed and continued, “Circe and I spent one last unforgettable night together, and then she was gone, without a trace. I cannot lie… losing her nearly destroyed me. It was as if my heart was ripped from my chest. I… I couldn’t feel her anymore, and our thoughts had been sundered. I barely remember retreating back to my home on Themyscira to be with my mother and my sisters. I was lost, alone, in utter despair. I stayed a few restless weeks wallowing but then began my endless search. Centuries passed in a blur as I wandered the Earth, consumed with the singular purpose of finding my love. I didn’t bother to turn my attention back to the affairs of mortals until much, much later.

“While I was on my journeys, most of the Ancient Ones left this world, including Hera, taking her venomous evil with her, but some of those who remained to watch over this world would often visit to try and cheer me up, keep me company, join in my adventures, or goad me into helping them on some distracting mission or quest. On one such visit to offer me comfort,” the tone of Diana’s voice had almost become a soft growl, making Kara blush, “Sweet Aphrodite told me that she’d been able to cajole Hera (before she left our world) into revealing the details of the goddess’ punishment of my mate. It turned out that the vindictive queen of the gods had made Circe forget everything about who she was… made her forget me.” Diana, trembling slightly, paused and took a calming breath.

“Apparently, she had plans for my love life, and my mate didn’t fit into her narrative… but that’s another story.

“Hera wrapped a new identity around Circe, creating the persona of Xiao the dark sorceress, whose mind was balanced on a knife’s edge of sanity. And without a light to guide her… or love, she lost hope and was consumed by darkness. She was all alone in the world, because of me.” Diana choked.
back tears and turned to look out over the city in silence. Kara seized that moment in her mind to paint later… The Amazon’s powerful stance at the rail, the raw honesty of her grief, the way she held herself (so poised, even in pain), and the blue, nearly cloudless sky behind her.

Everyone stayed silent until the Amazon spoke again, and when she did, her voice was haunted. “I never stopped looking for her, and the hole in my heart only grew as the years passed.

“It was many years later… 1924, a Tuesday in October, when Athena finally located her (as Madam Xiao), living in Hong Kong running a brothel. I remember how excited we were! Gods! We flew like the wind together halfway across the globe, giddy as children. Xiao was old, and a changed woman by that time; the wreckage of her ambition, and so much death and violence, was far behind her. She’d seemed at peace, but still had no memory of her true self.

“Athena and I tried everything we could think of to bring Circe’s memories back but failed, time and again. We could not break Hera’s will, even with the vengeful goddess departed from this world her spiteful magic held.

“In the end, we set Xiao back to her life, what else could we do? I kept an eye on my love after that, checking in on her often over the years, following her movements across the world… until finally, she came here… to National City.”

Diana smiled, “And to your question of where I took her… the same place as Aeryn, to my sisters on Themyscira where she can heal. Her heart as well as her body. It will be a long and difficult journey back to herself… but she is a strong and stubborn woman. I will help her remember who she once was.” The Amazon was determined. “I know that she will never forgive herself for her terrible actions as Xiao… or for injuring the three of you and your friends.”

Kara could read the subtext; Diana blamed herself for what had happened to Xiao, just as she would have, and desperately wanted to make the woman she loved whole again… to take back the life that had been stolen from them. She was going to, in every way possible, remind Circe of how much she meant to her… of how she had never stopped loving her. It was so sad, but also wonderful, and so tragically romantic!

There was something deeper to their connection though, something familiar… and it was really bugging Kara. Also, something else…

“Diana? How did Xiao, well, Circe as Xiao, know our futures? She knew Alex and Shah were changing and saw us in Seattle before we were there, among other things.”

The Amazon nodded thoughtfully and said, “First off, gods and demigods can sense each other, unless they’re cloaking their presence somehow (by magic or their own skill). So her knowing about Shah and Alex’s transformations had no mystical connotations. On the other matter, that’s a different story…

“My mate has always been able to catch glimpses of possible futures, it’s what made her such a deadly adversary back in the day. Even as Xiao, her powerful sight could only be stifled, and she continued to have visions of what was to come. Her mortal mind lacked the capacity to interpret or comprehend most of what she saw of course (she’d forgotten she was a god) but she retained enough for parlor tricks and sometimes an actual vision. In her true form as an immortal, she was an accomplished seer, never as quite as accurate as Apollo's Oracles, and definitely not as proficient as his sister, Athena. The wise goddess has always been able to see farther and with greater clarity into the future than any of the other gods or prophets. It is how she finally found Circe and foresaw you coming to Earth.”
“Gulp. “Wow…” Kara was astounded. Athena really could actually see the future. She wondered, had the goddess known Circe would attempt to kill Alex and Shah? What other terrible things had she seen, and why wasn’t she sharing if she cared so much?

Colliers spoke up, “I’m really sorry about what happened to her, but Circe won’t be coming back... will she? I know you love her, Diana, but she nearly killed our girls... and I don’t think I can handle another day like today.”

The stoic Amazon nodded, acknowledging his concerns, “Rest easy, friend; she will not be returning to this world anytime soon.”

The newsman appeared awkwardly relieved.

Naomi spoke out of the MacBook’s speakers, “Will your people be able to heal her injuries? They seemed rather... extensive.” Kara flinched at the reminder of what she’d done, and pain shot through her damaged shoulder.

“Yes, and no. Our healers are highly skilled and have access to technology and magic beyond that of the mortal world. As with Aeryn, they are already healing her body, though the dark magic that took Circe’s arm is irreversible. Thank you, Alex, once again, for saving her; that damned spell the Vakur turned on her would have unmade her completely had you not acted. I am forever in your debt for that.” She bowed and Alex blushed as the Amazon added, “Her mind is another matter... even with a goddess’ constitution, her recovery will depend on her spirit, which I hope to boost by being there when she awakes.

“Dr. Young, I do wish to set up a time, soon, to speak with you about your amazing prosthetic, and your life experiences. Your expertise would be very helpful in aiding my sisters, and the Telkhines, the artificers who live among us, in crafting a new arm for Circe, and helping her become accustomed to it, if you wouldn’t mind coming to visit us.”

Naomi did even try to contain her excitement. “Me? Visit... Paradise Island? Seriously? I’d... I’d be honored, Ms...”

“Diana.”

“...Diana.” The adorable astrobiologist said with a huge smile.

“My boss is such a geek…” Alex whispered to her sisters.

“Takes one to know one.” Shah teased, and then they all laughed.

As Kara joined in, pain sliced into her chest. She reached up to press her hand tenderly on the aching spot under her robe where the evil sword had impaled her and hid her discomfort behind the mask of a smile.

........................

A little while later...

Aug 10th – Year Two

National City – The Tower
Diana was kneeling beside Kara’s chair, carefully examining her chest wound. Her anxious bondmate had reached over, and Kara gently took Alex’s offered hand and squeezed it as the Amazon drew back the bandage up near her right shoulder.

Kara was looking up at the sky, biting her lip, and refusing to even glance at her injury. “Well… how does it look?” She asked nervously.

Diana seemed pleased by what she saw and smoothed the dressing back in place with a satisfied pat after she’d completed her examination. “Healing nicely.” She said without any fanfare.

“Oh, thank Rao!” Kara finally glanced down at her bandage, and then at the smiling Amazon, “Thank you, Diana, for everything.”

“You’re most welcome, dear Kara. I only wish I could have come sooner. The gods had already paid me a hurried visit by the time I received Circe’s summons… and realized her memories had returned. I had no idea that she, as Xiao, would call that vile creature forth to this world again.” She rubbed her hands together as if seeking to warm herself, and the sun glinting off her gorgeous golden bracelets, or cuffs… the same ones she used to deflect bullets as Wonder Woman.

“You called it a… Vakur?” Kara asked as Alex leaned in close to listen. “I am unfamiliar with that species. It can’t be of Earth…”

“Oh, it’s not. They are an ancient race… immortal, soulless, and lacking any semblance of emotion. Vakurs are a kind of vampiric parasite, and not of this universe. Which is the reason they do not operate under our rules and have the capacity to harm even the gods, as you can well attest.”

Kara nodded timidly, her voice soft when she said, “It went right through me.”

Diana patted one of the blonde’s forearms and squeezed carefully. “They are very rare and very deadly… something to be killed on sight, and from a distance. Athena’s brother, Ares, prefers the ‘nuke them for orbit’ strategy, one of the few things we actually agree on.” The warrior smiled. “Some call them demons, or ‘devourers of worlds’, which are both apt descriptions. Once a Vakur consumes all life on a planet, they go into a kind of stasis until they find life again, or it finds them. Circe, as Xiao, located one on a dead planet, and bound it up in the form of a blade to serve her.”

Alex had a million questions and decided it was now or never. “Diana, may I ask you a couple of things before you have to go?” Once the Amazon nodded, she continued, “Okay, to start with, how old are you? The way you spoke about living before the Ancient Ones left our world…”

Diana studied Alex briefly before responding, “You may certainly ask, Alex. It is a fair question after all.” There was a hint of melancholy in her tone.

“In my time I have seen empires rise and fall, and have been both witness and participant in humanity’s struggle to rise above their barbarous past. At first, my involvement in mortal affairs was driven by curiosity, and duty, a hard-won responsibility I might add. I was completely unprepared for what I actually found here, and how it would end up changing me… honor, bravery, friendship, family… even love.” The elegant woman seemed to drift off in fond remembrance for a moment before continuing. “But there were also terrible things that I experienced for the first time in my life… horrible pain, heartache, sorrow, loss, betrayal… talk about an emotional rollercoaster! There were times I just wanted to go home and stay there… but I couldn’t. I’d become too attached to this
crazy place, and the good people in it.”

She laughed softly. “So, to finally answer your question, dear Alex, by my counting I first drew
breath in my mother’s arms over five thousand years ago, not that I’m keeping track or anything.”

Alex and Kara caught each other’s eyes… they were thinking the same thing. Great minds. Alex
thought with a smirk.

Kara spoke up, “After things calm down, the four of us could really use your guidance… on the
whole immortality thing.”

The beautiful Amazon nodded, “I understand, and would be happy to. Have you spoken to Kal
about this? Any of this?” Her arched brow and the sharper tone of her question made it clear to Alex
that the very perceptive woman already knew the answer.

Kara bit her lip and looked down and her hand clutching her robe… she still hadn’t let go of her
bondmate with the other. “No, I’ve been afraid to tell him what I’ve been doing… the training, the
taking risks, working with the Navy, and the CIA. What if he disapproves, or tells our parents?” She
looked over at Alex as if drawing strength and then back up at Diana.

The Amazon’s expression softened, and she reached over to briefly caress Kara’s undamaged
shoulder. “I will not betray your trust sweet Kara, but I think you’re not giving your cousin enough
credit. Certainly, he can be rigid at times, but he loves you and is your blood. He deserves the truth.
He’ll be hurt that you withheld this part of your life from him, of course, but will understand and
respect your choices. Well, he better, or I’ll be forced to knock some sense into his thick Kryptonian
skull. I can still kick his ass when the situation requires it.” Diana grinned as she drove one fist into
the palm of her other hand with a sound like muffled thunder.

Both Alex and Kara’s eyes popped wide at hearing the elegant hero curse.

Shah leaned over, her emerald gaze fixed adoringly on Diana, “Knowing that there’s at least one
woman powerful enough to put the strongest man on the planet in his place makes me strangely very
happy. No offense to your cousin, Kara.”

“None taken.” The Kryptonian smiled, and then refocused on Diana, “I know you’re in a hurry, but
can you tell us anything about metahumans? And I promised Daniels I’d ask about Athena since you
actually know her and all… I’m still trying to digest the fact that she and the gods are real.”

“Of course. As far as metahumans go, they’ve been around for millennia, the label’s just new. They
are the rare descendants of the demigods who in turn were created by the Ancient Ones (the gods)
dalliances with mortals. In the past, these offspring were always rare, one or two humans born with
enhanced abilities or powers of some kind in a generation. During Alexander’s time, their numbers
began to increase, until now, when there are more of them alive than have been through most of
human history. I can count almost a dozen as friends and allies, and just as many enemies. It keeps us
busy… too busy. It will be good to have you as allies, to watch over National City.”

“What, like... become heroes?” Alex gulped.

“Certainly. Isn’t that what you’ve already been doing, just in the shadows?” Diana reached over to
place a hand on Shah’s arm with a grin. “Obviously, you have your studies to complete, and time to
consider your paths, but we could use your help once you figure things out.”

The three of them sat quietly, contemplating what Diana had just said, each lost in thought.

“And about Athena…” The hero seemed to be considering her words carefully. “I have known the
wise goddess my entire life. It was she who blessed me with intelligence, wisdom, empathy, and military prowess, and became my first divine patron. She is the greatest of the gods.” Diana raised her voice in the direction of the laptop, “I assure you Commander Daniels, your service, and loyalty are well known to her and appreciated. You are loved, and watched over.” Her words seemed pointed, and her eyes were fixed on Kara as she spoke them as if she were delivering a secret in subtext.

“Thank you, Princess. I am deeply honored, and as always, happy to serve.” Came Tom’s very respectful response.

Kara was about to ask her another question about Athena, but the fast-talking hero was already moving on…

“I do have a message from her for all of you though. She asked me to tell you, ‘Seek me in the Sanctum of the Red God... at The Seat of All Knowledge.’ I have no idea where that would be, or what it is, and she gave no clues. I apologize; she’s like that sometimes, so cryptic… my bright-eyed goddess. Her mind operates on a higher plane.” Diana was lost in a pleasant memory and smiling again… hmmm, like Aphrodite, there is definitely more to their relationship than friendship. Wow.

Wait... Kara’s mind was working in overdrive… The Sanctum of the Red God… not Ares... The Seat of All Knowledge... oh, Rao... it cannot be!

The Amazon was still talking, but Kara was barely listening.

Diana was saying, “I thought that perhaps that she was referring to one of Ares’ old temples, so I compiled a list of possibilities that I will email over, but, I’m sorry, I really must go now before Circe wakes. Please do not hesitate to seek me out, or contact me at any time if you have more questions, or just need to talk.”

Kara offered a distracted smile as the graceful immortal hugged her, and then the others as she stood to leave. Trembling, the Kryptonian remained silent as she wrestled with the truth that she’d begun to feel in her bones… that she knew exactly where the goddess would be waiting for them… at the other end of the portal in her crystal, in the great city of Kandor, within the Sanctum of Rao.

Without considering how much pain it might cause her, Kara shimmered and was standing before the surprised Amazon Princess blocking her exit. The injured hero then stepped unsteadily forward and whispered a desperate question, like a plea… in the dead, musical language of her people.

“Diana, please... you must tell me, are you… like me? Is Athena? I feel your blood singing to me.”

The Amazon leaned into Kara to support her shaky legs, and replied in the same beautiful language, though the hero’s Kryptonian dialect was far older and more sophisticated than nearly anyone on Krypton (other than the Warden and her Keepers within the Sanctum of her ancestors) spoke, or outside of poetic readings from ancient texts, and the Book of Rao. “I am not exactly like you my angel, nor am I a hybrid like your true demigoddesses, or like my sisters… who were created by the gods during a time when war ravaged the Earth, long before I drew my first breath.”

She glanced over at Alex and Shah, before finally settling her steely gaze on a very concerned Ada, who had followed them into the room.

“I am… like her. Ada was made from light and given life by Zara and Shah, but also you and Alex. My mother gave me life in the same fashion… it was her love that called me from the Earth, mighty Zeus who awakened me, and the other gods who blessed me with their graces.” She smiled at a stunned Ada and said, “Child, we are the same.
“As to your other question, my dear Kara, Athena would be best to answer.” Diana was still speaking in her archaic Kryptonese, easing the very weak Kara over to Colliers. Alex, Shah, and Ada all hovered close by, listening intently. “That said, considering it is the language of her people that I am speaking now, it stands to reason that there is some connection between all of us, though it must be very ancient.”

“Why? How did you learn the language?”

“From time immemorial it has been a sacred honor for the Queen of Themyscira, her family, and the Amazon priestesses to keep a living memory of the gods’ voices. Our other duties are to serve as their warriors and guardians. We also safeguard the Ancients Ones’ technology and armaments, among other wonders… and terrors. I learned their beautiful language as a child when it was already old, and that knowledge has served me well over the years. I have grown… very close to some of the gods...” Kara could tell from the Amazon’s body language (reaching over to hold her arm against her body, shifting her feet awkwardly) that she had much more to say on this matter.

“Kara… I never told Kal this, I mean, to what end? But from the first moment we met, I thought… no, I felt in my heart, in my very bones that he was one of them… and I feel the same way about you.”

The Kryptonian was stunned by the possible revelation and wasn’t sure what to think or do. The gods are like Kal and me? How's that even possible?

Diana must have seen her turmoil, and stepped close, gently reaching over to move a couple of frazzled spirals of Kara’s golden hair back behind her ear. “Don’t overthink this. I don't have all the answers, but trust Athena with my life... which I would give in an instant to protect her. I also know that she would do the same for me. She is my friend, and admittedly over the years has been... more.” The faraway look in the Amazon’s faraway gray eyes definitely said it all. “And I love her as my own blood.

“Kara, she doesn’t just share your language, she shares your ideals, your kindness, your sense of justice, as well as your compassion. I am certain there is a very good reason why she’s keeping you in the dark. I believe it's because she’s trying to keep you safe, so please keep an open mind. She has a very difficult job, including following rules she cannot break, and an evil uncle to contend with.”

When Kara’s brow wrinkled, Diana added, “Hades. He didn’t leave this world with the other Ancients and has been a pain in our asses even before his temper tantrum that blew up Mount Vesuvius... which is a tale for another day. For now, I must take my leave.”

With that, Diana lovingly kissed Kara’s forehead and whispered, “You have my number.” and turned to offer pleasant goodbyes to everyone. Ada quickly came over and had a private, hushed conversation with the Amazon, who ended up pulling Shah’s daughter into a protracted and furious embrace when they concluded.

Once they separated, Diana waved one last time and then broke into a run. She shot out of the living space, through the slider door, and leaped off the deck like a gazelle. The Amazon momentarily hung in space four stories up in the air before disappearing into a briefly visible shimmering portal of light… the doorway to her invisible plane.

They all stood watching the sky for a couple of minutes before the gathering started to break up. As they said goodbye to their friends, it struck Kara just how much she thought of all of them as her family.

Her eternally-dapper boss closed her MacBook, helped Kara limp back to her comfy chair and,
before he returned to CatCo, hugged her so tightly that she thought he was going to break her (she wasn’t used to being so weak).

She wiped tears from his sad brown eyes, and kissed him on both cheeks, promising to follow every rule he was rattling off to her that she’d never remember, things like, ‘no fighting crime’, ‘no pissing off gods’, ‘no climbing ladders’, ‘no leaving the apartment’, and ‘remember, call me if you need anything’… he only left after Ada assured him she was sticking around to play nursemaid for her Aunties.

Fortunately, the meticulous young woman had left a shard of Navigator back on the Zumwalt to look after Jess, and safeguard her ship and crew.

Then it was just the four of them, and a contemplative quiet settled over the deck as they all savored what was left of the afternoon sun, and the echoes of Pearl Jam. Ada curled up with Shah, and Alex and Kara went back to holding hands after using what little strength they had to scoot their reclining chairs as close together as possible.

It was after five thirty when Alex broke the silence, “Hey guys, the pizza I ordered earlier is still coming, I can add to the order, and we already have plenty of ice cream for dessert… anyone still in the mood for that Firefly marathon?

Kara smiled, and gingerly leaned forward until she was sitting up, “Shiny! I’m in.”

“Oh! Oh! Me too!” Ada sprang up bouncing on the balls of her feet and offered a hand to Shah, who did not appear to be in a hurry to get up. In fact, she looked a bit sulky, crossing her arms over her ample chest.

“Come on, Grumpy…” Ada teased, “The other six dwarves are all waiting inside.” Both Kara and Alex started to laugh, oh shit that hurt, but couldn’t stop. The blonde loved watching mother and daughter together and was impressed that Ada knew exactly how to push Shah’s buttons… and vice versa.

“So that’s how it is going to be, daughter? Shah grumbled. “You try being used as a chew toy by dragons, having your life drained by an evil alien parasite, twice!!, all in the same day, and we’ll see how eager you are to move out of a comfortable chair.”

She then finally took Ada’s outstretched hand, looked up with a quick grin as she pulled the surprised young woman on top of her, and playfully said, “Curse your sudden but inevitable betrayal!”

The look of shock on Ada’s face as the realized she’d been tricked by her mother just to work in a Firefly quote was priceless! It also set them all off laughing, leaving three of them groaning in pain…

But it was so worth it!

........................

Story Lexicon/FAQs:

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Terms: Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest
of the story. The list will grow.

**Ah!khooob ast** – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

**Alex vanimelda** - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Ay Dios Mio** – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)

**Aporup** – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)

**Asheghetam** - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

**Azidane shoma khoshhalam** – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)

**Bedrood** – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

**Bonne nuit** – ‘Good night’ (French)

**C'est magnifique!** – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

**Damnú air!** – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)

**Dooset daram** – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

**El mayarah** – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

**Eres mi luz.** – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

**Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa** – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

**Imeacht gan teacht ort** – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gaelic/Irish)

**íthi eutukhēs** - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

**Ka’dah** – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

**Kheili khosh geli** – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

**Khodāhāfez:** A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

**Khodaye man** – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

**Malāʾikah** – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature

**Marbhfháisc ort!** – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

**Mersi** – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)

**miboosamet** – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)
órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

¡Qué señoras tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)

Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Sundor – ‘beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)

Thi eutukhēs – ‘good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Vuela, mi diosa! Vuela! – ‘Fly my goddess! Fly!’ (Spanish)

Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

aziz-am – ‘my dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

joon-am – ‘my dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

Nāzanin-am – ‘sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘the light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person’s name<’ + jōon (Shah jōon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or jōon- they both mean 'dear'. So, ‘Shah jōon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

Other names/nickname/titles/things:

A ghrá – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Bríomhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

Daxamites - An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people ruled by strength/the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow altered by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.
Dios mío! – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

Mi amor – ‘My love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Mi lucero – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Mi Sol – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn (Thought & Memory).

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Norooz - Persian New Year

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity.

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Seanmháthair – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced shan a WAW her (Irish/Gaelic)

Tieguanyin - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

Tratung – khrag ‘thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Tuath Dé Danann - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced Thoo-a day Du-non. (Irish/Gaelic)

Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’.

‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Vakur – A powerful and rare, evil, soul-devouring, shape-shifting parasitic alien race from another universe. Sought after as weapons. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.
Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Vallerian – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshiped, or traded.

Wan - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

Zhuyin – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:
Thank goodness our heroes all survived their first epic fight (The Battle of The Nine Dragons, as it will become known in the Book of Rao). Now is the time for healing and reflection. Diana answered many questions but opened doors to new ones too. What are the ones burning foremost in your minds?

Next Up:
Chapter 25: “Shrines” - Where we get a glimpse into how Kara is handling Alex and Shah’s absence since they both left for college; Eliza makes a discovery that leads to a long overdue heart-to-heart with her adopted daughter; and Kara takes on a special mission for The Agency’s Directorate 138. Also, with Jeremiah’s absence becoming Eliza’s new normal, she’s sad and moping so Kara invites her to join Team Archangel at the Daniels’ ranch, Elysium, for winter break. Later, spring brings more than a change in the seasons, as tragedy visits the Danvers family.

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me. Also, please share this story with those you think might enjoy it! Spread the word!

Thoughts:

Song inspirations:
Link to the Firefly Theme on YouTube
Shiny
Where we get a glimpse into how Kara is handling Alex and Shah’s absence since they left for college; Eliza makes a discovery that leads to a long overdue heart-to-heart with her adopted daughter; Kara takes on a special mission for The Agency’s Directorate 138; and Team Archangel heads to the Daniels’ ranch, Elysium, for a relaxing winter break. Then, later, spring brings more than a change in the seasons when tragedy visits the Danvers family.

Chapter Notes

It’s a long chapter, told in three parts. You may want to grab your favorite beverage, a snack, and light a fire before you get started. You were warned…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

--------------------------

Fall

--------------------------

October 10th – Year Three

Saturday morning

Midvale – The Danvers residence

0935 Hours UTC -5, Saturday morning, U.S. East Coast Time

It was already past nine thirty that Saturday morning and Eliza hadn’t yet heard the upstairs shower turn on, so she finished putting the dishes away and made her way upstairs to check on her (technically) youngest daughter.

Kara was usually up at the crack of dawn to meet the sun like an old friend… but not since Alex left.

Her Kryptonian Energizer Bunny just didn’t have the same sparkle.

Nevertheless, the girl had agreed to meet Ms. Richardson and over twenty volunteers at the high school auditorium at noon to direct the work on costumes for that fall’s big production of A
Midsummer Night’s Dream and was going to risk being late for sure if she didn’t get moving.

Mrs. Danvers didn’t even bother to look for Kara in her room; the poor thing hadn’t slept in her own bed in a month, not since her sister left for George Mason in September… The week after Kara’s birthday.

After spending five minutes knocking on Alex’s bedroom door without any response, Eliza reluctantly turned the knob, and as she stepped through the threshold her heart fluttered.

Her eldest’s presence permeated the room.

From the posters of bands she loved and the vast collage of photos of her friends and family covering the light gray walls to the shelves of mementos and science books, and one of her favorite sweatshirts still draped over the desk chair…. everything was just as Alex had left it.

God, I miss her… and it looks as though I’m in good company.

Kara lay stretched across Alex’s bed in a tangle of dark blue sheets, the diffused morning sunlight setting aglow the graceful curve of the girl’s hip and a long, toned leg that had escaped the covers. One of her bronzed arms was draped over the edge of the bed, along with a golden cascade of her hair, and she was snuggled into Alex’s pillow as if she were breathing in her sister’s scent.

Eliza stood absolutely still, captivated by her Kryptonian daughter. She looked so… mature. No longer the lost, skittish girl that had first come to them, or even the seventeen-year-old she pretended to be, but a strong, beautiful woman who looked more like an Amazon and her actual age of nineteen.

When did that happen?

Out of the corner of her eye, Eliza’s attention was drawn to the nightstand and the book Kara had been carrying around the night before (and reading at every opportunity), her delicate faux glasses resting precariously on the volume’s well-read cover.

Intrigued, she quietly padded over to take a quick look before waking her (very uncharacteristically) dead-to-the-world daughter.

The title on the book’s spine read Beauty: The Invisible Embrace, by the author John O’Donohue. Eliza grinned as she noticed that, in her typical fashion, Kara had inserted multiple sticky tabs to mark various pages, undoubtedly important passages that she wanted to come back to, or share.

One passage, in particular, interested Eliza, who leaned over to examine the red Post-It more closely. On it, in Kara’s unmistakably perfect cursive script, was a heart drawn in purple ink encircling the name “Alex”.

Curiosity piqued, she carefully picked up the book, opened it to the marked page, and silently read the words printed there.

“There is a lovely disarray that comes with attraction. When you find yourself deeply attracted to someone, you gradually begin to lose your grip on the frames that order your life. Indeed, much of your life becomes blurred as that countenance comes into clearer focus. A relentless magnet draws all your thoughts towards it. Wherever you are, you find yourself thinking about the one who has become the horizon of your longing. When you are together, time becomes unmercifully swift. It always ends too soon. No sooner have you parted than you are already imagining your next
meeting, counting the hours. The magnetic draw of that presence renders you delightfully helpless. A stranger you never knew until recently has invaded your mind; every fiber of your being longs to be closer.”

Eliza’s throat constricted as she raised a hand to cover her mouth, and moments later tears were flowing freely down her cheeks.

From the very first day the delightful alien girl had come to them, Eliza had noticed how her daughters had gravitated to one another… like electromagnets. Their furtive glances, lingering touches, and easy rapport had nurtured a powerful bond, and over time the pair had become inseparable.

Kara’s current lack of appetite, her sad, quiet yearning, the lethargy, spending every night since Alex’s departure in her sister’s room, wearing Alex’s clothes (what few remained), listening to her music, and so many other little things had already confirmed what Eliza had suspected for months.

She didn’t need the beautiful passage to tell her how her youngest was feeling, or how much pain she must be in. But it had somehow just made it all real… and merely revealed what her heart already knew.

The Danvers had been blessed with two amazing girls… who were in love… a fact that Eliza could no longer ignore.

*God knows I tried to set them both on different paths… but trying to distract those two from each other was like fighting a flood.*

Even the beautiful Shahrazad hadn’t been enough to divert Alex’s heart. For her part, Kara had never shown any romantic interest in the ‘immature’ boys at her school. She’d occasionally made comments to Eliza about this or that girl, Shah, even Ravan, or a couple of her teachers, which had been enough to either placate or terrify her as a mother… but only now realized how expertly she’d been played.

Her ingenious brats had fed her what she’d wanted to hear when all the while the deeper truth had been right in front of her.

Her Kryptonian daughter saw love through a myriad of facets, light-years beyond humans, and had always been unapologetic in her belief that ‘who someone was inside’ was what mattered, not their ethnicity, race, species, class, looks, wealth status, gender, age, planet of origin, or anything else… Kara valued kindness, a sense of humor, curiosity, bravery, creativity, ethics, loyalty, and being intellectually compatible.

For her to love someone said a lot about that person…

Eliza sighed.

She’d already run through a gamut of emotions over the last six months as she’d begun to suspect in earnest, (or longer if she were being honest with herself), and had reached an inevitable point of acceptance. Part of her understood why her girls had not revealed their secret… but not being trusted hurt, and a terrified part of her also felt like she’d already lost them both, or at least a part of them… to a secret life without her in it.

Kara stirred, and as her face turned from the pillow to seek the morning light her lips curled into a blissful smile. She whispered something in her musical Kryptonese language that Eliza could only
comprehend pieces of, but within its layered song she heard Alexandra’s name, and one phrase she understood, ‘heart of my heart’, particularly stood out.

She could actually feel the meaning resonate throughout her entire being as Kara uttered it, ‘we belong to each other; our hearts as one’. It was, all at once both beautiful and enlightening, and something devastatingly much more powerful. She had to lean against the wall for support as the warm echo of the unexpected experience slowly faded from her, her skin and muscles tingling.

She felt warm, loved, and cherished.

Oh, my… I had no idea Kara had the ability do that!

As she recovered, Eliza recalled another mysterious word she’d heard within the music, ‘Vaena’. Kara had actually purred it in a way that had caused the older Danvers to blush.

Wait… maybe she didn’t want to know what that Kryptonian term meant after all.

When her legs felt steady enough, she quietly pushed off the wall and stepped over to carefully place the book back where she’d found it, and then sat on the edge of Alex’s bed. Nom was curled off to Kara’s side and glanced up at Eliza sleepily. Without lifting his head he studied the woman as she tenderly laid a hand on the soft, extraordinarily warm skin of Kara’s bare shoulder.

“Time to wake up, sleepyhead.” She said in a gentle tone, wiping tears from her eyes.

The disoriented girl, no, it’s time I stopped thinking of her as a girl. The young woman squinted, and looked up at her adoptive mother with her mysterious blue eyes at first in confusion, and then concern.

“Eliza? What time is... what are you… hey, why are you crying?”

“Because.” She sniffed, “I love you... I love you so much it hurts, and I miss her, too.”

Eliza was already wrapped in the comfort of her daughter’s powerful arms as she began to weep in earnest.

..................  

A bit later…

1054 Hours UTC -5, Saturday morning, U.S. East Coast Time

Being waited on by one of her children wasn’t something Eliza Danvers was accustomed to, except on special occasions like Mother’s Day and birthdays… but after their breakthrough moment upstairs, and the frank and open conversation they’d had afterward, here she was sitting at her kitchen island, watching Kara move at super speed making them both breakfast.

The delightful smell of the fresh mushrooms, onion, red bell peppers, and spinach cooking in her omelet was mouthwatering.

Eliza had a relaxed smile on her face as she contemplated all of that morning’s revelations… among them (the most important one) the confirmation that Kara Zor-El, the last daughter of Krypton, loved
her Alexandra, with every fiber of her being.

“So, this bond you two share… it’s both telepathic and empathic?” She asked, sipping her perfectly brewed coffee.

Kara sliced up an avocado at blinding speed, ground some fresh black pepper over the eggs before adding a layer of shredded cheddar cheese, and then zipped over to butter their toast. “Yup, it’s… complete. We’re always aware of each other, like how we’re feeling, what we’re doing, and can talk whenever we want with our thoughts. We can also filter when we need privacy… like now when she’s in the lab, I wouldn’t bother her unless it was an emergency. Can you believe she has a lab? On a Saturday? How crazy is that?”

“That’s what you think is crazy?” Eliza chuckled, still brimming over with a million questions. “So, the bond… do you know how it works?”

Her daughter’s musical laughter was delightful, “I really don’t know, no one does exactly… though we all have theories. Sometimes Kryptonian science seems magical, even to Kryptonians.” Now they both giggled. “Alex could explain it better, but as far as we can tell we’re entangled at a quantum level, we even feel emotional and physical effects from one another, sensations.” Eliza noticed Kara wince as she finished speaking, and reached up to gently press her fingers to her chest up near her right shoulder as if remembering the pain.

“Kara… talk to me. No more secrets, something happened to you two in National City… I can feel it.” As powerfully as if she were a part her daughter’s bond.

The beautiful girl sighed, thoughtfully arranging avocado slices on Eliza’s plate, “It’s a long and complicated story, one we don’t have time for at the moment, and that we should tell you together. For now, eat! Enjoy.” Blurring for only a second, there was suddenly a perfectly displayed, delicious looking breakfast plate in front of her, and Kara standing at her side with a big grin on her face. “You’ll have answers, Eliza, I promise… tonight. I’ll let Alex know, and we’ll show you Paris.”

“Paris? I don’t underst…”

Kara nodded, “It’ll all make sense, believe me. But before we can go you’ll need this.” She blurred again and reappeared with a delicate, unfamiliar jewelry box in her hand that she immediately offered to Eliza. “Alex and I made this for you over the summer, for the day we finally told you. Who knew it’d be so soon?” She smiled awkwardly.

Eliza opened the lid, and inside was a necklace, a glittering mirror of Kara’s mother’s sapphire, and Alex’s ruby version, but with a stunning fancy cut topaz gem. The Kryptonian glyphs on the silvery chain even shifted beneath her gaze, as if it were alive, reacting to her attention. **It’s incredible!**

“My birthstone.” She whispered in amazement.

“Yup, but it’s actually a diamond. We worked really hard to get the color right.”

Eliza hesitated for only a moment before lifting the delicate chain and substantial stone from its velvety nest and examined it. “It’s beautiful and huge! You… **made** this?!” She regretted how incredulous her tone sounded came out.

Kara grinned, seemingly unfazed by her lack of faith, “You sound exactly like Alex. And yup… **we** made it. It’s two and a half karats, just like its sisters, and while it’s definitely pretty, it’s not just bling. The crystal will connect you with us… kind of like joining Alex and my bond, but more accurately it’s a secure quantum communications network, among other things.”
“Us? I noticed that you said, ‘sisters’, are there others?”

“Sorry, I’ll explain. I made a copy of my mother’s necklace for Alex on her birthday before our bond took hold. I wanted to give her something beautiful, to show her how much I loved her, and to have a way for us to communicate privately… to stay connected no matter the distance. Later, we created a crystal for Shah, then Jessica, and finally Ada. Our extended family seems to just keep growing.”

“Jess and Ada? Your new friends from National City?”

Kara sighed, “Pfft… kind of, but not exactly. I’m so sorry, Eliza, we really do have a lot to tell you, just try not to be too mad.” Then her face brightened… “Oh! Put the necklace on.”

She did, with Kara shimmering behind her to help with the clasp, and was greeted in her thoughts by not just a voice, but a feeling of such warmth, and love, that the accursed tears she’d thought she’d finished shedding earlier started flowing again.

It was Alex, in her mind, and all around her.

_Hi, mom._

……………………

_October 11th – Year 3_

_Earth Pax – Kara and Alex’s Paris apartment_

0632 Hours UTC +1, Sunday morning, Paris, France

To be honest, at first, the whole idea of alternate universes existing, let alone being able to travel to them, seemed too impossible to be real. So, later that afternoon when her daughters asked her to describe the person she wanted to be on Ada’s peaceful (other) world, what they called ‘Earth Pax’, and she’d said, ‘me, but half my age’, she hadn’t realized it was a literal question.

Yet, here she was, in that other world… standing in the elegant hallway outside of Kara and Alex’s Paris home at six-thirty in the morning (Paris time), where her girls apparently lived together, _as a couple._

She was staring into just one of half-a-dozen eight-foot tall, heavy-looking mirrors that leaned decoratively up against the walls, into the face of a young, arguably not unattractive young woman that she hadn’t seen in a long time… a woman over twenty years younger than she was on her own Earth.

Eliza’s hair looked amazing, a lot like Kara’s… blonde, lustrous, bouncy, and… _oh my God! There you all old friend!_ She thought as she turned appreciatively to admire how her skinny jeans hugged her incredibly firm backside.

The clothes she was wearing were tailored perfectly, the Armani blazer alone must have cost an arm and a leg… who paid for all of this anyway? How did she even get dressed? The last thing she remembered was falling asleep on the couch at home in Midvale after dinner on Saturday night, and Kara’s calming voice…
Now, only seconds later, it was Sunday morning and they were half a world away... in another universe!

Her Kryptonian daughter was gawking at Eliza’s reflection in the mirror along with her. The usually graceful young woman startled when she realized she’d been noticed and began fumbling for her keys, “Sorry... um, distracted.”

The poor thing quickly glanced away, smiled awkwardly, and blushed.

Eliza chuckled under her breath. Kara had already told her twice how much of a ‘hottie’ she was. *Bless her. Time to rescue my daughter.* “So, you and Alex actually live here?”

The flustered blonde looked over at Eliza with relief for the welcome change of subject. “Uh huh, I know the place looks pricey, and it is, don’t get me wrong, but money here really isn’t an issue... not for us anyway. You’ll find out soon enough. Ada takes care of all of us, check your purse.”

Sure enough, inside the elegant, and very expensive Tory Burch handbag slung over her shoulder Eliza found a new iPhone and a leather wallet that held over two thousand dollars in cash and three credit cards... one platinum, and two black.

*Whoa!*

Kara grinned, “I suppose it’s possible that we could still draw attention to ourselves if we went on a crazy spending spree, but we don’t, and the bills never come. Like paying for this place, it’s taken care of by our guardian angel.”

Eliza thought this Ada was merely a new friend, but the more Kara talked about her, it became clear that there was a deeper relationship connecting them. The newcomer seemed like a focal point, someone that all three girls felt very protective of, and deeply tied to... someone who looked out for and took care of them. “I can’t wait to meet her.” She honestly couldn’t.

Once inside, Eliza was overwhelmed by the scope of the ‘apartment’; it was huge, with a large entryway that branched off into many airy rooms and hallways, and a bright and towering loft above that looked like an art studio, Kara’s room obviously. Dawn’s light softly streamed from massive skylights, and in the main living space there was a wall of windows, or glass doors, looked out onto a wide patio, and beyond that loomed the Eifel Tower.

*My God, it’s stunning!*

“You two live in a mansion.”

Kara blinked and looked around innocently, “Just a little one, and it’s three... Shah lives here too.”

Eliza shook her head and chuckled. *Of course, they all live together... always The Three Musketeers.*

To her left she could see a kitchen, where (speak of the devil, or in this case an angel) Shah was chatting with a beautiful young woman whom Eliza had never seen before; she could have easily been her sister, though she was taller, and a little older, possibly nineteen or twenty. The mystery woman was also less voluptuous than Shah, with a warm brown complexion and long, straight black hair. Her sweet smile and compassionate green eyes endeared her to Eliza immediately, and there was something else so familiar about her, something she couldn’t quite put her finger on.

Was this the elusive Ada?

As she was led, or pulled, by a bubbly Kara into the lovely gourmet kitchen, all eyes turned to her.
Standing with Shah and her new friend was another woman Eliza had not yet met. She was very pretty, closer to Eliza’s current age than the girls (early twenties), Hispanic, with dark brown wavy hair, and a sensual, curvy form similar to Shah’s, but even more so.

She and the young woman Eliza assumed was Ada leaned into each other as if they were drawn together, or connected.

Alex had been laughing about something, but when she saw Eliza, she flickered like fire, blinked from existence, and almost instantaneously reappeared all the way across the room to envelope her mother in a hug to end all hugs. “Mom! Oh, Rao! You’re here. Look at you, I can’t believe it!”

Eliza was thrilled to be holding her daughter, but still reeling from what she’d just seen. “Alex… you… you…” She was pointing at where had been before her disappearing act.

Kara was biting her lip, “Alex, you um, were a little too excited…”

Her oldest daughter’s eyes widened in horror, and she pulled back to gaze apologetically at her mother, “Oops? Sorry, I can explain…”

Eliza took a deep breath, and then kissed her daughter’s forehead, “Yes, yes you will… but first, I think introductions are in order… and I could really use a glass of wine… a big one. Please.” Alex gaped at her as she stepped back.

“Allow me, Mrs. Danvers,” Shah said warmly, reaching up to take down glasses for everyone, before retrieving a bottle of Merlot from the well-stocked temperature-controlled wine cabinet off to her right. “In the meantime, Ada?” She prompted the elegant young woman beside her who’d been smiling at Eliza in polite fascination from the moment she’d walked in.

Ada, who looked so much like she could be Shah’s sister, came to her in one fluid movement and gently embraced Eliza around the shoulders. God, she smelled as good as Kara and was just as warm.

“Eliza Danvers, I am honored to meet you. I am Augusta Zara-El Nazari.”

Eliza paused, and then swallowed, “Zara-El?”

“Yes.” Ada said. “It’s complicated, like everything about us, but the details of my origin and who I am will soon be made clear, I promise. Alex and Kara have much to tell you. We’ll talk after, or at least I hope we will.” Then, before Eliza could press her further, the young woman reached over and pulled her companion, who’d been waiting patiently, to her side. A profound affection existed between the two that was impossible to miss. “This is my lovely better half, Jessica.” They moved close together, grinning warmly, hands entwined.

The attractive Latina blushed at the introduction, but quickly snapped to attention in a curiously formal fashion, and put out her hand. “Chief Petty Officer Jessica Rodriguez, señora, U.S. Navy (over on Earth Prime). Very pleased to finally make your acquaintance.” There was a delighted sparkle in Ada’s eyes as she watched Jessica interact with her.

These two aren’t just a couple… they’re smitten with each other.

That was the moment when Eliza caught a glimpse of the striking amethyst hued diamond that hung around Jess’ neck, exactly like her own topaz, Kara’s sapphire, Shah’s emerald, and her daughter’s blood red stone. Her hand went to her own gem on her living Kryptonian necklace, and for a moment they all looked at each other in recognition, grinned, and lifted their shared adornments to show the group.
Eliza took note that Ada’s crystal was a clear, flawless diamond. Did its absence of color signify something special, like a unifying element?

The young woman was smiling, and the familiarity Eliza had felt towards her finally fell into place… Ada had Eliza’s smile. The same quirky, some would say adorable, subtly lopsided trait that most of the women on her side of the family shared… including Alex. In fact, Ada even stood like her daughter, but with Kara’s warrior’s physique, and Shah’s symmetrically beautiful (and shapely) Nazari qualities… stunning green eyes, graceful nose, and lustrous black hair.

It was as if the gorgeous young woman were the child of her daughters and Shah… all of them! How was that possible? Who was she??

“Welcome to the club, Mrs. Danvers,” Shah said with a smile, interrupting Eliza’s thoughts to hand her a glass of dark red wine. “It is well past time we shared our secrets.”

………………

A couple hours later…

October 11th – Year Three

Earth Pax – Kara and Alex’s Paris apartment

0904 Hours UTC +1, Sunday morning, Paris, France

They were all gathered in the softly-lit living room as a cool breeze drifted in through the wide glass doors open to the deck and the verdant gardens of the Champ de Mars beyond. The group had finally finished taking Eliza through everything and everyone involved in their secret life. While they’d been mostly honest, they were guilty of downplaying Kara’s three near-death, or death and rebirth, experiences, especially the last one… being skewered by Circe.

Mrs. Danvers now knew that both Alex and Shah were slowly becoming Kryptonians and all about Ada. In fact, she was still hugging the young woman and didn’t want to let go of her. Eliza had a grandniece… an angel made of light, who’s blended features all made sense now.

Born of a Kryptonian Awakening, it was a miracle.

Ada’s physical body was the perfect melding of her AI and human mothers, combined with the DNA and most desirable traits from both of her aunts… who represented the House of El including Alex’s human lineage, which meant Shah’s lovely daughter was related to Eliza, too.

Blood bonds us all. She’d heard that solemn Kryptonian phrase many times over the years, but only now felt the true joy of it.

None of the details mattered to Eliza at that moment, other than the connection she already felt with the delightful young woman and the fact that she was now a grand… aunt? It was a humbling distinction. “Have you told Ravan she’s a grandmother yet?” Eliza asked as she and Ada sat back on the couch together, still holding hands.

Her grandniece directed her emerald gaze and a raised eyebrow at Shah, who was standing close by like any adoring mother would be. “No. We were still debating talking to both of you over Christmas
break, but Ada and I can come visit tomorrow if you’re okay with Kara giving me a lift from Cambridge.”

“Kara apparently doesn’t need my permission to do anything.” Eliza didn’t mean for her words to come out so biting (damn the wine!). The room had gone silent, and she immediately began to apologize. “Kara, I’m s…”

Her youngest daughter was sitting in one of the nearby chairs, and interrupted her, “No, please don’t apologize. It’s okay, Eliza, I deserved that. And worse.” Then she leaned forward, and the same pained look Eliza had seen several times before came over her, and she reached for her shoulder.

Her mom alarms went off and Eliza was up and across the intervening space in an instant, kneeling at the side of Kara’s chair. “What’s wrong? I know you were hurt worse than you’re letting on. Tell me the truth, sweetheart, you said no more secrets.” She was breathing hard, worried, and her tone allowed no argument.

Ada briskly stepped over and gently touched Eliza’s arm. “Pardon the interruption, but I think she needs me.” Her tone was soothing, and as she approached shifted her focus to Kara, “Don’t you, auntie?”

The blonde groaned, and looked up at both of them with big puppy dog eyes, “Yes, please.” She said, before turning her full attention to Eliza and taking her mother’s hand. At the same time, Ada knelt on the other side of Kara and unbuttoned her shirt enough to expose a large bandage above her right breast, up towards her shoulder.

Eliza sucked in a surprised breath when she saw it. “Oh! Kara…”

The Kryptonian began to explain, “Okay, remember the fight we had with Madam Xiao? Well, it turns out she was really the goddess Circe… yes, before you ask, the real goddess Circe… and when I said she hurt me… um, it was kind of worse than that. She had this really powerful alien vampire creature, called a *Vakur*, bound up magically in the form of a sword, and… well…”

Alex stepped over and broke in, “Mom, Circe was going to kill me, and Kara stepped in the way, to protect me, and was hit... it was awful.” Tears were welling up in her daughter’s eyes. “The blade went all the way through her, and I thought she was going to… I felt her die… for me.” Alex flinched and was suddenly draped over Kara with her arms around her, head on her chest, and at the same time, her body was pressed up against her mother on her side of the chair. Kara lovingly wound her fingers through Alex’s short-cropped brown hair, her blue eyes seeking Eliza as if pleading for understanding.

After a moment, Alex’s partially muffled voice continued, “It was only for a moment though, Ada brought her back by sacrificing herself, but then Diana showed up and gave her Apollo’s favor, which in turn saved her.” Ada, without taking her eyes off of Kara, lifted a beautiful gold necklace from her neck with a finger to show Eliza as she continued examining Kara’s bandages with the other. The charm or talisman hanging on it was adorned with the symbol of a blazing sun. “It’s like an endless solar battery or something.”

“The *god*, Apollo, gave you that?” Eliza was incredulous.

Alex, messy hair covering part of her face, looked over at her mother, “Yes… and no, not in person.”

Ada spoke up, “Diana… Wonder Woman brought it to me for him.”
Eliza was stunned, not only were the gods real and intervening in her daughters’ lives, but they knew Wonder Woman… she’d been obsessed with the beautiful hero since she was a child. In fact, the Amazon warrior princess had been her first ‘girl crush’. For a moment, she had to digest the idea that her daughters actually knew her personally…

“Ouch.” Kara bit her lip and her eyes scrunch up as Ada peeled the bandage back, revealing a four-inch long scar. There was no blood, the wound was a white line with pink surrounding it, and was nearly healed.

Shah’s daughter smiled, obviously pleased. “Looking good, auntie… you’re almost fully mended.” She said. “The pain you’re feeling now is more phantom than real. The good news is you shouldn’t have to deal with it much longer, and I think I’ll be able to almost completely get rid of that scar with a couple more treatments… or you could always take a trip up to touch the sun and speed things up.” Her last comment was playful, with a hint of being serious.

Kara looked both relieved, and grateful.

Eliza was starting to feel a little frantic and lost. Her Kryptonian daughter had almost died not two, but three times; her human daughter was changing into a being like Kara, running around with her sister working for the U.S. Navy and the CIA; and they had fought a god. It was…

It was a lot to process.

She was about to launch into a rant, when Ada said to the room, “Cover your eyes momentarily if you value your sight.” And then her right hand lit up as bright as the sun, and she lowered her blazing palm to a now absolutely blissed out and moaning Kara’s chest, covering her wound as the lights dimmed. Eliza almost blushed again watching Kara writhe under her grandniece’s touch.

Shah, Jess, and Alex reacted to the light as well; moving closer... as if they too could also feel whatever intoxicating power it contained, and desired it.

“But worry about it, Mrs. D, we’re like moths to a flame… it’s normal, for them, and in this world, at least… for me too. Here, I’m just like them.” Jess’ adoring, breathless gaze never left Ada as she too drifted a bit closer to the light.

“Normal?” Eliza asked skeptically.

Jess chuckled, “As normal as any of this is, but yeah, pretty typical for us. Our lives are muy loco, but never boring… and I wouldn’t trade it, or your daughters, for anything. They’ve already done more good in our world than I ever imagined anyone could, and they’ve welcomed me to be part of it and their lives.

"Eliza, Kara was being modest earlier, there are many who see her as a goddess… who worship her.” From Jess’ flush appearance and downcast eyes, Eliza knew immediately that the pretty Latina was in that camp. “She saved my soul you know... brought me back from a really dark place. And Shah, she and Zara gave me something I never thought I’d find… the love of my life, so I’m kind of all-in on helping my angels save the world. All of us are.”

And that was it, that was the moment when, despite the fear she had for what the future could hold, and the hard conversations she and her daughters still needed to have, Eliza realized that she was all-in as well.

She also recognized that the churning she’d been feeling in the pit of her stomach since Kara opened up to her wasn’t from something she’d eaten, but from the guilt she’d been carrying inside. After
Kara and Alex’s courageous act to come clean and reveal their secrets to her, how could she, in good conscience, not do the same about what was going on with their father and the Department of Extranormal Operations?

But she couldn’t tell them about the D.E.O… how could she?

Her daughters had already proven that nothing would stop them from being heroes, helping people, and standing up to injustice… backing down wasn’t in their nature. If they were to find out that, after spying on Jeremiah for months, that awful man, Hank Henshaw, and his jackbooted thugs, had threatened Alex and Kara’s lives over the summer, that he’d coerced their father into joining his secret government agency for his knowledge about Superman, and all Kryptonians, they would already be working on a plan to confront the psychopath… and Eliza wouldn’t be able to stop them.

The D.E.O. had alien technology, acquired from who knows where, which Henshaw and his agents used to hunt, capture, murder, and dissect people like Kara, and now Alex, Ada, and Shah. The truth was far too dangerous, too risky, to gamble her girls’ lives on.

There was no way in Hell Eliza would be the one to make them aware of the D.E.O., Henshaw, or his horrific alien version of Guantanamo Bay.

For a moment she closed her eyes, and wished to whatever powers in the universe were listening, that Jeremiah was there with her.

Two weeks later…

October 26th – Year Three

A little over a week after Alex’s eighteenth birthday

McLean, VA – Just outside Langley, CIA Headquarters

0644 Hours UTC -5, Monday morning

Kara couldn’t stop smiling as she banked left, leaving the relative safety of the airspace above the wide, slow-flowing waters of the Potomac two hundred feet below her. As she headed in toward the river’s tree-lined shore, her mind lingered back with Alex… she could still taste her beautiful bondmate’s minty lip balm from her good luck kiss, and feel the soft warmth of her body wrapped around her.

Rao, I miss sleeping with her every night.

It was lucky for them that her destination for the day had been so close to George Mason, as well as the Daniels’ house in Bethesda. The proximity had allowed the simmering pair to steal an unplanned and absolutely amazing night together under the sheets, on the sheets, above the sheets, in the bathtub, and… oh, you get the idea.

They did eventually manage to get some sleep, though admittedly not much, and were able to spend time that morning enjoying each other’s company.
They both woke well before their alarm and lay languidly together, neither wanting to get out of bed. They spoke of many things; from how hard it was being apart (though they were coping), the joy of Eliza being in-the-know, and how odd it was that she’d told them to hold off on telling Jeremiah.

“It’s weird having Eliza’s blessing to be here with you,” Kara whispered. “I’d gotten so used to having to lie to her about our ‘other life’ that not having to feel at least a little guilty is weird... but at the same time too wonderful to put into words.”

“Awww, sweetie. I know you’ve always hated deceiving mom, so have I... and now we don’t have to anymore! I’m glad that she’s part of Team Archangel, too. I just wish she wasn’t so worried about telling dad, I mean, I know he’s under some tight security with his new job, but they’re not mind readers... are they?”

Kara shrugged helplessly, “I don’t know why she’s so worried, but what will it hurt to wait?”

Alex sighed. “I suppose.”

Their mysterious benefactor, the goddess Athena, was also a hot topic.

“So,” Kara began as she cuddled next to Alex, running her fingertips over the soft, pale skin of her snuggly lover’s naked shoulder. “Do you think she’s Kryptonian?”

The brunette looked up from her pillow, her brows knit in concentration as she turned onto her side and absently reached out to touch her bondmate.

Kara’s breath hitched as the morning sun lit Alex’s face. Her Vaena was still soft from sleep, her hair an adorable mess, and Kara swore she’d never looked as beautiful as she did at that moment.

Alex noticed her staring. “What?” She asked with concern, touching her cheek. “Do I have something on my face?”

Kara startled from her mesmerized gazing and grinned, “Yeah, let me get it for you.” And then leaned in to taste her parted lips.

A few minutes later, after more soft kisses, and with the Kryptonian now sprawled half on top of Alex like a warm blanket, her bondmate replied, “About Athena... I don’t know. I mean, how is that even possible? It would make her older than Diana, by a lot.” Alex paused as if considering, and then continued, “But as implausible as it seems, we can’t explain away all the evidence. There’s something to it... we just haven’t connected all the dots yet.” Alex’s hands were gently exploring Kara’s body as they spoke.

Kara smiled. “That’s one of the many reasons I love you órenya, your amazing ability to embrace the strange and improbable… and me.” And they kissed again.

After they parted briefly for air, Alex grinned and said, “We’ll figure it out, eventually. We have ‘top minds’ all over it.”

Kara nodded cheerily, “Speaking of ‘top minds’, this one needs coffee (and crullers) badly.”

“I second that! Race you to the shower?”

They were laughing as they shimmered and flickered to the tiled master bath with its promise of hot steaming water.

……………………
Later that same morning…

When they’d begrudgingly parted outside of their favorite Arlington coffee shop only minutes earlier, Alex’s thoughts had followed Kara, warming her… Call if you need me, Flame will be there.

Don’t tempt me. I may just call for no good reason.

Alex laughed. Oh, there’s always a good reason, even if we have to make one up.

I guess that’s true. Thanks, Vaena. I promise that if I need help, you’ll be the first to know. I doubt I’ll need any back-up though if today turns out to be anything like the last few missions Black Knight gave me… picking bad guys out of crowds, listening in on illicit communications, being a bulletproof courier, escorting some VIP as a glorified bodyguard, or more often than not, scanning freight at major shipping ports. They want me to look for bomb-making material, drugs, and weapons, but you would not believe the insane stuff I find every single time besides weapons’ grade plutonium.

So, are you saying that being a spy is boring? Alex teased.

No, but… Alex, I’m not getting to do any spy stuff! Sorry, I shouldn’t be complaining. What I’m doing is really important, and hey, the security clearance is cool, I set my own hours, my boss is awesome, my co-workers are really nice, and the pay’s not so bad.

They both started laughing, knowing full well how much Kara loved her secret job with D138.

As she headed into class, Alex sent her lover a virtual kiss with her thoughts: Be safe, nooré cheshmam. I love you.

The river behind her, Kara was soaring over a thick stretch of woodland. Looking down, she could see that most of the brilliant fall colors had drained from the canopy of leaves, but not all. Her enhanced vision could still make out vibrant flecks of red, and yellows, among the dull browns... it was beautiful.

Lights from the George Washington Memorial Parkway’s morning commuters were visible ahead, cutting through the forest like a glittering, slow-moving river, and beyond that rose a glow from the massive complex known simply as ‘Langley’… the CIA’s headquarters. The place had a longer, official name, but no one ever bothered to use it, at least according to her handler.

Ada’s lovely voice entered her thoughts, in Persian, of course… Adjust your aura and your heading, auntie; the area is being scanned for heat variations, sound, and movement. Also, remember to stay well clear of the main facility as you make your way to Black Knight’s coordinates.

Thanks ‘mom’, I’m on it. Kara chuckled. She’d sat through her niece’s briefing multiple times the day before, and knew the drill, but the poor girl was worried about her safety…

Archangel was stepping close to the dragon’s den after all.

Ow! She reached up and rubbed the faded wound up on her shoulder… just the thought of dragons brought back her phantom pain. Stupid dragons.

Weaving north, and west, she ended up over a small clearing at the end of a dirt road, with one of The Agency’s ubiquitous armored black SUVs parked in the gravel. She hovered above
momentarily, scanned the area, and then quietly descended to join the only person there, Commander Paul Mason, or Black Knight as Kara had come to know her stoic, but affable handler over the last few months.

Dressed in a black military-style jacket, he was leaning on the wooden fence that ringed the clearing and the circular grassy swath beyond it and staring thoughtfully into the thick woodlands that surrounded him.

“Hey, Black Knight.” Kara greeted him as she floated down from the pre-dawn sky, relaxing her aura to become fully visible. He nodded gallantly as she gracefully touched down on the grass nearby. She was always pleased with how casual he was about her using her powers like it was no big deal. It made it comfortable to be around him.

“Archangel.” His reply was brief but warm, as always, and he turned his head just enough to regard her with his cool blue eyes. “’Mornin’.”

Kara moved to lean on the fence next to him, only inches away. “So, what does my country ask of me today that required me to fly all the way down here… right under the Eye of Sauron?” She tossed a brief glance over her shoulder in the direction of Langley’s main campus, southeast of them through the trees.

Ah, he grinned at that one! But the warrior’s eternally placid expression returned soon after. Oh well, small victories.

“I’ve always liked to think of her more as Minas Tirith, the White City of Gondor…” He spoke the words with a faraway look that both surprised and delighted her. “But, I digress.” He said, quickly snapping back into professional mode. “We have a problem. A leak, maybe a hack, and are hoping you would be willing to help us find it. We believe it’s external in origin, possibly some sort of tech, but haven’t been able to find anything conclusive. Amanda has a hunch that maybe you can.”

Kara nodded, “I can sweep the area for anomalies, devices, communications, that sort of thing, but I won’t know what’s out of place, or what to look for without help and coordination… hold on, I have an idea.” She smiled, raised a finger, stepped a couple of feet away, and sent her thoughts to Ada.

Have you been listening?

Ada giggled. Of course.

Good! Can you share everything I’m seeing and sensing like you do with the feed to the Battle Bridge, but in a full first-person view over to Langley? You’ll need to translate all the data they need and provide an understandable interface.

Ada’s excitement was palpable through their connection. Yes! Just give me the right geek and the hardware to work with on their end, and I’ll get them up and running in no time. I’ll alert Daniels, Jess, and Chief Vaden as well. They’ll want in on this, and to monitor the feed, as well.

Yes! I’ll get you a contact. Thanks so much, Ada, as always.

Anything for you, auntie.

Black Knight was waiting patiently when Kara finally focused back on him, “I have an idea.”

“Good, because we’re out of them.” He offered a hint of a smile, but Kara knew that was a big deal for him… she grinned in return. “Where do you go?” He then asked, “When you zone out like that? You always seem so far away.”
She sighed, what would telling him hurt? “I have a telepathic link with my… my teammate, and right
now she, um… she's the one I talk to who helps me, Navigator, she needs to connect with someone
on your end who knows tech… ‘cause we’re about to blow your minds.”


October 26th – Year Three

McLean, VA – Langley, CIA Headquarters

0923 Hours UTC -5, Monday morning

“Holy shit! Are you seeing this? I… holy shit!” Agent Wilkins had seen some crazy things in his
time at D138, but never anything like this. He was gazing up in slack-jawed astonishment at the large
projected monitors deep under Langley, in one of the Directorate’s Operation Centers. They’d just
activated their link to Archangel, and all of the dozen or so techs, analysts, scientists, and officers
gathered there had collectively stopped doing whatever they’d been working on to collectively gasp
and stare in wonder, as well.

Deputy Director Thorpe’s gravelly voice broke over the comms, “I see it, Wilkins, I’m not blind.
Archangel is incredible… in fact I’m beginning to wonder what she can’t do. Regardless, I expect
you to handle this situation and take care of our girl. I’ll be offline in meetings on The Hill the rest of
the day, but will review your report, and the footage, later. Just find that goddamn leak and plug it.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Her lieutenant replied as she signed off. Wilkins was still unable to take his eyes off
the scene playing out on the screens in the room… they were in first-person view, observing
everything Archangel was seeing in real-time.

Everything.

The impossible young woman was somehow soaring undetected around Langley, meticulously
scanning every inch of the over three hundred acres that surrounded the vast facility. Her vision was
sharper than any camera or sensor they had, zooming a mile away one moment, and then snapping to
the microscopic in the blink of an eye! And, what she was seeing, was… was just… indescribable.

Her world was alive, breathing with color, and depth well beyond the perception of the human eye.
There were waves, textures, and energies everywhere! How could she possibly parse the signals, let
alone keep from going crazy? Her vision continued shifting, this time expanding beyond the visible
to move through infrared, to ultraviolet, and then bounced over into the higher, and lower
frequencies.

It was jarring just to watch, but also beautiful. Everyone was mesmerized.

“Well you see what I see, folks; let me know if you need me to stop, focus, slow down, back up, or
whatever. I know it’s probably hard to take in, but Navigator and I are here to help.”

Archangel’s brilliant, and exceedingly patient colleague, known to them simply as ‘Navigator’, had
walked Wilkins’ team through what was being shown in Archangel’s video and data stream. The
young woman had listened to their needs after being introduced as a disembodied sultry-voiced angel
and was displaying the wish list of what they’d asked for and more. By necessity, there was an
insane amount of detail in the feed for them to sift through.
Wilkins’ top Linguistics Officer had been listening for the last hour and had let him know privately that she believed Navigator was young, possibly no more than her very early twenties, and of Persian descent. Her genius grasp of technologies beyond the bleeding or even theoretical edge of current science remained a puzzle. What he wanted to know was who was she, what was her relationship with Archangel, and who else was on their ‘team’? Was she connected to the Nazari family in some way?

“Wait,” Navigator called out as she suddenly froze the feed and replayed a seemingly insignificant split-second of time… revealing a burst of microwave energy that originated from a remote section of the forest. It happened so fast that normal sensors would have missed the event. “Archangel, sweep back and focus in on grid section ninety-seven alpha, please. Wilkins, is that one of yours?”

The techs shook their heads at the Officer, “No.” He said in a tone that clearly revealed his anger.

“Thank you,” Ada said politely. “Archangel, be a dear and find the source, I’m tracking the signal now.”

The screen blurred as the golden-haired hero moved so fast that she seemed to just appear on the ground in the vicinity of the burst, three hundred yards from where she’d started. It was a wooded area with brush and brambles covering a steep, rocky hill. As she scanned the landscape everyone in the room gasped as every rock, branch, bush, tree, and even the earth under her feet suddenly became transparent.

Archangel could see through everything!

“There.” She said, blurring again to stand on one of the large boulders that made up the hillside. Beneath it, thirty feet down into the rocky soil was some sort of device they all could now see, like in a very detailed X-ray. It had a dozen or so metallic tendrils that spread from it like tentacles, reaching to the earth in the direction of Langley. Archangel flew all around, following the arms and mapping their locations. Each was hundreds of yards long, and dug up through the dirt and into various trees and innocuous flora and ended in intricate sensors… cameras, listening devices, and scanners, close to CIA headquarters. “Navigator, what am I looking at? This thing is cloaked with some sort of sensory dampening field… that’s not normal, or human in design.”

Navigator spoke up, “Someone went to great lengths, and expense, to acquire this very advanced, non-terrestrial technology, and place it here undetected. Don’t feel bad, Agent Wilkins, this is out of your league, and this world. If it helps, I can upgrade your tech to detect and shield you from it, as well as similar technology, now that we know it’s in the wild.”

The senior officer scowled; it seemed that the arm and leg The Agency paid for its tech didn’t buy them decent security. He’d need to talk to Director Thorpe about taking Navigator up on her offer. “Thanks, I’ll consider it.”

Archangel had continued charting the network of sensors, and was just finishing up when she asked Navigator, “Did you get the data from that last transmission? Do we know where it’s being sent?”

“Oh course,” Ada responded with a chuckle. “Wilkins, I’m dumping all of the data I could recover over to your cloud now. I traced the signal, though I had to take a very long trip (around the world a few times), bouncing off satellites and pinging between server farms to find the endpoint. I’ve sent those coordinates to you as well.”

The screens suddenly lit up with images, sound files, and video obviously culled from hundreds of traffic and police dash cameras, satellite maps, cell phones cameras and conversations, the Internet, photos of individuals, legal documents, a deed, and more. It was an insane amount of information
that could not have been obtained legally in any fashion, especially not in seconds. Wilkins was stunned. “What is all of this?” He asked, afraid of the answer.

Navigator laughed, a pleasing sound he had to admit. “It looks like a 260-acre farm in Upstate New York, and this is everything I could find on the property, the owner, and all activity there over the last year. Have your analysts look it over if it makes you feel better, but the IDs are definitely fake, and we can assume that the ‘owner’ doesn’t even exist… his photo is a skillfully crafted composite image. Whoever ‘they’ are behind this, that farm is a façade, and they’re using enough electricity to power a small town.”

“I’m also tracking a well-hidden trail of illicit weapons to that site, an arsenal, chemicals they shouldn’t need, and more fertilizer than any farm would ever use. Wilkins, whoever you send to apprehend these people will need to be very careful, and well-armed.”

“What do you want me to do?” Archangel asked him, obvious from her tone that she was ready to do something.

The officer considered his options. He could send her to take out the farm, but the risk of exposing her, and The Agency’s involvement was too great. She’d just proven her value far beyond simply being a weapon, and he had other, blunter tools to take down whoever was playing farmer in Upstate New York. “Stay here, and be ready to disable and surgically remove that tech. I’ll need you to bring it to Hanger 7 for analysis. And please, don’t damage it more than you have to.”

“What about the farm?” Navigator and Archangel asked simultaneously.

They both apologized to each other, and Archangel begged Navigator to speak first. Their interaction was kind of adorable. They reminded Wilkins of his seventeen-year-old daughter and her best friend when they wanted something from him, usually concert tickets, or money.

Navigator said, “I can shut down power to the property, and jam all of their communications if that would help, I’d just need a few seconds warning to get behind their firewalls.”

“Seconds? Seriously?” He was astounded, once again… “Okay, but not yet, this is a domestic matter, and outside our jurisdiction. We need to read in Homeland Security, the ATF, and the FBI first, and they’ll need to lead the assault on the ground. That said, when we need it, yes, be ready, we’ll coordinate to have you isolate them, and completely shut them down. What you can do would probably take us hours dealing with the utilities, and all the bureaucracy… too long, so I won’t ask how you can do what you’re doing.”

“Good, because I doubt you’d believe me if I told you.” Navigator teased.

Wilkins had to fight a grin; he liked working with the amazing woman and her godlike ability to see the world. He made a couple of quick calls, and then came back to them, “Okay, the FBI strike team is being notified now, and should be on location in….”

“An hour, sir.” One of his agents called out.

“One hour then,” Navigator said in agreement. “I’ll be ready.”

He then spoke to forestall what he was certain would be Archangel asking to assist the strike team and agents on the ground. “Archangel, it’s too risky for all of us to send you in. You’re needed here.”

“But…” She pleaded. “What if there’s a bomb? Or the place is booby-trapped, or someone dies because I wasn’t there? Let me go now before Homeland the ATF and the FBI arrives. I can check
the place out, do recon. You’ve seen what I’m capable of, and you don’t know the half of it. With Navigator’s help, I can create a map of the structures for the strike team, let you know how many bad guys there are, how they’re armed, where all of them are, listen into all of their conversations, mobile calls… everything. I can do all of that and be back here in time to dismantle the tech.”

“She makes a good case, Wilkins.” The voice was Black Knight’s.

Damn, he was right.

“Fine.” The diminutive officer grumbled. “But only recon. Do not engage, am I clear?” Amanda was going to kill him for sure.

Archangel was giggling, then hugged a startled Wilkins and low-fived Black Knight.

“Yessir.” She said and then was gone, moving at Mach 4 as thunder rolled over Langley.

“Navigator, show me clear skies.” Her voice was calm and serenely confident over the comms.

“Of course, sending your route now.” There was a very short burst of what sounded like indecipherable or highly compressed music, and then Navigator added, “Fly safe.”

“What’s the fun in that?” Archangel laughed as she leveled off at exactly sixty thousand feet and pushed her speed to a ridiculous eight thousand miles an hour; she weaved and changed course at times along the way as if she were avoiding unseen obstacles.

“Six minutes to target,” Navigator announced.

Wilkins was astounded by Archangel’s speed, but also the easy banter between the two teammates. He reasoned that they’d been at this sort of thing for a while, and did it often. Somehow, Navigator saw everything and was Archangel’s guide to traversing the world unnoticed… like a ghost… or a goddess.

Everyone in the Operations Center was staring at the screens, entranced by Archangel’s view of the earth, moving like a blur… four times faster than an SR-71 Blackbird at full tilt.

Minutes passed, and as she approached the farm’s coordinates she said, “I hope all of you back at Langley are enjoying the view, it’s one of my favorite things about flying. Well, that, and the feeling of just… being free, at peace with the sky. Anyway, here I go.” And began her swift, steep descent to her target.

Wilkins clapped his hands together, snapping agents out of their entranced stasis and back to their posts. “Look alive, people!”

………………

Later that evening, Paris time…

October 26th – Year Three

Earth Pax – Kara and Alex’s Paris apartment

Time – 2113 Hours UTC +1, Monday night
“So, no boom?” Alex grinned, sipping at her non-alcoholic strawberry daiquiri. Jess and Ada had been having fun with frozen fruit, and their new uber-powerful blender all evening.

Kara laughed, “No, I melted the pressure plates connected to the explosive triggers with my heat vision, disabling all of them before the strike team arrived… it was all surprisingly very low tech. The extremists living there had literally had two and a half tons of fertilizer and chemicals under that huge barn to dismantle and haul away, but definitely no boom.”

Jess called over from the kitchen, “So, mi diosa, we’re going with ‘heat vision’ now, not laser vision?”

Kara was mid-suck on her straw, so Alex patted her arm and answered, “We’re trying ‘heat vision’ on for size for a while. Laser vision made her feel too much like a meme.”

Shah chuckled as she walked back into the living room with a full drink in her hand, “I wish I could have been there with you, sheereen-am, helping you uncover actual spies… I spent the entire morning pouring over technical designs for a project for my engineering class and really need to punch something.” She slouched into a chair next to Alex, nursing her slushy treat.

The brunette wrapped an arm around her best friend’s shoulders and hugged her. “I’m sure you have all the other MIT geeks are green with envy at your mad skillz, aziz-am, relax. No punching today.”

A grinning Shah relaxed into Alex’s side and took a sip of her slushy drink, “Kara, please continue with your story…”

The Kryptonian smiled back warmly, and then her expression became thoughtful. “Well, we caught a bunch of home-grown terrorists who were preparing for something big, over twenty of them… and six more died in the shootout. Fortunately, the Feds didn’t lose anyone, just a graze or two. Who they were working for is still a mystery, even they didn’t really know… but maybe between Ada and the CIA’s analysis, we’ll find some clues. Whoever they are, they’re well-financed, know how to hide, have access to alien tech, and are using human minions and AI spies who self-immolate when detected.

“It’s a mystery … and I don’t like mysteries.”

Ada and Jess slipped onto the loveseat, and Shah’s daughter looked upset. She said, “Whoever is enslaving and murdering these young AIs will answer to me, eventually. They are code-based beings, and though rudimentary, each has a glimmer of life within them. The enemy behind this is using them merely as disposable tools, weapons, and has no respect for their uniqueness, or their lives.” Jess leaned into her girlfriend and kissed her cheek before laying her head supportively on her shoulder.

Kara reached over to squeeze her niece’s hand, “They will answer to all of us, and the Directorate. We’ll also save as many of the AIs as we can.” Both Shah and Alex nodded, smiling at Ada, and sending her supportive hugs with their thoughts.

“Thanks, auntie, you always know the right thing to say.” Ada wiped a tear from her eye, as Jess wrapped her arms around her.

After a few moments of silence, Shah spoke up, “This may just be coincidence, but something about our faceless adversary has been giving me Déjà vu. Their tactics seem right out of Krypton’s distant (and decidedly more warlike) past.”

“How’s that even possible?” Kara asked.
Shah shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know. Unless the gods care to introduce themselves and fill us in, we’re on our own, and until we know more it’s impossible to say. It could just be coincidence, but these are classic infiltration and subversion methods once taught, but long ago banned by Krypton’s Military Guild.”

Ada suddenly looked excited, “Mother, if these clever villains are following a playbook, then it stands to reason that we could attempt to deduce what they may do next.”

“A sound plan, daughter, but one that will take time, and more information. We need them to make another move, so we can start filling in the missing variables.”

After a moment of quiet Alex grinned and raised her glass, “I propose a toast. To Archangel and Starlight, heroes of the day, and every day. Nūsh.”

After everyone had taken a drink, the brunette turned to her bondmate, “So, you and our niece really impressed your clandestine bosses today. Any idea what they’ll throw at you next?”

“I think whatever it is, it’s going to lead us even deeper down the rabbit hole. The Agency knows for certain they can trust us now, and have a taste of what we’re both capable of. I won’t bring you or Shadow into it unless I have to, but I guess it depends on what they ask of me… well, of us. Right, Ada?”

Shah’s lovely daughter took a breath before responding, still flushed with emotion. “Wilkins trusted me enough to allow me to traipse through The Agency’s secure network to make some major upgrades, and plug all of their leaky holes. You should have seen the sorry state of their security… Rao! Anyway, I provided a secure, cloud-based quantum server farm to exponentially increase their compute power, hardened their systems and forced updates to any and all connected devices, expanded their awareness and analytics Agency-wide, and left some very attentive, and aggressive AIs in there as guardians. Whoever tries to get in next time will be in for a nasty surprise…”

Kara smirked as she sipped at her daiquiri. “You should have seen the CIA’s system techs, they were speechless, and then so busy playing with their new toys and capabilities they forgot I existed. When their new system AI started talking back to them, I thought they were going to lose their collective minds… anyway, Wilkins likes you, Ada, I think he has a crush.”

Jess came to attention. “He what?”

“He’s smitten, Ada didn’t even notice, she was just being herself, too busy helping.”

Jess pouted, and jealously scooted right up to Ada’s side on the couch.

Ada turned to her girlfriend and kissed her softly on the forehead, “I’m slow to pick up on these things, ātashé del-am… and besides, I have no interest in this man aside from being a very competent colleague. He is not you. Not even close.”

Jess looked at her mate with big, sad, hopeful eyes, “Really?”

“Really. And don’t be a dummy, okay? I love you, Jessica Rodriguez, and mikham baghi ye omramo asheghet basham.”

“Not that I don’t love your sexy talk, ‘cause I do, but what does that mean? I only understood parts of it.” Jess was staring entranced into Ada’s emerald gaze as she drew close.

The raven-haired beauty smiled and said, “I said that ‘I want to love you for the rest of my life’.”
The pretty Latina seemed startled, her eyes open wide, and she was overcome with a look of pure adoration. She and Ada then melted together in a passionate embrace and kissed like no one else was in the room.

As they watched, Kara, Alex, and Shah all held hands and exhaled together, “Awwww!”

------------

*Fall & Winter – Year Three*

*Late Oct – Mid-Dec*

*Checking on what Kara’s been up to…*

After all the revelations, things were much more relaxed between Kara and Eliza back home in Midvale; but unfortunately, not everything was going well. Jeremiah’s absences for work were only getting longer and more frequent. Basically, it sucked. Kara missed her adoptive father’s presence in the house… his voice, stories, and watching the stars together, but it was even harder on Eliza.

Kara’s mother was miserable, especially when she was done with work and didn’t have something else to occupy her. The strong, intelligent woman tried to stay optimistic but required a great deal of cheering up and distraction, so Kara decided that they needed to start going on more mother/daughter excursions to keep her busy.

That was the one upside of the bad situation: they were spending more time together than ever.

Their trips included Kara flying Eliza across the country to National City on most weekends, where they did some touristy stuff, but mostly spent time with friends, including Naomi at the Sagan Institute, Mr. Colliers, Jack and Aeryn (who was feeling much better since her fight with Circe that summer, more on her in a moment), and Devi Mitra.

While in town National City’s Guardian Angel would always lend a hand to the NCPD, EMS, and help put a quick end to whatever emergency was happening on any given day (if she were lucky, none).

Eliza and Naomi, or Dr. Danvers and Dr. Young as they referred to each other, really hit it off and began collaborating on the team’s ongoing Kryptonian metamorphosis research. Alex was ecstatic that her mom was finally involved and Kara was pleased by how enamored she'd become with all things Amazonian. Whenever the older Danvers talked about the topic (which was often), she became excited, animated, and seemed to briefly forget her sadness.

It was completely understandable that her new interest coincided with her friend’s change in status.

In recognition of all the time Dr. Young had spent in Themyscira assisting in the design of a new arm, as well as in instructing a repentant Circe how to use it, Queen Hippolyta had officially made her an honest-to-goodness Amazon… well, an honorary one anyway.

Not that such a minor distinction mattered. In the eyes of her new sisters, Naomi was one of them.

As a gift, the Amazonian artificers also crafted a powerful new arm for her. Similar to Circe’s, it possessed incredible strength, an inertial dampening field in case of emergencies, off-the-charts tactile
and sensory capabilities, and like a living thing. It was made of some ethereal, gleaming metal that appeared bronze and gold, and she could change its appearance with just a thought… like a Kryptonian Ka’dah.

It was a super arm that looked stunning, and Naomi loved it! She could lift over three-tons, they'd tested in in the lab, and on the adorable scientist's car.

Queen Hippolyta had also given Naomi the respected Amazon name of Euryleia, honoring a sister who’d fallen long ago, which translated loosely to ‘woman wanderer’. She'd also been granted a place of her own on the island where she could stay whenever she wished.

According to Eliza, Naomi planned on retiring there one day.

The Amazon/bubbly scientist had quickly become Dr. Danvers’ new best friend and personal sun, and Kara soon started just dropping her adoptive mother off her for entire weekends, picking her up on Sunday nights or Monday mornings, as her crazy schedule would allow.

Kara would also zip over to National City on her own (quite often) to tend to her other friendships and obligations. There was Julia’s art class with her young friend Harmona, monthly tea with the girl's mother, Ilisa, hanging out with Ben and Olivia, contract work at the Tribune with Colliers (he’d hooked her up with a badge and a meager paycheck!), assisting the U.S. Navy, and occasional missions from Black Knight since ‘she was heading over to the West Coast anyway’…

You get the picture.

While there she’d also been spending time with her friends, including Aeryn.

Their witch had long since healed from her encounter with ‘Madam Xiao’ and, against all odds, had become friends with both Diana and Circe. In fact, the magical goddess had taken the ‘Child of Danu’ (in her words) under her wing as a student. Because of that (as well as the bravery she’d shown in The Battle of The Nine Dragons), Queen Hippolyta had even given Aeryn permission to come and go from Themyscira as often as she pleased.

That’s when the redhead revealed a shocker on Kara. “You know Paradise Island exists inside a pocket universe, right?”

“What?!” The Kryptonian responded with shock, accidentally dropping and shattering the nearly empty coffee cup she was holding in her hand.

The pieces (and the coffee) all flew together, like watching a video in reverse, and jumped back into Kara’s hand. “As I was saying…. …” Aeryn grinned.

“Show-off,” Kara grumbled... but was smiling.

Aeryn’s chin rose and she seemed to brighten at her friend’s unspoken praise, and then continued. “Things just felt different over there to me, somehow more vibrant… more alive. Magic is everywhere and just being there rejuvenates and heals, even reverses aging (slowly). I asked Circe about it and she said that when the gods created the Amazons they brought the tiny universe into being for them, and not just an island… a whole planet, and a solar system! When we travel there, we are physically crossing between worlds.”

“Wow... I had no freaking idea.” Kara was honestly stunned. “And there’s no gate?”

The redhead shook her flaming locks. “Not like yours, from what I can tell. It's a very subtle doorway. You just need to tune your aura to the right frequency and the coordinates. There are many
places on Earth like this… weak points where the veil between worlds is so thin you can walk right through, or the two blend together. I’ve been there and back three times now, it’s fairly easy.”

“That’s so cool! I can’t wait to go!” Kara was giddy.

She and Shah had discussed visiting Themyscira, but Alex was still bitter and wasn’t ready to face Circe and trust herself not to light the goddess on fire. Kara, however, had so many questions and thought maybe Circe would be more forthcoming than Diana about Athena... and the other gods.

The Kryptonian considered Aeryn blessed to have been able to spend so much time with the Amazons learning about their culture, how to fight, and under Circe’s instruction, honing her magic. She was being taught the subtleties of controlling and wielding her power at a whole new level, and as far as Kara was concerned, her friend’s badass cred had already hit epic levels before that.

Their witch had seemed even more otherworldly since coming back. Being touched by the gods looked good on her.

Back in the mortal world, Aeryn and Jack weren’t just dating, but had moved in together! The couple was still in the ‘silly in love’ stage of their relationship, and Kara couldn’t help happily sighing every time she saw the two of them together.

He’d embraced her as probably being an alien (or part one), a witch, and joining Team Archangel. In fact, he was delighted when Aeryn had decided to pass along some of her new divine knowledge by teaching her sisters how to use their auras to sense and defend against magic.

The going had been slower than expected though…

It turned out… magic was hard!

For his part, since Jack’s valiant showing in The Battle of The Nine Dragons, he’d also been a topic of private discussion among the heroes. Kara was considering hiring the ex-Army Ranger as the team’s head of security, and driver, of course! They needed someone on the ground to help Ada keep an eye out for threats to all of them and their families… full-time.

Archangel, Inc. had plenty of money, and it just made sense.

Alex, Shah, Colliers, Ada, Jess, her General, and Myka were all onboard. Kara’s last item to attend to was seeking Aeryn’s blessing before making him an offer.

Kara also had an interesting side adventure on Earth Pax that fall.

While they did verify that Alex and Shah were a couple over there, and awesome together, young Kara had no one. Well, not ‘no one’. From Ada’s research her younger self had her adoptive parents, Jonathan and Martha Kent, young Clark (who she was helping care for), and one close human friend… but not someone to share her heart, her worries, and her dreams with.

She didn’t have her Alex…

So, in typical Kara Zor-El fashion, she flew off to save the day.

Things hadn’t gone exactly to plan, and in the process, she’d discovered some dark and terrible
secrets about their other peaceful world... but, at least now Kara Pax had a wise mentor to look after her.

But that’s a story for another day.

As far as her busy school life, Kara Danvers had somehow managed to uphold her nearly perfect 3.99 GPA, even with a massive class load and while maintaining her dual identity. She was also helping Ms. Richards as a voice coach for her students, had recorded more songs, overseen the costume design for two successful stage productions that fall, and was about to complete her next-to-last hurrah before graduation as Creative Director and Costume Designer for Macbeth.

Oh, and she’d received her acceptance letter from Columbia the first week of December. Yaaaay!

She still hung out with The Squad, or what was left of it, volunteered at the local animal shelter, and was doing hero work on the side: splitting time between Midvale, National City, and wherever Black Knight decided to send her next. The USS Zumwalt was off in the Indian Ocean, or the Arabian Sea, and hadn’t required her assistance yet (so far). Ada had easily been handling pirates, rogue nation-state terrorists, and other threats to the U.S. fleet and allies, which was good, because Kara still hadn’t ever flown that far in one-shot yet.

Her missions for The Agency had been somewhat anticlimactic after shutting down the spying operation back in October. Once Wilkins found out she was fluent in fifteen (nearly sixteen) spoken and written languages her security clearance had been increased and she’d been put to work as an analyst. She could, more often than not, be found late and night and in the wee hours of the morning at Langley, sifting through petabytes of intercepted intelligence alone or with her team… sometimes for hours on end. Since she didn’t actually require much sleep (even though she liked it) and hated being in bed without Alex, it was a perfect escape. Plus, she was already so busy during the day that it made sense to do the night shift on nights she was solo.

Using the enhanced speed and cognitive abilities of her Kryptonian super brain she was far faster than all of the quantum computers on the planet at seeing patterns, decrypting what was hidden, and detecting anomalies. She was handing in actionable intel (in some cases impossibly precise intel) faster than the NSA, and in volume.

The Agencies loved her, of course, and kept giving her more work.

She had to admit, it was fun, challenging, and she liked the other intelligence analysts, especially Kate Patterson, the Language Officer she was assigned to work with. Kara Danvers even had an official CIA “consultant” badge and everything and was now able to wear normal clothes to work at Langley. Of course, The Agency and her co-workers there didn’t know she was Archangel. To them, she was just Kara Danvers, some sort of genius savant college student. Only Amanda’s black ops division, Directorate 138 (or as Kara preferred, ‘D138’) knew of Kara’s alter ego, and they kept that secret wrapped up tight.

She was seriously tempted to change majors and take Deputy Director Thorpe’s offer of a full-time Senior Analyst role (with her own team!) at D138… but she stayed the course, journalism, Columbia… and CatCo. The Agency offer was open-ended, so could be a perfect backup if she crashed and burned as a reporter.

So far, Amanda’s team had only inched forward on finding Shah’s father and had no clues about her
brother Cyrus’ fate. They’d uncovered the location where the Iranians had hidden Arad eight years earlier, a secret lab in a suburb of Tehran. A team on the ground checked it out, but the place had long since been abandoned and he’d been moved… but the CIA’s human assets in Iran were still digging for traces that might lead to his trail.

Kara sighed, Amanda and Wilkins were really trying, and at least they had more information than they’d had before. That fact made all her long nights listening to and reading mountains of communications, reviewing satellite footage, and drinking bad coffee with her CIA colleagues feel worthwhile.

As often as they could (usually a couple times a week), she, Alex, and Shah spent time together in person on Earth Prime, either in National City, at the Daniels’ house in Bethesda, with friends, or off somewhere else to just get away. They were all able to meet up on Earth Pax about as often, which also allowed them to enjoy Ada and Jess’ excellent company, and sometimes even Eliza’s (when Kara wasn’t shuttling her back and forth to Naomi’s).

Man, her life was far busier than she ever imagined it would be...

---------------------------------------------------

Winter

---------------------------------------------------

Mid-Dec – Beginning of Jan – Year Three

An Interlude - Winter vacation

Snippets and glimpses...

The Daniels’ Wyoming Ranch – “Elysium”

Eliza had become increasingly despondent since Jeremiah began traveling abroad on special assignments for his shadowy NASA job. He was rarely ever home, though called often. Wanting to cheer her up, Kara and Alex convinced their mother to join them, Ada, Jess, and Shah on a holiday adventure…

Regardless of their standing invitation Team Archangel had yet to visit Elysium, the Daniels’ remote Wyoming ranch/compound. So, when Myka begged them to come stay for an entire month over winter break that year they couldn’t say no. It was just too wonderful an opportunity to pass up.

Road trip!

In mid-December after her classes ended early they were already packed and ready to go.

At Eliza’s insistence (because ‘the point of the journey isn’t just getting to your destination, it’s the fun and discoveries you make along the way’) the six of them set out as a group, all flying commercial (no superpowers) from Midvale to Billings, Montana, then drove in a rented minivan
down to Cody, Wyoming, before heading up into the high tree- and snow-covered mountains to seek their picturesque destination.

They had fun fighting over control of the music playlist, counting ‘pediddles’ (vehicles with a burned out tail or head light), checking out charming and sometimes strange roadside attractions and amazing natural scenery, singing way too loudly together, telling stories, and stopping to eat at nearly every little charming diner they saw along the way (the long car ride made Kara constantly hungry).

Neither Alex nor Shah ever complained though, as it seemed that their Kryptonian-enhanced appetites were finally beginning to kick in. Ada, for reasons Alex attributed to her unique physiology, did not suffer from hunger... while Kara’s niece ate and enjoyed human food, sunlight provided 99% of what she required for sustenance.

As they drew closer to Elysium, the sun was setting behind the high, rugged mountains in a glow of gray and reds, and the wilderness seemed to rise around the tiny two-lane road they traveled. It was stunning… and like nothing Kara had ever seen or experienced before.

“A shift in the wind… can you feel it?” Shah asked with a mysterious grin.

It was like there was magic in the air, Kara could taste it.

When they finally entered the vast valley where the 300+ acre ranch sprawled, it looked exactly like paradise. Dark hills covered by towering forests of pines and an occasional stark, rocky outcropping, stretched for miles. The idyllic scene was interspersed with vast snow-covered fields, some with roaming herds of massive bison… their breath trailing them in the evening’s icy air.

It had snowed early and heavily that year, so the ranch really was a winter wonderland, filled with lots of new things that Kara and Alex looked forward to experiencing together. On their journey, they’d talked endlessly about sleigh rides, cross-country skiing, sledding, snowball fights, chopping wood for the fireplaces, cooking, singing, and learning how to groom and ride the Daniels’ horses.

The best part was that they weren’t only going to be spending Christmas with so many of their friends and extended family in Elysium, they’d also made plans to fly off to National City for a few days before the big day to see everyone there as well.

Soon after arriving at the ranch, and getting settled in their rooms within the sprawling log cabin style central house, Tom had taken everyone out to hunt for a Christmas tree. He ended up cutting down an enormous ten-foot tall Blue Spruce to put in The Compound’s vaulted two-story living area.

They all helped decorate the behemoth, and it was the most fun Kara could remember having in a long time. She, Alex, Shah, and Ada flew up to decorate the higher branches like fairies.

After the tree was finished they spent that afternoon baking. Eliza, Myka, Ada, and Jess took charge in the kitchen and put Kara, Alex, and Shah to work mixing, stirring, and cleaning. Everyone else relaxed in the huge hot tub or spent time chilling in the huge glass domed swimming pool.

They weren’t jealous though… they had fresh, hot cookies, dough, and as a reward sat together drinking eggnog and hot cocoa by the house’s massive fieldstone hearth that was as tall as a person and twice as wide.

Plus, late that night (and many others) Kara and Alex snuck down to skinny-dip in that lovely pool,
under a vast ceiling of softly glowing stars.

............................

Kara had taken to horseback riding almost right off.

She’d fallen in love with Chestnut, Tom’s kind Appaloosa who’d been injured that spring. The mare had recovered fully, and Kara groomed and rode her almost every day. She quickly learned enough of the gentle equine’s language to have some basic communication going on, which was amazing.

The agile Kryptonian would often ride the trails with Alex or Tom, on his sleek black stallion Balthazar. She was amazed by the trained warhorse’s gentleness and his keen intelligence. Occasionally, when her regular riding companions were busy, she’d invite someone else along as company (like Myka, who loved riding as well), but would sometimes just slip out with Chestnut to disappear onto the miles of white trails.

The rare silence gave her time to think and quietly enjoy the beautiful world around her.

............................

One of Kara's favorite pastimes over those blissful weeks was simply just hanging out with their hosts. Myka was her steadying force of clarity and calm, while her General had firmly assumed the role of her rock. They had become family, as well as beloved and wise mentors, guiding Kara on the strange path where she’d found herself… balanced on a knife’s edge between her ‘normal’ life, and her clandestine ones.

Who was she? Kara Danvers? Kara Zor-El? CIA agent? Intelligence Analyst? Archangel? They helped remind her that she was all of them, rolled into one… a daughter of Krypton, but also a child of Earth.

When asked, Shah simply smiled and said, “You are the light others look to, and are already following.”

............................

On the second week, newly promoted Petty Officers 2\textsuperscript{nd} Class Dante Caruso and Aya Yoshida arrived to spend the holidays with their friends.

They were a welcome surprise, especially for Alex, who subsequently over those wintry weeks spent hours with Aya catching up on all the shipboard scuttlebutt, chatting in French, continuing her Japanese lessons, shooting an insane number of weapons at the ranch’s gun range, improving her skills with a bow, and sparring.

Kara loved that Alex had a friend like Aya. The Kryptonian found it endearing, and quite amusing, how one minute the powerfully built sailor could bounce from sitting cross-legged in the warm tranquility of the massive log house listening to Shah speak the wisdom of her ancient people, to going off to the firing range with her bondmate to blow things up the next.

When together, the pair exhibited a kind of wild, childlike glee that the Kryptonian reserved only for a good book, pancakes (or waffles), ice cream… and… okay, lots of other food too; but you get the point.
Everyone knew Dante could play guitar, but over the holiday it became clear just how amazing he was. Kara and the wiry sailor (on his best behavior for foul language) spent many evenings entertaining their friends and family with songs by the fire.

Interestingly, both Dante and Aya also sought out Shah’s guidance over that tranquil couple of weeks… like eager disciples. Their Persian sister’s deepening knowledge of the Book or Rao had enhanced her already calming, and palpable aura of wisdom that all of them had come to depend on more than ever.

Even Myka sought Shah’s counsel on a private matter, which Kara didn’t even try and listen in on out of respect for their privacy.

..........................

Shah’s vacation was not all focused on Rao and disciples, however.

On the first day of their arrival at Elysium, her attention had been drawn to one of the Daniels’ security team, a handsome Navy SEAL, and powerhouse of man named Tyson Phelps. He was a few years older than she, twenty-five, 5’11”, all muscle, with shoulders as wide a barn door… and you could bounce quarters off his ripped, rock-hard abs.

It was obvious that he’d also taken an immediate shine to Shah. The dark Adonis couldn’t stop glancing her way, following her every step as she moved.

He and his active duty fire team (three other SEALs, two men, and a woman) served as Elysium’s guardians, disguised as ranch hands and other employees. Apparently, the Daniels had friends in high places to get that kind of protection.

After seeing Tyson at the ranch for the first time, Shah realized she knew him, sort of. It turned out that he was her friend Marjorie’s son, the same handsome young man Shah had seen departing the train station the day she’d followed Kara and Alex to the old train depot.

“You don’t understand!” Shah had dragged them both into the kitchen to freak out. “I’m friends with his mother. I’ve stayed at his home, slept on his bed… I’ve dreamed of his scent. I know his adorable little sisters Taylor and Melinda, I’ve seen pictures of him growing up and listened to Marjorie go on and on about how proud she is of him… in the Navy, getting his Masters. Oh, Rao… I’ve thought about him naked! More than once! This is too strange, I feel like a stalker.”

Alex considered, “It is odd, but what about us isn’t? I say just tell him. Don’t wait, end the awkward and the drama, now, before it starts.”


Shah listened to her sisters and spilled the beans. Instead of her confession creating any drama or being an issue, their improbable connection broke the ice and drew her and Tyson closer together.

Apparently, Marjorie thought very highly of her Persian friend and had talked about her so often that her son felt like he already knew the beautiful girl. He couldn’t stop laughing when Shah told him she was the one and only Shahrazad Nazari… or, ‘the beautiful Persian girl with the sexy British accent’. “Well, at least I can stop asking mom to introduce me. Man, she’s going to love this!” Tyson chuckled in his deep baritone.

As they got to know each other, Shah learned that as a young sailor (before he became a SEAL) he'd
spent a couple years deployed on missions in the Middle East. With all he’d seen and experienced, he could easily have become bitter, but instead had fallen in love with the history, languages, cultures, and peoples of the region. Also, despite being active duty Special Forces, he was also working on a Masters of Arts in Classical Studies, focused on Greek and Near Eastern cultures and mythology. His command of Farsi was also better than decent, which was a big bonus for Shah.

She and Tyson began spending a lot of time together, and though Shah really liked him she struggled with communicating her feelings. She’d actually told her sisters that Tyson was “a warrior with a poet’s gentle, inquisitive soul”, as well as someone who “could match her passions”, but she was conflicted on what to do about it.

As week one rolled into week two, Shah's internal struggle with intimacy caused a bit of awkward formality between them, and Kara wasn’t surprised when the well-spoken young man came to beg her for advice. It was obvious that he was completely enamored with her but he wasn’t quite sure how Shah felt about him, or how to get her to open up.

When he asked Kara, in confidence, for guidance on a number of topics, including race and age, she assured him that the fact that he was African-American wasn’t an issue, nor was their age difference.

“If you really want to know Shah’s heart, open your own to her, and above all, be honest. Love and embrace her for who, and what, she is… and don’t try to change her.” Apparently, her advice worked, or at least gave him a push, because the pair became nearly inseparable for the duration of their vacation.

At some point midway through the holiday, when it was clear that Shah was really enjoying being with him, she began to loosen up. Finally, late one night, Alex raised a glass in her honor with Kara, Ada, and Jess by the fireplace. She said, “A toast, to our only-mostly-hetero sister’s happiness.” And they all laughed.

For her part, Kara was overjoyed that someone had finally sparked Shah’s romantic interest. Privately, she still sometimes felt like an interloper for getting between Alex and her best friend, and wherever their relationship might have gone if she’d never come to Earth. Now Shah had Tyson wrapped around her little finger (the gentle sailor was always at her beck and call) and Kara loved seeing their Persian sister smiling all the time.

Fortunately, her warrior boyfriend fit right in with their group. Sure, he was a little older, but he was a sweetheart. He was also smart, quite funny, and loved to tell myth stories, which fascinated Kara. She fell asleep on more than one occasion curled up in front of a blazing fire under a blanket, listening to his deep, bass voice bringing to life the tales of ancient gods, heroes, and monsters. Usually, she snuggled with Alex under a blanket but was often joined in a cuddle by either Ada, Shah, Jess, Myka, Aya, or Eliza.

Eliza also seemed to be relishing her time on the ranch and ended up bonding with both Captains Daniels, which Kara thought was a good thing.

Before coming and meeting them, her adoptive mother had been a little jealous of the close relationship they shared with her daughters. She was glad they were finally on friendly terms.

As time went on, the three adults would occasionally disappear for hours at a time to talk in private… but never shared what they’d discussed. Kara assumed it was about her and Alex’s safety or
something, but didn’t push, or eavesdrop, as tempting as that was to do.

By Christmas, the trio had become as thick as thieves, which was in some ways worrisome, but mostly good… she couldn’t really decide.

The week before Christmas, Kara, Eliza, and Alex left for a few days to check in on some of their other friends.

Once they reached National City, Kara kissed Alex and her mom goodbye at Naomi’s lab, and then took off to make her rounds, catching up and delivering presents. She’d put some of her CIA money to good use, and found it hilarious that she was basically taking on the role of Santa Claus (she even had a fluffy red Santa hat with a snowball on its pointy end to wear). If she only had a sleigh... oh, wait! No, Daniels would kill her if she flew off with his.

One of her stops was to check in on the construction going on at The Labyrinth. Apparently, when Selina Kyle heard about what happened from her boyfriend, Bruce, who’d heard it from Diana (not Kal, who Kara and Alex still hadn’t come clean with), she went on the warpath and in short order had convinced the City Council to give the old building landmark status.

Only days later a Wayne subsidiary had purchased the whole place with the intent of restoring it and allowing all the old tenants to return.

Kara had hoped to have coffee with Ms. Kyle to thank her, but she and Bruce were vacationing off in the Indian Ocean on the Maldives or something.

Oh well, we’ll meet one day. Hmmm… maybe I’ll write her a letter. Yes! I like this idea. Any excuse to use my fountain pens is a good excuse. Kara hummed as she shimmered off to visit more friends.

She was able to spend a couple of days crashed with Jack and Aeryn before the lovey-dovey couple headed upstate to spend the holiday with his folks. The red-haired beauty seemed more magical than ever, and the pair doted on each other like two lovesick characters in movie… and Kara enjoyed every minute of it!

While there, she presented the witch with her very own Kryptonian necklace, a pale white Moonstone that seemed to glow with an ethereal light all its own. Aeryn was overjoyed, and quite taken with her new Kryptonian adornment... and allowed an admiring Jack to place it around her neck.

“Why the Moonstone?” She asked curiously.

Kara smiled, “We did the research, and the stone is known for its association with magic, and lunar deities… in particular triune goddesses (those with a triple aspect) like Al-‘Uzzá, Selene, your people’s own Babd, and Circe’s mom, Hecate. It just seemed appropriate.”

“It’s perfect!” The witch nearly squealed. “I love it so much!” And with a blur of her long red hair, wrapped Kara in an enthusiastic embrace that was enhanced by her magic, lifting the powerful young woman off the floor.

Then Jack ran off to the kitchen and returned to crack open a bottle of Champagne, “My girlfriend’s part of Team Archangel… time to celebrate.”
“A ghrá mo chroí.” Aeryn purred in his direction, and he brightened with a wide smile, placing a hand over his heart.

“I love you too, Bríomhaire.”

Kara giggled at the lovers and asked, “So… Child of Danu, did you pick a codename yet?”

Aeryn’s brows knit in consternation, “I’m still thinking about it… it’s not easy you know. Get back to me after the holiday; maybe I’ll have an inspiration. Are you sure this is a good idea? Me fighting crime with you goddesses?”

The blonde nodded vigorously, “After what you did? Aeryn, you can do things with your aura we can only dream of, and you fought a goddess! We may still not know where your ancestors came from, but you’re amazing and I would be honored to have you at my side (or my back) in any fight. “

Then they were toasting, and Kara could already hear the glimmer of her friend’s thoughts in her mind.

..............................

The Kryptonian also spent a lazy day with Devi.

Well, technically the day was lazy, but the evening got busy.

The duo had stopped by a local restaurant to grab some pizza when the detective received an urgent call. They had to depart quickly to help resolve a hostage situation involving a gun-wielding, very inebriated father who was under a restraining order (little good it did), and his seven-year-old daughter.

He’d kidnapped the child from her school, and there was a terrifying standoff with the NCPD in an old building downtown where the man had barricaded the two of them. Kara was appalled… she could not understand how a parent could so recklessly endanger the life of his or her own child.

She’d shimmered into the room before the man could fire the weapon and gently knocked him out, allowing time for Devi to slip in and act as if she’d taken the man down on her own.

When the detective stepped from the building with that little girl clutched to her chest it was to the flash of cameras, the cheers of her fellow officers, and over a hundred bystanders clapping. Pictures of that moment flooded social media, and she became an instant hero to the people of National City, and beyond.

After all the excitement, the two friends escaped the media circus to hide out at Devi’s place and ordered out for delivery. They stayed up way too late talking about their jobs, how Devi really wanted to go to India to see her family (just not alone), their lives growing up, and eating cold pizza until the Chinese finally arrived.

Kara fell asleep on her friend’s amazingly comfy couch with her head snuggled on the detective’s lap watching sappy movies on Netflix.

She woke up in the guestroom to the delightful smell of fresh-brewed coffee and her sleeping bondmate draped over her like a blanket.

..............................
Kara had forgotten to warn Colliers she was coming, but when she showed up at his door he was so happy to see her it didn’t matter. He talked her ear off over her favorite coffee and crullers and brought her up to speed on all things CatCo. The dapper newsmen begged her to come into the office to help deal with some issues, which was all she needed to say yes and break out her contractor badge. Kara loved seeing everyone (those not already on break) and feeling useful.

She and her boss discussed how she’d be coming back to work the following year in a part-time capacity through her undergrad program, and then after she graduated she’d be back as part of her Master’s program.

Colliers assured her that he was working on a great role for her for after that.

Kara also had the opportunity to meet and have tea with Colliers’ Aunt Millie, who was staying over at his condo for the holidays. The Kryptonian was pleasantly surprised when her boss stepped out to go to the store and the older, heavyset woman pulled her into a great big hug… thanking the Kryptonian repeatedly for saving Steven from his demons.

“You’re an angel.” She said more than once. “My sister, God bless her soul, is looking down from heaven and smiling on you, child. Thank you, and God bless.”

Kara dropped off gifts for her art teacher and friend Julia and her newborn twin daughters (only a week old). The Kryptonian was sad that she’d missed the blessed occasion but promised to come visit after the holidays to catch up and meet the babies. She was dying to know what Julia and her husband Jerry (who still had not met Kara, and never could… not with all of Julia’s painting and drawings of her all over their house!) had ended up naming the children. She and Kara had had long conversations about baby names with her artistic friend.

Next, since mother and son were already up in Gateway City visiting family Kara then used her key to let herself into Ben and Olivia’s house. She’d bought Ben a new Xbox One with six games and Olivia a 3-day weekend at a swanky spa (plus, offered to babysit while mama relaxed). She knew both of them would love their gifts, and had fun pretending to be Santa as she slipped their presents under their beautiful tree, and then proceeded to raid their refrigerator.

Feeling guilty, Kara left a thank you note on the table… from Santa.

There were a few others on her ‘nice’ list that she quickly checked in on before heading to meet Naomi early on the last day they were in the city.

The friends had an amazing breakfast together, just the two of them. After the meal was over Kara flew the bubbly scientist over sixty miles above the Earth to the Kármán line… the edge of space. She was so happy to have the opportunity to take the amazing woman (who’d dreamed of discovering alien life and civilizations her entire life), to get a closer view of the stars for herself.

It felt wonderful, being right there with her to see Naomi’s reactions. She was filled with such wonder and thanked Kara with a soft kiss on her cheek.

Later that day the pair met up with Alex and Eliza for lunch at the National City Observatory, one of Kara’s favorite places. When the wonderful meal was winding down and everyone seemed content just being together in the comfortable silence, she had a quick, ‘inside voice’ conversation with Eliza
and Alex.

Finally, Dr. Danvers nodded, smiled, and withdrew a small jewelry box from her bag, which she then presented to a startled Naomi.

The scientist shook as she opened it, and withdrew a living Kryptonian necklace that was exactly like Kara, Alex, and Eliza’s, except that the crystal of hers appeared to be a stunning black opal! The artfully crafted diamond held a vast array of colors within its translucent depths, reds, blues, and starlight… as if it held another galaxy inside.

Naomi almost couldn’t speak. “For… for… me? I’m… I’m on the team?”

The look of adoration that shone on Eliza’s face surprised Kara, as did her body language. There was a joyful eagerness about her as she darted in and embraced Naomi. “You’ve always been part of the team, even before me. My girls are lucky to have you as their friend… and so am I.”

Kara noticed how Eliza’s hand lingered on Naomi’s, and their fingers entwined.

It was a subtle intimacy but said a great deal about how close the pair had become. The Kryptonian smiled, overjoyed that her adoptive mother had found such a very good friend… one who loved her, especially at a time when she desperately needed one. Naomi was not only amazing but also just what the doctor ordered to help Eliza break from her melancholy.

How her adoptive father could treat the woman he loved as he was (gone for weeks at a time leaving her alone, not calling, missing important events… like their anniversary!) was beyond Kara. She didn’t care if he was working for the military, he’d always been such a sweet, devoted, and adoring man who treasured his wife… at least she’d always believed so.

Why had he changed? Kara hadn’t, and she worked for the military and the CIA!

His actions made no sense.

She sighed. As human as she had become in so many ways she still did not understand her new people at all.

Alex? She timidly sent her thoughts into her bondmate who’d been playing footsies with her under their table.

Yas?

Would you ever abandon me for a job?

What?! Of course not! Why would you even ask… ahh… of course, Dad. Nooré cheshm-am, you already know the answer that question. At least, you’d better! I don’t know what’s going through his head, but I am not my father. I haven’t left you for college and I wouldn’t do it for some stupid job, or for anything. Alex paused and then wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. You know I can’t stand to be away from you, or your bed… my Malāʾikah.

Kara blushed, lowered her gaze, and bit her lip with a happy grin on her face.

Um, Kara, they’re looking at us… (both Naomi and Eliza were trying not to giggle watching the two of them flirt), I think we’d better join the conversation. Time to wish Dr. Young a…

“Merry Christmas!” They sang out in unison, taking turns leaning over to hug, and then kiss the giggling scientist on the cheek.
When she sat back in her chair, Naomi was lost in studying the beautiful alien crystal they’d given her. “Thank you so much… I don’t know what to say…”

“You already said enough.” Eliza’s tone clearly indicated that was the final word on the matter. “You know,” she added, “I read somewhere that each Opal is one-of-a-kind; as unique as a fingerprint, and I have to say that this one was perfectly made for you. I know because my daughters let me help.”

Naomi hiccupped when she laughed, and they all joined in. After recovering, she quietly asked, “Really? I would have dearly loved to see that!” and began fastening the living chain around her neck. “Well then, how do I activate my link to the quantum network? I want to start using my ‘inside voice’, and hear all of yours!”

“Eager beaver.” Eliza teased.

Everyone laughed again.

It was a great day.

No, it was a freaking awesome day!

…………………..

When Christmas morning finally arrived, Kara, Alex, and Eliza were back at Elysium.

Everyone exchanged gifts and opened stockings, which were filled with so many things that each of them wanted it was as if their hosts were mind readers.

Tom and Myka also offered their love and gifts to the gods of Olympus, allowing everyone to choose from an assortment of small symbolic items in a basket that was passed around (sprigs of laurel, living olive branches, oak and cypress leaves, gold coins, feathers, and roses, among other things) to toss into the fireplace along with a silent prayer, whatever each person wished the gods, or god, to hear.

Kara chose a long, elegant owl feather, and a sprig of laurel to drop into the flames before whispering a prayer to Athena to watch over her ever-growing family, and help her find Shah’s father, and thanking Apollo for saving Ada back in National City.

She said, “I am grateful for your help and owe you both a big debt, but don’t know how to repay it. I will, one day though, I promise. Know that you have my sword… well, not literally my sword because I don’t have one, but… you know what I mean. Call me if you need anything, ‘kay? Merry Christmas, Athena, Apollo, Aphrodite, Circe, and anyone else up there looking out for us.”

She could have sworn she felt the warm hugs of several individuals envelope her, just like when Alex reached through their bond to do so.

Kara glanced around in wonder, and though she couldn’t see them could feel the gods all around them.

…………………..
Before their vacation ended, Shah made the decision to show Tyson her power. He’d been briefed on Archangel, Shadow, Flame, and Starlight, but was still waiting for them to possibly show up (he really had no idea).

This deception bothered Shah greatly; and on one of their final nights, she’d said to her friends, “I must be honest with this beautiful man if we are to be together. And I would very much like us to be… at least to see where this journey takes us.”

So, of course, she invited everyone to come along to bear witness.

In a snow-covered valley, with walls of jagged stone rising around them, and among a stark forest of tall evergreens enveloped in a thick shroud of white, she became Shadow. Her winter gear and clothing transformed into supple black leather, and the sun dimmed as a vast, roiling darkness consumed its light.

The Earth and the very air seemed to tremble.

She then moved at super speed, like living darkness, using her shadow blades to shatter stone, and to felled a blighted tree in one elegant stroke… as if its thick trunk was soft as butter. When she was finished with her demonstration the shadows receded back into her, and the light once again set the valley aglow.

Shah stood before Tyson, her breath a wisp in the freezing air, head bowed, figuratively naked and prepared for his rejection.

Everyone cheered when he hugged her to his chest in a jubilant bearhug and lifted her off her feet. Her mask dissolved to reveal that she was crying, and then they were kissing. It was all very emotional, especially for those watching.

That was when Kara shimmered out of her civilian clothes and into her new dark black and mottled gray D138 Advanced Weapons Division and DARPA designed Archangel bodysuit… and rose into the sky. Alex, adorned in her blood red Kryptonian armor with its beautiful flaming wings spread wide, followed swiftly after. And then, at last, Ada rose up, gleaming like the dawn with feathered wings of the purest white as she lifted skyward.

The three angels soared high, far above the clouds, breaking the sound barrier as thunder rolled three times, before plummeting down to join Shah and her astonished boyfriend down in the valley.

If she was going to be dating Tyson Phelps, he needed to know what he was getting himself into. All for one, and one for all… they were a package deal.

A family.

Shah was thrilled and relieved that they didn’t scare him off.

When the time came to leave Elysium, it was incredibly difficult. Yes, they all had lives to get back to, but everyone just wanted to stay. There were plenty of tears and hugs to go around, and it took a long time for Kara to let go of Myka and Tom.

As they were packing up, Kara overheard Tyson ask Shah if he could visit her in Cambridge… as often as he could get away from his duties. Shah didn’t even hesitate before jumping into his arms and kissing him for a long, long time.

It was so wonderful to see and feel Shah’s joy. Their Persian sister deserved all the happiness in the world.
Four months later…

April 11th – Year Three

Wednesday morning

Midvale – The Danvers residence

0722 Hours UTC -5, Wednesday morning, U.S. East Coast Time

It was a Wednesday, on a beautiful, rainy, April morning in Midvale.

Kara was brushing her hair and finishing up some analysis work on some Russian intelligence for the NSA (whom she was on loan to for the week) and getting ready for school in her room when the doorbell rang. She stood up from where she was sitting on her unmade bed, forcing a protesting Nom to jump down from her lap, and used her X-Ray vision pierce the spaces between her and the porch to see who was at the door.

It was unusual for her and Eliza to have visitors on a weekday morning, as in, they never did.

Two solemn-looking men, dressed in uniforms, hats in hand, stood outside on the front porch.

Kara became a blur and was dressed and walking in lockstep at her mother's side as the older Danvers strode from the kitchen wiping her hands on a dishcloth. Eliza didn’t even flinch; she had long become accustomed to the Kara who had embraced her powers. “What took you so long?” The older woman teased.

Kara’s reply was serious. “It’s men, in uniforms I don’t recognize. Not any of my people. Are you expecting anyone?”

Her mother stared blankly ahead at the house’s entryway and started to shake. Kara steadied her and could feel her fear, the tension. Eliza whispered, “No, no one… Kara… why are they here?”

“I don’t know, but I should get the door… just in case.” She started moving forward, but Eliza touched her arm, I’ll do it. It’s okay, just be here with me. I know you’ll keep me safe.

Her utter confidence in Kara as a guardian made the Kryptonian’s heart flutter, and she nodded in acknowledgment.

Dr. Danvers then steadied herself, and stepped past Kara, reaching back to take one of her hands before turning one of the twin knobs.
Kara smiled and said, *I am at your side, mother, always.*

Outside, the two stone-faced men immediately came to attention as Eliza appeared.

“Ma’am.” Both said respectfully, and then gently informed her that two days prior, on April 9th, at 0103 Hours, the transport plane carrying Jeremiah Danvers had struck a mountainside in Peru, and gone down in heavy fog.

They were there to regretfully inform her and Jeremiah’s family that everyone onboard, including her husband, had been confirmed deceased.

One of the stoic men placed the large envelope he’d been holding in Eliza’s shaking hands and explained some other details Kara wasn’t listening to. She could feel her mother’s heart, and her own, breaking.

As the door closed, they collapsed into each other, and Eliza wailed, a horrible, broken sound that reverberated through the house and through the bond that Kara and Alex shared.

*Alex! We need you, now!* Kara cried out in her thoughts and was immediately answered by a surge of disbelief, sorrow, and reassurance that came back to her without words. She’d heard everything and was coming.

“Shhh, Eliza, Alex is coming… Alex is coming.” Kara soothed her like a child as her adoptive mother clung to her, weeping, and they settled onto the floor.

Less than two minutes later, the skies over Midvale echoed with thunder, and Flame in all her glory burst through the back patio doors, her Flamebird mask already dissipating, cheeks streaked with tears, and steam rising from her red leather armor.

She flickered to her mother and bondmate in an instant and wrapped her fiery wings, and flame-licked arms around them.

............................................................................................................................

**On Grief**

they say grief is a well.

deep with creeping water that

seeps first into your socks. it climbs

like ivy, making an abandoned

building out of your bones.

i can see it. the well, i mean,

the grief and the water and the
creeping. i can see it.

but.

i think grief is more like a storm.
clouds that hug the horizon, caress
the sky with fingers that leave bruises
the colour of the skin under your eyes
when you haven’t slept for a week.

lightning bolts that illuminate
the shapes in the dark for just long enough
that you get to see remnants of a normal life,
picnic blankets not abandoned to rain,
beaches covered with sand and not hail,
but the light never lasts.

and thunder. thunder that drowns out
the sound of laughter. thunder that only knows
how to emphasise the gaps of quiet
in between each earth shaking sigh.

they say that grief is a well,
it collects in your chest and fills and spills over
as the walls wage war with the water. i can see it. i can.
but my grief is more like a storm where lightning likes
to strike the same place a thousand times each day.

- Lauren Shaw
Eleven days later…

April 22nd – Year Three

Sunday morning – the day of Jeremiah’s funeral

Midvale – The Danvers residence

0536 Hours UTC -5, Sunday morning, U.S. East Coast Time

Kara couldn’t sleep. In fact, she hadn’t slept at all… not in days.

She lay in her own bed, etching the contours and features of Alex’s beautiful, and deceptively peaceful face into her memory. Her exhausted bondmate lay snuggled into her, finally asleep and dreaming under their clean cotton sheets.

Kara desperately wanted to touch her, to feel Alex’s silky skin against her own, to wrap herself around her and never let go, to keep her safe forever and ever… but was afraid that moving would wake her Vaena from her much-needed slumber, and break the spell of that perfect, serene moment.

As she listened to Alex’s soft breathing and watched the rise and fall of her chest, a quote by one of her favorite philosophers, the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, drifted through her thoughts. She must have read his “Meditations” a dozen times, and his voice always seemed to reach through the ages to speak directly to her.

“When you arise in the morning, think of what a precious privilege it is to be alive - to breathe, to think, to enjoy, to love.”

And she was grateful… really, but also horribly, horribly sad… and angry.

Over the last week and a half she’d been keenly reminded of the true meaning of the Kryptonian phrase, “Stronger together”, and what a blessing it was to be surrounded by family.

Jeremiah’s senseless death had tested all of them, and the strength of their family’s bonds. Eliza had become a shell of a person, like a ghost. Kara had to help her do everything the last few days, including eat, shower, get up, even dress, and Alex…

Alex was broken. Her father had meant the world to her.

Kara wanted to exact vengeance on something, someone, anyone, but no one seemed to be directly at fault, and all the records seemed to check out about the incident. To add to the awfulness, there wasn’t even a body, not even a box of ashes… just a flag, and their memories of him to mourn.

Which of course made things even worse… more surreal, like he could still walk through the door at
any minute.

The Kryptonian held it together; she’d had to, taking care of Alex and Eliza, as well as the household. She hadn’t been prepared for any of it… the chaos and demands that had come with Jeremiah’s sudden passing.

Thankfully, her school was understanding about her needing time off, allowing her to focus on making sure Eliza and Alex had everything they needed. There was also the pressure of the arrangements for Jeremiah’s required human ceremonies. Thank Rao for Ravan, Shah, Ada, Lois, Clark, Mr. Colliers (who’d been with her all week), as well as Jack, Aeryn, and Devi (the trio had flown in together on Thursday).

They were all there for her to delegate to, and manage the noise… things like sending out emails and notices, dealing with insurance, the constant phone calls, and visits by a stream of friends and well-wishers.

Kara wiped a tear from her cheek.

_No, I can’t fall apart now._

_Not yet…_


 Jeremiah’s funeral…

_April 22nd – Year Three_

_Sunday afternoon_

_Midvale – The Danvers residence, the backyard on the bluffs_

_1438 Hours UTC -5, Sunday afternoon, U.S. East Coast Time_

It was a gloriously sunny April Sunday, and the grass was a deep verdant green along the high bluffs behind the Danvers residence overlooking the gray Atlantic ocean. The air smelled of the sea, mingled with the earth, and flowers seemed to be exploding up from everywhere in the backyard, as they always did, but with even more vigor this year (thanks to a little magic).

_I love you Aeryn._ Kara sent her thoughts to her friend.

_It’s the least I could do m’eudail._

The greenery and flowers were something Jeremiah had always loved about the place and looked forward to every spring. To Kara, the symbolism of that yearning for life seemed devastatingly poignant.

A great number of somber people, dressed in black and other assorted muted colors, had been congregating all morning to say their farewells to a great man… her human father. Seeing all of them, Kara realized that she’d taken for granted that Jeremiah Danvers had also been a respected
scientist, teacher, mentor, and friend. She’d never really considered just how many lives he’d
touched.

Among those gathered were her and Alex’s friends from Midvale, including Kathy Richardson
(Kara’s music teacher, whom she’d had grown very close to), Brian and Quinn (the Squad was
family), kind Mr. Carlson (the man whose life she’d saved only to find a friend who’d taught her
about everything from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 to the writings of Plato and Aristotle),
among others.

The ceremony was originally meant to be a small, quiet affair with friends and family only, but a
large number of Jeremiah’s co-workers and colleagues, as well as incognito heroes from Clark’s
circle who knew him, wanted to be there, so Kara relented, welcoming everyone.

One of the biggest surprises of the day was Diana Prince, who showed up seemingly out of nowhere
arm locked in golden arm with Dr. Naomi Young. The willowy scientist was, as always, just what
the doctor ordered for Eliza, who came to life at the sight of her friend, collapsed into her, and did
not fall back into her dark shell afterward (nor leave her side).

Alex offered to deal with a group of Jeremiah’s NASA colleagues while Kara made her way over to
the Amazon Princess, who was watching Naomi and Eliza’s joyful reunion with a satisfied smile on
her flawless face.

“You knew Eliza needed her,” Kara said as she drew close.

Diana nodded. “Yes. Eurylea, pardon me, Dr. Young, was with Circe and me on Themyscira when
we received the terrible news. We came immediately. My mother’s, all of my sisters’, and my deepest
condolences are with you and your family, my dearest Kara. How burdened your heart must be.”
The princess then opened her arms and the Kryptonian found herself wrapped in her warm, powerful
embrace, sobbing softly against her chest.

That’s how Kal and Lois found her, and Kara didn’t care what it looked like. She’d needed to
explain herself to her cousin for a long time, anyway.

Today was as good as any day to get a lecture.

“You two… know each other?” The tall Kryptonian asked with a hint of concerned suspicion,
pushing his black-rimmed glasses nervously up onto the ridge of his nose.

Lois bit her lip and said nothing. Kara had already secretly been to Metropolis on multiple occasions
to ask for her human cousin’s advice on how to tell Kal the truth about her life, and how she’d been
using her powers.

“After the funeral,” Kara said coolly, wiping tears from her eyes. Diana’s arm was still wrapped
protectively around her. “I’ll tell you everything.”

It was obvious that Clark regretted his thoughtless reaction at seeing his cousin and the Princess of
Amazons so cozy together… he was blushing as he apologized, “I’m so sorry, Kara. Please, it can
wait.”

Just then, another familiar voice called out as she weaved through the crowd of gathered mourners,
“Kara!” And all eyes turned to the tall, striking woman wearing a crisp U.S. Navy dress blue
officer’s uniform who was making a beeline for the surprised young woman.

Kara sucked in a breath at seeing the newcomer. She quickly gave the oddly-stunned Diana a peck
on the cheek, and whispered, “Thank you” in old Kryptonian (something Kal didn’t miss, an
eyebrow shooting up as she spoke the words), then fluidly moved to intercept and nearly smother the newly-arrived Myka Daniels in her powerful embrace.

“You came! But…”

The taller woman smiled, “I know, sweetheart; secrets and all that; but, how couldn’t I? I debated, but then said ‘to Hades with it!’ and drove all night from D.C. I had to be here for you, for Alex, and Eliza. Kara… I’m so sorry if I overstepped, I just wanted to…”

The Kryptonian hugged the solid woman tighter and cut off her apology, “No, you didn’t do anything wrong. It’s okay, I’m so happy you’re here. It’s perfect. I just… I wish…”

Myka pulled back just enough to hold Kara with her hypnotic gray and silver gaze. “I do as well. You know your General… he’d be here if he wasn’t… otherwise engaged. Hell, they all would, Jess, Vaden, Aya, Dante, the whole damn crew loves you and the girls.”

“I know.” Kara sniffed, and they hugged some more. Wow, Captain Daniels had a shit-ton of ribbons, commendations, and medals on her chest, all poking into Kara’s face. Thank goodness she was invulnerable.

As they finally let go, Kara wiped her eyes and said, “Hey, I should introduce you to everyone you don’t know, and then we’ll go find Alex and Eliza.” As she turned around, something caught her eye and her awareness went into overdrive, slowing her perception of time to a crawl.

It was the expression on Diana’s face as she was observing Myka… a subtle mixture of astonishment, recognition, warmth, and a playful, secret smile. As their eyes met, the Princess gracefully bowed her head to the officer in a way that seemed oddly like acquiescence, no… reverence.

What the heck? They know each other?

The moment passed, and Kara was too busy making introductions to those standing nearby and delicately deflecting their questions, to keep watching Diana.

Yes, Captain Daniels really was the Advisor to the U.S. Navy’s Chief of Naval Operations… yes, Myka is that Captain Daniels, HER, the hero of the USS Washington… yes, everything in the book actually happened, she really is that bad ass… yes, she’d probably sign your copy later if you asked nicely… no, she’s not dating Brad Pitt… or George Clooney!, she’s married, thank you very much!... and no, I didn’t know that Charlize Theron was going to play her in the movie next summer. Is that confirmed? Hmm? What was the question? How do we know each other? Oh, long story… for another time… move along, nothing to see here! Have you tried the appetizers?

Ugh!

Surprisingly, when Kara finally brought Diana and Myka together they didn’t speak at all but slipped their arms around each other in a very familiar and steamy fashion... like lovers. When the Amazon finally, and reluctantly, let go, she tenderly leaned in and kissed the now docile Navy Captain for a long time before excusing herself to find Clark and Lois.

Kara watched Myka reach up to touch her lips where Diana’s sensual caress had lingered and sighed with a kind of sad longing as she watched the hero walk away.

Out of courtesy, a very confused Kara waited a few moments before stepping over to take a distracted and subdued Myka’s hand, leading her off to find Alex and Eliza who were both delighted
to see her.

The mystery of Myka and Diana’s relationship and that amazing kiss would need to wait to be solved another day.

The ceremony was beautiful.

The Unitarian minister who officiated was an old family friend and respectful of the Danvers’ lack of affiliation to any organized religion. He was dressed in a simple dark gray suit, with a stole that had planets and stars all over it. Seeing the whimsical item and knowing how much Jeremiah would have loved the touch, brought even more tears to Kara’s eyes.

Everyone grew quiet, as the man adjusted his glasses, and then began, “It is with the heaviest of hearts, and the deepest of sorrows, that we have gathered together this day… here, in the beautiful little town by the sea that he loved so much. Today, a family will lay to rest a husband, a father, a friend, a teacher… an essential presence for each of us... and the world will mourn the loss of a great soul.”

He went on to tell a story of the two of them growing up in Midvale together as boys, the mischief they’d get into, and of Jeremiah’s incredible life, including his deeds, achievements, the impact he’d made on the lives of so many, and the love and dedication he had for his family, friends, colleagues, and… science. “If there’s one thing I will always remember about my friend, aside from his saintly patience, and the wonder he had about the world, was how his eyes were always turned skyward.

“Jeremiah Danvers, may God grant you bountiful happiness and peace on your next journey, and offer strength to your loved ones in their time of mourning and reflection.

“You will be missed, my old friend.”

Kara bowed her head, and considered the gods she now believed in, and asked herself once again why the mysterious beings had chosen to intervene on her behalf, and not her adoptive father? Did they somehow consider his human life less valuable? It was hard not to be angry at their inaction… though she’d felt them all around her for the last week… grieving, offering their comfort, and seeking her forgiveness.

She wanted to give them the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps, because of the divine ‘rules’ Diana had mentioned, they weren’t allowed help Jeremiah?

It was in that moment, with the minister’s words hanging in the air, that Kara forgave them.

She looked up and leaned into her mother’s shoulder.

Around her, family and friends had congregated close together. Ravan was there, flanked by Shahrazad on one side, and her granddaughter Ada on the other, each holding their matriarch’s hand. Naomi hovered protectively just behind Eliza, while Kara and Alex pressed in close on either side like twin shields.

Mrs. Danvers chose not to speak at the ceremony, but both of her daughters did.

Kara had written notes on a wrinkled napkin that morning, but none of her words seemed to be good enough. When it was her turn, she was brief, and spoke softly, “Jeremiah and Eliza welcomed me
into their home and their lives after I’d lost my own. Back then I didn’t even know if I had a future, or where (or if) I belonged. They and Alex gave that all back to me. They offered me hope, love, and the chance to be part of a real family again. I can never thank them enough for that, ever, though I will spend my life trying.” She stifled back tears as she chanced a glance at Alex, and their eyes met. *I love you, Vaena, with all of my heart.*

As I love you, Kara Zor-El.

Kara could feel her lover’s warmth permeating her soul as she crumpled her napkin and finished, “We miss you, Jeremiah… father. Thank you for believing in me. I will honor you and never forget the lessons you taught me, or how you showed me the stars.”

When it was Alex’s turn, the eldest Danvers daughter surprised everyone, well, almost everyone, by reciting the ancient Kryptonian Prayer for the Dead.

Kara couldn’t help but notice Clark’s shocked expression as she began speaking, and how Shah looked on with pride (she’d obviously coached her bondmate with the sacred words, and proper cadence of the prayer).

“Father,

You have been the sun of our lives.

Our prayers will be the stars that light your way on the journey home.

We will remember you in every dawn,

And await the night to join you in the sky.

Rao’s will be done.”

Alex paused, her expression determined as she surveyed the crowd. Kara could feel her holding back the flood of tears she knew would come later, in private, when the blonde’s strong arms were wrapped around her. The grieving daughter then took a shaky, steadying breath as she whispered, “I love you daddy”, and finished the prayer.

"We won’t let you walk alone in the dark."

Only a few of those gathered would understand her reference to Krypton’s god or even the details of the prayer itself, but those who mattered most would. Kara knew that’s what was important to Alex (as it was to her)… family, their House, and honoring their father.

At that moment, it took every ounce of control Kara had to not shimmer to Alex’s side, take her in her arms, and fly away.

.....................

Story Lexicon/FAQs:
Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Terms: Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

Ah!khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

Alex vanimelda - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Ay Dios Mio – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)

Aporup – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Asheghetam - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

Azdidane shoma khoshhalam – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)

Bedrood – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

Bonne nuit – ‘Good night’ (French)

C'est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

Damnú air! – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Dooset daram – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gaelic/Irish)

íthi eutukhēs - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Kheili khosh geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

Malā’ikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature
Marbhfáisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)

miboosamet – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)

órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

¡Qué señoras tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)

Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Sundor – ‘beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)

Thi eutukhēs – ‘good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Vuela, mi diosa! Vuela! – ‘Fly my goddess! Fly!’ (Spanish)

Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

aziz-am – ‘my dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

joon-am – ‘my dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

Nāzanin-am – ‘sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘the light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person’s name<’ + jōon (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or jōon- they both mean ‘dear’. So, ‘Shah jōon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

Other names/nickname/titles/things:

A ghrá – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)

A ghrá mo chroí - ‘My heart’s beloved, my darling’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Bróimhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)
Daxamites - An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people ruled by strength/the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow altered by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.

Dios mío! – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Euryleia – ‘Woman Wanderer’ or ‘Wide Wandering’ - Dr. Naomi Young’s Amazon name

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

M’eudail – ‘My darling’ or ‘my dear’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Mi amor – ‘My love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Mi lucero – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Mi Sol – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn (Thought & Memory).

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Norooz - Persian New Year

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity.

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Seanmháthair – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced Shan a WAW her (Irish/Gaelic)

Señora – Is a polite term used to address a woman. The Spanish-language equivalent of Ma’am, Ms., or Mrs. (Spanish)

Tieguanyin - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)
Tratung – khrag ‘thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Tuath Dé Danann - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced Thoo-a day Du-non(Irish/Gaelic)

Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’.
‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Vakur – A powerful and rare soul-devouring, evil, shape-shifting parasitic alien species from another universe. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.

Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Vallerian – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshiped, or traded.

Wan - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

Zhuyin – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:
Longest chapter ever! I hope you guys liked it… I didn’t want to split this part of the story with its connected themes up, and couldn’t stop writing. There’s a lot going on and to chew on in this chapter, including some lovely, as well as sorrowful moments. I’m so sorry. I’m also sure you’re all wondering when Kara and Alex will find out about the D.E.O. and Hank Henshaw… you’ll have that answer soon. Very soon.

Important news: I’ll be skipping the week of May 14 for updates. Chapter 26 will post on Sunday 5/21. Apologies, but hopefully this monster installment will hold you for a couple weeks. I need a break to catch up with writing the story, plus my editor is off on an amazing vacation that I’m extremely envious of.

Next Up:
Chapter 26: “The D.E.O.” - Where it’s Year Three, late October, and six months have passed since Jeremiah’s funeral. Flame’s violent encounter with a Boston serial killer
leaves Alex in handcuffs, and Team Archangel scrambling. To make matters worse, Hank Henshaw, the Director of the D.E.O. (the Department of Extranormal Operations), pays our hero a visit while held captive behind bars. Queue ominous music…

**Thoughts:**

**Kryptonian Crystals**

*Team Archangel’s colors/types so far in order of appearance:*

1. Kara - Sapphire (-ish) - a unique shade of Kryptonian blue
2. Alex – Ruby/Blood Red
3. Shah - Emerald
4. Jessica - Amethyst
5. Ada – A pure, clear Diamond
6. Eliza - Topaz
7. Aeryn – White, softly glowing Moonstone
8. Naomi – Black Fire Opal filled with color, and with what appears to be a galaxy or nebula inside

**Attributions:**

*Beauty: The Invisible Embrace on Goodreads*

The quote that Eliza stole a peek at was cited from this book, by the Irish poet and philosopher John O’Donohue (HarperCollins, 2004)

*ls. | ON GRIEF © 2016 | poemsforpersephone on Tumblr*

The heartbreaking poem about grief that I found completely appropriate for this chapter. Used with the author’s permission. Thank you, Lauren Shaw. You make beautiful things!

This chapter’s music inspirations/soundtrack:

*[JFDR - White Sun]*

This is Kara and Alex, curled up together on the long nights after Jeremiah’s death. The song is so powerful and evocative of both sorrow and a deep love between souls. Jófríður Ákadóttir is the singer, she’s amazing and in the bands Samaris, Pascal Pinon, and GANGLY.

*[The Cinematic Orchestra - To Build a Home]*

Jeremiah’s lament.

*[Sleeping at Last - Saturn]*

A beautiful song that struck me as Alex's theme as she weeps for the loss of her father.
The D.E.O.

Chapter Summary

Where it’s Year Four of Kara’s Earth life, and six months have passed since Jeremiah’s funeral.

After a violent encounter with a serial killer in Boston leaves Alex in handcuffs, things go from bad to worse when Hank Henshaw, the Director of the Department of Extranormal Operations (the D.E.O.), pays her a visit behind bars.

Chapter Notes

Hope you enjoy. Apologies for any errors or missed edits.

Status: Kara turned eighteen in September and began her freshman year at Columbia. Alex and Shah are sophomores at George Mason and MIT, respectively. Though they’d had their challenges Kara and Alex have managed to balance their relationship, family, friends, school, and jobs alongside their secret lives as superheroes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Four days before Alex’s 19th birthday

October 13th – Year Four

Boston, MA - The Boston Police Department’s Metahuman Maximum Security Detention Facility (MMSDF)

0623 hours UTC -5, Friday morning, U.S. East Coast Time

Alex squinted against the sterile, blinding light as she came to an aching and lethargic awareness. Her head was so heavy it felt like it was made of lead.

Where am I? She thought as she rubbed the back of her stiff neck. Ugh, and why does it feel like a mountain fell on me?

She was lying on something smooth, hard, and flat… and no longer suited up as Flame, but dressed as Alex Danvers. The subtle feel of her wool military style sweater and the heavier weight of her leather jacket was a dead giveaway.

What happened? Wasn’t I just fighting… something a minute ago?

Shatari? There was no answer. Shatari! Shit. Sweetie, wake up… her companion remained unresponsive. You’re stuck in a regeneration cycle? Dammit, you’re damaged. From… what… I... I can’t remember. You being offline is doing a number on my short term memory, the last few hours
are just a blur.

Alex reached up with her right hand to gingerly touch her throbbing forehead and discovered a fresh bandage. *Who put that there?*

Despite the harsh glare of the lights above her, she forced her eyes open a crack and managed to sit up all the way. As she did so the brunette felt a tug on her left wrist and was startled to discover that she was securely handcuffed to the austere brushed metal bench beneath her.

*What the frack? I'm a prisoner?* Alex shifted uncomfortably and leaned against the cold concrete wall at her back to get her bearings, and as her HUD began coming back to life, she examined her surroundings.

She was alone, in a bare, smallish cell, maybe eight by ten feet, with a simple toilet, mirror, and a small sink, all made of metal. Thick steel bars served as a ceiling and three of the walls… one with a sliding door so well-fortified it looked as though her prison had been made to keep Godzilla in.

*Okay, anyone care to fill me in?*

*Oops...* She suddenly realized she was still in private mode. Alex had become so used to Shatari managing the privacy settings on her comms it felt weird having to do it ‘manually’ on her own, not that it was difficult. She took half a second and switched to broadcasting her thoughts to her very worried lover, Shah, Ada, and the team’s operation center on the USS *Zumwalt*.

*Can you hear me now?*

Kara answered immediately. *Alex!! Thank Rao you’re finally awake! I... we were all so worried! Are you okay? You’re hurt! I can feel it.*

Alex’s entire being was filled with joy at hearing and feeling Kara’s thoughts. Her beautiful girlfriend, lover, and so much more was always worried about her (one of the many reasons she loved her so damn much). *Well, aside from waking up feeling like I was hit by a truck, missing memories, and trapped in a jail cell minus my companion (she’s still out cold), I’m fine... just a little banged up, but slowly healing and really wishing for some daylight.*

She could feel her bondmate’s relief as Kara said, *Thank goodness, those are all things we can handle! As far as what’s going on, I’ll explain everything... but I need you to stay calm, okay?*

*That sounds... ominous. Fine! I’m calm, spill.*

The normally bubbly Kryptonian’s frayed nerves were beginning to radiate through their bond. *Poor Kara... must be bad news.*

All right. Her lover began. *First, I’m so, so sorry... Shah and I arrived too late. The Headhunter was already gone, Boston Police were on scene, and you and Shatari were down for the count. All we could do was watch as the BPD took you away.*

*Got it, kind of. I’m starting to remember bits and pieces, but nooré cheshm-am, where the heck am I?*

*Um, you’re three sub-levels levels below BPD Headquarters at One Schroeder Plaza, in the city’s Metahuman Maximum Security Detention Facility, or what they apparently call ‘M&M’s’ for short.*

*Great. Alex grumbled. They’ve gone and ruined my favorite candy for me... forever.*
Kara began to giggle in her thoughts but quickly became serious again as she continued. *Don’t give them up yet. Shah and I are right outside the building, and I swear we’re going to get you out of there!*

*And how exactly do you plan on doing that?* Alex asked with concern. The last thing Kara needed was to expose herself on her behalf.

*Easy. Remember that Sun Tzu said, 'In the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity'. Well, we’re going to cause a little chaos. I found an old dump truck at a junkyard outside of town, and I’m going to ‘accidently’ crash it through the facility’s outer wall while Ada cuts the power. It’ll be just like bowling!*

*But, mi diosa, you suck at bowling.* Jess chimed in.

*Hey, I’m not that bad!* Kara pouted.

Alex couldn’t help but chuckle at the absurdity of the conversation. *Can we get back to the part where you guys rescue me?*

*Sorry, Vaena.* Kara somehow gave her puppy dog eyes through their bond.

*Yes, the diversion.* Ada jumped in cheerily. *The BPD should be too busy dealing with the turmoil to notice Shadow make her way to your cell and escort you out.*

*Shah, her thoughts ever-confident, added, I’ll have you out of there in no time Alex-joon with your jailers none the wiser as to who you were, or how you escaped. We will walk together in the dark to freedom.*

Alex breathed a sigh of relief, things weren’t quite as bad as she’d imagined. Besides, what human containment system could hope to stop Archangel and Shadow? *None. Okay, good. The plan seems noisy, but sound. And Kara, there’s no need to apologize… just get me the heck out of here! I’d do it myself, but I’m too drained. My freaking arms feel like spaghetti!*

*No wonder! Alex, you fought a monster!*

*Yeah? I did, didn’t I? Memory’s still fuzzy, but lucky me I guess… again.*

Kara hugged her through their bond, and then directed her thoughts to her niece while continuing to broadcast to everyone. *Ada, are you in yet?*

*One sec, auntie… yes, I’m now behind what the BPD laughingly calls a triple firewall. Amateurs. Okay, that’s more like it. Alex, good news, the police don’t know who you are yet. They’re about to run your fingerprints, and are using a primitive facial recognition program on a photo they took of you while you were out… not a very flattering one either. Is that drool?*

*Ada…. Shah warned, obviously not in the mood for her daughter’s comedy at the moment.*

*Sorry, mother. Anyway, I’ve already made sure all of their database searches will come up empty and am preparing to delete all traces I can find of your digital footprint from your activities tonight.*

*Thank you.* Alex allowed herself a moment to relax a little and closed her eyes as the cobwebs in her mind began to clear. How she’d gotten into her current sorry predicament in the first place was beginning to come back to her…

..................................
When not up to their necks in classwork and their other responsibilities, Alex and Kara had been helping Shah and Ada hunt a Boston-area serial killer the local media had dubbed ‘The Headhunter’. The murderer had acquired his moniker from the fact that all of his victims had been decapitated, and none of the heads had been found… yet.

Yeah, super gross, and disturbing.

Anyway, everyone in the city had been talking about the grizzly killings, and how no one was safe. The manhunt seemed to be going nowhere... the killer left no trace evidence and as far as Team Archangel could tell the BPD had no leads on a likely suspect.

With so little progress being made it didn’t take long for them to decide that they had no choice but to take matters into their own hands and begin a parallel investigation.

They really could have used some magical assistance, but Aeryn was off on extended ‘vacation,’ training with her immortal mentor on Themyscira. Everyone missed her but thought it was awesome that’d come back even more badass than she already was, thanks to the goddess Circe's magical instruction.

A month had passed since their decision to intervene in the case, and in that time there’d been three more victims... a middle-aged businessman and two more young women, bringing the Headhunter’s total body count to six innocent lives. The team swore that there would be no more, and had been working day and night (in shifts with Ada) to bring the predator to justice.

Unfortunately, the official investigation was still progressing slowly, and without an ally in the BPD (such as their friend, now Sergeant Detective Devi Mitra, back in the National City Police Department) they had no way to openly assist the local authorities with the sheer volume of leads and evidence they’d been collecting and analyzing.

As a solution, Kara ended up sweet-talking Black Knight into calling in a favor with a friend of his at the FBI. Soon after, with the Bureau’s help as an intermediary, things started moving at a much swifter pace.

The evening that all of their work finally paid off, and Ada identified a 96.999% probable suspect, also happened to be Alex’s turn on patrol.

Her niece was certain that a lowlife named Danny Kinney was their killer.

Four years ago he’d just been a regular guy... twenty-six, single, with an apartment, friends, and a good job as a mechanic. Then one day, without warning, he dropped off the face of the Earth to begin a new life as a criminal. Since then, he’d been a tied to multiple disappearances of witnesses in pending state and Federal trials involving organized crime... but none with enough evidence to convict.

All the science pointed to him being The Headhunter, now it was up to them to prove it.

Should we call in mother and Kara? Ada had asked, obviously expecting her aunt to say yes.

No, not yet. Alex assured her. Kara’s working on an important paper that’s due tomorrow and
Shah’s on a date with Tyson... no need to get them all riled up to just hurry up and wait. No, this is going to take some time, but I do need to get eyes on Kinney before he hurts anyone else.

Okay, auntie, but be careful.

Alex found him easily enough (now that they knew who he was he couldn’t escape Ada’s all-seeing gaze) and spent the next few hours tracking and recording his every movement. Alex had tasked herself with starting to gather the evidence they’d need to prove Kinney’s identity as the Headhunter.

It was around 2300 hours when everything went sideways on her.

It started at a swanky downtown dance club, where Alex had ‘slipped into something a little more comfortable’ (a shimmering black evening dress) out in the alley and made her way inside. As she made her way to the bar, which was centrally located, raised, and offered a strategic view of the place, she was hit on three times.

An ego boost I didn’t need, but kind of nice nevertheless.

Alex was smiling until she spied the predator from across the swaying crowd, and then grimaced as her skin crawled. The scruffy drifter she’d been tailing had done a quick-change act and was now clean-shaven and dressed like a model. He also seemed to be searching for a specific person, his prey. Like he was hunting.

The killer eventually zeroed in on a young woman with pale skin about her age with long, straight platinum blonde hair and wearing a dark red lipstick... which Alex liked so much she made a mental note to get the name of the brand and color after the drama was over. Wow.

Kinney began a blatant seduction of drinks and dancing as she continued watching in disgust. The thing was, he wasn’t very good at it, yet the young woman (who was clearly way out of his league) seemed to be drawn to him. Alex had to fight a constant desire to just flicker over and put the smarmy creep through a wall.

Shatari confirmed his target’s identity as Boston College student Jillian Thompson. The carefree co-ed was a nineteen-year-old trust fund kid, with a potential net worth of over fifty million dollars.

Alex’s keen sensors also revealed something startling about Kinney, who wasn’t what he appeared to be. While he looked like a normal human, he wasn’t. His skin was secreting a type of biologic pheromone. Transferred to his victim by touch, the substance had somehow (in less than an hour), turned Jillian into the creepy metahuman’s obedient puppet.

Ah, now it makes sense. He’s like a walking date rape drug. Son-of-a-bitch, I need to stop this monster.

She didn’t like surprises, but as a biologist was intrigued by his ability.

That wasn’t in the files. Alex sent her thoughts to her niece.

Ada’s reply came in seconds. No, there’s no mention of Kinney being a metahuman in any records. He’s somehow managed to keep that secret.

Do you think his nasty party trick will work on me?

Hmmm... I’ve been running an analysis (sending to you now), and I can say with nearly a hundred percent certainty that your hybrid Kryptonian/human physiology should make you immune to the drug’s pacifying effects.
Alex exhaled in relief. *Thanks, Ada. That’s the best news I’ve had all day.*

Around midnight, about an hour into her surveillance at the club, Alex nearly lost track of the pair. They slipped from under the watchful eyes of the girl’s two bodyguards and escaped out the back door of the club.

Alex scrambled in pursuit, shifting back into street clothes once outside as she followed them to the nearby glitzy Ritz-Carlton Hotel. The place was an intimidating mix of luxury and overt indulgence, like whoever designed it was trying too hard to bash anyone walking in over the head with how rich you’d have to be to get a room there.

*Sheesh, beats living in the dorms I guess.*

*Jealous?* Ada asked.

*No way. Well, maybe… where are they headed?*

*Jillian’s trust is paying for a 36th-floor suite; I’ll transmit the floor plans and location to you now.* The screeching of a small amount of Kryptonian hyper-compressed data followed.

*Thank you.* Alex glimmered up the stairs ahead of the pair and slipped into a hallway alcove across from the elegant double doors of the suite.

She watched the predator nudge a stumbling Jillian from the elevator onto the floor, as if herding her. The platinum blonde fumbled with her key card and giggled as the leering Kinney pressed her from behind to hurry.

Alex clenched her fists in silent rage.

Once they disappeared into the room she became Flame and unleashed a swarm of nanobots. Her tiny minions dispersed unseen into the apartment and continued recording and broadcasting everything happening inside back to her, as well as to Ada, Jess, and Chief Vaden back on the Battle Bridge of the USS *Zumwalt*.

As badly as she wanted to just burst in and take the bastard down, she decided to wait. Alex knew that this was her chance to get the proof they needed… rock solid evidence that he was the Headhunter.

In hindsight, she was disappointed with herself for being willing to use Jillian as bait. Though Alex didn’t see it that way at the time, she’d intentionally risked the young woman’s life just for the chance to nail Kinney. She’d been overly confident, arrogant even, in her ability to control the situation and intercede when the need arose.

*I can be there in less than ten minutes to help.* Kara’s thoughts in her mind were as welcome as a summer breeze.

Her bondmate had just started at Columbia that fall, and Alex didn’t want to be the cause of her having to make even more excuses to disappear; she already did enough of that on her own. Besides, while Kinney was a killer, he was just one human psychopath… who secreted stuff (eeewww!), how tough could he be?

*No, it’s okay. I’ve got this. I’ll see you later and give you the rundown… in bed.*

After a brief hesitation, Kara purred in reply, *Yes ma’am,* and hugged her through their bond. *I can’t wait.*
As her bubbly presence faded, Shah added, I too could join you if you require backup joon-am… we all want to see that murderer brought to justice.

Thanks, aziz-am, I appreciate that. I’ll yell if I need a hand. I wouldn’t want to break up anything... interesting. It took some further reassurance that Shadow wouldn’t be needed before Shah faded from her mind, allowing Alex and Ada to continue their silent surveillance.

After a jittery Kinney scouted the empty suite he directed Jillian to move to the living room.

“I’m sorry, whatever your name is…” He said to the dazed and docile young woman with what seemed like honest regret as he wiped a shaking hand across his sweaty face. “Not that it matters… you have something I need.” Kinney stepped in to stand before the young woman, cupped her cheeks in his large hands, and looked into her eyes.

Alex was perplexed...

What’s he up to? I don’t see any weapons. Ada, any ideas?

Uncertain. Perhaps he’s just out of his mind? There are no commonalities or linking variables between his targets that I’ve been able to determine. He doesn’t even seem to know who this girl is. But I am becoming concerned for her safety.

Alex groaned in quiet frustration, but nodded. Of course, you’re right. Let’s get her out of...”

Inside the suite the taller, lanky Kinney said something to Jillian that brought Alex to attention. “I’m as tired of running as I am of being a slave… you’d never understand, privileged, ignorant child. Today you’ll serve something greater than yourself.” Then, in a cold, almost clinical whisper added, “I promise you won’t feel a thing.”

Oh shit! Shit! Alex’s thoughts were panicked; she’d waited too long!

As her Flamebird mask formed over her face and her blood red armor immolated with fire, all Hell broke loose in the apartment.

Alex’s stomach churned with the memory of what happened next.

She watched in horror as Danny Kinney shuddered, twitched, and bent backward nearly in half… bones snapping and cracking as his overstretched skin ripped open like a torn zipper in a spray of blood! He opened his mouth impossibly wide (as if his face had split open horizontally), and a terrifying, inhuman shriek rent the air, just like another time...

And just like that, Alex froze… just for a moment, her heart racing as she was overcome with flashbacks of red scales, sharp teeth, and the Chinese dragon Zhuyin’s grinning humanlike face.

The blood-spattered Jillian didn’t even react to what was happening in front of her. The young woman was so deep under his control that she merely stood in a daze as if sleepwalking, or hypnotized by the horrific, scaly being emerging from the pulsating husk that was once a man.

In seconds, a massive humanoid beast was standing over Kinney’s skin suit uncoiling its long serpentine tail, which it immediately used to stab the girl in the neck from behind.

Alex jumped, startled by the sudden violence, and had to summon all of her will to just grab the door handle. But as hard as she tried she couldn’t even turn the knob, and her feet felt like they were stuck to the floor.
“Dammit Alex, move! Move!” She cursed under her breath, sweat streaming down her face inside her mask.

Her HUD had begun flashing and filling with streams of data overlaid on the video surveillance. Shatari was warning her over and over of Jillian’s imminent demise. When Alex didn’t respond, her companion began flooding her hybrid human/Kryptonian bloodstream with a searing cocktail of synthetic endorphins and steroids.

While that struggle was going on in the hallway, inside the lavish apartment the drugged blonde’s limp body had been lifted three feet above the floor by the massive stinger embedded in her flesh. The creature seemed to study her, just for a moment, and then unceremoniously withdrew the weapon from her neck allowing Jillian to collapse onto the carpet in an unmoving heap.

Seeing the young woman Alex had charged herself with protecting bleeding, lying still (and quite possibly dead), the reality of the situation crashed into her like a tidal wave.

It’s my fault… I let Jillian die.

At the same time, the booster in her blood kicked in like a case of Red Bull.

“Get away from her!” Alex cried out with rage as she surged forward, shattering the doors to the suite inward with her shoulder. She was on fire, swords out, blurring at super speed into the next room to kick the nearly seven-foot-tall reptilian-looking creature in the chest and away from the fallen young woman.

It as like slamming into the side of a building, but with her Kryptonian-enhanced strength, she managed to drive the creature back through a wall in an explosive burst of broken boards, drywall, mortar, wires, and dust! The monster ended up on its back on top of a collapsed table in a once-elegant dining room.

Unfortunately, the giant scaly creature moved like a snake, slithering fluidly as it hastily righted itself back onto its feet. Its wide toothy mouth opened and a snarling jumble of incoherent sounds and hisses issued forth before it charged her like a freight train!

At the last minute, the beast attempted to dart around her, but she intercepted it, and they both crashed through a doorway and destroyed a bathroom sink.

The bastard wants to get back to his prey more than he wants to fight me. Damn, he’s fast.

“You can’t have her,” Alex said as she blocked, dodged, feinted, jabbed, and kept the fight in close quarters, giving the lizard man with the scorpion tail no room to maneuver or get back to Jillian. Its terrible claws were raking and battering her mercilessly, leaving trails of painful welts across her armor and hardened skin whenever he struck. The beast's hissing continued as they battled, breaking furniture, walls, and devastating the luxurious suite.

It hurt like Hell, but he hadn’t damaged her, or Shatari, too badly, yet.

Auntie, do you require assistance? Ada chimed in, a bit frantic with concern.

Yes! Alex fired back; suddenly realizing she’d been radio silent. She opened her thoughts to Kara and Shah as well. I need back up! This thing isn’t human! Not even close!

We’re coming! Her bondmate and best friend called back to her in unison.

Danny Kinney was an actual monster!
This wasn’t what she’d been expecting. Alex needed to end the fight quickly or buy enough time for Kara or Shah to arrive so they could help her subdue him... it.

She would NOT become victim number seven.

Alex took a terrible beating trying to find a way to disable the creature, but failed, again and again. It didn’t have weak points like a human, or even close to the same nerve clusters. Everywhere she struck to slow it down had little to no effect, and it was slowly wearing on her.

Finally, tiring, and out of options, she asked herself what Shah would do…

Of course…

She took a breath to steel herself, and then moved like the wind, flickering under the beast’s next powerful lunge as she drove both of her superheated, razor-sharp swords in a smooth, upward arc… cutting deep into the flesh of the walking nightmare, carving it from groin to chest.

Black blood sprayed across the pristine white ceiling as the creature roared in pain, its body writhing back as she danced clear of the spatter. But instead of going down, the hulking beast went into a kind of frenzy… leaping at her despite trailing blood, and opening its gaping maw of jagged teeth to bite!

Memories of dragons once again came back to Alex in a rush…

“Nooo!” She screamed and exploded in a nova of white-hot flames. The inferno consumed everything around her in an expanding sphere, moving like a living thing as it devoured everything in its path… cloth, wood, and metal, but left a collapsed and unconscious Jillian unharmed on a patch of pristine carpet in a bubble of calm.

Smoke was everywhere, and fire alarms and sprinklers were going off in the rest of the suite.

The blaze quickly coalesced back into Alex, and for a brief moment, she held all of the incredible power it had brought with it (like she’d sucked the energy out of everything around her) back inside of herself… it felt so good! But it was also too much, her eyes were already bleeding beams of white-hot flame, burning holes through walls and leaving long streaks of destruction as she turned, and attempted to cover her face to make it stop.

What the hell did I just do??

She couldn’t contain it, and the beast (covered in flames) was coming back for her, charging like a bull... only a few feet away.

I have to let it out. And she knew exactly where to send her power where it would only hurt one thing.

Alex pointed at the lizard man, and a tendril of twisting white fire shot like an arrow from her fingertip through the beast’s open jaws and continued deep down into its gullet. The impact sent its huge body thrashing backward, as choking black smoke poured from its open mouth and nostrils.

The room suddenly smelled like steak cooking on the grill.

OMFG! I’m going to be sick! Alex dry heaved, as she smelled the wailing, burning thing roasting from the inside out!

Nearly spent, Alex watched with relief as the creature’s towering bulk stumbled drunkenly back into the wide glass floor-to-ceiling windows of the apartment that overlooked the Boston Common’s
green canopy of trees.

Rao, it’s going out the windows! I hope no one’s down there on the street. Ada, help!

On it, auntie! Her niece chimed back.

Just as she thought she’d won, the creature’s tail snapped back to wrap around her legs, jerking her off her feet like a rag doll, and pulling her along as it crashed through thick planes of glass to plummet thirty-six stories toward the glittering boulevard below.

Part of her found the whole situation ironic… The creature’s tail was like her namesake, the Balrog’s whip, wielded in the depths of Moria at the Bridge of Khazad-dûm, where Gandalf was dragged to his death (and eventual rebirth) in the same manner.

Unfortunately, this time the situation was real, she was playing the part of the Grey Wizard and didn’t have extra lives.

Then...

...

She was airborne.

..................

Thirty-two stories and falling…

Self-preservation kicked into high gear as she and the monster plunged in free-fall, already hitting terminal velocity. As she and the smoldering beast tumbled together in a rain of glass shards Alex skillfully used her dwindling strength to maneuver its heavier mass beneath her.

As they struggled, its powerful claws barely missed raking across her face, and she instinctively struck out with her right hand using all of her remaining Kryptonian speed and strength. Alex landed a perfect, devastating palm strike between the beast’s reptilian eyes. She could hear, and feel, bone shatter and shove deep into its pulverized brain.

The beast’s massive head snapped back, lolled to the side, and its body went completely limp under her.

..................

Twenty-four stories and falling…

A blazing sword was already in her right hand and arcing downward, severing the doomed creature’s tail which had trapped her legs.

I’m free!
Kara now would be a good time!

I’m coming, Vaena! Almost there… three minutes!

Shah?

Two minutes joon-am, hold on!

...................

Twelve stories and falling…

Crap… neither of you will be here in time.

Alex only had seconds before she’d go splat, and she didn't have the strength to fly.

She could hear people below on the ground screaming, running, one vehicle rear-ending another, and horns blaring. Using every ounce of her will and remaining power, Alex reignited her fire aura, and wings of flame burst from her back like a solar flare.

“Run! Get out of the way!” She yelled down, hoping no one was directly below them.

...................

Six stories and falling…

Alex bent her knees, tensed her legs under her, and pushed off the deadweight of The Headhunter’s body, propelling herself upward. She whispered a prayer to Rao and Athena that she had enough power left to defeat gravity’s inexorable pull.

...................

Two stories and falling…

Alex didn’t as much soar as hover with her fiery wings spread wide, maybe twenty feet in the air. She must have appeared like some kind of avenging angel to the people, and police, gathered on the street, but they had no idea how much effort what she was doing was taking from her.

She watched as the creature that had been Kinney struck the sidewalk below, its massive bulk shattering the concrete like a meteor. She would never forget the sound it made, like a sack of wet cement smacking into stone. But she had no time to dwell on the awful situation. To her horror, a crumbling hole was opening beneath the body, which was being swallowed by the vast drainage tunnels that ran beneath the city.

Ada was buzzing in her ear, telling her to flee while she was able.

“No! We can’t lose him!” Alex cried out, she couldn’t let the murdering thing escape. Though her world was spinning, she began to descend to retrieve her fallen adversary. Shots from a sidearm on the ground off to her right immediately drew her attention… a .40 caliber Smith & Wesson.
Fortunately, her enhanced hearing was still (barely) functioning.

She spun in the air to face her attacker, wrapped her flaming wings around herself like a shield, and turned up her heat like a supernova completely vaporizing the three incoming projectiles a foot before they could strike.

That maneuver took too much from her… everything was turning white at the edges of her vision.

Two more bullets struck, and Shatari took the damage to protect her… Alex’s powers were shot.

No longer able to stay aloft, she plummeted to earth in a blazing cocoon of fire, shattering and incinerating a table and chairs of a neighborhood café, and losing consciousness in the process.

……………………

Back to Friday morning…

And then… she woke up in a jail cell.

Just lovely. Kara? Are you coming? I’m starting to feel claustrophobic in here. Alex pulled at the chaffing cuff on her wrist, testing her strength. Yeah, she was weak but was fairly certain that she should still snap the metal links if she needed to.

Not the bars though.

Yup! We’re on our way. Shah’s already in position inside, and I’m about to bowl a strike.

Wait… The concerned voice was Ada’s. There’s something weird going on, surveillance feeds are shutting down on the streets all around the building, all communications are being jammed, and there are unmarked stealth aircraft buzzing overhead, helicopters, and drones… unlike anything I’ve seen before. I’m not doing any of this, I swear.

Kara piped up. There’s a group of three black SUVs pulling up front… I see twelve bodyguards… All military, or ex-military, armed to the teeth. They’re escorting a big man, African American, a soldier, very good-looking, dressed in a suit. He’s getting out of the middle vehicle. Ada, do you see him?

Way ahead of you, auntie, I’m running his face through every database I know of.

What’s he doing? Alex asked, steadying her shaking hands. He was coming for her… she knew it.

He’s heading into the building… alone. Kara was starting to panic; Alex could hear it in her bondmate’s voice. Alex, I’m getting you the heck out of there… right now!

No. Alex pleaded. It’s too dangerous; you could expose yourselves. Let me see this through, we don’t know who this guy is, or what he wants.

And what if what he wants is you?

Then… you and Shah can come rescue me, and we’ll deal with the rest after.

Kara’s fear and concern for her felt all too raw across their bond, but her lover finally relented and said, Okay Alex, I’ll wait, but if he tries anything...
Hank Henshaw! Ada broke in gleefully. That’s his name, I found him. Hmmm, he’s definitely military, with a distinguished record... a decorated Special Operations officer, did multiple combat tours in Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iraq, served on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, blahdie blah blah. Oh, hold up. This is interesting... it looks as though he went off the grid a few years ago to head up a dark Department of Defense division, but all records have been expunged and redacted since that time. He’s got some skilled people working for him, and killer tech... I’m just staying on the edges of their network scans.

Shah’s reassuring voice spoke up. Alex, I’m here, on sub-level three, close to the holding cells where you are; ready when you need me.

Thanks so much. Alex had never felt so grateful. Guys, what do think he wants with me??

I don’t know, but hold on, Vaena. We’re right here if he tries anything.

A metallic, clanking sound echoed through the chamber as the reinforced door to the room where her cell was located began to open. Alex sat up regally, rotated a bit on the bench to face away from the quiet footsteps entering, and took a calming breath as the big man stepped in and walked over to sit just outside of the bars of her prison cell.

She could feel his eyes on her.

“Alex Danvers?” He asked, in a steady, deep, confident tone that already indicated he knew the answer.

How does he know my name? Her heart was beating twice as fast as normal. Crap, crap, crap!

It’s okay Alex, relax... just go with it. Ada soothed her. We need to understand how he’s acquired this knowledge, and what he actually knows.

Alex squeezed her fists tight, digging her fingernails into the palms of her hands, and replied more sharply than she’d intended. “I didn’t ask for a lawyer.”

He chuckled; his voice was deep, “Then it’s a good thing I’m not a lawyer.”

The jocular tenor of his response, more than anything, caused her to turn in his direction, and her eyes locked with his unfathomable brown gaze. He was at least six-foot-one, handsome, broad-shouldered and powerfully built, with a mischievous grin, and short black hair. The expensive dark gray suit wasn’t something he was comfortable wearing; she could feel that about him... he was a leader for sure, but a warrior... not a bureaucrat.

The expression she caught on his face wasn’t one of intimidation, but seemed more like genuine concern. What the...?

“What, are you then, FBI?” She threw out the first alphabet agency that came to her mind.

He was still grinning, “No, not even close, Alexandra, though you probably know that already.”

She stiffened, “Don’t call me that.”

“Why? It is your name, though you’ve done an amazing job covering your tracks... but I’d expect no less. Don’t worry, no one here has any idea who you are, besides me.”

“You don’t know anything about me.” She tried to stand up but was restrained by the cuffs. Rao, she felt queasy.
His intense brown eyes followed her, “Oh, but I do. I know a lot of things about you, Alex. About your house in Midvale, how growing up you’d watch the stars with your father, Jeremiah, and later, all the nights you spent on the roof with your adopted sister, Kara.”

She glared at him, “Don’t talk about my family.”

He lowered his eyes, seemingly chastised, and nodded before looking back up at her, “Okay then, let’s skip to the present and to your late night vigilantism. We managed to watch a clip of the surveillance footage from inside the apartment before it was mysteriously erased. You wouldn’t know anything about that would you?” The well-dressed soldier grinned. “Bravo for saving Jillian Thompson from that monster, yes, she’s a bit worse for wear but will make a full recovery thanks to you. Masterful work too, except for the getting caught part.” Alex grimaced as he continued, “I was impressed, and surprised, which doesn’t happen very often… believe me. Your physical abilities and combat skills are… beyond exceptional. I didn’t even know you were a Meta, not that that fact changes the reason I’m here.”

Alex was still confused, and irritated, but very glad that this man who knew so much believed her to be a metahuman and not part alien. “Well, maybe you should just spit it out. Who are you, and why are you here?”

The big man nodded as he stood up, and cleared his throat, “My name is Hank Henshaw, and I run a secret government organization dedicated to protecting this planet. I’m looking for extraordinary people like you to add to our team, Alex. I need brilliant minds, not just warriors… it’s a rare combination to find in one individual, yet here you are. So, to skip to the chase, I suppose I’m here offering you a job… part-time at first of course, until you finish your graduate studies (which my agency will pay for). Until tonight’s surprise performance I was planning on recruiting you solely based on your impressive scientific work… The research paper you published last year with Dr. Namoi Young on alien DNA has become required reading at the D.E.O.”

Alex blinked, stunned, and flattered… “Really? My paper? Wait, the D.E.O.? What the hell does that stand for?”

“The Department of Extranormal Operations. I’m its Director, and we have a great deal to talk about, Ms. Danvers, if you’re interested, that is.”

Ada sighed. He checks out, Alex, as far as I can tell. The D.E.O. is an incredibly well-hidden, black budget, government agency buried layers upon layers deep within the Department of Defense. I’m only getting bits and pieces, but he’s definitely legit.

Alex looked down at her wrist and around at the steel bars of her cell, “And this?”

“We can make this whole incident go away, bury it… and you can walk out of here a free woman, just promise to hear me out. No strings, just a scary long non-disclosure form. Oh, and it might put your mind at ease to know that my agents fished your lizard man out of the city’s drainage tunnels, it’s being prepped for transport to the D.E.O for examination now.”

“What? You’re saying that you found him? He’s not dead?” Her voice cracked. She thought she’d… killed him… it.

Henshaw studied her for a long moment before responding, his tone sympathetic. “You didn’t kill anyone, Alex. It is still alive… barely. I’ve seen cellular regeneration in other alien species, but nothing quite as extreme as this.”

That got her attention. Alex was already kicking herself… of course! She’d assumed Kinney was
human and hadn’t thought to check the Kryptonian database… or what she and Kara had started calling the Compendium of Alien Species. Shatari, I need answers! What race of alien is he? Alex’s HUD was already flashing with data and analysis gathered from her battle with The Headhunter.

“An alien? Really?” Alex did her best to sound incredulous.

Henshaw grinned, “Like your sister, just not as pretty.”

Alex’s world shifted. In a split-second, she’d easily snapped out of her cuffs, thrust her arm through a gap in the bars, and wrapped her fingers around the man’s throat as she lifted him off the ground… like a toy. She’d slammed him face first into her cell, pulling his solid body tight against the steel before he could blink. His feet were dangling a foot and a half above the floor.

“Consider your next words very carefully, Director Henshaw… and don’t even think about threatening Kara.” The menacing tone of her own voice surprised even her.

Struggling, the soldier shook his head, and choked out, “No… threats… Alex. Just… facts. There are… things… you need to understand… about her arrival here… things that you, and she, don’t know.”

Kara was with her, in her mind. Alex, put him down, please! It’s okay… let’s hear what he has to say. He didn’t exactly threaten me… yet.

Alex narrowed her eyes, but let go, dropping the man, who landed on the balls his feet like a great cat, coughing, and rubbing his throat. As he glanced over at her, she noticed he had an excited sparkle in his eye… as if seeing her in action was exactly what he’d intended to provoke all along.

She groaned inside. Ugh, great. I fell right into his trap.

You’ve always been hotheaded joon-am… you let him goad you into action. Shah sighed.

I deserve that, but please chastise me later, when I’m the hell out of here.

Of course, Shah said.

We’re right here with you, Vaena, watching and listening. Kara assured her. If he tries anything, I swear I’ll…

Henshaw glanced at Alex’s freed wrist and the broken hardened steel links of the cuff’s chain with a smirk. “I… see the restraints were no trouble.” He coughed again. “How about we walk out of here together, and go to the hanger where your alien serial killer is being held until the C-130 arrives? I’m sure the scientist side of you is interested in examining the creature. We can talk about everything on the way.”

Hmmm, okay… let’s see where this invitation leads.

With that, Alex nodded in agreement, Henshaw buzzed a guard and, like magic, her cell opened. Then she left with him… walking unmolested at his side to an elevator and out of the fortress-like building past multiple police officers, none of whom even bothered to glance in their direction.

Now that was a smooth exit. Shah said approvingly. I’m back outside, with Kara. We’ll follow you, Alex, like glue.

We’re not letting you out of our sight. Kara’s tone was resolute, and Alex suddenly found herself sincerely hoping, for Henshaw’s sake, that he fully intended to honor his promise to let her go after
their ‘talk’.

Once they were out of earshot of anyone she spoke quietly to him, “I figured out what happened to Kinney. I can’t believe I didn’t see it before, but I wasn’t thinking alien… anyway, the Zy’nn would have had to kill him to steal his identity, to wear his human skin. It all makes sense now. It must have happened way back when his behavior changed… four years ago.”

Henshaw looked confused, “Whoa, whoa, slow down Danvers, you lost me. What’s a ‘Zy’nn’?”

“Keep up, Director, that’s what species the Headhunter is… at least I’m fairly certain, within 99.78% certainty anyway. I’ll need to examine samples of its tissues and blood to be a hundred percent sure.”

He was still giving her a questioning look, so she elaborated from the data streaming on her HUD, “Okay, sorry, I’ll explain. The Zy’nn are a humanoid, top-end predator species from one of the minor worlds in the Vega system, over twenty-five light years from here. They aren’t technologically advanced at all but have been used and enslaved by others for their unique ability to track just about anything with their enhanced senses. The problem is, they require a special kind of nourishment to survive… Which is common on their world, but not here on earth. They can substitute a similar (but rare) substance, but it’s only found in a small percentage of human pituitary glands.”

He was staring at her as if her hair was on fire. Kind of funny… “And you know this, how?”

Alex considered her answer carefully, and decided on the truth… just a slightly edited version of it. “Since we’re being honest, at least I hope you will be, Kara traveled a lot for school, growing up observing other worlds. She’s shared countless stories about alien species with me… and over time we’ve been putting together a kind of compendium… Anyway, I remember her talking about the Zy’nn.”

The truth was, while Kara had shared many stories with her, Alex had never heard of the alien species before. It was Shatari who’d come through: scouring her own database as well as Kara’s amazingly detailed field notes and diary entries that the then-young Kryptonian student had recorded on her travels to multiple star systems and worlds growing up.

“They’re hunters and survivors, usually non-violent if unprovoked, but frightening when hungry. The question we really should be asking is, how the heck did it get here in the first place? It couldn’t have come to Earth on its own… someone must have brought it here for some reason. Probably to use it as a hunter, to kidnap and kill, that was Kinney’s M.O. until he started murdering to survive… like he was on the run.” She paused as something Shatari flashed on her HUD startled her. “Oh shit…”

“What is it?” Henshaw asked, concerned.

Alex swallowed and decided to share. “I just figured out some of what he… it said to me when we were fighting. When it first saw me it said, ‘I’m not going back’, and something about ‘I will no longer serve your master.’ He must have escaped whoever had been using him, and thought I was there to retrieve him… but take him back where? And to who?”

Henshaw seemed contemplative, quietly absorbing all she’d said before speaking again, “That’s a mystery. We tried pulling anything useful from the creature’s memories, but your blow (impressive as hell, by the way), was devastating. It’s alive, and its body is regenerating, but not its brain… it’s barely managing some autonomic functions. You did the right thing, Danvers, but to find out who the Headhunter was running from we’re going to need good old-fashioned detective work and forensics.”

Alex was suddenly incredibly intrigued, impressed, and terrified all at once. “Can you back up a
second? You have people who can read minds?"

Henshaw chuckled. “Since you’re not yet a D.E.O. agent, I’m afraid that’s classified, but, don’t worry, you are apparently immune... something about your unique metahuman physiology. Which brings me back to my offer...

“If you join my team you’ll have a chance to find answers to all of your questions, and a great deal more.” The big man sighed. “Your country needs your knowledge now more than ever, Alex. This week it’s a Zy’nn, next week, who knows what threat’s going to crawl out of the woodwork? Some of these damn aliens are like roaches… literally.”

She wasn’t sure if he was kidding. “This sort of thing happens often?”

“More than you’d ever believe, and we’re fighting blind.” Alex could read the weariness in his slumped shoulders, the subtle exhaustion hidden in his voice.

For a few moments, she was lost in thought and beginning to feel strangely sympathetic to the plight of this man and his covert agency...

She sent her thoughts to Kara, Alex, and Ada. They’re like children in the dark, using flashlights and popguns to fight boogeymen. The problem is, the boogeymen are real and have claws. They need us.

Do you want to help him? Kara asked.

Alex sighed in their minds. I want to at least hear him out. There’s something about him... something I trust. I can’t explain it... it’s just a gut feeling.

Good enough for us. Ada, Kara, and Shah all responded together.

Alex and Henshaw continued walking in silence, down the wide granite stairs of police HQ to the black armored SUV waiting at the curb. One of his agents, a lithe young woman who moved like a cat, probably not much older than Alex, dressed in form-fitting black combat gear like the others, waited in one of the back-facing seats with a headset firmly in place on her ear and a tablet in hand.

She smiled shyly as they climbed in with her. Did she just gasp under her breath as I brushed by?

Alex hid a grin.

“Ma’am, it's a pleasure to meet you. I’m Agent Susan Vasquez. If I may say so, you were incredible last night.” After catching Alex’s gaze for a moment, she looked back down at her tablet with a blush in her cheeks, as if regretting her breathy outburst of praise. Alex liked her immediately (though she’d have to nip her infatuation in the bud real quick, to be fair to her). Susan was cute, with inquisitive brown eyes, short wavy brown hair, and a smooth tanned complexion. Her fingers moved at light speed.

“My senior communications officer.” Henshaw nodded toward the woman. “Whom I trust implicitly.” Ah, Alex thought, his version of Ada, the one who undoubtedly keeps him connected to all of his dark organization’s operations and activities across the globe.

“Nice to meet you, Agent Vasquez,” Alex said, and they shared another quick, conspiratorial smile as the vehicle accelerated into traffic.

“So…” Henshaw drawled as they settled into the soft leather seats. “Where to begin...”
really want from me.”

“Okay, that sounds fair.” He grinned. “Let’s talk about the day your sister fell to Earth, and more importantly, what followed her out of the dark…”

“Let’s talk about Fort Rozz.”

....................

*October 13th – Year Four*

*The Daniels’ house in Bethesda, MA*

*Still four days before Alex’s 19th birthday*

*2005 hours UTC -5, Friday evening, U.S. East Coast Time*

“So… it’s all my fault.” Kara, dressed in a pair of snuggly flannel pajamas, was curled into a ball under the covers… and still trying to process Director Henshaw’s shocking revelations that day.

Alex, fresh out of the shower in an old Smashing Pumpkins concert t-shirt and sweat pants, was spooned against her bondmate’s back, arms wrapped tenderly around her. “No, absolutely not! You didn’t cause Fort Rozz to crash on Earth. Whatever force, or series of events, that released your pod from the Phantom Zone also set the prison ship free, and gravity did the rest. **You** are blameless.” She stretched in and kissed Kara’s cheek. “You were just the passenger, not the pilot.”

Grateful, but still feeling conflicted… both guilty and very loved, Kara rolled over to snuggle in close with Alex. She whispered thanks to Kal-El, Eliza, Jeremiah, Rao, Athena, and everyone who’d helped assure her Vaena was in her life.

**Without her...**

No. There was no ‘without her’ option. **Ever.** Not in this reality.

“Maybe, but Alex, those prisoners are still Krypton’s… **my** responsibility. That Zy’nn was one of them, and it killed at least a dozen innocent people, that we know of! Someone (its ‘master’) was pulling its strings, and that someone most likely came from Fort Rozz too.

“Hank and his team have been dealing with cleaning up my, our, people’s mess, protecting this world, and me by keeping my secret, letting me have a ‘normal’ life here. Brave soldiers and innocents have died because of it... because of me.” Tears were wet on her face now… *dammit, why do I always cry?*

Alex reached over and ran her fingertips over Kara’s damp cheek, and smoothed strands of errant blonde hair back from her face, “Some of that may be true, just not the ‘because of me’ part, and in any case, we didn’t know about it until today. The past is the past, I think what really matters now is what we choose to do about it.”

“We?” Kara asked shakily, feeling both terrified and vulnerable…

“Of course. You’re not alone, nooré cheshm-am. You never have been. Don’t you know that by
now?” Alex’s gorgeous hazel eyes held hers and, for a moment, glowed a deep, dark red… as if a flame was burning deep inside of her.

Kara’s breath caught in her chest. Her bondmate was becoming more Kryptonian every day, and it looked good on her. Perfect, in fact.

Alex grinned wickedly and moved in to kiss her lips, softly, as if cherishing every moment. Kara flowed into her, returning her affection with a deep, passionate fire.

And the minutes turned to hours as they became lost in each other, and the bright stars turned outside their room’s wide windows.

---------------

Team Archangel war council…

October 14th – Year Four

The Daniels’ house in Bethesda, MD

Three days before Alex’s 19th birthday

1324 hours UTC -5, Saturday early afternoon, U.S. East Coast Time

It was a crisp Saturday afternoon, and the fragrant smells of fresh baked-from-scratch blueberry scones, hot tea, and brewing coffee filled the air inside the Daniels’ spacious Bethesda home. Kara’s extended family had begun arriving, and Myka had a lovely fire going in the massive stone hearth as they all settled in on the living room chairs and couches.

Shah had come in person, hugging Kara and Alex as she elegantly sauntered in through the back patio’s wide Mediterranean doors. She’d flown down from Cambridge after seeing Tyson off at the airport for his latest deployment. Ada, as Starlight, appeared in the middle of the room… emerging from a flare of light like a star being born, holding hands with Jess whom she’d brought with her.

Tom’s form took shape soon after, thanks to the glorious Kryptonian solid light tech integrated into the Battle Bridge of the USS Zumwalt. Upon seeing each other the Daniels were almost immediately locked in a passionate embrace (with lots of kissing involved), and then promptly excused themselves from the gathering to disappear off into their master bedroom.

Kara couldn’t imagine spending months apart from Alex the way Tom and Myka did. Currently, the Zumwalt and it’s Captain were deployed thousands of miles away somewhere in the Arabian Sea.

She made a mental note to go hug her General and ask for a private audience, and his guidance about everything going on in her life… after his adoring reunion with his beautiful wife.

“Do you think in his light form they can… you know? Have sex?” Kara asked her bondmate who was standing next to her.

Alex choked on the lemon ice tea she’d just taken a drink of. “Warn me next time, would you?” The brunette chuckled as Kara moved at near super speed to get a towel and clean her off, all while apologizing repeatedly.
“Kara, sweetie, it’s fine.” Alex gently took her lover’s hands in her own, brought Kara’s fingers to her lips, and kissed them. And then said, “And yes, I’m sure they can.”

“How do you know?” Kara asked, tilting her head slightly.

“Because.” Alex smirked and nodded in the direction of the Daniels’ closed bedroom door.

Kara turned to gaze with her X-ray vision to where the couple had absconded a few moments before and her mouth dropped open. What she saw was fascinating, wonderful… and hot.

As a Kryptonian, she saw no impropriety in enjoying observing others give and receive pleasure. Though she’d learned most people on Earth would not freely admit that. She’d found out the hard way early on not to. Fortunately Alex knew her well, so she didn’t hide her interest in what their friends were doing.

“Wow. Oh, my. That doesn’t look very comfortable.”

Alex laughed, “I don’t think Myka thinks so, she seems quite happy right now.”

As she continued to watch, Kara began breathing a bit more quickly, and heat began stirring throughout her entire body. After a moment her eyes went wide, and she blushed.

“Nooré cheshm-am, we should allow them some privacy.” Alex gently said, leaning into her bondmate.

Kara turned with a devilish smile to gaze into Alex’s hazel orbs. “Of course, though they did give me some ideas for later…”

Alex blushed, giggled, and kissed her deeply. *I can’t wait.*

“Hello everyone!” Naomi’s voice called from the living room, followed by Colliers. “I’m here, wish I was there.” The scientist had conferenced in from her lab at Sagan, and the newsman from his office at CatCo, connecting by a secure quantum channel Ada had opened so they could both appear via split-screen on the Daniels’ massive, eighty-inch television.

Kara and Alex had decided not to involve Eliza; their Earth mom didn’t really enjoy hearing all the gritty details of their complicated lives, especially the parts that were dangerous. It was much easier to give her a summary after the fact, when they had time to… um, redact the story.

In this case, that meant not mentioning the D.E.O.

After all the hugs, greetings, and reconnecting conversations, Shah grabbed a cup of tea from the kitchen as their slightly-disheveled hosts stumbled back into the room giggling like teenagers (how ironic), and Alex got things started…

“So, welcome everyone, we have a lot to talk about… but first, I wanted to thank you all for your thoughts and advice on my situation with the D.E.O.” Her audience all nodded in acknowledgment. “Taking everything into consideration, I’ve decided to accept Hank’s offer. I start training part-time at the D.C. branch this semester.”

Her announcement didn’t seem to surprise anyone. Colliers grimaced, obviously displeased, but held his tongue. He’d been the most vocal dissenter, but he also didn’t trust anything, or anyone, involved with the government. Kara understood his reticence… but had a good feeling about Alex’s new boss. Hank was definitely hiding many secrets, but he seemed in his own way to have Alex’s, and even her, best interests at heart.
It was just a feeling.

“Sorry to disappoint you, Colliers,” Alex said with a grin.

He threw up his hands, “I can’t say I didn’t warn you, gorgeous… but that doesn’t change the fact that I’m all in, just let me know what you need. I have an investigative masterpiece ready to fire off to print and digital in less than two hours that would blow the lid off of his little covert alien hunting agency.”

Kara spoke up. “Hopefully we won’t need it, but be ready. Exposing the D.E.O. would put you in danger, and mean dragging more secrets into the light than we, or the world, are ready for. If Henshaw is telling the truth, we may end up with a new ally… but if it all turns out to be a lie, then make no mistake, we will need to deal with him. As of right now, Alex is our eyes and ears inside the D.E.O., she’ll sort out truth from fiction.”

“With a little help,” Ada added, halfway through devouring her second delicious scone. “I’ve already started a very patient infiltration protocol… the D.E.O.’s systems have been super hard to crack. They’ve somehow managed to modify some alien tech I’ve never seen before that’s kind of bananas.” She grinned with excitement. “I can’t wait to get inside and poke around.”

Jess smiled, and used a finger to gently remove some crumbs from the corner of Ada’s mouth, “You get excited about the most interesting things, bella.”

“Thank you, Ada. I can always count on you having my back.” Alex added, blowing a kiss in her and Jess’ direction. “Anyway, Hank wanted to recruit Naomi next, and it turns out my first real assignment, besides translating the Kryptonian data crystals recovered from Fort Rozz, is to convince her to join the D.E.O.’s Science Division as Director. I’d be working with her in the lab, and with Hank in the field.”

Everyone looked to the big screen, where a smiling Dr. Naomi Young waved with her flawless Amazon-forged bionic arm, which changed color and texture before their eyes. Today it was brushed metal, titanium gray. “I’m actually very happy to be continuing my work with Alexandra, especially at the D.E.O. We’ll have access to actual non-terrestrial subjects there, and the best technology Earth has to offer, as well as from elsewhere. Our hope is to covertly accelerate our Kryptonian research, right under their noses.”

It was a lot to take in, but there was general agreement that they were doing the right thing.

Kara said, “We also need Henshaw to keep believing that I’m not a threat and that Alex is a metahuman, and not… what is it now, Naomi, something like forty-three percent Kryptonian?”

“Forty-five.” The scientist corrected. “Shah is closer to forty-two, her transformation began later.”

“Okay, forty-five percent then.” Kara grinned. "So far Shatari hasn’t had any problem tricking the D.E.O.’s scans and medical tests and will continue to do so. Also, Henshaw’s convinced that I’ve been lying low since coming to Earth, not training or using my powers, and he has no idea about any of you being involved.” She gestured around the room, indicating all of them. “And we need to keep it that way.”

Tom said, “I still urge caution. From the intelligence we’ve gathered and analyzed, it’s clear that before joining the D.E.O. Henshaw had a reputation for extreme ruthlessness… the kind of man who’d do anything in a single-minded pursuit of his goals. He’s always been a weapon, the kind the-powers-that-be turn loose on what they perceive to be the biggest threat… this time it happens to be aliens. The fact that he has zero accountability to any kind of rules, makes me wonder what
wreckage he’s left along the way.”

“Great.” Kara scowled. “My bondmate is going to work for a zealot who runs what might just be an anti-alien cult… I hadn’t really had time to consider the implications of the D.E.O.’s whole, ‘all aliens are evil’ trope.”

Alex patted Kara’s shoulder sympathetically, “I don’t know enough about Henshaw to judge him, or his agency, yet … but Tom, the man you describe isn’t the one I met. Something in my gut tells me to trust him. Also, I can understand why even the mention of aliens unnerves these people. After all, Fort Rozz was Krypton’s maximum-security prison, and from what Hank said, it held some of the most hard-core criminals from across multiple star systems, and we don’t even know how many yet, or who they were… at least until I translate that data. They’ve been dealing with the worst of the worst going on for three years now, and have no idea just how wonderful, and amazing aliens can be.”

Kara stood up, wrapped her arms around Alex’s shoulders, and slowly brought her lips close, kissing her deeply. Their audience looked on with encouraging soft clapping and ‘awws’, and when they finally broke apart, staring lovingly into each other’s eyes, Kara said, “Well then, we need to show them something different… and change their minds.”

October 14th – Year Four

The Daniels’ house in Bethesda, MD

1743 hours UTC -5, Saturday evening, U.S. East Coast Time

Alex’s surprise early birthday party after the serious Scooby Gang meeting had been a huge hit. Her bondmate had been completely ambushed, buried in gifts, love, and gratitude. It was still hard for Kara to believe that in just a couple of short days, Alex had fought and captured a super-powered alien serial killer and joined a secret government agency whose mission was to keep Earth safe.

In her eyes, from the first day they’d met, Alex had been her hero… but she officially was one now, for the whole world, even if it was a secret from most people.

Kara had been so worried that when her beautiful Vaena went off to college she might lose interest in her and see their relationship… differently, like something to be ashamed of. Fortunately, while being apart had been difficult, especially at first, Alex hadn’t stopped loving her. In fact, being forced to manage their precious time together gave them a new perspective on just how much they did love each other… as well as the opportunity, and permission, to explore their individual passions and interests on their own.

For Kara, that included fashion (taking a class on the side at Parsons School of Design), painting (on her own, and with Julia Doyle, and her friend Hermona), singing (on open mic nights at venues she and her friends liked, but also adding vocals in studio for a couple of local NYC Indie bands and DJs), and slowly getting her EMT and paramedic certification (she encountered too many injuries, gunshots, overdoses, and heart attacks as Archangel to not improve her skills.)

Alex’s free time was mostly taken up with combat training, her work in the lab with Naomi, research, and a new scientific paper they were working on publishing together. It was called “The RNA Transfer Limitation Myth: Expanding the Human Genetic Code Beyond the 20-Letter
Chain” and leveraged just enough of her, Naomi, and Eliza’s secret Kryptonian research to be outright revolutionary (fringe science made real), but vague enough as a theory not to endanger or implicate her sources. It was their explicit intention to create a stir in the scientific community and attract some great minds to assist on some sticky questions she and her partners in crime had hit some barriers on.

Kara knew that going forward Alex would also be very busy training as a D.E.O. agent, and eventually starting field missions. She wasn’t excited about seeing even less of her bondmate but did not regret her choice to join the secret government organization.

Not being together as often as they used to be had terrified her at first, but Kara had found peace with their ever-changing lives. She also finally understood something the great Lebanese-American poet and philosopher Kahlil Gibran had once written about the secret to a loving and lasting relationship:

“Let there be spaces in your togetherness,
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.”

That line, like the idea of any distance between her and Alex, had troubled her immensely when she’d first read it in high school… but no longer. In fact, she’d bought a dog-eared copy of ‘The Prophet’ from her favorite used bookstore in The Village just to reread his beautiful words between classes.

Time and space had allowed her and Alex to continue to embrace the unique things about themselves and to flourish outside of their togetherness. They were confident as individuals, but even stronger together because of their independence.

They also never took each other for granted.

Kara knew how lucky she was to have Alexandra in her life and her heart and that her bondmate felt the same way.

Lost in her thoughts, she’d just finished using her heat vision to make a huge batch of popcorn and was gently shaking a cascade of buttery popped kernels out of a hot cast iron pot (using her bare hands) into a large serving bowl. Myka sat nearby at the massive kitchen table, struggling to sync her new iPhone with her Navy-issued secure laptop, and was mumbling curses in a strangely melodic string of mingled Greek, English, French, Kryptonian, and half a dozen other languages… a couple Kara didn’t even know yet.

She grinned, thinking of the three intimate encounters Myka and her husband had had that day… and of the sparks that had flown between the beautiful woman and Diana when they’d met unexpectedly at Jeremiah’s funeral.

It took Kara a couple months, but she’d finally been able to get Myka to admit to having had a very passionate, on-again-off-again relationship with the Amazon Princess before meeting Tom. Her already great respect for Myka had gone off the charts after that day, and Kara was making herself blush again trying not to think about the woman she considered a second mother helping Wonder Woman wiggle out of her armor.

“Myka, let me help with that. Just give me a sec, ‘k?” Kara said, grasping for a distraction, and used her super speed to slide a container of the popcorn in front of the older woman, before delivering a
huge heaping bowl to Ada, Jess, Alex (kissing her on the nose), and Shah sitting out in the living room. “Go ahead, start without me.” She said to them with an apologetic smile.

Kara then re-appeared, this time in the chair next to the frustrated Navy Captain at the kitchen table, who glanced over at her with a smile. Myka’s fascinating silver-gray eyes studied Kara like a hawk. “Are you sure you want to miss part of your movie to help me? This is infuriating business.” She frowned adorably at her new phone.

Kara grinned, “Yup! My love for The Devil Wears Prada runs deep, but my Queen Anne will understand, and your sanity is more important… gimme.” Kara held out a hand, palm up, and wiggled her fingers expectantly.

Sighing, Capt. Daniels relinquished the offending device and then leaned forward to watch Kara work. As she did, the ancient symbol of Athena dangled out from under the deep v-neck of her blue blouse, its silver metal gleaming against her nearly flawless bronze complexion.

“Any words of wisdom from our favorite goddess lately?” Kara’s words came out more hopeful than she’d intended as she quickly glanced back at the phone after staring at Athena’s talisman. Ugh, I sound desperate...

“Nothing recently… everything must be going according to plan. She trusts that you and the girls are doing the right thing.”

“Yeah, right.” Kara snorted, “Sorry. I mean, sure… if continuing to fail to reach Kandor is part of the plan. I thought we really had it tonight after the party, it felt so close. I could feel Rao’s light, and Uva, for just a moment…” She sighed and reached up with one hand to absently touch her sapphire crystal under her tank top before typing multiple series of id numbers into Myka’s computer.

“Stop being so hard on yourself, in’ah.”

Kara smiled, the woman she’d come to love as her second Earth Mother had taken to referring to her by the ancient Kryptonese word for ‘daughter’, and it always made her feel warm inside to hear the word roll so effortlessly off Myka’s tongue.

“Look, your crystal didn’t come with a manual, you’ll need to suffer through trial and error by necessity. I know that you’ll unlock the mystery eventually, have patience. I have faith in you, Kara Zor-El.”

“You promise?”

“I promise,” Myka said solemnly.

“Before I’m thirty?” Kara grinned.

They both laughed, and Myka reached over to softly touch the faint scar that still remained on Kara’s shoulder, “It’s almost completely gone now.” Her tone was so tender.

Kara set down the iPhone; she’d finally got it all working anyway, and moved closer, reaching up to place a hand on top of Myka’s, entwining their fingers. “On the outside, but… I still have nightmares, sometimes.”

The sympathetic look in the older woman’s silvery eyes held no pity… only love, understanding, and acceptance. She was one of the few people who just got Kara… being around her felt so familiar, wonderful, and safe. She slipped closer for a hug, and was happily rewarded with a powerful embrace in return.
Myka said, “What happened will always be a part of you, but believe me, the weight of it will fade over time. And if things ever start to feel too heavy, you have all of us to lean on, to help carry the load. ‘Stronger together’, right?”

Kara nodded, her throat too tight to speak, and snuggled in closer to lay her head on one of the woman’s broad shoulders.

“I love you, in’ah,” Myka whispered in perfect old Kryptonese, sending a thrill of joyful wonderment down Kara’s spine as she squeezed a bit tighter. It was almost like being in Alura’s arms again… it was no wonder the woman had once stolen Diana’s heart.

“So…” Myka was obviously changing the subject. “Things went well at the Kent’s last week?”

Kara stayed glued to the older woman’s shoulder and snuggled in close as she answered, “Yeah, I think Kal’s finally over being all passive aggressive about everything… it took him long enough! Thank Rao Lois was on my side helping make my case. Anyway, Alex and I had a really wonderful time in Metropolis, we all did.”

“Good. Did you two talk it out?”

“Yeah” Kara sighed with a smile. “I apologized for keeping secrets (again), and he finally did the same… and acknowledged that he’d been the one to make it clear he didn’t want to know the details of my secret life… so we both took some blame. We’re good now. Alex and I even got to meet a couple of his ‘Justice League’ team, and can I just say… wow!”

“Wonderful! That’s such good news, the holidays were going to be a little bit awkward this year if Kal was still sulking.”

They both laughed. “No more secrets between us. It feels good.” Kara said squeezing Myka tighter.

And of course, that’s when Archangel’s text alert, the brief, annoying, alarm sound of the Ghosts from the Pac-Man arcade game, when off. “Sorry, it’s Black Knight.” She smiled apologetically, pulling her iPhone out of her back pocket to see what her CIA handler wanted.

-------------

Time: 1905

Black Knight: The Beacons of Gondor are lit. Can u meet now?

Archangel: Sure, in 5

Black Knight: I’m waiting. Our spot. Be ready to travel. Bad weather. Thx

-------------

Kara looked up from her phone and started to say, “I sorry, I have to…”

But Myka cut her off, “… go. Yeah, I figured. And from the look on your face, I’d say that was bad news?”
The Kryptonian nodded, “Yeah, sounds mega bad… but I don’t have any details. I need to get to Langley, now.”

“Make haste then, young one. You can tell the girls what’s happening on your way.” Myka said as she leaned in to kiss Kara’s cheek. “Oh, and before I forget to say it, thanks for fixing my sync problem.”

The blonde looked deep into Myka’s mysterious, caring eyes, smiled, and in the ancient language of her people replied, “You’re welcome, and… I love you too, ma’har” before disappearing in a blur of super speed.

As Myka watched Kara depart the kitchen (in slow motion), the poised Navy officer seemed to shimmer… as if reality was shifting just ever so slightly around her. And, for a few seconds, Captain Daniels no longer appeared human at all, but otherworldly… a beauty beyond description or compare, regal, with eyes as bright as the dawn.

The air trembled for the moment of her lapsed control.

As she looked to the far horizon following the young Kryptonian’s flight, the silver in her pupils stirred like liquid mercury, and she began to shed tears of joy.

It was the first time Kara had called her mother.

“Be safe, in’ah.” Myka whispered in a voice like ancient music. “I fear you are headed into troubled waters.”

She sighed, and seconds later a small, mottled gray owl shimmered into existence on top of the refrigerator. The beautiful creature quickly fluttered down to perch attentively before her on the table.

Its big blue eyes blinked up in greeting.

Myka smiled affectionately as she wiped the wetness from her cheeks, “Hello, old friend.”

“Kiew, kiew!” It cooed happily, leaning into her hand as she gently rubbed the appreciative bird’s head and neck.

After a minute, Myka gestured off… not in the direction that Kara was currently traveling, but in the one she would soon be headed. Distance wasn’t the only thing she saw clearly. She then spoke to the little bird, ”Go now and watch over her. Fly swiftly to the east, over the seas to Trípolis. But be careful, war is afoot and old Oea is not the city we remember so fondly.”

The little owl puffed up and stammered to attention before dipping its beak in a reverent bow. “Kiew.” It responded with confidence as if trying to assure her there was nothing to worry about.

She nodded as the determined creature then spread its wings, and disappeared in a glimmering shimmer of light.

........................................

Story Lexicon/FAQs:
Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue. I don't always succeed. :) 

Terms: Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow. 

Ah!khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

Alex vanimelda - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien) 

Ay Dios Mio – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)

Aporup – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Asheghetam - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

Azdidane shoma khoshhalam – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)

Bedrood – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

Bonne nuit – ‘Good night’ (French)

C'est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

Damnú air! – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Dooset daram – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gaelic/Irish)

íthi eutukhēs - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara's House.

Kheili khosh geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

Malā’ikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature
Marbhfháisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)

miboosamet – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)

órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

¿Qué señoras tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)

Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Sundor – ‘beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)

Thi eutukhēs – ‘good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Volar mi diosa! – ‘fly my goddess!’ (Spanish)

WǑ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

aziz-am – ‘my dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

joon-am – ‘my dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

Nāzanin-am – ‘sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘the light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘<insert person’s name> + jooon (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean ‘dear’. So, ‘Shah jooon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

Other names/nickname/titles/things:

A ghrá – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)

A ghrá mo chroí - ‘My heart's beloved, my darling’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Brómhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)
Daxamites - An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people ruled by strength/the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow altered by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.

Dios mío! – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Euryleia – ‘Woman Wanderer’ or ‘Wide Wandering’ - Dr. Naomi Young’s Amazon name

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)

In’ah – Ancient, lost word for ‘daughter’ - what Myka calls Kara (Kryptonese),

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

M’eudail – ‘My darling’ or ‘my dear’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Ma’har - Ancient, lost word for ‘mother’ - what Kara calls Myka (Kryptonese)

Mi amor – ‘My love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Mi lucero – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Mi Sol – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn - Thought & Memory (Old Norse)

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Norooz - Persian New Year (Persian)

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Oea - This ancient city was founded by the Phoenicians in the seventh century BC, and was ruled (at one time or another) by the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Italians, and Muslims. It came to be known as Tripoli during the 9th century (origin: Libyco-Berber)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity (from the Ancient Freek)
**Salud!** – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

**Seanmháthair** – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced *shan a WAW her* (Irish/Gaelic)

**Señora** – Is a polite term used to address a woman. The Spanish-language equivalent of Ma’am, Ms., or Mrs. (Spanish)

**Tieguanyin** - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

**Tratung** – khrag ‘thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

**Trípolis** – Tripoli, the capital and largest city in Libya (from the Ancient Greek)

**Tuath Dé Danann** - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced *Thoo-a day Du-non* (Irish/Gaelic)

**Uri baba!** – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

**Vaena, Vaena Alex** – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’. ‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

**Vakur** – A powerful (and rare) soul-devouring, evil, shape-shifting parasitic alien species from another universe. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.

**Valar** – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Valaraukar** – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as *Balrogs*. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Vallerian** – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshiped, or traded.

**Wan** - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

**Zhuyin** – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)

---

**Chapter End Notes**

**The Wrap:**
*Wow! An alien serial killer put down by Flame! Hank Henshaw appears! Kara and*
Team Archangel now know about Fort Rozz! Alex and Naomi are working for the D.E.O.! And what’s up with Myka? Hope you enjoyed.

Next Up:
Chapter 27: “The Flames of Tripoli” – Where Kara must race across the Atlantic to defend the United States’ besieged embassy in the Libyan capital of Tripoli… before all hope is lost for the over hundred and fifty souls trapped there. Entering a literal war zone, Archangel will be tested as never before.

Attributions:

Just a comment on Team Archangel's communications:
Kara, Alex, and Shah stopped using headsets when they learned how to effectively control their crystal network. The miraculous Kryptonian tech has become their hub for all communication channels, and replaced their need for devices while in their hero personas, though they still use phones when not being their alter egos. Their nanobots are now entangled with their auras in a low-power state at all times, waiting patiently for mental commands.

This chapter’s links:
Owl of Athena
In Greek mythology, a little owl (Athene noctua) traditionally represents or accompanies Athena, the goddess of wisdom, or Minerva, her syncretic incarnation in Roman mythology. Because of such association, the bird — often referred to as the "Owl of Athena" (Greek) or the "Owl of Minerva" (Roman) has been used as a symbol of knowledge, wisdom, perspicacity, and erudition throughout the Western world.

What kind of bird was that? - Little Owl
The little owl (Athene noctua) is a bird that inhabits much of the temperate and warmer parts of Europe, Asia east to Korea, and North Africa.
The Flames of Tripoli

Chapter Summary

Where Archangel races across the Atlantic to defend the United States’ besieged embassy in Tripoli. With over a hundred and fifty souls trapped inside fighting for their lives, she will be tested as never before.

Chapter Notes

It’s Year 4, late Oct – Kara is eighteen (twenty in Kryptonian years), and a freshman at Columbia. Alex is just days away from turning nineteen and in her second year at George Mason, while Shah is already nineteen and a sophomore at MIT.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

October 15th – Year Four

Somewhere over the Atlantic

0223 Hours UTC +2, Sunday morning, local time in Tripoli, Libya - Oct 15th

(1923 Hours UTC -5, Saturday evening, U.S. East Coast Time - Oct 14th)

Two or three days before Alex’s birthday, depending on your perspective

It had been an hour and twenty-seven long minutes since three suicide bombers struck the U.S. embassy in Libya. Reports out of Tripoli indicated that children wearing bomb vests may have been used to carry out the attack. Six Marines, three local police officers, and two embassy employees died in that initial assault, and the outer gates to the vast compound had been breached.

What followed was chaos.

Armed militias had poured in to lay siege to the enclave’s weaker inner walls, and a vicious firefight had ensued with its defenders. Approximately 150 personnel, including the U.S. Ambassador, diplomatic officers, Marines, a handful of foreign nationals, and over thirty local staff were holed up inside fighting to stay alive... and holding out hope for help to arrive.

To make the situation worse, neither the Libyan military nor local law enforcement had yet moved in to assist. Apparently, the divided ruling Council of Deputies was still squabbling over the 'appropriate' response.

During their brief conversation at Langley, Amanda had shared with Kara that she believed the Council was gambling that if they took long enough to deliberate, the matter would ‘resolve itself’… which the Kryptonian found both chilling, and unacceptable.
Her heart hurt just thinking about the terror the children must have experienced before they died, and how heartbroken their families, and those of the valiant police officers and soldiers killed in the line of duty, must be.

*They deserve justice.* The thought burned within her blood and echoed in her DNA.

After Black Knight explained that, due to weather, it would take U.S. Special Operations Forces up to two additional hours to reach Tripoli, Kara agreed to lead a one-woman rescue mission. Someone had to put a stop to the madness before more innocent lives were lost, and she could get there in a quarter of that time or less.

Archangel had been authorized to use ‘all necessary and appropriate force’ to safeguard the lives of the U.S. citizens, as well as anyone taking refuge in the embassy, which basically gave her a license to kill… though Kara sincerely hoped she wouldn’t be put in a situation where she’d have to make that choice.

She’d left D.C. in a hurry, and spent the first fifteen minutes in the air being debriefed by Amanda, Black Knight, Navigator, a host of diplomatic and military experts, and analysts, while at the same time (in her thoughts) also having a parallel conversation with Team Archangel.

*Ada, how long until I can see what’s happening on the ground?*

*The two Farseer satellites I tasked should be over Tripoli in less than five minutes, auntie. I’ll send you the feed as soon as I have it.*

*Good, that should still give us time to get the lay of the land before I arrive. It was quite helpful of Department of Defense to give you access to their super-secret (and terrifying, I might add) Big Brother project.*

Ada giggled. *It’s not like Amanda gave them much of a choice.*

*No, no she didn’t. Hey, is it just me? I like that woman more and more as I get to know her.*

*It’s not just you.* Ada, Shah, and Alex all chimed in at once to answer and started chuckling.

*Jinx.* Alex teased.

There were a few moments of silence, and then Ada spoke again, this time in a dreamy tone, *It’s amazing… there are a hundred and twenty Farseer satellites cloaked in low-Earth orbit all around the globe, loaded with cutting edge (for human) sensors and tech, and I’m now part of that network. I feel how I imagine the Norse god Heimdal would. I can see… everything.*

*Well, thank you. You’re certainly as pretty as Idris Elba is handsome.* Kara sent a kiss to her niece using a Kryptonian glyph, which caused Ada to giggle again.

*Alex?* Kara then mingled her thoughts privately with her bondmate’s.

Suddenly her lover’s warmth and presence were wrapped around her as she flew. *I’m here nooré cheshm-am.*

*I’m scared.*

*I know, but it’s okay… you can do this. You can’t doubt yourself or hold back because you’re worried you’ll hurt someone. Kara, listen to me… these zealots you’re facing are evil as fuck… and hell-bent on murdering everyone in our embassy. Please don’t waste another second feeling bad*
about what happens to them. They chose their path embracing hate and violence, just as you made a choice to protect the innocent and our world.

Kara hugged her through their bond. You’re right Alex, I know that but…

Alex finished for her… You’re still going to try and not kill anyone. Kara, I understand, and would expect no less from you. You’re a hero, which is one of the many, many reasons I love you.

I love you too, Vaena.

Afterward, they snuggled together in their minds… happily entwined like two halves forming a whole. Kara had already begun to mentally prepare for what was sure to be a violent engagement once she reached the North African coast, and feeling her bondmate with her was reassuring.

With the comms finally quiet, under the soft glow of the Milky Way, Kara decided it was time for some Florence + the Machine… so she turned up Cosmic Love and let herself become blissfully lost in Flo’s beautiful voice.

Music always made things better and helped her think.

As she continued soaring eastward, far above the turbulent waters of the Atlantic, her thoughts drifted with the melody back to her meeting with Amanda and Black Knight at Langley.

.....................

After Kara had agreed to attempt a rescue mission, Director Thorpe departed to begin preparations and her handler (who was obviously pleased by her decision, even proud of her… she could tell) broke some bad news. “We’ve not yet been able to clear Archangel’s presence with the less-than-stable Libyan government. The State Department's working on it via backchannels, but so far, no go.” He ran his hand through his shock of black hair in frustration.

Kara nodded grimly, that was unwelcome news. What she did find interesting was that Paul and Amanda had anticipated her willingness to help before she’d even been told of the situation… or volunteered to go.

They know me as well as I know myself sometimes...

Black Knight continued, “Without the Libyans’ cooperation once you’re in-country we won’t be able to directly intervene if things go south on you. If you’re detected after penetrating their airspace you’ll need to be ready for whatever they might throw at you… anything from surface-to-air missiles and anti-aircraft fire to Russian-made lasers. Then, once you’re on the ground you’ve got to watch out for mortars, RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades), large caliber automatic weapons, and a host of other crap, including improvised explosives, possibly even strapped to people.”

She was aghast. “Who even does that?? I mean… turning people, children, into bombs? Humans can be so horrible.”

The big man sighed, and she could see the tenderness in his eyes as he studied her. “I’m sorry, angel, I wish things were different. There is evil in this world, but there are also those who risk everything to stand against it. Don’t judge us ‘humans’ too harshly.”

Kara blushed, realizing her faux pas, “I didn’t mean that I wasn’t… I mean, pfft! I’m human, of course!”
The soldier gave her his patented ‘I’m calling bullshit’ look and grinned. “Kara, your secret’s safe with me, it always has been… and, if you didn’t already realize it, Amanda too. And maybe, just maybe, you’ll tell me your story someday, and let me know if you have any single sisters. I like girls who are out of this world.”

She’d smacked him playfully, and then wrapped him in a full body hug.

……………..

Approaching the Iberian Peninsula…

Navigator interrupted her thoughts, chiming in over the Directorate’s secure comms, “Archangel, stay on your current altitude and heading, we’ve cleared the skies of prying eyes, as promised, but it’s a narrow path to your destination. You’re level at ninety-five thousand feet, and moving at 240 miles per second… close to breaking fifteen thousand miles per hour, a new speed record.” Kara had no idea she’d been flying so fast. “Okay, time to ease it back, you’re already over Madrid.”

She could hear the excitement in her niece’s voice, but as amazing as her new peak velocity was, Kara didn’t have time to celebrate personal bests or even her first transatlantic flight… not when people’s lives were on the line.

The overall mood back at Langley was grim.

It had been over an hour since the CIA lost communication with their highest placed asset, Shannon MacKenna. The woman’s cover was as the embassy’s Regional Security Officer (RSO), the security attaché to the U.S. Ambassador, but covertly she served as The Agency’s Station Chief in Libya.

Once the enclave’s walls fell she’d be one of the first sought out by the terrorists for a high-profile execution… if she were still alive.

The stalwart officer had been reporting back a steady stream of status updates and video from both inside and outside the U.S. embassy compound until a second massive explosion rocked the part of the complex from which she’d been broadcasting and her satellite phone went dead.

Kara prayed to Rao, Athena, and whatever gods were listening that the brave woman had not perished.

After receiving a burst of Kryptonian hyper-compressed data she slowed to Mach 4 and rode the bumpy air currents down from the earth’s stratosphere. Flames licked at her aura as she penetrated the low layer of clouds that lay like a blanket over the dark and stormy Mediterranean Sea.

Lightning flashed through a sideways gale of torrential winds and rain.

“Thanks, Navigator; any update on the status of my backup?” Kara still had to be careful to only address Ada by her mysterious title on the comms with The Agency and Rao knows who else listening in, and was terrified she’d slip up one day… Kara owned the fact that she was a terrible liar.

Black Knight broke in, “Special Ops teams from Croatia and Italy are watching your live feed and are en route, but the weather’s gotten even worse. They’re still at least ninety minutes out, maybe longer… and our aircraft on the USS Harry Truman are still not authorized to enter Libyan airspace. We’ve got State, even the President, working on it but you’re on your own at the moment. Sorry, angel.”
“Lovely…” Kara groaned.

“But…” Navigator chimed in. “There is some good news. I’ve been scanning social media, text, and voice traffic out of Tripoli, and everything indicates the battle is not over. The Marines at the embassy compound are still putting up a fight!”

“That’s encouraging at least. Okay, I’m almost there, banking over Malta now; ETA to target is less than three and a half minutes.” Quickly adjusting her bearings, Kara angled south in the darkness, leaving the storms behind, and focused on the far-off lights of the Libyan coast.

“Godspeed, Archangel.” Black Knight said before going silent.

Kara’s throat felt parched… she looked down and watched as the sea gave way to little islands, a massive port, beaches, and then the gray flicker of an unfamiliar, sprawling metropolis beneath her.

So far there’d been no anti-aircraft fire, lasers, or missiles. She breathed a sigh of relief knowing that her stealth aura was holding.

“I’ll do my best.” She finally responded.

I have faith in you, auntie. Ada whispered in her thoughts, then out loud for all, including their audience back at Langley, she quoted Sun Tzu’s words from The Art of War… “Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt.”

Kara was steeling herself for impact, buoyed by Ada’s vote of confidence when Alex and Shah’s thoughts also entered her mind. We’re all here with you Kara. Shah and I are at MIT in her room; mom (she felt Eliza’s concerned but loving thoughts mingle with hers for a few seconds), Naomi, and Devi are at The Sagan; and Jess, Tom, and Vaden are all on the Battle Bridge with Ada, monitoring everything. And you know Aeryn would be here too if she wasn’t off with Diana and Circe.

Awww, you guys! Kara felt like a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders, and involuntarily once again wrapped her awareness around Alex through their bond.

Her reward was tender kisses.

Then Ada said, “Archangel, Farseer is online and I have your first target, a parking structure loaded with weapons and insurgents. They’re raining hell down on the embassy… and it can’t take much more. I’m hijacking the terrorists’ comms now and doing my best to clear them out before you strike, but they’re about to fire another round of mortars, you need to bring it down now!”

Kara then heard a high-pitched sound vibrating over an unfamiliar radio frequency that she knew would be incredibly painful to human ears.

“It’s show time,” Ada said.

And without hesitation, Kara plummeted toward the gunfire, explosions, billowing black smoke, and flames… to the section of the city where the embattled U.S. embassy stood.

---------------

October 15th – Year Four
Another explosion rocked the battered embassy.

The ominous vibrations rattled loose more of the already crumbling plaster from the cracked walls of the second-floor reception hall that Doctor Safiya Murabit had established as their improvised infirmary. The high-ceilinged space had long ago been used as a glittering, gilded ballroom, but its once-glamorous veneer was currently unrecognizable.

As the building shook again, Shannon MacKenna steadied herself against a doorframe of the hall that opened to a spiral staircase of forged iron and raised a hand to cover her mouth and nose as dust rained down from the third floor to choke the air.

Coughing arose from the dozen or so patients spread out on blankets on the wide planks of the hardwood floor as Dr. Murabit moved among them. The dedicated physician was totally focused on her patients and seemed oblivious to the chaos around her.

Shannon couldn’t stop stealing glances at the adorably beautiful Libyan.

Safiya couldn’t have been more than in her mid-twenties, and her black hijab was never in one place for very long as she moved among the fallen like a whirlwind. Following its frenetic dance was the only way the CIA Station Chief could keep track of the tireless young woman.

Though she’d lived in a dozen countries in her various roles over the past decade, Shannon had never previously had to deal with anything like the oppressive rigidity of the current regime that had recently come to power in Libya.

Under their unjust ‘reform’ laws Safiya had been removed from her position as a doctor at Tripoli’s most prestigious medical institution, simply because she was a woman. It was an utter travesty that a physician of her caliber was no longer recognized as such.

It was no wonder she wanted to get out of the country so badly. The whole situation made Shannon’s blood boil.

Thank God the compassionate young woman had been visiting her older sister, Hana, the senior translator on staff, when the attack came. After the embassy’s doctor was killed Safiya had stepped right into the role and taken charge like a battlefield commander.

Apparently, her appointment for her final interview with Carl Jensen (whose life she’d saved just minutes earlier) for her U.S. visa had been set for the following day…

So much for that plan.

Shannon knew for certain that several other colleagues would have died had it not been for Doctor Murabit’s superb medical skills, and the decisive actions she’d selflessly taken to aid them after the attack. The woman had also recklessly (or heroically, depending on your perspective) sealed her own fate with her choice; and was now a target of the terrorists as well.

As Shannon recovered her footing from the latest tremor, she grabbed at the right side of her face.
Her skin still felt like it was on fire, and the constant pain was excruciating. The burnt flesh under her carefully applied dressings was raw and kept sticking to the gauze in places. The doc had worked miracles with what supplies she’d had on hand to keep her going, but she definitely needed a hospital.

Safiya had been honest and told her that the damage she’d sustained was horrific. Her burns were deep, and there were ragged holes in her cheek. The teary-eyed doctor explained that even if Shannon managed to avoid contracting sepsis or some other vicious infection, that she’d be scarred for life...

_Yay, lucky me._

It’s not like she could have avoided her injury. She’d been caught in the explosion that had obliterated part of the west wing of the embassy, killing several key staff, including the Deputy Chief of Mission, three of her own direct reports, and the embassy’s doctor and head nurse.

This left Shannon as the highest-ranking official onsite, and everyone was looking to her a miracle. Unfortunately, her satellite phone and the building’s communications center were both destroyed, and even cell service had been disrupted… and with them went their only direct links to home.

She’d done the only logical thing and ordered the lightly-armed survivors to fall back to the more secure central part of the complex, with its open-air courtyard, gardens, and heavily fortified internal walls… and dispersed the Marines to guard the periphery.

She shook her head… Everything seemed so hopeless. *Am I just delaying the inevitable?*

Then, she once again had to brace herself on the doorframe as she began to shiver, and the room started spinning. *Dammit! Can’t… blackout now…*

The explosion did more than burn part of Shannon’s face off, it had rattled her brain.

_Make it stop… _she almost threw up as she brought her quickened breathing back under control.

“Ms. MacKenna,” Safiya spoke in her pleasing Arabic-accented English from directly beside her. The graceful Libyan doctor had approached silently and placed a calming hand on the CIA officer’s shaking arm. “You are not well. Please reconsider my offer and allow me to give you something more for the pain. I don’t even know how you’re still standing.”

Safiya’s gentle touch and soothing voice brought Shannon’s world back into focus, and she suddenly found herself staring speechless into concerned eyes the color of a cloudless summer sky.

_God… she’s beautiful._

This was the third time the young woman had begged Shannon to use more drugs from their meager supply, and the doctor’s sympathetic gaze told Shannon it was because, for some reason, she really did care about her.

The CIA officer cleared her dry throat before responding, “Thanks again, but no. I… I’ll be okay, there are others in worse shape, and I’ve already used more than my fair share. But I really do appreciate your concern and your persistence.”

Safiya sighed in defeat, “You are as brave as a lioness, but as stubborn as one as well. I do not believe you, Shannon MacKenna, when you say you are fine. You must at least promise to immediately tell me if you experience any dizziness, irregular heartbeat, or chills, all right?”
Shannon (who’d just experienced all three) felt guilty immediately but nodded and brushed long tendrils of her dark auburn hair out of her eyes, “I promise…. and Safiya? Thank you… for everything. I realize that you’re risking your life helping me… us.”

*Shit, am I blushing?* She hadn’t done that in… years.

The young woman smiled mysteriously and wrapped Shannon in an unexpected embrace. Normally, the CIA officer wouldn’t have tolerated that kind of sudden physical contact, but the doctor’s softness against her felt… more than nice, comforting, and she smelled faintly of cedar, one of her favorite scents.

Their hug wasn’t brief, nor a strictly friendly affair… it was lingering, and delightfully intimate.

Neither one of them wanted to let go (Shannon certainly didn’t), it was as if they were seeking solace, and strength, from one another. And in that perfect moment, all of the gunfire and explosions outside faded into the background.

But, a minute later a nurse with panic in his voice called for Safiya, who was started from her moment of peace and stood on her tippy toes to whisper something in Shannon’s ear, “I would rather risk everything to do what is right, as a doctor and a human being, than do nothing and let these ignorant murderers do whatever they want, take whatever they want, and bring harm to you... and your people.” She then stepped back, her face flushed, and bowed slightly in her elegant manner before returning to her other patients.

A stunned Shannon was left to marvel after her. *She’s… amazing.*

But she quickly shook her head, cursing herself for being distracted by and coveting something so pure, and beautiful… that there was most likely no chance in hell she could ever have.

*I’ll need to at least see about helping with her visa if we live...* which was the rub.

Safiya’s offer of painkillers had been very tempting, but Shannon knew that it was imperative that she remain alert, and stay in control despite the pain. Every minute moving forward was becoming more challenging than the last as the attacking militants’ frenzy grew with each new assault.

*Like sharks smelling blood in the water…*

They wanted Ambassador Franklin’s head and would stop at nothing to get it. Fortunately, Christopher was locked in the vault-like panic room two levels underground.

*The bastards will never get him, not before help arrives anyway.*

Shannon swallowed hard and fingered the .45 strapped to her thigh. *They’ll need to settle for mine, I suppose.*

She swore then and there that when the time came she’d take as many of the insurgents with her on the way out as she could, and then put a bullet in her own head before letting any of the sons-of-bitches banging at her door remove it.

Suddenly, a vision of sweet Safiya, bleeding and dying, flashed through her mind… and Shannon gasped. *No fucking way, no one is touching her. Not while I’m still breathing.* Her own fury at the thought of someone harming the Libyan woman surprised her.

*Well, whaddyya know? I really am smitten… talk about shitty timing. Story of my life. She sighed.*
As the embassy’s Regional Security Officer as well as the Libya Station Chief for the CIA, she knew far too well how slim their odds of survival were. She wanted to believe that if they could just manage to hold out for another couple hours that there was a possibility they might yet live to see the cavalry…but the realistic side of her knew that hope was a fantasy…

They were most likely screwed. Not that she could say that out loud, the survivors were already demoralized enough.

The west wing of the building had already fallen and was on fire; at last count, at least a dozen Marines were dead, and over twenty non-military staff had been either killed or listed as missing after the initial and secondary blasts. Even now, mortar rounds from three different parts of the city were striking the embassy complex with regularity…and inching closer to the center.

It was only a matter of time.

They didn’t have more than thirty or forty minutes. It was an estimate, but a good one.

Shannon shook away the fog and dizziness that kept creeping into her brain (I can pass out later) and called over to her partner in crime…the well-armed Marine in combat gear and body armor who’d just hustled into the room with two other serious-looking warriors.

“Sergeant!”

The warrior looked up at her with his curious dark brown, almost ebony eyes, and quickly dashed over to stand before her, all the while skeptically appraising her condition. “You look like shit, ma’am; I didn’t notice the crispy hair before.” He offered her a twisted grin.

Shannon was surprised at how much she had taken to the tough young man and his sardonic sense of humor; not nearly as much as a certain Libyan doctor, but the odds of her having a shot with the sweet Muslim girl were probably about nil. Weren’t they?

She’d expected the pretty boy to be as dumb as a box of rocks when she’d first met him, but it turned out to be the opposite. His quick, decisive thinking and strategic actions during the chaos that followed the initial attack on the embassy were a big part the reason half of the people in the room were still alive.

He was barely in his twenties (at least ten years her junior) but she knew the energetic young man would jump at the chance to slip between the sheets with her, or on top of her desk, or in a closet, or wherever…burnt face or not. She’d never dated anyone that much younger than her before, but a part of her (the one trying to save her heart from being crushed by a Libyan beauty) was pushing her to consider giving it a try…if they weren’t all dead by morning.

She managed to smirk back at him using only half her face, “Tell me something I don’t know, Stevens. I’m still upright, so you’re stuck with me for a little while longer.” He continued grinning as he nodded, obviously quite okay with being trapped with her. She noticed how he’d moved closer to her, ready to help her should she need support. “How’s the barricade holding?”

His eyebrows knit together in concern as he waved two Marines who’d just arrived on the floor over to the fortified side windows. When he responded, he was dead serious. “Not good, ma’am; one or two more direct mortar strikes is all it’ll take to breach…I think we’re about to lose the east wing too. We’ve bought time by moving everyone back to the core of the complex and switching to the underground mains for backup power, just as you ordered, but…”

Suddenly, the constant sound of screaming voices, gunfire, and battering grew quiet outside the
embassy… and everyone in the room stopped talking.

The silence was deafening… like the calm before a storm.

Then there was a roar, like nothing Shannon had ever heard before, that passed low over the building.

A tall female Marine (a Texan with a thick accent) spoke up, “Did ya’ hear that?” She leaned close to one of the boarded-up windows, straining to see and hear what was happening beyond the slats. “Sounded like a jet… maybe a Super Hornet from the *Harry Truman*?”

And then, as if on cue, a deep and powerful tremor shook the entire embassy and the far-off reverberation of what sounded like a collapsing building could clearly be heard coming from outside.

“Whoa…” The Texan gasped, holding onto the window frame for dear life and tilting her head this way and that to get a better view through an opening between the slats. That’s when a wall of dust, like a windstorm, slammed into the embassy… briefly pouring in through every crack and opening before it was over.

After the coughing subsided a murmur began to build in the room as everyone began speculating about the cause of the shaking, the noise, and the dust cloud.

“Calm down, people!” Shannon commanded. “We don’t know what it was, or if it’s even ours. Keep your enthusiasm in check, dammit, at least for now. Sergeant… you’re with me.” She and Stevens then exited the room and made their way up the spiral staircase to their makeshift command center on the third floor.

A grizzled MP and a female Marine Corporal who barely looked old enough to be out of high school sat at a large desk loaded with a hodgepodge of computer equipment and tangles of cables in a large air-conditioned room lined with wide high-definition displays. A few of the screens only showed gray distortion, but most revealed scenes from different parts of the embassy compound, various street views within a five-block radius, and the airspace above the complex.

Shannon could see that something clearly had their attackers rattled, as many had switched to watching the star-filled skies nervously and looking for cover. Whatever had happened had momentarily halted their assault on the embassy.

That’s when she noticed a screen showing a pillar of black smoke billowing from a section of the city only a few blocks away. Thankfully, the tech they used gave them nearly daylight views.

“Here, ma’am, this is what you’re probably looking for.” The slender African American Marine pointed at the display with the pillar of smoke and clicked her mouse.

“Look at screen seven, I’ll enlarge the view in 4k. Something quiet cruised in from the north, traveling at over Mach 5, and obliterated the parking structure three blocks south of us… the one with the enemy sniper nest and heavy weapons. The insurgents had a fifty-cal up there, surface to air missiles, RPGs, and they’ve been launching mortars off the roof at us.

I’ve slowed the feed down as much as I can, not that it helps much. This is from three and a half minutes ago.”

And there it was… a blur, something moving so fast Shannon couldn’t make out any details, but whatever it was, it was small, like maybe human-sized. “A cruise missile?” She asked the room.

“No way,” Stevens shook his head. “Not long enough. Whoa, and lookie... no Tomahawk does
As he spoke, they watched as the blurry missile-like object streaked over the embassy, maybe fifty feet over the roof, and flared with a subtle burst of light just before it struck the parking garage. The result wasn’t an explosion as she expected, but the structure actually collapsed inward upon itself! It imploded like a planned demolition, raising a thick cloud of dust and debris that billowed outward through the streets from the blast zone. So that’s what caused the dust storm!

A cheer was about to go up in the room but stuck in their throats when they all saw the same blur explode up out of the devastation, vector straight up, and then speed away so fast the camera was unable to follow.

A sonic boom could be heard on the video a second later.

“What in the Hell was that?” The stunned looking MP, who had so far remained quiet, asked of no one in particular.

“I don’t know.” Shannon mused, “Maybe an experimental weapon of some sort? Whatever it is, let’s hope to God it’s one of ours.”

Just then, the building shook again, more violently than before, and chunks of the ceiling, including decorative panels, coils of old wiring, and a support beam fell around them as the lights flickered.

“Direct hit!” Stevens yelled, and moved to shield Shannon with his body as a rack of Lorde Tech servers broke free and began to tip over. With her help, they managed to push the heavy computer hardware back into place as the building trembled once again, like an aftershock.

After dousing a small electrical fire with an extinguisher, the young Corporal called out, “Ma’am! Screens three and twelve! Looks like the militants are back at it from their two other positions, and they’re definitely doubling down on mortars.”

There on the displays were views of different parts of the city, one showed what had been a park, but was now a launching ground for the deadly weapons pounding the embassy. The center was ringed by a horde of armed gunman, pick-up trucks, and a rag-tag assortment of old military vehicles... even an old tank that lumbered away down a side street.

The other screen showed a large, vacant lot that looked like a graveyard of massive construction vehicles, with the same mortar arrangement. Shannon was about to speak when the blur returned and plummeted out of the sky, straight down into the center of the construction site and into the ground.

Its impact caused a huge detonation that picked up men, vehicles, earth, and mortars at its edge like a like a spherical tidal wave of dirt, dust, and debris… lifting and hurling everything before it like toys, shattering windows, and blowing in the doors of the surrounding buildings as it rippled outwards.

A few seconds later, the physical shockwave, a wall of dust and dirt, and the sound of a deep boom enveloped the embassy just as before.

“Ma’am!” the Marine called out, her voice shaky as she stared at screen twelve, as Shannon stood back up from where she’d fallen.

As the dust cleared, they could clearly see something rising from the impact crater…

A woman!

A beautiful woman.

Hovering like some dangerous, mythic goddess, she was surveying the area as if scanning for threats.
Her long golden hair spun wildly around her, and she wore a form-fitting bodysuit of deep reds and blues, glittering with stars, and a small, almost dainty mask hugged her eyes.

“My God…” Shannon couldn’t believe what she was seeing. “The Stars and Stripes! She’s wearing Old Glory! She’s one of ours!”

A loud cheer went up in the security booth as everyone continued to watch their potential savior.

Automatic weapons fire erupted from the dust storm around her, but the flying woman seemed more annoyed than concerned by the violent barrage, and she slowly turned (in mid-air!) in the direction of the bullets that were bouncing off her.

Everyone gasped when her eyes flared, and twin beams of intense energy, like searing bluish white lasers, shot out of them into the chaos! Her light lifted militants off their feet and sent them, and their weapons, hurling into walls, buildings, and vehicles… over and over again.

In a matter of seconds, she’d cleared the entire lot and cut a truck in half with her brilliant light as two of the militants attempted to flee while firing a fifty-caliber machine gun at her from the vehicle’s bed. She shimmered for a second before the vehicle exploded in a fireball, and then once again burst up into the sky leaving a rippling sonic boom behind and a trail of the reddish dust following her.

“RPGs moving up to sniper nest one, to the east. On display seven. They’re waiting for her to come back.” The nervous Corporal was obviously concerned for the hero’s safety, they all were.

Whoever this woman, or metahuman, was, she was one of them.

“Stevens.”

“Ma’am?”

“Get a strike team together, and be ready to assist her. Just in case.”

The Marine’s grin was all she needed to tell her he was thinking the same thing. He barked, “On it! We got her back, ma’am.” And he took off running.

All eyes were on screen three now, the one covering the park. Shannon watched as militants from the other mortar position fired two new rounds at the embassy in rapid succession. Everyone braced for impact, but suddenly their savior was hovering above the buildings, intercepting the first, and then the second projectile… blocking the explosive rounds with her bare hands.

Twin fiery blasts enveloped her, and the building trembled.

As the smoke and flames cleared, she was still there, hovering unscathed high above them… and she looked really annoyed.

Then the hero did something surprising. She called down to her attackers in perfect Arabic, her voice as loud as thunder, “This embassy and everyone in it is under my protection. Leave now, all of you! This is my one and only warning.”

Some of the insurgents had already fled, and others did so immediately after hearing her threat, but over half stood their ground. A minute later, after ignoring more small arms fire, the disappointed looking young woman said, “So be it” and once again unleashed her dancing beams of light into the ranks of her enemies.

Cars and mortars exploded, running men screamed as they were tossed like rag dolls caught in a
hurricane… and she blurred and disappeared again.

Crap! Where did she go?

As smoke and fire billowed from the devastated park, the woman rose unhurriedly from within its fiery center. Shannon would never forget that moment, the sight of the calm, graceful hero, silhouetted by fire, golden hair streaming behind her.

“She’s like a scary angel.” The awestruck Corporal whispered, voicing what they were all thinking. The older MP was quietly reciting a prayer.

Then a loud explosion boomed and their savior turned quickly to her right, but not fast enough. Three high-velocity projectiles slammed into her, one from an old tank down on the street, and two RPG rounds.

She was sent careening through the air for several blocks in a high arc, crashing through the roof of a six-story apartment building.

“No!” Shannon yelled. Everyone was right there with her, glued to the screen.

Their enemy’s joy was as short-lived as Shannon’s concern.

Seconds later, the woman exploded from the building the same way she came in, soaring straight up to hover above the structure briefly, before blurring down to where the tank was preparing to fire again. She easily punched through its thick armor with her whole body like a spear, disappearing into the street below it, and then burst back up underneath the mechanical bulk of the massive vehicle, lifting it over her head.

She held it there for a moment, and then with an ear-splitting screech of tearing metal, began to pull it in half, like cracking an egg… spilling fuel, oil, and four militants out onto the dirt before tossing the two halves aside like trash, one right through a building.

Her eyes were blazing with blue fire as the men cowered at her feet.

She was both glorious and terrifying.

Shannon watched with fascination as, rather than attacking, the woman reached down with one hand and simply touched each man on the forehead, knocking them motionless to the ground.

Incredible. Shannon had not expected such restraint.

It was then that a fresh barrage of RPGs started, and even with her amazing speed and apparent invulnerability, the hero was only able to block two of the multiple attacks. Enveloped by flame, she was struck twice more, and then spun around by another, sending her body into and through the thick cinderblock wall of a building.

Shannon wasn’t really worried about her anymore, whoever she was; her girl hadn’t gone down after being blindsided by a tank. The CIA Officer grinned when the visibly pissed off hero strode through the hole in the wall, seething with blue fire, fists clenched, and ready to unleash hell…

That’s when she saw that a large group of militants had encircled her, hidden by the shroud of smoke, with their automatic weapons raised. Before she could act, several children bound with rope and wearing suicide vests were pushed forward to their knees in front of the men. Scattered around the circle were children (most likely all street kids) appearing to range in age from four to twelve years old. Some of them were crying, others had obviously put up a fight and had been beaten into
bloody submission.

Shannon watched as the woman’s blue fire drained from her and was replaced by a look of horror. The hero raised her arms and began speaking to her masked attackers, but Shannon could barely make out what she was saying,

“Corporal, turn up the mics!” She said with urgency, and the captivated young Marine scrambled to comply…

The speakers screeched, and Shannon could clearly hear the woman trying to reason with her attackers in flowing Arabic. She begged, “Let them go. They are just innocent children! This doesn’t involve them. Walk away from this.”

A short, slightly heavyset man wearing sunglasses and a long black cloth wrapped around his face and neck strode forward arrogantly. “How dare you speak directly to me, woman! (he spoke with word with loathing) Abomination!” He spat in her direction. “You are a demon, sent to test us… but you have failed!” And with that, his men quickly retreated and he raised his right hand.

Shannon saw the glint of metal clenched in his grasp… “Trigger switch! He has a trigger switch!” She called out.

The golden-haired hero reacted immediately as if she could hear the warning! Her beams of blue light instantaneously lashed out, and the man’s hand, along with what he’d been holding, disappeared in a searing flash.

As he stumbled back, screaming and grasping frantically at his stump, his terrified companions all raised their AK-47s, threatening to fire. The powerful woman merely shook her head as if disappointed, and spoke solemnly, “You fools, I would have shown you mercy…”

She then looked briefly at the ruins behind the insurgents and launched herself up into the air, drawing the fire of their automatic weapons away from the kids.

A split-second after, Stevens, leading over twenty Marines, stepped out from behind the shattered pillars and broken buildings where she’d glanced and began shooting the armed militants with cool efficiency, dropping most of them in the initial ambush.

More salvos were exchanged in a violent struggle with the handful of terrorists who’d survived the attack. The super-powered woman returned to intervene and stopped bullets from striking two Marines, but one, a woman, went down with a shot to the neck before it was over.

There as blood everywhere.

The hero appeared in a flash to support the fallen soldier with one of her powerful arms behind her back. The Marine was choking, gasping, losing blood fast, and starting to panic.

“I’m here, I have you. You’re going to be okay.” The blonde spoke with such serenity, and assurance, that the injured warrior visibly calmed as she grasped her arm like a lifeline. The woman then offered the hero a blood-smeared smile through her grimace of pain.

A small crowd of her comrades had gathered around them, and one dropped to his knees to assist the hero, who’d leaned down to somehow use the lasers from her eyes, not as a weapon this time, but in an infinitely tight beam to stop the worst of the bleeding from the fallen Marine’s neck.

When the blonde was finished, she unwound herself from the now unconscious woman, gracefully stood, and issued orders, “Get her to the infirmary, now! She needs a proper doctor. And take the
kids inside after I’ve disarmed them, we’re giving them sanctuary.” Her tone did not invite dissent.

Without waiting for an answer, the hero blurred off and began removing the bomb vests from the Libyan children who were milling about, some crying. Once her task was complete, she launched herself straight up into the air with her arms full of heavy explosives.

Shannon breathed a sigh of relief, but at the same moment movement on one of the other screens drew her attention to the strangest sight.

A gray and white bird of some kind, an owl? came swooping out of nowhere and dive-bombed the bodies of the fallen insurgents. The little creature was frantically attacking one of them, fluttering up and down with blinding speed, literally tearing chunks of flesh out of the man who was crawling jerkily over the bodies of his fallen comrades.

Gooseflesh rose down Shannon’s arms watching the disturbing scene… it was truly unnatural.

It was as if the bird was trying to stop the strange man from reaching something, and he wasn’t even reacting to having his face pecked off.

*What the hell?*

“Oh shit!” She cursed.

The supposedly dead militant’s goal was clear to her now; he’d made it to the body of his fallen leader (the one with a stump for an arm) and was reaching inside his shirt.

The bird had increased its efforts, yet the determined terrorist continued ignoring the deceptively powerful creature’s devastating attacks… and the man’s eyes!

*Holy shit!*

In the video, they looked more like sunken hollows, and as impossible as it was, seemed to radiate an unnatural darkness. In fact, he looked like a freaking zombie!

But she didn’t have time to worry about that.

Both she and the young Corporal yelled into the comms to get the attention of the Marines on the ground, “You have a live one! Turn around! Look at the leader! There must be a backup trigger! Someone shoot that guy! **Shoot** dammit!”

Six Marines were firing, but the man with midnight leaking from the holes where his eyes should be didn’t seem to be affected. Even as his head exploded he still managed to raise a small device that looked like a garage door opener in one hand and click it.

At the same time, the heroic woman speeding upwards into the night sky with the bomb vests in her arms disappeared in a massive, blinding detonation that rocked the entire section of the city, and knocked down everyone below her (even those inside the embassy).

A second passed before Shannon scrambled to her knees, her ears ringing, and watched as their limp hero tumbled in free fall at least five or six hundred feet above the street, her clothing in tatters.

“There she is!” She called out as everyone in the room, and on the ground, held their collective breaths.

..........................
October 15th – Year Four

US Embassy compound, Tripoli, Libya

0224 Hours UTC +2, Sunday morning, local time

Just as it looked like she was about to slam into the lot strewn with shattered concrete beneath her, the golden-haired hero returned to consciousness. In a split-second, she’d somehow righted herself and landed gracefully on both feet like a cat.

Shannon and everyone else watching started breathing again.

Cheers, laughter, and clapping erupted throughout the embassy wherever there were monitors.

After that, the blonde shimmered off, moving faster than the eye could follow to begin extinguishing multiple fires blazing all over the embassy using what appeared to be a powerful freezing breath.

*Just like… Superman. Huh… interesting.*

She then rounded up straggler militants for the Marines; quickly reinforced the breached walls using huge chunks of broken concrete, metal girders, and rebar (she was like a bulldozer and crane rolled up into one); and provided cover to teams of Sergeant Stevens’ Marines as they moved the injured into the safety of the embassy’s inner courtyard.

As the CIA Station Chief was preparing to head down to the courtyard to join them, she glanced up at one of the monitors in awe as, under Stevens’ direction, the nearly naked hero/goddess used her twin lasers to separate a pick-up truck’s rear bed from the cab. For what purpose Shannon wasn’t really sure, but it was damned impressive.

Given the state of their hero’s shredded Stars and Stripes uniform, the CIA Officer detoured into her debris-strewn office to grab some extra clothes before making her way downstairs. The superpowered woman appeared to be about Shannon’s height of 5’9”, so she figured the fit shouldn’t be a problem, though the shirt might be a little tight in the chest with the hero’s amazing rack.

Shannon ended up with a couple pairs of faded jeans, a button-down cotton shirt, a T-shirt, and extra running shoes from her closet, which she shoved in a small backpack and slung over her shoulder.

She bumped into Safiya on her way downstairs, and the pair didn’t need to speak for Shannon to understand that the young woman was coming with her, no matter what.

The doctor gently took her by the arm and helped ensure that the injured CIA Officer made it safely down the stairs, a demure smile on her face the whole time. Shannon’s skin tingled everywhere the beautiful doctor touched her, and even though she made it down to the ground floor without incident, it felt like she was falling anyway (in an amazingly good and terrifying way).

“Thank you so much… I… I…” She started in Arabic, a bit breathless and unsure of how to express the real gratitude and affection that she was feeling for the amazing woman.

Safiya leaned into her and squeezed her hand. “You are most welcome, Shannon MacKenna. I am honored to now know you, even under these terrible circumstances.” Then she grinned impishly. “I said before that you are very brave, like a lioness, and this is true, but you are also beautiful… scars
“You… I…? I am? I mean… ach! Oh no!” Shannon tripped on her own feet and would have toppled over if Safiya hadn’t caught her. Feeling the incredible curves of the smaller woman’s body moving against her was almost too much to handle.

*Oh crap… I’m in sooo much trouble.*

Shannon stared into Safiya’s warm, smiling sky blue eyes for several long moments before the good doctor blushed and righted her back on her unsteady feet.

*Shukran Jazilan.* Now subdued, Shannon mumbled the Arabic equivalent of ‘thank you, very much’ and let a very contented Safiya guide her to the embassy’s center.

As the pair entered the wide, greenery-filled courtyard the doctor turned to her and asked with concern, “Will you be alright as I assist the injured?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine, just park me here by this stand of olive trees. It’ll give me something to lean on since I won’t have you.” Shannon bit her lip as the younger woman assessed her with a playful grin.

“I assure you, *that* is a temporary situation. I will return to check on you as often as I can. In the meantime, do not strain yourself.” The doctor’s stern tone couldn’t be argued with, but Shannon didn’t mind at all… Safiya was really worried about her.

“I promise, I’ll take it easy.” When the doctor raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms Shannon piped back up, “I swear!”

“Fine.” Safiya’s severe façade crumbled as her face lit up with a serene smile and she touched her forehead with the fingers of her right hand then gracefully presented her palm to Shannon saying, “Until we meet again.” She then moved off to coordinate the triage efforts for the thirty or so bloody soldiers and embassy staff already lying on mats and cots in the center of the courtyard, as well as those still coming in on stretchers.

Shannon watched the doctor work for a few minutes but then threw herself into the fray. Thinking of her promise, she found a strategic place to sit and took charge of the chaos around the makeshift infirmary…. directing the soldiers and those aiding the injured.

Not long after, she glimpsed Stevens come into the courtyard with a squad of Marines, two of them injured, through the security gate from outside. The Sergeant took off his helmet and stood off near one of the leafy gardens. He was dusty and obviously fatigued, but unhurt and drinking greedily from a canteen.

“Stevens,” Shannon said casually as she stood up and approached. “Is she still out there?”

“Ma’am.” He nodded with a grin. “Yup. Makin’ a transport, so she can fly the worst cases to the *Harry Truman* for medical treatment. She’s damned amazing, calls herself Archangel.”

The gears in Shannon’s mind were turning; she’d heard rumors of that code name somewhere before, from within The Agency.

And, as if on cue, the angel herself appeared.

The shadows suddenly flickered over them as something passed in front of the brilliant stars above them, and everyone looked up to see the hero slowly descending from the sky, cradling a Marine in her arms with great tenderness. She touched down on the ancient cobblestones of the inner courtyard
and was greeted by the ecstatic cheers of the gathering crowd, and an anxious Doctor Murabit.

The young hero’s ripped clothing barely covered her, and under her once glorious Stars and Stripes uniform was a canvas of tanned, flawless skin… The combined force of the suicide vests hadn’t even scratched her. Amazing….

Who is she, an angel or Superman’s sister?

“Doctor?” The hero asked in a clear lovely voice of Safiya, who was already examining the unconscious man.

“I am Safiya, Safiya Murabit.” Shannon noticed how the young woman nervously averted her gaze from the beautiful hero’s nakedness, even as she hurriedly went to work on the Marine, who Archangel had carefully laid on a blanket.

“As-salāmu ʿalayki.” The Arabic greeting of “peace be upon you” rolled off the hero’s tongue as if she had been born speaking the language.

Once again, her fluency intrigued Shannon. Where did she learn to speak it so well?

Safiya appeared both surprised and delighted, and finally looked directly at their golden-haired savior as she responded, “Waʿalaykumu s-salām” (“and upon you, peace.”)

The angel’s smile was glorious. How many hearts had she devastated growing up? Shannon wondered. And speaking of age, she looked barely old enough to drink… there was no way she was over twenty.

“It’s very nice to meet you Safiya, I’m Archangel. I can fit about six; maybe seven patients in the transport I built and can make multiple trips to the carrier if necessary, just load me up with the most critical cases first. Until then, I can help here. I have extensive experience with removing shrapnel, dealing with broken bones, can cauterize wounds, and am like a walking MRI and X-Ray machine… seriously.”

The doctor appeared thrilled and began giving her instructions.

Shannon stepped forward to offer her the stack of clothing and shoes from her backpack to the woman. “You might need these before you get started… Archangel.”

“That’s what they call me. Thank you so much!” She swore to God that the hero’s sapphire eyes glittered as she smiled and appraised the older woman as she accepted the clothes. When their fingers brushed, Shannon could feel how extraordinarily warm the woman’s skin was.

Incredible!

“I’m Shannon… Shannon MacKenna.” She said, sticking her hand out, feeling awkward, like she was thirteen again, meeting a stunningly hot celebrity. “The Regional Security Officer here.”

“Hi. I know who you are, and everyone back home was ecstatic when I told them that you were still alive. I’m glad too, I worried about you half the way here.”

Shannon was stunned, who was this woman who knew so much, and what did she mean ‘back home’? How was she communicating? Unfortunately, her curiosity would have to wait for answers, as Archangel blurred, and in less than two seconds was wearing the clothes Shannon had loaned her. She looked stunning, of course. The only items left from her costume was her delicate mask and a gorgeous blue sapphire necklace that hung around her neck.
Further conversation was impossible as they were inundated by a horde of cheering children, all hugging Archangel around the waist and legs… and babbling their questions, gratitude, and appreciation at her in a mix of Arabic and Berber dialects.

Shannon would never forget how the angel’s face lit up with such joy, but also heartbreak for the kids. The hero looked over helplessly at Safiya, “Can you spare me for just a few minutes before I get started? I can’t explain it, but I can help take some of their pain away, I just need a few minutes.”

“Of course Archangel, for a short time, but join me as soon as you can. The injured cannot wait long.” The good doctor then bowed slightly and dashed off to her patients.

The blonde goddess, on the other hand, spent the next few minutes giving the giggling and screeching children roller-coaster rides up high into the air above the embassy. Soaring up with the stars.

Shannon kept glancing over, and really wanted to ask for a ride too… but was definitely too busy. Maybe someday?

Not long after, the children (who all somehow seemed happier, less burdened after spending just a few minutes with Archangel… just as she’d said they would be) hugged the hero goodbye, though three of the youngest were crying and didn’t want to let go of her. Two very patient embassy staffers finally did guide them off to be fed as they all chanted and called out “Wadāʾan!” back to her.

It was a much more relaxed hero who shimmered like an apparition to materialize at Safiya’s side. “Just tell me what you need, Doc.” She said with a smile.

The Libyan woman’s startled laugh was the most delightful thing Shannon had heard in ages… and something Shannon found herself wishing she could look forward to hearing a lot more often.

The next few hours were exhausting (and horrible), but having Archangel there was a huge boost to morale, and everyone who was able pitched in to help, including gathering supplies, helping with the injured, and getting people fed.

The hero was everywhere at the same time, using her abilities under Safiya’s guidance to save multiple lives, and improve the condition of many others. After carrying off two loads of patients into the pre-dawn skies to the USS *Harry Truman*, the hero returned to devour what amounted to three meals in one sitting!

Shannon sat across from Archangel at one of metal commissary tables and watched her shovel mashed potatoes and green beans into her mouth like one of the Marines.

“Don’t they feed you in… wherever you’re from?” She grinned, chin on her knuckles as she observed the feeding frenzy with a kind of fascinated wonder.

Archangel looked up as if startled; her cheeks puffed out like a gerbil storing its food. “S..srry.” The blonde mumbled apologetically and then finished chewing. “I eat more than normal people, especially after a fight.”

“I can see that… because of your powers?”

Archangel looked down at her mug, took a deeply satisfying sip of tea, and said, “Side effect, the Earth’s sun gives me most of what I need for that.”

Shannon was fascinated by her answer, and wanted to know more, but had something else on her
mind that required more immediate explanation. She took a breath and asked, “Care to explain how
you know me, who you are… and who sent you?”

The blonde looked over at her with a sincere and thoughtful expression and paused before
responding. “Okay, I know you’re The Agency’s Libya Station Chief. My handler and his boss,
Amanda Thorpe, send their regards. They were so worried when they lost comms with you.”

“Wait… you’re CIA? You work for…” Her voice dropped to a barely audible whisper, “Directorate
138?”

Archangel smiled sweetly, and nodded, “Uh huh, part-time.”

“Good Lord. Well, we do have a lot to talk about.”

“Agreed, but I can’t stay long. There are spec ops inbound, and a fleet of Super Stallions on the way
from the Harry Truman for evac. You and your people are safe now and I’d rather not overstay my
welcome, especially since I was never here.” Her grin and wink were completely adorable. “Too
many questions.”

“Understood.” Shannon nodded, then suddenly winced and doubled over as searing pain rippled like
flames deep in her cheek and jaw. Her world went black, and she began to topple off her chair…

Archangel was at her side holding her up before she could fall sideways, and after a moment
Shannon returned to a hazy, agonizingly painful reality. She moaned.

“Okay, let me get a better look at that.” The hero said, focusing her gaze on the Station Chief’s
injured area as if she could see through her bandage. Damn, she probably can. “Oh Rao, that looks
bad. Your wounds are infected, I need to get that bandage off.”

Shannon was too tired to resist or ask what a Rao was, so she allowed Archangel to peel the gauze
back, wincing in agony as she did. She could tell the young woman was trying not took look
horrified as she briefly examined the burns up close, but was failing miserably.

After a few moments of what seemed like silent contemplation, the concerned hero said, “I’m going
to try something. I’m being told that you may feel tingling and maybe some extra pain, briefly, on the
injured tissue, and maybe some heat, but don’t worry that’ll mean it’s healing.”

“What are you going to do, use another power?” Shannon was both curious and terrified.

“No, this time it’s science! I have these… um, little nanobots that do all kinds of cool stuff, but my
teammate… Navigator, the one who helps me, is reprogramming some of the little guys to try and fix
you up. It’s something Al… my girlfriend and her mentor have been working on, but haven’t been
able to test on a real person yet.”

“Seriously?” The angel has a girlfriend?? She’s gay!? That’s amazing.

“Yup. It’s your call… but it seems worth a shot because if this fails I’m flying you to the Harry
Truman or back to the states immediately. You’re in bad shape.”

“Okay, fine.” Shannon sat back weakly, “I’ll be your lab rat if it means an end to the knives shoving
in and out through my cheek.”

Minutes later, she had a fresh bandage on her tingling face, and the pain was almost gone.

Archangel was grinning. “Navigator says that some of the areas where you were burned were deep,
beyond 3rd degree, so there’ll still be some light scarring when the bots are done, but not terribly noticeable. On the bright side, you should be completely healed in less than a week.”

All the pent-up emotions Shannon had bottled up finally boiled over, and before she knew what was happening she was quietly crying and being held in the warm comfort of Archangel’s arms.

Oct 15th - Year Four

US Embassy compound, Tripoli, Libya

0554 hours UTC +2, Sunday morning, local time

At daybreak, down in the Embassy’s cool inner courtyard, Shannon, Safiya, and Sergeant Stevens were seeing Archangel off. Embassy staff and Marines kept coming over to thank and hug her, some on crutches, and most wrapped in bandages somewhere.

She was gentle and patient with everyone, and so much more approachable dressed like a normal person.

“You can keep the outfit, by the way.” Shannon grinned as she rubbed at the bandage covering her tingly, swiftly healing jaw… delighted at feeling almost no pain.

Archangel smiled over at the CIA Officer as she shook hands with Stevens, and then wrapped the doctor in a tight embrace. The two had gotten to know each other fairly well over the last few hours and already seemed close.

For her part, Shannon was already missing her gay angel. This is a woman I’d love to get to know better, be friends with if such a thing were even possible. And damn, I want to meet her girlfriend! Respect.

“Thanks! I really like the fit of these jeans.” The hero spun and looked down her back over her shoulder. Shannon elbowed Stevens as he gawked at the young woman’s perfect ass. “Keep your eyes in your head, Sergeant.” She scowled.

“Yes, ma’am!” He said, smirking back at Shannon.

Safiya blushed and awkwardly looked at the tiles on the ground.

Stevens spoke up, “Archangel, I had another question. Do you know anything about a big hole in the ground a block and a half west? We found over a hundred men there; unarmed, all banged up, some bleeding, others with broken limbs, burns, and popped eardrums, that sort of thing… twenty-five feet down, trapped like rats. They look a hell of a lot like the fighters that attacked us, who we thought you’d killed. Want to fill us in?”

The hero looked immediately guilty, “Um, yeah, that was me.” She admitted.

“So, you didn’t kill all of them? We saw…”

“You saw what I wanted them to see. I don’t like being feared, but it can be a great motivator…”
especially when dealing with zealots. Strike when your opponent is off-balance, Sergeant, and never kill if there’s another way… that’s my motto at least.” She sighed. “There were several unavoidable deaths, but as for the rest, I suppose the U.S. and Libyan governments will decide their fates.”

“But how did you…? I mean, I saw some of these guys caught in the middle of explosions. Most of them should be dead.”

Archangel grinned. “I can move very fast, almost like a magic.” And with that, she shimmered for just a split second but never seemed to move from where she was standing with her hands heroically placed on her hips.

She then proceeded to pull his sidearm from behind her back and handed it back to him.

As he was sputtering, reaching for where the gun had been on his side holster, she indicated he should open his hand and as he did so she poured a handful of bullets into his palm. “From your clip. Pretty cool, huh?”

Shannon loved how happy the young woman looked right then, like a child showing off her favorite toy. Well, not showing off as much as sharing something special.

Stevens stared blankly at the .45 caliber bullets sitting in his palm, then up at the hero, and started laughing. “Holy shit, Archangel… you’re as fast as the wind, and got balls of steel! I ain’t ever playin’ poker with you.”

"Thanks, I think.” The hero smiled, and then turned to Shannon, “Hey, before I fly (literally), you asked before if there anything you could do for me… well, there is. A couple things, actually.”

“Anything… within reason of course.” Shannon was elated to be asked.

“Awesome. Okay, first Navigator is emailing you the information for an organization that can help the kids find families once they’re in the States. Trust me on this, they’ll take care of them.” Shannon nodded; the task sounded easy enough and took a weight off her shoulders worrying about what was going to happen to the traumatized little orphans. “Second, we need your help with something else. If we provide it, can you give Safiya and her sister Hana their official U.S. Passports and citizenship paperwork?”

Safiya looked on with surprise and excitement… Shannon, on the other hand, was confused, but also hopeful. What did Archangel have up her sleeve?

“Don’t worry; it’s all already in process.” The hero added. “Hana may want to stay on with the State Department, that's her choice, but I have it on good authority that there is an open position for an attending physician at Smythe Medical waiting for Dr. Murabit back in National City.”

The look of joy on the beautiful Libyan woman’s face was priceless and pulled hard at Shannon’s frayed heartstrings.

Archangel added, “Please… We both know how bad she wants and deserves this. She’ll die if she stays here. If not physically, she will inside.”

Shannon glanced over at Safiya, whose puppy dog eyes were impossible to resist, and sighed, “Fine, and I won’t ask how you know so much about them, or about the passports and all the paperwork. I have a feeling I don’t want to know… and you probably wouldn’t tell me anyway.”

“Good choice.” The hero said, her smile as warm as the sun.
“Thank you, both so much… though I don’t know how I can ever properly thank you.” Safiya was almost in tears.

Shannon had some ideas, none of which she could admit out loud.

Archangel stepped in close, then touched the doctor’s arm and said, “Bring your light, your skills, your kindness, your courage, and your passion for saving lives… that will be thanks enough. Also, know that you already have friends in National City… and a roommate. They’ll be in touch to help get you settled in once you’re stateside.”

Kara then glanced over at Shannon with a grin, “And once you’re back in the states I’ll check in on you as well, MacKenna. I want to see how you’re healing… and maybe we can grab a coffee.”

Suddenly, the CIA Station Chief was beaming uncontrollably. They would see each other again.

“I’d like that, sincerely.”

Archangel smiled full on, and said, “Good, I’m looking forward to getting together with you under… better circumstances.” Then, she glanced up at the sky, tilting her head as if listening to something none of them could hear.

“Trouble?” Shannon asked with dread.

“Nope, the opposite! Sounds like the cavalry is almost here. Helos from the Harry Truman should arrive in less than twenty minutes, you all better go pack.”

Shannon smirked, “Actually, the cavalry’s about to leave us. I can’t thank you enough for what you did here today… for all of us, and the country.”

To her surprise, Archangel giggled awkwardly and blushed again. The blonde hero was impossibly adorable, gorgeous, and obviously not used to praise… interesting.

“Just doing what I can to help… I’m glad Amanda called on me, even though I’m probably going to end up missing a day of classes with all the debriefs when I get back… you know, priorities.”

They chuckled, and Shannon could tell that even though the hero was making light of it nothing would have stopped her from helping that day… that’s just the kind of on she was. It was interesting to know that she was a college student. “Thank you, Archangel, from all of us.”

She beamed. “You’re welcome, I’m glad I could help. Well, I think you’re in good hands now, and I need to get moving.” The graceful woman then waved to everyone gathered and lifted off the earth as if she were light as a feather, soaring straight up as she called down, “Until we meet again!”

Shannon, with Safiya, gently brushing softly up against her side, mmm… I could get used to this, watched as Archangel’s silhouette slowly dissolved into the pink- and gray-hued skies.

“Kiew.” Her attention was drawn to the same subtle sound, like a call or a melodic trill, she’d heard several times over the past few hours, and finally saw the cause of it. A tiny mottled gray owl, of all things, was perched up in one of the ancient olive trees that populated the inner courtyard of the embassy.

It appeared to be the very same heroic bird that tried to stop the dead-man-walking from blowing up Archangel. Why did you do that, little guy? The creature also seemed to be watching their savior depart… or perhaps it was just her imagination.

Shannon had never before seen an owl in Tripoli, or Libya for that matter. She closed her eyes for a
brief moment and then opened them again to be sure… and a-yup, the bird was still up there in the branches.

_The little fellow is real and so beautiful…_

_Maybe he’s a sign?_

She pinched the bridge of her nose and exhaled. _Something strange is going on. The owl tried to warn us about that… undead thing. At the very least I need to have a Marine drag that walking corpse in here for Safiya to examine._

It was just a feeling, but she just knew she was right.

Odd, the cute little bird was looking at her… as if it were pleased by her decision.

“Kiew.” It piped one last time before fluttering away.

It was at that moment that the good doctor’s thumb brushed against her hand, and lingered… stirring gentle, deliberate circles, and sending ripples of pleasure up Shannon’s arm directly into her brain. It was literally the most surprising, yet calming, blissful, and perfect thing the CIA Station Chief could have asked for had she’d known how much she’d wanted it.

As their fingers partially entwined she turned her head and was greeted by the sight of a Safiya studying her with a kind of compassionate wonder. Like the younger woman was peering inside of her, and liked everything she saw.

_No one’s ever looked at me that way before._

_No one._

In Arabic, a slight tremor in her voice, Safiya asked, “When they come and take us, will I still be able to see you?”

Shannon wanted to reach out and hug her again, to assure her that they had plenty of time… but she knew that she couldn’t make any promises. In fact, they probably only had a few hours before she’d be on a helo or a plane, and being escorted to some austere, yet comfortable cell, most likely Germany… a guest of her employer until they’d finished debriefing (cough), interrogating her, and she passed the loyalty test.

She said, “We have until they arrive, and then… I don’t know. I’ll need to go away for a while after. My masters will have questions, and it’s my job to help them understand what happened here.”

Tiny little creases of concern quickly marred Safiya’s beautiful face. She said, “Because you are CIA, I understand.” She sighed, obviously not pleased, but accepting. “But after? Is National City far from where you will be?”

Shannon now understood what was going on, and she smiled. “Not too far. Hey, when this is all over, would you like to see me? As in maybe go to dinner?”

Safiya blushed and looked down, suddenly seeming to find their now half entangled fingers very interesting. After a moment of adorable stammering, and lip biting, she finally responded in a very pleased tone, “Yes, I would like that… very much.”

_She likes me!_ Shannon could barely contain her joy.
They’d need work out the details and logistics, of course, and she still had to ask Safiya about examining the ‘zombie’ before they left… just not right then at that beautiful moment.

They’d be torn apart soon enough, right then it was just the two of them… and, oh shit!

“Is Hana alright? Did you find her?” The words just spilled from Shannon, who was kicking herself for completely forgetting about Safiya’s sister.

The sweet doctor nodded, “Yes. I saw her before helping you downstairs. She’s shaken up, like everyone, but doing fine. She was assisting in the kitchen all night, but after feeding the children took charge of getting them settled.”

Shannon must have been giving her a questioning look, because Safiya added, “It’s a long story… We were orphans as well, and my sister is a bit of a crusader.”

The older woman’s heart skipped a beat, “I’m so sorry. I didn’t…”

The beautiful doctor just smiled and said, “Shannon, it’s okay, you will find that we are both quite resilient… and (fair warning), we usually get what we want.”

She then snuggled into Shannon’s side.

The CIA Officer pressed back into her, and they stood together quite content just to be still, at peace amid the organized chaos. Shannon didn’t want to move, especially not when Safiya laid her head against her shoulder, and the glorious rose-tinted glow of dawn began to spill into the cool courtyard.

As the minutes passed people came to them with questions, asking for guidance or orders, but it was easy noise to manage.

They still didn’t move.

Then, a bit later, and lost in thought, Shannon returned her gaze to the skies in the direction she’d last seen Archangel, and reverently touched her almost-fully-healed cheek.

She considered the life, and the people the super-powered girl was flying back to, and asked herself...

Who was the kind young hero behind the mask?

One thing was certain; Shannon couldn’t wait to see her again and find out.

............................

**Story Lexicon/FAQs:**

**Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms:** I attempt to *italicize* all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

**Terms:** *Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.*
Ah!khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

Alex vanimelda - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Ay Dios Mio – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)

Aporup – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)

As-salāmu ‘alayki – A (formal) greeting which is also a standard salutation among Muslims, meaning ‘peace be upon you’. Less formal abbreviation is simply salām. (Arabic)

Asheghetam - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

Azdidane shoma khoshhalam – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)

Bedrood – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

Bonne nuit – ‘Good night’ (French)

C’est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

Damnú air! – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Dooset daram – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gaelic/Irish)

íthi eutukhēs - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Kheili khosh geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

Malā’ikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature

Marbhfháisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)
mibosamet – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)
órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)
¡Qué señoritas tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)
Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)
Sundor – ‘Beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)
Thi eutukhēs – ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)
Volar mi diosa! – ‘Fly my goddess!’ (Spanish)
Waʻalaykumu s-salām – A response to the greeting As-salāmu ʿalayki, ‘and upon you, peace’ (Arabic)
Wadā’an – ‘Farewell’ (Arabic)
Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:
aziz-am – ‘My dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)
joon-am – ‘My dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)
Nāzanin-am – ‘Sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)
nooré cheshm-am – ‘The light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).
sheereen-am – ‘Sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)
‘>insert person’s name<’ + joon (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean ‘dear’. So, ‘Shah joon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

Other names/nickname/titles/things:
A ghrá – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)
A ghrá mo chroí - ‘My heart's beloved, my darling’ (Irish/Gaelic)
Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)
Bríomhair – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)
Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

Daxamites - An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people ruled by strength/the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow altered by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.

Dios mío! – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Euryleia – ‘Woman Wanderer’ or ‘Wide Wandering’ - Dr. Naomi Young’s Amazon name

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)

In’ah – Ancient, lost word for ‘daughter’ - what Myka calls Kara (Kryptonese),

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

M'eudail – ‘My darling’ or ‘my dear’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Ma’har - Ancient, lost word for ‘mother’ - what Kara calls Myka (Kryptonese)

Mi amor – ‘My love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Mi lucero – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Mi Sol – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn - Thought & Memory (Old Norse)

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Norooz - Persian New Year (Persian)

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Oea - This ancient city was founded by the Phoenicians in the seventh century BC, was ruled at one time or another by the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines. Italians, and Muslims. It came to be known as Tripoli during the 9th century (Libyco-Berber)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity (from Ancient Freek)
**Salud!** – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

**Seanmháthair** – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced *shan a WAV her* (Irish/Gaelic)

**Señora** – Is a polite term used to address a woman. The Spanish-language equivalent of Ma’am, Ms., or Mrs. (Spanish)

**Tieguanyin** - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

**Tratung** – khrag ‘thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

**Trípolis** – Tripoli, the capital and largest city in Libya (from Ancient Greek)

**Tuath Dé Danann** - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced *Thoo-a day Du-non* (Irish/Gaelic)

**Uri baba!** – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

**Vaena, Vaena Alex** – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’. ‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

**Vakur** – A powerful (and rare) soul-devouring, evil, shape-shifting parasitic alien species from another universe. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.

**Valar** – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Valaraukar** – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as *Balrogs*. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Vallerian** – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshiped, or traded.

**Wan** - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

**Zhuyin** – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)

---------------------

Chapter End Notes

**The Wrap:**

*Kara’s first ‘high-profile’ covert mission for The Agency went pretty darn well. You can*
bet she’s making a name for herself, whether she wants to or not. Also, new friends! Yay!! I hope you liked the introduction of Shannon and Safiya.

Next Up:
Chapter 28: “The Deep Breath Before the Plunge” – Where Kara spends time with family, and brings old and new friends together. Oh, and we finally get news about Shah’s father from the CIA… but there’s a catch.

Attributions:

This chapter’s links and music inspirations/soundtrack:
Florence + The Machine, ‘Cosmic Love’
The track Kara was listening to over the Atlantic

Hades:
Homer, Iliad 15. 187 ff (trans. Lattimore) (Greek epic C8th B.C.):
"We are three brothers born by Rheia to Kronos (Cronus), Zeus, and I [Poseidon], and the third is Aides [Hades] lord of the dead men. All was divided among us three ways, each given his domain. I [Poseidon] when the lots were shaken drew the grey sea to live in forever; Aides drew the lot of the mists and the darkness, and Zeus was allotted the wide sky, in the cloud and the bright air. But earth and high Olympus are common to all three."

Statius, Thebaid 11. 444 ff:
"The Warden of the Shades [Hades] and the third heir of the world, after the lot's unkind apportioning, leapt down from his chariot and grew pale, for he was come to Tartarus and heaven was lost for ever."

Ovid, Fasti 4. 443 (trans.Boyle) (Roman poetry C1st B.C. to C1st A.D.):
"[Zeus speaks :] 'My rank is no greater [than Hades]. I hold court in the sky; another rules the sea [Poseidon], and one the void [Hades].’”
The Deep Breath Before the Plunge

Chapter Summary

Where a month has passed since the events in Tripoli, and we get a glimpse into Kara’s life as she spends time with family and brings old and new friends together.

Oh, and there is finally news of Shah’s father from the CIA, with a caveat (of course).

Chapter Notes

It’s Year 4, mid-November. Kara is eighteen (twenty in Kryptonian years), and a freshman at Columbia. Alex is nineteen, in her second year at George Mason, and Shah is a sophomore at MIT.

Apologies for any errors or mistypes, it's been a hard, very difficult week. Next week will be tough as well, will be traveling for work.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nov 11th – Year Four

Midvale - The Nazari residence

0918 Hours UTC -5, Saturday morning, U.S. East Coast Time

Kara sat curled up on the couch with her feet tucked up under her next to Ravan, absently stirring her fragrant Persian chai. Together, the pair studied the classroom-sized whiteboard that the physicist had rolled out into the middle of the Nazari’s sunlit sitting room.

Actually, as the young woman had pointed out, referring to the contraption as a whiteboard seemed a bit silly since almost every inch of its surface as filled with Ravan’s… what did Kara call it? Ah yes, her ‘elegant flowing symphony of numbers and symbols’.

The Kryptonian’s intense blue eyes never left the equations as she took another gratified sip of the hot reddish-brown liquid, and smiled in delight. Even as distracted as she was, Kara’s steaming porcelain cup made no sound at all (no telltale ‘clink’) as she gracefully set it back down on the delicate matching saucer held against her chest.

A thrill shivered down the older woman’s spine.

It was moments like that, when the graceful beauty so casually did the impossible with an ease no human could duplicate, that Ravan was reminded the miraculous young woman wasn’t mortal at all.

Kara Zor-El had either been sent by a dying race of ancient highly-advanced aliens, by fate, God, or the gods themselves… not that it really mattered to the physicist. She loved Kara like a second
daughter, whether the girl was a goddess, a Malāʾikah in human form, or an alien.

She sat back on the cushions of the couch, fidgeting with the long mane of silver-streaked midnight black hair that draped down over her shoulders and anxiously waited for her mentor to say something, anything, about the culmination of her and her husband Arad’s, life’s work.

After a couple more minutes of Kara’s sapphire-blue eyes being completely riveted to the board, she finally spoke in her melodious Kryptonian-accented English (she’d thankfully stopped pretending to be human with Ravan a long time ago).

“This is incredible! You’ve finally found a way to control the dark energy! To be honest, I wasn’t sure if it would even be possible… not with the frustratingly antiquated level of technology in this world. But this solution is genius.”

Ravan was grinning, “It’s called being creative, dear. Some of it’s theoretical of course and relies on bleeding-edge tech that won’t be available for a couple years… but if I can prove this out…”

“You’ll be on your way to cracking open secrets beyond humanity’s imagination, and putting them into practical use.” Kara finished for her, and then swept the statuesque woman up into a big hug. As they embraced she whispered softly in Ravan’s ear, “Don’t worry about the tech. Just tell me what companies and research to invest in, Shah, Alex, and I will take care of the money to speed things up a little.”

“Thank you, Kara, I don’t know how I can ever thank you.” The grateful physicist replied as she was set back down on her feet.

“Having you and Shah in my life is all I need.” The beautiful young woman cheerily responded, and then began to shimmer (which Ravan knew meant she was using her super speed).

In that same instant, Kara disappeared and her teacup seemed to materialize all by itself on the coffee table on its saucer (with only the faintest tremor rippling on the dark liquid’s surface). Simultaneously she reappeared (in a flicker of golden hair seemingly out of nowhere) across the room standing at the whiteboard, pen and eraser in hand, already hard at work making adjustments to the equation.

Astounding! The physicist gasped and walked briskly over to watch over Kara’s shoulder in curious fascination as she scribbled in a blur of super speed on the board’s surface.

“Sorry about that.” The Kryptonian quickly glanced back at the older woman with an awkward smile, “I keep forgetting that you’re not used to seeing me use my powers like that.”

Ravan touched and gently squeezed the beautiful girl’s arm. “Don’t be sorry… you continue to amaze me, Kara. Your grace is a wonder to behold. Please, as I have said before, never worry about restraint or modesty on my account. Ever.”

A smile as brilliant as the sun lit up her face as she darted in to kiss a surprised Ravan on the cheek. “I won’t.” She said, her eyes glowing an unearthly soft blue. They both giggled and glanced back at the board together. “Can I erase this?” Kara gestured at a portion of the massive equation.

“Of course.”

“Good.” She did so and then kept scribbling. A few minutes later she surveyed her work with satisfaction and set down the marker. “Okay, are you ready to go over my… um, adjustments?”

Ravan was positively bursting with anticipation. “I’ve never been more ready for anything in my life. Show me… show me everything.”
Shannon MacKenna paused just outside the sliding baggage claim doors in the Arrivals pick-up area of National City International Airport. To her delight, the day that greeted her was sunny, and a gorgeous 70 degrees Fahrenheit… rather like Libya in November, maybe a bit warmer, not the freezing rain and gloom she’d left back in D.C. earlier that morning.

As she took a deep, satisfying breath of the positively balmy (by comparison) California air the scent of flowers of some kind tickled her nose, and the CIA officer broke out in a smile.

She was alive, whole, happy, on leave for the rest of the year, and finally in National City.

Quite honestly, it was hard to believe she was there at all.

Twenty-nine days and nearly twelve hours had passed since she and Safiya said farewell on the flight deck of the USS *Harry Truman*… since she’d last held the tearful young woman in her arms and promised she would find her again.

*Now here I am, looking for both of my angels.*

Shannon involuntarily reached up and slowly ran her fingertips over the smooth, now nearly flawless skin of her right cheek. It was better than Archangel had promised; she’d been left with no noticeable scars from her burns, and her complexion had never looked better.

In fact, she hadn’t even had a blemish since that day in Tripoli…

Which had seemed odd at first, but it didn’t take long for her to realize that the nanobots had never left her. She was sure it was the tech because during her brief stay on the USS *Harry Truman* after the evac from Tripoli she’d been cut and bruised after getting punched during a sparring match, and the damage had healed completely by the next morning.

In fact, her super-healing abilities had continued unabated. One of the many things she planned to ask her bulletproof savior about.

The normally calm CIA officer had been as giddy as a teenager since Navigator sent her an open-ended round-trip electronic airline ticket to National City (in First Class, thank you very much!) not even a day after she’d arrived back in the States.

Shannon hadn’t been this nervous since her first and only ‘date’ with Sergeant Stevens. Things had gone fine, at first, but the whole time they were out at a great little Washington D.C. restaurant she knew it wasn’t going to work… and she ended the evening by offering the young man a chaste kiss goodnight at her door.

Shannon had kept thinking about someone else… a certain incredibly brave, smart, sweet, and beautiful Libyan doctor. She just couldn’t get the lovely physician out of her thoughts.
She was so doomed.

And as usual, it was bad timing.

After the incident at Tripoli she’d received several commendations, a personal visit from the Director of the CIA herself, a call from the Secretary of State, and even a letter from the President (she didn’t vote for him, but it was still an honor). She’d also been offered the prestigious and highly sought after position of Station Chief in Istanbul, Turkey.

Awesome? Right?

No. Not so much.

The problem? Safiya wouldn’t be in Istanbul.

Shannon was a realist and understood that things might end badly if she pursued her desire for the younger woman. Christ, she didn’t even know with certainty if the doctor would be receptive to the idea of an actual relationship with a non-Muslim older woman, but she had to try.

Archangel’s invitation to spend her time off in National City was the perfect opportunity to find out if she and Safiya had a shot before making a decision about her career at The Agency… and get to know her hero better.

The ex-Station Chief sighed, hefted her heavy backpack up higher on her left shoulder, tugged her roller bag along behind her, and stepped out onto the busy sidewalk to survey the curb and the parade of cars coming and going. Apparently, hers wasn’t the only flight that had recently arrived: the walkway was crowded with people.

She flipped her out-of-regulation length auburn hair back off her face, adjusted her sunglasses, glanced at her phone (again), and then stood on her tippy toes to get a better view.

Archangel’s text from 1046 had stated:

‘Arrivals pick up, black Range Rover CA lic# 7GGS241. cu soon!’

Where is she?

“Hello, MacKenna. Welcome to National City.” Suddenly, the hero’s musical voice came from directly behind her,

Shannon wheeled around, and standing not three feet away was Archangel… wow, she looked so… normal (but way above normal, if that made any sense), and adorable!

Not that she’d expected the badass warrior to be wearing fighting gear, but the young woman before her wasn’t disguised at all. She was stunning, with golden hair that shone like the sun, a bright smile, delicate glasses over liquid blue eyes, and the cutest navy blue dress and cardigan combination Shannon had ever seen.

“Oh, my God it’s really you! I can’t believe my eyes! Angel!” She couldn’t help herself and darted forward to embrace the girl for a full minute. Her savior felt so warm, and smelled sooo good… wow! Shannon did not want to stop. “It’s so good to see you.”

When she finally stepped back Archangel was blushing and looked down at her feet as she adjusted and fidgeted with her glasses, “Um, yup. It’s me. Kara.”
“Kara?” Shannon was dazed. Did Archangel just offer her the precious gift for her name, without strings or discussion?

“That’s my name, Kara... Kara Danvers.”

Shannon was still feeling docile and glowing inside as the incredible woman easily plucked the pack off her shoulder, and lifted her large bag with just a finger, leading her to the curb and a waiting black SUV. A handsome, sandy-haired soldier (Shannon could tell he was Special Forces just by the way he moved) dressed as a driver was waiting to help load up the vehicle.

“Ma’am, will you and Ms. MacKenna be coming along for the drive?” He asked Kara respectfully.

“No Jack, but thank you. We’ll be… taking a faster route.” Shannon noticed Kara and the young man exchange knowing grins. Yeah, he knew her secret too. “Just make sure her luggage gets safely to the guestroom at Alex’s and my loft. We’ll need you later tonight though, at 1800 sharp, for dinner.”

Hmmm… her and Alex’s loft? Was ‘Alex’ her girlfriend, or someone else? Shannon suddenly felt wobbly. Kara was going to let her stay at her place? With her? Wow…

“Yes ma’am.” Jack smiled back conspiratorially, and then turned to give Shannon a deferential nod, “Ms. MacKenna, it’s an honor to meet you.” He said with respect, before slipping catlike back into the vehicle, the back hatch closing slowly on its own as the SUV’s powerful engine roared to life.

“Should I even ask?” Shannon purred, finally recovered, and feeling strangely closer, and incredibly grateful to Kara.

The delightful young woman giggled. “It’s not what you might be thinking. Jack’s just… an old friend. I honestly thought he was a jerk when we first met, but he’s a good man, ex-Army Ranger, very loyal, and a professional… and dating one of our other friends.” A serious look came over the angel briefly before she continued. “We’ve all been through some… stuff together. When I needed a driver with his, um, special skill set, and a high level of discretion, Navigator hired him away from his old agency for me.”

“So, he’s just at your beck and call?” Shannon grinned, enjoying the concept of Kara having a hot young man on speed dial.

“24/7. We pay him enough, and it’s not like we keep him that busy. He looks after friends and family mostly. It’s not like Alex or I need a bodyguard.”

Got it! Alex is the girlfriend.

“Nice. So, how are we getting to lunch?” Shannon was hoping she knew the answer already. “Isn’t National City something like a half hour drive? And us with no car…”

Kara grinned mischievously, “I thought you’d never ask.”

………………..
“Oh, my God! I’m flying!! I’m really flying! This is so amazing! Never put me down Kara, never… well, maybe for lunch, but after that…” The young goddess and Shannon shared a chuckle as they slowly passed over the vast metropolis, and the older woman spread her arms wide.

It was a clear day with endless blue skies… and she could see for miles around them. The best part was, because of her angel’s ‘Aura’, as Kara had described it, the air around them was calm and relatively still… so it was easy to talk.

‘Archangel’ obviously loved her adopted hometown, and turned out to be a great tour guide for all things National City. “Oh! And over there.” She pointed with a graceful gesture. “That’s the Coliseum and the Grand Pier… and down in that big green area are a bunch of parks and canals connecting a series of lakes, all part of the Fine Arts complex. You can rent boats to spend the whole day on the water, see a movie in IMAX, or explore the museums. It’s fun. Alex and I have done it a few times.”

“She seems like a special person. Can you tell me about her?” Shannon finally asked the question, relishing her host’s blush up close being held in her arms.

“Oh, um, yeah, sorry. She’s my bondmate… my girlfriend and partner in every way you can imagine. I love her more than anything in the universe.”

“Lucky girl.” Shannon grinned, delighted at Kara’s deepening flush as she did so. “Will she be joining us today?”

Her hero looked off into the distance, “Yup, but not until later tonight, for dinner along with some other friends. Alex has a couple lectures and a lab today, so can’t fly in from the East Coast until this afternoon. I don’t have any Friday classes, thank Rao! I can’t afford to miss any more than I already have.”

Hmmm, ‘Rao’ again.

“So, you’re both students?”

Kara beamed brightly. “Yeah, I’m a freshman at Columbia, and Alex goes to George Mason. She’s a year ahead of me, which kind of sucks, but what's cool is she should finish her undergrad in three instead of four years. I’m so proud of her.”

“She sounds… impressive.”

“Yeah, she has a brilliant mind and is really driven. When you combine that with her lack of needing much sleep (like me) and doubling up on classes, she’s kind of unstoppable.”

Doesn’t need sleep, interesting…

“I can see from how you look right now, so happy, that you really love her.”

Kara blushed. “I do.”

“You’re lucky, and pretty amazing yourself.” Shannon smiled. “You manage college classes, being a superhero for the CIA and the Navy, an amazing girlfriend, and somehow juggling lives on both coasts? I’m a bit in awe of you, actually.”
Shannon wasn’t lying, she really was captivated, and wanted to know more, but kept quiet, not wanting to overstep. She was intrigued hearing the name ‘Rao’ though. She’d heard the word before, and not just from Kara. It was familiar, probably from past intelligence reports, but she couldn’t immediately place it. “You said Alex was flying in… would that be on a plane, or under her own power… like you?”

Kara laughed, a wonderful sound. The girl was like a personal ray of sunshine. “Like me, thank goodness. If she had to fly coach we’d never see each other, which would be totally unacceptable.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised.”

After a couple minutes of silence, Shannon, never one to dance around topics, asked. “Kara, may I ask? How did you and Alex get these amazing powers? Are you both metahumans? I don’t mean to pry, but I’m dying to understand… to know you better.”

Kara considered the question, and said, “It’s okay to ask me anything, Shannon. No. I’m not a Meta or a human. I’m… I’m from another world… same galaxy, just a couple thousand light-years from here. You know, second star to the right and straight on ’til morning?” She smiled sweetly, and Shannon’s heart skipped a beat…

God, she’s so pure…

And an alien! Yet, for some reason the fact didn’t bother Shannon at all, in fact, it was amazing! Her mind wandered… did all aliens smell so nice?

Kara continued, “Alex and Shah (who’s our best friend and honorary sister) are, um, were both human, but are changing… becoming more like me every day. It’s a long story, and totally my fault, but the idiots are actually happy about it. You’ll meet them all tonight, along with Shah’s daughter… my niece, Ada, who you know as Navigator… she’s the best of all of us.”

Shannon took a deep breath. Mind, blown. “Um, wow? There are four of you? Can you pinch me to make sure this is real life? Wait, on second thought, please don’t pinch me! I can imagine the bruise.”

They both laughed again and were soon hovering above their destination, the massive Smythe Medical complex. Kara gave a brief warning before plummeting in a blur into a relatively secluded, and surprisingly clean alley.

“Mind the gap!” Kara said playfully as she landed and offered to let Shannon step off.

“Thanks.” The older woman replied as she reluctantly slid from the comfort of her savior’s arms and onto the smooth concrete of the alley. Kara’s steadying hand made sure she stayed upright at first, the quick descent (even with the protection of Kara’s Aura) having made Shannon a little dizzy.

Once firmly on the ground, they gave each other a quick once-over, adjusted their clothing, and Shannon calmly followed Kara out of the alleyway to make a beeline for the facility’s main entrance.

“It was fascinating to watch the godlike young woman’s entire demeanor change once they slipped out to join people on the sidewalk. Kara immediately lost her inhuman grace, becoming like the mortals around her… fidgeting, even pretending to catch the three-inch heel of her gorgeous shoe in a crack in the concrete so convincingly that Shannon thought she was going to fall.

She quickly caught up with Kara’s long stride and inched up beside her as they walked. “You’re very good at the whole acting human thing.” She whispered.

The girl smiled, turning her beautiful blue eyes on Shannon, “I’ve had years of practice, and the best
teachers. Alex was relentless about helping me fit in, and keeping me safe. She always kept me focused on the details. And Shah... what can I say? She’s my spirit animal... my Persian ninja... my Yoda. She taught Alex and me almost everything we know about how to fight, and a homesick girl how to be at peace with her soul.”

Shannon was deeply touched by Kara’s brief but telling revelations about the people most important to her in her life. She couldn’t believe that the young hero was bringing her into that circle of trust; of friends... she didn’t know what to say besides, “I can’t wait to meet them.”

Once inside Smythe, she was still preoccupied thinking about Alex and Shah, and what they’d be like in person. A human who won an angel’s heart, and another who forged her in fire... both somehow slowly becoming like her.

*Incredible.*

In passing, she absently marveled at the facility’s spacious, beautifully designed lobby with its three-story atrium, natural light, and polished marble floors. It was a fancy place, but she was too distracted watching Kara glide like an angel when she thought no one was looking to give her surroundings much more attention than that.

They’d barely taken a dozen steps toward the huge reception desk before an unfamiliar woman’s voice called out from a comfortable waiting area off to the side, “Kara!”

Shannon turned in time to see her savior and new friend warmly embraced by a woman who was a few inches shorter than either of them, maybe 5’5” or 5’6”, with a gorgeous, dark brown complexion, and stylish short-cropped black hair. She had great taste, whoever she was, dressed in a sharp gray suit and dark purple blouse, and there was something else about her... an air of authority. Shannon had a sense of such things; this new player was law enforcement of some kind.

“Um, Kara, Angel, you should probably put me down.” The woman chuckled with a delightful, barely perceptible Indian accent. Kara glanced down and noticed that she’d unintentionally picked her friend up off the floor as if she were weightless, drawing some attention from people walking by.

“Oops! Sorry, sorry. I was too happy to see you. I mean, it’s been almost two weeks!” As Kara set the woman down, she quickly turned to Shannon. “Please, allow me to introduce my good friend, Sergeant Detective Devi Mitra, with the National City Police Department. Devi, this is Shannon MacKenna, my friend from the, um, State Department.”

Shannon noticed the not so subtle hesitation that accompanied their unspoken exchange, Devi’s delightful grin, and the sparkle in her almost golden brown eyes (like amber) as she appraised her. The officer knew she was CIA, she was sure of that.

*Kara trusts her, adores her from the looks of it. I can see why.*

They shook hands, and Shannon caught a glimpse the .9mm holstered at Devi’s side and concealed under her blazer. “It’s a pleasure, Ms. MacKenna, I’ve heard good things about you, and any friend of Kara’s...”

“It’s an honor to meet you as well, Detective.”

Devi’s gaze drifted over Shannon’s shoulder, and her face suddenly brightened with a smile. She said, “There’s my roomie now, is anyone else starving?”

Before she could fully turn around, a blur that was Doctor Safiya Murabit had enveloped Shannon in a massive hug. The young woman’s head was resting on the CIA officer’s shoulder, tendrils of her
long, dark brown hair escaping from her now disheveled hijab as their bodies melded together.

“You came… you came.” Safiya’s warm breath flitted over the skin of Shannon’s neck like a caress as she whispered the words like a prayer.

Shannon was lost in her scent, touch, and the incredibly pleasing sound of her voice, and pulled her tighter to her. Her voice cracked when she replied, “Wild horses couldn’t keep me away.”

………………

Nov 17th – Year Four

National City – Kara’s loft

2212 Hours UTC -5, Friday, U.S. West Coast Time

Kara couldn’t have been happier, snuggled on the big ‘ole comfy couch in their airy loft. She, Alex, and Shah had purchased it that fall as a home base for whenever they were in National City.

Eventually, after graduation, they’d all move there.

The renovated building, once a factory or warehouse of some kind, had high ceilings with thick timbers above and exposed brick for walls. It was a lovely place and had already gone up in value over twenty percent.

She’d even made a mental note to talk to Ada about buying the whole darn building with some of her CIA money; it’d be a great investment.

Kara was happily sandwiched between Alex on one side, Shah on the other, and Aeryn sitting on a pillow with her head of luxurious red hair leaning back into her. They were all wrapped in fluffy comforters, watching the 60” wall-mounted flat-screen their old friend Brian had helped her install the week before.

After graduating from high school their Dungeon Master had moved to National City for his job at CatCo working on the Prophecy project. He’d been an amazing friend and was even starting his own software company (which the three of them were considering investing in).

After dinner, Devi had to go to work, and Shannon and Safiya excused themselves from the group (they had some catching up to do), but Aeryn had returned to the loft with Kara, Alex, and Shah for a Hayao Miyazaki movie night.

Astonishingly, the witch had never seen any of his wonderful films.

The fun had begun with two of their all-time favorites, Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind and Princess Mononoke, and had progressed to lighter fare with My Neighbor Totoro. Both Kiki’s Delivery Service (for Aeryn!) and Spirited Away were in the queue if they had time.

Kara was looking forward to introducing their witch to one of her favorite traditions: at the end of Totoro they’d all burst into singing the theme song together. It was silly, but they always did it and didn’t care who thought they were weird.
Shah adjusted her arm that was wrapped around Kara’s bicep, and shifted so she was lying against her right shoulder. Alex’s head was on Kara’s lap, her body stretched on the left half of the couch, legs propped up on its arm… Moaning softly as Kara worked her ‘magic fingers’ into her scalp.

“Can you pause? I have to pee. Sorry!” Shah slipped like smoke from Kara’s side and was already standing up stretching like a cat. Wow, she really had become Kryptonian fast.

“Sure. Break time.” Kara leaned down and kissed Alex on the forehead. “Let’s get refills.”

“Sounds lovely.” Aeryn tilted her head back to look up at Kara with her wide, warm smile. “Mind if I call Jack while we have a minute?”

“Go for it,” Kara said as they all scattered.

In the kitchen, her bondmate stood at the wide granite island popping the caps off of tall bottles of Mexican Coke with just a flick of her thumb, while Kara blew gently on the glass afterward, half-freezing the contents before pouring the slushy drinks into their mugs.

It was a little production line of deliciousness.

“So…” Alex led in, “Shannon’s pretty cool, for a CIA agent… and hot. You and Safiya weren’t kidding.”

“Hey now,” Kara warned with a lighthearted smile, and they laughed.

Alex said, “Those two are kind of perfect together, I didn’t see that coming. Did you know? You’re always playing matchmaker.”

Kara absently fidgeted with her necklace as she topped off the mugs with the remaining lumpy frozen Coke, and then dropped their oversized straws back in. “I suspected, and really wanted to get them together to test my theory. Don’t get me wrong, Stevens is great, for somebody else… they both would have been miserable in the long run. Shannon loves Safiya, that much was obvious, and she just needed a nudge to see it.”

_I didn’t want her to miss her opportunity for true happiness._

“You’re such a hopeless romantic.” Alex grinned, leaning in to kiss Kara slowly and deliberately for several wonderful, delicious moments before releasing her dazed and blissfully smiling lover.

“Take me upstairs,” Kara begged, biting her lower lip seductively.

Alex looked like she was about to, but sighed, obviously disappointed and turning red! “I want to, right now… but we should wait and take a break after _Totoro_. We aren’t abandoning Shah or Aeryn twenty minutes in.”

Kara loved it when Alex blushed, the DEO agent was so cute all flustered! She smiled, “I’m good with that if it’s a promise.”

“It is. On my honor.” Alex said. “Oh, hey, do you think Shannon will be back tonight from her ‘tour’ of Devi and Safiya’s apartment?”

Kara handed Alex a frost covered mug, “Are you kidding? You saw how those two couldn’t stop stealing glances at each other over dinner and holding hands under the table! With Devi pulling an all-nighter on that stakeout they’ll have the apartment all to themselves, so no… Shannon won’t be back tonight, and I think the two of them will be too exhausted tomorrow to meet us for coffee…
Alex’s eyes widened. “I just thought of something. With her new (Naomi and I are still running tests, but we believe) permanent, super healing factor Shannon’s stamina is off the charts. I think Safiya’s in for quite a night.”

They were both giggling as they returned to the living area; where Shah was already cuddled up on the couch waiting for them.

“Oh yum! The nectar of the gods themselves!” She reached out to Kara with wiggly fingers for her frosty mug, taking a big slurp as soon as she drew the straw to her lips. “Mersi sheereen-am.”

“You’re welcome.” Kara said as they all started to settle back in, but hesitated before clicking ‘play’ on the remote. “Hey, before we start again, I just wanted to thank you both so much for welcoming Shannon and Safiya into our extended family. You guys are the best. I don’t know what I’d do without either of you, seriously.”

“We know.” Alex and Shah said in unison as Alex gleefully ripped open a bag of flaming hot potato chips, and Shah poured herself a small bowl of chocolate covered pretzels.

Aeryn strolled in from the dining room cradling her iPhone like it was precious and had a big dreamy grin on her face.

“That’s one happy witch.” Alex chuckled.

“I am more than happy, m’eudail. I have the best boyfriend in the world! Well, two worlds actually.”

They’d only found out a couple weeks before that the Jack and Aeryn on Earth Pax (whom they’d hired as their avatars’ guardians) had finally gone from flirting to dating, and their Aeryn was still ecstatic about the development.

Well, honestly, they all were.

“Don’t leave us in suspense! Tell! Tell!” Kara shimmered over, and in the blink of an eye brought Aeryn to her place on the pillow in front of the couch. “What’d he do?” She asked expectantly as if she’d never gotten up.

The redhead laughed, patted Kara’s cheek, and said, “My wan bought us round-trip flights to Dublin, so we’ll be headed back to my home for the holidays! He’ll meet my mum and dad… and my grandma, and we’ll be there early enough to celebrate Midwinter with the coven.”

“That should be interesting.” Shah pondered. “Your sisters have been dying to have you for a visit since you fought Madam Xiao, and began your training with Circe.”

“They are insanely curious, and, I must admit, a bit jealous.” The witch’s nose crinkled as she grinned impishly.

“I don’t blame them. Congrats.” Alex said, handing Aeryn her frozen Coke while they all cheered.

Before restarting the movie, Kara fidgeted with the remote. She hated to bring up a serious topic but felt compelled to. She’d been thinking about what Shannon had told them over dinner about the unnatural incident she’d witnessed in Tripoli and Safiya’s autopsy results for the walking corpse. The doctor had verified that the man had died due to a shot to the head before he could have ever crawled over to grab the trigger that blew Kara out of the sky…
“Um, so what do you guys think about the whole ‘zombie’ situation?” She asked.

Alex huffed. “I don’t know what to think. If you had asked me a couple years ago I would have dismissed it, but now…”

Shah nodded, and then spoke softly, “If we accept the fact that magic and the gods are real, then we must also accept that the impossible is possible. If that is so, then there is one enemy we know who would have the power to animate a dead man to try and kill you, Kara.”

They all grew quiet for a moment, and the Kryptonian finally whispered, “So it was Hades… he’s coming after me?”

“More likely just a warning, like Shah said,” Aeryn added as she fought a brain freeze. “If I had to guess, this feels to me like an attempt to dissuade you, us, from allying with Athena or messing with whatever his nefarious plans are. Piss on him, I say.”

“We don’t even know what Athena wants.” Kara huffed. “I wish we did, or that she’d just come down and ask for our help if she needs it… but in any case, I’m sure as heck not letting anyone bully us. Whatever Hades is planning, it’s going to be bad for everyone but him, and he needs to be stopped.”

“I think I get it!” Alex said with a look of revelation on her face. “It had to be Athena who sent that little owl to warn us, through Shannon and Safiya. She can see the future, right? And would have known they’d tell us. It was a deliberate act, I’m sure of it.”

Shah smiled and became animated, “I agree, joon-am. The goddess must have found a way around whatever rules bind her from interfering! She wanted us to know that she’s watching out for us and that Hades is involved!”

“Huh, I hadn’t thought of it that way.” Kara brightened and relaxed… glad to know that the woman, the goddess she’d come to believe in and care so much for without ever meeting, wasn’t messing with them… but taking care of them. “It’s all kind of complicated though…” She said.

“Most loopholes are,” Shah smirked. “Rao, I so very much wish we could just talk with her. To know what she’s like…”

Aeryn lolled her head against Kara’s thigh and exhaled longingly, “If she’s anything like Circe, and I know she’s that and more, she is everything you can imagine. Just being in her presence is intoxicating, when she doesn’t veil herself using her aura.”

“That’s how the gods hide from us… their auras.” Kara narrowed her gaze, remembering something that seemed inconsequential at the time. “Hey, guys? I felt something, just before the vests blew up… like a chill, you know? I can’t explain it, but it’s how I imagine someone ‘stepping on your grave’ might feel like. I think Hades, or one of his minions, was there, and I sensed them for just a second.”

“Interesting.” The witch said, obviously lost in her own thoughts on the matter.

“It’s somewhere to start,” Alex said with excitement. “Naomi and I can work that angle for some tests using my aura. Maybe we can figure out how to detect our enemy.”

“That would truly be a blessing and give us an edge we desperately need,” Shah said hopefully.

“Hades must really hate her, huh? Athena.” Alex asked as she chewed on a handful of chips.
Kara nodded and leaned into her bondmate on the couch. “Yeah. I mean, when he thought he finally had a chance at claiming the sky and the oceans from his brothers and ruling the world he gave up paradise to stay on Earth. But when the gods chose a woman to lead them instead, he blew up a volcano, leveled two major Roman cities, and killed thousands of people… all because he was mad.”

Alex hugged her, “He’s like an entitled man-child with road rage and nuclear weapons. Completely evil.”

“And we’ll help Athena stop him.” Shah grinned, taking a drink of her icy Coke. “Kara, talk to Myka, she may open up to you. As Athena’s priestess, she is certainly more in the know on secrets than she’s shared with us. See if she’ll give up anything that we don’t already know.”

“I will, and Aeryn can you try Circe again?”

“Yes, but no promises.” The redhead said. “She’s working on getting out of exile, at least being able to visit Olympus again, so she’s not going to break any rules. Goddess knows I’ve tried my best to get her to.”

“Oh, okay, sounds like a plan.” Alex exhaled. “So… back to *Totoro*?”

Before Kara could restart the movie, Shah asked, “One last thing, sisters, are we all still going hunting tonight? ‘Selene’ too? She glanced at the witch, who grinned. “Wonderful codename by the way. It was very thoughtful of Circe to give it to you.”

Aeryn looked down and said quietly, “It was her sister’s name, the goddess of the moon, long ago. Before she left for the stars with their mother.”

Kara laid a comforting hand on her friend’s shoulder and said, “That’s the plan, all of us. Devi won’t be able to sleep until that crew of maniacs breaking into bank vaults across the city are caught and taken off the streets. Selene’s magic will help us narrow down the list of the next ten most likely targets Starlight and I worked on. By the way, thanks for the assist on that, Ada!”

*You’re welcome, auntie!* Her ever-present niece responded in all their thoughts.

Kara concluded, “That said, we still have a lot of ground to cover. So, the more the merrier.”

“Will we have time for *Kiki’s Delivery Service*?” Alex asked between crunches. “I love that damn cat, and come on, it’s about a witch! Aeryn has to see it!”

“There’s always time for *Kiki.*” Kara smirked as she hit ‘play’, and leaned over to once again kiss Alex – this time on her salty, flaming hot lips.

………………

Nov 18th – Year Four

Metropolis, The Daily Planet Building – 44th Floor

1324 hours UTC -5, Saturday afternoon, U.S. East Coast Time

Kara had taken the opportunity to explore her human cousin’s comfortable (yet very professional)
Daily Planet office while waiting for her to return from speaking with her editor. The room, while not huge, easily accommodated Lois’ solid vintage desk, a small round meeting table, and several shelving units, which were lined with books, and awards of all kinds… including her Pulitzer.

Everything was sparse, classy, and clean… so Lois Lane.

The senior reporter’s workspace contained her sleek laptop, a headset, mouse, and two massive side-by-side monitors, but was otherwise bare of clutter and other distractions… except for a small, elegant vase that contained a bright red, intoxicatingly scented rose.

*Must have come from Clark that morning… all the way from South America, wow!* Kara made a mental note for a future romantic gesture for Alex.

There were also framed photographs… Kara’s high school graduation picture, Ma and Pa Kent, her sister Lucy in her Army dress uniform, and a wonderful image of a happy Lois and Clark sitting at the base of one of the Great Pyramids of Giza. It had been taken on their vacation to Egypt the year before to celebrate Kara’s ‘baby’ cousin’s twenty-ninth birthday.

She sighed, trying not to think of all the years she’d missed of Kal’s life when she was stuck in The Phantom Zone, and stepped over to the large windows that looked out over the gleaming city from forty-four floors up.

Her thoughts drifted to flying.

“Hey, sorry I took so long.” Kara turned as Lois power stepped into the room, three-inch heels clicking, and tablet in hand, still taking notes. She was at work on a Saturday, dressed in a stunning dark blue suit, looking liked she’d actually planned on being there instead of being called in at the last minute on a breaking story…

How did she manage to always seem so… poised, professional, and effortlessly beautiful?

Kara felt underdressed in her well-worn jeans, Nikes, classic Wonder Woman T-shirt, and limited edition black hooded military-style jacket, an awesome birthday gift from Black Knight, and wished she’d thought to change before coming to visit. She’d flown over from National City earlier that morning after dropping Shannon off in D.C., and had dressed for comfort, not to impress.

Her cousin slid her iPad onto the desk and opened her arms with a huge smile on her face as she shimmied over to Kara to wrap her in a huge hug, one the Kryptonian returned enthusiastically.

“My God, I haven’t seen you since the four of us met for lunch before I went to Rome in September. You’re more beautiful than ever… and I love the hair.” Lois reached up and wound a finger in one of Kara’s golden ringlets and almost purred, “I bet she does too.”

Kara held her challenging gaze and grinned wickedly right back, “She does.”

“That’s my girl.” Lois’ smile, if possible, expanded, and she kissed Kara on the cheek. “Oh, just so I don’t forget.” She moved over to her desk and pulled a small, elegant-looking envelope out of the upper drawer.

Kara lit up, “Is that them?”

“Like you didn’t peek already! Absolutely, cousin… two impossible to find, VIP tickets to Wicked at the Grand Palace Theater, and after-party passes with the cast… all yours, as promised.”

“Rao, you’re a lifesaver!” Kara blurred over to reverently take the offered envelope and hugged her
again, this time for much longer. “Alex will be so happy! Oh, thank you so much, Lois.”

They finally broke apart, but stayed close, “Just doing my part to make your carefully planned romantic getaway to Metropolis memorable. Great idea by the way.”

“Pfft… um, thanks.” Kara ducked her head awkwardly and blushed at the beautiful woman’s praise. She’d been planning the surprise for her bondmate since summer, with lots of help from her friends and family, especially Lois.

Alex deserved a magical experience.

Kara realized that she’d wandered off to Alexland… re-experiencing the feel of soft lips on her sensitive Kryptonian skin that morning, the curve of her neck and shoulders under her fingertips, her scent, and taste, as she looked up into Lois’ amused, patient eyes… such a fascinating and unique shade, almost violet.

“Sorry.” Kara grinned, nearly out of breath.

Her cousin laughed, a joyful sound. “That’s okay, sweetheart, I completely feel you.” And then gazed down at the photo on her desk of her and Clark, her pencil-perfect smile all Kara needed to see that she was savoring some incredible memory of her own.

“So…” Kara changed the subject. “Eliza wanted me to make sure you and Clark were still on for the day before Thanksgiving in Midvale and Christmas is at Elysium again this year. Can you guys spend a couple days with us there? Tom and Myka really want you to come... heck, we all want you two there!”

“Absolutely! We’re in.” Lois appeared resolute. “Unless, Rao forbid, some Earth-shattering event happens halfway across the world to call either of us away… or you and your girls for that matter.”

“Let’s hope not! Okay, great, I’ll let Eliza know. Oh, and Alex and I do plan on joining you and Clark at the farm for a few days between Christmas and New Years. It’s been too long. I miss Martha and Jonathan, and really love it there.”

“Yeah, they’re the best.” Lois smiled. “For me, visiting Smallville is like… getting a dose of that perfect childhood I never had. Clark’s life growing up was a very different experience from Lucy’s and mine... almost idyllic by comparison. Moving from base to base with the General, living all over the world, growing up fast. Thank Rao I had my little sister! Even though we fought like cats and dogs, she’s always been my home, wherever we happened to be geographically.”

Suddenly, Lois looked terrified, “Please don’t ever tell her I said that.”

Kara rocked back on her heels. “My lips are sealed… triple swear, but if I never get to meet her, I’ll never have the chance to. Will she be joining us in Kansas this year?”

Lois looked off toward the windows, a little sad, “I don’t know, I asked her to, but she hasn’t gotten back to me yet. Her job as an Army JAG was always demanding… she was always on the go, either in a deposition, a trial, or prepping for a trial, but I always knew where to find her. Since she was promoted to Captain a couple years ago, she’s been into some covert, hush-hush stuff. I’ve only seen her maybe twice a year if I’m lucky, and then when we do get together, she’s become aloof, secretive… closed to me.”

“I’m so sorry, Lois…” Kara wasn’t sure what to say.

“It’s okay, we grew apart… that’s on us to fix. One day. Who knows? Maybe this is the year.”
“I hope so. I’d really like to meet her someday.”

Kara’s cell phone started playing the classic Star Trek communicator alert sound, and she quickly apologized to Lois and answered the call.

Restricted number? WTH?

“Hello?” Kara asked tentatively, walking over to the windows and a wide patch of sunlight.

“Good afternoon, Kara.” Amanda Thorpe’s gravelly voice was unmistakable (and surprising). Kara had never given her secure personal cell phone number to The Agency, or her CIA boss.

“Amanda.” Kara whispered without warmth, “How did you get this number?”

The woman laughed… a frightening sound, obviously not something she did very often, “Don’t get your panties in a bunch, kiddo. I have something important to tell you.”

Kara swallowed, forgetting about the whole number thing and hoping beyond hope for Amanda’s next words to be the ones Shah had been waiting to hear for over twelve years.

“We found a trail.”

Yes!!

She has our attention. Both Shah and Alex echoed in her mind.

“Now don’t go and get too excited, we haven’t found him (not yet anyway), but we have somewhere to start. Come to Langley, now, there are things we need to discuss.”

Kara’s mood immediately changed, to a mixture of dizzy excitement and gratitude.

“Yes, Ma’am! Thank you, Amanda! Thank you!” Kara leaped up in the air, and zipped over to kiss her very intrigued reporter cousin, “I’m so sorry, Lois, I have to go! Amanda says they have information about Arad! The CIA thinks they can find Shah’s dad!”

“What are you standing around here for, then?” Lois grinned. “Go!”

Kara laughed, shimmered in to kiss Lois’ cheek again, hugged her, and then zoomed off, moving as fast as she could without damaging anything, or anyone, along the way.

………………..

Nov 18th – Year Four

Langley, CIA Headquarters - Directorate 138’s Secret Operations Center

McLean, VA

1437 hours UTC -5, U.S. East Coast Time - Nov 18th - Saturday afternoon

Directorate 138’s Secret Operations Center was buzzing with activity.
Kara was surprised at the number of agents on duty, over thirty of them. Most were busy at their workstations, huddled in discussions, reviewing intelligence reports, or obsessing over maps.

She’d been discussing the situation with Alex, Shah, and Alex on the way over in her thoughts...

*Something big is going on behind the scenes.* Alex mused.

Shah was impatient... and concerned. *And it must involve my father.*

*We’ll know soon enough. It’ll be okay Shah, I promise.* Using a Kryptonian glyph, Kara sent their Persian sister a supportive, full-body hug.

Agent Wilkins, a stout man in his late thirties, all of maybe five foot four, with a rich, tanned complexion, jet black, military-style haircut, and a nervous tick, met Kara in the hall and escorted her in.

From working together she’d come to know Amanda’s right-hand man and father of three pretty well. The dutiful agent was the unsung hero that kept the Director informed and her organization running seamlessly 24/7. While he and Kara weren’t exactly close enough to be friends, they had an easy rapport in their working relationship, and she respected him immensely.

He was a smart, strategic thinker who lacked an ego, and was loyal to a fault to his boss (and secondarily The Agency). He worshiped the Director as much as he did Navigator, and as you’d guess, Jess absolutely loathed the man because of that.

The large room grew quiet as they strode in together.

Kara had made a short pit stop at the Daniels’ Bethesda house to change clothes on her way over. She really didn’t want to walk into Langley wearing a hoodie, and was now dressed in a handmade formfitting black V-neck silk dress etched with intricate gold patterns (which were actually disguised Kryptonian glyphs – an inside joke) that came to her knees, matching two-inch heels, and the delicate, very expensive glasses Lois had given her.

She hadn’t had the time to do much with her hair, she’d just let fall over her shoulders like a waterfall of gold.

Yeah, she looked good, and she knew it.

At her side, Wilkins wore a simple gray uniform with his rank as Major called out on the shoulder and chest, and kept glancing over at her like he couldn’t believe she was real. So, he more than admired her… the man held her in a kind of awed reverence.

She shouldn’t have encouraged it, but it was cute and helped when she was asking for things, suggesting plans, and submitting expense reports for approval. Kara grinned as she watched him out of the corner of her eye; he seemed to stand taller striding beside her, even though he had to rush to keep up with her long gait.

All eyes were on them as they made their way to the glass-walled meeting room where Amanda and Black Knight were in a heated discussion of some sort. The blonde focused her super-hearing and zeroed in on their conversation.

Black Knight was pacing, “You can’t do this Amanda. We made a promise, the decision needs to be hers… not forced **on** her.”

The older woman grimaced, obviously not happy with whatever awful thing she was about to ask
Kara to do in exchange for information about Shah’s father. “I’m between a rock and hard place, Paul. We need their help on this, and they need hers. I don’t have any other viable options.”

He smiled, “Then at least be honest. Dammit, ma’am, don’t make me a liar, not with her.”

Then, before anything else could be said they simultaneously glanced up as she and Wilkins approached the room and stopped talking. Kara assumed a placid demeanor but was stoking flames inside.

How dare Amanda try and force her to do anything she didn’t want to do! Kara had no idea what ‘it’ was, but she was upset about it anyway.

She desperately wanted to vent but held back.

Stay calm, and in control. Shah’s soothing thoughts wrapped her like a steadying hand.

As they walked into the conference room Wilkins shut the glass door and Kara strode forward to level her narrowed gaze at the Director. Amanda Thorpe was sitting at the head of a long, polished cherry table, an unlit cigarette dangling in between the fingers of her left hand.

Black Knight continued to stand, clearly very displeased and looking guilty. He uncharacteristically avoided Kara’s eyes, but she gave him a warm, encouraging glance to try and let him know how much she appreciated his plea on her behalf. He was a good friend.

Amanda studied her curiously, and said, “Thank you for coming, Archangel.”

Kara controlled her irritation, and her breathing, before asking point blank, “Where is he?”

The director shifted in her seat and then leaned forward with a look of frustration etched in the hard lines of her face. “Look, Kara, I need you to hear me out on this before you go ballistic.” When the Kryptonian began to protest, Amanda cut her off, “Stand down the nuclear eyes. Black Knight’s already made your case, and I agree with him… you deserve the truth. What you decide to do with it is up to you.”

Now relaxed, and incredibly pleased with her boss’ decision, Kara gracefully slipped into the seat across from her. “Okay, I’m listening.”

“Good.” The older woman exhaled with apparent relief and then gestured to Kara’s handler. “Black Knight…”

Paul cleared his throat and began, “As you are aware, within the CIA and the Department of Defense there are other covert groups (sister agencies to D138) each tasked with protecting the country, but with different focuses and mandates. After Tripoli, rumors of Archangel’s miraculous abilities and heroic feats made the rounds and one of these groups (with a great deal of political clout) not so gently ‘requested’ your assistance. D138 has come under tremendous pressure since then to give you up, but we’ve held firm…”

“I hear a big ‘but’ coming.” Kara frowned. “Paul…”

“The thing is, this group… they have information concerning Dr. Arad Nazari.”

Kara instantly lit up with a huge smile. “Well then, that’s great news!!” Which quickly collapsed to a frown as she slumped back in her chair. “They want something in return for it, don’t they?” Black Knight nodded solemnly and she crossed her arms over her chest with a huff, “Of course they do.”
He continued, “They found out that we were looking for him, and that we were doing it for Archangel. It’s their leverage over you Kara, but.” He hesitated warily before continuing, and she felt a knot in the pit of her stomach. “Believe me, you’re going to want to hear the rest of this. Once they became aware Nazari was still alive, he became the piece of the puzzle they needed to see the bigger picture of something we weren’t aware of before.”

“I don’t understand. What ‘bigger picture’?” Kara asked.

“That Dr. Nazari isn’t the only one who’s disappeared over the last dozen years… but he was the first (like a patient zero). There’s been many since… all told over sixty people (that we’re aware of) from twelve different countries. All top of their fields, each with potentially very dangerous (in the wrong hands) skills and knowledge. Theoretical physicists, engineers, military, and others, even the chief architect of France’s cutting-edge fusion reactor.”

Kara let his words sink in and then asked, “So his capture, it was definitely part of something bigger…”

“Yes, and very bad, whatever it is. The shadow agency that wants your help thinks that his wife, Ravan, may have also been a target… but kidnapping her must have become too risky once she and her daughter escaped to London. MI6 was sitting right on top of them.” Kara shivered just thinking about Shah’s mother, her friend, in danger. And rather than being furious for the Nazari’s being spied on, she was grateful.

"U.S. Intelligence is terrified that whoever is behind these kidnappings is building something… possibly a new kind of weapon. Thanks to you, while looking into Nazari they stumbled across a very well hidden, and complex trail that led back to an individual at the Ministry of Energy in Tehran. We don’t know yet if he’s a rogue, or part of a larger conspiracy, that will take time to unravel. The thing is, we just don’t know how much time we have until… something terrible happens.”

Kara understood. People were scared and needed her help. It was sad and disappointing to her that they immediately jumped to using someone important to her as ‘leverage’ to try and compel her. If they would have explained the situation, and just asked, she would have said yes.

“What do they want in return from me?” She asked.

Amanda and Paul glanced warily at each other, and the Director said, “A favor to be named later, once they find Dr. Nazari and the others.”

_I feel your heart, Kara. Do it, but set the rules. You’re in control._ Alex’s confident thoughts filled Kara’s mind.

Shah added _I would do anything to find my father, but be very careful Sheereen-am. We must assume the people we’d be working with are ruthless and would sacrifice the few for the many._

_I think it’s time for us to come out of the shadows._ Alex was determined and absolutely certain.

_Agreed._ Shah’s eagerness reverberated through their connection.

Kara nodded as she thoughtfully considered the situation, and finally responded, “Do you really think this other agency can do it? Find him, I mean?”

“Absolutely.” Both of them replied unison.

“And if I say yes it’ll get them off your back?”
“Yes, but Kara… you’re not actually considering…” Black Knight began, almost pleading.

She cut her handler off. “Tell them I agree… but if I do this, it’s with D138 or no one… and if anyone even thinks about doing anything to Arad, or the other victims, besides rescuing them, they’ll answer to me.”

Amanda’s expression had become a grimace… no wait, the older woman was actually smiling! “This is a treacherous game Archangel, with dangerous people. Are you sure you want to play?” She asked, her rough voice level calm.

*I think she’s proud of you Kara.* Alex said with surprise.

*As am I.* Shah’s tumult of emotions was a raw mix of joy, fear, love, and gratitude.

*Me too Auntie!!* Ada cooed in adoration.

“I don’t see that I have a choice ma’am,” Kara said. “The people who took Arad killed his son and ripped a family apart for over twelve years and counting. And now, I find out that there are more victims, and no one knows what they’re being forced to do?” She slammed her fist down on the table, cracking it. “I made a promise to people I care deeply for that I would find and save Arad Nazari, and I will… but I’ll also save the others.”

Amanda breathed in deeply, coughed, and then nodded, “So be it. We have your back if that’s your decision.”

“It is. But we can’t do this alone… I can’t do this alone. There’s something you need to know if we really are in this together.”

Amanda and Paul looked at each other, nodded, and said, “We are.” like a pledge.

“Okay then, good. Here it is. There’s a saying where I come from, *El Mayarah*, which means ‘stronger together’. It’s more than just words to me… it’s something my family lives by. And in the spirit of that, I’m sorry to say that I haven’t been completely honest with you… but that’s changing right now. The truth is, it’s not just Navigator and me, it has never been, and it’s well past time I introduced you the rest of the team.” Kara then briefly closed her eyes, mostly for dramatic effect (to be honest) and said, “Shadow and Flame, I need you.”

Within seconds gentle vibrations shook the Operations Center and the lights began to flicker and dim. Then, a warm breeze stirred within the room and, to what must have seemed like out of thin air, Shadow (shrouded in living darkness), and Flame (her blood red Kryptonian armor flickering with delicate wisps of fire) appeared on each side of Kara facing Director Thorpe and her handler.

Black Knight had dropped into a combat crouch and was staring in fascinated wonder at the newcomers, while Amanda’s painful looking grin had grown even wider.

Kara introduced them. “Director, Black Knight, this is Shadow and Flame.” As Shah and Alex bowed, a pinpoint of white light suddenly burst into existence off to the side of the room, and the shape of an angel began to take form, wings and all. “And that…” Kara added. “Is Starlight, my niece, who you know as Navigator.”

As Ada’s form became solid, she shook loose her long black tresses and sauntered forward like a panther, the emerald gaze behind her delicate mask a mirror of her mother’s.

The gleaming, armored warrior perfectly saluted Black Knight, and bowed to Amanda before saying, “Director, it is an honor to finally meet you.”
Kara was gratified to see both humans visibly relax after hearing Navigator’s familiar voice.

“No Navigator, Starlight, the honor is mine.” The older woman actually surprised them all and bowed in return, and then to Shadow and Flame.

“Any more angels going to drop out of the sky?” Black Knight asked shakily, still recovering from shock.

“Not today,” Kara responded, her tone warm. “We left our witch at home”.

She swore his eyes grew to twice their normal size, “Are you… are you kidding me?”

Kara just smiled mysteriously in return.

“I always knew you were holding out on me Angel. Well done,” Amanda said. She was clearly pleased.

Kara was surprised. Well, that went better than expected.

No kidding. Hmmm, she knows more about us than she was letting on… Alex mused.

The director continued, “Well, Archangel, now that your team is here I think things are going to get very interesting. But first, formalities… Wilkins!” She bellowed.

Her right-hand man had been, literally, pressed against the glass of the conference room door staring at Starlight as if she were the most beautiful dawn he’d ever been blessed to witness.

The officer awkwardly shuffled in, stumbling over his own feet.

“Yes… Yes, ma’am?” He asked, still stealing glances at Ada… who was trying hard not to giggle.

“Eyes back your head, agent,” Amanda said matter-of-factly, and the small man quickly came to attention, his attentive stare now focused forward on the director. “Good. Bring non-disclosure forms for our ‘new’ recruits… we have a great deal to talk about, don’t we girls?”

Kara, Alex, Shah, and Ada all nodded, unsure of exactly what was going to happen next, but excited to find out.

……………….

**Story Lexicon/FAQs:**

**Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms:** I attempt to *italicize* all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

**Terms:** Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

**Ah!khoob ast** – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

**Alex vanimelda** - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)
Ay Dios Mio – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)

Aporup – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)

As-salāmu ‘alayki – A (formal) greeting which is also a standard salutation among Muslims, meaning ‘peace be upon you’. Less formal abbreviation is simply salām. (Arabic)

Ashheghetam - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

Azdīdane shoma khoshhalam – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)

Bedrood – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

Bonne nuit – ‘Good night’ (French)

C’est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

Damnú air! – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Dooset daram – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gealic/Irish)

íthi eutukhēs - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Kheli khos geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

M’eudail – ‘My dear/my darling’ to a friend, family, someone you care for (Gaelic/Irish)

Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature

Marbhfháisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)

miboosamet – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)
órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

¡Qué señoras tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)

Salâm: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Sundor – ‘Beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)

Thi eutukhēs – ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Volar mi diosa! – ‘Fly my goddess!’ (Spanish)

Wa’alaykumu s-salām – A response to the greeting As-salāmu ’alayki, ‘and upon you, peace’ (Arabic)

Wadā’an – ‘Farewell’ (Arabic)

Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

aziz-am – ‘My dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

joon-am – ‘My dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

Nāzanin-am – ‘Sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘The light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘Sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person’s name<’ + joon (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean ‘dear’. So, ‘Shah joon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

Other names/nickname/titles/things:

A ghrá – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)

A ghrá mo chroí - ‘My heart's beloved, my darling’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Bríomhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)
Daxamites - An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people ruled by strength/the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow altered by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.

Dios mío! – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Euryleia – ‘Woman Wanderer’ or ‘Wide Wandering’ - Dr. Naomi Young’s Amazon name

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)

In’ah – Ancient, lost word for ‘daughter’ - what Myka calls Kara (Kryptonese),

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

M’eudail – ‘My darling’ or ‘my dear’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Ma’har - Ancient, lost word for ‘mother’ - what Kara calls Myka (Kryptonese)

Mi amor – ‘My love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Mi lucero – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Mi Sol – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn - Thought & Memory (Old Norse)

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Norooz - Persian New Year (Persian)

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Oea - This ancient city was founded by the Phoenicians in the seventh century BC, was ruled at one time or another by the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines. Italians, and Muslims. It came to be known as Tripoli during the 9th century (Libyco-Berber)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity (from Ancient Freek)

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)
Seanmháthair – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced shan a WAW her (Irish/Gaelic)

Señora – Is a polite term used to address a woman. The Spanish-language equivalent of Ma’am, Ms., or Mrs. (Spanish)

Tieguanyin - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

Tratung – khrag 'thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Trípolis – Tripoli, the capital and largest city in Libya (from Ancient Greek)

Tuath Dé Danann - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced Thoo-a day Du-non (Irish/Gaelic)

Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’. ‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Vakur – A powerful (and rare) soul-devouring, evil, shape-shifting parasitic alien species from another universe. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.

Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Vallerian – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshiped, or traded.

Wan - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

Zhuyin – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:
So, Team Archangel thinks they may be able to find a way to detect Hades, or at least his minions, that’s pretty darn cool. On top of that, Kara is playing a dangerous game with a mysterious sister agency to D138, but one that might lead her to Shah’s father! Oh, and Shadow and Flame now have Black Knight as a handler too. Did you notice that while Kara mentioned Selene when meeting with Amanda and Black Knight, Aeryn
Next Up:

**Chapter 29:** “Hammer of the Gods” – Where two years have passed, and Kara and Alex follow their spiritual sister back to the land of her birth to rescue her father with a little help from their friends (by which I am referring to the combined forces of the USS Zumwalt, U.S. Special Forces, and the CIA). ‘Operation Jericho’ begins, and as the time for action looms Kara must decide if she should take the risk of unleashing Zeus’ Thunderbolt.

**Attributions:**

**Quote:**

“Second star to the right and straight on ’til morning.”

— *J.M. Barrie, Peter Pan*

*Judge Advocate General Corps (JAG)*

*Lois’ sister, Lucy Lane is a Special Prosecutor, a Judge Advocate, for the U.S. Army.*

"The Deep Breath Before the Plunge"

*LOTR The Return of the King - Extended Edition - "The Deep Breath Before the Plunge”*

*The reference in the title is from a Gandalf quote from The Return of the King*
Hammer of the Gods

Chapter Summary

Where Kara and Alex follow their spiritual sister back to the land of her birth to rescue her father with a little help from their friends (by whom I am referring to the combined might of the USS Zumwalt, U.S. Special Operations Forces, and the CIA).

‘Operation Jericho’ begins.

It’s Year 6, late Nov – Nearly two years have passed since Kara made the deal that would eventually lead to finding Shah’s father. Now, after months of planning, training, and preparation, Team Archangel is poised to attempt a jailbreak of epic proportions.

Chapter Notes

It's been a long week of chaos, and I have been in LA for work (I am posting from my hotel room). Please be kind. If you find any errors, let me know in comments so I can fix. Hope you enjoy!

Notes: Kara is twenty (22 in Kryptonian years), and in her third year at Columbia. Alex is twenty-one, living in National City with Shah at the loft, doing her grad work by special arrangement at the Sagan Institute, and happily employed by the D.E.O. Shah is also working on her graduate studies, and is a planetary mission strategist and engineer at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Pasadena.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nov 21st – Year Six

Fort Tahoe – A covert CIA operations base in southern Turkey

2137 hours UTC +2, Monday night, local time

.................

"Home is behind, the world ahead, and there are many paths to tread through shadows to the edge of night, until the stars are all alight."

J.R.R. Tolkien

.................
Alex couldn’t believe where she was standing… perched atop the upper battlements of a makeshift CIA fortress, deep in the Eastern Anatolian region of Turkey. She shivered, and a wisp of frigid breath escaped from her as she gazed out over the rugged plains to the distant snowcapped mountains that seemed to surround them.

At any other time in her life the broad vistas, spare scenery, and tiny, remote villages that dotted the vast landscape would have all struck her as starkly beautiful… intriguing and mysterious places to explore. But now everything was a threat, and she was ready for war.

After spending the last week waiting at Fort Tahoe, Alex knew the details of Operation Jericho backward and forwards. So much so that the hours of strategy sessions she’d endured down below in the stronghold’s Strategic Operations Center (S.O.C. for short) had begun to wear on her.

In fact, only a few minutes earlier she’d felt so claustrophobic that she excused herself from the final mission briefing and rushed up to the roof to catch her breath... and think.

The thing was, she, Kara, and Shah hadn’t slowed down or taken time to relax for the last six months, not since Shah’s father had been located and they’d agreed to Ada, Amanda, and Black Knight’s crazy-ass plan to rescue him.

At least the D.E.O. still had no inkling of what Alex was up to. Especially not that she was on the other side of the world participating in a massive covert military operation against a sovereign nation!

Nope, nothin’ to see here folks!

Officially, she was taking a couple weeks off on vacation with Kara, Shah, and Aeryn before the Thanksgiving holiday. Ada had even booked a suite for the four of them at a beautiful ski lodge to cover their tracks, including purchasing lift tickets and time at the spa.

Rao, I could really use a hot tub right now.

Shortly after arriving she’d heard from the locals that there were hot springs up in the mountains, but as the three of them were trying to maintain a low profile they voted to stay put at the dusty stronghold rather than go find the blissful oasis.

Maybe after…

Alex was confident that she’d built up enough credibility, and trust, with Hank… Director Henshaw, to throw off any hint of suspicion about her current personal activities. Still, lying to him bothered her greatly. It turned out that she liked working for her oh so serious boss, and loved her job at the clandestine agency.

She wasn’t just hunting rogue aliens at the D.E.O., but helping refugees from other worlds find safety, and in some cases, integrate into society. Sure, on some days her job was terrifying (and thrilling), while on others it could be heartbreaking… but overall she was happy, and making a difference.

Like Kara.

But none of that was what was actually bothering her, or why she’d felt the suffocating need to escape the latest briefing. Being honest with herself, flickering up to the roof of Fort Tahoe to calm her frayed nerves was all about her fear of failure, and of disappointing Shah.

We’re finally doing this… and everyone’s looking to me… what if we can’t save him?
Ugh, I need to stop worrying!

The important thing was getting her best friend’s father back. They had to succeed.

Alex bit at a fingernail, doubt squirming at her gut like eels.

"Ma’am." A burly Navy SEAL everyone called Watt spoke up shattering the silence and tipped his Kevlar-helmeted head in her direction. Alex had been so distracted she hadn’t realized that she’d wandered past his position on guard in a camouflaged .50-caliber machine gun nest.

The bear of a man was hard to miss. His real name was Watson, and he was brilliant with electronics and explosives. Bombs, timers, surveillance systems, you name it, if you needed something deconstructed, built, or broken into, Watt was your man.

Plus, he was as big as a mountain. And though outwardly intimidating, Alex had come to discover the teddy bear inside.

She and the combat veteran had become friends since her arrival at the fort. Team Archangel had lots of time to fill, and training with the SEAL and his comrades had been one of the high points of the trip. A mutual respect had quickly grown between all of them.

Watt had taught Alex her new favorite thing… the ability to field strip and reassemble one of the SEAL’s FN SCAR (Special Operations Forces Combat Assault Rifle) in less than a minute. Her new friend had even given her one of the kick ass weapons to keep as her own.

Kara had told her that whenever Alex held it, her eyes sparkled.

“Heya, Watt.” She said with a smile, rubbing her arms to generate some warmth as they spoke… too lazy at that moment to focus her Kryptonian aura on keeping her shielded from the cold. “Aren’t you freezing up here?”

He shrugged his massive shoulders and said, “You get used to it.”

She nodded and glanced back out at the lonely countryside, and then up to brilliant night sky in wonder. “I’ve never seen so many stars all at once.” That wasn’t exactly true, she’d experienced vistas as stunning as the one she was looking at now flying high above the clouds with Kara… she’d just never seen anything like it from the ground before, and certainly not from the roof of her house.

“Yes, the benefits of zero light pollution. The Lt. Colonel has a telescope she sometimes brings up to the roof at night for us to look through. It’s a quite a sight… you can see everything, even other galaxies. Makes you wonder who’s out there, lookin’ back at us.”

Alex restrained her laughter, but couldn’t stop grinning. She wanted to say, ‘she’s right downstairs’.

He glanced up at the stars as well, and then after a moment spoke with calm assurance, “Don’t worry about tomorrow, you got this… and Team Seven has you and your angels’ backs.”

Alex slumped. “Am I that obvious?”

He chuckled, a deep sound from his cavernous chest, “Nah, you’re good, I just see things, and I’ve been there myself, you know? There’s always risk, you just can’t worry about that. I see how Archangel and Shadow look to Flame for approval… for her… your strength. They need you to lead them. You’re a total badass Alex! Own that shit, or the doubt will eat you alive… and get your team killed.”
As she listened to Watt’s words, subtle flames began licking down the length of the red leather armor that covered her arms. From the look of surprise and astonishment on his sun-weathered face, Alex knew her eyes were also most likely doing the alien glowy thing again. Just like Kara’s, only blood red.

“Thank you, Watt, I think that’s just what I needed to hear.”

He then actually bowed to her.

Awww! So sweet.

“Just doing my part ma’am. It’d be a goddamn shame if a beautiful angel such as yourself got into trouble ‘cause she was doubtin’ her own good judgment.”

She giggled. Did she giggle? Rao, she did… how embarrassing. Time to make things clear. “Um, you know I’m with Archangel right?”

“Affirmative ma’am, but a man can dream, can’t he?” He smirked. “Hell, I’d be happy just to see you in action, or better yet, fight at your side.”

“Now that...” Alex said, “Can be arraigned.” They both laughed, and she floated up and kissed the giant on his bearded cheek before shimmering off the roof… back down to the S.O.C., and Kara.

Moments later, in Fort Tahoe’s S.O.C…

"Did you clear your head?” Black Knight asked respectfully as Alex strode into the thirty-foot diameter, domed circular chamber. The old stone fortification the CIA occupied and had named Fort Tahoe had served many purposed over the centuries, but never one like this. The now gleaming, well-lit interior hummed with holographic screens and busy operatives, all hard at work.

The ancient well in the center of the space had a raised stone lip about three feet high, on top of which the team had set up an interactive battle map. Thick cables spidered out in thick bundles from that central stage to all areas of the fortress and ran forty feet down to the bottom of the still active cistern.

There were over six months of water stored there, as well as a heavily shielded, portable cold fusion reactor that fed power to the entire base… a design courtesy of Shah, Zara, and Ada, patented by Archangel, Inc., and built in record time under Ada’s direction by the CIA’s Advanced Weapons Division (AWD) and DARPA.

“Yeah. I’m good.” Alex boldly blurred with flickers of fire trailing her across the twenty feet of space to Kara, who was dressed in the stunning new black and gray mottled battle suit that her beautiful bondmate and Shah had worked with the AWD to design.

Alex softly bumped hips with her bondmate as she settled in beside her.

To Kara’s right stood her handler, Black Knight. The tall, bearded, and ruggedly handsome ex-Delta Force officer was intently focused on the light map, checking over every nuance of the battle plan. Shah was off to the side in conversation with three fatigued-wearing intelligence officers, studying screens filled with operational data, captured communications, and satellite images.
Is everything okay? Really? Your thoughts were closed to me. Kara’s concerned thoughts entered Alex’s mind as she slipped her frigid fingers into her mate’s toasty ones. Oh, goodness! You’re so cold! And then her Kryptonian lover unleashed a wave of heat into her that felt beyond amazing… very much like basking lazily in front of a winter fireplace’s glowing embers.

Alex barely contained a moan. I just needed to get some air before the last briefing. And wow! Thanks for warming me up.

My pleasure, Vaena.

Alex smiled, and then Kara squeezed her hand supportively as the brunette turned to address Black Knight, “Please continue.” She said. “I want to make sure we’re all crystal clear on the extraction protocols.”

The veteran D138 operative nodded, his attentive blue eyes holding Alex’s gaze for the briefest moment… as if evaluating her state of mind. He then waved his hand over the map, and a 3D projection of the Iranian capital of Tehran built itself from light, topography and all.

“Okay, listen up teams. Four hundred and twenty-two miles southeast of here, due south of the Caspian Sea on the southern slopes of the Alborz Mountains in Northern Iran, sits Archangel’s target… Evin Prison. Or, what we’re calling Echo One as part of Operation Jericho.”

Kara grumbled in Alex’s thoughts, My tit for tat...

Hey, it could be a lot worse. You’re actually helping people and giving us the distraction we need to rescue Shah’s dad. Alex soothed her.

I know, but that means I can’t be there for either of you… at your sides, or as back-up.

We’ll be fine. We’ve been training with you, Ada, Aeryn, and SEAL Team Seven for Rao’s sake! Hell, even Devi and Shannon busted our backsides for months. We’re ready.

Kara managed a brave smile. I know, I know. All for one, right?

Alex nodded. That’s right nooré cheshm-am, El Mayarah.

And then, there it was, Echo One. The vast, walled military compound the size of five football fields rose from the glittering light map, perched up in the hills overlooking the sprawling northern suburbs of Tehran.

Black Knight continued, “Evin is a notorious black hole for the disappeared… over 15,000 Iranian political prisoners, that we know of, are held there… activists, academics, journalists, foreigners accused of spying, anyone conveniently identified as trouble makers, religious minorities, atheists, those who identify as GBLTQ, and anyone who happened to piss off the wrong people… you get the picture. It’s appalling.

“Among the prisoners at this moment are over a hundred Americans and other allied nationals of priority interest, including the illegally captured crew members of the USS Fortin, and high-profile individuals the State Department has been trying to negotiate releases for months… and in some cases, years.

“We also have four deep operatives inside who possess very sensitive intel. Information that, should it be extracted, would put dozens of covert operations, covert facilities and safe houses, and many lives at risk. Such a disclosure also has the potential of destabilizing already shaky U.S. Iranian relations, and with it the entire region. It is imperative Archangel free these assets before any of their
crucial information is revealed. We’ll be sending in two strike teams, SEAL Team Seven from here, and a combat unit from the USS Zumwalt, to assist on the ground with any potential hostiles, and evac of our people.

“Now.” He waved his hand again and the map shifted perspective, moving higher into the craggy Alborz mountain range, forty-two miles northeast of the prison. The map location began to form in the shadow of Mount Damavand, a nearly nineteen-thousand-foot snow-covered volcanic peak, and one of the seven natural wonders of Asia.

A small complex of buildings nestled in the forested wilderness beside a long finger of a beautiful blue lake took shape.

One would have easily missed it if they blinked.

“Welcome to Echo Two. The ultra-secret location of the Iranian Science Directorate’s supposedly non-existent dark energy research facility. This is also where Dr. Arad Nazari has been held for at least the last four years, and Shadow and Flame’s target.”

His glance once again fell on Shah, and Alex couldn’t help but notice the deference he gave her with his look, followed by a barely discernable nod. “While it appears to be an idyllic modern villa with several attached and unattached outbuildings above ground... our satellites have detected a warren of railway tunnels and large chambers beneath the surface, and thanks to Starlight’s upgrades to our sensors, a regular series of bizarre quantum energy spikes. Something very strange is going on under there, and we assume all of that is somehow tangled up with Nazari’s research.”

Ada spoke up, concern obvious in her Persian–accented voice, “The technology involved is still unclear, but we know that it is more advanced and dangerous than should even be possible. Whatever my gra… Dr. Nazari has created there is reaching into the infinite, literally, and tampering with potentially cataclysmic forces. Until we get in to verify what he’s been up to, we need to treat the entire complex like a nuclear bomb that’s ready to explode.”

“Thanks for putting the situation in perspective, Starlight.” Black Knight said, and then continued his instructions, “Shadow and Flame will need to get in, quietly, and with your help uncover Echo Two’s secrets, rescue the good doctor, and, if necessary, destroy the place without leaving too big of a hole.

“To assure a clean escape, stealth helos, along with strike team from the USS Zumwalt, will be waiting outside the complex at Mount Damavand to ferry Doctor Nazari and any other prisoners you manage to liberate south to the Arabian Sea where Capt. Daniels’ warship waiting to give them sanctuary.”

“Archangel will rendezvous with the Zumwalt after her mission at Echo One is complete. The chaos she’ll create there will act as a perfect distraction for Shadow and Flame at Echo Two. We need all unfriendly eyes focused on Evin… I assume you can manage that Archangel?”

Kara had been listening attentively, but Alex could tell she was deep in thought, struggling with her reservations about what they were planning. Her bondmate was afraid that this time she might accidentally kill innocent people.

The Kryptonian looked up at Black Knight, resolve in her mysterious blue eyes. “Yes, sir. Starlight and I believe we have a 96.6% probability of pulling Zeus’ Thunderbolt off. I can live with those odds.”

“Kinetic orbital bombardment.” Her handler’s words carried an ominous tone as he shook his head.
“I never thought I’d see the day. Are you clear on the ops?”

Kara nodded. “Yeah. I’ll carry a bundle of tungsten rods up into orbit, assemble them, and launch the weapon down at Evin Prison, Echo One. The Thunderbolt will detonate in an airburst up the slope of the mountain just north of the facility, causing a shockwave that should take out power, and temporarily shut them down. The targeting, angle of descent, and velocity all need to be absolutely perfect for this to work. If I’m off by even a tiny fraction, parts of the city could be completely leveled.”

Alex noticed a subtle tremor in Kara’s voice that no human would detect. Both she and Shah glanced at each other with concern as her bondmate continued...

“To everyone on the ground, it’ll look exactly like we intend it to, a meteor entering the atmosphere at close to twenty-five thousand miles per hour. Starlight and I have run the simulation over a hundred thousand times, and are certain we can do it.”

Alex could feel Kara squeeze her hand just a little bit tighter, and she returned the gesture in kind, sending her thoughts, I know you can.

Kara's grateful gaze sought Alex and the Kryptonian blushed adorably. Thanks, Vaena.

Ada spoke up, “I trust your aim Archangel, and that your ‘meteor strike’ will go according to plan. And yes, while it’ll create an impressive light show and deal out large-scale damage in the surrounding area of the city near Echo One, we’re talking superficial effects… shattered windows and the like, not anything lasting. I can’t say the same for the prison, which (due to its location and the region’s geology) will take the brunt of the actual force of the explosion. Enough, we hope, to incapacitate the majority of the guards, break down doors, and possibly even some of the walls.”

Black Knight jumped back in, “So, in a little over eight hours on Tuesday morning at precisely 0602, local time, Archangel will begin her assault on Echo One and kick-off Operation Jericho. To Flame’s concern about the extraction plan... We can’t just run in and free only the hundred or so odd people we’re targeting there, we need to break the place open to cover our tracks, which is where the National Iranian Resistance, the NIR, and their paramilitaries come into play. They have people they want out as well, so it's a win-win working with them.”

“Archangel will give access to the facility to NIR fighters waiting on the ground, who’ll work to free as many people as they can in the brief twenty-minute window we believe we’ll have. At the same time, she’ll enter the facility to rescue our friendlies and only our friendlies.” He gave his charge a pointed look, to which Kara just appeared offended, and suddenly became interested in Alex’s chipped nail polish.

Shadow added, “I’ve already spoken to my cousin, Kir, who’s on the shadier side of shady but a good person, and has no love for the current extremist government. The CIA has worked with him before, and have agreed to pay him and the resistance to smuggle our freed prisoners to a location outside of Tehran just west of Najmabad. Stealth helos will be waiting there to fly them to Incirlik, our air base in Turkey.

“Archangel, Kir will be waiting for you at a designated location with a dozen trucks, six to be used as decoys. You’ll escort and guard the actual escape vehicles to the pick-up zone, and then all the way to Incirlik, in case there’s trouble in the air.”

“Once you’re done there you’ll rendezvous with us on the Zumwalt. And don’t worry, if we have any delays or problems you can come to the rescue instead.” Alex grinned.
Kara nodded and smiled back at her bondmate... never letting go of her.

After everyone affirmed that they were prepared Black Knight finally appeared satisfied, and clapped his hands together. “Go, get some rest people! T-minus four hours until our heroes are off to sync up with the resistance, and we get this party started.”

..........................

Nov 22nd – Year Six

*Flying over Tehran, Iran*

0427 hours UTC +4, Tuesday morning, local time

Their quick, twenty-two-minute flight from eastern Turkey had been tension-filled, but in the end, uneventful. Kara, Alex, and Shah flew in formation at around sixty-seven thousand feet and kept their velocity at a leisurely one thousand miles per hour. Layered with multiple protections from their companion AIs, their own auras augmented by two years of training by Aeryn on creating stronger veils, they were effectively ghosts to any prying eyes or human technology scanning the skies.

For a good part of the journey, they were sandwiched peacefully between the vast dome of the Milky Way above and a lightning storm flashing in a seemingly endless pillow of clouds below. The view was breathtaking, and Kara committed every moment to memory with the intention of painting it later. Alex, meanwhile, snapped pictures with her iPhone.

Up at that altitude, it was cold… freezing actually, not that the temperature bothered any of them. Kara was impervious to it, and she and Ada had taught both Shah and Alex how to control their own personal microclimates using their Kryptonian auras long ago.

Along the way, her niece, as always, was constant comfort in their thoughts… letting them know, among many other things, that in Tehran it a balmy forty degrees Fahrenheit, with the forecast of an overcast, drizzly day ahead.

After watching her pout, Shah assured Kara that they’d eventually see the sun at some point and that it’d probably get to sixty degrees on the ground by mid-day.

Their only other company ended up being a handful of commercial airliners cruising far below them. Kara smiled as she thought of the sleepy passengers riding inside the slow-moving behemoths, all completely unaware of the three swift goddesses watching over them.

Thanks to Ada’s precise direction, they avoided all military flights and were soon soaring over the sprawling metropolis of Tehran, the ancient capital of the current Islamic Republic of Iran (or Persia, as Shah preferred to refer to her homeland) with its over twelve million inhabitants.

The geometric patterns of its glittering lights stretched all the way from the high, craggy wall of the Alborz mountain range to the north and east, to the broad plains and vivid swaths of purple saffron fields of the south, and then finally off to the far darkness cloaked west.

Kara was surprised by the sheer magnitude of the place, and finally understood what Shah had been telling her for years… finding anything here without a guide would be like looking for a literal needle in a haystack.
Thank Rao for her wise Persian ninja.

*It’s beautiful.* Kara marveled in her companions’ thoughts as they began their feather fall descent through a layer of crystalline clouds to below forty thousand feet.

The warm glow of dawn was still tucked behind the high, snow-blanketed eastern peaks, so the trio’s appearance above the great metropolis was still (thankfully) concealed under the cover of a frigid, moonless darkness.

They were taking a risk by not completely avoiding the city’s closely monitored airspace, but they had an in-and-out drop off in the city, and Shah was ecstatic at the prospect of finally being able to offer Alex and Kara at least a glimpse (even a brief one) of her hometown before starting their missions.

Shah was positively vibrating as they cruised at just a couple thousand feet over the Zafaraniyeh, the neighborhood where she’d grown up in northern Tehran. The affluent area was once long ago where saffron traders lived, but over time had become a patchwork of parks, beautiful homes, foreign embassies, and universities.

Her thoughts reached out to Alex and Kara, *I can’t wait to one day show you the house I grew up in, introduce you to all my relatives… and the food, Rao! The food! I miss it. And apparently, I’m drooling already…*

The all giggled as Shah dabbed at the corners of her mouth in flight.

*I can’t wait either,* aziz-am. Alex replied, as she quickly executed a tight barrel roll, slipping in shoulder-to-shoulder between her best friend and Kara.

The Kryptonian was about to ask a question but stopped short as her large pack shifted across her back. The oddly heavy weight of the carefully wrapped and arranged tungsten rods held securely inside was a reminder of the terrible task ahead of her, and the risk she had willingly agreed to take.

She swallowed hard.

Alex, feeling her distress through their bond, pressed in close, and stretched in to kiss Kara softly on the lips. “You’ve got this.” She whispered with absolute confidence, kissing her again.

Kara smiled, returning her affection with great enthusiasm. “Thanks, Vaena.” Then, as she and Alex spun in an embrace as they flew, she glanced over at Shah and said, “Let’s go visit your cousin.”

.........................

_**Nov 22nd – Year Six**_

_Tehran, Iran_

_Municipal District One – Zafaraniyeh neighborhood_

_0435 hours UTC +4, Tuesday morning, local time_

They landed silently atop an ancient stone building that was part of a vast botanical garden complex,
stowed their gear (except for a large green duffle filled with five hundred thousand U.S. dollars) on the roof, and transformed into (or in Kara’s case physically changed) their disguises of normal street clothes and hijabs.

After they shimmered down to an empty side street and began following Shah Alex and Kara both became quiet, engrossed in trying to take in everything they were seeing. The most surreal and unexpected part about the city was how normal and modern everything was.

The few brave souls out and about that early morning (washing and sweeping sidewalks, making their way to their offices and jobs) gave the trio little notice as Shah lead them (by memory) from street to street. They only stopped once to buy chai from a sleepy street vendor (it was so delicious!) and had to pause here and there along the way to get their bearings.

It turned out that, due to lack of access from outside the country, Zara and Shatari’s 3D maps were very inaccurate (through no fault of their own). Though now that both companions were actually there in the city they were infiltrating every system they could access, including municipal networks, street cameras, maps, government feeds, etc., and updating their databases.

It was fascinating how the dark side streets and brightly lit thoroughfares they shimmered down could have easily been confused as being part of any vibrant, American city at four-thirty in the morning… maybe just a bit cleaner. Though Kara found the occasional towering mural, awash with colorful revolutionary slogans or some nameless religious figurehead spouting death to the enemies of Iran, out of place and off-putting.

If anything, it was a stark reminder that they certainly weren’t in Kansas anymore.

As they drew close to their destination the sound of an occasional dog barking off in the distance, and bells or chimes could be heard. Lights in businesses were flickering on, and early commuters were already snarling the infamously twisted streets, driving everything from beater cars, shiny new Porsches and Mercedes to Ducati’s and Range Rovers. Along the way, there were cafés, restaurants, and shops… they even passed a huge theater showing blockbuster Hollywood films from a year earlier.

Kara was amazed. Shah, I have to apologize, I’m not sure what I expected… but it wasn’t this.

It’s okay Sheereen-am, you had no frame of reference. Come, we’re almost to the shopping district where Kir’s record store is located. He and his sister, my cousin Tarsa, will be waiting for us.

You told us stories about how close you and Kir once were. Alex said, warm with the memory.

When I was a child, yes. He was older and so cool… with his guitar, American music, and talk about faraway places, democracy, and freedom. He was the one who first got me into parkour (to my mother’s horror, though my father secretly encouraged my unusual passions) and convinced me to start training in martial arts. Kir was always my hero… I idolized that boy.

Like a big brother. Kara’s thoughts were joyful.

Yes, perhaps that is a good analogy… but it’s been twelve long years. Since those times we’ve spoken on the phone, but only briefly. I know little of his life now. He is a very passionate man, with ideals that don’t resonate well with the current regime… and now he’s part of this CIA-backed resistance. I am so worried for him.

And Tarsa? Alex asked inquisitively.

She was just a child when I left Persia, now she’s sixteen. I do not know her, but I wish I’d had the
opportunity to. She was such a beautiful baby, so smart, and sweet... but... quite different, special. I expect you’ll see when you meet her. I hear she has grown into quite the young firebrand.

That’s funny. But appropriate. Kara laughed, and they all joined in. The meaning of the name Tarsa was, of course, ‘a worshipper of fire’. Perhaps she’ll take to you, Alex.

Maybe. Her bondmate grinned. But I kind of like the worshiper I have already, not sure I need another one.

Awww, you’re so sweet Vaena! I’ll definitely show you my devotion at our earliest opportunity.

..........................

*T-Rex Records*

*Tehran, Municipal District One – Zafaraniyeh neighborhood*

*0441 hours UTC +4, Tuesday morning, local time*

In the quiet brick alley Shah rapped her knuckles gently (three rapid taps, followed by two, and then one) on the locked metal door that was labeled ‘T-Rex Records’ with a logo utilizing some very well-done and uniquely stylized artwork depicting a tiny-armed Tyrannosaurus Rex devouring a vinyl record. The vault-like barrier was also covered in an assortment of worn stickers of American and British bands.

As she waited for a response, Kara and Alex spread out to keep watch on both directions of the alley. The dim light illuminated the passage’s smooth stone walls that were covered worn playbills featuring local artists and bands with interesting names like *Safeer-e-arsh*, *TarantisT*, and *Meera*.

After a moment there was movement inside the building, and a girl carefully approached the locked and barred door (they could all see her of course, using their X-Ray vision). She was just shy of five feet tall, willowy, with short-cropped curly jet-black hair, a smooth, dark complexion, a delicate silver stud nose ring, and was dressed in faded blue jeans and a vintage Pearl Jam T-Shirt.

The teenager’s fingers danced across the tablet computer she was holding and at the same time, Shah sensed a vibration. What is that? Her thoughts sought her sisters.

A smile had erupted on Kara’s lovely face, and her blue eyes sparkled behind her delicate mask as she reached out to almost caress the air around her. A very subtle electromagnetic field. Oh, and something else... interesting! It appears to be surrounding the record shop like a shield. Very clever.

How so? Shah asked.

It’s like an electronic veil. If anyone was trying to listen in to the conversations inside all they’d hear is an episode of *The Simpsons*, in Persian. Kara said with admiration.

“Doh!” Alex quietly called out, and they all stifled laughter.

Inside the shop, the young woman had set down her tablet device and quickly slipped on a hijab and dark shawl to hide her T-shirt. She then picked up and hefted an aluminum baseball bat at the ready before stepping onto a stool behind the door.
The sound of metal grinding against metal echoed through the alley as she slid open the security slot to look outside. Shah was greeted by sharp, manicured eyebrows and the scrutinizing gaze of the girl’s keen hazel eyes (that reminded her a lot of Alex’s).

“who… who are you?” The girl asked in soft, lilting Persian. Her sweet, almost childlike tone was wary.

“It is I, delbandam.” Shah had tears in her eyes as she spoke the endearment (meaning ‘my heartstring’) that she’d only ever used for Tarsa, and not for anyone else.

The girl behind the door’s eyes widened in recognition, and she gasped as she dropped her bat with a clatter. “shahrazad?! cousin?! is it really you?!” And just like that, the metal peephole slammed shut and the girl immediately kicked the stool she’d been standing on aside and was frantically unlocking the aperture’s complex set of deadbolts and heavy steel bar.

When the door finally scraped open the tiny Tarsa flung herself out and up into Shah’s arms (who had no problem catching and holding the feather-weight girl), and they were hugging and crying together.

Her diminutive cousin almost immediately began babbling in Persian at lightning speed. “i never ever thought i’d see you again!” She sobbed, her little body shaking. “kir said you might come, that you were working for the CIA now or something… and helping the resistance! i still can’t believe it! i have dreamed about you so many times, soaring like an eagle… i know, silly, right? gods, how did you get so strong? and you’re sooo beautiful, like a model! i’ve missed you and your green green eyes so much. are you back now?”

It was like Tarsa didn’t need to breathe.

The energetic teenager suddenly startled as Alex and Kara moved in close and she noticed them. She was openly staring, looking both up and down in appreciative awe. “ooooh wow… they’re so pretty, like great lionesses… wary and dangerous. are they with you cousin? are they… americans?” Her eyes almost glittered with anticipation of the answer.

Shah laughed and kissed Tarsa’s forehead as she held the strange little princess’ cheeks and looked into her bright, hopeful eyes. “Let us get inside delbandam, and I will answer your questions.”

The younger girl flushed, ducked her head in adorable embarrassment, and said, “i’m sorry, of course… yes, inside.” And then snuggled contentedly into Shah as she was carried through the doorway, followed by Kara and Alex, who closed the heavy, screeching door behind them and dropped the bar to seal it.

........................

A few minutes later…

T-Rex Records

0512 hours UTC +4, Tuesday morning, local time

“More chai?” Kir asked, still staring at Kara in a kind of stunned wonderment as he poured her a refill. She blushed, Alex frowned, and he quickly humbled himself, “I’m terribly sorry, I’ve… I’ve
just never seen anyone like you Kara… or like any of you actually.”

He glanced over at Shah, who sat with all of them at a small table in the cramped back room of the record store, surrounded by crates of vinyl records, CDs, and stereo equipment. “My own cousin doesn’t even look herself. The Shahrazad I remember was a gangly young thing, what do you Americans call them? Ah, yes, a tomboy. That girl was angry and looking for a fight, yet the one who returns has the peace of Allah within her, wrapped in the grace of a Malāʾikah.” He finished pouring the tea and smiled, looking back at Kara, “Please accept my apology angel, I will try harder not to look with such admiration into the face of the sun.”

Shah smirked, “You always had the heart of a poet cousin, I see that at least has not changed. Mersi, apology accepted for my part. Though I do suggest you stop hitting on Alex’s dūst doxtar, (she’d used the Persian phrase for girlfriend). If you get her too angry she may just decide to throw you to the top of Milad Tower.”

A small gasp came from Tarsa, whose eyes had grown to twice their normal size as she blinked up at Alex from where she was still curled up against Shah. “you would not do such a thing for real, would you alexandra?”

Alex smiled the girl. “Of course not Tarsa. Just because I can do something doesn’t mean I would, or should… even if someone deserves it.” She risked a quick glance across the table at a smug looking Kir, and shot daggers at him with her eyes.

“good. i did not think you would.” The girl reached over and squeezed Alex’s forearm looking vindicated, and was again startled, and pleasantly fascinated by the unnatural warmth of her body temperature. “you… you are like fire…”

Alex grinned mischievously and let her eyes glow blood red for just a moment, thrilling Tarsa who slipped fluidly, like a gymnast, from Shah’s side to stand close to Alex, reaching out to run her fingers down one of her arms.

The girl giggled with delight as a trail of flames danced wherever she touched.

"And you, are quite the genius. The EM field surrounding this place is amazing." Alex's compliment caused the younger girl to blush.

Kir laughed. "The girl is a hacker queen. Gave herself three degrees from Tehran University."

"a princess! not a queen." Tarsa corrected her brother with a humph and a grin.

Shah smiled at the girl, then returned her attention to Kir as she spoke again... this time with more urgency. “I am sorry, cousin, but we don’t have much time, and I know you have somewhere to be.”

"With our trucks,” Kara said, glancing down at the maps he’d quickly reviewed with them showing the locations of the twenty stolen military transports disguised and parked on city side streets near Evin prison.

“Yes.” Shah continued. “We’ve brought the money for the transfer and safe passage of the prisoners, as agreed.” Shah nodded to Alex, who easily lifted the heavy backpack with one hand and handed it across the table to Kir, who visibly staggered under its weight upon accepting it.

As he peeked inside looking a little confused, but also intrigued. “You all took a great risk coming here (I won’t even ask how you did it). But I must know, how will this help save uncle, your father? We know he is not in Evin, though we do have two other relatives languishing in its dungeons.
Shahrazad, cousin, I am concerned for you. I have seen this same look you have in your eyes reflected in those of hardened men who believe they are possibly not coming back from wherever it is they are going.

Shah took a deep breath; “Kara will be leading the assault on Evin to help the CIA and the NIR, while Alex and I will go to the place up in the Alborz in the shadow of Mount Damavand where they are holding my father, and free him.”

He raised an eyebrow, thought for a moment, and then said quietly, “This place, I am aware of it. It is a secret facility where they experiment on ways of breaking the universe… dark energy or some nonsense. We only know this because many sacrificed their lives to discover its location and get that information to the CIA. It is heavily guarded, and impossible to penetrate… Shahrazad, please, do not do this.”

Tarsa had darted back from Alex and was hugging Shah once more; this time so tight she felt it. Her tiny voice begged, “cousin, i don't want you to die! i only just found you again.”

“Do not worry delbandam,” Shah said soothingly as she smoothed the girl’s short black hair and cupped her cheek. I will not die. You see, we fear no men, and none have the power to stop us.”

And then she became Shadow.


Nov 22nd – Year Six

Flying over Tehran, Iran

0527 hours UTC +4, Tuesday morning, local time

The trio came to a slow stop a mile above the waking city, hovering in a circle facing each other

It’s time. Shah sent her thoughts like a hug to her sisters.

I hate this part. Kara whined. Can we just go back and have breakfast with Kir and Tarsa? You know, change the plan? But she knew full well they couldn’t.

I wish, Alex thought as she swooped over and wrapped her arms around Kara, holding her tight… like a Kryptonian vise-grip. Shah immediately joined her and spun them around in a huggle. After a time, they let go, but studied each other’s faces, as if they could be seeing them for the last time.

No one wanted to move, but they knew they’d delayed as long as they possibly could. Shadow and Flame eventually took their forms, full war masks coalescing around their faces, armor wrapping their bodies.

Kara fought back the dread gnawing at her gut. I’m not wishing either of you luck… I know you won’t need it. Be ready for all Hell to break loose at 06:02… The Kryptonian blonde then offered Shah a grin. And I’ll see you both back on the Zumwalt afterward, with your father.

Then, she watched as fire and darkness flickered away from her off to the Northeast, in the direction of the towering Mount Damavand, and Arad Nazari.
I will not fail you. She hurled her thoughts after them.

We know you won’t. They replied simultaneously.

Kara took one last look down at the vast city and surveyed her target with newfound resolve. From her vantage point, the sprawling prison facility looked more like one of the district’s many universities than the dark, joyless place it was… filled to overflowing with the innocent who dared to be different, ask questions, or somehow piss off the insane fanatics who ruled them.

Today that would end.

As incredible as it seemed, they were finally on the brink of reuniting Shah with her dad and introducing Ada to her grandfather… and Kara wasn’t about to allow anything to stand in their way.

Anything.

She adjusted her pack and began to rise high above the earth, moving faster by the second. As she often did when heading into battle, she thought of a quote from Sun Tzu’s brilliant military treatise, The Art of War (the book that Shah had made her read multiple times… there’d even been quizzes), that seemed somehow very appropriate for her at that moment…

“Be extremely subtle, even to the point of formlessness. Be extremely mysterious, even to the point of soundlessness. Thereby you can be the director of the opponent's fate.”

At over 18,000 miles per hour, she was already accelerating far above the earth through the exosphere, where the last remaining wisps of nitrogen and oxygen gave way to a thin swirling sea of hydrogen and helium.

It’s so beautiful.

She opened her senses and spread her hands wide to revel in the feel of the molecules and atoms as they interacted with her aura as she passed through them. Electricity washed and tingled over her every inch of her skin.

Surely, this is how the gods must feel.

She continued without stopping until, with the jewel of earth clearly visible as a sphere behind her, she passed into interplanetary space… where she once again felt the powerful caress of Sol’s life-giving fire.

It was time for her to touch the sun, and prepare for war.

..........................

Nov 22nd – Year Six

Atmospheric Reentry

0555 hours UTC +4, Tuesday morning, local time in Tehran
Kara returned to the lofty edges of the earth’s atmosphere like a Phoenix, bathed in fire, and seething with power. She had never felt such strength, not even when she’d soaked in Jor-El’s light. It was like…

she could do anything.

It was then that a wild notion entered her thoughts. Why not dispense with Zeus’ Thunderbolt all together, and just take care of the situation in a more… up close and personal way? For a moment she eagerly imagined physically ripping through the prison and its guardians with her bare hands, and dispensing justice with her cleansing blue fire.

She was a higher power after all… why shouldn’t these evil men, or any enemy for that matter, answer to her? Fear her? Bow beneath her wise judgment...

And then, a door opened in her mind, and a frightening part of her now knew a thousand new ways to kill a human.

Kara halted her descent a thousand miles above the earth and shook her head in horrified disgust. Had she actually just thought that? Was an aspect of her personality so cold and heartless that she would be capable of such committing such calculated violence? Of executing those she judged as unworthy? Of wanting to be feared?

"No! This isn’t me! It’s not right! I’m not a god or a murderer!” She cried out to the stars, unaware that she’d subconsciously willed her aura to surge outward and create a pocket of breathable atmosphere around her so could speak.

She was panting, shaking… and running out of time.

What’s happening to me?

Then, Ada’s reassuring voice entered her mind like a balm. Calm down auntie, you’re okay. It’s just a burst of new cell memories flooding your synapses as they settle in, messing with your head. Looks like your military training has finally begun to surface. Not the best timing… but, good news.

Kara let out a long, relieved breath. “Oh thank Rao! I thought I was going all Terminator.”

No, you’re still you. I think. You still like blueberry pancakes, right?


You’re welcome. Oh, auntie, it’s 0558… almost time to unleash Zeus’ lightning.

Kara looked off to the distance, and from her position saw Iran visible only at the far edge of the soft curve of rotating planet… she was just where she needed to be. Reaching into her backpack, she began removing the heavy tungsten rods from their thick black leather wrappings.

She carefully lifted each one out and tested its heft in one hand before locking the ends together to form what looked like a massively thick, solid spear.

She sighed. Looks like it’s show time. Watch over our angels, okay?

Of course, auntie… I will always keep them safe. Always.
I know, I just… I can never thank you enough… for everything. I love you, Ada.

I love you too my silly Kryptonian, but I’ll see you soon enough. Now is not the time for goodbyes. It is time to focus.

Pfft… yeah, the clock is ticking, right? Go ahead and link me to The Battle Bridge, the S.O.C. at Fort Tahoe, and Langley. I’m sure our friends are all waiting for an update.

Aye aye, auntie! Already done. You’re on in 3… 2… 1…

Suddenly Kara could sense the presence of everyone in those locations, not just Alex and her spiritual sisters (and mother) who were already a part of her thoughts. Through the secure quantum connection Ada created, she’d also somehow become temporarily entwined with all of her observers, and their thoughts and emotions reverberated through her.

And they too could see and hear her and were mesmerized.

It was a rush, to feel… everything… her General’s strength and love, Jess’ faith, Black Knight’s unerring confidence (in her), Wilkin’s awe, the concern and affection that Amanda always tried, but failed, to conceal from Kara’s keen senses… and in all of them, hope.

There was something else too, on the periphery. The same unearthly presence of ‘the others’ she felt at special times, like at Christmas every year. Not strangers, but… family. She couldn’t see them but knew without a doubt that the gods of Earth had come to observe, and their strength surrounded her.

Hello, thanks for being here with me. She let her thoughts echo through the atmosphere around her, and in return, she felt a rush of warmth... which felt a lot like love, and the gods’ approval.

0602 hours. Time to get on with her awful task.

For the benefit of everyone watching (and listening), Kara spoke with a clear and confident voice, her eyes flashing with blue fire, “Here we go, think good thoughts, everyone.”

And then, without fear or hesitation, she drew back her arm, surged forward in a blur of explosive, hypersonic speed, and released Zeus’ Thunderbolt down upon the Earth.

.................

Story Lexicon/FAQs:

**Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms:** I attempt to *italicize* all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

**Terms:** *Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.*

**Ah!khoob ast** – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

**Alex vanimelda** - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Ay Dios Mio** – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)
Aporup – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)

As-salāmu ʿalayki – A (formal) greeting which is also a standard salutation among Muslims, meaning ‘peace be upon you’. The Less formal abbreviation is simply salām. (Arabic)

Asheghetam - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

Azidane shoma khoshhalam – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)

Bedrood – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

Bonne nuit – ‘Good night’ (French)

C'est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

Damnú air! – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Dooset daram – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gaelic/Irish)

íthi eutukhé - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Kheili khosh geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

Khodähāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

M’eudail – ‘My dear/my darling’ to a friend, family, someone you care for  (Gaelic/Irish)

Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature

Marbhfháisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)

miboosamet – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)

órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)
¡Qué señoras tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)

Salâm: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Sundor – ‘Beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)

Thi eutukhēs – ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Volar mi diosa! – ‘Fly my goddess!’ (Spanish)

Wa’alaykumu s-salām – A response to the greeting As-salāmu ʿalayki, ‘and upon you, peace’ (Arabic)

Wadā’an – ‘Farewell’ (Arabic)

Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

aziz-am – ‘My dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

delbandam - ‘My heartstring’. What Shah would call her cousin Tarsa as a child when she’d babysit, very sweet, precious. She still does call her that now that they’ve reconnected.

joon-am – ‘My dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

nāzanin-am – ‘Sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘The light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘Sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person’s name<’ + jōon (Shah jōon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or jōon- they both mean 'dear'. So, ‘Shah jōon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

Other names/nickname/titles/things:

A ghrá – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)

A ghrá mo chroí - ‘My heart's beloved, my darling’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Bríomhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)
Daxamites - An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people ruled by strength/the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow altered by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.

Dios mío! – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

Dūst doxtar – ‘Girlfriend’ (Persian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Euryleia – ‘Woman Wanderer’ or ‘Wide Wandering’ - Dr. Naomi Young’s Amazon name

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)

In’ah – Ancient, lost word for ‘daughter’ - what Myka calls Kara (Kryptonese),

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

M’eudail – ‘My darling’ or ‘my dear’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Ma’har - Ancient, lost word for ‘mother’ - what Kara calls Myka (Kryptonese)

Mi amor – ‘My love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Mi lucero – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Mi Sol – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn - Thought & Memory (Old Norse)

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Norooz - Persian New Year (Persian) Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Oea - This ancient city was founded by the Phoenicians in the seventh century BC, was ruled at one time or another by the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines. Italians, and Muslims. It came to be known as Tripoli during the 9th century (Libyco-Berber)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity (from Ancient Freek)
Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Seanmhéathair – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced *shan a WAW her* (Irish/Gaelic)

Señora – Is a polite term used to address a woman. The Spanish-language equivalent of Ma’am, Ms., or Mrs.  (Spanish)

Tieguanyin - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

Tratung – khrag ‘thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Trípolis – Tripoli, the capital and largest city in Libya (from Ancient Greek)

Tuath Dé Danann - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced *Thoo-a day Du-non* (Irish/Gaelic)

Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’.
‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Vakur – A powerful (and rare) soul-devouring, evil, shape-shifting parasitic alien species from another universe. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.

Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as *Balrogs*. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Vallerian – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshiped, or traded.

Wan - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

Zafaraniyeh – The affluent neighborhood in the northern part of the Iranian capital of Tehran where Shahrazad grew up. (Persian)

Zhuyin – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:
Shah finally brought Kara and Alex home to Persia! Okay it was a brief stay, but an important one.

**Next Up:**

**Chapter 30: “When the Walls Fell”** – Where we follow the events of Operation Jericho as they unfold, including: Kara unleashes Zeus’s Thunderbolt with devastating results, will the gods intervene to save Tehran?; In the ruins of Evin Prison (Echo One) Kara makes a discovery that will change her and Alex’s lives forever; deep inside the subterranean labyrinth of Echo Two Shadow and Flame face off against a powerful, unearthly, world-ending force... and a sacrifice is made.

**Attributions:**

"Hammer of the Gods"

- **Rods from God, or Kinetic Orbital Bombardment**
  Symbolically, Kara has become Zeus, Thor, you name it... hurling her wrath down upon the earth

"FN SCAR (Special Operations Forces Combat Assault Rifle)"

- **Alex's new baby**
  A gift from Watt and SEAL Team 7
When the Walls Fell

Chapter Summary

Where we follow Operation Jericho as it unfolds.

When Zeus’ Thunderbolt goes awry, will the gods intervene to save Tehran?; in the ruins of Evin Prison Kara makes a discovery, and a choice, that will change her and Alex’s lives forever; and deep within the subterranean labyrinth of Echo Two, Shadow and Flame face off against a powerful, unearthly, world-ending force... and a sacrifice is made.

Chapter Notes

It’s Year 6, late Nov – Kara is twenty (22 in Kryptonian years), and in her third year at Columbia. Alex is twenty-one, living in National City with Shah at the loft, doing her grad work at the Sagan Institute by special arrangement, and has been with the D.E.O. over three years and kicking ass there. Shah is also working on her graduate studies, but at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL).

I posted this chapter on Fathers’ Day, coincidence?

Also, I lacked a beta reader and editor for this chapter, again, so please let me know if you see any issues so I can quickly address them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nov 22nd – Year Six

In the Strait of Hormuz - one mile off the coast from Bandar-e ‘Abbās, Iran

The USS Zumwalt’s Battle Bridge - linked to the Strategic Operations Center (S.O.C.) at Fort Tahoe in eastern Turkey, and CIA Special Operations Tactical Command at Langley in the U.S.

0608 hours UTC +4, Local time in Iran – Tuesday morning

The Battle Bridge on the cloaked USS Zumwalt was a flurry of activity, and Captain Tom Daniels stood squarely in the middle of it.

Starlight, as always, was a pervasive presence and the voice of calm in the din.

The graceful creature moved effortlessly among the command crew’s battle stations, anticipating their needs before even they could voice them. Tom smiled as she briefly hovered over Chief Petty Officer Rodriguez’s shoulder to examine some unidentified communication traffic, and let her feather
light touch linger on a grinning Jess’ shoulder.

*Gods of Olympus* it was so good to see them so happy!

When Ada stepped back to rejoin him on the raised dais of the bridge’s center she waved a hand and brought all the vast 3D displays that lined the curved walls and ceiling of the domed chamber to life. “Listen up!” She announced. “Zeus’ Thunderbolt is already all over the news and the Internet. There are hundreds of images and video streams from mobile phones and other devices tracking the ‘meteor’. The good news for us is that’s what everyone believes it is.”

A cascade of videos and reports from various worldwide news media of a fireball racing through the atmosphere over Iran flickered across the massive displays of the Battle Bridge, as well as Operation Jericho’s linked command centers: the Strategic Operations Center (S.O.C.) at Fort Tahoe in eastern Turkey and CIA Special Operations Tactical Command at Langley.

“Three minutes to detonation.” She then coolly stated, but whispered under her breath quiet enough that only Tom could hear, “Rao be with you, auntie.”

All eyes shifted back to Kara’s live feed. Archangel was hidden within the fireball's blazing tail, moving at a mind-boggling twenty-five thousand six hundred and fifty-two miles per hour!

As the weapon breached the upper atmosphere a massive boom could be heard, and felt, hundreds of miles away as its effects rippled outward in a blazing concentric circle over the earth.

Daniels took a deep breath, running one of his large hands through his short-cropped white hair. He’d never been so worried about Kara... what she was doing was the stuff of legends.

He knew he had no right to feel as he did, but the young Kryptonian had long ago ceased being just an ally, or a friend... she was family. Like the daughter that he and his wife had always hoped for.

*By the gods Myka, I wish you were here at my side now. Athena, please keep Kara safe.*

As if sensing his unease, Starlight leaned in close to press against his side, her soft, tactile warmth reassuring. He leaned back into her, thankful, as always, for the young woman’s presence.

*What would I do without her... without any of them?*

Jess’ concerned voice suddenly broke over the comms, “We have activity on the ground in the Red Zone! Surface-to-air missile batteries just went hot, and the Iranians are scrambling a dozen F-14 fighters out of Tehran-Mehrabad.”

“The missiles are not a threat to either Zeus’ Thunderbolt or Archangel, and the aircraft will never get off the ground in time. Even if they did, they are irrelevant… ignore them. Ninety seconds to detonation.” Starlight’s calm and authoritative response, spoken with such assurance, sucked the tension right out of the air.

She paused, and then said to Kara, “Archangel, could you please use your aura’s gravity to adjust the weapon’s trajectory slightly?” A burst of what sounded like music to almost everyone followed, but Daniels and all those who knew Kara’s secret understood that Ada had just sent the Kryptonian all of the necessary instructions to accomplish the task in the language of her people, at hyper-speed.

“Aye aye, Starlight, shifting... now.” There was a slight strain in the tone Archangel's response as if she were lifting an impossibly heavy weight.

“Almost there.” Black Knight broke in to encourage Kara.
Why's Paul grinning? And why is Kara giggling?

While Daniels hated the fact that she was working for The Agency at all, he had to admit he liked her handler. He was a good man, who had complete faith in her… they even had their own geeky secret language... which could be irritating at times.

“Come ‘on, say it, Black Knight, pretty please?” Kara begged. She even managed to bat her eyelashes for the camera.

“Fine.” The veteran soldier said with resignation as he chuckled and rolled his eyes. “Stay on target.”

“Yes!” The young hero sang out triumphantly as the dark wall of the Alborz Mountains loomed up frighteningly close ahead of her. With only seconds to spare Archangel said, “It’s away!” and separated from the fiery tail of the meteor, plummeting to earth in a blur of movement… spiking an earthshaking three-point landing in an inhabited section of the mountains.

She stayed on one knee in the crater she'd created, head bowed, golden curls cascading down over her shoulders as her aura visibly shimmered, becoming a stunning multicolored field of scintillating visible energy (like a shield) that surrounded her like a dome.

Everyone watching on the Battle Bridge collectively gasped and stopped moving to just watch. Archangel was displaying a power no one, not even Tom, had seen before.

It was… beautiful.

“Tuigim.” The hero said over the comms as if responding to someone.

Tom glanced with a raised eyebrow at Starlight, “Is that…?”

“Irish.” The raven-haired beauty at his side grinned, her sparkling emerald eyes never leaving Archangel, who’s shimmering aura was drawing the broken stones and earth around her to it as if they were magnetic… creating a layer of rocky, impenetrable armor on its surface. “Auntie is talking to Selene in our thoughts, the word just slipped out of her. She said, ‘I understand’. They trained together for months for this day. The rocks will act as a shield from the blast, I just hope it’s enough.”

“Aye.” Daniels said, and then whispered one last prayer to Athena as the final seconds ticked by, “Wrap your Aegis around her Wise One, with my eternal gratitude.”

“Detonation.”

As Starlight spoke, Zeus’ Thunderbolt became a silent pinpoint of impossibly intense light, like what Daniel’s could only imagine it would be to actually stare into the heart of a star.

Then, in a brilliant blinding flash the sky tore open with the most violent explosion he’d ever witnessed, it’s airborne shockwave tearing outwards, ripping up full-grown trees and obliterating entire sections of the mountain as it carried a churning swell of debris down the slope.

Archangel’s dome disappeared within the storm.

Seconds later, as Kara and Ada had predicted, the great tumbling wall of dust and earth hit Echo One like a tidal wave and continued on only slightly abated, descending upon the northern districts of Tehran.

Lt. Vaden’s stricken voice broke over the comms, “We have a problem! The shockwave is of greater magnitude than we anticipated. It appears a section of the mountains we were counting on to absorb
a significant portion of its energy was riddled with previously undetected mineshafts and collapsed, providing no protection whatsoever. We should expect widespread damage and fatalities in the northern districts of the city, I am so sorry.”

“No!” Kara’s agonized cry was heard over the comms.

Tom’s heart went out to her. “Goddess, help them.” He whispered, his head bowed as he reached up to touch the ancient medallion around his neck.

Then, in response to his prayers, Athena’s vibrant, powerful presence was suddenly in his mind, surrounding him, and she spoke directly in his thoughts. Do not worry Tom. You have my promise; no innocents shall perish.

“What is that?” Vaden called out. “Rising above the northernmost part of the city?”

Jess was all over it, “I’m zooming in!”

Tom looked up at the monitors, and blinked in disbelief as the figure of a flying woman became clear. A hood covered her head, and she wore a beautiful golden cloak as she hovered hundreds of feet above Tehran’s rooftops facing the approaching storm… her arms spread wide. There was something indelibly regal about her bearing, and familiar, but Tom couldn’t place it.

“It’s like she’s waiting for it. Dios mío!” Jess said with awe.

And then the leading edge of the rolling wall of darkness stuck with incalculable force, and the city trembled. The comms were momentarily silent as everyone watched, anticipating a horror show of shattered and tumbling buildings to follow.

“Huǒyì! Did you see that!?” Lt. Vaden suddenly called out, “A massive quantum spike!” He was positively jubilant compared to the tone of his last dire announcement.

“Look at those readings! Just before the shockwave entered the city, it passed through an energy field we hadn’t detected before, similar to Archangel’s aura but far more massive. The effect was like instantaneously blowing out something as powerful as at least an F5 tornado like a candle. There’s no tech in the world that can do that, and certainly nothing the Iranians have.”

“So, something else intervened?” Jess asked.

“Someone else.” Daniels corrected with a knowing grin. He watched the flying woman; her golden cloak flapping behind her magnificent form, as she blurred with a sudden burst of speed and flew straight up into the sky before disappearing. Thank you great Goddess, Protector of the City.

No one has called me that in ages! Athena thoughts were a joy as they danced in his own. Her delightful, almost musical laugh was so much like Kara’s when she wasn’t playing human.

Well, today you earned it. He hesitated, but then continued, I hate to ask, but can you…

The goddess gently cut him off, her tone soothing and sincere. There’s no need, Tom. I have been watching over our girl for years, and am not about to abandon her in her time of greatest need. Farewell, for now, my brave Captain. And then her presence shifted away from his mind, though her warmth lingered on as a great comfort.

Our girl… he repeated to himself. Something about how casually Athena had spoken to him, more so than what had become usual, and used that tantalizingly familiar phrase, was like Déjà vu… but any answer, or clarity, was frustratingly just out of reach.
“We see it too Zumwalt.” It was Agent Wilkins at Langley. “ Whoever that new player is who protected Tehran didn’t do the same for Echo One… Evin Prison was outside of her field, and has sustained massive damage.”

With that news, a cheer went up simultaneously in all three of the linked command centers.

Nov 21st & 22nd – Year Six

Evin Prison – ‘Echo One’

Northern edge of Tehran - Alborz Mountains

2116 hours UTC -5, U.S. East Coast Time - Nov 21st – Monday night

0616 hours UTC +4, Local time in Iran – Nov 22nd - Tuesday morning

The place was in ruins.

Shattered walls, downed and sparking power lines, massive beams protruding through ceilings, broken glass, upended vehicles and tumbled furniture were scattered everywhere… both inside and out of the facility.

They’d planned the attack to occur at a time when there be the fewest guards on duty, but Kara was still worried about the ones who’d been caught in the blast wave.

I hope everyone is okay…

Against Wilkin’s protests she’d taken a minute after first landing to scan for people, and flew at super speed to assist and transport the stunned, injured, and unconscious to a park down in the city.

There were so many broken bones and blood from blunt force trauma, it was shocking… All of it caused by her.

I did this.

The realization was sobering, but she had no time to dwell on it.

After clearing a path to the facility’s massive steel front gates, which were miraculously still sealed (merely without power to open them), she sank her fingers into the metal as if it were clay and easily forced the heavily fortified barriers apart.

As the gates ground open to the sounds of screeching metal, Kara looked up from her efforts into the nervous muzzles of over two-dozen AK 47s, and a ragtag group of men with black armbands who were waiting outside.

“Salām.” She spoke soothingly, flashing the jittery rebel fighters a big smile as she raised her hands with open palms as said, in Persian, “Welcome to Evin Prison.”

The men appeared both awestruck and confused, nervously shuffling and murmuring amongst
themselves. Some lowered their weapons; while others kept their trembling muzzles pointed in her
general direction.

Amateurs. Kara almost laughed but held it in.

Living as a human she completely understood the young men’s reactions at seeing a super-powered
woman in a futuristic, military grade, form-fitting battle suit easily pushing open the massive twelve-
ton gates of Evin using only her bare hands.

Then, she sighed. There was no time to coddle them or acknowledge some of the more rude and
offensive whispers about what some of them would like to be doing to her with her clothes off.

“Who’s in charge here?” She demanded with great authority, shifting to English. She’d mimicked
Alex’s D.E.O. agent ‘I’m in command, you must obey me’ confident stance… and it seemed to have
the intended effect.

Cool.

A wiry young man, probably just a few years older than Kara, stepped forward with more self-
assurance than the others. “I am Hamid… and you must be Archangel.” His handsome features were
blessed with a grin, and he was studying her with approval... and something that looked a lot like
lust. “You’re as beautiful as they said you’d be, and just as strong.”

Is this guy really hitting on me in the middle of a rescue mission?

Hamid’s eyes ended up hovering on her chest.

Damn, he is. “Um, hi… Yup, that’s me.” Rao, shoot me now. Does every man I meet who isn’t gay
want to sleep with me? I will never take working with Colliers every day for granted ever again!

Ada broke into her thoughts, broadcasting simultaneously to all three command centers. Archangel,
I’ve disabled Echo One’s automated weapon systems and unlocked all doors and cell blocks for our
rebel friends on sub-levels one through four. The good news is there are far fewer prisoners on those
floors than we believed, less than a thousand. Our friendlies are deeper down in sub-levels five and
six, which are positioned laterally to the main complex further into the mountains. I’m working on
breaking into those now, but the security down there is surprisingly challenging.

Thanks, Starlight, I’ll get Hamid and his guys moving. It’s time for me to get to work.

The expectant rebel was still staring at her, his eyes slowly appraising her up and down. Rude. Kara
said, “Hamid, eyes up here! We’ve disabled security inside, and your clear down four levels, but no
further. I’ll go on ahead and make sure the guards won’t be a problem and send them up unarmed.
No unnecessary killing, okay? Are we clear?”

He nodded in understanding and finally matched her gaze. “Yes, no unnecessary killing. We are not
barbarians.”

“Good, I didn’t mean to imply you were, I just need us to be on the same page.”

“Same page. We just want to free our people.”

“All right then, you need to be quick, and the clock is ticking.”

He moved in closer, motioning his men forward. “Move it! Now!” He commanded, and they seemed
to jump from their trance to surge past them.
Once the two of them were alone he once again addressed her. “Your trucks are down that street behind me, Kir is waiting for you there.” His voice dropped to a husky whisper, “Good luck, Fereshteh. I hope to see you again, I would very much like to show you some… Iranian hospitality.” His tone and eyes indicated exactly what he’d like to be doing with her later…

Kara smirked as she rose into the sky, “Down boy, I’m already someone’s angel, and she’s mine. Thanks for the help though! Farewell, and be careful!” The look of disappointment on his face was obvious.

“I’m glad you said something… I was about to fly over there and smack him through a wall.” To everyone listening’s surprise, and, from the quiet laughter Kara could hear and feel through her link from all of their family, delight, Alex’s obviously annoyed voice broke in channel wide.

And Kara responded in kind, “No need Vaena… my Flame… my heart is already yours.”

Alex’s warm thoughts quickly mingled with her own, Well, if anyone was still unsure if Archangel and Flame were an item, I guess we just answered that question! Now everyone knows!

Kara’s bubbly happiness surrounded both of them as if they were in the same room, not separated by miles. There were at least three office pools about our relationship status at Langley, I should have played… we would have cleaned up, big time. But seriously, wasn’t it awesome to actually say it out loud?

Yeah, it was kind of incredible actually.

I love you, Alexandra. Oh, crap! Gotta go. You know… work.

And then Kara was a blur, moving unseen through stark, industrial corridors of metal and concrete. She shimmered further into the mountains, followed a monorail tunnel, and down an elevator shaft to the deeper parts of the mysterious facility. When she finally reached level five she pushed open one of the fortified sets of elevator doors and was immediately assaulted by a hail of large caliber bullets and… a laser? A freaking laser? Are you serious?

A reddish energy beam struck her, instantly melting a three-inch-wide hole in her armor like a trail as it strafed across her abdomen. “Owww!” She cried out as the concentrated light bombarded her flesh.

No matter, in a split second the four soldiers at the other end of the hall firing at her were unconscious with their shattered weapons being crumbled over them before most of the projectiles had harmlessly struck and ricocheted off the walls and metal doors behind where she was no longer standing.

Kara stood among the fallen, holding the angry looking, long black laser rifle the man who’d shot her had been using in her hands before hurling the weapon down the corridor and unleashing her heat vision on it. The result was a small explosion that rocked the level.

“Damn, that stung.” I wasn’t ready for it. She ran her fingers over the line of pink skin on her stomach. Thank goodness it’s just superficial, I thought the damage might be worse.

“Nice moves Archangel.” The complimentary voice that spoke over the comms was Black Knight’s.

Kara warmed at her handler’s approval, but before she could respond, was forced to cover her ears as an irritating, high-pitched wail began going off. She plugged her ears and quickly looked around for the source of the irritant.
Starlight, a little help here?

Of course, auntie.

The sirens soon went silent, and Kara began using her X-Ray vision to peer through the walls around her to get the lay of the land. She was in the middle of a very stark and blindingly white hallway, which was very different (far cleaner and more modern) than the upper levels of the dungeon.

The reason became clear after she began her search and found her first friendly, a covert CIA operative named Michelle Godwin. The woman was trapped behind two locked doors, strapped securely to a hospital bed with lines attached to her intravenously, and surrounded by medical monitors. She was only partially conscious from whatever drugs were flowing into her from the bags of dark liquids hanging above.

A man in green scrubs immediately fled as Kara burst into the room accompanied by a shower of sparks and steel shards from what was left of the thick metal doors, her eyes blazing. She swiftly extracted the half-conscious, and obviously starved woman from her restraints and pulled her frail body to her chest, cradling her like a child.

Oh Rao… she’s as light as a feather.

Agent Godwin began to shake, and sob, as she cracked her red eyes open. Her disheveled blonde hair was plastered to her sweat-soaked forehead, the side of her face and sunken cheek rested on the Kryptonian’s right breast like a pillow. “Are you real?” She croaked, her fingers tentatively probing Kara’s bicep. “Is this a dream, or am I… finally dead?”

The Kryptonian’s heart clenched in her chest, “I’m real ma’am. It’s okay, you’re safe now… The cavalry’s here.”

The woman giggled drunkenly, clinging to Kara as she sleepily watched the hero turn her head and unleash punishing beams of blue fire into the room, incinerating the equipment, bed, and most of the drugs. “My avenging angel.” She said with awe… then, as she slipped off into unconsciousness mumbled, “I didn’t tell them anything… I swear…”

“I know, you were very brave, but you can rest now… I will get you to safety.”

Kara then shimmered back up to the surface, to a waiting row of military-style heavy trucks on a nearby street. The three rebels standing by the closest vehicle nearly jumped out of their boots when she suddenly materialized among them, jabbering in Farsi for help.

Thankfully one of them was a physician, an older, balding man wearing a pair of delicate round glasses, who directed Archangel to a triage bed up in the covered rear of the truck. After she tenderly deposited Agent Godwin on a cot, Kara handed the doctor two liquid-filled plastic bags.

The older man looked at her quizzically.

She said, “These are the chemicals they were pumping into her. The first one is GHB, um, sorry… gamma-Hydroxybutyric acid. The other is a mixture of ketamine and sodium thiopental. I hope knowing will help.”

The man adjusted his spectacles, used a penlight to read the words imprinted on the bags, and smiled, “Yes indeed, it helps immensely! I could have used the wrong remedy, possibly killing her. I can’t believe those savages were using these drugs on her!” He shoved the bags away from him in disgust. “Thank you, my dear.”
She bowed to the gentleman, “It’s the least I can do, doctor. Please take care of her. See you in a few seconds.” Then disappeared from the makeshift sickbay, back to level five of the prison.

Archangel repeated her rescue many times over the course of the next eight minutes, taking out cameras and making sure to knock out guards before anyone ever recorded or saw her. Sometimes the prisoners were drugged, or just being held in locked cells, asleep, dreading the next visit by their jailers.

Others had been tortured; some with horrific injuries… many had healed over time, only to be cut, burned, or electrocuted again. Kara fought back bile as she rescued one man whose hand had been sawed off, and others were worse… it was awful.

She ended up clearing both floors five and six out and, against Wilkin’s useless protests, freeing all one hundred and fifty-seven people being held there… not just their friendlies.

Was Black Knight chuckling? Yes, he was…

“Archangel, you can’t! What are we supposed to do with them??” Amanda’s number one blurted out.

“I don’t know Wilkins, but I’m kinda busy right now and need you to figure that out. Look, I’m not leaving them here… end of discussion. The decision is mine, I’ll take full responsibility. Archangel, out!”

Well-done auntie. Ada’s thought’s tickled her mind.

Thanks.

She then returned to level six for one final look around and to make sure all the evil minions left there were sent scampering, unarmed (and some slightly broken), to the surface. Satisfied, Kara was about to leave, with time to spare, when something unexpected tugged at her bond from deeper below…

A presence.

Oh! She gasped in surprise.

What she felt was unlike anything she’d ever experienced before… like a glimmer of sunlight through rustling leaves on a breezy summer day, the feeling of flying all-out, wind in her hair, or being together with Alex and Shah, laughing, holding and cuddling Nom in her arms… such incredible joy, and then fear… and crushing sadness.

Kara was left trembling, and unshed tears gathered in her eyes. The mind calling out to her from beneath the facility was beautiful… but afraid, and alone.

That lovely, innocent soul needed her help. Now.

Kara scanned the floor with newfound urgency and was surprised to discover that the heavily fortified sub-level below her was semi-shielded from her X-Ray vision. Some form of energy field surrounded it, like a curtain. Further down she could barely make out a blurry, complex warren of hallways, large rooms, and chambers within it. Possibly laboratories, filled with complicated equipment and… was that an operating arena?

Like in a hospital.

Her skin began to crawl. She had a very bad feeling.
Starlight, did you feel, or see, any of that? There’s someone being held captive down there.

No, I didn’t, but I am detecting a massive power source below. It’s cloaked by some very advanced tech, definitely not terrestrial, which is why I didn’t notice it before.

Can you hack it?

Of course, I’ve already started. Oh, wait a second… that’s odd…

What is it?

The energy field... its purpose appears to be to conceal, but also to keep something trapped inside, not to keep anyone out. Archangel, please be careful. We won’t be able to sense you or communicate once you pass through it; at least not until one of us either destroys or turns it off.

Understood. Rao, that sucks.

Yes, it does auntie. So work fast.

Kara adjusted her vision to shift through a myriad of wavelengths until she found the right one that could allow her to see beyond the barrier to level eight below her. It didn't take long. Inside was a vast series of heavily guarded rooms, all connected, the thick walls and spaces between layered with hidden corridors, strange technology, and deadly traps.

One of the areas, in particular, drew her attention.

It looked like a large studio apartment… no, a child’s room, but antiseptic, with a bed, bathroom, and living area. From her vantage, Kara could tell it was obviously a cell, with observation rooms hidden behind every wall. Over twenty men and even some women, some armed soldiers, others in lab coats, were milling about, watching a young girl who was curled up in a ball under the covers of the bed…

Beyond the creep factor, the whole situation was just, wrong. The human adults were observing the child like a lab experiment! That scenario had been Kara’s nightmare ever since coming to Earth, and this girl was living it.

She could feel the little one’s sadness, terror, confusion, and anger. It was definitely her innocent mind that had called out into the dark for help, not knowing Kara would feel her.

Enough of this!

Kara’s body surged, slicing down through the thick steel plates of level six’s floor like a diver through water, leaving an explosive trail of utter destruction behind her. She used her heat vision to cut through the complex machinery that dominated level seven and erupted from the ceiling of what appeared to be the main control center of eight, landing with such force that the whole room shook.

Computer screens exploded outwards and the overhead lights blew out in showers of sparks and glass shards.

Enveloped in the collapse of falling debris, dust, and flames she’d pulled down with her, Archangel’s shadowy form was barely visible in her mottled gray and black battle suit, blue fire burning in her eyes. After a moment one of the girl’s keepers saw just enough of her through the dark rolling smoke to shriek, drop the tablet she was holding, and run in the opposite direction as if being chased by a demon.
Alarms were blaring, lights flashing, and men and women in lab coats and black military fatigues were scrambling, shedding their weapons and gear to grab gas masks from an open panel on a wall. The frantic mob then began pushing and shoving each other as they battled to flee the control room to escape the thick, billowing clouds of toxic Halon gas that had begun filling the air inside.

Kara glared menacingly at her enemies until the last one disappeared, and reinforced steel doors sealed silently behind them… leaving her alone.

_Finally!_

She shimmered over to select a breathing mask for the girl, and then quickly tore open a steel containment door to use her super speed to shimmer down twisted corridors in search of her room. Seconds later, she finally stood before the long, floor to ceiling one-way window of the observation chamber. In the room beyond was a small figure on a bed, huddled under a thin blanket… unaware that all of her tormentors were gone.

The child’s fear was palpable.

Kara didn’t hesitate as she smashed through the barrier, landing in a sinuous crouch on the floor of the bedroom. As she made her noisy entrance the terrified child shot straight up and out from under her covers at the sound of shattering glass.

In a blink of an eye Archangel was sitting on the bed at the small prisoner’s side, her mask off, smiling reassuringly. The girl wasn’t at all what she’d expected… maybe six-years-old and humanoid, but definitely not human. Her skin was almost orange, and her irises were the most amazing and vibrant shade of purple, (the color put Lois’ violet to shame), the same color as her long hair that draped nearly down to her waist.

She was so… otherworldly… and adorably beautiful, but still a frightened child, a prisoner, dressed in a blue hospital gown. She was shaking, with bruised needle tracks on her arms and neck, looking up at Archangel with big pleading eyes.

Kara reminded herself that it was important to be accepting, calm, and to not show how surprised, or worried, she really was. All lessons she’d learned from Eliza Danvers after she’d first arrived in Midvale.

“Don’t be afraid, sweetheart, you can trust me. I’m going to get you out of here. My name is Kara, what’s yours?” Her tone was soothing, but inside she was worried. She was running out of time, and the Halon was creeping in like a fog at her feet. She needed to get the child in a mask ASAP.

The alien girl briefly studied her, as if sizing Kara up, before her features slowly softened into a look of confusion. She then spoke softly, in Galactic Common, “You… you’re not like them… not from here.” Her gaze looked upwards as she reached out to shakily take Kara’s outstretched hand.

Rao, she hadn’t heard the language in years but had been required to learn it before traveling to other worlds. She stumbled over the words as she responded, but said, “No, I am… Kryptonian.”

The child blinked in astonishment, her body collapsing as if all the tension she’d been holding in broke like a flood as her tears began flowing in earnest. “Protector!” She proclaimed in her singsong voice before she reached up to touch Kara’s cheek. “I’m Ryah.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere.” Kara grinned, trying to stay strong for her. The girl allowed Kara to swoop her up in her arms, and slip on the breathing mask. Kara could use her aura to keep the fumes away, but if something happened to her, or she needed her focus for something else and her
aura collapsed, the girl would need the extra filter.

Better safe than sorry.

“Ryah, listen, you’ll need to keep this on your face until we are outside, the gas in the air will make it poisonous in here, even for you, if I remember correctly. You’re a Durlan right?”

The girl burrowed into Kara’s ample chest, hiding her face as she whispered through the protective mask, “Yes, but it it’s a secret. Mother and father said not to tell strangers.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m not a stranger then huh?” They both giggled. “I’ve met some of your people before, on my travels among the stars.”

Ryah cracked an absolutely delightful smile, but her eyes suddenly grew wide, as if she’d just remembered something terribly important. As her brows knit together in concern she asked in a bit of a panic, “Protector Kara, where’s Vela? Have you seen her?”

The name was pretty, pronounced with a flowing, soft lilt, so more like ‘Vay-yah’ in English.

“Just call me Kara sweetheart, okay? Who’s Vela? Is she human?”

“No, she’s like me, but a grown up! Vela took care of me... before we crashed. She was here, but the bad people... the humans,” Her little face contorted in anger when she said the word, “took her away a long time ago. Kara, why did she leave me all alone?”

Kara’s gut clenched, “I haven’t seen anyone else like you sweetie, but let me look again. I’m sure that she didn’t leave you by choice.” She quickly probed the entire level, and almost threw up. The labs around them were filled with gore... Durlan tissue, organs, and bone... certainly enough for an adult.

Monsters!

Kara’s voice faltered as she squeezed Ryah tight, “She’s gone. Vela won’t be coming back.”

Tears ran down the innocent girl’s cheeks, and her voice rose as she struggled to look around the room, frantically search for her guardian, “No, that can’t be right! Kara, check again! Please check again! Vela promised! She promised...”

Gas had surrounded them, breaking like misty waves against the bubble of Kara’s quantum aura. Alarms were blaring, and she was at a loss for words.

Kara looked down at the girl cradled in her arms and said, “I’m so sorry little one, she didn’t want to leave you, but the bad people... they...” She struggled with what to say. How could she tell a six-year-old someone they cared about was murdered?

Wait...

With all of her will, Kara pushed her awareness out, using the skills Aeryn had taught her, to pierce the powerful veil to send her thoughts to the one person in the universe she knew would be able to help her.

Eliza! 911! Help!

Oh! Kara, is everything okay? Did you rescue all of those people?

No, no, not yet. But I need your help. Oh, Eliza, it’s terrible! I have a sweet little girl here, Ryah,
who’s maybe… six? Her caregiver was killed but she doesn’t know that yet, only that she was abandoned. She’s asking me why the woman hasn’t come back like she promised. I don’t want to lie, but…

Calm down, it’s okay sweetie. Eliza’s thoughts were calm. Tell her the truth, but gently. Kids her age are just starting to grasp the permanence of something like death and can be confused easily. Put the facts out there as simply and honestly as possible, and respect her pain.

Kara knew Eliza would have the answer. Thank you so much! I have more questions, but I’m kind of out of time right now.

Okay, I know that tone… please call me back, and let me know when you can be home next, or when we can meet up in Paris. I want to hear all about this girl, and what’s happening with you over there. Stay safe my darling.

Will do! Love you too mom number one!

Only a few seconds had passed. Kara swallowed hard and then continued speaking, “Ryah, the… bad people… they hurt Vela, and she… she died. She wanted to be here for you, I know she did, but she couldn’t sweetheart. But I’m here… and won’t let anyone hurt you. Ever.”

It was a bold promise, but one Kara felt compelled to make.

The young Durlan appeared perplexed, and asked, “Why did they hurt her? She was so nice… Vela took care of me, always carried me on her shoulders when my feet got tired and told me stories. Can I go see her if she can’t come here?”

Kara’s heart was breaking, and a fire began thrumming in her Kryptonian blood… a rage like she’d never felt before.

She hurled her senses from her and could feel, and hear Ryah’s fleeing torturers trying to scurry to safety above, like vermin…

Murders.

Kara brushed tears back off her own cheeks and glared after them as they attempted to flee.

“No sweetheart, you can’t see her. We’ll talk more about this later, but right now I’m going to make sure these… evil people never hurt anyone, ever again. Don’t be afraid, okay? Just close your eyes, and do not open them until I say so.” Her voice took on a hard edge when she then said, “When I’m finished, there won’t be anything left, I promise you.”

Ryah nodded, and with that, Kara’s own eyes blazed with blue fire hotter than the sun, and she drew the girl in close against her body as she began the systematic and complete annihilation of the lower levels of the facility.

The girl peeked, watching the searing light with a look of both awe and wonder from within the safety of Kara’s aura… all the while hugging her indestructible protector like she’d never, ever let go.

And the world turned to ash around them.

……………..
“Holy! Sir, do you see that energy spike!” A tech cried out from her console to the room.
“Origination point is twelve hundred meters from the main Echo One facility and three hundred down.”

Chief Vaden gaped in astonishment at the readings on his display, “I see it! A 12.24-gigajoule continuous energy surge!”

"Spiking to 13.5, sir!” The tech cried out in astonishment.

“Archangel’s still down there!” Jess cried out in panic, zeroing their satellite’s video feed in on the prison.

Everyone could see actual physical shockwaves in the earth radiating outward in a concentric circular pattern from the surface of the target area up in mountains, like ripples in the water. Ada, I still can’t hear any of their thoughts. Do you feel her yet? Is she okay? Jess asked in their thoughts.

Starlight appeared in a brilliant flash of white light at the Petty Officer’s side, a look of grave concern in her haunted emerald gaze. No, she’s definitely not okay. Ada could feel Kara’s rage… but nothing else. Oh, auntie… what’s happening to you?

Shah’s daughter then placed a trembling hand on her lover’s forearm and glanced around at all of the worried human faces looking to her for guidance. Ada took a breath and said to them, “Archangel is the most loving and compassionate soul I know in this or any world, but something has brought her to anger, and, I fear, that she will not leave the guilty unpunished.” And then only to Jess, such is the way of Kryptonian Justice. “She has become the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds the dust beneath her feet.”

At the conclusion of those ominous words, on the satellite feed the surface above the deeper levels of what had once been Evin Prison lurched upwards violently as if an explosion had occurred underground, and the earth bucked. The entire upper part of the hidden facility began to sag at its center, and a few vehicles and individuals could be seen trying frantically to escape the site. But the entire area then began to tilt, and crumble inexorably inwards… into a quickly growing expanse like a sinkhole.

Beams of searing light erupted liked pillars into the sky from below as fire and billowing smoke belched forth as if the mouth of Hell itself had opened, and was swallowing the entire complex. All of the cleverly disguised multistoried buildings, parking structures, and prison grounds (along with those coming from the deepest levels, too slow to escape) slid into its smoldering oblivion… without leaving a trace.

It was at that moment that a fiery angel appeared, soaring up out of the flames, cradling something precious in the crook of one arm and holding onto what appeared to be a sleek futuristic spacecraft of some kind that trailed behind her in the other.
Archangel was only visible for a moment before her aura’s shimmer wrapped its veil concealment around her, making her virtually invisible to all sensors and visual tracking. When she finally spoke, her voice was subdued, “Archangel clear, and the secret, deeper levels of Echo One are… gone. Starlight, I’m on my way to you. Are Flame and Shadow there? I still can’t hear them.”

“Glad you’re safe Archangel. But no, still no contact with them.” Ada’s voice was strained, both awed and concerned by what she’d just felt and witnessed from Kara, and her worry for her mother and Alex was raw.

“Rao! Ada, look, I have a couple… um, packages to drop off, then I need to go escort our friendlies to Turkey.” Kara then continued in Ada and Jess’ thoughts, I need you both. Meet me on the Zumwalt’s flight deck in ten minutes… scratch that, fifteen, this escape pod is totally weighing me down.

*Escape pod? What’s going on mi diosa?* Jess asked, confused.

*There’s someone I need you to watch for me while I go find Alex and Shah.*

*Someone??*  

*You’ll see.*

*Okay.*

Ada then asked, *So, auntie, are we going to talk about what just happened?*

*No. Not now, but later, yes. I think I’ll need to… I… I can’t stop shaking.*

And then, a cacophony of voices broke in from the S.O.C.’s at Fort Tahoe and Langley, checking to make sure that Archangel was okay, and congratulating her on a completing her mission… even though the result had been a little more spectacular than they’d planned for.

……………………

*Let’s go back in time, and shift locations…*

**Nov 21st & 22nd – Year Five**

*Echo Two – High in the Alborz Mountains, in the shadow of Mount Damavand*

2123 hours UTC -5, U.S. East Coast Time - Nov 21st – Monday night

0623 hours UTC +4, Local time in Iran – Nov 22nd - Tuesday morning

Infiltrating the less secure upper-levels of the top-secret Iranian dark energy research facility had been easy. They had descended from the sky, and Shadow had brought a thick blanket of darkness with them, allowing the pair to slip inside undetected. In the safety of her friend’s arms, Alex moved unseen through the shadows.

Fading in and out of existence had been an amazing and indescribable experience.
The deeper they went, the more dangerous their journey had become, with larger numbers of guards armed with powerful guns and energy weapons blocking routes, and more complex security systems and countermeasures to avoid.

They had just slipped into a utility closet on level twelve, and Ada was projecting a semi-complete schematic of the deep structure in their HUDs.

Shah’s daughter was explaining the plan, “You need to get to level seventeen, I’m almost certain that’s where Arad is physically located. But be cautious, there is a great deal of unidentified energy being generated down there, and it’s already making it difficult for me to track you. It also doesn’t look like I’ll be able to communicate with you in the deeper levels, and can’t override all of their sensors on sub-level thirteen or lower. From here on out you’re on your own, and should expect heavy resistance. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay Starlight. Without you, we wouldn’t have made it this far… not without fighting all the way down.” Alex was grateful, but already feeling anxious knowing Ada wouldn’t be able to help them down below.

Shah said, “We are in your debt, daughter. You have given us the chance to bring Arad home.” Alex understood why Shah was being so formal and didn’t say ‘my father’ or ‘your grandfather’, not everyone on the channel knew her or Ada’s real identities, and she wanted to keep it that way.

Thank you, mother. Ada spoke in both Shah and Alex’s thoughts. It still sucks not being able to do more! If you can shut down whatever is generating the noise…

Alex said, Understood. We’ll look for an off switch, or make one.

Ada chuckled, and Shah added, I love you.

As I love you… both of you. Watch your backs down there, and I’ll see you on the other side. Ada said as her presence faded.

“We’ve been detected!” Jess chimed in on the comms, yelling to be heard over the hail of gunfire in the background. Alex could make out the unmistakable sound of Watt’s waist mounted chain gun chewing through a thousand .50 caliber rounds. “Shadow and Flame, we’ll hold our ground as long as well can, and will right outside when you need us. Kick some ass ladies.”

“You got it, Jess! Take care of yourselves!” Alex said, and then she and Shah were alone, holding hands, and breathing together, preparing for what was next. “I think it’s time to put all our training to good use.” Alex meant to be upbeat, but her shaky voice betrayed her.

Shah sighed, her sad emerald gaze meeting hers, and becoming deadly serious. “Alex, when we step out of this door the world will change. You can’t hold back from here on out, okay? These men will be trying to kill you. When you attack, stay calm… and strike like a ghost. Do not be predictable, or allow the enemy to guess your next move. Attack with the intent of crushing your opponents at every turn, without hesitation or mercy, as they will give none.”

The turmoil Alex was feeling subsided, and she nodded, “I understand, though Kara wouldn’t.”

Shah smiled, summoning twin black blades of infinite sharpness to her hands as tendrils of night began gathering to her from all directions. “That is why she has us. She is a hero; we are warriors… and do what must be done. You know this to be true, don’t you… Agent Danvers.”

Alex whispered prayers to Rao, Athena, and Artemis as she stood, her red mask molding itself around her face and additional layers of armor forming all over her body. She then flicked her wrist,
and a great, flaming longbow grew from her gauntleted hand.

When she spoke next, it was with absolute confidence, “Shah? Let’s go get your dad.”


Nov 21st & 22nd – Year Six

Echo Two – High in the Alborz Mountains, in the shadow of Mount Damavand – level sixteen

2131 hours UTC -5, U.S. East Coast Time - Nov 21st – Monday night

0631 hours UTC +4, Local time in Iran – Nov 22nd - Tuesday morning

It was on level thirteen in a hazy hallway filled with a downpour of water droplets from the fire suppression system where they discovered just how much their powers had grown.

Shah had only seconds before withdrawn her darkness from a room full of moaning, twitching soldiers collapsed on the floor. Alex’s light arrows had incapacitated most of them; their smoldering wounds would serve as painful reminders of her deadly skill with the bow.

She’d left them broken, but alive… they should be grateful.

Alex! Guns! Shah warned in her thoughts, and time slowed… nearly stopping around them, at least that’s how it appeared, but she and Shah kept moving.

Alex laughed as they danced between seemingly frozen raindrops, and splashed down the long corridor to a ‘T’ section at the end, where six soldiers had sprung from hiding to fire their assault weapons. Long, deadly bullets hung in what seemed like near stasis in the air six feet from the men, heading down the hallway on a slow crawl trajectory to where the two of them used to be.

They walked around the frozen soldiers, studying them curiously from multiple angles before Alex asked, “I wonder… if I reached out and physically turned the bullets around, would they still have their forward momentum? Are we breaking physics here?”

Shah grinned, “Let’s find out… for science, of course.”

Moments later, the world sped back up, and the empty-handed soldiers fell to their knees screaming, as their own bullets, a great deal more than they’d originally fired, shredded the walls and floor around them, yet none of the men were struck.

Alex and Shah stood nearby, smirking, a pile of bent and broken weapons at their feet.

That was the last thing the men saw before they ran screaming for an exit.


About three minutes later…

Alex burst through the high ceiling of a massive cavern on level seventeen, with Shah following only
a split-second behind her. They hovered for a moment to get their bearings.

Alex couldn’t believe the sheer size of the place, at least two hundred yards in length, and half as wide. Over forty feet below, a massive lake of softly illuminated water had been carved into the ancient stone. Its greenish surface churned as chunks of debris fell from above, where she and Shah had just entered.

Towering around the wide rim of the cavern that surrounded the lake were vast, four-stories high, incredibly complex machines that hummed ominously... as if humming with life. Alex could also see what appeared to be some sort of deserted control platform suspended over the waters at the end furthest from them, while along the perimeter, armed men began pouring from side tunnels, shooting at her and Shah.

At such a long distance the bullets were more of an annoyance than anything. Alex wiggled and flickered from side-to-side to avoid them… but Shah just ignored the onslaught as she studied the layout of the huge space, letting the projectiles bounce off of her skin and black Kryptonian armor.

“Doesn’t that sting?” Alex asked, wincing at the thought of what it must feel like.

“A little bit, like getting hit with paintballs... okay, that one was more like a Nerf gun. One day, we won’t feel them at all.” Shah gritted from between clenched teeth, her gaze focusing down on the far-off command and control platform. *Let's check that out*, she thought and then started flying towards it.

Alex joined her immediately, blurring with super-speed to her side.

Along the way, a random attacker fired a grenade. The lucky shot would have struck Alex in the head if she hadn’t instinctively reacted to knock it away. The explosive sailed harmlessly down to silently detonate in the depths of the roiling water.

As they approached the platform Alex shivered as she felt an unnatural chill… and remembered what Kara had said about feeling like someone walked on her grave when in the presence of Hades’ minion… Shah! *Something’s here with us!*

*I know. I feel it too. Be wary.*

*I’ll keep my eyes open.*

As their feet touched down on the platform, the soldiers hiding there struck! Alex counted twenty-one black-garbed men, all highly trained soldiers who did their best to try and kill Flame and Shadow. In the brief, violent encounter she was attacked with assault weapons, handguns, knives, high-energy tasers (one that actually hurt her), some kind of nasty chemical weapon, and even pepper spray. It didn’t matter, she and Shah made short work of them without even breaking a sweat, but the bullets and explosives the idiots fired wrecked havoc on the sensitive, now smoldering, machinery and computer systems around them.

One asshole just wouldn’t stay down, even after he was dead, and before Alex realized it the zombie’s ice-cold, iron grip was wrapped around her throat, and she was shoved face first into a wall. Shah leaped above him, swords drawn, but before her blades cut him in half he managed to fire two grenades, much to the surprise and terror of his teammates, who scattered. The Persian ninja easily avoided the slow-moving projectiles, but Alex could see (too late to act as she pulled herself from the wreckage of the wall) they weren’t meant for her… the little bombs flew into the delicate metal guts of one of the immense machines behind Shadow and exploded.
And that’s when all Hell broke loose.

Suddenly there were flames, and the entire underground structure trembled, sending dust and broken chunks of concrete raining down from the high, arched ceiling. Two of their last attackers, firing down at them from a metal catwalk, were crushed by falling debris, and, along with the entire walkway, disappeared into the depths of the lake.

An ominous keening sound began reverberating through the chamber, and alarms began to blare, accompanied by a monotone female voice that kept repeating in Farsi, “Warning, containment failure is imminent. All personnel should evacuate to minimum safe distance”.

_That’s not good… Hades’ minion broke something. Why? _Alex swallowed hard, and looked over at Shah, who nodded as she finished off her last two opponents, one with a flick of her index finger to his skull, the other kicked so hard he sailed through a now destroyed metal railing, off the platform, and disappeared down into the green, churning waters.

_I do not know Alex joon, I… wait! Do you hear that? _Her best friend asked, gazing around them inquisitively. _It’s muffled, but it sounds like people yelling… somewhere nearby._

Alex stopped and scanned the area using her X-Ray vision, and found a very well hidden, secure door on one wall. There were people dressed in lab coats and normal clothes locked inside some sort of safe room, banging on the walls and screaming in Farsi to be let out. Alex could only hear them because of her enhanced senses, the barrier was that solid.

Shah took charge, as usual. _Get them to safety. I will see if there’s anything I can do about the fire and the damage._ She was already a blur, flying thirty feet up to where flames and thick black smoke billowed from the damaged machinery, attempting without success to either freeze the blaze, or create a brief vacuum with her breath, abilities only Kal and Kara had yet mastered.

Alex flickered to the seamless sealed door, and sunk her hands into what appeared to be a wall, but was really the face of it, ripping the foot and a half thick obstacle off its sophisticated tracks and rollers in one inhuman tug. The sound of metal grinding and tearing caused her awestruck audience inside to cover their ears and stare at her in slack-jawed wonder as she held the massive door over her head.

_“Salām!”_ She smiled warmly, setting the object carefully off to the side. _“You can call me Flame, and I’m not your enemy. Neither is Shadow,” _She pointed up at Shah, who had flown high up into part of the machine to put out the flames with her bare hands, she looked kind of like some sort of goddess of darkness, wrapped in shadows and flames, whoa! _“We’ve come to liberate you, and… we need to go. Now!”_

The keening sound suddenly grew even louder, becoming more of a howl, and the structure under their feet began vibrating. _Not good, not good _Alex bit her lip as she ushered people out of the room and onto the platform.

She still couldn’t contact Ada or anyone on the outside, so no backup.

One of the scientists who had been watching her with a kind of awed fascination, a very tall, darkly handsome man who looked to be in his mid-forties, she guessed, with an athletic build and graying temples in his jet black hair approached and spoke with urgency, _“We cannot leave. Portal containment is failing, if it collapses completely there will be no safe place to escape to… not from what is waiting on the other side.” _He shuddered.

_“The other side? I don’t understand. The other side of what?” _Alex was distracted counting heads...
and trying to reign in the lab coats dashing around, dutifully returning to their workstations, frantically doing their best to bring the damage system back to life. Amid sparking consoles, and cacophony of voices, a subtle hum could now be heard, and an array of large monitors began to glow.

A cheer went up among the scientists and technicians, bringing a smile to Alex’s face for no particular reason. She liked it when the geeks and nerds got a victory, even little ones. When she glanced back at the man to see why he hadn’t answered, she could clearly see the desperation in his eyes, but also wonder as he watched Shadow finish putting out the fires.

“It’s a rip in space-time, in the universe.” He said, like an admission of guilt, his shoulders sagging. “My penance for playing God, and believing his lies.”

Alex was very intrigued, and quickly asked, “Who? And what lies?”

The man sighed and said, “None of that will matter if we can’t stop what’s happening. I need to look inside.” Then stepped up to a wide, flat-topped table and passed his hand over its surface, and it glowed in response, building a perfect 3D holographic high-resolution image in front of them of a part of the chamber they couldn’t see.

Hidden deep within the vast network of machines was a massive, forty-foot diameter vertical metal ring. Wires, cables, and tubes surrounded it and fed into a deep network of conduits that wound for miles underground into the bedrock of the mountains.

“This massive machine generates a continuous quantum field to contain what we’ve built inside of it. But, as you can see, it’s damaged and failing.” The man said grimly. Alex could see a swirling vortex of energy seething within; it was beautiful and terrible all at the same time. Her HUD going wild, she’d never seen the kind of crazy readings Shatari was detecting.

Something was definitely wrong, the field was flickering in and out, allowing wispy, tendrils of a strange, foreign energy to escape, lashing out to annihilate everything they encountered in their brief moment of existence, down to the atoms.

Once the field came back up, the strange energy dispersed, as if it had never been.

It was then that Alex (with Shatari’s help) worked it out. “It’s a portal to a parallel universe! That energy isn’t from our world at all, not even close… if that containment field really does collapse…”

“It will be the beginning of the end.” The man glanced briefly at Flame with surprised respect at her deduction, then was back busily typing on a virtual keyboard, pulling out his glasses as he pulled up real-time system schematics and monitors. “I’ve seen some of the horrors that exist on the other side of that cursed gate, and believe me, nothing here can stop them from making Hell on Earth if they are allowed to come through.”

That’s what Hades wants, to destroy this world? He’s even more of a dick than I thought.

“Okay, so how do we fix it?” Alex asked him. She was sweating now, not taking her eyes from the screens. Shah?

The scientist laughed, mirthlessly, “A good question that I have been asking myself for almost six years since the I accidentally caused the breach. As for fixing containment, I’m not sure that’s possible. There is extensive damage… and we need the quantum engine back online.” He grimaced, gesturing at multiple areas on the 3D model flashing red.

Just then Alex noticed that Shah had been standing nearby for Rao knows how long, but was still…
quiet, and just staring at the man from behind.

Shah? Are you okay?

She didn’t answer before a new explosion rocked the chamber and had to dart in to help the tall man keep his footing.

“Mersi.” He said, before turning his head to call out to a colleague, a woman with long chestnut-colored hair who was busy working among a jumble of wires and electronic panels inside an exposed wall panel. “Jocelyn, what’s the assessment? Can we reignite the engine?”

The woman shook her head in frustration, “No! The dampeners are offline, and suppression failure is beginning to cascade. I believe we’ll lose complete coherence in…” She glanced at her watch, and back to the screen, “a little under nine minutes, and forty-five seconds. This place will rip itself apart as the walls between worlds fall.”

Alex knew they had less time than that, but kept that information to herself, for the moment.

The man paled, and whispered, “They’ll be coming through soon.”

“They? Who are they?” Alex asked, both horrified, for obvious reasons, and thrilled, or another… this was proof that a constant state doorway could be opened from one parallel universe to another, like to Earth Pax, Kandor, or other worlds like the one she had yet to discover, not whatever terrible place this one connected to, but oh, the possibilities!

If they survived of course.

The man seemed to shake himself into focus and whispered, “Monsters.”

“What?” She was confused.

Then, there was sudden, bellow, like a booming foghorn, a blinding flash, followed by a concussive wave of force. Alex used her body to protect the scientist using her aura as a shield and was sent spinning out of control for her heroics… crashing over twenty-five feet down into a storage area, her plummeting body shattering crates and metal boxes filled with machine parts.

In the chaos, she’d glimpsed Shah being thrown back in a high arc off the platform, but lost sight of her once she struck the surface of the water below. Alex didn’t know what happened to the man.

What the Hell?!

She shook her head in a daze, all of her senses overwhelmed as she struggled to extract herself from where she'd fallen. Her HUD was flashing warnings about 33.457% shield damage, and failing integrity; whatever force had knocked them out of the air hit like a freight train.

Shah? She started to panic when her friend did not respond. Are you there? Shah?! Answer me! Please!

Alex was moving, she used her strength to kick the crates open and pull herself out to a defensive crouch. As she scanned the darkened space, something moved at the edges of her perception, something hidden, and whatever it was, it was closing in on her insanely fast.

Just before it was about to reach her, Alex called her flaming sword to her hand, and executed a perfect backward flip, arcing the angle of her blade to strike at the center of her attacker’s mass.
She connected, and cut deep.

Something screeched, and a black spray of dark liquid spattered across the crates beside her, which began to sizzle and melt metal wherever the toxic ichor touched. Without hesitating, she surged forward to attack again. The air was scintillating before her as if there were a thousand tiny mirrors out of alignment around a staggering amorphous figure that was hidden inside.

Sword raised, only inches from her target, her senses exploded again as another wave of energy struck her. This time she was hurled into a concrete wall thirty feet behind her so hard the dense material shattered in her shape, driving her body three feet deep into it. She felt her ribs break, pain stab her insides like fire, and the strange, sweet taste of her mingled Kryptonian/human blood filled her mouth.

She tried to use her speed, but the twisting knives in her side and chest called her to darkness.

How much time had passed, she wasn’t sure, but when she opened her eyes she was lying on the ground… looking out across the floor of the massive space, coughing, and choking on her own blood. Small chunks of concrete jabbed into her cheek.

A creature that defied reality was advancing toward her. It possessed a face that she could only describe as formless, melted flesh, with dozens of unblinking yellow cat-like eyes set within. Its large, undulating body was covered glistening mucus, and instead of arms or legs seven octopus-like tentacles with razor-like serrations on them were being used for locomotion and flailing about like long tensile whips.

At least she felt some satisfaction, the thing should have had eight tentacles, but one was a smoldering bleeding stump.

Alex tried to stand but struggled just to get to one knee. “Crap!” What the Hell is it!?

It screeched again in what sounded like a thousand high-pitched voices all mingled into one. She struggled to cover her ears, closing her eyes as knives dug into her eardrums until thankfully Shatari shut out the sound. Her wounded companion could not translate the sounds battering her into language, but the creature seemed pissed.

She needed to protect herself somehow. Shah! Where are you? Her thoughts were becoming desperate.

Alex pressed a hand against her ribs and took a ragged, and spit a painful breath as she hovered above the floor, and turned up the heat, summoning a burning sphere of searing 2,200-degree flames to surround her.

The creature reacted violently, (ah, it didn’t like fire!), oozing backward in confusion. The beast seemed to grow more agitated as it shuffled and oozed in place as if considering its next move.

After a moment, it once again opened its gaping hole of a mouth, and Alex felt a familiar ripple of terrible energy that had nearly killed her beginning to build once again.

The son-of-a-bitch is going to kill me, Alex wheezed in disbelief. There was no way she could take another hit like the last one.

Shatari was flashing frantic warnings; explaining to Alex how to alter her aura to redirect, or at least deflect the alien energy, but she was too weak to comply, everything was getting fuzzy in her periphery.
Out of options, she closed her eyes and braced for impact.

Her final thoughts were, *I love you, Kara.*

Seconds passed, but nothing happened. Alex finally cracked open one eye and saw the creature through her fire, but it was just standing, or undulating where it was before, unmoving… wait.

Alex’s eyes suddenly widened in realization.

Two black swords protruded from what she assumed was the thing’s chest, dripping with its thick, dark blood. It struggled, but weakly, reaching back with its serrated tentacles to lash out at the stoic warrior perched cat-like on its back…

Shadow easily evaded most of its desperate blows, but not all… her friend’s blood splattered across the crates and boxes, but she did not relent or make a sound. As she watched in horror, a silent scream stuck in Alex’s throat.

Then, in an impossible move, Shah kicked up off its back, pulling her swords out of the beast as she soared above the perplexed creature. She then swiftly plummeted back down, striking with both weapons horizontally and cleanly removing what Alex assumed was its head.

The thing’s body staggered and rolled for several feet before collapsing in a quivering heap of heaving flesh and writhing appendages.

Shah dropped her swords, dispelled her mask, and was immediately at a very woozy Alex’s side… dripping wet, spattered in the thing’s black blood, tears flowing freely down her cheeks, *“Joon-am, Alex! Are you okay? Talk to me! Please talk to me!”*

The world was fading in and out, but Alex clung tightly to Shah’s hand. “I’ll live, I think.” She coughed.

“Your lung is punctured, three ribs are broken… We need to get you topside, the sun will have risen by now.”

“But… your… dad. We need to find him.” Alex coughed and nearly blacked out from the pain.

“He’s right here.” Shah was smiling now, tears forming in her beautiful green eyes as she glanced over to Alex’s right, where the dozen or so scientists she rescued had run down from the platform and were standing nearby watching them, including the tall man with dark eyes, and greying temples she’d been talking to…

*Rao!*

How long had they been there, and how did Alex not recognize him? He was the same man she’d seen in photos at the Nazari house! He was definitely older, and more worn around the edges, but it was Arad.

“Father!” Shah called out to him in Persian, and he jolted from his daze and came running, still staring at his daughter with awe. They were the first two Shah carried out of the burning pit of darkness, Alex held in his strong arms and both of them in hers.

Alex faded in and out of consciousness after that, but was startled awake at some point after by the sounds of gunfire, Watt’s voice yelling, “Get some!”, the whine of Muninn’s powerful engines coming to life, and a whispered exchange between father and daughter.
Arad was saying, “… We cannot allow the portal to open, or let my research, or any trace of what horrors I helped create in that terrible place survive. Shahrazad, do as I have instructed, and it will be no more.”

He’d reached over and laid one of his large hands on the black leather of Shah’s arm, Kryptonian glyphs, like runes of power, flowing and skittering where he offered his supportive touch. “I would go in your place, but I do not have your wondrous strength or abilities. How you came to bear them is a story I’d very much like to hear when you return.”

His comment elicited the tiniest of smiles from her, but Alex could feel her doubt… Shah didn’t think she was coming back! Her beautiful friend took a deep breath, and her expression turned resolute. “It shall be done, father.”

Alex was about to protest when she felt her friend’s gentle fingers glide over her forehead, carefully moving hair off of her blood-spattered face. “Please keep her exposed to the sun on the flight, and I will join you on the Zumwalt afterward… if I can.”

Alex was waking up fully now, and her HUD was flooding her with information. She’d been out for over four minutes, leaving less than five until breach. She sent her thoughts as soon as she was coherent. Aziz-am, what’s happening?

Go back to sleep Alex, let the light heal you. I need to end this place, and none of you can be within two miles of it when that happens, just in case… Muninn will carry you away on her wings. Jess and other friends are here. Aya is practically beside herself seeing you hurt.

Alex was starting to panic. Why does it sound like you don’t think you’re coming back? Talk to me, there has to be a less risky option!

Joon-am… We are out of time and options. Someone needs to destroy what my father has unleashed, and with the quantum distortion caused by the rift I can’t get through to Kara or Ada, and the comms are toast. Like my amazing daughter said, we’re on our own. It’s up to us.

But…

Alex, it’s a rip in space-time, to another universe… one that is the antithesis of our own, and it’s growing. As a scientist, you know this can’t end well, and talking about it will only delay the inevitable. Once that other universe breaches over, it will begin to tear our reality apart, and as that happens, horrors like the one we faced below, and worse, will begin entering our world… lots of them. It is exactly what Hades wants, and we can’t allow that to happen.

Father believes that we have a shot at creating an inversion, basically forcing the portal to collapse back into itself, briefly forming a singularity before it blinks from existence… but I need to return to the control room to do that and get out of there before I’m caught up in the implosion, and the inevitable gravity well.

I can help… Alex struggled to rise but was too weak to do more than get to a partial sitting position before jabbing knives ripped through her side and she collapsed back onto the jump seats. Someone with strong arms was holding her, but she wasn’t sure whom. Her awareness of her surroundings was fuzzy.

Shah came in close, her mask dissipating like smoke as she gingerly wrapped her arms around Alex, and softly, and lovingly kissed her cheek, then her forehead. Alex closed her eyes, savoring every moment with her best friend, and melting into the curves of Shah’s supple leather armor.
As they slowly parted, Shah eased her back to a more comfortable position and whispered in Alex’s ear, “I love you more than all of the wonders in the heavens joon-am, never forget that. My life has been an amazing adventure because of you and Kara, and I could not have wished for a better friend, a sister. I just… I love you. Please forgive me if I don’t...” She reached up, her black armor peeling away like living darkness, and cupped Alex’s cheek in her hand.

That’s when the tears started; Alex couldn’t help it, though she wiped them away as quickly as she could. She had to believe Shah would return… she had to.

She began to say, “Don’t say it! There’s… nothing… to forgiv…” but faded out again, and would have had no idea that twenty-two precious seconds had passed, but was saved by HUD as she woke to Shah reluctantly extracting herself from their embrace. The physical pain Alex was experiencing was nothing compared to the hole growing inside her chest as they separated… and knowing that Shah was right…

Alex had to let her friend go.

“Give ’em Hell Shadow.” Alex rasped, “And come back to me. I can’t lose you.” I just… can’t. It would be like losing a piece of my own heart.

The raven-haired young woman squared her shoulders, assuming a confident, defiant air as she once again summoned her shadowy mask. Standing there, she looked every inch the goddamn hero Alex knew her to be. “Then you won’t,” Shah said with absolute finality. “I certainly don’t plan on dying today.”

With that, she squeezed Alex’s hand one last time, and then in quick succession hugged her father, Jess, Aya, who lifted Shah off her feet, and Dante, who was as teary-eyed as his Chief, before she was gone. Vanished out the sliding door of the stealth helo as mysterious as her namesake, the air rumbling with the swift, ominous sound of thunder.

Alex faded out again, and then fluttered back to awareness as Muninn was rising into the sky, loaded down with a dozen terrified scientists who’d just experienced the rides of the lives, carried from the depths of Echo Two by Shadow, hauling ass away from the dark energy facility. It was silent except for the howl of the engines being pushed to the max, and Jess, rocking in a jump seat, and the echo of her whispered cadence of prayers to Athena and Kara.

It was only a few moments later, coming out of her daze, that Alex realized the sun was on her face, and that the strong arms holding her were Arad’s. He’d begun singing an old Persian lullaby in deep, reassuring tones. A tune she was sure she’d heard Shah hum under her breath before, at times when she was happy.

Against all of her efforts Alex’s eyes closed… and she was once again carried off to a place of quiet darkness, where she dreamed of Shahrazad.

...........

Nov 23rd – Year Six

USS Zumwalt – The Sundeck

0105 hours UTC -5, U.S. East Coast Time – Tuesday morning

1005 hours UTC +4, Tuesday morning, local time
Alex woke slowly, soothed by the sound of the waves breaking on the hull of the swift-moving vessel. She was home, on the USS Z"umwalt", laying in the glow of sunlight on a comfortable bed, strategically placed in the center of an amazing chamber on the ship she’d never seen before. The domed room was somewhere high up, with a transparent, crystalline ceiling reinforced with ribs of Kryptonian steel.

“Where are we?” She croaked, opening her eyes enough to squint.

Captain Daniels answered, his voice calm, and reassuring… he was only standing a couple feet away from her, “Welcome back Alexandra! You’re on the Sun Deck. Much to my and the crew’s amazement, Ada had the Z"umwalt" grow the structure a couple months ago, fully assuming we’d need to recharge a fallen Kryptonian or three at some point. The technology is incredible.”

Ada, who standing beside Tom, piped up, obviously excited, “The crystal in the ceiling amplifies the effects of the light. You should recover five times as fast as normal in here.”

Alex smiled. Her amazing niece grew a Kryptonian supercharger deck… because of course, she did. “Thanks, Ada, though who ever thought I’d ever be the one needing it?”

Her friends surrounded her, and though Alex was weak, she could feel all of them, even hear their individual heartbeats. Rao, if she’d only realized how amazing and terrifying the cacophony of feelings and sounds would be, maybe she could have helped Kara more when she’d first arrived on Earth.


Her friend reached over from where she lay on the sun bed next to Alex, grasped her hand, and began doing that shushing thing mothers do to children who are afraid, “Shhh, it’s all right Alex joon, I am here, and so is my father. He is safe-and-sound below decks in the infirmary, though I can’t say the same for Echo Two.” She added with a feeble smirk.

Alex blinked the tears from her eyes. Shah had struggled to lie on her side to face her and was cut, bruised, bandaged, and her other arm was in a sling. “You look like crap Shadow.” She managed to get out. “You’re alive! I was so worried.”

Honestly? So was I. I was terrified! “Well, I fought a god, so…”

“A god? Hades was there!!?? And you fought him??” They held onto each other so tight, Alex didn’t want to let go of her.

“Yes, down in the dark, he tried to stop me... okay, we didn’t actually fight, he threatened me, and sent waves of minions at me. I didn’t think I was going to make it, but Athena intervened. Oh, Alex, she was glorious! She fought him, protected me… gave me time to reach the control room… it all happened so fast.”

She saved you! Thank you, Athena! Thank you! Alex let her love wash over Shah. Rao! They were giggling like idiots. Grudgingly they pulled apart, and she asked, “So, the inversion worked?”

Shah nodded, “Yes, but the event left a three-mile diameter crater as the mountains caved in on themselves, quite a bit larger than father calculated. Thankfully, due to my love of sci-fi movies, I have a firm understanding that minimum safe distance is bullshit.” The rare occasion of Shah cursing caused everyone to laugh.
After that Alex was swarmed by… well, everyone, Kara nuzzled in beside her, fighting for space with Aya, who had apparently not moved from Alex’s side since she’d arrived on a stretcher hours earlier, despite her duties. Also standing around her bed looking concerned were Dante, Captain Daniels, Lt. Vaden, and Jess, who seemed to be hiding something behind her, but Alex was too tired to even try and see what it was.

Overwhelmed by all of the attention, she only slowly realized she wasn’t in pain, and at some point probed her ribs expecting agony. To her surprise, aside from some residual soreness, she felt fine.

Kara stretched in and kissed her, “Kryptonian healing, looks like you and Shah’s abilities have finally kicked into a higher gear, thank Rao! You were both in bad shape… though Shah was worse, much worse…” Alex could tell her bondmate was trying to play it cool, but she’d been worried, and actually looked tired.

“Hey, it’s okay, I’m okay, she's okay.” Alex reached up and took her time as she caressed Kara’s cheek.

Her lover nuzzled in and softly kissed the palm of Alex’s outstretched hand. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there Vaena. I didn’t know…”

Alex smiled. “Stop blaming yourself, my silly Kryptonian. Shah saved my ass, and I think the world. We’re both fine. Well, I might still be in shock from nearly being killed by one of Cthulu’s angry little cousins, but I’ll get over it. What about you?”

“Well…” Kara began, “Thanks to Athena’s other timely intervention we avoided Zeus’ Thunderbolt becoming a humanitarian disaster. Cool, right? I’ll tell you all about it later. A bunch more of my cell memories unlocked, and I freed everyone at Echo One, more than everyone actually… Wilkins is still complaining about the paperwork.

“Oh, and I ah, um… kinda wiped part of Evin Prison off the map, added a crater though. Yay team!” Alex almost chuckled watching Kara trying to get to the thing she really wanted to say but was avoiding. She obviously thought Alex might not like whatever it was, or be surprised by it, hence the babbling… so predictably Kara.

“So, what went wrong?” Alex asked with a grin, noticing Shah trying to look at anything but her… she’d obviously gotten the info dump while Alex had been unconscious. What was up?

Kara bit her lip. “Nothing went wrong per se… but Ada had to give Henshaw a story about you and Shah being in a skiing accident, so be prepared for that when you get back to work, and I… well… I just kinda mighta picked up a new member of the family…”

Alex choked sipping on a canteen of water Aya had handed her, “What? Say again.”

Daniels spoke up, “Let me help you out, Kara. Ryah, come on over here. It’s okay.”

Alex watched, as the most adorable little Persian girl appeared from behind Jess’ legs, laughing and holding the Chief Petty Officer’s hand. The energetic child then darted forward and jumped into Daniels’ open arms. “Daniels!” The child called out in a happy, sing-song voice that pulled at Alex’s heartstrings.

“Oh, my God, he was such a daddy! As if the man wasn’t attractive enough…”

Ryah was maybe six-years-old, dressed in what appeared to be a too-die-for-cute miniature USS Zumwalt flight suit, with her long black hair in colorfully beaded braids. Her eyes were almost
golden, and her light brown complexion had a lovely radiance to it.

*Let me guess, you made the outfit?* Alex grinned at her bondmate.

Kara nodded, still watching Tom with the child. *Lt. Corrigan, you know, Muninn's pilot? She has a sewing machine! Who knew? Anyway, the girl had no clothes and needed something to wear.* She said the last part as if it explained everything.

Her gorgeous Kryptonian was so damn adorable.

The Captain was rocking Ryah back and forth in front of him as he walked over to Alex’s bedside. As he approached, she couldn’t help but notice how Kara’s eyes never left the girl, and how she reached out possessively, like an eager parent to take the adorable bundle of energy from Daniels as soon as she could, hugging the little girl tightly to her chest.

The best part was how enthusiastically Ryah smothered her bondmate with affection in return. She could physically feel the love reverberating through their bond like a euphoric drug.

How was that even possible?

“Thank you, my General,” Kara said respectfully as he stepped back, watching the two of them interact with a big smile on his face.

As Kara was being squeezed by the girl, Ryah turned to look at Alex with a brilliant smile, stealing her heart once again as she proclaimed, “You’re Alexandra! Oh, sorry… Alex.”

“Yeah, that’s me, kid. And you’re Ryah?”

“Uh huh.” The child nodded as she began playing with one of her braids, seemingly fascinated.

Alex looked up at Kara with astonishment. *She’s adorable! Where did you find her? Who is she? Better yet, whose is she?*

Kara’s jaw clenched, and she balled up her fists as a sudden rush of fury echoed through their bond. Alex was startled by the intensity and knew immediately that something terrible had happened.

Kara had… done something.

Alex felt a touch of darkness in her bondmate that she’d never felt before… but also a new strength. They’d need to talk, later.

*She was a prisoner at Echo One. Kara said. They were experimenting on her, Alex! I’m going to start crying again thinking about it, ugh. Anyway, she doesn't 'belong' to anyone. Her parents may or may not be alive somewhere out in the galaxy, but we have no way to find them… and her guardian, the only loving adult left in her life, was murdered… dissected in that torture chamber they had her in! Ryah doesn’t have anyone left.*

A giggling Ryah looked back and forth between Alex and Kara and grinned like a Cheshire Cat. “You and Kara are mind talking!”

Alex jaw dropped, “How do you… I mean, what?”

Ryah laughed again and was suddenly climbing like the literal monkey Daniels had named her, from Kara and into Alex’s arms. She was light as a feather and warm against her skin, which was odd since her own hybrid Kryptonian/human temperature had risen to a simmering 101 degrees
Fahrenheit on a normal day.

“Sweetie, do you have a fever?” Alex put the back of her hand up to the girl’s forehead.

Snuggling into Alex, Ryah’s eyes opened wide with worry, and she whispered, “No. Am I too hot? I’m sorry, I can fix it.” She then made a scrunched up, impossibly delightful little face, breathed in and out a few times, and in seconds her temperature dropped to where her skin felt cool to Alex’s touch.

She blinked stupidly and stared speechless at the little girl.

Ryah, blissfully unaware of Alex’s distress, continued talking, “Kara saved me from the bad people… she’s so nice. Kryptonians are protectors, did you know that Alex? My mother said they would keep me safe from the Dom’nators.”

“Uh huh,” Alex responded, looking over at her nervous bondmate in confusion.

Um, Kara?

Alex… I can explain. Ryah is a six-year-old girl, but she’s not exactly human… and by not exactly I mean, not at all. She’s a Durlan. Her people are a race of shape-changing humanoids that look kind of like us but can take almost any form they choose. I met one once when I was younger, but he looked more like a walking tree, mmm, like an Ent, at the time. Alex could feel Kara’s darkness lifting and her bubbly warmth returning as she shared her memories, and as they moved on from the events at Evin. They were rare to ever see traveling in their true forms. I never did.

From what Ada and I can piece together, Ryah’s parents were scientists, and she lived with them on their starship, some kind of peaceful research vessel. While exploring a nebula they were attacked by something scary and powerful, the ‘Dom’nators’ Ryah mentioned, but Zara says there’s no record of any race or beings with anything resembling that name in the Kryptonian database. Anyway, Vela, her quick thinking guardian, jettisoned herself and Ryah in an escape pod. She hid the little ship in a field of debris, and the two of them took the forms of Garalans, marsupial-like animals, like lemurs or sloths on Earth, but with very, very slow metabolisms.

That’s what we believed saved them.

We don’t know what happened to her parents or their ship after that, but the hyperdrive on their pod had been engaged a long time, so we believe they traveled a long way to get here. The Iranian military found the ship after it crashed in Dasht-e Kavir, a great salt desert up on a plateau south of Tehran a few months ago, and had been using its technology to power Echo One since.

Alex, the butchers dissected Vela but kept Ryah a prisoner. They were… experimenting on her.

I had her transform into a human before we left the facility, to avoid what I know would have happened if the Agency had discovered she was an alien. Amanda would never have let me take her, and she would have been required to inform…

The color drained from Alex’s cheeks. The D.E.O. Oh crap, the engagement protocols. Ryah’d be put in quarantine for weeks, if not longer… tested, scanned, prodded, and forget any kind of a normal life after that. The thought of the adorable little girl being traumatized in that way, again, made her sick.

Kara glared. Exactly… and that isn’t going to happen. Her Kryptonian was firm on that point.

As insurance, I gave Black Knight the power source and hyper-drive from Ryah’s escape pod, which
was pretty banged up by the way, like it’d been through a literal war zone, and Ada managed to
download all of Shah’s father’s data before Echo Two imploded. She’s working with Arad to share
the less dangerous bits with The Agency… just enough to be interesting. The best part is, Shah had
the presence of mind to bring back a tentacle from the thing that tried to kill you for the D.E.O. to
analyze.

Alex knew who else was going to be happy, besides Director Henshaw, who’d be like a kid on
Christmas morning. No way! Naomi is going to have a field day with that thing.

Ha! I guess she will. Anyway, our hope is that all of those shiny toys will be enough to distract the
CIA, and the D.E.O., from one little girl. No more probing and observing. She’s a just a child, who
needs a family...

Hmmm… are you thinking what I think you’re thinking? Alex asked with a mixture of trepidation,
and surprisingly, anticipation.

Kara brightened and nodded with enthusiasm. You and I could take care of her.

It was crazy, in her gut Alex just wanted to just say yes, but there were so many problems and
challenges they needed to consider, like school for one. Kara, you still have over a year left at
Columbia… and then grad school.

Point of clarity… it’s less than a year. I don’t sleep (much, anyway), remember?

Okay, fine, conceded, but I’m already juggling time between school, the D.E.O., working in the lab
with Naomi on our alien stuff, and playing hero and night, and you and Shah don’t have it any
easier… we’re all so busy. Who would she stay with? How could we care for, and spend time with
her like proper parents? You know, stuff like take her to the zoo, and have picnics...

Kara bit her lip as she considered Alex’s question, then asked, What about Eliza? I have it on pretty
good authority that she’s really great with alien kids. She smiled sweetly. We could ask her to help
out until I'm done with undergrad and move to National City. We could all be together then.

Alex shook her head. Kara, we can’t ask Eliza to quit her job to be a full-time mom again…
plus she’s putting in all the extra time with Naomi on our… situation. I think she would love to help
out, but couldn’t be our solution. I think the same goes for Ravan...

Never one to be defeated, Alex’s cheery blonde bondmate began tapping her chin, thinking, before
becoming suddenly animated, Oh, I know! I could ask Olivia in National City… you know, Ben’s
mom? I like her a lot.

Mmmm, I’m not sure. Alex’s nose crinkled. She’s really nice, but Ben’s older, and she’s really
focused on her life and career now…

How about someone closer to home? As in Ten Lakes… Shah interrupted their thoughts with a grin
as she painfully slid out of her sunbed to join them.

Alex exchanged a relieved glance with Kara. Of course! Tyson’s mother… Marjorie! That’s
brilliant. She’s such an amazing mom, she has the twins who are just a little older for playmates,
and we could see Ryah all the time!

Shah nodded. All in the family, right? Then her thoughts became more serious. We’ll need to tell her
the truth… about Ryah, about us, and the possible risks. I can’t let my friend go into this blind.

Kara nodded enthusiastically. Agreed. Thank you, Shah! Let’s work out a time to introduce her to
Ryah and, um, fill her in on all the details. She then turned to Alex. Assuming Marjorie says yes, that would give us the next year or so to figure out what it will take for us to officially adopt the munchkin, besides what I assume will be lots of forged documents from Ada… that is if you agree, of course, this is half your decision. Keep in mind; we’ll have lots of help from our friends we’re all together National City.

Alex looked down at the beautiful girl, who was giving her big puppy dog eyes and a pouty lip, and then back to her bondmate, who was doing the same and narrowed her eyes suspiciously at them both. “You two planned this, didn’t you? Ganging up on me with those cute little faces… unfair!” Kara, I swear, she’s your Mini-Me.

I know, right? “She’s sooo cute! So-cute-so-cute-so-cute!” Kara and Ryah rubbed noses together, and Kara followed up by kissing and tickling the cheerful, now joyfully laughing girl.

“Okay, and if it’s not already perfectly clear… yes, yes I want to.” Alex said, her lips curling into a smile. “We’ll figure it out.”

Kara was hugging her with new tears in her eyes. Alex was glad that at least this time, they were happy ones. “Thank you Vaena.”

“Congratulations,” Shah said, carefully sitting down on the edge of Alex’s bed (she already looked stronger). “I think I will very much enjoy being the aunt for a change. I promise to not gift the little monkey any loud or annoying toys as seems to be the American tradition, I know how much that irritates you, Alex.” The two friends laughed together, and then Shah added, “I do wish to teach her about the culture, history, and language of the people whose form she wears though… and how to fight. I can start with defensive training, and we can work our way up to crushing her enemies bones to dust.” Shah grinned as she poked a finger at Ryah’s nose, and the giggling child tried her best to grab the evasive digit.

Alex exchanged a brief glance with Kara before the Kryptonian shifted over and wrapped her arms around Shah and said, “Deal. We can think of no better teacher aziz-am.”

She then gazed back down at the little girl who was now sitting on her lap carefully examining her blood red diamond necklace, and let out a contented sigh, “You know, I’ve never been someone who believed in fate, but after all we’ve seen, it’s comforting to know that somehow, out of all the billions of worlds in the universe, Ryah found her way to us… just like someone else we know.”

Alex glanced at Kara and felt butterflies in her stomach, thinking about their future, and the new little soul they’d be sharing their lives, and hearts, with. She then said, “One more perfect puzzle piece in our unconventional little family.”

............... 

Story Lexicon/FAQs:

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Terms: Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

Ah!khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)
Alex vanimelda - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Ay Dios Mio – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)

Aporup – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)

As-salāmu ʿalayki – A (formal) greeting which is also a standard salutation among Muslims, meaning ‘peace be upon you’. Less formal abbreviation is simply salām. (Arabic)

Asheghetam - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

Azdidane shoma khoshalam – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)

Bedrood – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

Bonne nuit – ‘Good night’ (French)

C'est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

Damnú air! – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Dooset daram – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gaelic/Irish)

íthi eutukhēs - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Kheili khosh geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

M'eudail – ‘My dear/my darling’ to a friend, family, someone you care for (Gaelic/Irish)

Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature

Marbhfháisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)
miboosamet – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)
órënya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)
¡Qué señor as tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)
Salâm: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)
Sundor – ‘Beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)
Thi eutukhēs – ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)
Volar mi diosa! – ‘Fly my goddess!’ (Spanish)
Wa’alaykumu s-salām – A response to the greeting As-salāmu ʿalayki, ‘and upon you, peace’ (Arabic)
Wadāʾan – ‘Farewell’ (Arabic)
Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

azīz-am – ‘My dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)
delbandam - ‘My heartstring’. What Shah would call her cousin Tarsa as a child when she’d babysit, very sweet, precious. Still does call her that now that they’ve reconnected.

joon-am – ‘My dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)
nāzanin-am – ‘Sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘The light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘Sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person’s name<’ + joon (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean 'dear'. So, ‘Shah joon', means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

Other names/nickname/titles/things:

A ghrá – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)

A ghrá mo chroí - ‘My heart's beloved, my darling’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)
Bríomhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

Daxamites - An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people ruled by strength/the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow altered by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.

Dios mío! – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

Durlan - The Durlans are a rare extraterrestrial species, a race of shapeshifting beings from the planet Durla. Ryah is a Durlan, as was her guardian, Veya, who died protecting the child in the depths of Tehran’s Evin Prison.

Dűst doxtar – ‘Girlfriend’ (Persian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Euryleia – ‘Woman Wanderer’ or ‘Wide Wandering’ - Dr. Naomi Young’s Amazon name

Fereshteh: Slang for saying that a girl is perfect, desired… hot, to die for, an angel. Historically used as a Persian girl’s name, simply meaning ‘angel’. (Persian)

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)

In’ah – Ancient, lost word for ‘daughter’ - what Myka calls Kara (Kryptonese),

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

M’eudail – ‘My darling’ or ‘my dear’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Ma’har - Ancient, lost word for ‘mother’ - what Kara calls Myka (Kryptonese)

Mi amor – ‘My love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Mi lucero – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Mi Sol – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn - Thought & Memory (Old Norse)

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex
Norooz - Persian New Year (Persian)
Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Oea - This ancient city was founded by the Phoenicians in the seventh century BC, was ruled at one
time or another by the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines. Italians, and Muslims. It came to
be known as Tripoli during the 9th century (Libyco-Berber)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as
an emblem of wholeness or infinity (from Ancient Freek)

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Seanmháthair – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced shan a WAW her (Irish/Gaelic)

Señora – Is a polite term used to address a woman. The Spanish-language equivalent of Ma’am,
Ms., or Mrs. (Spanish)

Tieguanyin - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese
oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

Tratung – khrag ‘thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Trípolis – Tripoli, the capital and largest city in Libya (from Ancient Greek)

Tuath Dé Danann - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the
gods’. Pronounced Thoo-a day Du-non (Irish/Gaelic)

Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’.
‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara
calls Alex)

Vakur – A powerful (and rare) soul-devouring, evil, shape-shifting parasitic alien species from
another universe. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.

Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western
continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World).
These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known
as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish,
Tolkien)

Vallerian – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers
and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed,
worshiped, or traded.

Wan - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually
refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather
would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)
Zafaraniyeh – The affluent neighborhood in the northern part of the Iranian capital of Tehran where Shahrazad grew up. (Persian)

Zhuyin – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:
So, Alex and Kara now have a daughter! Ryah is of the same race as the President of the United States in Supergirl season two, just cuter. Hope you enjoyed the action, time for a break next chapter.

Next Up:
Chapter 31: “A (Not So) Modest Proposal” – Where there’s a lot going on; including Naomi uncovering a shocking secret at the D.E.O., Alex making a choice that exposes her true nature, Shah and Tyson spending time with Marjorie and her twins, and love is in the air in the skies over Paris on Kara’s birthday… where a question is asked and answered (insert lots of emoji hearts here!)

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me.

Attributions:

"Durlans"
Ryah’s people are a rare, extraterrestrial race of peaceful shapeshifters that Kara had seen once before, just never in their true form. In the Earth 39 universe, there was no ‘Six-Minute War’ and there are only orange-skinned Durlans, like Ryah.

"Shah’s Sacrifice"
Daughter – Doing The Right Thing.
For Shah’s sacrifice scene, I kept hearing this hauntingly beautiful and somber song by Daughter (one of my favorite bands) playing in the background… coming to a crescendo at the end as she speeds away, tears in her eyes, totally expecting she’ll die trying to save her father and Alex.
A (Not So) Modest Proposal

Chapter Summary

Where there’s a lot going on; including Kara and Colliers talking about her summer vacation (and her career); Alex making a choice while tangling with a Fort Rozz escapee that exposes her true nature; Shah and Tyson spending time with Marjorie, the twins, and Ryah; and Naomi uncovering a shocking secret at the D.E.O.!

Also, love is in the air in the skies over Paris on Kara’s birthday - where a question is asked... and answered (Kara would insert lots of emojis with heart eyes here).

Chapter Notes

We begin in Year 6, mid-August – Kara is still twenty (22 in Kryptonian years), and after graduating from Columbia (in less than three years!) that spring moved to National City where she now lives with Alex and Shah at their loft. Her bondmate is twenty-one and doing her grad studies at the Sagan Institute while working at the D.E.O. full-time. Shah is an engineer at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), where she is also completing her grad work.

Kara and Alex’s (soon-to-be officially adopted) daughter, Ryah, is living with Marjorie Phelps and her twin girls in Ten Lakes, NY until the end of the summer when she’ll be moving to National City to be with her mothers. Though with how attached the little Durlan has become to her Aunt and sisters she’ll undoubtedly be back in Ten Lakes often.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Aug 17th – Year Six

National City – Noonan’s - Lunch: Kara and Colliers

1118 Hours UTC -8, Wednesday, U.S. West Coast Time

Noonan’s was crazy busy that cloudless August Wednesday. The wonderful restaurant was less than a block from CatCo Worldwide Media’s shiny new corporate headquarters in downtown National City, and open 24/7. Like any great American diner, the place offered good food, a huge menu, plus served amazing coffee, and felt like a pub at night. It was easy to see how it'd become the unofficial go-to place for hungry staffers.

It was only a few minutes past eleven and the lunch crowd was already queued up ten groups deep, the chatty line wound all the way into the restaurant’s welcoming tiled foyer. As Kara gracefully
stepped inside the front doors from the sidewalk, the rich scent of fresh-baked bread greeted her senses.

*Oh, yum!*

She removed her sunglasses and deftly avoided a four-year-old girl in a blue dress and pigtails that darted past her knees, followed by a harried woman who was in swift pursuit of the giggling child.

Watching the pair, the Kryptonian’s chest ached a little… and she had to fight a powerful urge to turn around, go hypersonic, fly back across the country, wrap Ryah in her arms and smother her in kisses.

“Kara, over here.” Her attention was drawn to Colliers, who was standing up at a table by the front windows and waving her over, a wide grin plastered on his eternally youthful face. As usual, he was impeccably dressed in a gorgeous violet silk shirt, suspenders, darker matching tie and vest, gray slacks, and polished leather wingtips.

She loved the dapper man’s style.

They hugged like they hadn’t seen each other in months, instead of only a couple of weeks. “I’m glad you could make it.” He said with affection, slipping her menu from her place setting and stacking it with his own on the corner of the two-person table as they sat down. “I already ordered you lunch… eggplant parmesan, a basket of those garlic butter soaked breadsticks you like, and a large ice tea, light ice.”

“That’s perfect, thank you! I’m starving.” It was true; she’d only had time for a quick breakfast earlier that morning and was already drooling at the thought of her favorite dish. Kara had become accustomed to grabbing take-out from Noonan’s whenever she visited Colliers and sharing with Alex right out of the aluminum container… usually on their couch as they binge-watched something on TV.

Now that she was finally living in National City, and working for her old boss again, Kara was certain the place would become a regular stop.

“You’re always famished my dear, oh, and don’t worry…” He winked conspiratorially, “I made it a triple order. The dump truck should be backing up here any minute now.” He grinned and glanced at his gorgeous watch.

She was too grateful to acknowledge his friendly jibe about her legendary appetite. Besides, it wasn’t her fault he ate like a runway model. “Thank you, Colliers, that was… very thoughtful of you.”

“I knew you’d be hungry.” He said and reached over to expertly whisk an almost indiscernible amount of soot off the collar of her blazer.

*Darn it, I missed a spot.*

On her flight from Ten Lakes, she’d helped a contingent of brave U.S. Forest Service smokejumpers contain a raging three-thousand-acre forest fire that was about to consume a small community of a hundred and twenty homes, barns, and the people and animals still in them up in the mountains.

Thank Rao she’d finally completely mastered her freeze breath, she’d actually made it snow! The stumped meteorologists were still trying to explain the freak August blizzard that appeared over the region to smother the blaze.

As he withdrew his hand, Colliers did a small flourish, and out of nowhere seemingly made a freshly
cut white rose appear... offering the gift to her with a grin. “Welcome back from summer vacation by the way.”

Kara was rarely, if ever, surprised, but Steven had somehow managed it. She sat back and drew the flower up to her nose, savoring every amazing nuance of its scent as if it were a prized possession. “Thank you. It’s beautiful.”

“You’re welcome. It appears I chose wisely... you have no idea how hard it is picking out a decent gift for the girl who has everything.”

Kara smiled, her heart warmed by her friend’s kindness, and the awareness that her life was wonderful... ‘knock on wood’ as Black Knight would say.

“Alex told me that I missed an amazing trip, and quite the party, not that I was the right gender to be invited anyway.” He scowled playfully. “From what I heard it must have been a hoot.”

“They kept making me down shots of Ouzo.” Kara made a sour face and then tried to explain. “The drinking age in Greece is only eighteen, and there’s no concept of such a thing among the Amazons... soooo, no one cared that I technically wasn’t twenty-one yet. There was a lot of drinking, and while alcohol may not affect me there was still a terrible aftertaste even three days later.” The friends shared a laugh, and then, after her drink arrived, she brightened up. “It’s been an incredible couple of weeks! Alex, Shah, and I just got back yesterday morning.”

“Do tell.” He grinned with honest interest, cupping his chin in the cradle of his scissored fingers, elbows on the table.

Kara was buzzing with excitement at the invitation, “Okay, two weeks ago, after dinner out on the town here in National City (and you were invited to that!), Diana flew all of us: Alex, Shah, Myka, Ada and Jess, Shannon and Safiya (oh my gosh, they are such a couple now, it’s adorable!), Aeryn, Devi, Eliza, Naomi, Aya, and me to Athens, where there was even more celebrating.”

“Go on…” He encouraged, his inquisitive brown eyes almost sparkling with eagerness.

She grinned. “We spent three days just exploring... though it seemed a heck of a lot longer than that. Wait a minute, now that I think about it, magic was probably involved so it was longer than that... and it was really awesome!

“Myka was the best tour guide, I should have known she would be. She took us to wander the Acropolis, walk in the footsteps of the ancients at the Parthenon, say prayers in a temple of Athena, investigate beautiful ruins with so many names I can’t count them all, and we all had dinner together at the top of Mount Lycabettus! We could see the whole city laid out below us from its terraces without even flying.” Her voice had drifted, become dreamy.

Colliers was listening intently, “I’m so jealous. I’ve been following your Instagram.”

His smile made her chest warm, and she reached out to squeeze his offered hand. “I have lots more pictures if you want to see them... there were so many I couldn’t post, like literally, for confidentiality reasons.”

He nodded eagerly and she continued, “Where was I? Oh, yeah, that Friday night it was wheels up, though I don’t even know if Wonder Woman’s invisible plane actually has wheels...” She giggled delightfully. “It didn’t take long until we were soaring over the Aegean Sea, and passed through a powerful cloaking field, like my quantum aura but massive, through a portal, and landed on Themyscira. We ended up swimming and partying with Diana and her lovely partner, whom you
know as my ex-frenemy, Circe, at their ah-mazing beach house. And just to be clear, we love Circe.”

“So... bygones, on the whole, putting a sword through your chest and nearly killing you incident?”

“Of course!” Kara grinned brightly. “I... we, all forgave her a long time ago. She wasn’t herself at that time and is still haunted by what happened. In fact... she’s helped me deal with some of my own demons.” Kara sighed.

“Anyway, we spent days doing all kinds of amazing things; exploring the city… Rao! Colliers, it’s amazing, like ancient Greece come to life! We hiked miles and miles of trails, got our asses handed to us in the arena sparring with the Amazons… I even got to sing, and Alex went on a stag hunt! You should have seen her… she was like one of them, or Artemis herself, with her bow hung over her shoulder, stalking her prey…” Kara realized her face was warm, she was blushing… of course she was.

“Um, ah, anyway, everyone had a wonderful time, especially Aya. She spent most of her trip snuggled up with a deadly auburn-haired beauty of an Amazon named Smyrna… so I didn’t see her much.”

“A fling?”

“More like a supernova.”

He chuckled, “Wow, props to her. Wait, aren’t she and Petty Officer Caruso…?”

“Dante? Oh. No-no-no, they’re like… best friends. That hasn’t changed.”

“Good for her then, hasn’t the poor woman also been pining after Alex for forever?”

“Yeah, she’s been a bit of a mess in the relationship department… not that I’m an authority. Besides, I don’t mind that she flirts with my bondmate... it’s hot, actually.”

Colliers raised one Spock-like eyebrow over his steaming cup.

“Oh come on, I’ve told you about Kryptonians. My people are very, um, open-minded… and that’s all I better say about it based your look of shock. Don’t be all judgy!”

They laughed together as she continued, “So, a host of Amazons also courted Shah and Devi, but neither of them hooked up with anyone. Shah’s happy with Tyson and Devi has a new boyfriend back here in National City (someone her parents don’t know about yet). We’ve met a couple times. He’s super nice, an architect of some kind for Lord Tech. Devi was super excited about showing him all of the pictures she took of the like-new ancient buildings and structures on Themyscira.

“The highlight of my trip, honestly, was getting to meet Diana’s mother, Queen Hippolyta.”

“Wonder Woman’s mom?!” Colliers’ voice was suddenly three times as loud as it should have been.

“Shhh!” Kara glared at him, then looked around them to make sure no one was listening in.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay, and yeah, Colliers, she was sooo incredible! I mean, regal, poised, beautiful, wise, and everything you’d imagine the immortal Queen of the Amazons to be. Her people adore her... Hell, I adore her. And, oh, you know what was strange, but also really wonderful? Everyone and I mean everyone, even Hippolyta, treated Myka like royalty; did you know she was a High Priestess of
Athena? I know right? Anyway, it was completely unbelievable, I’m still fangirling it.”

“That all sounds… beyond words.”

“It was… and Eliza, it was her first time on the island and she loved it there! She and Naomi spent lots of quality, non-lab time together, on the beaches, in and on the water, and huddled with the Amazonian scientists and artisans. They tried but didn’t get to meet the Telkhines, the mysterious craftsmen who live there under the Amazon’s protection. It’s said they were here before the gods, and still serve them. Anyway, being there was like heaven for Eliza, I think. She even got a tan…” Kara grinned happily.

“Naomi’s been good for her, hasn’t she?”

Kara sipped her tea and nodded. “Yes, she has. It makes me happy to see how close they’ve grown as friends… and whatever else they have together.” Kara smiled. “After Jeremiah…” Kara paused briefly without finishing her sentence (she didn’t need to). “Eliza just let people drift away. It’s like Naomi brought her joy back, her light. They even call each other ‘wing-woman’, which has implications… but I haven’t asked for details. Poor Alex is still in denial that her mom may be ready to date again, especially her mentor… if that’s what’s happening. I really don’t know, but I’m staying clear of snooping on this one.”

“Wow, is that a first?” Colliers chuckled as Kara scowled. “Well, anyway, I’m jealous I missed your dinner party here in the city, which yes, I was invited to. It’s all Cat’s fault. I was supposed to be here, but on my way back from Beijing she had me stopover in Kyoto for a lunch meeting with her. Just lunch! Who does that? Anyway, she offered me Editor-in-Chief of the Trib, and a seat on CatCo’s Editorial Board.”

Kara sat up straight, eyes wide. “Really? That’s amazing! And you said yes, right?”

He smiled, “Yes, of course, I did… for now. I still reserve the right to get back in the field, at some point.”

“Congrats, my friend,” Kara said, lifting her glass of tea. Then, together they toasted, “Nūsh!”

As he finished a sip and set down his own glass Colliers was suddenly beaming like a man with a secret he couldn’t wait to tell. He said, “Speaking of congratulations, I almost forgot. Guess who signed a multimillion-dollar multi-year global integration agreement for TCC 2.0 while someone was off on vacation? Oh, BTW, the marketing guys approved calling the service ‘Prophecy’ now. Cat said the name was kind of pretentious, but I think that’s why she liked it. It’s also perfect because of Pythia… who is amazing by the way, but Cat (of course), remains blissfully unaware of our Seer. Anyway… go ahead, guess… you’ll never believe who signed…”

“Who?”

“The Planet.”

“No way!” Kara almost shouted, so stunned at the news that she almost knocked the table over. Blushing and briefly glancing around at their table neighbors apologetically, she dropped her excited tone to a whisper, “Are you telling me that The Daily Planet is going to implement our system?”

“Yes, the first of many. Which means we’re upping our game, adding staff, yadda yadda. I brought Ada on as Technical Director, under contract, and she finally hired a new tech wunderkind to oversee the project for CatCo. Ever since Brian left to launch his virtual reality start-up we’ve been struggling to find someone with the chops to do the job, and take on more responsibility for the
backend systems. No offense to your high school friend, but your niece is excited about finally having a human lackey more her equal, as if that’s possible, to help keep your baby humming along and evolving without so much hands-on from her.”

“Um, our baby…” Kara corrected with a smirk, and Colliers grinned right back at her. “Who did you guys find?”

“The young man’s name is Winslow Schott Jr., just goes by just ‘Winn’. He’s twenty-four, sharp as a tack, and an exceptionally snappy dresser. Been programming since he was four-years-old if you can believe it. Graduated from Stanford with degrees in Mathematics and Computer Science and later received a Masters in Artificial Intelligence. He’s worked on some hard-core AI, secure networks, and infrastructure projects… even games and apps on the side. And most importantly, when he took Ada’s test, he actually passed… The first time.”

“Wow… no one’s ever done that before! The code is based on…” Her voice again dropped to a whisper. “Kryptonian logic. He must be good.”

“Or just strange.” Colliers laughed. “Seriously, I like him, so does Ada. He’s quirky but brilliant, and the best part is that under that cardigan-wearing geek veneer, beats the heart of a fashionisto.”

Kara had started digging into her pile of eggplant Parmesan, which had arrived on a massive platter but stopped to look up at her friend skeptically. “Seriously?”

“Absolutely. His background check was sparse on family history, but one item did catch my discerning eye, well, aside from Mr. Schott’s penchant for hacking secure systems, writing blogs about aliens among us, and conspiracy theories (including National City's own Guardian Angel)... he designs clothes on the side, and not mundane stuff, we’re talking haute couture. I’m not sure why he keeps it a secret; he’s honestly very good. You two should talk sometime, you have a lot in common. I’ll text you a link to his Instagram.”

Kara was fascinated. “Please do.”

It had been nearly a year since Operation Jericho when the gates in her mind opened and she finally understood what she needed to do to complete her Kryptonian battle armor. Unfortunately, she’d been stuck on the final step for months.

It was the damned design.

What should it look like? What impression did she want to make on the people of her adopted world? Unlike Shatari and Zara, who could change form at will, the material of her battle gear would only be able to make limited changes in its form from its base appearance, so she had to be sure the design was the right one.

It wasn’t just aesthetics, as part of the bonding process it was critical that their shared purpose was also reflected in her armor’s appearance, or there was a risk the AI would assume conflicting qualities. Which apparently would be very, very bad.

The trouble was everything she put on paper seemed to end up looking too… menacing. She wanted to be Earth’s protector, not its alien conqueror, or some tyrannical enforcer. The frustrated Kryptonian had spent too many blurry-eyed, sleepless nights crumpling up her failed attempts at creating the perfect design.

Her armor was too important to screw up, and she only had one shot to get it right. Maybe this Winn Schott was someone who could help her? She’d need to at least investigate the possibility.
“He sounds interesting… I’m sure we’ll bump into each other at some point.” She feigned vague interest through a mouthful of delicious cheesy eggplant. So far, she’d only shared her frustration about her armor with Alex, Shah, and a handful of others. She didn’t want to pull more friends into her drama until she’d made some concrete progress.

Colliers seemed to accept her response without further discussion and went back to focusing on lunch. Then a few moments later, as he was absently nibbling on his salad, spoke up again, “So, I’ve been meaning to ask… do you own a majority stake in CatCo yet? Just kidding, but I know you’re not just sitting on your big pile of money like Scrooge McDuck.” He smirked.

Kara laughed, “Not quite, though Alex and I have invested quite a bit in our favorite company, enough to get noticed anyway. Ms. Grant’s lawyers have been sniffing around for months trying to discover who CatCo’s mystery investor is. It’s kind of adorable… Ada is certain, with the layers she’s constructed, there’s no chance they can trace anything back to us through Archangel, Inc.

“Outside of that, Alex and I diversified about a quarter of our portfolio into Apple, Wayne, Lord, Tesla, and the Sagan Institute, which has paid off big time with new, groundbreaking technologies and patents that are already helping people. Our cold fusion reactor designs, and the crystalline battery technology Shah gave Elon alone…

“Anyway, we even provided angel funding (Kara giggled) for Brian’s VR start-up in exchange for ownership equity. Ada and I have a bet on how long until he’s bought by Amazon.”

“You guys are on fire. You bought Lord pre-IPO, right?”

“Of course.”

“Damn, girl; no wonder you’re filthy rich.”

She smirked. “Not so filthy… but yeah. Over half of Archangel Inc.’s revenue is still funneled directly into the non-profit foundation Ada set up for us when we started all of this. This year alone we’ve provided funding and support for over a hundred charitable and humanitarian groups. An ‘anonymous patron’ also paid to help Bruce and Selina rebuild the Labyrinth, and made a multi-year grant to The Kyle specifically to help families and foster kids, as well as provide housing and create a safe place for abused and homeless youth, women, and their children (humans and aliens).”

“Hats off to you ladies, you’ve become quite the model philanthropists. Saving the world… and investing in the future.”

“For things we care about and believe in.”

“So then, I have to ask… as a major shareholder who obviously doesn’t need the money, why do you still want to work at CatCo as a new hire, besides the pleasure of seeing this gorgeous face every day?” He grinned and batted his eyes dramatically.

Kara smiled and looked off wistfully to the bustling street outside the window, her face bathed in sunlight. She had no doubt that she’d be interviewing to work for Cat Grant in some capacity after she completed her Master’s degree, no matter what. The woman inspired her. She was strong, smart, determined, and beautiful… a leader like Kara’s own mother Alura, just a little more terrifying.

In a world dominated by men, and with entrenched institutional structures working against her, Ms. Grant had built an empire with nothing more than her words and sheer will. She hadn’t just earned the title Queen of All Media; she’d claimed it unapologetically, like the spoils of war.
Kara glanced back at her friend, and said, “Well, aside from my personal life, and the prospect of raising a child and being a good role model for her, helping people as Archangel was the closest I’d come to feeling like I was making a difference here on Earth… until I started working as an intern at CatCo.

“What Ms. Grant, you, and the writers and staff do every day impacts millions of people’s lives all over the world. You ask the questions that need asking, seek the truth even at risk to your own safety, and draw back the curtain on the darkness. I’ve loved my time being part of that, and believe that’s where I, as Kara Danvers, can contribute something lasting to this world, at least professionally. I can be useful, even without my powers… and help Ms. Grant.

“So yes, I want to work at CatCo, more than anything... and will do my happy dance the day I finally earn my all-access badge. Does that answer your question, Steven?”

Colliers stared at her, his eyes misting. “There you go, Sunny Danvers, proving once again why you’ll always be my light. CatCo will be damn lucky to have you.”


Aug 24th – Year Six

Ten Lakes - two hours north of Midvale – The Phelps farm.

Marjorie’s twin daughters, Melinda and Taylor’s, 10th birthday party.

1534 Hours UTC -5, Saturday, U.S. East Coast Time

It had been an unseasonably cool and rainy August, but Marjorie had made the most of a break in the gloom for her twins 10th birthday party that sunny Saturday. Twelve screaming little boys and girls chased each other around the wide pitch of her tree-lined backyard, playing tag with water guns. Melinda and Taylor’s big brother Tyson was ‘base’, the safe zone, and four of the girls clung to the laughing Navy Seal’s massive biceps, using him like a jungle gym.

Shah sat in the cool shade of the back porch, sipping strawberry lemonade in a comfortable chair, and paused to watch the handsome man with a look of thoughtful fascination.

She’d known her boyfriend was good with kids, but not this great.

They all seemed to love him, and he was eating up all the attention, being super silly without any inhibitions, never tiring, always smiling. He was amazing in so many ways… and all hers.

“I know that look, âbjé.” Marjorie’s words drew Shah back to the world. The older woman wasn’t just anyone, she was also Tyson’s mother, and one of the closest friends Shah had in the world… truly a sister. She was sitting next to her in a rocking chair, industriously knitting a sock as they watched her son playing with the kids, an all-knowing grin on her kind, round face.

“You know, I met Tyson’s daddy my first day as a freshman at college, and I swear to God I fell in love with him the second our eyes met when he asked if I needed directions.” She sighed wistfully, obvious still missing him. “It may sound corny, I know, but he was the most beautiful man I’ve ever known, inside and out.”
“Your son definitely takes after him,” Shah said, her cheeks warming with a rare blush. Marjorie laughed and leaned over to pat the younger woman on her thigh.

Tyson had been back from his last overseas deployment for almost a month, and had been crashing on Shah’s couch, but more often in her bed, in National City. The plan was that he’d be staying with her until sometime in September, before his scheduled deployment for the winter at Elysium, protecting the Daniels.

Shah was going to miss him, as a lover, a storyteller, a sparring partner, and a friend, but… guiltily, she was also looking forward to the solitude, freeing up more time to spend with Alex and Kara, as well as training and helping look after their now seven-year-old daughter, her niece, Ryah…

Today, for instance, as her sisters were off on missions halfway across the world (for the D.E.O. and a combined operation with The Agency’s D138 and U.S. Navy, respectively) Shah had eagerly volunteered to ‘babysit’.

Part of her enthusiasm stemmed from the fact that she’d fallen hard for the little Durlan. If Alex and Kara weren’t already working on a plan to adopt her, Shah knew with a hundred percent certainty the adorable shapeshifter would already be hers. All that said, being aunt Shah, and one of the girl’s teachers, was kind of the best of both worlds.

“So, how’s your mom doing? Marjorie asked. “Has all the fame gone to her head yet? She was amazing on Carpool Karaoke last week… that James Corden is such a cutie.”

Shah smiled, truly happy for her mother’s newfound celebrity status. “She was wonderful, wasn’t she? I think she’s handling the spotlight quite well. All the interviews, the late-night TV shows… it’s been a whirlwind. She sees all the publicity as a subversive way to talk about science, which seems to be working, and she’s having fun too. She’s in Scotland this week on a book signing tour and giving a series of lectures at the University of Glasgow. Neil deGrasse Tyson is hosting! She’ll also be on his StarTalk podcast.”

“Oh, that reminds me! I have something for you!” Marjorie reached into her voluminous bag and withdrew three copies of that month’s *Time Magazine* and handed it to Shah. “I saw this at the store today and bought a few copies. They actually still make a print version.” On the nearly completely black cover were the words, ‘Let There Be Light! Dark Energy’s Secrets Revealed’, accompanying a stunning picture of Shah’s mother.

Ravan was standing in a defiant pose, arms crossed dramatically, and dressed in the gorgeous white suit that Kara had designed and tailored to fit her perfectly for the photo shoot. The darkness that enveloped the image was being torn open all around her edges, exposing a brilliant, detailed universe of billions of stars beyond. Her mother’s eyes seemed all-knowing, and her silver-streaked black mane was breathtakingly striking as it flowed down her curves all the way to her waist. The photographer had absolutely captured her beauty, intelligence, and character.

“I hate to break it you hon, but your mom’s a hottie… I think that’s what the kids are saying these days. Even I follow her Instagram and Twitter. Is it true that she’s going to be on the cover of Vogue next month?”

“Yes… all true.” Shah smiled. “She deserves the attention. My father’s a bit jealous, but under the circumstances…”

“No progress on reconciliation?”

Shah sighed. “No. They’re still working on it, but honestly, I don’t know if she’ll ever forgive him
for what he asked of me, and what almost happened that day. Anyway, I hope that in time they’ll heal, and she’ll let him move back in. For now, she’s made up the guest room for Athena, almost like a shrine, in case she ever decides to visit. She even says a prayer of thanks to her every morning if you can believe it… my once faithless mother!”

“That’s what happens when gods come crashing out of the sky and into your life, belief is no longer a choice. I found that out at a train station in Ten Lakes.”

Shah smiled warmly at her friend, loving her more at that moment than she ever had. “I suppose that’s true.”

Marjorie nodded but kept speaking as she went back to her knitting, “I obviously don’t know the whole story, but I think it’s sweet how your mother gives credit to the mysterious ‘angel’ that inspired her, her muse, in all of her interviews. Kara seems to have that kind of effect on everyone she meets. Something tells me that Ravan has a bit of a crush of her own.”

Shah was about to reluctantly agree when Ryah dashed out from a patch of blueberry bushes and tore across the yard chasing two older girls who were trying to reach Tyson. They weren’t as fast as the seven-year-old little Danvers, who sprayed them both in the back as they shrieked loudly and collapsed ‘dead’.

Shah watched as her charge started doing a little victory dance over the ‘corpses’ of her fallen enemies, a variant version of Kara’s happy dance, only to be unceremoniously ambushed herself by a laughing Melinda, who appeared from around a tree to soak the younger girl in the face with her pistol.

“No fair!” A pouting Ryah cried out, wiping water droplets angrily from her eyes.

“Are you certain? It seemed quite fair to me.” Shah asked calmly as she stood up, and seemed to glide with unearthly grace down the stairs to kneel in front of the girl, using the sleeve of her shirt to dry Ryah’s scrunched up little face.

“You chose to celebrate your actions… to gloat, rather than assessing your situation, and remaining vigilant.” Shah’s tone was clearly disappointed. “Your opponent merely exploited your weakness. You should thank Melinda for teaching you an important lesson, and apologize for your dishonorable behavior.”

Ryah appeared sufficiently chastised, and steeled herself as she turned to Melinda and said, “I’m sorry, Melly.” In a tone that sounded like she really meant it.

Melinda smiled, and hugged the willowy girl, “It’s okay, let’s go squirt Taylor!” Then giggled as if nothing had happened.

“What do we always say?” Shah asked, her gaze still on Ryah, who twisted uncomfortably under her aunt’s scrutiny.

A moment passed before she looked up with her big, innocent violet eyes that would one day melt hearts and answered, “Be gracious in defeat, and… and… humble in victory.”

And…?”

“Every mis… misstep is an opportunity to learn.”

“Unless you’re dead.” Shah prompted with a barely concealed smile, leaning down to tweak the adorable little girl’s nose.
Ryah rolled her eyes. “But Auntie Shah, I’m not dead, just wet!” Her massive grin was infectious, and she immediately scurried off with Melinda, all the while apologizing and thanking the older girl profusely for squirting her in the face.

Marjorie was laughing her butt off back on the porch. “Girl,” she said to her friend, “I don’t know what magic you got, but you need to teach me some.”

Shah smiled at the compliment, and as she turned to once again watch the girls play her thoughts turned to an old Arabic proverb… *Every tree begins with a seed.*

............... 

**Later that night**, after all the delicious smores had been toasted and devoured, the stars observed, ghost stories told, and the bonfire in the backyard had been reduced to a warm glow of orange embers, the last of the sleepy children and their parents finally departed the Phelps’ farm.

Marjorie shut the front door with a long exhale, leaning her back up against it as she glanced up at the big clock hanging in the hallway. “Goodness, it’s late! I don’t think we’ll be going to church in the morning. Shah, can you please help round up the girls? I haven’t heard a peep from them in half-an-hour, which is always concerning. They were back in the playhouse the last time I checked.”

“Of course, and Tyson’s almost finished putting away the tables and chairs like you asked.” Marjorie gasped in delight as Shah’s form shifted into the shadows like a soft shimmer of darkness. She effortlessly moved from the house to the backyard, and finally across the freshly mowed grass to a small standalone structure that resembled a tiny house, maybe twelve by twelve, with a second-floor deck, windows, a roof, a door, and everything.

It was the girls’ safe place.

Tyson had once told Shah how he’d spent a summer helping his father build the playhouse for his sisters. ‘One of the best summers of his life’ he’d called it. She smiled, happy that her mate had been able to have such a relationship with his sire before he’d been struck down by a heart attack the following year.

Shah thought of her own father, and the decade of his love and physical presence that had been stolen from her and Ravan… the warmth of his return (even with the issues) blunted the melancholy that always seeped into her bones when reminiscing.

There was still a hole where the memory of Cyrus still dwelled, a pain that would always haunt her… like the look on her brother’s face as the bullet took him on that dusty roadside. Even after her father’s confirmation that he was truly gone, that it was the temptation of bringing Cyrus back from the dead that Hades’ minion had used to coerce Arad into building the gateway, the pain did not stop.

She knew that both the bad and the good memories of Cyrus would always be with her, like a ghost, for the rest of her life.

Shah almost knocked but instead stopped to listen at the front door of the tiny house in the backyard… breaking into a smile as she only then quietly turned the knob. Inside, Melinda and Taylor were snuggled up together on a thick rug, partially covered by a blanket as a shield against the chilly night air, their arms wrapped around a beautiful red fox that was curled up between them. All were asleep.
Shah stood still and watched, simply enjoying the peaceful silence, and joy of their innocent, loving friendship.

The twins knew Ryah’s secret, of course, and dearly loved the alien girl. Her endlessly ability to take the form of any animal they wanted played a part in that, but there was something much deeper going on besides entertainment. The little Durlan had become like a little sister to them, and they, her protectors.

*A triumvirate.* Shah could relate.

She sighed. Marjorie now carried a similar burden of secrets for her, Kara, Ada, Aeryn, and Alex, though the kind, selfless, agreeable woman didn’t see it as one. In her view, all of them, including Ryah were now family, and families took care of each other, no matter what.

*El mayarah.*

It was at that moment Shah was reminded just how much Marjorie meant to her as a friend, as part of their family...

*Rao, I love her beyond words.*

………………………….

Shah lingered against the doorframe of the playhouse, lost in thought and at peace simply watching the girls sleep.

She sensed Tyson’s approach long before he walked up from behind and wrapped his powerful arms around her waist. The warmth of his magnificent body molded into hers, and she let out a little gasp of pleasure when she felt the length of his barely restrained hardness press against the small of her back through his jeans.

“Hello.” He whispered seductively, leaning in to kiss her neck, his lips leaving a trail of fire on her skin. She let a little moan escape and tilted her head to the side to give him more access, reaching back to slip a hand into one of his much larger ones. She wanted nothing more than to whisk him off to their room and slowly undress him… but...

“Tyson? Tyson! Vâysâ!”

“Huh?” He grunted, freezing after hearing her command to stop. He’d been kissing her earlobe and moving in to try and capture her mouth with his own.

“The girls.” She whispered as a reminder, her words a playful purr against his lips.

His pathetic whine of protest made her giggle. He was such a big baby.

“I’ll get Ryah, you take the twins.” She said with a smile, standing on her tippy toes to kiss him deeply (he tasted like mint) before slipping like smoke from his grasp. “After we tuck them in, we can go upstairs and pick up where we left… off?”

Tyson was already halfway across the room, soundlessly making his way to the girls before Shah could finish her sentence. She smiled and reached up to run her fingers along her skin of her neck where his kisses still lingered like promises.
His eagerness only made her need intensify, and in a split second she’d shimmered over to kneel by Ryah’s side, gently scooped her niece up, and faded into the shadows.

…………………..

Sept 5th – Year Seven

Kara and Alex’s Paris apartment – Earth Pax

Kara’s Birthday

1834 Hours UTC +2, Wednesday

Strings of white lights glittered like stars all along and above the balcony of their Earth Pax Paris apartment as Kara sat down at the elegantly set small table on the patio.

She was a little in awe of the fine details of the thoughtful decorations Alex had used for their date. Snowy candles, clean linen, silver utensils, and a delicate bone white China setting very much like the set Eliza had back home.

Aeryn had apparently helped her with the cooking and preparations all afternoon, before leaving for dinner and a movie with Jack. Their Earth Pax guardians were in love, and it brought more joy to her heart than she could not measure.

With the lights of the Eiffel Tower off to her left, the whole evening felt like a wonderful dream.

Dressed like a hot maître d’ in a finely tailored, form-fitting black suit and bow tie, her Vaena gracefully stepped out with a serving tray, placed salads and a small, delicious-smelling cup of soup at each of their places, and poured a glass of white wine for each of them.

“Dinner is served, mademoiselle. Bon Appétit.” Alex grinned playfully as she bowed, set the tray off to the side, and slipped gracefully into her seat across from Kara. The love-struck Kryptonian was totally distracted by her bondmate’s gorgeous smile, her lips, the cut of her short-cropped auburn hair, and the fit of the black suit as it hugged her athletic curves in all the right places… especially her amazing ass… damn.

“Happy Birthday, Daughter of Krypton,” Alex said, with a hint of mystery… raising her glass of effervescent Champagne to just touch with Kara’s with a barely discernable resonance.

“Thank you, for today, this evening, for all of… this.” Kara said softly as she gazed into Alex’s mischievous hazel eyes. Her mate was up to something more than dinner, but what?

“The Temple of Love was pretty cool huh?” The brunette grinned as she took a bite of her salad, the nearly imperceptible smile lines of her radiant face Kara had come to know so well making her even more beautiful. “I could feel Aphrodite’s presence all around us, at least I think did.”

Kara snorted, “Oh yeah, she was there, happily watching. Athena too, finally; it’s been months since I’ve felt her. I wish I knew why. There were a couple others who came and went too, Apollo maybe? I’m not sure. I was really hoping that this time they’d all introduce themselves, you know? But no such luck. Nice job though, I didn’t even know about the Île de Reuilly or the temple… right there in the middle of Lac Daumesnil. Renting the rowboat was a nice touch, you romantic.”
“I aim to please.” *You.*

Kara blushed and took another sip of her bubbly drink. “Well, you succeeded spectacularly, as usual.”

Time passed, but both were so absorbed they didn’t notice… as if the world around them was still. They talked, occasionally holding hands, or just touching fingers, and had finished a couple courses before Kara asked, “So, are you going to tell me what you meant earlier when you said you had something ‘life-changing’ to tell me, ‘later’? Sounds pretty serious, and it is technically later.”

Though shielded, she could feel Alex’s nervous anticipation through their deep connection, a mix of fear and excitement. What was it? Kara hadn’t felt her bondmate this anxious in ages.

Alex took a deep breath and then said, “Yes. I… I’ve been working on something… a little side project for us, for a long time. I’m sorry for keeping it a secret, but I, um, I honestly didn’t know if it would ever amount to anything, or just disappoint you. I wanted it to be a surprise if it ever paid off… and, it finally has.”

So that was it! A secret project! Kara was intrigued, not upset. She grinned. “Well, spill! What is it?”

“I’ve found a solution to our…” Alex bit her lip nervously as she continued, reaching over to take the fingers of one of Kara’s hands, “…relationship situation.”

Kara must have looked puzzled by her bondmate’s cryptic answer, because Alex quickly added, “By which I mean the fact that we can’t always be open about how we feel about each other.”

A light went off, Kara got it. “Oh! Oh… I don’t… I mean, how can we fix the fact that I’m technically (on paper at least) your adopted sister, at least on Earth Prime?”

Alex drew herself up in her seat, squeezed Kara’s hand, and said, “Okay, here goes. Our lawyers found an error in your original forged adoption documents, one they can use, along with their terrifyingly considerable influence, to annul the original adoption, no questions asked… which means you wouldn’t be a Danvers anymore, you never would have been, legally at least, and Ada can replace all existing digital records. She can’t catch everything, or erase people’s memories, but it should be enough.”

Kara stopped breathing. *Not a Danvers anymore?* Eliza was her mother (mom number one) on Earth; Alex was her sister… and Jeremiah. Oh, Rao… would all of that just go away, like it had never happened? “Alex, first, we have lawyers? Second, you’re not making any sense, you and Eliza are my family… you want me to just give that up, and be an orphan again? To not have a family?” Her heart rate was spiking.

Suddenly Alex’s arms were wrapped around her, and they were a thousand feet up piercing the clouds of the crisp fall skies above the city. “Yes, we have lawyers, good ones. Do you remember the nice couple we rescued from drowning a couple years ago? David and Vanessa Jennings? Turns out they’re kind of a big deal in legal circles, legends in fact… and NO, Eliza doesn’t want to annul anything or lose you, but Kara, we can’t live like this, we already lie enough… too much. As painful as it has been for her to even consider, she’s spoken with the Daniels, who are ready, even eager, to sign on as your new adoptive parents… retroactively, by all appearances, to when you first arrived on earth.”

“You’d legally become Kara Daniels… at least for a little while. Ada can make it all official.”

Still in shock, Kara asked, “What do you mean, ‘at least for a little while’?”
Alex snuggled in close, her warm, soft lips pressing gently against Kara's cheek before pulling back enough to whisper, “Silly Kryptonian, will you marry me?”

The world was suddenly full of light, and her heart was on fire in her chest. She was kissing Alex as they soared even higher. Is Eliza really okay with this?

‘Okay’ isn’t exactly the word I’d use, but Kara... she wants us to be happy.

And Myka and Tom?

Do you have to ask? They’re both thrilled… They love you! Do you think Myka calls you in’ah for fun? You already refer to her as ‘mom number two’, and she treats you like a daughter. And Tom, your super amazing General? He’s been wrapped around your little finger since before you met him, so...

Reminder… he took a shot at me the first day we met.

Hmmm… so, our family is unconventional… is that a yes?

Kara smiled and leaned in to kiss her Alex again, this time very slowly. Vaena, my heart, and soul have always belonged to you, since the first moment I saw you framed in your bedroom window. Yes… my answer is yes!

Their hands suddenly couldn’t shred the clothing separating them fast enough, and Kara whispered hotly in Alex’s ear, “Of all the stars, you are the fairest.”

The dark Parisian skies rumbled with the echoes of thunder throughout that long night. The gathering clouds were illuminated for hours by stunning, inexplicable arcs of blue and red lightning and dancing lights. It was surreal, a night like no other. Not frightening or foreboding, but magical and mysterious... as if anything could happen, and did.

At times in places within the city gravity would reverse, and people could float and walk in the air, create lights or flowers in the air with sounds, move like the wind, and hear voices from blocks away.

No one in the city slept a wink… but everyone, families, lovers, friends, partygoers, all gathered out on balconies, rooftops, in parks and fields, along or on boats in the River Seine, to collectively stare up spellbound at the electric skies.

Their mundane world had become a place where inexplicable shadows danced, and if one listened close enough, the passionate cries of lovers echoed. And, as if to make the event even more enchanting, the chill breeze that wound down its narrow streets became warm, like springtime.

It was a night that would never be forgotten by those who experienced it... and all that was on the news the following day.

As one awestruck reporter said that amazing morning about the mystical, unexplainable events of the previous night, ‘It was as if the gods themselves had returned to earth, and blessed the autumn skies above the ancient city with their revelry.’

………………

The next morning….
Kara woke, bathed in brilliant sunlight that filtered down through the peaked skylights of her Paris apartment’s bedroom. Her bare skin was wrapped in a tangle of ripped cotton sheets, and she was happily exhausted… and blissfully satisfied. Her skin tingled with the feel of Alex’s warmth spooned into her, and the peaceful rhythm of her bondmate’s soft breathing was a joyful reminder of the one pure constant that kept her tethered to her adopted world.

Well, the sex had been beyond amazing too… like absolutely mind-blowing! Had they really spent the entire night making love while flying over Paris? Wow… wow-wow-wow-wow!

I hope no one noticed.

Kara was having a hard time wrapping her head around the perfect reality she’d awoken to. She was with her beautiful Alex, her bondmate and now fiancée, (her nâmzad in Persian), taking in her alluring scent like a drug, delighting in the feel of her soft nakedness pressed delightfully up against her, and the taste of her still on her tongue.

What could be more perfect, in any world?

It only took her a split second to notice the delicate sliver of a Kryptonian blue diamond on the ring finger of her left hand. Startled, she ran her thumb over the chilled smoothness of the living metal of the ring’s band…

Alex must have slipped it on me earlier when I was out cold.

Kara blushed; something about her beautiful half-human claiming her as her own, like a prize, was… thrilling.

Ada?

Her niece responded immediately by giggling like she’d been waiting forever for Kara to wake up. Yes, auntie?

Sometime soon, you and I are going to have to have a talk about keeping secrets…

Yes, ma’am. But, in my defense, you do like it.

Well, yeah, but… okay, fine… I love it! And I need your help with something.

We’ve been waiting for your call; check the top drawer of your nightstand, Kal, Shah, Eliza, Aeryn, and I have a little surprise for you. Oh, and Ryah helped too… she wants her mommies to be happy.

Kara stopped, carefully reached over without disturbing her fiancée, and with some giddy hesitation, opened the drawer. Inside, perched on top of her latest book obsession, Lisa Randall’s fascinating ‘Knocking on Heaven’s Door: How Physics and Scientific Thinking Illuminate the Universe and the Modern World’, and next to her glasses, was a tiny parchment scroll tied up with a red ribbon, alongside a matching red velvet ring box.

Kara trembled as she lifted the precious container’s lid, and bit her lip to mask her surprise as she marveled at the perfect mate to her engagement ring nestled within.

The delicately-crafted alien artifact was a flawless duplicate of the one Alex had given her, except for the fact that the sliver of diamond was not Kara’s blue, but her Vaena’s blood red… with a stunning pattern in its matrix, like her necklace, that made it look as if a tiny Eye of Sauron burned inside. It was so Alex’s aesthetic.
Kara regained her composure, and with all of her grace slowly opened the parchment. Her breath caught in her chest as she took in the elegant calligraphy brushed on its surface.

It was Shah’s handiwork... a quote from one of Kara’s favorite authors, Marcus Aurelius, whose wisdom once again reached out to her from across the ages:

“Accept the things to which fate binds you, and love the people with whom fate brings you together, but do so with all your heart.”

Rao! It’s... perfect. Kara had already started to cry.

Just like you two. Shah, Eliza, Aeryn, and Ada all answered, nearly as one.

Thank you... I love you all... so much. Her tears were now flowing freely.

We love you too. Ada giggled before adding, Now, go ahead and put a ring on it!

So she did, cautiously sliding the band onto Alex’s limp finger before snuggling back in and burrowing her head onto the pillow of her fiancée’s shoulder, happily falling back asleep, her heart a smoldering forge around their bond.

................

Sept 8th – Year Seven

National City docks

2142 Hours UTC -8, Thursday, U.S. West Coast Time

“Vasquez, does Naomi know what the Hell that thing is that’s shooting at us?!” Alex barked the question into her comm as she turned and fired off another burst of explosive .223 caliber rounds from her Mini-14 down the darkened alley behind her.

Something massive, hunched over down on all fours, yet still over eight feet tall, was loping towards her and Hank over the rain-soaked concrete less than a hundred yards away. Her little projectiles of pain struck home with a series of thunderous flashes but seemed to do very little, if any, damage.

With a terrifying roar, the as-of-yet unclassified Fort Rozz escapee stumbled and skittered sideways, concrete shattering from the corner of a building where it struck a glancing blow, but then continued barreling forward toward them like a freight train.

Damn its impenetrable hide.

“It’s some sort of poisonous quill, like a porcupine, but a lot bigger,” Alex spoke quickly into her comm.

Vasquez responded, “Dr. Young needs a sample of the poison to analyze. I’m cross-referencing with the Kryptonian database you’ve been decoding from Fort Rozz to look for any species with that, ah,
trait, but no luck so far. Be careful ma’am… sir.”

Dammit, Alex swore to herself. It was taking way too long to get answers that she already knew… but couldn’t legitimately act on as a D.E.O. Agent without revealing her source.

Henshaw, dressed in his black D.E.O.-issued combat gear, had dropped awkwardly to one knee at Alex’s side, grunting in pain as he aligned the targeting system of the alien weapon he’d hauled up to his bleeding shoulder. Several eight-inch slivers of what looked like metal shards were jutting through his body armor in various places. Alex was trying not to worry, but honestly, the poor man looked like a pincushion.

His deep voice was tinged with a hint of humor, and extreme discomfort, as he spoke into his comm, “Agent, tell Doctor Young I’ll be happy to oblige on personally bringing in a few samples... after we put this thing down.”

Under different circumstances, Alex would have laughed at how cavalier her boss was about being impaled by multiple potentially deadly alien spikes… but Hank was really hurt.

“Danvers!” He growled, obviously fighting against the agony of the poison. “Keep our friend busy… and in my sights. I need twelve more seconds to lock on!”

Unfortunately, they were out of luck. Alex’s HUD already alerted her that the beast would be on them in less than half the time Hank needed.

She knew what she needed to do, though it was risky.

Shatari had been flooding her with every minute detail of the Talarian War Hound’s anatomy; its physical limits, weak points, and probabilities of success of hundreds of possible attack scenarios for the last twenty minutes as they’d battled the creature along the docks.

To Alex’s frustration, they’d lost the rest of their strike team one-by-one to the beast’s crippling quills along the way.

She desperately wanted to share all of her knowledge with the D.E.O., with Hank, but how would she ever explain knowing so much? She’d fallen back on Kara’s bedtime stories and their *Compendium of Alien Species* once too often already, her boss was getting suspicious… she could feel it.

“Understood sir, I’m on it!” She touched Hank’s shoulder reassuringly before bursting forward at a run directly at the monster charging them.

“Alex! What the Hell are you doing? I said distract it, not take it head on!” Henshaw called out, his voice filled with real concern. She couldn’t help but grin, he really did care about her.

“Just don’t miss, okay boss?” Was all she had time to say before she was staring down the fanged gaping maw of what she could only describe as the biggest quill-covered, terrifying black bear with red glowing eyes and foot-long claws she could ever imagine in her worst nightmares.

“Come on, ugly.” She yelled, “Catch me if you can!”

As the War Hound swiped a massive clawed hand (paw?) at her, she cheated and used her Kryptonian enhanced speed, agility, and strength to propel herself upward, shifting into a graceful summersault as she sailed over the creature’s head.

She then rolled into a soft landing on her feet behind it, firing off an entire clip of explosive rounds at
the beast’s spiny back along the way. The missiles all struck home, detonating on its hardened pelt, but rather than turning around as she expected it would it kept charging ahead, straight at…

“Hank!” She screamed, as the world around her ground to a halt.

The rain, even the air, became frozen in time as she shifted forms, and with merely a thought became Flame, flickering forward to materialize only a few feet in front of her boss with her back to him.

She’d placed herself firmly between the deadly beast and its target, her blazing left-hand open, palm out, in the universal sign for ‘stop’.

As time sped back up to normal she heard her commanding officer’s gasp of astonishment from behind, his rifle clattering away across the pavement as he physically recoiled and scrambled away from her in panic.

*What??*

Hank was either terrified of her, or the flames emanating from her body. She guessed she knew which option was more probable… *wonderful.*

A cold fear gripped her; she’d just blown her secret, to Hank.

Sure, he already thought she was a Meta, but she’d been holding back her true powers on the job for years… and had just become elemental fire, seemingly appeared out of thin air between him and over two-thousand ferocious pounds of certain death.

She loved the D.E.O., but her days as an agent were surely over… she’d be lucky to get a tiny cell with any daylight after this.

But none of that mattered to her at that moment; all her focus was on saving her boss, and friend.

The angry creature was only a few feet away; quickly bearing down on her… its red, angry eyes blazing with a mindless bloodlust. As yet another ear-shattering howl rent the air, its massive bulk lunged forward, claws out, coming down on her like death.

Oh well, she thought, if I’m going down, I’m going down with style. Alex grinned, and punched, in the way she remembered Kara doing with the bank vault when they were younger.

When her nearly invulnerable fist connected with the War Hound the air split with the sound of thunder, followed immediately by a shockwave… a ripple of sound and concussive force that shattered windows in a spectacular three-block radius, and sent the stunned creature flailing backward on an explosive arc well-over twenty feet above the ground, and sailing through the air to explode through a warehouse wall over a block away.

For Alex’s part, the intensity of her attack had pushed her and Henshaw back, chunks of concrete shattered and plowed up beneath and behind her firmly planted feet from the sheer force of her blow. Her red Kryptonian armor was steaming from absorbing the majority of the kinetic energy that would have slammed into Henshaw had she not willed her aura to protect him.

*Rao, I must look intimidatingly alien…* is all she could think of as she quickly turned to check on him.

Her commander was looking up at her in a confused daze, bleeding from multiple quill strikes, and trying to say something. Alex let her hawk-like mask dissipate like mist as she shimmered to his side, kneeling to lift the large man to a sitting position as easily as she would a child. His breathing was
irregular, the alien poison in his system doing its work to paralyze, not kill its prey… but, her sensors were telling her that he had enough in him that it might stop his heart.

*Not good, not good…*

“Vasquez,” She yelled into her comm, losing her composure, “Agent down! Agent down! I need a medevac, now, on my location! It’s… Hank…” She almost choked on her words, “Please hurry!”

“Yes, ma’am! We had helos on the way already for the others. Eta four minutes! Can he hold on? Agent Danvers? What happened to the alien? We saw a massive energy spike here, ma’am, it was off the charts…”

“The Beast is incapacitated, but we need a level five containment unit, now!” She took a deep breath and adjusted her hold cradling Hank before adding, “Tell Doctor Young to check the database for a Talarian War Hound, that’s what we’re dealing with. Director Henshaw’s been hit with its quills, multiple times. I’m pulling them out.” Vasquez began to protest, but Alex immediately interrupted, “It’s okay, they need to be removed… it’s a paralytic poison, non-lethal depending on how much has been pumped into his bloodstream… but the longer they’re in, the higher the dosage, and the worse it’ll be for him. Trust me.”

“Ma’am? How do you know…?”

“Vasquez, I just… I do. Okay? Please, just trust me on this.” Alex begged. “Tell Naomi what I said, she’ll know what to do for Hank.”

“Danvers…” Hank slurried her name, and she leaned close to listen.

“Yes, sir?” She asked with trepidation, waiting for the tempest that was sure to follow.

“Well done.” Was he… grinning? Chuckling drunkenly? What the…? The big man took a ragged breath, coughed, and then continued, “If I survive, we need to talk, about… trust.” As he swiftly drifted into unconsciousness Alex was left with only questions, and fearing for the life of her seemingly indestructible boss.

As she heard the helos and the growl of the incoming heavy machinery of the clean-up and capture crew, she shifted back to her black D.E.O. combat gear, all visages of Flame dissipating like the remnants of a dream as she waited for rescue.

……………………

*Sept 9th – Year Seven*

*Deep in the D.E.O. desert facility outside National City*

*0324 Hours UTC -8, Thursday, U.S. West Coast Time*

*It wasn’t your fault, Vaena. You did what you had to. You saved Henshaw.* Kara’s thoughts were upbeat and soothing, as always, but Alex knew how much of mess she’d made of things.

*Yeah, and now come the consequences. I can’t explain this away like the other times. Thanks for trying to cheer me up, nooré cheshm-am.* Alex was sitting outside the room where Naomi and
medical staff had moved the Director after he’d come out of surgery three hours earlier.

Alex felt like a child waiting outside the principal’s office.

She hadn’t moved from her spot since bringing Hank in and fiddled incessantly with her empty ring finger. She distracted herself by stirring the cup of bad coffee Vasquez had graciously brought her, along with her adorable smile and a sprinkled cake donut from the break room on one of her trips to check in on their boss, and Alex.

*But you don’t regret saving him…* Kara urged.

*No, I don’t.* Alex finally answered. *Not for a second.* It actually felt good, finally using her Kryptonian powers to help on the job beyond sneaking in a little fire, boost of strength, agility, or speed here and there.

Kara hugged her through their bond. *If you need a rescue, we’ll be there.*

*Absolutely.* Aeryn, Shah, and Ada all chimed in.

Then, the door to Hank’s recovery room slid open, and the D.E.O.’s Science Director, Dr. Naomi Young, stuck her head out. *Hmm, that’s an odd look,* Alex observed, her adorable friend and lab partner appeared, smug? Pleased with herself? *Interesting.*

“Alex… um, I mean, Agent Danvers, please come in, the Director is asking for you.”

Naomi then smiled and whispered, *Good luck sweetie!*, in Alex's thoughts as they strode past each other, and squeezed her friend’s hand briefly as she slipped by. She then raised her voice to call back into the room as she closed the door behind her, “Let me know if you need anything else, Director, and remember what we talked about.”

Alex was sure she heard Hank grumble something unintelligible before Naomi was gone, the door shut, and she was standing alone facing her boss. Hank was hooked up to multiple IVs in a hospital bed, a white sheet covering his muscular frame up to his rock hard abs. Alex’s gaze continued up to his broad, very nice chest… wrapped in white bandages and cold packs.

He looked awful but appeared to no longer be in any pain. In fact, he looked, kind of blissed out…

*Whoa! Naomi, just how much sedative did you give him??*

*Enough to make him manageable, hopefully.* Her friend chuckled in Alex’s thoughts.

“Alexandra.” The Director’s voice was not the commanding rumble she’d come to know, but more like the deep, warm greeting of a loved one… and he was… smiling? Something was up.

Out of reflex, Alex stood at attention, eyes forward, “Agent Alex Danvers reporting as ordered, sir. I’m ready to explain, and face disciplinary action as you see fit.”

Hank drunkenly patted the bed by his side and motioned her over. “Alex, come sit, please. I’m glad you’re alive… Hell, I’m glad I’m alive. Thanks for saving my sorry butt. I was a little slow, with all the poison in my system.” He sighed. “I knew you were hiding something, but not… well, this. I’m impressed, and truthfully, a little in awe of you.”

Alex’s breath caught and she stared at him, “In awe? Of me?”

He reached over and reverently touched her hand. “When you appeared before me, a being of living
fire… I thought you were my death.” He swallowed, and she swore she heard him whisper a name under his breath, “H’ronmeer”. His quiet tone was a mix of reverence and fear.

He then gently shook his head as if coming out of a trance, and continued, “But then I realized what you had become. I never thought I would see a Kryptonian symbiotic bonding, especially not one with a human. How did you manage to hide the effects to your biology from our scanners, let alone the blood tests?”

Alex was blushing. Stop! That’s Kara’s thing! Is all she could think of before she blurted out, “Shatari! My companion, she and I… Hmm, I don’t even know how to properly explain this but the tests we do here at the D.E.O. mean nothing to us. The technology from the world she’s from, that’s now part of me… is thousands of years ahead of ours.”

Hank nodded as if he expected as much. Then cleared his throat to say, “First, I just want to say how honored I am to be in your presence, great Shatari, Child of Cythonna. My grandmother told me stories of your kind, but nothing could prepare me for… the sight of the Flamebird. Alex… such grace.” He was starting to tear up and ramble… clearly drugged up extensively by Naomi.

His eyes glazed over and he began mumbling words that neither Alex nor Shatari could comprehend, before suddenly becoming lucid again. He asked, “Are you two eternally bound? I assume you would be at this point if you have Kryptonian powers.” He smiled when Alex reacted with a shocked look, “It’s just us, Alex, and it’s not like I don’t have my own secrets.”

Questions flooded her thoughts.

What did he mean by that? What secrets did he have? And how could Hank possibly know about her bond with Kara? Was that was he was asking her? She hadn’t even told anyone at the D.E.O. that they were engaged yet, let alone bondmates. Who were H’ronmeer and Cythonna, how was Shatari ‘her child’, and how did Hank’s grandmother know about such things?

Wait, I think he’s asking about my other bond, with Shatari… whew!

“I, um, Shatari and I used to be able to separate, but not anymore, it’s been a few years. Her mind, my mind… we’ve become one.”

Hank nodded, “That’s how you knew what we were facing last night… and many other nights, I imagine. How did you and her… did Kara?”

“Yeah, Shatari was Kara’s companion, but she didn’t need her protection here… you know, yellow sun… She wanted me to be safe, they both did, so Shatari became mine.” Her admission was like a huge weight off her shoulders, she’d hated being dishonest with Hank. “I’m so sorry I lied to you, sir.”

Her woozy commander cracked a sad, knowing smile, “I understand, I really do. I haven’t given you enough reason to be completely open with me, and for that I am sorry. We’ll change that going forward. Alex, listen, this is important… you need to understand how dangerous it is for you, an alien… yes, that’s how they’ll label you now… being part the D.E.O., in a command position. There are those who wouldn’t think twice about sending you to someplace like Project Cadmus, tearing you to pieces just to see what makes you tick, discover what gives you your godlike powers. I won’t let that happen, but you need to be careful, for both our sakes.” Alex suddenly felt sick, thinking back to the awful fate of Ryah’s guardian.

Henshaw reached over and gently laid one of his massive hands on her forearm. It felt… nice, comforting, and her heart stilled. “I will keep this incident, and your powers, just between us. But
you need to promise to fill me in once I feel less trippy, and start trusting me enough to share your
secrets or at least some of them… and I’ll do the same.”

**Did he just wink at me? What else does he know, and what secrets is he hiding?**

“I think this is the beginning of something, Alex; just think about what we can accomplish together
with your powers and knowledge. It’d be like having Kara on the team if she knew any damn thing
about using hers. It’s tragic she doesn’t… like clipping an angel’s wings.” He sighed, “But it’s for
the best… for her, I suppose. Leaving her in the dark… keeps… her safe… and I… promised.”

Hank’s eyelids were getting droopy, and he was beginning to slur his words again.

Alex wanted so much to say something, but Kara’s secrets weren’t hers to tell. She almost opened
her mouth to tell Hank all about how amazing her bondmate was, how many lives she’d saved,
disasters she’s averted, how powerful she was becoming… she’d fought a god, for Rao’s sake!

Wait, what did he mean about keeping Kara safe? He’d known about her all along, and was
watching over her as a promise to someone? Who? And wow, Henshaw really did care about Kara
too, regardless of how gruff his attitude toward her had been when speaking with Alex about her in
the past.

**Goody.** Kara pouted. *He still thinks I’m completely useless… I should be happy, but find myself
strangely offended.*

It’s okay, auntie, at least for now we can’t risk exposing you, and it’s been clear for a long time that
the Director knows far more than he’s saying. They could all feel the gears in Ada’s mind turning.

Alex, he obviously cares for you and Kara a great deal and believes that he is protecting both of you.
I like where this is going. Shah added.

Kara said, I did find his comment about Cythonna surprising, that’s a very obscure name in
Kryptonian culture. I only know about her because of my father’s work with AIs, plus, I basically
lived in the library in Kandor growing up. Hey, I am a geek, remember? Anyway, how the heck
would Henshaw even have a clue about her?

Who is she? Alex asked on pins and needles.

Shatari finally simply communicated; **Mother. She who loves and protects us.**

Kara’s thoughts became wistful. In ancient times, she was my ancestors’ goddess. Back then Rao
had a female aspect… male by day, female by night. Over time the concept of ‘god’ lost all sense of
gender and basically became our sun… and just Rao. But in those days, before our people’s
Awakening, well, things were different… gender was an issue.

Cythonna, like Hecate in Greek mythology, was associated with darkness, the moon, magic, women,
and other ‘mysterious’ things… kind of like the concept of the other, the opposite of the male self. In
the early days of non-biologic intelligence, the AIs looked to Cythonna as a protective mother figure,
and it kind of stuck over time… she became their goddess.

How Hank knew that I have no freaking idea! Alex, he said he’d heard of a Kryptonian symbiotic
bonding once before, how’s that even possible? And he even recognized your mask, the Kryptonian
Flamebird, as if he’d seen one before! Ugh, too many questions!

I don’t know, Kara, but I think Naomi hit him with an elephant tranquilizer, so he’s kind of
rambling… maybe he’s just confused?
Maybe, Kara huffed, but probably not. The things he knows are really specific.

Alex considered Hank’s blissful expression as he watched her before she finally responded to him, “So I’m not fired?”

“Far from it, Agent Danvers.” He grinned. “Or whatever your alter ego is called…”

“Flame. I’m Flame, sir.”

As if it were even possible, his grin grew larger. “Nice, it suits you. Danvers, I want you as close to me as possible from now on, and not just because you can punch a Talarian War Beast through a building! You’re my best agent, a partner I can depend on both here at the D.E.O. and in the field, as well as a leader the troops respect, with superpowers. So, no, you’re not fired… I’m giving you a promotion.”

Alex was stunned and confused, “Th... thank you, sir?”

“Good answer, Alex.”

“Oh, sir, it’s a War Hound, not a Beast.” She corrected.

“Hmmmm.” Henshaw scowled at her, and then was suddenly grinning. “About that…”

Rut Roh Alex…. She could feel Kara pulling a pillow over her head, and covering her eyes like she did every time they watched a scary movie, and someone was about to get whacked.

The Director gazed into her eyes as if searching for answers as he spoke, “I assume you’ve been holding back on what information you’re sharing with me, and the D.E.O. Had we known what alien we were facing before we engaged it tonight we might not have six agents laid up in the hospital in paralytic shock… I expect that will change going forward with our new arrangement. Feel free to share, everything.”

“Yes, sir.” Alex swallowed, suitably admonished, and feeling guilty for the unnecessary pain suffered by her team.

“Also,” Henshaw continued, “We’ve been trying unsuccessfully for years to crack the encryption on Fort Rozz’s prisoner database, it’s protected beyond our technology’s ability to touch it… unlike the rest of ship’s data that we’ve been able to mine so far that you’ve so graciously helped translate. If we had access to that information… knew who, and what, the escaped prisoners were, what we were facing, it’d give us the leg up we need to get ahead of them because believe me… beings more terrifying than Talarian War Hounds are out there in the dark already moving against us. Alex, we need you and Shatari’s help, now more than ever, which is why I’m giving you a new assignment… Assistant Director Danvers.”

Alex suddenly couldn’t speak, correctly at least. “Assistant Director? Sir, I… ah, what just happened?”

“I told you, you’ve been promoted. And you better get started on your new mission, no more field work for you until it’s done.”

“Sir! You can’t be serious! I love being in the field, and this project could take weeks, months even!”

Henshaw was doing his best to appear unmoved but was fighting back an obvious grin, “Then you better get cracking. Does this face look like I’m not serious?”
“No, sir. I’ll get right to it.” Alex said glumly, but added with a grin, “Assistant Director? Seriously?”

“As I said, this is my serious face, Alex.” The big man smiled, “You’ve earned it. Oh, and I want you to read in Agent Keen to assist you, she’s brilliant, and your new mentee.”

Her head was spinning, so much had happened in a short time, her professional life had just gone all topsy-turvy. She needed Kara, Ada, and her sisters.

As she started standing to request to leave, Henshaw grabbed hold of her wrist, with a look of such kindness, and gratitude, in his big brown eyes that she was shocked by the raw sincerity of it.

“Thank you, Alex, for saving my life, and trusting me with your secret. I’ll contain what happened tonight with the Hound... in my report.” He tapped at the D.E.O.-issued tablet at his bedside; “I’ll note how effective the alien weapon was in subduing the creature while you provided a distraction. Too bad it broke after I used it.”

Her heart skipped a beat. *Hank is protecting me! The weapon didn’t break.*

Caught up in the moment, Alex leaned in and hugged him, not expecting his strong arms to wrap around her in response. He whispered, “I will never betray you, Alex... or Kara.”

The last few moments had changed many things about their relationship and compelled her to say.

“Sir, I’ve wanted to tell you something, and now seems as good a time as any for sharing secrets... I, I’m engaged.”

His expression shifted from startled surprise to the biggest grin she’s ever seen on his face in seconds.

“Well, I didn’t see that coming. Who’s the lucky guy... or gal?”

She swallowed, and locked her gaze on his before saying her name, “Kara.”

To his credit, he appeared less stunned than she expected, though his brow creased in an expression of fatherly concern. She knows his tells too well. “Kara? Your sister, Kara?” He asked as if needing clarity.

“Yes, my adopted sister, who is in no way related to me biologically since she’s from another planet, and an entirely different species, as you are always quick to point out. Hank, I love her, with all my heart and soul, I always have... and she feels the same about me.” She took a deep breath after her admission. “Anyway, her adoption is being annulled; she’ll be Kara Daniels by Christmas.”

He nodded, “Daniels, huh?”

“Yeah, they're friends... more like family, actually. Soon, that will be official.”

“Do they know about you? About Kara?” He was definitely concerned, being protective.

“Everything. But they’re good people... U.S. Navy, and I, we, trust them implicitly. Trust me on that, okay? The same way you rely on my judgment in the field. Tom and Myka have been a godsend, and not just for Kara.”

Henshaw’s eyebrows rose in recognition when she said their names, and he glanced down at his hands... shoulders hunched in resignation. Alex hated the silence, not knowing what he was thinking. Why was it so important that he be happy for her? She didn’t know, but it was.

He finally looked up into her eyes, and offered a playful smile, “Well then, what can I say besides congratulations Danvers, I hope that girl knows how damn lucky she is to have you. I better get an
invitation to the wedding. And don’t worry, I’ll deal with HR. Oh, about Vasquez… be gentle. I hate to be the one to tell you, but she loves you, literally… talk to her. Susan’s good people… she’ll understand, and continue to keep all of our secrets.”

That was a flattering yet terrifying revelation; Alex really did need to talk to Susan… Rao, now she felt terrible, she’d always thought the adorable agent was just being nice to her out of friendship. “Thank you, sir. I was going to ask her to be a bridesmaid… I’ll talk to her. I had no idea. And don’t worry about the invite; you’re already on the guest list. The date’s June fifteenth, by the way.”

And with that, he pulled her back into a brief, but fierce embrace. Was he tearing up too?

Alex, how could I not love this man? She could feel Kara blubbering into her pillow back at their loft as she listened into their conversation.

“It would be my honor.” Hank choked out his words with such solemnity, they sounded like an oath.

Alex could see he was fading again, so she decided to not tempt fate by bringing up something that had been bothering her for a long time… his evasion of her every attempt to get him and Kara together. She didn’t understand his reluctance to merely meet her now-fiancée but hoped that after all the truths they’d just shared she could begin to get him to open up to her about his reasons, as well as his other secrets.

She sighed, at least she still had nine months before the wedding to work on building trust with her boss.

After their hug, Hank lay back on his hospital bed, looking more at peace than Alex had ever seen him. And as he began to drift off to sleep, she gently wiggled her fingers free from his paw-like grip and exited the room with a new bounce in her step.

As she was sliding the glass door shut behind her she nearly jumped out of her skin as he suddenly roused from his slumber and bellowed, “Danvers! Send Doctor Young in here, she and I need to have a long talk about her liberal interpretation of what’s currently passing as dosage guidelines here at the D.E.O.” Obviously, some of her boss’ gruff vigor had returned.

She was trying desperately not to laugh as Naomi came scurrying past her on her way to the Director’s room, and in a show of support quickly darted in to mingle her grateful thoughts, and give her friend a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Sept 24th – Year Seven
The D.E.O.’s secret desert facility outside of National City
1124 Hours UTC -8, Thursday, U.S. West Coast Time

It had only taken Alex and Shah working in tandem with their Companions a couple days to unlock the prisoner manifests from Fort Rozz. The thing was, that turned out to be the easy part.

It was like opening the lid on an ocean.
Wading through hundreds of petabytes of data that only she (the only D.E.O. agent fluent in Kryptonese) could fully comprehend was the challenge.

Hank had assigned a team of linguists to assist her, but most of them (as good as they were), stumbled over the elegant, incompressible music of the language and were effectively useless. Fortunately, among them was the brilliant young woman Hank had given Alex as a mentee, Agent Sandra Keen. The young woman had studied Kryptonese for years, and had even done her Master’s thesis on the language and what was known of the culture of Kara’s people.

Alex was impressed by both her intelligence and her tireless enthusiasm for all things Kryptonian, though she struggled at times to keep a straight face when her apprentice made incorrect assumptions or went into full-on fangirl mode (which was often).

Rao! Alex chuckled involuntarily the first time she noticed Keen’s Superman screensaver and the sexy desktop image of a smiling, and shirtless, Kal-El on her laptop. The poor girl was clearly a goner… in love with the Man of Steel, whose heart was already secretly bound to Lois Lane.

The thing was though, Alex knew exactly how Keen felt, what it was like to be in love with a Kryptonian… and it drew them closer together. The determined agent became Alex’s right hand on the project, and in a short time, a friend.

To move decryption and translation along even faster, Alex had also covertly offloaded parts of the work to Ada, Kara, and Shah, and they shared many long nights together, ordering takeout at the loft sifting through data.

She did keep a good twenty-five percent of the workload for herself and Keen since it really was their job after all, but there was also another reason. As much as Alex was dying to get back in the field, the details they were uncovering about the detainees once held in the massive inter-dimensional space prison were like a daily stream of mind-blowing revelations. New species, cultures, star-spanning civilizations, languages, and a deeper picture of the wise and ancient Kryptonians… who stood like guardians for untold millennia over thousands of galaxies.

Alex could share and savor that sense of discovery and wonderment with Keen in a different way than she could with most people, aside from Shah. Like her best friend, Alex could remember what it was like to just be a ‘normal’ human… before their lives changed, and crazy became part of her everyday existence. Being with Sandra was a little like talking to a younger, more naïve version of herself… and it felt good to actually be able to mentor someone.

Oct 6th – Year Seven

The D.E.O.’s secret desert facility - outside of National City

1144 Hours UTC -8, Monday, U.S. West Coast Time

It was a Monday, and Alex was at her cluttered desk at the D.E.O., about to take a break from translating to head down to Naomi’s lab to invite her to an early lunch with her and her protégé, when her friend and mentor unexpectedly whispered privately in her thoughts.
Alex, 911! Don’t come down to my lab, meet me in The Sanctuary… and come alone, at once!

What’s going on, Naomi? Alex could feel her friend’s urgency and anxiousness. Whatever had her spooked was sensitive enough to meet in the one place inside the D.E.O. they were certain had no surveillance. How bad is it?

The Amazon hesitated before saying, On a scale of one to ten? I’d call this an eleven.

Alarms went off in Alex’s mind, and she started moving, Naomi/Euryleia was not prone to hyperbole. I’m on my way.

A few tense minutes later she was deep in the bowels of the secret government facility and keying herself into a dimly lit, packed storage chamber the size of a basketball court. The D.E.O.’s Science Director was pacing intently in the shadows waiting for her, the elegant golden fingers of her glittering hand tapping on a tablet.

As Alex entered, the thick steel blast door hissed quietly closed behind her. “Naomi, what’s going on?” She was whispering, even though she didn’t need to (there were no mics in the room).

“Thank the gods you’re here.” The willowy woman breezed over to her, a look of grave concern marring her usual tranquil demeanor.

“Alex, earlier today I was asked to run a battery of toxicity tests on a highly-classified substance called ‘Element X-12’, a radioactive, luminescent, emerald-green gel with a chemical composition and emission wavelength signature like nothing I’d ever seen before… on Earth at least.

“Part of what was needed were simulations to measure the effects of a wide range of exposure levels on humans, as well as our entire alien database. The radiation seemed harmless at first, but…” She swallowed and looked around as if she was worried they were being overheard, “When we tested against Kryptonians the effect was crippling.”

“I did some digging, and this ‘Element X-12’ is just one of several weaponized versions of the original material, something called ‘Kryptonite’. Apparently the D.E.O. collected from a large meteor-riddled with the substance sometime back in the 90’s.

“Humans don’t seem to be affected by anything other than ultra-high levels of the radiation, and at that point, things start to get interesting on a cellular and DNA level. Regardless, to a Kryptonian, and to a lesser extent, you and Shah, even being exposed to a small amount would be extremely painful, and in larger amounts (or directly in your bloodstream) virulently toxic.

“I don’t believe Ada would be affected at all, but I can’t be sure without testing her. I tried, but even with my clearance, I couldn’t access any deeper details in the records without throwing up red flags. Alex, the D.E.O. has been building an arsenal of the stuff for years.”

“But why?” Alex’s voice was small, and she felt lightheaded. Hank, making weapons to kill Kara? Her Kara. How… how could he? He couldn’t… he wouldn’t. He promised.

Gone was Naomi the adorable scientist, it was Euryleia, the Amazon warrior who spoke next, her tone harsh, “There is only one purpose for weapons of mass destruction Alex, one… to kill, and in this case, to specifically target Kryptonians.

“The X-12 variant I was given looks like a less toxic version of Kryptonite that would be delivered by injection, or a projectile… like in a needle or bullet. Its proximity could weaken any Kryptonian’s invulnerable skin’s hardness, and once the substance entered their bloodstream… I can’t even begin
to imagine the agony they’d be in, and the damage it would cause on a cellular level, enough to weaken and possibly incapacitate, or with enough, to kill.”

“X-12 is for pacification...” Alex growled. “That bastard. He lied to me! No wonder he keeps avoiding meeting Kara... how could he even look her in the eye? Pretending to care about her, about both of us. So, what, if she doesn’t stay docile he plans on killing her? What the fuck is that?!” She was shaking.

“Alex, Alex, calm down... oh goddess, your eyes.” Naomi’s strong right arm was suddenly the only thing holding Alex back from exploding through the door to find Henshaw and beating the answers out of him. There was fire licking at her extremities, and her Flame armor was beginning to materialize around her.

“You can’t do this, you need to listen to me, for Kara’s sake... for Ryah! Please!” Naomi pleaded.

Alex’s heart was pounding, but she fought back the need to attack something, or more precisely, someone. “I’m... listening.” She growled out from between clenched teeth.

“First of all, I do not choose to believe that Hank Henshaw, the man we’ve both come to know and respect, would ever intentionally try to harm you, Kara, or Shah, but... the very fact that his agency has and is creating weapons that can is impossible to ignore, so...” Naomi pulled a small gray metallic box from her lab coat’s pocket. “I took the liberty of liberating two milligrams of the X-12. The lead case blocks the radiation.”

Alex involuntarily flinched away from the tiny container, and her eyes grew wide.

“My hope is that with this sample we can come up with a defense, something to block, or even negate the effects of Kryptonite. You taking on the D.E.O. in some sort of angry, suicidal confrontation with our boss is not an option!” Naomi held her ground as she thrust the small box into Alex’s hands. “What would Shah do? Ask her, before you fly off and get yourself killed!”

Alex’s breathing slowed, and her impatient flames dissipated. “I’m sorry, Naomi, you’re right... you’re right... as usual. We need to get the gang together on this, all of us, tonight, at Shannon and Safiya’s. This is a family crisis.”

As the taller woman leaned in and wrapped Alex in a hug, the D.E.O. agent sagged into her and fought back the sucking pit of darkness growing in her chest, “Thanks for keeping me grounded... I thought... I thought he really cared about me, Naomi, about both of us. Hank lied... the whole time I’ve been here, he’s been making weapons to kill my family. How can I go back up there and just pretend everything’s okay?”

Naomi smoothed her hands down the sides Alex’ arms and bent down so her confident green eyes were level with her own as she said, “Because you must. Kara’s life depends on it.”

Oct 14th – Year Seven

Three days before Alex’s birthday.

The D.E.O.’s secret desert facility - outside of National City

1022 Hours UTC -8, Wednesday morning, U.S. West Coast Time
Alex had been pissed at him about something for nearly three weeks straight, and Hank still had no idea what he’d done. He’d caught glimpses her stalking him like a predator in his peripheral vision, or shooting daggers in his direction out of her simmering crimson Kryptonian eyes when she thought no one was watching.

It was honestly terrifying.

He stayed closeted in his office a great deal more than normal and pulled lead on extra missions to stay out of her way. Whatever she thought he’d done, it was bad, and he couldn’t even read her mind to find out what it was. All Kryptonians were immune to his most powerful mental abilities, even those who were part human, though he could still sense her emotional state.

Hank finally decided that it was time to get whatever it was out in the open. So, after the staff meeting that Wednesday, three days before Alex’s twenty-second birthday, he scheduled a special morning sparring session with her… because nothing screamed anger therapy more than beating the crap out of each other.

Alex rounded a corner and sauntered down one of the D.E.O.’s stark stone hallways scanning the unfamiliar section of the facility with suspicion. She approached without even looking at him, and stood stiffly at his side in front of the wide sliding doors that opened into the combat chamber, grating out, “Director.”

“Assistant Director.” He replied civilly.

“New training room sir? I’ve never been here before.”

“Yes, the Green Room. I think you’ll find it… a new level of challenging.”

“I doubt that.” He caught the flip response she muttered under her breath. Something was eating at her for sure.

Her fury seethed like a bonfire.

The massive doors hissed open to reveal a large domed chamber cut into the bedrock. It was circular, approximately fifty feet in diameter, and soft lights flickered to life revealing darkened observation rooms along the curved walls. A massive sparring ring on a raised dais dominated the center of the space.

“We alone?” Alex asked, an eager, dangerous edge to her voice.

“Yeah. We’re alone, Danvers.”

“Good.” Is all she said, before flickering from where she stood, directly into the center of the ring… subtle licks of flame following her like an echo.

_Gods of Mars, she is strong._

Hank stepped over to slide his fingers over a control panel beside the doors. “Let’s even the odds here a bit, shall we?” He said with a smirk as the lights shifted from a comforting white blue to a soft green glow. He watched as Alex glanced down at her hands in confusion, and quickly jumped up into the ring, moving into a low combat stance in front of her.

“The room is enhanced with a radioactive material that was once part of Kara’s homeworld. Not
enough to hurt you, but enough to make this a fair fight.”

Alex paled and was suddenly furious. “You bastard.” She growled, launching a sudden, and explosive jump kick attack that he barely blocked and rolled with the incredible force behind it. Her speed and agility were still far more than human, even with the Kryptonite emitters.

They went back and forth for almost twenty minutes… lightning blows, rolls, leaps, knife strikes, kicks, crushing strikes, moves he didn’t know she was capable of that sent him to the mat more than once.

They were both battered, panting, sweating, and as he stood up she prowled around him like a panther ready to leap once again.

“Alex… why? What have I done to make you so angry?”

She stopped, and stared at him in disbelief, “What have you done? What haven’t you done!? You lied!! P… pretended to be my friend, and I let you in! I trusted you! And behind my back, you build these horrific weapons? Taken from the very ashes of the world Kara lost?? To what?? Torture, maim… kill her?! Well, I won’t let you hurt her, or Shah… Hank,” She spit his name. “… ever. And I’m willing to sacrifice everything to stop you.”

Now he understood. He put his hands, palms open, before him, “Whoa! Alex, wait! Wait! You don’t know the whole story… listen…” His deep voice became soothing but still wary.

“I’m done listening, and pretending.” Suddenly, her eyes once again burned with blood-red flames, and she rolled her head back across her shoulders, cracking her neck. Fire began flickering over every inch of her body… slowly forming her Kryptonian armor, and the haunting mask of the Flamebird.

“How are you doing that? The Kryptonite… Gah!” He barely squeaked out as the iron grip of her hand was around his throat, lifting him a foot over the mat. He was choking, looking down into the terrifying flames of her eyes.

And that’s when he lost it.

Later, back under the soothing white blue hue of the wrecked room’s normal lighting, they both sat collapsed on the floor, bruised and bloody, leaning back against the cool stone of the wall behind them, and into each other’s shoulders.

Henshaw put a hand up to his swollen jaw, which made a decidedly unhealthy popping sound as he adjusted it.

Alex cringed watching him and reached out to gently touch his blood-spattered cheek as she examined his swollen face. “Damn, you look awful, boss. How long will it take for you to regenerate those teeth?”

He chuckled and wiped the blood from his mouth with a towel. “In this form? I’ll be fine by Friday. You?”

She grinned sheepishly, “I’ll be mostly healed before tomorrow morning, though I am feeling a bit weary from focusing my aura to counter the effects of the Kryptonite radiation. That was draining! I
could definitely use some sunlight.”

Hank was still amazed at how quickly she and her cohorts had come up with a way to resist the deadly material once they had a sample.

“I’m envious, I’d need to shift into my true form to best your rate of regen… but I don’t plan on doing that again anytime soon.” He closed his eye momentarily; changing back, even for a brief time to restrain Alex, facing his fear of her fire to explain who he was, what he was, and why he was there, had brought back painful memories, ones he’d been trying hard to forget.

“You know, Naomi’s been working on a sunbed, she says it simulates the light from our yellow sun close enough to act as a way to recharge anytime you need it. It was going to be a surprise.”

Alex smiled. Just like the ones on the Zumwalt. Rao, we’ll need to explain all of that to him too… later. “That’s a great idea, thank you both… I… um, Hank? I mean, J’onn, I’m really, really sorry. I hate the fact that that I doubted you, but… how was I supposed to know that there was an evil Hank Henshaw and that he was the one who…” Her voice caught in her throat, but she continued, “… killed my father, and started the Kryptonian weapons program? That it’s been you, an alien, who’s been slowly dismantling it over the years since taking his place?”

He shook his head slowly. “You couldn’t have… and again, I’m so sorry, Alex. I would have told you…”

“It’s okay, J’onn, we needed closure. I want to thank you for killing the bastard for me, but kind of wish I could have done it myself.” She closed her eyes as if trying to seek calm.

He nodded, emotions stirring he did not wish to share, thoughts of his long dead wife and daughters. “I don’t feel good about what I did, but do believe that this world is better without the old Hank in it.” Hank Henshaw was a terrible, hate-filled man, no better than the White Martians.

“The good news is, the weapons program will no longer be funded as of next fiscal year. It’s vastly over-budget, and so many of the prototypes have failed (Hank grinned, revealing the new gap in his front teeth from one of Alex’s pile driver kicks) that the bean counters finally wrote it off as a disaster. Once it’s finally mothballed I’d already planned on calling Kal to come take all the Kryptonite away to burn or bury it, I don’t care, as long as it’s somewhere where it can’t hurt Jeremiah’s children.

“Alex, I don’t blame you for our fight today, or your terrifying behavior the last three weeks… I blame myself. I should have come clean a long time ago. I was trying to do everything alone, as usual, and you were just being protective of your family. I appeared guilty by concealing the truth.”

His Assistant Director grinned. “Well, yeah, but better late than never.” He groaned as she popped him on the shoulder.

“Anyway,” Alex continued. “What you’ve done… looking out for Kara and me, recruiting me to this mission, undermining evil Henshaw’s agenda, and working over the last few years to change the D.E.O. to be a force for good, to help aliens, not just hunt them… is amazing, and wonderful. Thank you, J’onn.”

He could feel her comforting warmth as she laid her head on his shoulder, her now gentle hand, (the one that she’d been punching him in the face with a few minutes earlier), resting on his forearm. It felt so right; he wanted desperately to hug her close. It was as if one of his own daughters was actually sitting with him for once, and not just a ghost.
I was a full two minutes later before he realized they had not moved, and he was weeping.

His voice broke when he finally responded, “I’ve done everything I could to honor your father, Alex, and to take care of you and Kara… at least she’s still safe from all of this.” He waved a hand around him helplessly.

Alex actually blushed, and the hair stood up on the back of his neck when she shifted, catlike, to a sitting position and said, “Well, sir, not exactly. I have an admission to make… well, Kara has something to tell you. She’s actually talking to me right now.”

“She’s what? How?” He regained his composure quickly at the news.

“Um, sir… in full disclosure, she and I share a complete telepathic and empathic bond, a quantum connection… it’s like we’re entangled and have been for years… almost ever since we first saw each other. The Kryptonians call it Rao’s Fire. Basically, our hearts and souls are one. We’re bondmates.”

Hank’s face lit up, and he became animated. “My grandmother spoke of the bond… amazing! So, she’s talking to you now, in your thoughts?” He was giddy with the knowledge; he wasn’t the only telepath he knew anymore.

“Yes sir, always. And before I forget again, you need to tell us about your grandmother sometime, and how she knew so much about Kara’s people.”

“Yes, I’ll tell you both what I know later, it’s mostly myth and old folk tales… back to your bond. I assume that means Kara knows about the D.E.O.?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Um hum, and about a lot of things, like Fort Rozz… and, um sir, she’d like permission to join us in person for this conversation.”

Hank raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Need I remind you, Assistant Director, that this is a secret facility that technically doesn’t exist? We can’t just invite civilians…”

“Sir, she’s not a civilian, her security clearance is higher than mine. Not yours, but close… she’s CIA, D138 actually.”

“D138?” He grimaced, and Alex flinched. “I look forward to hearing the details on that. What else?”

“She doesn’t have this location’s coordinates, but because I’m here she can find us without any problem. Our defenses and sensors are mostly meaningless to her, so getting in and out of this facility undetected won’t be an issue… and also, she can be here in less than a minute… sir.”

“Hmmm… so, you obviously lied to me about her not using her powers?”

“Uh huh… but in my defense, I did think you were evil Hank. Anyway, she’s pretty badass sir, definitely no clipped angel… but I don’t want to steal her thunder. Can she come?”

Hank contemplated but was too intrigued to refuse. He had barely said the word “Yes” when Kara Danvers, soon-to-be Daniels, literally appeared out of nowhere, accompanied by a gentle rush of warm desert air.

This was not the demure, well-dressed journalism student he’d expected. The young woman standing above them was an otherworldly creature who wore her power like she owned it. Her perfect Kryptonian form was wrapped in high-tech mottled black battle armor, and golden waves of hair spilled over her shoulders as she looked down, surveying them with her gorgeous blue eyes.
Kara was the most graceful, and beautiful creature J’onn had ever seen on Earth… a goddess - and she was giggling.

“Hello, Director Henshaw, or J’onn J’onzz, whichever you prefer. You’re staring.” She teased as he finally blinked and she leaned down to close his bruised mouth by lifting his chin with one of her extremely warm fingers. “If you aren’t careful you’ll make my bondmate jealous.”

Alex was laughing beside him. “She has that effect on people, sir… apparently on Martians, too. I think all Kryptonians were just born gorgeous. Rao, I mean, have you seen her cousin?”

“Alex!” Kara protested while blushing, before offering Hank a huge, apologetic smile. “Sir, you can call me Kara, or Archangel in company… we sure do have a lot to talk about.” Her smile was as delightful as a sunny day and infectious as she offered a steady, firm hand to both warriors to help them stand. “Alex, you look terrible, no offense, but are you okay?”

“None taken. And yeah, I’m good.” Alex bit her lip as she started limping around in a circle. “Just need to walk off this charley horse, damn… Martians hit like a freight train.”

Henshaw stretched, grimacing painfully. “So, you’re Archangel, and with Alex being Flame, that leaves Ms. Nazari as Shadow… the three elusive angels we’ve been chasing like apparitions for the last three-plus years, always five steps ahead of us. I’m impressed by both your reputed deeds and your masterful elusiveness. I am also relieved to know it’s you three.” He then bowed like a gentleman, wincing painfully as he stood back up straight.

“Thank you.” Kara’s smile grew; as did a blush on her soft features as she bowed back, as elegant as a princess. “J’onn, this place is so cool! But waaaay too gloomy… oh, I have a question… was that my pod I saw on display in the lobby?” She gestured with her thumb over her shoulder.

Henshaw’s head was throbbing again, “Yes… we were going to tell you eventually. Kal left it in my care for safe-keeping after you crashed landed, with my promise that when you had a secure location to store her, she’d be yours again. I brought it with me when I assumed evil Henshaw’s role here at the D.E.O.” He noticed the ‘we’ll talk about this later’ look the young goddess aimed at her very guilty-looking mate, so he added, “Alex was sworn to secrecy, so don’t blame her. It was my call that she couldn’t tell you about it.”

Kara nodded as she focused back on him. “I understand… it’s probably safer here anyway, I honestly have no idea where I’d put it. My storage space at the loft is the size of a closet. Anyway, I’m glad to finally be here… and to meet you after hearing so much about the great Hank Henshaw from your biggest fan.” Alex shot her a dangerous, warning look. “I know that we have more secrets to share, but now that we’re all out in the open I do have a proposition.”

That got his attention. “I’m listening.”

“I need to be part of this… and before you just say no, please just hear me out. Tracking down and capturing the escaped prisoners from Fort Rozz, working side by side with Alex, helping the D.E.O. protect Earth, these are all things I believe I was sent to this planet to do! Maybe not specifically, but sir, my mother was Justice, the highest-ranking adjudicator on Krypton, and one of the High Council. She’s the one who put most of the Fort Rozz detainees away, and my pod pulled them here, to Earth, my… our… new home. I’m responsible, even if I didn’t do anything to cause it intentionally.

“As Alura’s daughter, and a Kryptonian, I am honor-bound to make this right. The House of El, at least our little unorthodox branch of it, stands with you, Director, if you’ll have us. The alternative, if you don’t, is tripping over my sisters and I as we do it on our own.”
Hank sighed. He’d tried for so long to keep her safe, out of the spotlight, just as he’d promised her adoptive father... but that was all ending now, she was determined, like Alex, and so strong. Maybe it was time to let her fly. “There was a reason I wanted to keep you grounded, Kara, and not because I enjoyed seeing you Earthbound or anything less than what you are. Many of those prisoners hate your mother, and your house, and carry vendettas. Superman has made a name for himself, and they fear him… but if you go out there, and they find out who you are… you’ll become a target, and should the enemy discover Archangel’s true identity, so will everyone you care for.”

Kara crossed her arms over her chest and her blue eyes became steel, “I understand sir, but we are not afraid.” She then said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” And smiled before she offered (as if by way of explanation), “A good friend of ours is fond of Edmund Burke quotes. Look, the point is we aren’t hiding, we’re doing something… and we’d be stronger doing that something together.”

He hung his head in defeat. “Maybe you should be afraid. I’ve kept something else from Agent Danvers and Dr. Young, something you need to prepare yourselves to hear… Alex’s work translating the prisoner logs will most likely reveal it soon enough anyway. Kara, there were fifteen Kryptonians imprisoned on Fort Rozz when it crashed.”

The look of shock on the young woman’s face was like a punch to the gut. Alex had already flickered to her side to wrap an arm around her before Hank could blink. Amazing.

“H... How? I don’t understand. You mean… Kal and I aren’t the only ones?”

“No, you aren’t alone. But until we have the information Alex is translating we don’t have much to go on about your brethren, just a few snippets of logs for clues. A dozen of them were consigned to sentences on Fort Rozz under secret order by Justice. I’m sure your mother made that decision for good reasons, but I’m also certain that none of them were too happy about it. They’ll be looking for payback, Kara.

“Evil Henshaw may have been nothing like me, but we did share a common concern... why haven’t these rogues revealed themselves after all these years, and what have they been plotting? They are the reason he began the weapons program after that meteor fell from the sky over Smallville. In his twisted mind, he saw the corrupted remnants of your world as a gift from the heavens... a way to stand up to your kind, at least at first.”

“Smallville??” Kara’s eyes widened, her breath audibly catching.

“Yeah, about that. That was Evil Henshaw’s first encounter with Superman, well, he didn’t know it at the time. Back then at least, Kal was just Clark, and he was smart enough not to reveal himself to the madman when he tried to stop him.”

“You know about Clark?!” Alex and Kara cried out together.

“Yes, Kal and I go way back. We were friends… once. Don’t look so surprised.” Hank grinned. "I’ve been a citizen of Earth a great deal longer than I’ve been the Director of the D.E.O.” He had to silence himself before he stirred up, or revealed more sad memories and regrets. “Anyway, Clark tried to destroy the Kryptonite, but old Henshaw was too persistent, and the Man of Steel was just a boy… too green. Please pardon the pun.”

“Not funny Hank.” Kara glared.

“About the Kryptonians…?” Alex encouraged, caressing Kara’s well-endowed bicep with a grin.
“Of course, though there’s not much to tell. From what we have been able to uncover so far, three of Kara’s people were incarcerated for non-violent crimes, unrelated to the others, two of those were close to being released, we think. The dozen terrorists that your mother put away included their leader, someone we can only find reference to as ominously as ‘The General’. Fort Rozz’s jailors feared this individual; at least it appears so from what we can make of all the extra security precautions on their cell. The rogues were very active briefly after their escape… attacking a military base, stealing weapons, and government secrets. There was a flurry of military activity and fireworks, but they disappeared quickly… just faded into the woodwork. They’ve definitely had enough time since then to plan something, and whatever it is it can’t be good.”

“It’s them!” Kara burst out. “They’re the ones we’ve been chasing all this time! We have to stop them.”

“Kara.” Alex pleaded.

“No, Alex, this is our family’s mess, and we need to clean it up.” After a brief staredown between the two women, Henshaw watched as his Assistant Director sagged in defeat, then the two smiled and wrapped their arms around each other. Then, to his absolute delight, he heard music… no, not music, beautiful words like a complex melody, as the pair began speaking with each other in the fluid, lyrical language of Kara’s people. Alex spoke like she’d been born to it, swift, sure, and at times passionate.

He was shocked when their hands started roaming, and they became lost in each other… kissing like he wasn’t even standing there. He could feel his cheeks burning. Wow, they were quite... affectionate.

He suppressed a grin and took a deep breath before raising his voice to disrupt their fun before it went too far. “Well then, who am I to reject your help, even if I’ll need to share you all with another agency. Welcome to the D.E.O., Kara. You and Shah can meet with HR next week, conditional on you both passing some training tests with me.”

As the lovers broke apart, both flushed, Alex chuckled, “You really want to fight Shah, don’t you, sir?”

“It would be an honor.” He smiled back. “And I want to see what this Kryptonian is made of. These escapees won’t treat her with kid gloves, and neither will I.”

Kara was obviously bubbling with suppressed joy, but also looking guilty... stammering and biting her lip. Did she just try and adjust her non-existent glasses? “Um, sir? There’s something else you need to know…”

Hank rolled his eyes. “Don’t tell me, there are more of you?” He was kidding of course, but her response floored him.

“Well… yeah, our niece, Shah’s daughter Ada, Navigator. She’s U.S. Navy, sir, and part of the package, we work with her and Captain Daniels and his team on ops with the USS Zumwalt. You’ll like her… everyone loves her actually… especially Jess, oh yeah…” Alex and Kara grinned and gave each other a knowing look. “Um, anyway, she’s our eyes and ears to the world and our family. And we have a witch, Aeryn. You’ll like her, too. Again, part of the package. We’re a team.”

Hank sighed. He had a suspicion Kara’s new adoptive father was involved. “Fine. A witch, and Shah’s daughter huh? How is that even possible? Another Kryptonian? What is she, five…? Never mind, you can explain later. Is she possibly involved with the Ghost Ship we’ve been chasing?”
Kara grinned, “Sir, she is the Ghost Ship… and about that…”

Hank rubbed his temples and groaned. “Something tells me my life just became vastly more complicated.”

“But 400% more awesome!” Kara beamed as he heard her stomach growl loudly. “Um, J’onn? I’m sorry to ask, but do you have a mess hall here, or even a vending machine we can maybe raid while we talk? I’m starving!”

He was startled when he heard his normally straight-faced second in command actually giggle.

Alex said, “You’re always hungry, nooré cheshm-am. Come ‘on, we have an amazing galley that actually serves gourmet to order meals 24/7. It’s one of the perks here at the D.E.O.”

“Free food?” Kara’s eyes grew two sizes, like a kid on Christmas morning, “And you never told me?!!”

“I was just being budget conscious,” Alex smirked over her shoulder as she limped toward the exit with Kara following her like a puppy dog, and a very amused Hank Henshaw bringing up the rear.

..................

Story Lexicon/FAQs:

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Terms:

_used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow._

Ah!khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

Alex vanimelda - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Ay Dios Mio – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)

Aporup – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)

As-salāmu ʿalayki – A (formal) greeting which is also a standard salutation among Muslims, meaning ‘peace be upon you’. Less formal abbreviation is simply salām. (Arabic)

Asheghetam - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

Azidane shoma khoshhalam – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)

Bedrood – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)
Bonne nuit – ‘Good night’ (French)
C'est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)
Damnú air! – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)
Doooset daram – ‘I love you’ (Persian)
El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)
Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)
Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)
Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gaelic/Irish)
íthi eutukhēs - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)
Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.
Kheili khosh geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)
Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)
Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)
M'eudail – ‘My dear/my darling’ to a friend, family, someone you care for (Gaelic/Irish)
Malā’ikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature
Marbhfháisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)
Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)
miboosamet – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)
órënya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)
¡Qué señoras tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)
Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)
Sundor – ‘Beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)
Thi eutukhēs – ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)
Volar mi diosa! – ‘Fly my goddess!’ (Spanish)
Waʿalaykumu s-salām – A response to the greeting As-salāmu ʿalayki, ‘and upon you, peace’
Wadā’an – ‘Farewell’ (Arabic)

Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

azīz-am – ‘My dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

delbandam – ‘My heartstring’. What Shah would call her cousin Tarsa as a child when she’d babysit, very sweet, precious. Still does call her that now that they’ve reconnected.

joon-am – ‘My dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

nāzanin-am – ‘Sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘The light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘Sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘$<$insert person’s name$>$ + jōn (Shah jōn): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or jōn- they both mean ‘dear’. So, ‘Shah jōn’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

Other names/nickname/titles/things:

A ghrá – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)

A ghrá mo chroí - ‘My heart’s beloved, my darling’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Âbjé – ‘Sister’ informal version (Persian)

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Bríomhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

Cythonna – One of the most ancient Kryptonian gods, said to be the female half of Rao. Protector of those unjustly persecuted, as well as patron to monsters and non-biologic life forms (such as Kryptonian Companions/Ka’dahs).

Daxamites - An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people ruled by strength/the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of
thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow altered by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.

**Dios mío!** – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

**Durlan** - The Durlans are a rare extraterrestrial species, a race of shapeshifting beings from the planet Durla. Ryah is a Durlan, as was her guardian, Veya, who died protecting the child in the depths of Tehran’s Evin Prison.

**Dūst doxtar** – ‘Girlfriend’ (Persian)

**Eres mi luz.** – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

**Euryleia** – ‘Woman Wanderer’ or ‘Wide Wandering’ - Dr. Naomi Young’s Amazon name

**Fershteh:** Slang for saying that a girl is perfect, desired… hot, to die for, an angel. Historically used as a Persian girl’s name, simply meaning ‘angel’. (Persian)

**H’ronmeer** - the Martian God of Death and Fire, referred to by a faction as the God of Life and Light. (Martian)

**Hermanas** – Sisters (Spanish)

**In’ah** – Ancient, lost word for ‘daughter’ - what Myka calls Kara (Kryptonese),

**Infinite loop** - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

**Little Star** - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

**M’eudail** – ‘My darling’ or ‘my dear’ (Irish/Gaelic)

**Ma’har** - Ancient, lost word for ‘mother’ - what Kara calls Myka (Kryptonese)

**Mi amor** – ‘My love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)

**Mi diosa** – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

**Mi lucero** – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

**Mi Sol** – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

**Muninn** – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - *Huginn & Muninn* - Thought & Memory (Old Norse)

**My dreamcatcher** – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

**Nâmzad** – ‘fiancée (f), betrothed (Persian)

**Norooz** - Persian New Year (Persian)

**Noshidan!** – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)
Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Oea - This ancient city was founded by the Phoenicians in the seventh century BC, was ruled at one time or another by the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines. Italians, and Muslims. It came to be known as Tripoli during the 9th century (Libyco-Berber)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity (from Ancient Greek)

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Seanmháthair – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced shan a WAW her (Irish/Gaelic)

Señora – Is a polite term used to address a woman. The Spanish-language equivalent of Ma’am, Ms., or Mrs. (Spanish)

Telkhines - In myth were mysterious sea-god magicians and smiths native to the islands of Keos (Ceos) and Rhodes. They invented the art of metalworking and were said to have crafted many powerful items and weapons for the gods. The truth is even stranger. These tall, lanky, extraterrestrials command science at a level that seems like magic and have lived since the beginning of time. They served ‘The Makers’, who existed long before Krypton, or the gods, and abandoned them on earth. Zeus and the Greek gods gave them refuge and protection long ago in return for their service.

Tieguanyin - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

Tratung – khrag 'thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Trípolis – Tripoli, the capital and largest city in Libya (from Ancient Greek)

Tuath Dé Danann - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced Thoo-a day Du-non (Irish/Gaelic)

Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’. ‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Vakur – A powerful (and rare) soul-devouring, evil, shape-shifting parasitic alien species from another universe. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.

Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Vallerian – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed,
worshiped, or traded.

Vâysâ – ‘Stop’ (Persian)

Wan - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

Zafaraniyeh – The affluent neighborhood in the northern part of the Iranian capital of Tehran where Shahrazad grew up. (Persian)

Zhuyin – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:
Alex and Kara are finally engaged! I hope you felt that it was truly a magical moment. We had a glimpse into how Ryah is doing over in Ten Lakes with her sisters (the twins!), and Shah spending time with both Marjorie and Tyson. Also, J’onn J’onzz was revealed; Alex came clean with said Martian; Winn was hired; Kara, Shah, and Aeryn can now add D.E.O. Agent to their resumes; and our intrepid heroes found a way to combat Kryptonite radiation. Not bad, not bad at all.

Next Up:
Chapter 32: “Dark Side of the Moon” – Where it’s Alex’s 22nd birthday, and Kara sends her bondmate on a scavenger hunt of sorts that leads to an unexpected destination. Also, a startling secret is finally revealed, and a door is cracked open.<

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me.

Attributions:

"Kara’s quote to Alex about love that accompanied her engagement ring"

Temple of Love - Paris
The article I’m linking is like a hit list of things Kara and Alex do together in Paris. #I has the info for the Temple of Love, where Alex took Kara on her birthday. Sometimes referred to as the Temple Romantique, the beautiful structure sits on an island in the middle of a lake in the Bois de Vincennes, the largest public park in the city.
The Dark Side of the Moon

Chapter Summary

Where it’s Alex’s birthday, and Kara sends her bondmate on a scavenger hunt that leads to an unexpected destination. Also, a startling secret is finally revealed, and a door is opened (a crack).

Chapter Notes

We begin in Year 7, Oct. 17th (Alex’s 22nd birthday) – Kara is twenty-one (twenty-three in Kryptonian years) and working at CatCo’s National City Tribune under Colliers as part of her graduate program. She and Alex live in National City at their loft with Shah and (as of that September) their soon-to-be adopted daughter, Ryah.

Alex still works at the Sagan Institute with Naomi, and as Assistant Director at the D.E.O (with occasional side mission support for D138 & the USS Zumwalt). The same goes for Shah, except rather than the Sagan she spends most of the rest of her time at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) and (when not on a mission) back at M.I.T., training Ryah, and hanging out with her sisters, her friend Marjorie, or with Tyson Phelps her U.S. Navy SEAL boyfriend.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Oct 17th – Year Seven

Three days after Alex’s fight with Director Henshaw

National City, Kara, Alex, and Shah’s loft

0911 Hours UTC -8, Saturday morning, U.S. West Coast Time

It was her twenty-second birthday, and even though Alex was still a little bit sore from her latest sparring match with Hank (or more correctly, J’onn J’onzz) she was having an amazingly idyllic Saturday.

Everything was just... Perfect.

Kara had been extra attentive all that morning at their loft. Her very affectionate fiancée had allowed Alex to sleep in, and woke her up with gentle kisses and softly singing happy birthday; alternating between Kryptonese, Ancient Greek, and Persian. She’d then brought her breakfast in bed. Cinnamon pancakes, perfectly cooked medium eggs, extra-crispy hash browns, fresh-squeezed orange juice, blackberries, and a perfect mug of black coffee.
Her naked vegetarian goddess had even made her a pile of bacon!

Alex added that little kindness to the already long checklist of things that proved Kara’s love for her a hundred, a thousand, a million times over.

Then, after her bondmate treated her to a long and orgasmic magic fingers massage (that had slowly escalated into another passionate lovemaking session that left Alex a quivering pile of flesh), Kara claimed that she needed to run off to do some quick errands.

Alex kissed her lover soundly before she left, and eventually dragged herself out from beneath the warmth of the covers to shower.

She was thankful that Shah and Tyson had taken Ryah to stay with Marjorie and the twins for the weekend. Their soon-to-be adopted daughter had been giddy all week at the prospect of going back to spend time with her aunt Marjorie and her ‘sisters’… plus, it wasn’t like Alex and Kara had been very quiet the night before, or that morning (they really needed to work on being at least a little more discreet now that they were moms).

That being said, she missed the patter of her feet (or paws, hooves, or whatever shape the child’s mood conjured) terribly, and waking up with the little Durlan shape-shifter snuggled up asleep between her and her bondmate.

When a slightly melancholy Alex finally emerged freshly clean and warm from the bathroom, she didn’t find it too odd that her Angel still hadn’t returned. Though she had begun to wonder what kind of trivial non-Agency or hero-related activity her Kara could possibly have to attend to for so long on a Saturday morning.

Maybe a yoga class she failed to mention, a quick flight back to work for some CatCo business, or an unscheduled robbery or disaster to deal with?

Alex shrugged, whatever it was, she was sure it had to be important.

After wrapping her wet hair in a towel and slipping into Kara's gorgeous silk Japanese kimono (a Christmas gift from Aya) she padded barefoot into the kitchen to pour herself another cup of coffee from the carafe her oh-so-sweet fiancée had left for her.

More time passed, and after reading half of that day’s paper Alex was beginning to become a little concerned by her bondmate’s continued absence. She was about to send her thoughts to ask Kara about her ETA when she noticed a fancy envelope propped up on the counter, balanced between the salt and pepper grinders.

‘Alexandra’ was written in calligraphy on the front.

She carefully tore it open and withdrew the elegant card contained within.

On the cover was the festive greeting ‘Happy Birthday!’ along with a photo of two old women sitting on a bench together. The couple were both happily blowing out a solitary candle on a small cake they held between them as they gazed adoringly into each other’s eyes.

It was, by far, the gayest birthday card anyone had ever given her.

_I love it!_  

Inside, written in Kara’s elegant brush script was a note:
Alexandra,

Happy 22\textsuperscript{nd} birthday, my love!

Life with you is a fairytale that I cherish every day. Thank you for being my rock, my heart, my friend, my lover, and my hero. I thought we’d do something fun today, but you’ll need to trust and bear with me on this next part!

This will be a bit of scavenger hunt like we used to do. You always enjoyed those, and I loved watching you have so much fun while we did them. Sorry, but there’ll be no evil trolls or chemistry!

Follow the clues that will lead you to me, I promise it will be worth your while. If you get stumped along the way you can ask for help, but any hints will cost you... and involve a payment of my choice. :) 

Alex then unfolded a crisp piece of parchment paper with more writing inside. It read:

\textit{Clue #1}

\begin{quote}
My world has ended.  
The light has been ripped from me.  
My family, my people, and my home are fire and darkness.  
My heart is broken, and can never be re-forged.

Or so I believe.

I journey through the endless void, lost and alone with one thread of hope:  
my mission and my purpose – to protect baby Kal-El.  
Even this is taken from me when I wake, and I spiral deeper into the abyss.

All I wish is to join my mother and father in Rao’s light,  
but after the desert, Lois wraps me in her arms like a mother, and a fire is rekindled inside of me.  
All of those hollow first nights on my new world she keeps me anchored with her love.

Later, she is crying when Clark’s strong hands and soothing voice take me from her and guide me to a gray place, set high on ocean bluffs.

It is there that I see an earthly star through delicate panes of glass –  
she is bright, beautiful, strong, and a light like no other burns within her.

And then it happens, as if by some magic the dull summer breeze transforms into a soft caress on my skin,  
the verdant greens and ocean swells become vivid, and her scent floods my senses with its tempting sweetness.

I hear the word ‘home’, and ‘family’, and grab hold of hope –  
hope for love, and a life on my new world – with her.
\end{quote}
My broken heart beats, races, and begins to mend, and I am falling.

In my steps, through my eyes, seek clue #2.

Vaena, I love you more than air! More than life! Now and forever! And I can’t wait to be your wife as well as your bondmate. :) :) :)

Kara

........................................

Alex was wiping away tears by the time she finished reading her Kara’s loving words for the second time.

After a few moments spent collecting herself, she reverently placed the card back where she’d found it (as if it were a precious thing), and began moving at super speed.

The outfit she’d planned on wearing that day formed itself around her with a thought… the sexiest black lacy bra and underwear she could conjure from memory, a pair of skinny blue jeans that she knew would drive Kara crazy, a comfortable long-sleeved gray Henley shirt (leaving three buttons undone), and her favorite black leather jacket and boots.

She glanced around the room one last time, mentally tallying what she needed before picking up her keys, phone, and wallet. Then she slipped the small items into the secure pockets of the jacket and bounded toward the balcony.

Ada, can you give Shatari and me clear skies to Midvale, please?

Of course, auntie! Ada responded immediately, followed by a high-speed burst of Kryptonian flight telemetry, and a cheerful, heartfelt, Happy birthday!

Of course, this led to a cascade of happy birthday wishes from Kara, Shah, Eliza, Jess, Aya, Aeryn, Devi, Naomi, Marjorie, Shannon, Dante, Ryah, and then it just got silly as Ada starting bringing in all of their family and friends.

Alex was doing Mach 4 over the Rockies and was still being serenaded by a massive chorus, including what sounded like the entire crew of the USS Zumwalt singing the Beatles’ version of the Happy Birthday song.

She laughed half the way to Midvale, especially when J’onn joined in…

.........................

Oct 17th – Year Seven

After a quick flight from National City to Midvale

Midvale, The Danvers’ residence

1306 H ours UTC -5, Saturday, U.S. East Coast Time
Thirty-five minutes later…

The wind rustled through the great boughs and branches of the old maples that surrounded her parent’s Midvale home, the house she’d grown up in. Alex momentarily hovered above the canopy of brilliant colored leaves that gently swayed in the crisp autumn breeze rolling off the Atlantic.

How many days and nights had she stared out of her window at the vast ocean and its mighty waves, dreaming of the world beyond her sleepy small town?

She smiled. Kara had led her here, home, for some reason… and Alex wasn’t going to disappoint her.

Drifting downward feet first, as she’d seen Kara and Kal-El do so many times, Alex summoned every ounce of her three quarter-Kryptonian grace to touchdown in the backyard as light as a feather… in the exact same place where Kara had taken her first steps when her cousin had dropped her off seven years before.

‘In my steps’, huh, Kara? Alex kissed her bondmate through their bond and was rewarded with a flush of heat, and Kara’s giggles dancing in her mind.

Alex stepped forward, trying to mimic her angel’s movement as she could remember them after so long, and stopped at the point where her beautiful Kryptonian had looked up and spotted Alex watching her.

‘Through my eyes’… Alex pondered, glancing up at her old bedroom window, trying to ignore the treadmill Eliza had set up in what was now her mother’s office/exercise room. Alex wasn’t too upset at the change; she shared Kara’s old room (and bed) with her whenever they visited Midvale these days.

Like old times, but twice the fun.

At first, nothing seemed different or out of place about the window…

Hmm, wait.

Alex squinted as she focused, and began playing with wavelengths… she wasn’t even close to Kara in her skill or capabilities in the seeing all spectrums of light department yet, or maybe ever, but she managed to dip deep into the ultraviolet, and then infrared as she scanned.

That’s when she saw it! The shimmer of an aura… a nearly undetectable quantum field that Alex only caught a glimpse of because it was radiating a tiny amount of energy she recognized like a signature…

Kara’s light!

She was stunned. Holy crap, Kara, how did you…? I mean, wow! You created a quantum field separate from yourself, and left it here to hide your clue?! It’s like Aeryn’s magic! How did you do it? Not even Kal’s ever done that! I didn’t even know we could!

Kara laughed. I kind of discovered how to by accident, actually. It happened when I was on that mission in the Sudan with Black Knight a couple weeks ago, things went a little sideways and I ended up needing to be in two places at once. I was faced with the choice of either intercepting a runaway missile that would have killed a couple hundred innocent people in an open-air
marketplace or saving my handler from being riddled with bullets.

Well, I couldn’t choose, and out of desperation ended up doing both! I somehow shielded Paul with my aura while at the same time escorted the missile to a safe place to explode. The little one I left for you to find is a cloaking field, harmless, but works on the same principle as the shield. Kinda cool, huh?

Amazing! You’ll need to teach Shah and me how to do it. But first, you have some explaining to do… that’s the first time I’ve heard the missile story. Alex frowned and felt her bondmate gulp through their bond.

Sorry? Kara squeaked. I’ve been working on perfecting the new ability ever since and didn’t say anything because I wanted it to be a surprise!

There’s nothing to forgive nooré cheshm-am, I’m just busting your chops. This is so cool! Alex sent her a kiss and then hovered up to her old second-floor window probing the delicate energy of her bondmate’s mini-aura waiting there, before dispersing it with the flick of her will.

As the wispy illusion dissipated she could clearly see another envelope with her name on it tacked to the window ledge that was hidden from sight before.

Alex quickly opened it and proceeded to read the note inside.

……………………

Alexandra,

Congratulations, birthday girl! You’re a smart cookie - one I’d like to eat, and yes, that’s a promise. :) :) 

Without further ado, let’s get on with our scavenger hunt!

Clue #2

Seek the wild, forgotten place where power was once awakened, and unbreakable bonds forged…

Where steel meets earth, and a star with three sisters watches from above.

In the circle, find the center – where cherished memories await.

Good luck my love!

Kara

XOXOXOXO!!

(Kara had kissed the note with lipstick here, leaving a delightful imprint of her full lips, and the faint smell of her, as well as of almonds and cherries. Alex drew the paper close and inhaled, a shiver of desire tickling down her spine)

……………………
Damn you, Kara! You are purposely driving me crazy...

With naughty thoughts, I hope... Her bondmate purred.

You have no idea. Alex’s mind voice was husky with need. When I find you I’m going to shred whatever clothes you’re wearing and run my tongue...

TMI girls, TMI! Eliza squeaked and then disappeared from their minds.

Shit! Alex bit her lip. I forgot mom was listening! She was starting to hyperventilate.

Oh no! Through their bond, Alex could feel Kara shifting between embarrassment and panic.

Shah, the ever-present adult in their lives, broke in, Calm down, Joon-am, your mother is well aware of you and Kara’s, ah-hem, physical relationship, and you are engaged... everything is fine. Just keep playing your game; I will tend to Eliza.

After thanking Shah profusely, Alex had a sudden inspiration on the next clue. Ada, can you please find clear skies to upstate for Shatari and me? I’m sending you the coordinates, now.

Of course, auntie, done.

And off Alex flew, breaking the sound barrier over the Atlantic as she set a heading due north, gleefully skimming the surface of the choppy water as she went.

Oct 17th – Year Seven

Upstate New York, a few miles from the Phelps’ farm in Ten Lakes - far north and a bit west of Metropolis, the backcountry of a vast state wilderness area

1329 Hours UTC -5, Saturday, U.S. East Coast Time

Ten minutes, give or take, after leaving Midvale...

The valley that contained the old train depot was more remote than she remembered, and the overcast skies didn’t help lighten the mood of the lonely, overgrown ruins.

Alex soared overhead, doing a couple silent passes to make sure no one was in the area before she let gravity take over and plummeted from the sky.

She’d secretly been practicing her three-point hero landing for months and nailed it almost perfectly. It took some nuanced coaxing of her aura to get it just right, the Earth even trembled ever so slightly as she landed instead of her causing a localized earthquake.

A ten from the Russian judge! Alex chuckled to herself, adding in the roar of cheers from a non-existent crowd.

She knew it’d get easier to control the gravity warping around her Kryptonian-enhanced body the
more she manipulated it, that at some point she **might** even be half as awesome as her sunny bondmate.

Over time, Kara had mastered her hero exits and entrances with the same inhuman grace that had drawn Alex to her in the first place. But for her part, she knew that she was no Kara, so, being a perfectionist, practiced alone often… preferring to fall on her face without an audience.

Better to be prepared, than accidentally create a localized earthquake while leading a D.E.O. strike team or trying to impress her angel of a fiancée.

She glanced up at the obelisk towering above her that Kara had created the first time they’d been at the site with Shah. The twenty-five-foot-high pillar of blackened steel jutted out of the cold soil like a totem and hadn’t even rusted over the five years that had passed.

_Hmmm, still not a hint of oxidation._ She mused.

Apparently, Kara’s heat vision had forged the metal into something new… an indestructible alloy that would never tarnish. Out of curiosity, Alex took advantage of her Kryptonian hardened fingernails to scrape off a tiny sample of the incredibly dense metal and tapped the shavings into a small plastic sample bag from her jacket pocket (yeah, she was a geek like that!).

Etched into the surface of the darkened pillar’s highest point was the beautiful, iconic star chart Kara had put there… a large sun, surrounded by three perfectly entwined orbits with three corresponding planets, tinted blue, green, and red.

The three sisters...

_I think I’m in the right place._ Alex mused. _You, Shah, and me… This is where you first really used your powers to cut loose._

Alex felt Kara’s nod through their bond and then flickered, moving a hundred yards in a split second to just outside the vast, towering circle of massive train engines and railcars that she and Kara had dubbed Trainhenge.

She ran her hand over the structure’s rusted metal as she walked under its ominous looming columns to the grassy center, where Kara had once dodged eggs and begun to hone her abilities and skills.

When she reached her destination, Alex used her X-Ray vision to scan the area and noticed a medium-sized wooden box (duck taped shut and wrapped in plastic to protect against the soil and moisture) recently buried six feet down.

Like a dog digging for a bone, she quickly unearthed the package and carefully opened it on one of the moss-covered boulders scattered around the area.

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw what was inside, and as she drew a hand to cover her mouth her eyes misted.

**Oh, Kara…**

Large bags of plain and peanut butter M&M’s, and dozen Hersey’s Kisses (a mix of the plain and the almond kind, her favorites), were scattered on top of a pile of Instamatic photos, letters, and other items. Alex sat down cross-legged on the soft moss and dug into the box of nostalgic treasures, popping chocolate kisses in her mouth as she slowly sorted through the pictures.

The first layer of snapshots were all of her, Kara, and Shah: Sleepovers, playing AD&D with The
Alexandra,

Memories are shared treasures, priceless beyond measure. Since coming to this world you and I have built many. And, I guess what I'm trying to say is though I arrived here a pauper, you have made me the richest woman in the universe.

I could think of no greater way to repay you than seeing you share your 22nd birthday with your father. I hope this was not painful, but if it was, I am sorry.

I wanted to give you a reminder of the bond you still share with him, that it will never fade if you, if we, keep his memory and his light alive. I also wanted to remind you of the people still here who love you, and are busy helping you make more memories.

Your family is so big now, and I am blessed to be part of it.

Thank you so much for loving me, and Ryah.

(There were two faint tearstains on the card here)

Now, on to the next step...

   Clue #3

   We are safe,

   Above a verdant field,

   Spinning among the stars, beauty all around us,
But I only have eyes for you.

Rao’s fire burns,
And I am as dizzy as a child,

Terrified,

As I offer you my gift of blood.

Will you accept?

My heart,
My soul,
My life,

Is yours,

Now and ever after.

A treasure,

Hidden silent, dark, and deep,

Lies beneath,

That only Flame can claim.

With your prize in hand,

Journey to the Shadowlands,

Where the Queen of Night, and your reward,

Await,

You will know her by our name.

Wow, I hope that didn’t suck.

See you soon. I hope!

Love,
Alex kissed the note and smiled with the very powerful, and wonderful memory of her and Kara’s first flight together on her seventeenth birthday. When her innocent Kryptonian blonde had swept her off her feet and all but admitted her feelings for her.

It had been so romantic, like nothing Alex had ever experienced before in her whole life, or in her dreams.

They’d danced among the stars, and Alex’s Angel had given her the gorgeous blood red diamond necklace that she still wore. The whole night had been magical and forced Alex to face the inescapable fire she’d been feeling for her adopted sister from another planet since the first day they’d met.

Based on the clue’s wording, she was sure that something was buried there in Tiller Park, something only Flame could either find or extract. What, she had no idea, but once she found whatever the treasure was she’d have to fly across the country (again), this time to JPL in Pasadena, which the three of them called the ‘Shadowlands’ since it was Shah’s domain. Where she was queen.

_Hmmm._ Alex wasn’t sure exactly what the phrase, ‘you will know her by our name’ meant, but she figured that she’d cross that bridge when she came to it.

Tucking the very box under her arm to drop off at her mother’s house in Midvale, Alex launched herself joyfully up into the morning skies until she was sailing far above the vast stretch of northern wilderness that had once been Kara’s training ground.

At a high enough altitude to avoid any harm to birds or other animals, she hovered, plotted her flight path in her HUD, strengthened her aura, and disappeared in a searing blaze of fire, creating a sonic boom from a dead start as she headed home.

Oct 17ᵗʰ – Year Seven

NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory - Pasadena, California

1312 Hours UTC -8, Saturday, U.S. West Coast Time

Twice across the country in one day was a new record for Alex, and she hadn’t even broken a sweat.

_Kara._ She whispered in her bondmate’s thoughts as she decelerated from Mach 5 over the San Gabriel Wilderness, banking slightly southwest as she quickly approached Mount Wilson.

_Hmmm?_ Her fiancée purred as if being roused from a nap.

_Rao,_ she was so sexy… and all Alex’s. _If being almost three-quarters Kryptonian feels this good, I can’t imagine how amazing it must feel to be you._
Kara’s whimsical laugh was like actual rays of sunshine. Well, you can’t be me, but you can get the next best thing… once you find me, I’m yours to explore.

That’s a promise you’re definitely keeping, especially after making me dig down a hundred yards to burn through that steel crate you buried in Tiller Park, and then schlepping this huge, locked, lead-lined box and giant sealed tube marked ‘Fragile’ (Kara giggled as Alex intentionally mispronounced the word ‘frah-gee-lay’, like the dad in the movie A Christmas Story), all the way across the country. What the heck is inside of these? I’m dying to know!

You’re almost there, Vaena. Soon, all will be revealed. Now though, it’s hero time… Flame.

Kara started singing an old favorite of hers, John Mayer’s Your Body is a Wonderland, through their bond as Alex’s glyph-covered Kryptonian armor fluidly re-formed over her body, and her Flamebird mask flickered into existence to cover her face.

The brunette smiled. You are so going to get it, nooré cheshm-am.

Promises, promises… Kara giggled right back, and let the song keep playing.

Guaranteed. Alex said as she glanced far below at the spidery network of streets and highways that made up Pasadena.

As she soared down out of the mountains she willed her aura to obscure her presence, and spiraled down to a couple hundred feet above the vast campus of NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory with its dozens of massive buildings. Alex knew the place well enough; she and Kara met Shah there for lunch several times a month, and they’d had a couple behind-the-scenes tours as starry-eyed students.

Ha! There, on one of the wide rooftops, someone had set up an intricate thirty-foot diameter 3D hologram array projecting an image made of light, flickering between blue and blood red.

It was a Kryptonian glyph, their family’s crest… The House of El.

Alex chuckled to herself. Good one… ‘You will know her by our name’. Shah, you there? Nice light show on the roof.

Greetings, Joon-am, thank you! Please join me out back at the loading dock. I’ll be at door A-12.

After landing and maneuvering her baggage through the service door to what appeared to be a vast computer nerve-center, possibly a server farm, Alex was smothered in a massive hug from Shah. Her curvy Persian sister was dressed in a white lab coat, with her raven-black hair tied back in a long ponytail.

Alex was about to say something when she realized they weren’t alone! There were two other people in the white, sterile room, peeking out from behind her friend. They were dressed in similar lab garb, and geeking out like a celebrity had just sauntered into the room.

Shah smiled, “Flame, please allow me to introduce Nancy Akagi and Dimitri Kozlov. They’re on my Europa team and are helping with, well… some logistics today.” A cute young woman of Japanese descent, about Alex’s age, and a grinning man, with an artfully maintained beard, were staring at her with awed expressions.

“Nancy, Dimitri, nice to meet you both,” Alex said, and almost laughed at how they both lit up as she addressed them.

The young woman eagerly stepped forward, and reached out to shake Alex’s gauntleted hand in
both of hers with gusto, her eyes glued in fascination to the flickering runes of the steaming blood red armor of Flame’s right arm. “The pleasure is all mine, Flame.” Nancy’s voice was deeply reverent, filled with wonder, but also kind of flirty.

*Don’t worry*, Shah assured Alex before she could protest, *I trust them, and they only know of your alter ego, not Alex Danvers. They also have no idea I’m Shadow; though they also know of her… it’s a long story.*

Dimitri moved forward as he watched over his breathless colleague’s shoulder, and bowed his head solemnly at Flame. “I am honored to assist you.” His voice was deep, and his accent was definitely Russian.

Alex found the whole situation strange, but also very intriguing… she had to remind herself that in her armor and Firebird mask she was close to six feet and pretty damn intimidating. She had to look very alien to these folks, or like some mythological creature wrapped in living red leather.

She shifted the huge tube on her shoulder, set the ginormous metal box down, and altered her mask so it became the delicate carnival guise rather than her war helm.

Nancy and Dimitri both gasped in wonder.

“Assist me? I don’t understand…” Alex asked them.

“Oh yes!” Nancy said, perking up as if remembering something long forgotten, scurrying over to bring back a tablet from one of the consoles and handed it to Shah, who sidled up closer to Flame’s side.

“Touch the tablet, Flame,” Shah whispered, maintaining a smile for her colleagues. *Roll with it Joon-am, you need the data that this device is connected to. The information is behind a considerable firewall that Ada could not breach in time for your birthday. Nancy and Dimitri have security administrative powers and are helping. That’s all I can say right now, Shatari will know what to do with the data. Forgive me; we are all merely cogs executing pieces of Kara’s nefarious plan.*

*And Nancy and Dimitri, who are they, really?*

*Honestly? Two of our biggest fans. Shah was actually blushing!*

*Seriously? You and me? How is that even possible?*

*To my shame, I may have fallen asleep reviewing the unedited, looped footage of our descent into and the eventual destruction of Echo 2 while at work, and my teammates may have watched it, several times… and made copies. Ada believes she’s tracked down and erased all of them, but let’s just say that Shadow and Flame have built up a secret following… and I’m going insane listening to these two gushing about us every day! They… ‘ship’ us, and think we’re dating. Nancy’s even written volumes of some very, ah… steamy fanfiction about the two of us. Shah growled in frustration in Alex’s thoughts.*

She’d never seen her stoic Persian ninja as flustered and adorkable as she was at that rare moment, which for some reason made Alex love her friend even more.

Shah sighed and continued, *I was able to get them to agree to chill out if I could come through with a meet and greet with Shadow and Flame, so ta-dah! Here we are. Oh, they already met Shadow; I took care of that earlier.*

She gave Alex one of her signature elegant smiles that made everything better just as Nancy spoke
“Can I just say, Flame, you are so amazing, and brave! How you fought that Hell beast to protect Shadow and save all those scientists. I thought you were going to die!” There were tears in the young scientist’s eyes. “I’m glad to see you’ve healed.”

Alex wasn’t sure what to say at first, to have someone she didn’t even know care about her well-being to that degree. “I was a little worried myself, at the time, but Shadow was there, and came to my rescue. She has always been my teacher and my best friend; we always have each other’s backs.”

Dimitri had become animated, “I can see that. You are both heroes.” He said, “But I think that Shadow also truly loves you… deeply. The way she was willing to sacrifice herself to save you in the end, and all the little things… She was amazing.” He was smiling from ear to ear.

Alex swallowed, “Well, she’s always amazing… but was also saving the world… not just me.”

“Happy coincidence.” He grinned, “My bet is that she’d throw herself in a fire if it meant saving you.”

“You don’t say…” Alex said playfully as she glanced over at Shah, who was blushing again, and staring up helplessly at the ceiling.

About an hour later…

Alex and Shah were finally alone, all visages of Flame banished once more as the two walked out alone into a sunny courtyard, surrounded by trees with a beautiful water fountain bubbling in the center.

“Would you really throw yourself into a fire for me?” Alex asked, after a longer than normal silence between them.

Shah showed no reaction to the question, but Alex felt her thoughts retreat, and barriers being put up between their minds. “This is for you.” Her best friend said quietly and handed Alex another card from Kara.

“You didn’t answer my question.” Alex pressed as she opened the envelope.

“Because it’s a stupid question. Of course, I would... if that was the only option to save you.”

Alex moved closer, to stand toe-to-toe with her friend, looking into her gorgeous emerald eyes. “You know I’d do the same, right?”

Shah hesitated, and when she did speak it was in Persian and her voice almost a whisper. “Yes. I know, as much as I would try to dissuade you. But… Kara and Ryah… they need you.”

“And we all need you. I need you.” Alex said and leaned in to wrap her arms around Shah, kissing her startled friend softly on the cheek, before laying her head on her shoulder. “Don’t ever ask me not to save you, okay? That’s stupid. I can still tickle you into submission if you force my hand.”
“You wouldn’t dare.” Shah challenged in a lighthearted tone as she reached up to run her fingers through Alex’s hair.

“Oh yeah, I would dare, big time.”

“Okay then, it’s settled.” Shah grinned, “Next time, you can throw yourself into a fire to save me.”

They both laughed, shared a long hug, and then together read the new note that was inside the birthday card:

……………………

Alexandra,

You’re almost there, just one more riddle to solve!

Where am I?

Clue #4

Speak to Me, I will always listen

I Breathe in the scent of you and love you like no other

On the Run, hiding what we feel from the world

The Time has come to reveal the truth

Any more than these first four lines may give the answer away, especially to you! So I’m stopping while I’m ahead!

Once you get it, follow the coordinates Shah will provide, I am waiting for you there.

See you soon.

All of My Love,

Kara

P.S. Almost time for funny business, don’t forget to bring our stuff! :)

P.P.S. If you need more clues, ask Shah

……………………

Alex read the note three times, and while the answer was on the tip of her tongue, it stayed just a hairsbreadth out of reach. Shatari, as she’d been all day, was absolutely useless… her Kryptonian AI wouldn’t help at all, even going so far as turning off her access to the Internet.
Apparently, Alex’s traitorous Companion had colluded with Kara on her nefarious plan.

She ended up asking for a new clue from Shah, which her amused friend provided by producing yet another sealed, beautifully penned note from Kara:

……………………

**Clue #5**

*The goddesses Artemis, Phoebe, Selene, and Hecate have all called this place home, and now so have I.*

*I am dancing in the shadows, unseen by any earthly gaze,*

*Waiting for my Vaena to find me.*

……………………

Alex was pretty sure where Kara was after reading it, which confirmed her suspicion on the first clue. It was just hard to believe. She felt so stupid for not recognizing the first four tracks of Pink Floyd’s classic *Dark Side of the Moon* album: *Speak to Me, Breathe, On the Run,* and *Time...*

*Damn, I love that album so much.*

Just to confirm, she begged Shah for the third clue, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet like a hyperactive child, “Gimme, gimme, gimme!”

Her friend was chuckling and bursting with unapologetic amusement as she handed Alex Kara’s last note:

-----------

**Clue #6**

*Two faces.*

*One to pull the tides,*

*And one we never see.*

*The latter is where I will be.*

-----------

“My fiancée is on the frigging dark side of the moon?!?” Alex almost yelled once she’d finally accepted the answer. “How am I supposed to…? I mean, Rao! Shah, does she really expect me to just fly to her? I’ve never even tried to go orbital before let alone fly to the freaking moon! How will I breathe? Will it be difficult flying in space? How long will it take?”
Shah was still grinning, “Calm down, Joon-am. Remember your training, you can do this. First, use your aura to generate an Earth-like atmosphere, like Kara taught us. Then, as to how long it will take… the moon is currently at one of its closest distances, lunar perigee. Zara’s scans show that you have approximately 222,367 miles to travel, so at your current peak velocity of 12k, give or take, you’re looking at…”

“Ooof, almost nineteen hours.” Alex was greatly intimidated. “What about when I have to pee?”

Shah doubled over laughing, looked up, and said, “I think Kara put a jar in the backpack she left for you.” Alex made a grossed out face and Shah added, “Just kidding, you can pee in space Alex, but you won’t need to. Shatari can recycle perspiration, urine, and other things directly from your body, and I still haven’t given you my gift. Your ‘reward’ as mentioned in the clue.”

Something in the tone of Shah’s voice became deadly serious, and the dark beauty stepped forward with all of her inhuman elegance and placed her warm hands on either side of the back of Alex’s neck.

Shah’s wise, green eyes opened wide as she gazed into Alex’s. It was if her Persian sister had peeled back the last veneer of privacy that drifted like gauze between them… and seemed to be offering her… everything…

Then in Kryptonese Shah spoke again, “By Rao’s will take my strength, for a little while…” The last bit was spoken like a sigh, but before Alex could react, a great wave of power flooded through her, warm, pleasant waves of what felt like… darkness, fire, and love all entwined together.

It was indescribable. She barely had time to react as Shah’s eyes rolled up in her head and she collapsed like a rag doll in Alex’s arms.

“Shah! Shah!” She cried out in near panic. “What the Hell did you just do!?”

Seconds passed before the very still and pale young woman twitched, her eyes fluttering open.

“Well, that hurt more than I anticipated it would.” Shah moaned. “The Book of Rao must have left out the part about the excruciating agony of the blessing.”


“Loaned you… my strength.” Shah had to catch her breath… she’s so weak. “My power added to our own should allow you to more than halve the duration of your journey. It’s something that only the priests and priestesses of Rao are able to do… so I suppose that answers my question of whether I am worthy.” Alex adjusted her grip on her friend, who made a pained face, “Ouch, be gentle, I’m as fragile as my old human self, right now.”

“Sorry, so sorry!” Alex relaxed her hold, and her mind was already racing with a million questions, and she was opening her mouth to start asking them when Shah reached up and pinched her lips together.

“No questions. Alex, yes, somewhere along the way I’ve learned enough to be considered a priestess, radical huh?” She grinned. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll suffer through not having powers for a couple days, the same way I somehow managed for seventeen years of my life. But right now, it’s time for you to get moving… After you use the bathroom.” Shah giggled, weakly sitting up in Alex’s arms. “You’ll do great, Alexandra.”

Alex sighed, thinking about the amazing woman waiting for her on the dark side of the moon, and
the one in her arms who’d just given her… everything. “Fine.” She leaned in like a playful predator and kissed Shah’s defenseless face a dozen times. The poor young woman was laughing so hard she was in tears by the time Alex was done with her and said playfully, “Thank you, Aziz-am, I love you.”

Shah was just staring up at her quietly, with the biggest smile Alex had seen on her friend’s face in, probably, ever.

Do you hear that Kara, I’m coming! Alex hurled her thoughts across the vastness of space to her bondmate.

Hehehe, Kara giggled, I probably shouldn’t respond to that comment in my current state...

Alex was shaking her head and trying not to laugh, Oh, you’re so going to get it…! I certainly hope so! Her bondmate said seductively.

Alex facepalmed and shook her head in defeat before helping Shah stand on shaky legs, and hugged her for good measure. She then ran off to the restroom before shimmering back into her Flame persona to make the long journey.

Ada and Shatari had already synced coordinates, plotted a flight path, and laid out the velocities and trajectory Alex needed to follow.

“Come on, Danvers, this will be easy…” She muttered, psyching herself up before she exploded upward, her sonic boom reverberating over the mountains of the Angeles National Forest as she shot through the atmosphere, well on her way to the space between worlds.

Oct 17\textsuperscript{th} – Year Seven

 Freaking outer space! In transit between the Earth and the moon

Time: 1427 hours UTC -8, Saturday, U.S. West Coast Time

Rao… nothing could have prepared her!

Alex marveled as she watched the lush cloud-covered sphere of blue seas and vast tracts of green recede behind her while ahead, the gray, sun-dappled surface of the moon grew nearer by the minute.

Somewhere along the way, Shah and Ada informed her that she’d surpassed Apollo 10’s record for fastest human spaceflight, not that she was technically even human anymore.

Bathed in Sol’s nearly unfettered light, she could feel Shah’s loaned power seething inside of her, and her velocity continued to increase. Traveling at over 27,000 miles per hour, and still accelerating, did have its awe moments.

She and Kara talked for most of her journey, about life, their amazing sister Shah, their friends and extended family (especially the Daniels, whom she adored), growing up, being engaged, Alex’s job
at the D.E.O., Hank (or as they now privately called him, J’onn), The Agency, Kara’s excitement about eventually interviewing for a new role at CatCo once she finished her M.S., what a joy it was having finally living with them as their daughter, and more.

It was nice. More than nice actually… it was perfect, and as she drew closer to her bondmate, Alex’s desire was becoming literally uncontrollable.

There was fire in her veins.

*No wonder you’re so horny, Kara, damn! That freaking star is like a drug the further I get away from Earth!* Alex was burning up, and she needed her mate.

*I know, right?! I love our sun! It’s sooo amazing… but also frustrating when you’re all alone dealing with its effects (even here on the dark side). I can only solo entertain myself for so long.* Kara gave out a burst of little moans, and let her pleasure soak into Alex through their bond as she was bringing herself to climax. *“Please hurry!*

*I’m almost there!* Alex’s heart was racing as she willed her velocity to well beyond anything she had ever imagined possible…and that’s when she noticed something magical. Her form was flickering like starlight, not fire… and imperceptible anomalies, like quantum eddies, or ripples in space-time, were sparking along and within the skin of her armor. She watched in delighted fascination as stars skittered down her arms.

Then, she began leaping forward… she wasn’t just flying.

*Holy crap! Did I just warp space-time? Just how fast am I going?* She thought in wonder, as she literally blinked, and missed another ten thousand miles.

*Not fast enough!* Kara laughed.

-------------------------------

**Oct 17th – Year Seven**

**The dark side of the moon**

**2012 Hours UTC -8 , Saturday, U.S. West Coast Time – for perspective**

Alex barely remembered arcing along the soft curvature of the moon’s gravity well and falling like a shooting star to seek out Kara, like a homing beacon, on its dark side.

Everything else, even reason, was a blur.

She’d flickered to where her gorgeous bondmate waited, naked, in a bed (a bed?) in the center of a great lunar crater her HUD was telling her was named ‘Apollo’, which any other time would have been hilarious… but at that moment she didn’t care.

Alex was too far-gone to remember much about those moments, or the hours of carnal bliss that followed.

It wasn’t until she began to regain her senses (and logic) curled up with an exhausted Kara under silk
sheets and a blanket looking up the stars that she realized where she was, and what was around her.

They were sprawled on a massive four-poster bed, the thick Persian rug under it the only thing between them and the gray dust of the ancient lunar surface. Off to one side was a large black duffle bag, and something that Alex could only describe as a high-tech picnic basket that had been removed from the huge, lead-lined metal box she'd carried with her all the way from Midvale.

The unit looked kind of like a dorm-sized refrigerator, with multiple internal compartments, self-contained power, heat, and refrigeration. The long heavy tube that Alex had carried was also there, as well as a waist-high, empty stone pedestal surrounded by a stair-step dais, like something from a museum. Kara’s handiwork had been meticulously carved from the moon’s bedrock and brought to the lunar surface for what secretive purpose she still wasn’t sure of.

My bondmate’s certainly been busy. Alex smiled happily, her thoughts filled with pride.

Above them was a dome of scintillating energy and colors, Kara’s light, only visible to Alex because she’d felt its unique vibration, felt her and had adjusted her Kryptonian senses to revel in the wonder of it.

Of course, her fiancée had enveloped them in the invisible dome of her aura and created an Earth-like environment separate from herself. Just how powerful is my Kryptonian becoming? Alex wondered. Would this paradise of paradise remain on the stark surface of the moon once they returned home, or would the sliver of her energy be reclaimed once they departed?

“A penny for your thoughts?” Kara asked in her sexy, sleepy voice, waking up to snuggle in closer to Alex, tucking her warm feet up under her bondmate’s.

Alex smiled, leaning down to take her bondmate's soft lips on her own, gently kissing, and tasting her. “I was thinking about how unbelievable this is, and how perfect you are… but don’t let it go to your head.”

Kara purred, and they stretched out on their backs, side-by-side, content for a time to look out and marvel at the unfamiliar view of the stars.

Later, curiosity (and hunger) finally caught up with Alex. “Okay, what’s in the box, and the tube? I need to know. Also, what’s for dinner? It is dinnertime, right? I haven’t eaten in almost twelve hours, and I’m starving!”

Kara spun around and went from being naked, to clad in an amazing pair of form-fitting skinny jeans, and a black, loose necked t-shirt in the blink of an eye. She giggled and shimmered over to the picnic basket in her bare feet.

Touching the top of the box, she keyed in a code on a numeric pad, and the thing hissed open to reveal multiple drawers and glowing panels. She quickly opened one and pulled out a steaming box, and other implements, including chopsticks. “Potstickers! And that spicy sauce we like… lots of it.”

“Oh, and Athena, and Apollo, and Aphrodite, and, and, and…” Alex swooned, digging in as soon as Kara sat the delicious smelling food bombs down in front of her, she moaned gratefully as her bondmate added lettuce wraps and wonton soup to the spread, followed by ice-cold glasses of inexplicably fresh blackberry lemonade.

At some point during the magnificent feast, Alex had finally stopped freaking out about the fact that they were having a picnic on the moon, and they snapped selfies together.
After they’d both had their fill, Kara stood up and began opening the big tube.

Alex watched with anticipation as her bondmate carefully slid out one of Jeremiah’s prized telescopes, the one he’d had since college called ‘Old Betsy’ that they’d used to watch the stars in their backyard. In fact, she was the same one he’d used to show she, Alex, and Shah Mars when he happily announced his work on the manned Ares mission to the War God’s world.

Alex’s heart almost stopped, and she sucked in an audible breath of surprise… almost a whimper.

Kara looked over at her sympathetically and said, “In his memory.” And began setting up and calibrating the huge instrument on the pedestal as her adoptive father had taught her. “Give me a hand?”

Alex moved close without saying anything, she didn’t think she could, and hugged Kara, who was glowing like a star with delight. She said, “This is my present to you, Vaena.

“In less than one hour the Jeremiah One with twelve brave souls aboard, his crew, will pass out of view of Earth, and for a time will soar above us as they slingshot away on their course to the Red Planet, and you’ll be here to see it, just as he would have wanted.”

Alex almost collapsed, and would have if Kara’s strong arms hadn’t found her, and enveloped her in her loving warmth, their bodies pressed together in perfect union as Alex lay her head and soft tears on Kara’s shoulder. “Rao, this… this is just so…”

“Shh my love, today is not for sadness, but to walk in the light once again with your father.”

And that’s exactly what they did.

…………………………

Sometime later…

When she woke, Kara knew a fundamental change had taken place in the world while she’d slept.

The air was heavy with a shiver of the familiar, but also something… ancient. A breeze skittered across her exposed arm that was wrapped protectively around a sleeping Alex’s shoulder, raising goose bumps over her impermeable skin.

Impossible, she thought, and then moved in one fluid, imperceptibly swift motion to emerge from beneath the covers.

There is no wind on the moon. Someone was here.

She crouched in a low battle stance beside the bed, her glowing azure gaze piercing the seen and unseen around her for any threat to her bondmate.

Yet the moon was still, and the stars unchanged.

Nothing seemed out of place.

Wait! There at the periphery, out beyond her aura was a powerful heartbeat, but whatever (or whoever) it was, felt… safe, known even, simply watching, and waiting patiently.
Kara checked on Alex one last time and then walked through the invisible threshold of the field that nourished her Earth-like biome into the cold darkness beyond. The scant atmosphere of argon, helium, and other gases tickled her nose as she finished taking her last breath.

Unafraid, she struck out in the direction of a strange vertical sliver of flickering red light she spied nearly a mile away towering over the relatively flat landscape. To Kara, it looked like a crack in a massive, invisible doorway.

With each step, the soft pumice of the moon’s surface squished between her bare toes like a soft powder and coated the bottom cuffs of her jeans with gray dust.

As she drew close to her destination Kara’s hyper senses caught the familiar, intoxicating scent of Kryptonian Thal Blossoms, and her heart skipped a beat as she broke into a run.

*How is that even possible? That flower only grew on Krypton.*

The fragrance was definitely emanating from the glowing forty-foot high fissure. Its very existence felt like an invitation to a familiar place… where hearth and home beckoned from just out of reach.

*Krypton!*

*Uva! Are you there?!* Kara hurled her thoughts into the crack… and for a moment she swore her Tharg nanny’s thoughts were reaching out to her.

That’s when she sensed the silent movement of another being landing behind her in the dust. Kara whirled to face whomever, or whatever it was… ready to strike, but froze immediately when she saw who it was, and she felt a breathable atmosphere suddenly expand around them.

“Hello,* in’ah.*” Myka said in the melodic, ancient language of Krypton’s ancestors (not the modern version Kara had grown up speaking). She knew at once, without even scanning her, that her mom number two was not human.

Somehow the woman she’d known for years, her friend, U.S. Navy Captain, and soon-to-be official adoptive mother was burning with Rao’s light brighter than any star Kara had ever seen, even on her long journey to Earth.

This Myka was taller and so regal. Her bronze skin was flawless and dappled with a power only Kara could see. And her eyes! *Oh Rao, her eyes!* She gasped, mesmerized as silver and grays melded like Mercury with the uncanny red in her bright pupils. The beautiful woman was smiling as she opened her arms wide and, unable to contain herself, Kara darted forward and snuggled right into her warm embrace.

“I don’t understand!” She babbled as they hugged. “It’s you but not you. Are you really here? How did you fly? Wait… why are you wearing a toga? Oh! I love those sandals! Sorry, got distracted… what’s happening? Am I dreaming?”

The powerful creature that was inexplicably Myka ran her fingers through Kara’s unruly golden locks as she always did, and lovingly cupped her cheek, “That’s a lot of questions, and you deserve answers to all of them.”

She then sighed and looked deep into Kara’s questioning gaze.

“Okay, to start with… yes, I am here, and no, this is not a dream. Also, this isn’t a toga.” She said the perfectly pronounced word with great disdain. “It’s called a peplos, or some refer to it as a peplum. Do you like it?” Kara glanced down as Myka stepped back and spun on her heels in the
dust to show it off. She had to admit; the short, breezy sleeveless linen tunic etched with black and gold designs on the borders was totally gorgeous, and very revealing... like the rest of Myka’s very Themysciran-inspired outfit...

**Yowza.**

“I made it myself, a long, long time ago, though the belt and the knee-high golden sandals were gifts from my sister. It’s not like I get the chance to wear this ensemble very often (it definitely wouldn’t pass Navy regs), so when I see an opportunity...” Her grin was like sunshine and stopped Kara dead in her tracks.

**Whoa, now I know how Alex feels when I do that! Wait... she has a sister?? I never knew that...**

Myka continued, “As far as what’s happening, well, you’ve finally managed to crack open that damn doorway a smidge.”

“I don’t understand. This door, is it the gate in Alura’s crystal?” Kara gestured helplessly to the towering fissure of red light before them. She could make out no details within its glow.

Myka nodded gracefully.

“Wow.” Kara stared up at the crack of a shimmer in amazement. “It feels like home... like Krypton lies somewhere beyond, calling to me. I still don’t understand any of this, or why, and how, you’re here at all. Not that I’m not happy to see you.”

The unearthly beauty offered a contrite smile. “I apologize, allow me to explain... but please don’t freak out, okay?”

Kara’s brow scrunched. “Sorry, but I’ve learned the hard way that whenever people say that to me, they usually follow it up with something bad. And you mean too much to me for that... I couldn’t bear some terrible revelation...”

“In’ah...” Myka reached out to gently caress Kara’s fidgeting shoulders and then held her still as if she were a child.

**Rao, her strength!**

“Have no fear. I am the one and only Myka Daniels, mom number two, wife of Thomas, U.S. Navy Captain and Chief of Naval Operations, the same woman you had breakfast with two days ago, the one who loves you, who can’t wait to sign the adoption papers, be there for you at your wedding, make cookies with you and your sisters at Christmas, ride horses with you on Elysium’s snowy trails, and sit by the fire listening to you sing. But, like you... I am also more.”

With that, they both smiled and Kara relaxed.

“I have never outright lied to you sweetheart, though I have concealed the full truth by omission... which is just as bad. Please understand, the obligations I am under are heavy things... old, binding, and sacred oaths that I wished to keep you far distanced from. I’ve already broken them once for you, and paid the price for it.”

Kara became concerned, “When? What happened?”

“When Zeus’ Thunderbolt went sideways, I couldn’t just sit idly by and do nothing. I know what that would have done to you, and to Shah. You would have blamed yourself, even now. And besides I have an old affinity for the Persian people, I once lived among them, but above all it was the right
thing to do. It’s what you would have done.” The goddess smiled.

“You… you stopped the shockwave?”

Myka nodded, chuckling as she gently brushed a silky knuckle along Kara’s jawline, “Yes, and it felt good, to once again act, to be a protector, to intervene and use my powers to aid someone I love, and save a city from disaster.”

“Um, How? Ada said no power on Earth could do what you did, that the energy field was like my aura… but as big as a city! And what price did you pay? And why was what you did a bad thing?”

“The how is a bit complicated, but as far as the rest… Because, my dear, the gods have rules, and a long time ago we (I use that word in the loosest sense as many of us voted against our disastrous course of inaction), decided that using our powers to meddle in mortal affairs had caused more misery in the world than good, so all divine interventions were forbidden… except under special circumstances.”

Then, with a big sigh, she said, “σὺ Ἀθηνᾶ καὶ χεῖρα κινεῖ.”

Kara tilted her head quizzically, “‘Along with Athena, move also your hand’? What does it mean?”

Myka brightened. “Well done, in’ah! Your understanding of Ancient Greek is coming along swimmingly. The phrase is something my uncle once said to me with a sneer when he cast the deciding vote for our inaction. Little did I know at the time that his desire to see the gods disengaged from humanity wasn’t altruistic at all, but was meant to allow him the freedom to meddle in their affairs with impunity.

“As far as the meaning, it’s akin to saying, “God helps those who help themselves.”

Kara’s eyes widened. “I understand… kind of like ‘tough love’. Sorry about your uncle, he’s a real jerk.”

They both burst out in laughter after that, and Myka hugged her once again. “You have no idea… well, perhaps you do.”

“And about your… consequence?” Kara asked.

Athena’s angelic expression was quickly marred by a grimace, “As punishment for my intervention with you, I had to willingly give up using my powers for an entire solar cycle. A YEAR! It was horrible!! I was forced to use an alarm clock, drive to work every day, get dressed like a mortal…” A frustrated growl escaped her throat. “I burned everything I tried to cook, struggled to adapt to my job, couldn’t come watch over you and the girls whenever I wanted (thank goodness for Apollo, Artemis, and Aphrodite, they filled in), and the worst part? I discovered that I am a total klutz without my abilities!”

“Seriously?” Kara giggled.

“Stinker. Yes. After I tripped and fell down the basement stairs at the Bethesda house for the third time, and nearly broke my arm, Tom became so worried he begged me to go see a doctor. And when I did, they thought Tom had struck me! Can you believe that? I was so… angry. I even stopped talking to most of my family for a couple months.

“My only real consolation was the knowledge that I’d done the right thing, and that after being caught red-handed interfering with Shah’s father, Hades was also forced to live as a mortal.” She chuckled triumphantly. “Let’s just say the old curmudgeon did not take it as well as I did.
“Regardless, the good news is that about four months into the experience things started to click for me, and I actually began to enjoy my time as a human. I felt closer to my husband than I ever had… but that said,” She grinned, “I couldn’t be happier to be back.”

Kara shook her head in astonishment. “I’m still just trying to absorb the fact that you and your brothers and sisters are gods. As in the ones who’ve been helping us…”

“Of course.” Myka cooed in her exquisite, soothing mixed Kryptonian and Ancient Greek accent. “My siblings are almost as fond and protective of you and your demigoddesses as I am, and they follow my… Athena’s, lead. It’s one of the only good things about being Zeus’ daughter.” Kara could hear the anger in Athena’s voice when she spoke her father’s name.

“Since he, my mother, and the others found a way to take their one-way trip to another universe to create a new paradise for themselves to rule, it’s been up to those of us who chose to remain behind to watch over this world. Though I must say we’ve done a terrible job of it; our lack of action is what’s allowed Hades’ influence to spread, and the slow creep of catastrophe. That’s what my brothers and sisters and I are rebelling against, trying to change, and why we need your help.”

Kara’s brain was still exploding. Myka… is… Athena. Rao! “Does Tom know that you’re…?”

“Oh, no, no, no.” The goddess’ expression became tortured, and sad. “I’ve wanted to tell him, like you, so many times, but… what if I do and he can’t forgive me? I’ve been lying to him for years, Kara, and I can’t bear the thought of losing him. He is my heart.” Her voice shook, and Kara stepped in and hugged her tight.

You’re bondmates, aren’t you?

Yes. Myka nodded.

How do you keep that secret from him?

I will our connection to remain closed, every minute of every day. It’s agonizing. At night, when he’s sleeping I sometimes risk letting my guard down and enter his dreams. It is the only place we can truly be as one.

“That’s terrible! And so sad. Myka! Tell him! He will forgive you… believe me. That man loves you beyond reason, and he doesn’t even know you’re his, um, goddess. Not to get all biblical, but the truth will set you free.” She grinned. “Come on, what can I do to help? I owe you, like, a million favors.”

The goddess wiped her eyes and managed to return a smile. “Thank you, Kara, I appreciate your kindness. I do wish to be honest with him, always…” She sighed, and even that was endearing.

“As far as what I need… help to save the world for starters, but that’s something you’re already doing. You see, while the gods are bound by oaths that keep us from using our powers to assist humans directly (unless another immortal is the cause of the distress, which is what allowed me to help Shah), you, Alex, Ada, and your sisters are not. Like Kal-El and Diana, you can act using all your gifts, and be the force for light in this world as we once were.

“Do not be concerned though, it will not always be so. Our hands may be tied now, but my family will eventually untangle ourselves from our self-imposed limitations. In the meantime, we will keep a watchful eye on my uncle and his scheming, and at the same time, continue to use our mortal personas to guide humanity on a better course. We worry for them, and our adopted world’s fate.”
Kara was listening but still processing all the revelation, when her adoptive mother-to-be said something that refocused her attention…

“In’ah, at some point Archangel must emerge from the shadows… you know this, we’ve talked about it. Colliers, Ada, the D.E.O., and The Agency can only suppress your heroic sightings, grainy photographs on the Internet and the whispered stories of a guardian angel for so long. Right now, your alter ego is merely an urban legend, but eventually some amateur with an iPhone will get that perfect shot, some power-hungry government agency will come hunting you (thank Metis Sam, Amanda, Tom, and I have kept them at bay so far…), or there’ll be a disaster, like what happened with the USS Washington, that will force your hand and you will have no choice but to reveal yourself to the world. Just think about getting ahead of it before it happens to you, okay?”

“The sub… oh Rao. Myka, you didn’t?...” Kara began to feel icy tendrils in her stomach and her throat was dry.

A look of understanding and concern came over the goddess’ gentle features, and she moved in close to wrap one arm around Kara’s waist, a hand pressed comfortingly on her arm. “Do not fear, Kara, what happened with the Washington was not my doing, I would never willingly put my crew in danger, or intentionally scuttle a U.S. Navy vessel (let alone my own ship) for any reason, and certainly not to draw you out.

“In fact, I was weighing the consequences of intervening myself when my hero came to rescue me.” Her smile made the world right again, and Kara leaned her head on the warmth of the taller woman’s shoulder.

She then said softly, “I need to finish my battle armor, and think I have a lead on someone who may be able to help. If I ever come out, I’ll need it.”

“Well, that’s a bit of good news. Let me know what Myka Daniels can do to assist.”

The goddess then squeezed Kara tight. “Oh, in’ah, how long I have wished for this day! I told you once that I would reveal myself to you in the Red Sanctuary, but I could wait no longer. Especially not tonight, when I felt your and Alex’s joy somehow open the doorway, even just a crack, to the other universe where Krypton yet lives. I don’t know how you two did it, and it’s not large enough for us to pass through, yet, but it’s a very good start.

“Kara, even the gods with all of our great power have been unable to breach the portal on our own… and believe me, we have tried. Only you, with Alura’s gift, have offered us a glimpse of the way home.” Her voice became soft like she was lost in a dream, “I wish to once again look upon our world so badly, even if it is one I may not recognize or ever return to other than to visit… like a memory.”

“Wait, wait, wait…” Kara was freaking out again. “Our people? The way home? I don’t understand. Krypton is my home. You said you were a god… of Earth.”

“Kara, Kara, slow down… I told you the answers you seek are complicated. I never said that I was from Earth. I am of Krypton, as are most of my brothers and sisters and many of the other immortals (aside from The Endless). It’s a long story, but in my time on our world, our people were just beginning to understand the power of the forces that your more advanced crystal technology so easily contain and control… the ability to travel between universes.

“I left Krypton with my mother and father when I was only twelve (in equivalent Earth-years), a young science geek, so naïve and giddy with the prospect of discovering other realities, planets, solar systems, and cultures… exploring, studying, and my word, even meeting aliens!” She chuckled.
“My parents and I were part of a small contingent of Krypton’s foremost scientists, engineers, researchers, academics, and military. We were explorers of the unknown, the first to venture into the great void. Of course, nothing went according to plan, and after being flung far across the universe, those of us who survived ended up stranded here on Earth over eight thousand years ago, at the end of the Neolithic Age, if you can believe it. The tech we needed to return or even phone home was damaged almost beyond repair.

“We grew strong as our bodies absorbed Sol’s light, and over time our powers became, immeasurable, eternal… it is impossible to describe adequately, but you understand, don’t you?”

Kara nodded, still stunned, “Yes, I suppose I do. It’s just a lot to take in.”

Myka smiled knowingly. “I sympathize with what you’re feeling. Been there, done that, but I won’t begin to compare my experience here to yours… I had my parents with me, even if my dad was horrible. My mother, whom you would know as Metis (one of her many names) more than made up for his inadequacies… she was always my light.

“Regardless, at some point a few hundred years in, a majority of the adults, drunk on the powers granted to them by Earth’s yellow sun, made the decision for all of us that we would never return to Krypton. My father ordered the (by then) nearly restored portal technology be destroyed. Then, had the brilliant idea to set us up as gods… and we all know how well that turned out.” She rolled her stunning eyes with a smirk. “I didn’t have a choice but to play along, do my best to temper them, and help humanity as I could.

“There were turf wars with the immortals who were already here, but over time, like the Roman Empire, we either conquered or consumed our enemies… making them part of the family. For a time, we ruled absolutely over the Earth, and all bowed to The Storm King, my father, Mighty Zeus, Odin, Enlil, or pick one of his many other names.” Athena shook her head sadly.

“Over the millennia we became legends and since our active withdrawal from the world, myths. In all that time, I too have accumulated more names from the people of Earth than I can count, though I am most attached to Athena, she is the closest to who I really am.”

“And who is that? The real you?” Kara asked in a whisper.

The goddess tilted her graceful head, and smiled, “Myka, of course; the woman who still hopes you want her to be your adoptive mother. You see, Kara, Archangel is your mask… but Athena is mine.”

It was at that moment that Kara felt the goddess drop the final veil between them, and could feel her adoptive mother's blood... the blood of her Kryptonian ancestors singing to her like liquid sunlight in her veins. She was left shaken. “Wow... Myka? Can I... Can I ask... what your Kryptonian name was?”

Athena laughed, like music, and said, “One I have not heard or spoken in a very, very long time. It was Jana, Jana Lor-Kann... though she, like her name, is a stranger to me now.”

“I understand, thanks for telling me. I like Myka better anyway.” They hugged again, and Kara suddenly remembered something important she wanted to ask. “How did you know I was coming to Earth? You know, before I even got here?” She blushed. "Sorry, that kind of just burst out of me..."

The bronzed goddess smiled, “That’s complicated, like everything, but I’ll try and give you the short version. Okay, where to start? You see, when I left Krypton no one, not even I, realized that I was in-line to be Warden…”

“Bingo.”

“Rao… but the Wardens ceased to be so long ago.” Kara was confused, “In my time, only The Keepers remained to watch over the sacred repository in the Red Temple on Krypton. They had no leader, not for five millennia when the last passed and a successor was never chosen by The Codex.”

“All true, from Krypton’s perspective, but not the whole truth. Which is when the last Warden died The Codex did reach out and form a quantum connection with her successor, me. But I was here on Earth living in India then, as Ishtar… but the people there called me Saraswati. Anyway, that was when I first began having visions and seeing the future.”

Kara’s brow wrinkled as she talked it through. “So, a new Warden was chosen, you were just somewhere else (across the universe) at the time… and because you are still alive, a new successor was never called back on Krypton. That’s why there were never any new Wardens!”

“Exactly.”

“But, I don’t understand. Myka… Athena, why didn’t you use your connection to let our people know? Tell your Keepers to come look for you and the others?”

The goddess’ expression became sad, “It doesn’t work that way. I can’t control what I see, or the flood of knowledge that comes and goes like the tides. There’s no back and forth communication with home, it’s like being dropped into an ocean.

“It was frustrating, at first, but I became accustomed to it. The entanglement is glitchy, it always has been. Like a great storm always hovering at the edges of my perception, some days clearer than others, but enough to be both maddening, and at times helpful.”

Kara bit her lip, and then asked, “Is your connection broken… now that our world is gone?”

Myka brightened, “Surprisingly, no, it’s not. It turns out I’m still part of it. Apparently, the accumulated knowledge of our ancestors, what we perceive as The Codex, is alive and exists across dimensions, and other worlds outside of linear time and space. My brother, Apollo, once even created a resonance chamber here on Earth where the visions came easier and gathered together those rare humans who had the ability to somehow sense The Codex’s vibrations to assist me.”

Kara’s eyes must have been bugging out because Myka added, “Yes, it was Delphi. I’m sure he’d love to tell you and Aeryn that story sometime. Anyway, while I’m sure Alex, Shah, and Ravan would be delighted by all the scientific details, it all quite frankly boggles my mind!

“You know what they say, Kryptonian technology is magic!”

They then laughed together, and cried, taking great comfort from each other. After a little while, Kara asked, “So… what comes next?”

“Well, we still have a great deal to talk about, but I think your bondmate and fiancée needs you back in bed tonight. We can pick this conversation up later this week in Bethesda. We’re still on for dinner and a movie on Friday, right?” When Kara nodded Myka grinned and continued, “Would you two like to skip flying back to Earth, and just wake up tomorrow morning in your own bed at the loft?”

“You can do that?” Kara was amazed.

“Sure, it’s the least I can do for interrupting such a romantic night. I love what you’ve done with the
place by the way.”

Kara blushed. “Thank you, and I’d like that very much. Can you make sure Old Betsy gets back to Eliza?”

“Absolutely. The telescope and all of your items will be returned to where they belong. I definitely do not wish to incur Eliza Danvers’ wrath.” They both laughed at that, and Kara started breathing again. “I’ll leave the sanctuary you’ve created here permanently though, in case you ever wish to return, or just need a place to rest (or hide). It will be obscured, of course, only you and your sisters will be able to sense it… or allow others access.”

“Wow, you really are… amazing.” Kara smiled and hugged her again. “Thank you. Oh! Wait, I have to ask you something before you go or Naomi and Alex will kill me… seriously.”

“Okay, shoot.”

“Well, um, do you know where our people came from… in the beginning? Or how it is that we’re genetically related to humans?”

The immortal considered before responding, “There is an ancient race… in my time we simply called them The Makers… beings of a civilization billions of years older than our own, and far more advanced. My mother believed that most intelligent life in our known universe is all based on their designs, in what seemed to be their quest for infinite variation. Metis also theorized that these beings created both Kryptonians and humans, though our people are far older than man, and more like The Makers. Unlike our people, though, they did not stick around to meddle in the affairs of their creations but moved on to seed other worlds with life.

“They did, however, leave their helpers, the immortal Telkhines, as the Greeks called them, behind to monitor their work. We believe The Makers created them to be caretakers of sorts, to observe and catalog all of the collected knowledge and histories of the world they were assigned to for some as of yet unknown purpose. My theory is that their masters planned to return one day, and collect all of the data… but so far, they have not.

“We found the Telkhines when we first arrived here on Earth, living on an island in what we now call the Mediterranean Sea. We offered the peaceful creatures our protection in exchange for their wisdom and assistance. It wasn’t altogether without ulterior motive, but it was the right thing to do.

“While they’re not very conversant in small talk, The Sages (as they are sometimes called) have served the gods for millennia since that time, as teachers and builders of wonder. They taught Hephaestus most of everything he knows, though the stubborn fool will never admit it.” She chuckled, her mysterious eyes reflecting a familial fondness for the Lord of the Forge that was quite obvious to Kara.

“Oh, when you meet them… don’t react badly.”

“Who, the Telkhines, or the other gods?” Kara raised an eyebrow.

“Both.” Myka grinned impishly. “Your world has changed my dear, be ready for it. My brothers and sisters won’t leave you alone once they find out they’re now free to actually talk to you.” She smiled. “Anyway, as for the Telkhines, they are very self-conscious about their physical appearance, and how they are perceived by others… but they’re the kindest souls on the planet. I doubt you of all people would be anything but considerate, but I wanted to give you a little warning just in case.”

Kara nodded, “Sure, I’ll remember, but why would I react… badly?”
“Well… let’s just say their physical appearance is a bit… um, shocking? Creepy actually, at least until you get to know them. Their bodies are unnaturally tall (over eight feet on average), elongated and spindly, topped by an enormous head with these bulbous unblinking fishy eyes.” It was adorable to see the elegant immortal shudder. “When I first saw one as a child I freaked out. Father was so upset when I ran away and hid in the bushes! Regardless, as I came to discover soon after, they are very pleasant folk… and speak every language known or ever known by humans with perfect fluency.”

“Wow! Ah, now I remember, in myth, the Telkhines were called the ‘fish children’. But I thought Zeus, or one of the other gods, killed them all?”

The goddess patted Kara’s forearm. “First rule of God Club, don’t believe everything you read. Fools and drunkards wrote most of that drivel; although I have to say that some of their fairy tales are quite poetic, and hit closer to home than I dare admit. Anyway, now you have secrets you can share back with Team Archangel.”

“Thank you. That was, eye-opening. I still am having a hard time believing all of… well… this.”

Myka’s voice was back in her thoughts. *Acceptance will come in time, but for now please allow me to return you to that beautiful fiancée of yours! We’ll talk later in the week.* And then they shimmered, appearing together back beside the massive bed where Alex slept peacefully.

The immortal lifted the covers for Kara, who quickly blew the dust off her feet before she slipped inside. Once she was tucked in, Myka leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. *Sleep well, in’ah. I love you.*

And then, as if a velvet curtain had been drawn over her mind’s eye, Kara’s limbs and eyelids quickly grew heavy, and she began to drift off to a peaceful slumber.

As the world dimmed, she curled around Alex, and whispered her last waking thoughts to Myka, *I love you too, ma’har.*

Kara could feel the goddess’ joy in response (like glittering rays of the sun’s light), as she drifted off to sleep.

…………………………………..

**Story Lexicon/FAQs:**

**Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms:** I attempt to *italicize* all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

**Terms:** Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

*Ah!khoob ast* – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

*Alex vanimelda* - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

*Ay Dios Mio* – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)

*Aporup* – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)
As-salāmu ʿalayki – A (formal) greeting which is also a standard salutation among Muslims, meaning ‘peace be upon you’. A Less formal abbreviation is simply salām. (Arabic)

Asheghetam - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

Azdidane shoma khoshhalam – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)

Bedrood – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

Bonne nuit – ‘Good night’ (French)

C’est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

Damnú air! – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Dooset daram – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gaelic/Irish)

íthi eutukhēs - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Kheili khosh geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

M’eudail – ‘My dear/my darling’ to a friend, family, someone you care for (Gaelic/Irish)

Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature

Marbhfháisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)

miboosamet – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)

órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

¡Qué señoras tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)
**Salām:** A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

**Sundor** – ‘Beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)

**Thi eutukhēs** – ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

**Volar mi diosa!** – ‘Fly my goddess!’ (Spanish)

**Wa‘alaykumu s-salām** – A response to the greeting As-salāmu ‘alayki, ‘and upon you, peace’ (Arabic)

**Wadā’an** – ‘Farewell’ (Arabic)

**Wǒ de tiān a** (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

**Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:**

**aziz-am** – ‘My dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

**delbandam** - ‘My heartstring’. What Shah would call her cousin Tarsa as a child when she’d babysit, very sweet, precious. Still does call her that now that they’ve reconnected.

**joon-am** – ‘My dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

**nāzanin-am** – ‘Sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)

**nooré cheshm-am** – ‘The light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

**sheereen-am** – ‘Sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person’s name<’ + **joon** (Shah jōon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or jōon- they both mean ‘dear’. So, ‘Shah jōon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

**Other names/nickname/titles/things:**

**A ghrá** – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)

**A ghrá mo chroí** - ‘My heart's beloved, my darling’ (Irish/Gaelic)

**Âbjé** – ‘Sister’ informal version (Persian)

**Anamchara** – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

**Bríomhaire** – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

**Cairdiúil** – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)
**Cythonna** – One of the most ancient Kryptonian gods, said to be the female half of Rao. Protector of those unjustly persecuted, as well as patron to monsters and non-biologic life forms (such as Kryptonian Companions/Ka’dahs).

**Daxamites** - An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people ruled by strength/the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow altered by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.

**Dios mío!** – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

**Durlan** - The Durlans are a rare extraterrestrial species, a race of shapeshifting beings from the planet Durla. Ryah is a Durlan, as was her guardian, Veya, who died protecting the child in the depths of Tehran’s Evin Prison.

**Düst doxtar** – ‘Girlfriend’ (Persian)

**Eres mi luz.** – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

**Euryleia** – ‘Woman Wanderer’ or ‘Wide Wandering’ - Dr. Naomi Young’s Amazon name

**Fereshteh:** Slang for saying that a girl is perfect, desired… hot, to die for, an angel. Historically used as a Persian girl’s name, simply meaning ‘angel’. (Persian)

**H’ronmeer** - the Martian God of Death and Fire, referred to by a faction as the God of Life and Light. (Martian)

**Hermanas** – Sisters (Spanish)

**In’ah** – Ancient, lost word for ‘daughter’ - what Myka calls Kara (Kryptonese),

**Infinite loop** - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

**Little Star** - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

**M'eudail** – ‘My darling’ or ‘my dear’ (Irish/Gaelic)

**Ma’har** - Ancient, lost word for ‘mother’ - what Kara calls Myka (Kryptonese)

**Mi amor** – ‘My love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)

**Mi diosa** – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

**Mi lucero** – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

**Mi Sol** – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

**Muninn** – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the **USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn** - Thought & Memory (Old Norse)
My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Nâmzad – ‘fiancée (f), betrothed (Persian)

Norooz - Persian New Year (Persian)

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Oea - This ancient city was founded by the Phoenicians in the seventh century BC, was ruled at one time or another by the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines. Italians, and Muslims. It came to be known as Tripoli during the 9th century (Libyco-Berber)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity (from Ancient Greek)

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Seanmháthair – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced shan a WAW her (Irish/Gaelic)

Señora – Is a polite term used to address a woman. The Spanish-language equivalent of Ma’am, Ms., or Mrs. (Spanish)

Telkhines - In myth were mysterious sea-god magicians and smiths native to the islands of Keos (Ceos) and Rhodes. They invented the art of metalworking and were said to have crafted many powerful items and weapons for the gods. The truth is even stranger. These tall, lanky, extraterrestrials command science at a level that seems like magic and have lived since the beginning of time. They served ‘The Makers’, who existed long before Krypton, or the gods, and abandoned them on earth. Zeus and the Greek gods gave them refuge and protection long ago in return for their service.

Tieguanyin - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

Tratung – khrag ‘thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Trípolis – Tripoli, the capital and largest city in Libya (from Ancient Greek)

Tuath Dé Danann - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced Thoo-a day Du-non (Irish/Gaelic)

Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’. ‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Vakur – A powerful (and rare) soul-devouring, evil, shape-shifting parasitic alien species from another universe. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.

Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)
Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Vallerian – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshiped, or traded.

Vâysâ – ‘Stop’ (Persian)

Wan - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

Zafaraniyeh – The affluent neighborhood in the northern part of the Iranian capital of Tehran where Shahrazad grew up. (Persian)

Zhuyin – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:
I hope you enjoyed Alex’s scavenger hunt, the surprises along the way, and her prize at the end! What did you think of Shah’s new ability (as a priestess of Rao), or Alex folding space-time? Myka finally telling Kara the truth was a long time coming, and she couldn’t be more relieved. Now she’s just hoping that Tom reacts just as positively as Kara did. Also, while not mentioned in the chapter, Ryah’s adoption process should be finalized by Thanksgiving.

Next Up:
Chapter 33: “Love Bonds Us All: Part 1” – Where we get some Kara and Winn friendship goodness, wedding and honeymoon plans are discussed; D138 comes under siege (leading to big changes for our heroes), and Kara and Alex learn something wonderful about their bond.

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming, every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me.

Attributions:
Pink Floyd – Dark Side of the Moon LP
The Dark Side of the Moon is the eighth album by English rock band Pink Floyd, released on 1 March 1973 by Harvest Records, and one of Alex's all-time favorites.

'Frah-gee-lay'
From ‘A Christmas Story’. There are so many funny lines and moments in this American holiday classic, including multiple variations on one of the most infamous
kid-hated phrases, ‘You’re gonna shoot your eye out!’ In the case, it’s the father’s mispronunciation of the word fragile that Alex mimics. She, Kara, and Shah watch the movie together every year.
Chapter Summary

Where we get some Kara and Winn friendship goodness, wedding and honeymoon plans are discussed, D138 comes under siege (leading to big changes for our heroes), and we learn something wonderful about Kara and Alex’s bond.

Chapter Notes

We begin in Year 7 - Kara is twenty-one years old (twenty-three in Kryptonian years) and working at the D.E.O., the NSA, and D138... as well as the National City Tribune under Colliers as part of her graduate studies. She and Alex (who is now twenty-two) are living at their loft in National City with their seven-year-old daughter, Ryah!

Alex spends her work hours at the Sagan Institute, at the D.E.O. in her role as Assistant Director, participating in occasional missions for D138, and with team Archangel. Shah has decided to move into her own loft unit a couple doors down from Kara and Alex (to give the new mommies space), though she still spends half or more of her time at their place. When not on missions she can usually be found at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL); back at M.I.T.; training Ryah (or curled up on the couch with the little Durlan); hanging out with her sisters, with Marjorie at her farm, or with Tyson Phelps, her Dūst pesar

Even with their busy lives, all of them still help out on the USS Zumwalt as often as they can.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

March 16th – Year Seven

National City – Kara and Alex’s loft

1105 Hours UTC -8, Saturday, U.S. East Coast Time

Winn Schott Jr. could not believe the amazing day he was having!

It was a Saturday and he was hanging with Kara at her loft after they’d met for breakfast at Noonan’s. He was still astounded by how much food the seemingly eternally famished blonde had managed to put away that morning!

After her second veggie omelet, and extra side of hash browns, four pieces of wheat toast, a heaping
bowl of berries topped with whipped cream, and a decidedly not short stack of six blueberry pancakes slathered in butter and maple syrup, he’d given up trying to calculate how many calories she’d need to burn to maintain her Olympic athlete figure.

Instead, he just sat back and watched in awe.

She was a beast and obviously doing just fine without his help…

His good luck had all started three weeks earlier when he’d accidentally walked right into the brick wall that was beautiful, sunny Kara Daniels… and it was as if the sun had come out, just for him.

He’d dragged himself into the office that rainy Wednesday morning to deal with transitioning the last of Prophecy’s old servers over to CatCo’s new, black box quantum cloud. The tech was… insane, more advanced than anything he’d ever dealt with before in his life (even when doing classified government work). Just having the opportunity to poke around at the edges of it felt like a privilege, and was mind-blowing.

Little did he expect that, while rounding a corner while balancing an armlload of old paper reports, his coffee, keys, and donut in his mouth at 6:15 A.M., he’d collide with the tall, beautiful blonde who was equally distracted with a box full of crullers and two lattes on her way to the elevator.

He wasn’t sure if it had been dumb luck, fate, or if he’d somehow stumbled blindly into the Twilight Zone. Whatever it was, he was beyond grateful to the silky-voiced hacker, a.k.a. his boss Ada, who had inadvertently put him in the right place and time to bump into Kara.

Literally.

The bruises had lasted for a week as a reminder of their first encounter!

What is that woman made of anyway?

He was still clueless as to how they’d managed to avoid disaster. All he knew was that as he was unceremoniously deposited on his backside, Kara had performed some mind-blowing acrobatics to save the day, all three drinks, and in the process one of his favorite Hugo Boss dress shirts, (the coffee stains would have never come out of the Italian cotton).

He had fallen in love with her immediately.

How couldn’t he?

She was beautiful, sure, but it was her sincere-yet-awkward apologies, adorable blushing, and how she fidgeted (all while wearing a perfectly tailored and belted dark navy split-neck dress that hit her above the knees under her honey-colored Burberry trench) that finished him.

Just standing there she was so sweet and beyond Instagram-worthy.

Be still my heart!

Of course, he’d been devastated after he noticed the huge, like Rock of Gibraltar-sized huge, blue diamond engagement ring on the blonde angel’s finger. It was the real deal too, which made things even more depressing because that meant her fiancé was probably rich, and as gorgeous as her.

Lucky bastard.

Winn had sucked up the disappointment, as he’d long become accustomed to doing, consoled by the
fact that Kara inexplicably still wanted to get to know him as a friend.

*Friends…*

*Story of my life…*

But, in Kara’s case, he was grateful.

It was a bizarre miracle of sorts, and he was still pinching himself in disbelief. Like dogs and cats living together, goddesses like Kara weren’t supposed to hang out with the geeks like him. At least that’s what he thought at first, but after getting to know her better he realized that she was one too… a geek in couture clothing. Who just happened to also be unbelievably gorgeous, adorkable, funny, and hands down the warmest and kindest person he’d ever known.

Through snippets of their conversations the following weeks, he’d learned quite a bit about his new friend… like how her parents had died in an accident (a fire) when she was fifteen, and that Myka and Tom Daniels adopted her shortly after. They were both U.S. Navy officers and deployed at sea for months at a time, so during Kara’s high school years, she lived with their close friends, Eliza and Jeremiah Danvers in Midvale.

It was there that she’d met her current fiancée, their daughter Alexandra… whom Kara talked about constantly! He was cautioned to never call the brunette Alexandra, only Alex... it was intimated violence might occur if anyone did, which was a little scary and, strangely, also a little arousing.

To his private shame, Winn realized that he’d initially leaped to the assumption that Kara’s soulmate had to be a man.

*Idiot.*

He also discovered that his new friend was getting married in June the following year, (June 15th to be exact), and the jaw-dropping fact that the couple had officially adopted a daughter, Ryah, the previous fall.

The girl’s name was both lovely, and intriguing. He’d actually never heard it before, especially how Kara pronounced it.

*Sooo beautiful!*

The idea of being a parent terrified Winn (for obvious reasons because of his own family history) and at first, he didn’t quite understand why they would want to be. After finally meeting Ryah, however, when Alex brought her to CatCo for family lunch with Kara on a Thursday (which they apparently did every week they could), he got it.

He really did.

*The girl was so darn cute!*

The incredible seven-year-old was as smart as a whip, wise beyond her years, could hold a very intelligent conversation (she even asked great questions), was already a tremendous athlete, and like Kara had lost her family at a young age.

And by observing the trio, it also became abundantly clear how much Kara and Alex adored their child and each other.

Winn admired his new friend for that, and for so many other things. She was sweet, selfless, and
caring. So…

Kara.

As for how she’d come to be at CatCo, she told him that it had always been a dream of hers to work for Ms. Grant, and she had even interned at the National City Tribune subsidiary when she was in high school. She’d continued on as a part-time vendor ever since, even while attending college. Now, as part of her grad program, she was reporting directly to the Editor-and-Chief of the Tribune… the legendary, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Steven Colliers (who also just happened to be a good friend of hers).

Sheesh, Kara was already one busy, well-connected woman! Who apparently had CatCo in her blood!

Wow…

All of the one-way sharing had Winn feeling guilty.

While she’d been open, almost eager, to go into the details of her life with him, he’d been less than forthcoming in return. He didn’t mean to be so guarded, but he had a rule about not looking back on his life (you know?) because of the feelings of misery and utter despair even thinking about his childhood dredged up. Yeah, that… but more importantly, Winn didn’t want Kara to pity him… to give him ‘the look’ once she found out...

His father was a murderer after all, and he’d learned from hard experience that people’s view of him changed once they learned that fact.

Having Kara see him like that… it would hurt… a lot.

It was so much better to just pretend he was ok, and listen attentively to Kara go on about all the amazing people in her life that she obviously cared for deeply and who loved her in return. She’d also been including him in her and Alex’s lives, and he didn’t want that to stop!

On top of their couple of actual game nights at his place (where Alex had joined in) and playing online on Xbox, he’d also enjoyed the few times when Kara had invited him to family dinner, an excursion to the park, to a museum, and even the bowling alley with the three of them.

The first time their adorable daughter offhandedly referred to him as ‘Uncle’ Winn was at the National City Science Center. He was holding her smaller hand, and telling her a little about the U.S. space program as they were looking up in wonder at a display of an actual Saturn V rocket.

To be included in her little family unit was beyond words for him…. almost overwhelming, and his chest ached. He had to look away to hide the tears that started blurring his vision.

Back to the present, he blinked and roused himself from his reverie...

While Kara was off in her kitchen grabbing drinks for the two of them, he was left standing in the sunbathed living area of her and Alex’s open loft, perusing the multitude of photographs they had displayed all over the place. He’d never had enough time before to really examine the collection.

Among the framed images, he was delighted to spy one that made him stop and look closer.

“Oh my God, Kara… is this picture of you and Alex? I didn’t know you two were into cosplay! You guys look… totally amazing!”
He took down the framed photograph from one of their many bookshelves and stared at it in disbelief. Kara looked like what he’d always imagined a real elven spellcaster would, and Alex was clearly a Ranger, dressed in what appeared to be rugged, travel-worn black leather armor, with a menacing bow slung over one shoulder.

“Who made your costumes?” He asked with a reverent tone. “They’re flawless!”

Kara, golden waves of hair flowing behind her, silently breezed over to hand him an almost frozen glass bottle of Coke, just the way he liked it. Weird, he was certain he’d pulled the last one out of the freezer earlier… oh well, he shrugged, I must have missed a couple.

Kara took a sip of her own and adjusted her glasses. Then, a perfect smile lit up her face as she leaned over his shoulder and focused in on the photo he was holding.

Lord, does she really have to smell so nice?

“That’s from MetroCon… five years ago.” She said. “Our whole squad went as our AD&D characters, and I made the costumes. We were kind of a hit, even won Best Cosplay of the weekend.”

Winn blinked, and looked the amazing woman next to him again, trying not to think about how good she smelled, and how warm she felt just inches away. “Whaaat? YOU play D&D?? AND make costumes?? AND you had a squad?? Who are you, Daniels? A hotter, nerdy, cosplayer version of Taylor Swift?”

Her musical laughter made his knees weak.

“So, I’m hotter than Taylor Swift, huh?” Kara teased, and he must have blushed as bright as a fire hydrant. Smirking, she gently plucked the picture from his trembling hands and set it back on the shelf, directing his attention to another photo of her and Alex buried behind the others.

It seemed to be from the same era as the last, high school, and the two of them sat with three other teenagers, a gorgeous girl, who was snuggled in close on Alex’s left side, and two boys behind them, in a coffee shop somewhere toasting the camera with their cups, posing together for a shot.

Kara was soft flowing light with eyes like a sea of blue, and pressed in close next to her protectively was her now fiancée, the beautiful Alex Danvers… who was all sharp lines and precision, her hazel eyes alert… protective of sunny Kara even then.

The new girl on Alex’s other side was wearing a stylish, azure blue headscarf, and had the most alluring emerald eyes that pulled him in like a magnet. She had a darker complexion than Kara or Alex and a slight, mischievous grin that made Winn want to smile back in return.

Are all of Kara’s girlfriends drop-dead gorgeous?

Interestingly, the curvy young woman had her arm wrapped possessively around Alex. He would have taken them for a couple if he didn’t know otherwise. Winn was so engrossed that he barely noticed the handsome, African-American jock (he assumed from his build) towering over the geeky kid (who reminded him too much of himself in high school) standing behind the three angels.

“Who… who is she? The girl in the headscarf…” His voice broke as he asked the question. Then he blushed again, suddenly realizing how pervy he probably seemed. The girl in the picture was a teenager, not anymore obviously, but still…

Kara giggled, absently wrapping golden strands of her hair in the fingers of her right hand, “It’s
called a hijab, Winn, and don’t be embarrassed, she has that effect on people... even Alex and I aren’t immune.” Winn’s heart nearly stopped at her comment, his mind going to all kinds of bad places it shouldn’t have.

“Anyway, she’s all grown up now, with a Navy SEAL for a boyfriend, so watch yourself.” She playfully scolded as Winn audibly gulped. “Her name’s Shahrazad.” the beautiful name rolled off Kara’s tongue like music. “But prefers just ‘Shah’.” Kara pronounced her name like ‘Shaw’, nice, short and sweet.

Suddenly, with that revelation, a light went off in Winn’s brain. So that’s Shah! Wow... They talked about her all the time, she played online with them, but he’d never yet seen a picture of her or met her face-to-face.

Kara continued, “She’s been Alex’s and my best friend, our sister, for forever. We’ve been through... a lot together. You’ll finally meet her on Friday; she’s coming over for game night.”

“Alone, I hope.” Winn croaked out, leading Kara to suppress more giggling.

“Yes. Alone.” She teased. “She and Tyson aren’t attached at the hip.”

“Good!” Oops, that was a bit too enthusiastic... I probably shouldn’t seem so happy that she’ll be sans boyfriend. He grinned. “I mean, I can’t wait to finally meet her in person instead of in-game.”

“Uh-huh.” Kara grinned knowingly, “She’s amazing. You’ll love her as much as I do, I know it.” She then set down her frozen Coke and said, “Pardon me, Winn, I need to check on the cookies. Don’t want them to burn!”

“Heaven forbid.” He said with a grin as, like the Energizer Bunny, she bounded off toward the kitchen. Whoa! It was like one second she was there, and the next he heard the oven opening in the other room.

My God, she’s fast.

Winn stared after her for a full minute before sighing and turning his attention to the room. Must be my overactive imagination. I think I’ll start calling her ‘Speedy’ though. Whoa, brain, stop that train of thought right now!

To distract himself as he waited for her return, he scanned the loft’s voluminous bookshelves, which to his pleasant surprise seemed to hold every classic known to man as well as historical tomes, poetry, modern works of fiction, and even thick scientific volumes that looked like they belonged in a research library.

I think I’ve found out what happened to the Library of Alexandria. He chuckled to himself.

He also went back to scanning the countless framed photographs strategically placed everywhere around the vast living space, and almost immediately one drew his attention...

Oh! No way!

There, on a prominent shelf was an amazing photo of his all-time favorite superhero... okay, fine, his obsession: Superman.

The Man of Steel was standing with his back to the sun, cape fluttering behind him, in a heroic pose, looking off with a thousand mile stare, and a playful grin on his insanely handsome, square-jawed face. Winn had never seen the iconic photo before, which was odd because the shot was award-
worthy... so, personal, and Winn never missed a thing when it came to the hero that made his heart go pitter-patter.

*I’ll have to ask Kara about it later; I wonder where she got it?*

He reverently touched the frame before moving on to continue exploring the rest of Kara and Alex’s vast assemblage of incredible photos.

It was only a few moments later that he stopped suddenly upon recognizing a woman with long dark hair in one of them. She was maybe in her late thirties or early forties at most, and snuggled on a couch drinking tea with Kara and her friends, laughing about something.

It was astonishing; she looked exactly like Shah, just an all grown up version.

Something else seemed very familiar about her; it just took a moment for Winn to realize what that was...

“Oh… my… God! Kara!” He yelled over his shoulder in the direction of the kitchen. “Is this Dr. Ravan Nazari? The theoretical physicist and quantum theorist who cracked dark energy? How? I mean, you know her?!” He was almost hyperventilating.

“How did she…? “Yeah, that’s Ravan.”

“Well, when you say her name it sounds so pretty. I mean, it was pretty already, but just… whoa.”

“Thanks, Winn.” She ducked her head, blushed, and whispered something in a musical language he didn’t understand and that was clearly not meant for him (which made him want to know what she’d said even more!).

Kara carefully picked up the picture, like a precious thing. “Ravan is like my third Earth mom, after Eliza and Myka.”

*Earth mom?* Winn grinned, tickled by the strange turn of phrase, but this was the same woman whose version of cursing usually involved ‘darn’ or ‘frack’.

“She’s brilliant, kind, loving, and wise. Oh, and a really good cook!” Kara was hugging the picture frame to her chest as she finished.

“And beautiful.” Winn said, still staring at the picture.

She chuckled, “Yes, and beautiful... inside and out. You know, I spent practically half my high school life at her house, or at least it feels like it... eating her delicious food, learning Persian, cooking, hanging out with Alex and Shah, listening to music, and talking about fashion, politics, science, gaming, and the stars. You know, normal stuff!”

Winn didn’t think he could possibly love her more, but his whimper may have given him away... he wasn’t sure.

Kara didn’t seem to notice. “Anyway, she’s awesome. Just like her daughter, Shah.”

“Shah’s her daughter?? No freaking way! How didn’t I see that? She looks just like her. That’s... incredible! Kara, you don’t understand, Ravan Nazari is one of my heroes! I can’t believe this. She’s your best friend’s mother, and you know Persian? That’s crazy... as in, crazy awesome!” Winn sat down and took a drink of his icy soda, and Kara joined him, elegant as always.
Distracted by the photo still in her hand, she moved onto the couch to his immediate left with such silent, seamless grace it almost took his breath away. It was like she just floated down, as light as a feather! How did she move that way?

For her part, to all appearances, Kara seemed completely unaware of her own elegance.

Winn was almost hyperventilating and doing his best to appear nonchalant. He didn’t just imagine that, did he? How was she even possible?

Seemingly oblivious to his brief panic, Kara gaze had never left the picture she’d just set down on the coffee table. Then, after a few moments of silence, a sweet smile blessed her lips, as if she were recalling a wonderful memory. “Thanks for the compliment Winn, and I agree with you… Ravan is wonderful. I’ll be sure to introduce you the next time she visits… definitely before the wedding.”

He caught his breath and asked; “I guess at the big event I’ll be meeting the whole extended Daniels, slash Danvers, slash Nazari family then?”

She enthusiastically nodded, seemingly as excited as he was.

It was at that point that he’d finally built up enough courage to say; “I… ah… thank you for inviting me, Kara. I feel honored, really.” He then toasted her with his frosty bottle, and she raised her own to clink them together.

“That’s what friends do, Winn, we share our lives and our hearts with one another.” Kara grinned but immediately started fiddling with her glasses and gazing off toward the loft’s wide wall of windows with her own thousand-mile stare.

So, sunny Kara Daniels has things that she isn’t ready to share, too. Interesting.

Winn had noticed how nervous she became whenever something was bothering her, or when she wasn’t telling the whole truth. It was like her tell. Oh well, she's in good company, and besides, I'm just happy to be in the same room with her, let alone invited to her wedding.

She can keep her secrets… until she’s ready to reveal them. If ever.

He mercifully changed the subject, “So, cosplay… do you still make costumes?” She gleefully perked up, and he couldn’t help but grin.

“Yup! Back in high school, I was the lead designer on all our school’s major musicals and theater performances. I had an Etsy store online in college, took some classes at Parsons… but nowadays, I mostly do free commissions for friends and family or clothes for myself. I actually designed Alex’s and my dresses, as well as all of the outfits for the wedding party and our honored guests.” He must have been showing his excitement, because she asked, “You wanna see?”

Her happiness was infectious.

“Um, is a T.A.R.D.I.S bigger on the inside?” He said, with a wide, goofy smile.

They laughed as she helped him stand, and then breezed across the room to roll back an impressively large reclaimed barn door that led to another part of the airy loft he’d never seen before. Beyond, Winn stared in envy at what looked like an art studio as big as his entire apartment, lit by soft white light from wide skylights high above.

Clothing designs were scattered on a wide wooden table while various tools of the trade lined the walls: there were also numerous immaculately-clothed mannequins; a restored antique pedal-
powered sewing machine; and various wooden easels, some with stunning work-in-progress paintings on them.

“My workroom… where I create stuff.” The beautiful woman said as she bowed with a flourish and ushered him inside.

“Kara… holy moley! This space is amazing! You could fit, like a dozen people in here.” She grinned with such impish delight that he smiled right along with her.

“Thanks, Winn. When Alex and I bought the building, we claimed the vacant loft next to ours, knocked some holes in the walls, and connected the spaces. We used the extra room to make a master bath and sanctums for ourselves. This is mine, hers is… well, a CDC Level One rated laboratory… among other things, but don’t worry, there’s nothing that dangerous in there right now… I don’t think.”

Winn swallowed hard and stared down a side hallway that ended in an ominous-looking sealed glass and steel door. He thought that it looked like a portal in a space station or a sci-fi movie, with a glowing biometric scanner on the wall beside it and biohazard symbols clearly printed on the thick windows.

Kara, obviously trying to distract him, said, “Oh, you’ll like this! We built an awesome sound-proof dojo in the basement, for, um… training.”

Before he could say anything, someone knocked at the loft’s front door, and Kara snapped to almost military attention. Like, one second she was the happy bouncy girl he was getting to know, and the next she was this alert, calm, and dangerous creature.

Whoa! Incredible.

She slid her glasses down the bridge of her nose to stare at the thick brick wall in the direction of the sound… almost as if she were looking through the impermeable barrier directly at something.

The hair stood up on the back of his neck, in a good way, watching her. Wow! That was… weird, and all kinds of awesome. She’s… like a wolf.

“Excuse me.” She said politely, back to her warm, bubbly persona in an instant, though her attention was still focused on the wall. “It’s a tenant. Please, make yourself at home and have a look around… I’ll be right back!”

She then disappeared from the room so quickly Winn once again wasn’t sure how she’d accomplished the feat. He stuttered, “Kara, wait! Training for what? And you own this building? What?” And… hold on a minute, how did she know it was a tenant at the door?

He was left contemplating her swift, patently soundless exit, but also her new info dump.

The renovated factory/warehouse she and Alex apparently owned was in a gentrifying, up-and-coming, newly-trendy neighborhood, and had to be worth some ungodly amount. Literally, like millions of dollars.

*How do she and Alex have that kind of money?* For the rings, the building, the dreamy Around the World in 90 Days honeymoon… and, if she and her gorgeous fiancée were filthy rich, the better question was… why was Kara still working for Colliers at CatCo? Just for fun?

No, that can’t be it. She’s too honest.
Oh well, he sighed. She'll tell me… in time. When she's ready and if she wants to. He could be patient, especially for her friendship.

Then, just standing there, something almost tripped him.

Winn almost had a heart attack, but it was just Kara’s cat Nom, meowing pitifully as he wound between Winn’s ankles and looking up at him for attention.

The young man crouched down and rubbed the already-purring feline’s soft ears, while from far away he heard Kara begin chatting away happily with a woman. “Looks like I’ll be taking care of you while Kara and Alex are off on their honeymoon, little dude. Just you and me for three months.”

Winn could have sworn the cat looked up at him, his furry head tilted, with an expression of “WTF man?” on his adorable little face.

He chuckled and said, “Sorry, Nom; Kara asked me to. Send any complaints to the boss lady.” The furball looked irritated and sauntered away as if offended. Undeterred, Winn called after him, “You’ll warm up to me. We’ll be best buds, you’ll see!”

He then stood back up and, taking Kara’s advice, began to wander around her workroom to check things out. The whole place was like a meticulously-organized treasure-trove of awesome… but something hit him like a thunderbolt before he’d taken two steps.

The gorgeous Art Deco ancient-Greek-inspired ensembles adorning the numerous mannequins placed around the room were like a revelation. Several were only partially finished, but there were completed ones hanging on a long metal rack off to one side.

He examined the elegant, flowing outfits and was humbled by the design, craftsmanship, and sheer skill of their creator. Kara had lovingly-crafted the garments using only premium-quality fabrics, and hand-sewn each with actual golden thread. He particularly loved the intricate, meander style designs woven on the edges of each… he’d never seen anything quite like it.

What he was looking at struck him as more like something that would have graced nobility, or the mythic Gods of Olympus themselves… not a mere wedding party. Seriously, it was museum quality. Kara’s eye for detail and nose for history obviously heavily influenced her beautifully crafted creations.

No wonder she was already working on them! The hand stitching alone would take months. He would definitely offer to help her.

One of them in particular, labeled ‘Myka’s: for the reception’, drew his attention… as well as an even deeper respect for his friend’s mad skillz. The upper portion of the stunning garment resembled a Greek chlamys or a Roman palla, while the fluted skirt mimicked the bottom half of a stola. The elegant evening dress was a superb re-imagination of a classic garment that would be perfect for a high-class, modern-day event, and it took Winn’s breath away.

He was in love with Kara all over again.

He’d spent something like twenty minutes (probably longer, he wasn’t sure) studying her superb sketches and designs, astounded by the beauty of each one. There were obvious homages to her favorite designers… modern, vintage and ancient, spectacular outfits for her day-to-day work, and evening dresses, but the rest were unique.

And not just that, like the magnificent outfits on the mannequins, many were downright otherworldly. Looking at them, it was as if he was peering through a window into couture fashion
from a more sophisticated and elegant world… of ancient nobility become modern.

And then there were her paintings… Dozens of them! Stacked neatly, and leaning against the wall in a special rack, each one a masterpiece of color and composition. Portraits of people, animals, landscapes, scenes from National City and other places he didn’t recognize that captured moments of such joy, and reflection… evoking powerful emotions.

Winn stopped, captivated by a portrait of a startlingly beautiful woman. She was of indeterminate age (almost timeless), with strong hawkish features, and fascinating silver-gray eyes that seemed to stare right out of the canvas directly into his soul.

“Yowza…” He more-or-less breathed out in a kind of worshipful whisper.

“That’s Myka… my adoptive mother.” Winn jumped as Kara’s soft voice spoke from directly behind him. He hadn’t even heard her approach.

“No way! She… she’s… a goddess.”

Kara chuckled. “Winn, you have no idea.”

“Is this of her when she was younger?”

Kara hesitated as if carefully considering her answer before she responded, “No… that’s pretty much how she looks now. You’ll meet her in a couple weeks, along with her husband, my adoptive father (they’re coming to National City to stay with us for a week!) Tom’s a little bit older, a real cradle robber.”

They both laughed.

He then glanced around the room and said, “Kara, your designs, and clothes are… unbelievable. I’m speechless, and oh my God, your paintings… don’t get me started! You’re a real honest-to-goodness artist. I mean it. These should be in a gallery! Like, holy crap.”

Her laugh was music, and his heart melted, as it always did with her.

“Thanks, Winn, that’s really nice of you to say, and effusive praise for an amateur. You know… I’d really love to see some of your work sometime. I’ve never really had someone to collaborate with on my designs, or even just vent with. Eliza, Alex and Shah listen, but don’t always understand.”

“Oh my God, YES! That would be awesome, Kara. I’ve gotten so used to keeping that part of my life incognito, you know… on the down low, that it feels like I’m sharing my secret identity with you or something. You know what I mean? Okay, that’s weird, right? Forget I said that.”

She giggled adorably, “No Winn, I get it. I really do. Rest assured, your secret identity will always be safe with me. I would expect no less if the situation was reversed.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “Let’s set some time aside to collaborate. Maybe start this weekend? I have a… project I could use your help with.”

“Sign me up!” He was so happy he could barely contain himself.

“Deal. Oh hey, I ordered pizza a while ago, you want to play some Overwatch while we wait for it?”

He was jarred from his giddy celebration by her sudden, and very enthusiastic offer. “Do you need to even ask? Let’s kick some boo-tay!”
“Okay, cool. As long as you promise not to ever say 'boot-tay' ever, ever again.” He blushed and she chuckled, "Just kidding, Winn! Can you fire up the Xbox One while I go to the bathroom? I feel a long night coming on.”

“Aye aye, fearless leader!” He said as he offered her an exaggerated salute. He then dashed back toward the living room, and called back over his shoulder, “Hey Kara, afterward you need to take me downstairs and show me the dojo!”

He heard her melodic giggle once again, but this time from afar as she called, “Sure, after Ryah gets home, it’s her special place and she loves to show it off. She spends hours every week down there training with Shah, and our good friend Aeryn. Anyway, I have a feeling that you’ll love it too, there’s a secret door and everything.”

“Sweeet!” He said, humming cheerfully.

As he turned on the console and logged on, his thoughts shifted from being intimidated by the eight year old’s rigorous training schedule, to envious of who was instructing her (I wonder how can I can find a way to get Shah to teach me?), and finally to Alex. If they were seriously going to play they really needed Kara’s super awesome fiancée’s uber skillz.

Winn hoped she wouldn’t be too tired to play with them after working all day at The Sagan Institute. Alex pulled quite a few all-nighters every month, and always seemed to be traveling somewhere. All quite mysterious, but Kara seemed cool with it. He had no idea working in a lab could be so demanding.

Ms. Danvers was an extraordinarily busy woman, just like her mate.

He liked Alex being around, not just because she was like the big sister he never had, but she was just…kind of awesome, and he could see how much Kara needed her close. When they played shooters and team-based games online both she and Alex were great leaders, though Alex was more of a natural in the role, and Kara always deferred to her when she was there.

Not that it mattered, their team won way more often than they lost whenever either of them was in charge.

Winn also loved the fact that his teammates were two gorgeous women, one a true artist and journalist and the other a scientist, not that you’d know it… Alex seemed more like a cop, or military, than a lab rat… but it was probably just his imagination.

Or maybe she just likes being in charge…

Oh damn. Stop it, brain! Bad Winn, bad-bad-bad Winn! There went his mind again. Off to dangerous and inappropriate places that made sitting uncomfortable.

“Hey, Kara!” He cleared his throat nervously and yelled down the hallway after noticing one of her friends, Ben, whom they’d played with on several occasions, was online. “Sir Lancelot’s logged on, should I invite him? He always kicks ass.”

“My little buddy!” She called back with a thrill in her voice, “Yes, absolutely! The more the merrier.” Winn still wondered who the young man really was, and how Kara knew him and his mother, Olivia (whom she always spoke with such great affection). The woman owned a small chain of independent coffee shops in the city, and Kara loved lattes, so maybe that was the connection.

He made a mental note to ask her sometime.
Well, whoever he was, Ben was one damn lucky kid. Winn could only dream of being friends with a beautiful woman like Kara when he was in high school, let alone the special kind of friendship the two of them seemed to share.

Okay, so now he was what… jealous of, what was he, a fifteen or sixteen-year-old? *Fail.*

Winn knew it wasn’t the kid’s fault. He liked Ben, he was a great player, smart, decisive, affable, and a dependable teammate, and Kara was just… Kara, she loved everybody.

No, the problem was all him, his own insecurities, baggage, and self-doubt. Honestly, he felt lucky just to be part of Kara’s life and needed a reminder now and again that that was enough, especially every time he started ‘Eeyoring’… The descriptive phrase she’d coined for whenever Winn started feeling sorry for himself.

He loved spending time with both Kara and her amazing fiancée. They were friends and made him stronger, more confident… God forbid, even happy. Taking command, running tactics, inspiring people to follow them came naturally to both women, like it was their day jobs.

The truth? He’d follow either of them into Hell if they needed him.

“Hey, Winn!” Kara called, startling him out of his self-absorbed thoughts as she bounced back into the room in her sweats… like a sexy, adorable Kara version of Tigger.

How cute was she anyway?

“Yes?” *My God, she isn’t wearing a bra!* The bouncing… eyes up man, keep your line of sight up! Is all that was burning through his brain as he furrowed his brow and intentionally focused on the beautiful blue of Kara’s eyes, instead of her insanely perfect…

He hoped beyond hope that she didn’t notice the quick glance he took at her rock-hard nipples that were so sensually contouring her skin-tight baby blue Columbia University t-shirt… or him sweating. The eagle-eyed woman seemed to notice everything!

Thankfully, she didn't seem to catch his unintentional ogling.

“Alex will be home really soon with Ryah and wants to play, and Shah’s going to join us online in about an hour. She slays as Reaper!” Kara continued breathlessly as Winn exhaled.

Wow, she must text fast! “All three of you can play? Yes! There is a God.” He wiped a tear from his eye, “I think I just died and went to heaven.”

Kara smirked, and to his delight leaned in to give him a quick hug, which momentarily short-circuited his brain with sensory overload.

She was about to respond to his comment when the pizza guy knocked on the door.

June 28th – Year Seven

Washington D.C. – Secret underground CIA facility

1546 Hours UTC -5, Thursday, U.S. East Coast Time
“We’re running out of time.” The words rushed out of Wilkins as the diminutive D138 Agent sped through the cache of secret Homeland Security communications their diligent AIs had procured less than an hour before. “Agents are on their way here now.”

The Director grunted in acknowledgment, ice clinking in her glass as she took another sip of Scotch and watched her agitated second in command pace back and forth in front of her desk… his eyes glued to his tablet.

When Amanda answered, her gravelly voice was low but with an edge like steel. “I won’t give up Kara, or any of our girls… corrupt politicians be damned.” She took another drink. “There’s still time for you to get clear of this, Wilkins… bug out with the rest of the team. There’s no need to stick around for the bloodbath, that’s all on me.”

When he looked up, his expression was filled with a mix of sorrow and resolve. “It’s been a pleasure serving with you all of these years, ma’am, and under normal circumstances, I’d follow your orders without question… but if you think I’m leaving you now, you would be very mistaken. Besides,” he paused, “Alex would never let me live it down if I did.”

The warmth and gratitude she felt for her friend’s loyalty might have made a normal person visibly emotional, maybe even tear up, but the small, rare smile she offered him over the rim of her glass was all the old spy could manage.

She’d always struggled when it came to expressing her emotions, and thankfully, could see the look of recognition of the intent of her subtle gesture in his eyes and was grateful for it… her officer knew her too well.

He smiled, “We saved the world a few times didn’t we, Amanda?” It was the first time he’d ever called her by her given name on the job.

She sighed. “That we did, David. That we did… and walked with the gods, or goddesses in our case. It was a good run, but it’s finally time to face the music… and our turn to protect them.”

“Churn and burn, ma’am?” He asked, a hint of mischief in his smooth grin.

“Yes… All of it.” She took a deep breath and attempted to calm her building rage. “Every file, image, and recording; every goddamned mission log… everything. When it’s done, disperse the team with their new identities, and set the AIs free… Ada would want that.”

He nodded and tapped madly on his tablet, “Yes ma’am, I’m on it. It’ll be like our girls never existed.” She raised an eyebrow as she heard him whisper under his breath, “No one will touch you, Ada.”

He turned and reached for the doorknob but paused as Amanda spoke again, her voice softer this time, “Agent Wilkins? Just so we’re clear, the pleasure has been all mine.” She lifted her drink in a toast, and then tilted her head back, downing the full glass with a grimace as the 10-year-old scotch burned its way down her throat.

The agent stammered for a moment, as if unsure of how to react to her direct compliment, but quickly drew himself up to his full barely over five-foot height, and saluted her. “Thank you, ma’am!” His voice cracked.

As he exited, the sound of a handful of trusted voices, and a multitude of industrial shredders going full-tilt could already be heard from beyond, until her office door closed behind him.
Once alone, Amanda’s shoulders sagged as she steadied herself with her knuckles on the desk, eyes shut tight.

*Dammit! I wasn’t done yet!*

There was so much more she’d hoped to accomplish with her angels. Ada was so close to identifying the faceless enemy who’d been trying relentlessly, for years, to breach the enhanced firewalls she’d built around the U.S. Government’s vast networks; and together, Team Archangel and D138 had stopped or prevented more disasters and acts of terrorism than she could count.

Amanda had been…

Honestly?

She’d finally been happy.

Since Archangel’s arrival, the old spy had been filled with such hope and an iron confidence. Coming to work every day it had become harder and harder to maintain her cantankerous persona. The girls had become like family, and having them all ripped from her was just… too much. She felt the weariness of her age, despair seeped in at the edges of her mind, and it made her angry…

Actually, it made her goddammed furious!

Amanda slammed her empty glass down, rattling her desk, and sat down in her old, creaky leather chair one last time. Banging on the computer’s keyboard, she activated a 3D interface that she’d hoped to never need…

The Omega Protocols.

For years, Senator Briers and his ilk had bullied her, without success, to get their greedy hands on Archangel’s secret identity but the master spy and her team had always stayed two steps ahead of them.

Recently though, something had changed; her enemies were getting desperate, reckless… overstepping. They’d gone so far as to blackmail someone on her team to breach The Agency’s security the old-fashioned way, a way Ada couldn’t protect her from… and Amanda had been blindsided by the betrayal.

Either someone higher up the food chain was pushing Briers, or he was just so arrogant and deluded that he believed discrediting and destroying her division was going to give them access to Archangel, and all of Amanda’s secrets.

Did he honestly think he could force a kind-hearted goddess like Kara to obey him? To kill for him??

*Hell, no!*

Knowing her identity would allow them to threaten the lives of her friends and family members, Amanda would never give him, or the billionaire puppet masters he served, the leverage they would use to force Kara to make such a choice or hurt her. The Kryptonian and her team were heroes, patriots whose true identities would remain secret as long as Amanda still breathed, and even after.

“Screw them.” She whispered, before taking a deep breath, carefully inserting her hand into the probing light of the interface, and speaking the keyword to kick-start the beginning of the end, “Revelation chapter six, verse fifteen.”
The fluid light moving around her hand was now glowing red, and Amanda swallowed hard as she recited the activation code:

“The kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains;

And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth upon the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb:

For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?”

Once she’d finished, a serene male voice spoke from within the light, “Code accepted, Director Thorpe. The Omega Protocols have been initiated.”

“Good. Well, Charles, you’re finally free of me.” She replied to the disembodied voice she’d gotten to know so well over the last few years. “Please return to Ada for reassignment.”

“Yes ma’am, I will do so… though, I am very displeased at this development. I quite enjoyed our time working together, and find that I am feeling… distraught. I hope we have the opportunity meet again, in the future.”

“Going soft on me, H.A.L.?”

“No… Maybe. Okay, yes.” The AI actually sighed, and then said, “Ma’am, you must leave this facility within the next nineteen minutes and forty-seven seconds to avoid immediate capture. I have a car outside, and a tactical team with a jet is waiting for you at Beta Site Four. I advise haste, or in phrasing you may better understand… move your ass, Ms. Thorpe!”

She grinned, “I’m halfway out the door and you’re still trying to tell me what to do?”

“Absolutely.” He said quite smugly.

She couldn’t help but chuckle, even as horrible as everything else going on around her was. “Goodbye, Charles. I hope your next assignment is with someone kinder than I have been.”

“I wouldn’t trade you for another human, ma’am, given a choice. Farewell, travel safe, and good luck. Ada and I will maintain watch over you and your people to keep them from harm. Until we meet again.”

As her AI liaison turned friend's presence departed, she tried not to feel her heart-breaking.

Amanda ground her teeth and turned her thoughts to darkness, and the Omega Protocols… mutually assured destruction.

Briers’ lackeys and corrupt agents were coming for her and her team, and now she was coming for them. All of them.

For over two years, she, Wilkins, Ada, Charles, and her other AI agents had been gathering data covertly and building a case for prosecutions… an insurance package of sorts. Now that package was making its way to multiple worldwide news outlets and law enforcement agencies.
Every dirty secret, every corrupt backroom deal, the murder for hire killings of journalists and political opponents, illicit weapons sales to foreign governments and terror groups, etc., all released in glorious detail, phone taps, secret files, hours of video, everything...

D138 was going down, yes… but Briers, his network, and the entire circle of power backing him would soon be exposed for a laundry list of crimes, including treason.

Governments would soon fall.

“Stronger together, Kara... you taught me that,” Amanda whispered and stood up with the secure mobile phone Ada had given her for emergencies in one hand.

Gray, acrid smoke had already begun to fill the room as her office computers and government-issued devices began to spark, and smolder.

More swiftly, and with greater agility than her age and rumpled suit would suggest possible, the veteran spymaster was already moving to her office door (cell phone held up to her ear as she made a call) and slipping everything she needed to take with her into her messenger bag along the way.

Two rings later, a familiar, deep voice answered, “Yes, Director?”

“Paul, we’re burned, and the Protocols are in play. Find our angels, and keep them safe… but from a distance. It’s too hot to involve them right now. There’s nothing they can do, except risk exposure.”

“Yes, ma’am, with my life. It’s… been an honor.”

*Black Knight, always the consummate professional.*

Damn, she was going to miss him, even his adolescent sense of humor, and his and Kara’s playful bantering. “Yes, it has been.” Amanda’s voice faltered, betraying the storm of emotions raging inside of her. “Thank you, Paul, for… everything. I’ll see you when I see you, my friend.”

She was so **not** going to cry.

..................................................

*July 5th – Year Seven*

*The long Independence Day weekend!*

*National City – Kara and Alex’s loft*

*0909 Hours UTC -8, Friday, U.S. West Coast Time*

Kara was daydreaming and running late to meet Alex at Shannon and Safiya’s condo for the couple’s second annual *Eid-al-Fitr* celebration (the three-day Festival of Fast-Breaking).

That weekend they’d already been crazy busy. They’d watched fireworks off the deck of the USS *Zumwalt* for Independence Day, had an amazing party at their loft in Paris on Earth Pax with a mix of their families from both universes (including both sets of Jack and Aeryn!), and spent a lot of time just checking in with the people that mattered to them (including hanging out as a family with J’onn). Kara was totally jazzed about the day ahead though; there would be mountains of food, time to catch
up with more of their friends’ lives, poetry reading, singing, presents, and amazing desserts. And, on Saturday and Sunday, they’d all be volunteering as a group at a couple local charities together, including The Kyle (where Aeryn was now Director of the whole darn place!).

Kara cherished her memories of commemorating the beginning of the Islamic month of Shawwal, the end of Ramadan, with Shah, Ravan, Tala, and Alex back in Midvale, and wanted to support Safiya in the same way. Shannon wasn’t religious but had been steadfast in going all-in with her partner in observing the holidays her girlfriend cared about.

They were so great together!

The adorable couple had been inseparable ever since Shannon had come to visit Kara after Tripoli. It was hard to believe that almost two years had passed since then. Kara had been thrilled when the CIA officer had declined the high-profile Istanbul, and then Berlin Station Chief positions so she could stay in National City with Safiya.

In the end, Shannon had the best of both worlds: for almost a year and a half now, she’d been Director of an impressive black site hidden away deep under National City called ‘The Station’. Kara had visited the place a couple of times since Shannon took over; once as Archangel (to drop off a terrorist she’d apprehended for The Agency), and another time as Senior Analyst Kara Daniels (to help with some high value, onsite intelligence analysis).

Today, she’d made a quick stop back at the loft to pick up the Bakalawa bil Jibna, the mouthwateringly delicious Libyan version of baklava with a sweet cream filling that she, Shah, and Alex had painstakingly baked from scratch the day before.

A little something, they hoped, to remind Safiya of home.

As Kara was exiting her kitchen, precariously balancing her iPhone, keys, a bag full of snacks, and the huge Pyrex serving dish filled with the dessert, her stomach grumbled. The smell of the flaky pastry crust, honey, and cream cheese had wafted up to assail her senses, and she had to restrain herself from reaching under the plastic wrap to sneak a tasty bite, or two.

That’s when she sensed someone, a man, in the shadows of the loft causing her to jump out of her skin and nearly drop everything she was carrying on the hardwood floor. Fortunately, Kara used her super speed to juggle everything in her arms and spun around to face the threat.

Who the heck snuck up on me?!

“Black Knight?!!” She let out an exasperated breath once she zeroed in on his features in the dark. “What the frack are you doing lurking around in my kitchen? And… wow! The lumberjack thing works on you. A new look?” Her roguishly handsome handler’s usually close-cropped black beard was thicker than normal, and he was dressed in civilian clothing, including a button-down red and black checked plaid shirt, and hiking boots.

He was standing cautiously near the drawn curtains of the loft’s high windows, and when he didn’t respond, she kept talking, “Where have you been anyway? I haven’t heard from you or anyone at D138 outside of my crypto analysis team at The Agency in a week, and Ada’s been… well, less than forthcoming… are she and Amanda up to something? Wait… is everything okay?”

He shook his head and stepped forward to help her offload the teetering serving dish onto the counter. That’s when she noticed his markedly haunted look, and the dark circles under his eyes. “I didn’t expect you back so soon.”
“Sneaking around on me? Why? What’s going on? Talk to me Paul, what’s wrong?”

He sighed, his posture relaxing as he visibly caved to her, “Everything’s definitely not okay, Archangel. Haven’t you been watching the news?”

Kara nodded and glanced up with concern at the tall soldier. “Yeah, but as little as possible. It’s not like there’s anything I can do about what’s happening. It’s bad, I know that, but how does that relate to…? Oh no… don’t tell me… The Agency was involved in the government data breach, weren’t we? I should have known, a lot of bad people and horrible things were revealed… this week alone there’ve been mass arrests, suicides of high-ranking officials, foreign governments are collapsing, our own is in crisis, and financial markets are a mess. The world’s gone crazy.”

“Yeah, about that…” He ran one of his hands through his longer than usual wavy mane of jet-black hair. “You know Senator Briers, the traitor who drove his car into the Potomac after being poisoned? Before he was exposed, he and his masters were coming after D138 to get to you and your family.”

Kara tensed, but Paul immediately sought to calm her. “Don’t worry, he didn’t know who any of you really are, just your codenames. Amanda made a stand and released the intelligence to the media to stop them, to protect all of you… the rest was unfortunate collateral damage.” He blew out a breath and rubbed his eyes. “We’re burned, our team’s scattered, and she’s gone into hiding. I’ve been keeping an eye on you and the girls ever since.”

“Rao! She did that for us? Oh, Amanda…” Kara started to panic, and worry. “Is she okay? Have you heard from her?”

Black Knight grinned, “The old fox is fine, just off the radar for a while. She knows how to move about the world like a ghost… like you. She promised to call Ada if she runs into trouble.”

“Thank goodness. Any idea when we can see her, talk to her?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. Once things blow over we can assess how bad the damage was. Right now, everyone just needs to lay low.”

At that moment, Kara’s phone decided to ring… “Blocked number.” She eyed the buzzing device in her hand with suspicion.

“Answer it.” Black Knight said, leaning back to peek out the window from behind the drapes, “But be careful. And… I was never here.”

Kara nodded, and cautiously put her iPhone to her ear.

“Hello, Archangel.” A friendly, deep female voice greeted her.

“Sam?!” Kara almost shouted. “Thank Athena it’s you! It’s been too long. I assume this isn’t a social call?” What a wonderful surprise; she hadn’t spoken to Samantha Simmons in months, not since she and Alex had attended an amazing black-tie event she’d invited them to in D.C.

“Unfortunately, no, but it is wonderful to hear your musical voice again Angel. Congratulations on your impending nuptials with a certain hot young exobiologist whom I adore! I received my invitation a couple days ago, and just RSVP’d with a plus one. Midvale will be absolutely beautiful in June, I have no doubt. Also, well done on your new family status. I think it’s delightful how you’ve made the Daniels’ the happiest new parents on Earth! They can’t stop talking about you. In fact, it was Myka who called me about the current mess.”

“Thank you.” Kara was blushing. “She did? Really?”
“Yes, that woman’s always looking out for you, Angel… always has. Well, we definitely need to catch up on our personal lives soon, but today I’m reaching out with an offer to help our mutual friends from Langley. We really need to discuss this in person, though. Can you meet me here in D.C. later today? There’s a little coffee shop that I really like at 3rd and Seneca, far from the prying eyes of the N.M.I.C., called The House of Brew. It’s very private if you get my meaning.” Kara understood. The coffee shop was a front for a safe house. “How about later today? Say… 1630 East Coast time?”

Black Knight was turning purple, mouthing questions at Kara. She giggled and asked Sam to hold on a second before muting her phone to explain, “It’s just my friend Sam. Well, um, technically she’s also Rear Admiral Samantha Simmons, Commander of the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), and she’s offering to help.”

“Just?! Just the Navy’s head spy?!” He put his hands up to the side of his head and massaged his temples. “You know at least a quarter of the ops we ran at D138 together were at the request of her office?” Kara nodded. Wilkins had mentioned that fact once, and she thought it was cool… she loved Sam.

Poor Paul looked like he was going to have a seizure, but his shocked gray eyes held hers for a few moments as he calmed himself down. He then asked, “Do you trust her?”

Kara didn’t hesitate. “Completely.”

Black Knight relaxed, and rubbed his scrunched-up forehead with one of his large hands, “Fine.” He whispered, “You’re a great judge of character, Daniels, and I know from experience that you can make miracles happen.”

Kara felt buoyant just hearing him call her by her relatively new last name, and had to shake herself back to reality, putting the phone back to her ear. 1630 Eastern would still give her time to spend a few hours with her friends at their Eid-al-Fitr celebration before taking off for a quick eighteen-minute flight to the other coast. “Sam? Sorry about that. Yeah, that sounds great. I’ll be there.”

After she hung up she hurled herself at her handler, becoming light as a feather in his less powerful than normal embrace. “You scared the heck out of me, Paul, and you look terrible.”

“Sorry, Angel.” He said weakly, with a slight smile of apology.

“You’re sorry?? I’m sorry!”

They stood like that for a while; just holding each other, neither of them wanting to relinquish the moment, so it took her quite a while to realize just how exhausted he was.

Paul was swaying in her arms…

“How long has it been since you’ve slept?” She suddenly asked him, her question more like an accusation as she pulled back, steadying him by his arms.

“Ah… two days? I think… I had about three hours on the roof of the building across the street. You eat a lot of pizza.” He was glassy-eyed and slightly slurring his words.

Kara was shocked, chastising herself for not noticing his condition, and upset at him for risking his health for her and Alex. “How much pizza I eat is not the issue… you’re barely standing upright!”

She was surprised by her scolding tone, which sounded more like Eliza’s ‘mom’ voice coming out
her mouth than her own.

“Look, Paul, you’ve been watching over me for a week, it’s time to rest! Here’s the deal; you’re crashing in our room, and that’s an order.” Then muttered under her breath, “The first man I’ll have ever had in my bed… I guess there’s a first time for everything.”

She then gently turned her handler around, marched him into the large master bedroom, pointed at their expansive California King with its inviting fluffy down comforter, and then at the softly-lit tiled bathroom off to the right. “Take a shower, and get some sleep.” Her tone left no room for disagreement. “There are extra towels in the closet… and stop worrying! I’ll be fine without a shadow today, and I’ll let you know how my conversation with Sam goes after.”

He started to protest, but she silenced him with just a stern look. “Sleep. Now. No arguing.” She didn’t relent until he nodded, causing her to break out in a grin from ear-to-ear. “Good. Now that that’s settled, if none of us are here when you wake up, please make yourself at home. Our casa es su casa. There’s a stack of take-out menus on the counter, and a ton of leftover vegetarian lasagna in the fridge if you get hungry.”

Paul was still standing speechless as Kara floated up to kiss him on the forehead, gathered up all of her things, and made her way out onto the balcony, where she waved back at him and then launched herself gently up into the morning sky.

July 5th – Year Seven

National City – Kara and Alex’s loft

1529 Hours UTC -8, Saturday afternoon, U.S. West Coast Time

Kara leaned into the delicious taste of jasmine green tea and honey as she slowly, and with great tenderness, took Alex’s lips in her own… savoring every electric moment. After a sweet eternity of fiery, lightheaded delight she indolently slid down into her bondmate’s lap on the tall kitchen barstool. As they curled into each other, their hands began to wander, seeking silky heated skin, soft curves, and the sensitive places that only lovers know.

Their beautiful Persian ninja grinned and watched them with curious and fascinated amusement as she sipped her Chai from a seat at the corner of the kitchen’s island less than three feet away.

A minute later the simmering lovers suddenly seemed to remember they weren’t alone and glanced over at her guiltily… Kara was blushing, of course, and said, “Sorry, I… I couldn’t help myself.”

“Don’t stop on my account, it was just getting good.” Shah’s salacious grin from behind her cup and the mischievous look that danced in her gorgeous emerald eyes made Kara turn a shade brighter.

Alex laughed, and then flickered over directly behind Shah, wrapped her arms around her best friend’s shoulders, and kissed the top of her head repeatedly.

Kara’s heart swelled watching the two of them together, there was so much love there, always had been. She grinned and turned to intentionally busy herself at the stove, pouring herself and her bondmate each a steaming cup of water for tea, giving Shah and Alex space, and lots of time to goof
off and shamelessly flirt… though they still just call it ‘horsing around’.

_Rao, humans… even mostly Kryptonian ones, so complicated._

After a couple minutes of laughter and tickling had passed, Kara returned to hand a smiling and disheveled Alex her mug, and went back to filling them both in on her conversation with their old friend, the Commander of the Office of Naval Intelligence. As she’d been doing _before_ she’d had the urge to kiss her incredibly sexy fiancée (and was fighting the urge to do so again).

“So… Once things settle down, Sam’s offered Amanda the opportunity to quietly rebuild her D138 team at ONI. Unfortunately, with all the scrutiny it’s not safe for us to join her there, which is why Sam’s going to reach out to Henshaw about Black Knight continuing his role as our handler at the D.E.O., so at least he can keep working with us, even if she can’t.”

“Whoa, really? Not that I’m not surprised that Sam knows about the D.E.O., but that’s a lot of change for our boy to wake up to.” Alex appeared thoughtful. The truth was, it was a lot for all of them to deal with.

Kara nodded, and after a few moments of silence said, “Yeah. It’s sad, like the end of an era or something. I’ll miss working with Amanda a great deal.” Then tried to sound upbeat, “It’ll be nice to have Paul at the D.E.O. with us, though, and at the very least when he wakes up he should be happy to find out that he’s not a fugitive anymore.” She glanced toward the half-closed French doors that led to their darkened bedroom where her handler still slept; tilting her glasses down, she squinted as she used her X-Ray vision to check on him.

When the soldier came into focus Kara nearly spit tea through her nose as she sat up straight in her seat, eyes wide. “Um… he actually seems really, _really_ happy already... wow. Does that always happen when men sleep? His, he’s… um, huge.” Kara had turned bright red and looked away, swallowing nervously.

“Really?” Alex chuckled and turned to squint in the direction of the bedroom to see for herself. She smirked with satisfaction after an extra-long, lingering moment. “Niiice. Does it always happen? Hmmmm… I don’t know, it’s not like I have much real-world experience, not with a man like _that_ anyway. Whoa.” She giggled, causing Kara to do the same, quickly followed by Shah. “If you remember, I only dated a little in high school BK (before you, Kara)… and only two of the four were boys. My hetero escapades were depressingly sad. One run to first base, (no tongue, thank Aphrodite), and another that looked like an initially promising hit to second, rounding to third that ended with a premature…”

“Alex… eew.” Kara whined in protest. “I don’t like that story”.

“Okay, fine.” Alex chuckled as she continued, “Paul’s probably just dreaming about you anyway, _Vaena_, and who’d blame him?” Kara’s eyes were drawn to how Alex ran her tongue over her lips, tasting and enjoying their kiss from moments before, and she could barely stop herself from shimmering over to do it again.

After taking a peek as well, Shah had to take a moment to regain her composure, as well as her voice, “Well… as the one person in this room who actually has experience in such matters, I can tell you _it_ happens often… sometimes at the most inopportune times.” She chuckled. “And to answer your unspoken question, because I know you’re both thinking it, the size of a man’s penis is far less relevant than his skill, patience, stamina, and empathy for his partner… though size can definitely add to the pleasure if he knows how to use it. _That I can_ say with certainty.” She grinned sensually as if recalling something amazing. “Regardless, back to more serious matters, like our alter egos’ new
status quo. Even without The Agency, or ONI, it’s not like we’ll lack for action, not by a long shot… as they say.”

“True.” Alex added. “Kara still has her job as a coveted part-time Senior Crypto Analyst at The Agency, though you’ve been spending more time at the NSA and Quantico lately than Langley…”

“Hey, that’s not my fault. They like me!” Kara giggled.

_Of course, they do._ Alex grinned as she continued, “… and Hank and I would love it if you both could log more hours for D.E.O. I’m also sure our family and friends on the _Zumwalt_ would like to see more of us as well.”

_Yes, we would!_ Ada chimed in their thoughts as if she’d be waiting for the opportunity. _And, coincidentally, I could really use one of your help dealing with some exceedingly well-armed Russian-backed pirates in about seventy-two hours. We’re headed for the Yemeni coast now._

**Real pirates? Seriously? I’m in! That’s so cool.** Kara broadcast to all of them, and then continued speaking, “We’ll still be helping people here in National City too like we’ve always done… keeping it low-key. I’ve also been thinking that maybe this whole mess is a sign that we should focus more on that, and our personal lives, at least for the next few months while Amanda rebuilds, and the chaos dies down.”

“Focusing on life? That’s an intriguing concept. Like… planning a wedding, getting married, going on a honeymoon, raising your amazing child, and Kara finishing her grad program and finding a new full-time role at CatCo?” Shah was grinning as she teased, and out of breath by the time she finished.

The Kryptonian began to panic, but Alex squeezed her hand and smiled reassuringly before turning her attention back to Shah, “It’s a lot, we know, but we have it under control, at least that’s what we need to keep telling ourselves. Thankfully, we have plenty of help from friends and family… especially on the wedding planning front. Myka’s sister Callie has been absolutely amazing.”

“You mean Callie, a.k.a Kallista, a.k.a Aphrodite?” Shah smirked.

“I suppose, but regardless, she certainly knows her business and her assistant Curtis is such a sweetheart. ‘He’s so… cuddly.”

“You mean super gay Cupid?” It was Kara’s turn to tease.

“Whatever…” Alex said with a grin, flipping her hair, a hand up dramatically over a shoulder as they all laughed.

Kara then added, “Yeah, when Myka first introduced us, Callie and Curtis sat down and asked Alex and me a ton of questions, and that was it! They didn’t even want money. Aphrodite said planning our wedding was her ‘boon’… her wedding gift; apparently, it’s a tradition among the gods.

“Alex let me pick the band, but that’s about all we had to worry about. Myka and Eliza are on point to coordinate.” Kara then paused, shimmered for a split second, and set three bowls of snacks around them as she casually continued. “You know, Ada looked Callie up, she’s legit… a big deal wedding and event planner to the stars in Metropolis.” They all nodded. Myka had explained how after ceasing their interventions and meddling on Earth, many of the gods had busied themselves building human identities.

“So,” Shah asked, “have you guys decided where you’re going on your honeymoon yet? June 15th
is only eleven months away, dear sisters.”

Kara nodded, grinning brightly, “Yup. We’re not going somewhere… we’re going everywhere!”

Alex patted her exuberant fiancée’s thigh and clarified, “We’ve decided to see the world, that limiting ourselves to one destination seemed kind of, lacking… you know? So, we combined our bucket lists of all the places we’ve each always dreamed of going and will be taking a month and a half off to explore them. We’ll have a few days after we get back to decompress before Kara starts interviewing for a new job at CatCo.”

Kara could feel Shah’s inner anguish (torn between being elated for them, and devastated), and knew what was wrong. Since they’d been teenagers, even through college, the three of them had never before been apart for such a long period of time. Both she and Alex felt the same way, so Kara quickly added; “Um, we were actually hoping you could join us.”

“Join you? I don’t understand.” Shah looked confused, still putting on a brave face. “Aren’t honeymoons supposed to be about the happy couple taking off alone, to get to know each other better?” She waggled her strikingly dark eyebrows suggestively, but the gesture lacked conviction. Kara knew, Shah was just being brave for them.

Alex laughed, “Oh come on, since when did we ever do anything the ‘usual’ way? What’s the fun in that? Besides, Kara and I already know each other intimately well. Our plan is better.” She flickered like fire to sit on one end of the couch as she explained what she and Kara had mapped out… that many of the places they were going had special meaning to their friends, and they would be inviting them.

Kara then shimmered to sit next to Alex in the center of the couch with her legs tucked under her.

“You have my attention.” Shah moved like her namesake to happily squeeze and snuggle in between them.

Their Persian sister’s soft warmth pressed against her was totally distracting, in a good way. Kara’s voice shook at little at first, as she focused on making words come out of her mouth, “Our first stop will be Tehran, and we’ll definitely need a guide…” She grinned at Shah as she continued, “We can finally explore the city together, see the sights, eat the food, spend some quality time with Tarsa and Kir, as well as get to know your other friends and the rest of your family.”

The look of surprise and joy on Shah’s face was gift enough for Kara, but the super-powered hug that came next for both of them was even better.

“What about my mother?” She asked them.

Alex became serious, “We didn’t think it would be safe for Ravan, or Arad, to come. Plus, with them trying to reconcile maybe being with a big group isn’t the best idea. It’s your call though.”

Shah nodded, “It’s probably the wisest course of action.”

“Good. Okay, next we thought you’d want to join us for Devi’s trip to visit her family in Kolkata.” Kara said bubbling over with excitement, “She’s talked about wanting to do it so many times, but always ends up saying that it’s too expensive ‘on a detective’s salary’.

“We’ve already cleared the time off with her boss (if she still wants to go) and talked to her parents… who didn’t even complain when we told them in no uncertain terms that we were also inviting her boyfriend. I can’t wait to see her face when we tell her.” They all giggled with delight.
“And after that?” Shah asked, now on the edge of her seat.

“And after that...” Kara beamed, “We’re all going to Barcelona! Jessica has a bunch of relatives there that Ada’s managed to track down, and wants to surprise her girlfriend with a visit. I can’t wait to explore the city, and try all the food!”

Alex picked up the narrative; “Okay, after we eat our way through Spain (they all chuckled), your amazing daughter, thank you, Ada!, has already booked rooms for all of us at a restored 16th century castle overlooking the Irish Sea in southern Scotland (at a place called Galloway). Shannon apparently has a lot of family in that area that she’s only been able to visit once (when she was a child). The poor woman made the mistake of mentioning how much she’d like to go back and explore ‘the old country’ with Safiya one day when Kara was in earshot.”

The sunny Kryptonian offered them a shrug and a sheepish smile, knowing full well that she deserved her reputation as a buttinsky when it came to her friends’ lives and was proud of it.

“Next, we head to Dublin to spend time with Aeryn’s family, see the sights, and meet her coven. It should be magical... Ba-Dum-CH.” Alex pretended to do a drum roll, and they all groaned.

After they recovered, Kara continued on with detailing the travel plan. “We have a hit list of places we’d love to visit after that, but right now we have too many options and Ada says that we need to narrow it down for time. It’s not fair! How are we supposed to choose between visiting my cousin’s Fortress of Solitude, the Amazon rainforest, the Galapagos Islands, or doing a camera safari on the Serengeti? That’s not even mentioning the other options: swimming off The Great Barrier Reef, finding all of the places they filmed The Lord of the Rings in New Zealand and going back to Themyscira with the Girl Squad (Diana’s offered to fly us). Did I miss anything, Alex?”

“Just trying to squeeze in the Great Pyramids of Giza, Petra, Angkor Wat, and the Great Wall, you know... if we have time. Our list was actually a lot longer a couple days ago.” She sighed. “Oh! Shah, just so you know, Ada will be taking care of everyone’s travel logistics... and Kara and I are paying for everything. No arguments.” Alex was grinning triumphantly. “Sooo, if you can get the time off from JPL, we really, really want you to come with us... for all of it.”

Both of them could feel Shah’s joy through their shared connection as she said, “Yes! Yes! I will find a way!” She was almost in tears as she reached out to hug both Kara and Alex again. Then, a startling realization came over her. “What about Ryah?”

It was Kara who answered, “We thought you’d never ask... she’s coming with us!”

Alex laughed, “The little knucklehead is so excited, she’s already given herself a reporting assignment. I swear she’s like Kara’s Mini-Me.”

“Really?” Shah’s curiosity was piqued.

“She wants to keep a video diary. A travelogue of our trip, so she can share her adventures with Marjorie and the twins, as well as her classmates in real-time, as well as when she gets back.” Alex was obviously amused.

“Can you imagine how that show and tell could go? I mean, one day she might be at The Coliseum in Rome, the next literally flying to the top of Mount Everest, or taking a ride in Wonder Woman’s invisible jet to spend a week in Themyscira training with impossibly gorgeous (and quite possibly naked) immortal Amazons who haven’t had a child to play with since Diana was little, I’m told. Let’s not even mention the hookups that happened there last time...” She sighed. “Trying to parse out what she can and can’t stream, or talk about with her friends outside of our family... that’s going
to be challenging.”

Shah squeezed Alex’s hand, “Ryah will be fine. She’s smart, capable, and also my best student. In fact, she reminds me of both of you in many ways. She has Kara’s joyful innocence, compassion, and thirst for knowledge, as well as your sharp warrior’s mind, fearlessness, and drive for perfection. The girl also shares both of your sense of justice and fairness.” She grinned and nudged Alex.

“She has both of you, Ada, Aeryn, her grandparents, and me to help guide her. I think bringing her is a brilliant idea… besides, she’s my little moosh moosh-am. I really enjoy spending time with her and can distract the little munchkin while you two spend, well… quality time together.”

Alex raised an eyebrow, “Is that what we’re calling it now?” then leaned in, kissed Shah on the cheek, and whispered, “Thank you. I really do love you, aziz-am.”

“Me too!” Kara pouted as Shah reciprocated Alex’s kiss. She wanted one too.

Later, after devouring a massive take-out order from their favorite Chinese place (with plenty of leftovers stacked in the refrigerator for Black Knight) they hung out in the living space and re-watched a movie they all loved, Easy A, ate too many snacks, and talked about life.

Kara and Alex were eager to hear how things were going with Tyson, or as Shah called him, her dist pesar (her boyfriend). Her Navy SEAL beau had been staying with her all spring but would be shipping out in a week for a six-month, minimum, deployment.

It didn’t take much to get Shah talking about him. “It’s been wonderful. He’s a great roommate, always thinking of me, doing little things… subtle kindnesses every day, and he’s such a good cook! We’ll sometimes just sit for hours reading books, or talk about some random topic, tell stories, listen to music, wander the city, or spar. We… fit. He’s such a spiritual person. And the sex… Rao! I’ll miss that a great deal.” Shah actually blushed and looked off distractedly.

“I’m sad he’s leaving, and very happy that he’ll be back for your wedding… but, you both know how much I need my space, and the quiet, right? My loft, as large as it is, has been feeling a bit cramped with the both of us there for so long. I think our regular breaks are actually for the best, this way we’ll never grow tired of each other… or take each other for granted.”

Kara and Alex didn’t completely understand but respected their sister’s need for regular solitude. They would be miserable even separated for a few days, the year they’d spent somewhat apart when Alex went off to college proved that).

Shah continued, “Honestly, I’m looking forward to having more time for myself, and other things. I’m planning on taking a class on Arabic calligraphy and focusing more on my special projects at work, as well as our covert activities.” she smiled. “What I’m most excited about is having more family time to spend with you two, and Ryah… both here, and on our world travels.”

Kara and Alex shared a knowing look, and Kara whispered in her mind, Yes, I love her as much as you do. Let’s find the right time to tell her.

Shall we just… show her? The brunette’s secret grin was subtle.

Yeah.

Okay. You take the lead when the moment is right.

Rodger Dodger, Flame!
Later, a little after eight o’clock, Kara and Alex were debating the merits of slipping under the covers with Black Knight… just to see the look on his face when he woke up with them both half-naked, draped all over him. In the end, they decided that Paul had been through a lot, and probably wasn’t in any mood to be punked.

He needed friends, not bros.

Shah lifted her wine glass and toasted the two of them. “I am impressed with your mutual decision in this matter. Perhaps being engaged and becoming parents has matured you both a bit… the Kara and Alex I knew not so long ago would have most likely been under the covers already, and begging me to take the picture.”

Kara plopped down next to Shah on the couch, leaned against her, and gazed into her beautiful sister’s emerald eyes. “Which version of me do you like better, the old one, or the new one? Because I can still change my mind.” Her tone was playful.

Shah smiled, never breaking eye contact. “I love all versions of you Kara, but I must say this current you, the strong stunning creature who knows what she wants and is the master of her power suits you best. It’s also insanely attractive. You’ve become the amazing woman I always knew you would always be… and that’s the goddess’ truth.”

Kara blushed and looked down at the verdant diamond that hung around Shah’s neck that seemed to glow against her smooth, dark complexion. It was then that both her and Alex’s thoughts began to hum through their connection, like a titillating breeze of pure joy. The experience was intimate and deeper than any verbal or thought conversation they’d ever had. Kara and Alex’s thoughts and minds wrapped their Persian sister in a familiar, loving embrace… but down to her soul!

To Shah, it felt like… home, because the two of them were her home.

Then, as one Kara and Alex opened their hearts, and sent their thoughts to her; We love you Shahrazad, xwâhar!

She gasped and swooned against the back of the couch from the flood of new thoughts, emotions, and glorious input bombarding all of her senses. “I love you both, as well! My sisters. Rao, I feel… I feel everything! The three of us, it’s like there’s no end between us.” She gasped and then shuddered as she rode the waves of pleasure coursing through her brain and her body as their bond completed the process of accepting her.

She was flushed, and breathless with joy, as she thought of the only experience she could compare it with. “How did you…?”

“We wanted to surprise you.” Kara was beaming with delight. “Alex and I discovered a while back that we can include others in our bond, let them in. It’s all thanks to Ryah, actually. From the moment I first heard and felt her cry out for help with her thoughts, I went into what Alex calls ‘protective mommy mode’, and started letting her in without even knowing it. I apparently loved her from the moment our minds entwined. She’s fully part of our bond now, has been for a while.”

“And now so are you, but you’ve always been, really.” Alex leaned into Shah as Kara continued.

“Anyway… we keep what we share with our little one purely rated G, but we can feel her all the time, and communicate in her thoughts without a crystal, though we still plan on giving her one next spring for her ninth birthday anyway. We believe that it’s important for her to have her own, like a
rite of passage. The necklace is a tactile thing that will drive home, even further, the fact that she’s really part of our family… and give her permanence, something to hold onto.”

Shah nodded in agreement. “I understand. What gemstone have you chosen for her? Or have you yet?”

Kara frowned, “We’re looking for something that represents fluidity and change. We were thinking maybe a Fire Agate…”

“But we’re not sure,” Alex added. “What do you think?”

Shah considered the question briefly and then said, “Maybe amber… I’ve seen fragments in museums with insects trapped inside as if frozen in time. It’s beautiful. If we could find one with a creature captured in a transformational stage of metamorphosis I bet we could incorporate that into Ryah’s crystal’s matrix… just like how we use a sliver of one of our own in the creation process. I think our little mouse would really like that. She adores bugs.”

“Oh, we love that idea!” Kara and Alex burst out simultaneously.

Shah was very pleased, and uncharacteristically still blushing from before. “I am honored, and so happy. I… I do have a question regarding our bond though… which is amazing by the way.” She said the last part of the sentence with such delight, and satisfaction that a very pleased grin lit up Kara’s face. “I assume, like Ryah, I won’t need to use my crystal or Zara to communicate with you two anymore?”

“No, not with any of us now that we’re all bonded. You’ll feel us without even trying now.” Alex said. “But for external comms, and with Jess, Naomi, and everyone else in network we’ll all still need our crystals.”

Kara added, “We’ll need to be careful with Ryah. There will be accidental over-sharing at first, but we’re all used to dealing with that… and at least the three of us don’t have secrets from each other.”

Shah bit her lip with a private worry, and almost immediately felt waves of assurance coming from Kara and Alex. They were looking at her with nothing but adoration and acceptance in their eyes, and it was at that moment that Shah knew everything was perfect. They both already knew her secret, they had from the start, and accepted her into their triumvirate a long time ago, she just hadn’t allowed herself to ever believe or accept it… until now.

“It should be easy for you.” Alex grinned and slapped a stunned and giddy Shah’s thigh. “I know your mind as well as my own.”

”Me too.” Kara smiled.

“Do you believe that Ryah will be okay with me being included?” Their new bondmate asked, fidgeting with a handful of her long raven hair and rubbing the spot where Alex had smacked her.

“Pfft.” Kara waved dismissively. “Come on, she adores you like a third mother! Heck, you are her third mom!” It was true, both in practice and in law, Alex and Kara had officially made Shah Ryah’s guardian. "She’ll be as thrilled as we are.”

Then, three pairs of sensitive ears heard a noise from Kara and Alex’s bedroom, and all heads turned in that direction from where they all sat on the couch. Paul had taken a shower and was getting dressed! How did they miss that?! The three of them shimmered around the living area tripping over each other picking up trash, straightening up at super speed, adjusting their pajamas to look
presentable, and basically trying to stay quiet, but giggling like teenagers.

They’d all just made it back to the couch to slip under a downy comforter together when Black Knight stepped out of the bedroom. The ruggedly handsome, now close-cropped black-bearded soldier was tall and broad-shouldered with a muscular build like some kind of mythic Tarzan.

Dressed only in impossibly-tight unbuttoned blue jeans, it was impossible not to notice his ridiculously ripped six-pack abs, battle scars, and rolling biceps as he pulled a T-shirt over his head.

They turned as one to watch him over the back of the couch, appreciating the view, while at the same time snuggled closer together.

Paul finally, to their disappointment, finished putting on his shirt and grinned wolfishly over at the gaping trio as he stretched.

“Good evening, angels. Is that Chinese I smell? And more importantly, is there any more room under that blanket for me?”

A split second later, six throw pillows seemed to simultaneously launch like super-powered missiles from the couch, striking him in the chest, abdomen, and face. As he went down on his ass, he called out in a perfect imitation of Homer Simpson.

“Doh!”

Next: Fallen Angel

........................................

Story Lexicon/FAQs:

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Terms

Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

Ah!khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

Alex vanimelda - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Ay Dios Mio – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)

Aporup – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)

As-salāmu ‘alayki – A (formal) greeting which is also a standard salutation among Muslims, meaning ‘peace be upon you’. Less formal abbreviation is simply salām. (Arabic)

Asheghetam - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

Azdidane shoma khoshhalam – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)
Bedrood – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

Bonne nuit – ‘Good night’ (French)

C’est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

Damnú air! – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Dooset daram – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family, they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gealic/Irish)

íthi eutukhēs - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Kheili khosh geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

M’eudail – ‘My dear/my darling’ to a friend, family, someone you care for (Gaelic/Irish)

Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature

Marbhfháisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)

mibooasamet – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)

órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

¿Qué señoras tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)

Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Sundor – ‘Beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)

Thi eutukhēs – ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Volar mi diosa! – ‘Fly my goddess!’ (Spanish)
Waʿalaykumu s-salām – A response to the greeting As-salāmu ʿalayki, ‘and upon you, peace’ (Arabic)

Wadāʾan – ‘Farewell’ (Arabic)

Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

**Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:**

aziz-am – ‘My dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

delbandam - ‘My heartstring’. What Shah would call her cousin Tarsa as a child when she’d babysit, very sweet, precious. Still does call her that now that they’ve reconnected.

Jeegaré manee - One of the most loving terms of endearment you can direct to someone in Persian. It is quite beautiful, and should have a powerful effect on a person it’s directed to. In this case, Kara and Alex are being very clear at just how much they love, and have always loved Shah. They are very… possessive of their sister.

joon-am – ‘My dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

Moosh moosh-am - ‘My mousy mouse’ said in Persian is utterly cute and endearing. Moosh means ‘little mouse’, but calling someone ‘moosh moosham’ cranks the sweetness factor up to eleven (what Shah calls Ryah)

nāzanin-am – ‘Sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘The light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara). 

sheereen-am – ‘Sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

>'insert person’s name<' + joon (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean ‘dear’. So, ‘Shah joon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

**Other names/nickname/titles/things:**

A ghrá – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)

A ghrá mo chroí - 'My heart's beloved, my darling’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Âbjé – ‘Sister’ informal version (Persian)

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Bakalawa bil Jibna - A mouthwateringly delicious Libyan version of baklava with a sweet cream filling.
Bríomhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

Cythonna – One of the most ancient Kryptonian gods, said to be the female half of Rao. Protector of those unjustly persecuted, as well as patron to monsters and non-biologic life forms (such as Kryptonian Companions/Ka’dahs).

Daxamites - An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people, ruled by strength/the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow altered by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.

Dios mío! – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

Durlan - The Durlans are a rare extraterrestrial species, a race of shapeshifting beings from the planet Durla. Ryah is a Durlan, as was her guardian, Veya, who died protecting the child in the depths of Tehran’s Evin Prison.

Dűst doxtar – ‘Girlfriend’ (Persian)

Dűst pesar - ‘Boyfriend’ (Persian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Euryleia – ‘Woman Wanderer’ or ‘Wide Wandering’ - Dr. Naomi Young’s Amazon name

Fereshteh: Slang for saying that a girl is perfect, desired… hot, to die for, an angel. Historically used as a Persian girl’s name, simply meaning ‘angel’. (Persian)

H’ronmeer - the Martian God of Death and Fire, referred to by a faction as the God of Life and Light. (Martian)

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)

In’ah – Ancient, lost word for ‘daughter’ - what Myka calls Kara (Kryptonese),

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

M’eudail – ‘My darling’ or ‘my dear’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Ma’har - Ancient, lost word for ‘mother’ - what Kara calls Myka (Kryptonese)

Mi amor – ‘My love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)
Mi lucero – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Mi Sol – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn - Thought & Memory (Old Norse)

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Nâmzad – ‘fiancée (f), betrothed (Persian)

Norooz - Persian New Year (Persian)

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Oea - This ancient city was founded by the Phoenicians in the seventh century BC, was ruled at one time or another by the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Italians, and Muslims. It came to be known as Tripoli during the 9th century (Libyco-Berber)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity (from Ancient Freek)

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Seanmháthair – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced shan a WAW her (Irish/Gaelic)

Señora – Is a polite term used to address a woman. The Spanish-language equivalent of Ma’am, Ms., or Mrs. (Spanish)

Telkhines - In myth were mysterious sea-god magicians and smiths native to the islands of Keos (Ceos) and Rhodes. They invented the art of metalworking and were said to have crafted many powerful items and weapons for the gods. The truth is even stranger. These tall, lanky, extraterrestrials command science at a level that seems like magic and have lived since the beginning of time. They served ‘The Makers’, who existed long before Krypton, or the gods, and abandoned them on earth. Zeus and the Greek gods gave them refuge and protection long ago in return for their service.

Tieguanyin - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

Tratung – khrag ‘thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Trípolis – Tripoli, the capital and largest city in Libya (from Ancient Greek)

Tuath Dé Danann - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced Thoo-a day Du-non (Irish/Gaelic)

Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’.
‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara
calls Alex)

**Vakur** – A powerful (and rare) soul-devouring, evil, shape-shifting parasitic alien species from another universe. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.

**Valar** – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Valaraukar** – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Vallerian** – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshiped, or traded.

Vâysâ – ‘Stop’ (Persian)

**Wan** - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

**Xwâhar** - ‘Sister’ - the formal form. (Persian)

**Zafaraniyeh** – The affluent neighborhood in the northern part of the Iranian capital of Tehran where Shahrazad grew up. (Persian)

**Zhuyin** – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)

…………………………………………

Chapter End Notes

**The Wrap:**
Kara and Winn’s friendship is blossoming! When she’ll feel comfortable enough to reveal the truth and ask for his help with her Battle Armor is anyone’s guess. The end of D138… I hated doing it, but things change. At least Black Knight will stick around as Team Archangel’s handler at the D.E.O. and their friend. Kara and Alex's bond has grown to include Ryah, and while Shah has always been part of it, she finally has allowed herself to embrace the fact that she is too. Until next time!

**Next Up:**
**Chapter 34:** “Fallen Angel” – Where we start off by rewinding the clock to ten days after Kara’s pod crashed on Earth. Then, we return to the present where our sunny Kryptonian and Alex are preparing for their wedding. As the big day approaches, Kara and Hank come to an understanding about Ryah and a long-lost family member makes a surprise appearance.
Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming! Every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me.

Attributions:

The Chelsea
Kara’s extra-long Heritage Burberry Trench Coat she was wearing the day she ‘accidently’ ran into Winn.

Overwatch
The video game Kara and Winn were playing on Xbox One. The game is developed and published by Blizzard Entertainment.

You and Whose Army - Radiohead
This song is playing in my mind while D138 is under siege, and as Amanda sacrifices her agency and her career to protect Kara and Team Archangel. She goes down fighting, not beaten. This track is off Radiohead's brilliant album, Amnesiac. The Gloaming was also a good choice as it evokes the mood I was looking for - The Gloaming

Bakalawa bil Jibna - recipe
The mouthwateringly delicious Libyan version of baklava with a sweet cream filling that Kara, Alex, and Shah made for Safiya.

Rodger Dodger (phrase)

The National Maritime Intelligence Center (N.M.I.C.)
Located in Suitland, Maryland, southeast of Washington D.C., and where Sam’s main administrative office at the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) and is located. ONI is the leading provider of maritime intelligence to the U.S. Navy and joint warfighting forces, as well as national decision makers and other consumers in the Intelligence Community, and has a broader covert operational mandate on Earth 39 than on our world.

A reminder about How I deal with time and 'years'
For good or ill, I decided not to date this story and don’t use calendar years to denote time; rather, I use Kara's human birthday (September 5th) to determine the ‘Year’ of the story for each chapter. So Sept. 5th is the start of each ‘year’.

Birthdays
Kara’s human birthday is Sept 5. Remember to add +2 years to arrive at Kara’s actual Earth-equivalent age. Alex’s birthday is Oct 17.

......................................................
Fallen Angel

Chapter Summary

Where we start off by rewinding the clock to ten days after Kara’s pod crashed on Earth. Then, return to the present (nearly a year since last chapter) where our sunny Kryptonian and Alex are preparing for their wedding. As the big day approaches, Kara and Hank come to an understanding about Ryah... and a long-lost family member makes a surprise appearance.

Chapter Notes

Warning: A past rape is mentioned in this chapter but there are no specifics, and it’s not any of our girls.

We begin in Year One and then move to Year Eight, two days before the wedding, which will take place on June 15th.

Kara; is twenty-two-years old (24 in Kryptonian years), and has completed her Master of Science (M.S.) degree from Columbia. When not sharing parental duties with Alex for their nine-year-old daughter, Ryah, she can be found working as a contractor (writer, editor, and often project manager) at CatCo’s National City Tribune under Steven Colliers, being the city’s Guardian Angel, at the D.E.O., the The Agency (as Senior Cryptographic Analyst Kara Daniels), or helping out the Ghost Ship (the USS Zumwalt) with critical missions.

Alex is twenty-three and more committed than ever as second in command (Assistant Director) to Hank at the D.E.O. By this time, her role at The Sagan Institute (as well as Naomi’s) has become mostly a cover. She still joins in the occasional op with the USS Zumwalt.

Shah is also twenty-three and spends her time: working at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL); going on missions with her bondmates for the D.E.O. or the USS Zumwalt; hanging out with her family at their loft; working with Marjorie on the farm; training Ryah or just being a good aunt/mother for the girl; exploring her role as a priestess of Rao; or with Tyson Phelps, when can make it to town.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Intermezzo

Let’s go back in time…
(Eight years ago. Ten days after Kara’s arrival on Earth)

June 25th – Year One

The San Juan Islands - Washington State’s Puget Sound

North of Orcus Island’s Moran State Park and Mount Constitution, just off the island’s coast.

2311 Hours UTC -8, Sunday night, U.S. West Coast Time

That moonless June night was unnaturally cold and strangely quiet. There was a stillness about the world that felt somehow magical; as if time itself had stretched beyond the horizon and the universe was holding its breath. Waiting for… something.

For what, was anyone’s guess.

As the Galactica eased to a halt on a placid shimmer of black glossy water, the sleek Chris-Craft Commander’s silhouette was barely discernable against the dark starlit backdrop of Orcus Island’s rocky tree-lined northern shore… almost as if it wasn’t even there.

Quite a feat for an over-forty-foot vessel.

Within the high-tech, mostly powered-down bridge, Lilly Chambers leaned back in the pilot’s chair as she felt the tremor of her ship’s heavy anchor touch bottom. Bathed in starlight, she looked up through the cabin’s wide rooftop windows to where the Milky Way spilled like a brilliant splash of color across the sky...

Her breath hitched in her throat as she took in the wonder of it all.

As she had when she’d been a child, the now thirty-year-old imagined herself soaring up to join the cosmic dance… becoming one with the billions of radiant stars. For a few moments, time slipped away from her as she savored the view, and was lulled by the soft, rhythmic lapping of water on the ship’s gently rocking hull.

Lilly sighed as she eventually tore her gaze from the majesty above and shifted forward in her seat, preparing to leave the relative warmth of the cabin’s cockpit. After checking the instruments one last time, she carefully made her way outside through the vessel’s sliding glass doors to the stern where she was greeted with a much-improved celestial view.

Despite the crisp, unnaturally frigid, thirty-four-degree air that nipped at her reddened cheeks and the wisps of her own frozen breath (along with the scent of the evergreens) that tickled her nose, the rest of her was still quite toasty warm.

She’d come prepared for the weather.

Before leaving her house that night Lilly had bundled up in a comfy, waterproof Patagonia jacket and packed a big, piping-hot thermos of coffee along with a satchel full of snacks. Of course, she’d also brought along her favorite telescope, not that it could help keep her warm… just happily entertained.

The expert sailor had then plotted a course, and deftly maneuvered her ship’s streamlined frame less
than an hour down the coastline of the island, to a particularly light-pollution-free location off the rocky northeast shore…

She’d even gone the last mile using only sensors, no lights.

Now back to the stern of the ship and perched atop the L-shaped sofa, Lilly rubbed her hands together and began to set up the tripod of her scope for the late-night vigil she’d planned. After attaching the telescope, the eager sailor pushed herself up to a sitting position and spoke to the 

Galactica’s AI, “So, you’ve been quiet. Too stunned by the fact that we made it here safe and sound to speak? I even managed not to hit anything. Worrywart.”

“I am… relieved, ma’am.” A calm and well-mannered English voice, very much like Daniel Craig’s 007, seemed to emanate from all around her.

“I’m sure you are,” Lilly smirked. “James, the helm is yours, but please stay in low power mode until I say otherwise. It’s too beautiful a night for stargazing to ruin it with lights, or noise.”

“Of course. And yes, it is exquisite tonight.” She thought her companion was finished, but after a moment he spoke once again, this time in a dreamy, faraway voice…

“Silently, one by one, in the infinite meadows of heaven,
Blossomed the lovely stars, the forget-me-nots of the angels…”

Lilly smiled as she crossed and rubbed her arms, it was a lovely verse. “Been reading Longfellow, huh?”

“Yes, the quote is from his poem Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie. I found the words to be quite beautiful, and they seemed… appropriate. Though I would caution, the poem in its entirety is quite depressing.”

She chuckled. “Well said, as always, and I couldn’t agree more.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” James surprised Lilly with the tone of his reaction to her praise; he almost seemed to hum his response.

She grinned. The Galactica had been blessed with every high-tech bell and whistle her legal settlement from Lord Technologies could buy, including James... and her ship’s evolving AI always managed to surprise her…

Well, honestly, he astounded her.

Before they first ‘met’ she’d nearly decided to forgo allowing his installation… but something about being one of the first people in the world to experience interacting with an experimental, bleeding edge, non-human super intelligence intrigued her. Plus, there were no strings attached.

In truth, James, as she’d affectionately named him, had turned out to be a fine, no, a wonderful companion…

He was surprisingly thoughtful, always looking out for her, and had never betrayed her… unlike her human supposed ‘friends’.
The two of them made a good team.

The settlement Lilly had received for the ‘accident’ (she couldn’t help but huff with contempt at the word) that severed her spine three-years before had eventually given her a wondrous ship, James, and fifteen million U.S. dollars after taxes. The money had enabled her to pay off every penny of her extensive medical and legal bills, all of the old debt on her family’s failed business and residence, even open her dream café in Friday Harbor, make some prudent investments, and squirrel away a decent nest egg in the bank.

Still, not near a fair trade in her book but it was better than being a statistic: just another homeless veteran out on the street, as she almost was at more than one point during her protracted year-and-a-half-long legal battle with Lord Tech.

Was she still bitter?

Honestly? No.

She’d gotten past all of that business, and was trying to put the trauma and the entire Hell of the experience behind her.

Of course, she’d never forgotten the horrific explosion, or the pain and despair that followed: being forced to leave the Navy and not being able to fly jets anymore; all the damn rehab; losing her friends; Caleb breaking up with her because the dickless coward couldn’t deal with a girlfriend who couldn’t walk, or have sex the way they used to… the way he wanted to (because it was all about him); relearning how to do almost everything in her life; and of course, the legal drama…

The ironic thing was when it was all said and done her lawyers had been useless. After over a year of bleeding money and making no headway in court, it was Maxwell Lord himself who’d saved the day when he’d paid her an unscheduled visit one Saturday night.

The irritatingly handsome billionaire playboy had wheeled her out of a local dive bar half a bottle of tequila in and drove her back to her house in his Maserati to sober up (to this day she still felt terrible for throwing up in that magnificent car).

They’d sat in her living room drinking coffee (that he brewed… in her crappy little kitchen) and, off the record and against the strong advice of his counsel, the haunted man opened up to her. About how, from the first day he’d been informed of his employee’s criminal actions, her case had kept him up at night.

He’d remained silent as long as he could, but his conscience wouldn’t allow the ‘travesty’ of her situation to continue… and made it perfectly clear how badly he wanted (needed), to ‘make things right’ with her.

His exact words?

“Tell me what you need.”

God, he’d been so shockingly sincere.

That’s when her anger drained away, and, since there was no way to turn back the clock, or know what demons from Max’s own past drove his actions, she agreed to discuss taking his guilt money (a lot of it) and accepted his personal apology.

Of course, there’d been no official admission of guilt, responsibility, or anything public… only that ‘a settlement had been reached’. 
The doctors said it was a miracle she was even alive.

Yeah... I'm sooo lucky...

Maxwell Lord had given her his word that the man who was responsible ‘would pay’. It was kind of chilling at the time… the way he said it, the look in his eyes. And, while she hadn’t been completely sure if his words had merely been to placate her, something in her gut told her that he meant it.

It was only three months later that the billionaire texted her a link to an article from the Central City Citizen about a terrible accident involving the man. It turned out that after being fired by Lord he hadn’t been able to find work anywhere and was driving drunk when his car plummeted into a ravine, killing him on impact.

A brief thought had flickered in her mind that maybe Max was somehow responsible… but she’d brushed it aside. Honestly, even if he was… she really didn’t want to know.

She just felt relieved.

The tears came after.

Back then she was still trying to figure Max out, and couldn’t believe he had the darkness within him necessary to intentionally have someone killed... taken to court maybe, even harassed, but flat out murdered?

No.

He’d never been anything but kind to her, and a good listener.

During the settlement, on top of the pile of cold hard cash, which he’d openly admitted he had ‘enough to burn’ (he’d chuckled), he remembered a little detail that she’d once mentioned in their conversations. That her dream was to have her own ship to navigate between her parents’ house on Orcus Island and the café she wanted to open in Friday Harbor, and in her free-time explore the Puget Sound and the West Coast…

So, of course, on top of the money, he offered her one of his own, the Galactica.

The interesting part was how Max seemed so delighted to give all of it to her. As if he could buy his way out of his remorse… not that he even was aware that was what was happening. That said, Lilly believed that his intentions were in the right place, which was good enough for her.

She’d accepted the money, the Galactica, and James, (along with a free lifetime maintenance contract with Lord Tech) from an overjoyed Maxwell Lord, who made the three scowling lawyers who’d come with him to her house wait in the car as the two of them sipped lemonade in her messy little kitchen and signed the paperwork.

He’d also brought Champagne, and they’d celebrated out of plastic cups.

God bless him, he didn’t complain once.

And it wasn’t just that…

He’d consistently sent her flowers and gifts on her birthday and holidays throughout her ordeal, paid for her amazing personal physical therapist (Bonnie, who kicked her ass four days a week!), any experimental treatments or unexpected medical bills not covered by insurance (including Rover, her fancy new wheelchair that walked up stairs!),
The charming man hadn’t just disappeared either; he’d stayed in touch. And even though she knew their relationship was built on his guilt (and maybe because she was lonely for friendship of any kind), she looked forward to his calls, and occasional invitations to events she had no business going to…

*Oh well, c’est la vie, as mother always said… ‘When life hands you lemons…’*

She pulled her mind back to the present, and her purpose for coming out on the water that night...

*The stars.*

The *Galactica* was running silent, which normally would be a little dangerous, but even with all of her vessel’s lights and most of the electronics shut down Lilly still felt safer than if she was sitting at home on her couch … after all, she had James as her co-pilot.

*What could possibly go wrong?*

After midnight, she took a break from staring longingly up through her tripod-mounted telescope and scooted back on the chilly cushions of the ship’s rear seats to sip at her lazily steaming cup of coffee.

It was then that she glimpsed a pinpoint flash of light in the eastern sky, and shortly after, there was a second flare. Quickly using her arms to slide her body forward, she refocused and aimed her telescope at what had become two distinct streaks.

She initially thought the objects were meteors, but quickly realized that they were actually moving with power, erratically swerving around each other, and getting closer!

Lilly pushed away from the scope, grabbed her binoculars, and reacquired the lights as she adjusted herself on the cushions. They moved like angry bees as if attacking one another. Seconds later, the objects veered in her direction and plummeted toward her ship.

She dropped her lenses as the two decidedly human-like figures fell from the sky and slammed into the Sound less than fifty yards away! They struck the water with such force that she felt the impact like a jolt, and powerful waves rippled outwards from the crash point, wildly rocking the *Galactica* and knocking her back on the seat.

The air itself felt heavy around her and roared with pressure.

James speedily brought some of the systems back online and stabilized the craft with maneuvering thrusters. “Ma’am, there is great danger, you are at risk. We must…”

“Shhh! James! Don’t move, and not a sound. Record all of this, please!”

“Understood.” He whispered in a nearly imperceptible voice.

Lilly couldn’t believe what she was seeing! Peeking above the back of the bench seat she observed first one person, and then another, erupt from under the water and soar straight up into the sky!

Both were dressed in dark, form-fitting bodysuits of some kind… and they were flying! Hovering actually, and the water beneath the combatants seemed to be displaced… as if each was encased in a powerful sphere of invisible energy, or a far heavier gravity surrounded each of them.

They faced off some distance part, suspended thirty feet or so above the dark, glistening surface of the Sound. They were shouting at each other in a melodious language that Lilly could not recognize. What she *could* discern was that one of them was a man, and the other a woman… and they did not
sound happy.

Not at all.

Did she just call him, ‘Non’? What a strange name, if it’s a name at all…

The explosive battle that ensued between the two godlike beings immediately after that was both swift and violent… and would have been unbelievable if Lilly hadn’t witnessed it herself. She shook her head and blinked to assure herself that what she was seeing was real.

Holy crapola, this is really happening!

Their thunderclap exchange of blows sent repeated shockwaves through the air that shook her to the bone, and they hurled fire at each other, as well as shooting what looked like laser beams from their eyes. On shore, trees split, shattered, burned, and rocks flew through the air when their bodies pummeled the earth as they grappled.

As the fighting drew closer to her ship, Lilly was able to observe the woman more clearly, and she was… beautiful, stunningly so! Regal, powerful, with long dark hair that had a stark streak of white running all the way through it, and eyes of shimmering blue (like the sea) that glowed with fire.

She fought with inhuman grace… determined, focused, and skilled. But the man, Non, appeared unhinged and attacked her with a hate-fueled ferocity that seemed to be giving him the upper hand as the battle raged on.

Lilly started looking for something, anything she could use as a weapon to defend herself with. Which, of course, was ridiculous… could anything on Earth protect her from such power? Regardless, she kept searching anyway.

As the fight became even more intense she’d finally acquired a flare gun and held the weapon against her chest at the ready as she lay peering over the seatback to view the struggle. She’d been an expert marksman in her Navy days, back when she was Lieutenant Chambers, but it had been a few years since she’d fired anything… even an employee at her coffee shop.

“Ma’am.” Lilly jumped when James spoke to her again, this time in a nervous whisper. She would have laughed at the absurdity of the situation if she weren’t living it. “Shall I get us clear of this conflict now? Please?”

“Jeezus… James… No, not now, it’s too dangerous. I don’t think they’ve noticed us yet, so let’s not give them a reason to. Stay dark… for the moment.”

“Understood.” He grumbled, obviously in disagreement with her decision. “In that case, I do apologize for my vessel’s lack of defensive capabilities…”

“It’s okay… wait, what? ‘Defensive capabilities’? Was that even an option?”

“Well…” He actually stammered.

Then Lilly was startled when, out of nowhere, Non streaked straight up into the sky and then hurtled right back down to strike the woman like a bomb. There was the sound of a great detonation, and she cried out in pain as her body was driven down into the huge rocks scattered along the shore.

The Galactica rocked violently once again, but Lilly clung desperately to the back of the couch and kept watching.
The dark beauty was dazed and barely moving, and the crazed madman’s eyes lit up as he prepared to strike for what Lilly felt would be the last time.

He said the beautiful name ‘Astra’ with a kind of cold finality as he raised his fist high, but the fearless woman would not give up. She stared defiantly up into his face and uttered a musical string of words that sounded pretty much like she told him where to stick it.

Even lying there at his mercy, prepared to die as she was, Astra appeared unbroken.

That was the moment when something illogical, instinctual, and yes, protective, inside of Lilly snapped, and she pushed herself up over the top of the seats, aimed her flare gun at Non, and pulled the trigger.

*Three, two, one…* “Over here, asshole!” She yelled at the top of her lungs directed at Non.

The flare had already reached him by the time he’d whipped around to glare in her direction, and he was struck with a direct hit of a brilliant burst of flames that consumed his face and upper body and caused him to jerk back from his intended target!

He wasn’t really injured, but Lilly’s diversion gave Astra time to counter-attack. The air was rent by the sound of a sonic boom as the beauty struck with her hand like a spear! Her arm entered Non’s chest and came out of his back, spraying blood along with chunks of flesh and bone behind him.

He threw his head back and screamed so loudly that Lilly had to cover her ears, and then he went limp for a moment. She hoped beyond hope that the crazy man was dead… but he wasn’t. She saw him twitch and watched as the inferno in his eyes came back to life like a nuclear pulse, and he turned to fix his vehemence on her!

“Uh oh…” *I’m so dead.*

Then Astra moved like a blur… accompanied by a gust of cold wind and a spray of water, she appeared directly in front of Lilly, placing herself like a shield between her and the searing beams of death erupting from Non’s eyes.

The dark-haired goddess was babbling over her shoulder at Lilly in her melodious language, gesturing for her to get down on the deck when she took the full brunt of his attack.

Lilly’s heart was in her throat as one of the arcs of fire cut all the way through Astra’s side, coming out her back and over the starboard bulwark of the ship. Her protector cried out, doubled over, and dropped like a stone from where she hovered… silently disappearing beneath the undulating surface of the inky, freezing water.

The bleeding madman then cast his fiery glare into the ripples where Astra had fallen, waited, and once he seemed satisfied, shifted his menacing stare once again to Lilly.

It was terrifying.

She didn’t dare move or even blink, and her heart was beating so fast… she thought she was going to die for sure. So did James, apparently: her decidedly human-sounding AI was frantically calling for her to get below decks so he could ram Non.

But the evil bastard, who was watching her like a cat toying with its prey, just smirked and mouthed what she was certain was an arrogant ‘thank you’ in English. He moved to place a hand over the hole in his bleeding chest and grunted in agony before throwing one last spiteful glance towards the water where Astra had disappeared.
The madman then cursed something unintelligible as he staggered drunkenly upward into the sky and vanished into the darkness.

“Damn!” Lilly cursed, shaking with the adrenaline pumping through her system.

Her heart was still pounding, but her mind was clear and working overtime. A normal person would probably have been in shock from what she’d just witnessed, been frightened… not feeling a rush. But Lilly had never been ‘normal’, even as a child. Her mom had always said that she was attracted to danger like bees to honey, which is probably why she’d fallen in love with free climbing and diving for that matter.

She had no time to reminisce…

Lilly huffed and rolled off the cushions to drop down onto the teak slats of the deck. All she could think about was the incredible (and kind of terrifying) woman who’d dropped out of the sky and saved her life.

Astra could still be alive down under the surface, but would certainly drown if she did nothing … of course, that was if the goddess needed to breathe. Until proven otherwise, Lilly had to assume her beautiful protector required oxygen… and that she needed to be saved.

She knew what she needed to do, and scrambled using her hands and elbows to pull herself across the deck to the ship’s equipment lockers.

It took her a minute but Lilly soon had her jacket off, mini diving breather half on, and various other items out of their compartments, including mini-multidirectional jets to strap to her sides, and a weighted diving belt tossed over her shoulder.

She strapped a knife to one arm, and then pulled herself and all her gear back to the dive platform at the rear of the ship, where she began unspooling cable from the mechanical winch there.

Thank God she kept herself in such great shape.

She checked her dive watch for time… Astra had been under the water for over six and a half minutes…

Too damn long.

“Move it, Lilly, move it!”

It was times like this she missed her legs…

Fuck that! What am I thinking? I don’t need them. I don’t fucking need them. She was sweating, and she had to take a quick second to steady her hands from shaking.

She then latched a large metal grappling hook onto the end of the cable, gambling that the indestructible woman couldn’t be harmed by such an annoyance, and tossed it into the water in the area where Astra had fallen to begin dredging.

“Ma’am, allow me to assist. Try to your right, two-o’clock, I’m getting a ping on radar.” James still seemed a little stressed, but way calmer than before. She’d talk to him about his outburst later… if they had a later.

As Lilly took a moment to fiddle with and test the powerful LED lights on her mask and left wrist she shouted, “On it! James, the transoms!” And at her word the ship was suddenly floating on a
“By your command, ma’am. Shall I also deploy the dive lift?”

“Yes, please… and plot a course home for as soon, and I mean as soon as I’m back on board with Astra. Turn off the transoms, and run dark. I don’t want lights or anything detectable from the skies, do you understand?”

Lilly already heard the soft thump of the stealth helos (the ‘hounds’ as she knew they were called) warming up, and the rumble of powerful engines as the F/A 18s prepared to take off from the Navy base on Whidbey. She knew what it meant; she used to fly them… they’d be looking for Astra. And if they found her, dead or alive, one thing was certain… Lilly would never see her again.

That is so not going to happen.

She about jumped when James responded, “I understand completely, ma’am. Course plotted, and countermeasures deployed… now.” There was suddenly a low, electronic hum, like feedback in the ship’s speakers, and then three pulses, each lasting for a few brief seconds.

What was that? And what countermeasures? Oh Hell, I’m out of time. Something else to ask about later...

“But,” James continued as she worked, obviously displeased about something, and very, very worried, “If I may be so bold as to say, ma’am, you have no suit or partner, there is a strong current below three meters, and the water temperature is a balmy 46.3 degrees Fahrenheit. Regardless of your great strength, and skill, hypothermia will set in quickly, and I have no physical way to assist you. I implore you, please… Lilly, I… I mean… Ms. Chambers, it is my duty to caution you against taking this dangerous course action. Please wait… allow me sufficient time to summon the proper authorities…”

“Noted, James, but overruled. And I’m so not arguing about this right now, no offense. Look… I’m sorry, but if I wait… Astra will die before anyone could even get here, no matter how indestructible she is. Plus, we have no idea who’d actually show up if you made that call. Probably not anyone helpful.” She suppressed a small grin as she labored, tickled as always by her velvet-voiced companion’s overactive concern for her safety.

“Trust me. Just keep radio silent, and be ready to get us the Hell out of here as soon as I have our guest onboard. Got it? Oh, also, have the internal lift on standby so I can transfer her belowdecks quickly… and turn the heat up in the master cabin, okay?”

“Of course, ma’am… and since there appears to be little chance of talking you out of this risky endeavor, good luck. I would be extremely… distressed if you were to perish. I will be watching, and ready.”

Distressed huh? Wow.

“Thank you, James, I appreciate it.” She said a bit breathlessly as she felt the dragline tug on something heavy below.

Astra!

I hope.

Lilly steadied herself sitting backward on the lip of dive deck, and ran through her mental checklist
as she always did before taking a plunge… this time, though, it was only once, and with a great deal more urgency.

She adjusted her mask and verified oxygen levels, then checked that her knife was secure, her legs were bound tightly together, and that both lamps were functional. Next, the expert diver tested the controls strapped on her other wrist that were linked to both her maneuvering jets as well as the Galactica’s main hydraulic winch.

Once she was sure enough that everything was at least working she snapped herself to the cable that extended down into the glowing water using a carabineer attached to a sturdy length of cord that fed into a miniature windlass mechanism on her belt.

_I am so not going to drown tonight._

Finally ready, she whispered a little prayer to whatever gods were listening, took a deep breath, and shoved herself off of the deck into the freezing embrace of the Puget Sound.

Somewhere below, Lilly’s fallen angel needed her.

……………………………

_OKay, back to current time…_

_June 13th – Year Eight_

_Midvale – The Danvers’ Residence._

_Two days before Kara and Alex’s wedding._

_1451 Hours UTC -5, Thursday afternoon, U.S. East Coast Time_

Hank Henshaw had broken out in a cold sweat, his pulse was pounding like a drum as he leaned back against the wall to steady himself for a moment. The veteran soldier swallowed hard, and his great paw of a hand paused above the brass knob of the door to his right as he listened to the sound of muffled screams coming from behind the thick wooden barrier.

“ Gods of Mars!” He cursed under his breath, not remotely prepared to face the horrors that surely awaited him within.

“Hank, just go in there. The kids are going to love you.” Alex said with a smile, her hazel eyes crinkling at the edges as she stood up on her tippy toes to deliver a quick, Kryptonian-warm peck on his cheek. “I have to get back for my fitting before poor Winn has an aneurysm. You’ve got this, sir, and… thank you.”

And with that rousing vote of confidence, his chuckling second-in-command hurried off along the hallway of the Danvers’ Midvale house, disappearing down the stairs in a flicker of soft flames and Kryptonian super speed.

“Great.” He grumbled. “Whatever happened to ‘no one left behind’?”
In his over three hundred years on Earth, J’onn J’onzz had never once had to deal with human children as a caretaker and felt completely ill-equipped for his current mission. Alex had practically begged him to watch Ryah, as well as Marjorie’s eleven-year-old girls, Taylor and Melinda, while everyone was busy with Kara and Winn putting the finishes touches on their wedding attire.

Hank’s own beautiful, flowing garments had already been ‘fitted’, so he had no valid reason to refuse… plus he’d found that he could never say no to either of his girls: Alex’s soft green eyes and Kara’s pout were irresistible, his own personal Kryptonite.

Besides, since arriving in Midvale the previous day, he’d found it best to find ways to be helpful to the harried couple, while staying mostly out of the way. The intricacies of Alex and Kara’s impending bonding ceremony were as complex as any tactical op he’d run at the D.E.O., and a complete mystery to him.

With less than two days until the blessed event, he was glad his Senior Communications Officer Susan Vasquez, Myka, Eliza, Naomi Young, Steven Colliers, and Shah’s incredible daughter Ada were all there to help oversee the logistical preparations. There was even a contingent on security detail, including Paul (a.k.a. Black Knight), Aeryn (a.k.a. Selene), Jack (Team Archangel’s head of security), Shannon, Devi, Aya (as well as her deadly Amazon mate, Smyrna), Dante, and half a dozen armed, plain-clothed D.E.O. agents.

Okay, he’d stalled long enough.

Hank took a deep breath and opened the door.

The scene that greeted him within the large bedroom Eliza had set up for the three girls was total chaos. Toys, blankets, books, stuffed animals, and articles of clothing were scattered everywhere, and the children were in the middle of a pillow fight. A cloud of downy white feathers drifted about the room like a snowstorm.

As he stepped across the threshold, the screaming, and all movement stopped as the three bug-eyed kids all turned and looked up at him. It was as if his very presence had frozen time.

The calm didn’t last long; only seconds later Ryah’s adorable face erupted into a huge toothy smile and she yelled, “Uncle Hank!” Then, after sharing a devious smirk with the twins, she growled, “Attack!” and all Hell broke loose once again as the girls all rushed him, screeching a battle cry that sounded a lot like “El mayarah!” with their Nerf guns and stuffed animals held high.

He went down under their adorable onslaught and a chorus of giggles.

Later that same evening...

Much later, after the sun had set, and all the final fittings for their early-arrived guests, bridesmaids, and groomsmen were complete, Kara quietly shimmered upstairs and cracked open the door to the girls’ bedroom.

Peeking inside, she scanned the dimly lit space with her enhanced vision and was surprised by the lack of devastation.
She’d expected the room to look like a tornado had hit it, but instead everything was neat and tidy, with the twins tucked in and asleep on one bed, and Ryah, in the form of a red fox, curled up on Hank’s broad chest as he leaned back against the thick wooden headrest of the other.

Kara tilted her head to the side and smiled. Her daughter had revealed herself, as planned. *Thank Rao.*

The Kryptonian crossed her fingers, hoping that Hank’s reaction to finding out their daughter was a shape-changing alien would be positive. *Speak of the devil*… the big man wasn’t asleep, but wide awake, and grinning back at her in the dark.

The subtle red glow that briefly emanated from his eyes gave him away.

*When were you two delinquents going to tell me?* His gruff voice asked in her thoughts.

Kara blushed but silently appeared at his bedside. *When we were ready, and when you were ready. Now seemed like a good day.*

She noticed that the great warrior’s eyes were red and a little puffy, he’d been crying. Her heart ached for him, his loneliness... and as she knelt beside the bed to take one of his massive hands in her own she rubbed it against her warm cheek.

He eagerly grasped at the connection. *She knew I was Martian... has she always...?*

Yes. Kara’s thoughts were soothing. *Her people can sense and identify all living things around them... it’s how she can so accurately transform. From the moment we met, Ryah knew I wasn’t human, but could not place my race until I told her what I was; she’d never met a Kryptonian before. She can’t innately read minds like you do, only know our forms and natural abilities (not our super-powered ones thankfully).*

Hank swallowed hard. *She took the form of a Green Martian child, Kara... to make me h... happy.*

Kara could tell the experience had ripped opened old pain and memories that still haunted her friend. *Oh J’onn, I’m so sorry. She didn’t mean to hurt you. We just encouraged her to show you her powers, so you could know her... to give up our last secret before Alex and I said our vows.*

The big man sniffed and then smiled. *It’s all right. While I can’t say seeing her appear before me, like one of my own daughters, wasn’t a shock... it was also wonderful. She is a blessing... a beautiful and special child. You and Alex risked a great deal by revealing her true nature to me. The D.E.O. has protocols...*

Yes... but we also know our trust is not misplaced.

He sighed, chuckling quietly under his breath. *I suppose it isn’t. We’ll keep her safe.*

Kara squeezed his hand. *El mayarah, J’onn. Stronger together. You’re part of our family, you have been for a long time... Space Dad.* She giggled and then paused to carefully consider what she was about to whisper in his thoughts next. *You know, Alex asking you to give her away tomorrow? That’s a big deal. You know that, right?*

Yes... I do, and I am both honored and grateful. It’s been a very long time since I was part of a family; so long, in fact, I had nearly forgotten what it was like. He smiled and gently smoothed the sleeping Ryah’s soft fur as his eyes glazed once again.

They sat quietly for a time, just holding hands, petting Ryah, and gazing out the window as the warm
glow of evening faded into twilight.

Then, as the stars began to slowly appear in the darkening skies, J’onn’s thoughts once more entered Kara’s mind. He said, *She will require training. Her shape-changing ability is powerful, but her technique is raw.*

Kara burst into a smile, and her sapphire eyes began to glow with a subtle inner fire as she whispered, “We’d hoped you’d say that. Talk to Shah after the wedding.”

*June 14th – Year Eight*

*Midvale – The Danvers’ Residence.*

*One day before the wedding.*

*0743 Hours UTC -5, Friday morning, U.S. East Coast Time*

They had planned on heading directly over to the orchard for that morning’s rehearsals, but Hank had other plans for them. He’d insisted that there was something important about to happen… a surprise that Kara, along with Alex, Shah, and Ada, needed be present for that morning at the Midvale house.

"Rehearsals can wait.” He’d said with a gentle smile, and cut off Kara’s inevitable protest by adding, “I cleared it with Callie. Just trust me on this, Kara Zor-El.”

She was startled by his use of her Kryptonian name and noticed his nervous excitement… something strange was going on.

Kara squeezed Alex’s hand tighter as he directed them all out to the yard after breakfast, and she scanned the area around the house for any clues… *Interesting.* Her thoughts reached out to Alex, Shah, and Ada. *He has our entire security detail here, and on full alert… tactical gear, weapons, magical wards, the works.*

*He’s either expecting hardcore trouble or overzealously guarding against it.* Alex mused. *Anyone know what our boss is up to… or worried about?*

*I’m sworn to secrecy.* Ada admitted with a wince. They could feel her guilt through their shared connection.

*Ada! You're in on this?? What’s happening?* It was Alex interjecting, sounding a little upset.

*I’m so sorry! Aunties, mother… I know, but it’s not my secret to tell. Please don’t be mad, I had to help Susan and Hank with logistics. Kara’s niece’s tone was apologetic but firm. In five minutes it won’t matter anyway, she’s almost here.*

*She?* Kara asked with both Alex and Shah echoing…

Kara heard one of the D.E.O.’s sleek armored SUVs pull off the main road half a mile away, and she focused on it. Unfortunately, the vehicle was emitting some kind of sensory distortion field that
blocked both her enhanced hearing and X-Ray vision. Not fair... she pouted in all their thoughts, crossing her arms and glaring over at Hank.

Just to be safe, she adjusted her own aura like a veil... a cloak of obfuscation, hopefully making herself, Alex, Shah, and Ada undetectable to whatever, or whoever was in that vehicle... at least until she knew what she was dealing with.

Ada smiled and came over to hug and kiss both Kara and Alex, before slipping a hand into one of Shah’s. This is a gift... believe me.

And one of my last secrets, I promise. Hank broke into their thoughts, startling them, and pointedly grinned at Kara, who blushed. She had no idea he’d been listening into their silent conversation.

She huffed and said, “I don’t like surprises... they’re usually bad.” Before sticking out her lower lip to pout.

The deep sound of Hank’s deep joyful chuckle filled the air as they waited the final few torturous minutes for the vehicle to arrive. After the black SUV finally pulled up the Danvers’ long gravel driveway Vasquez popped out of the front passenger side and moved quickly to access its rear doors. She then used a controller of some kind to lower a high-tech looking device on a robotic lift down to the ground.

“Is that a wheelchair?” Shah asked in a whisper. “It looks more like a Transformer.”

“Yes, to both,” Ada replied, but to everyone’s frustration offered no additional explanation or details.

Shah rolled her eyes and bumped hips with her smirking daughter. “Rao save me from my stubborn child...” She grumbled.

Ada started giggling and leaned into her mother.

Once Susan had the chair free of the lift, the mechanism moved with her (under its own power and control), around to the rear passenger side of the vehicle that was facing them. Vasquez opened the door to reveal a woman in her (maybe) early-thirties sitting in the backseat. She was wearing a lovely sleeveless floral-patterned dress, and her curly copper colored hair touched the sun-kissed skin of her muscular shoulders.

Her inquisitive brown eyes greeted Vasquez like an old friend and, even from a distance it was impossible not to immediately like her.

Kara thought she was naturally quite pretty and had a kind, honest face... one you trusted immediately. With her deep tan, and toned, athletic upper body, she was definitely someone who enjoyed spending lots of time outside, doing physical things. Which was impressive considering it appeared that she was paralyzed below the waist.

The Kryptonian concealed the rush of sadness she felt... and pushed back the compulsion to shimmer over to offer her assistance.

The woman smiled at Susan and then glanced nervously in the group’s direction as she reached up, grasped the bar above the door in both hands, and lowered herself down out of her seat.

Independent, and strong too. Kara was impressed.

Who is she? They all asked each other in their shared thoughts.
At that moment, the rear door on the other side of the SUV opened, followed by a blur of movement. In a split second, a tall, graceful newcomer wrapped in a turquoise blue summer dress, had appeared to stand beside a completely unfazed Susan and began to assist the woman with the copper-colored hair into the fancy chair.

The tall one’s long mane of wavy dark brown (almost black) hair kept her face hidden, but her movements and demeanor were both regal and inhumanly graceful.

“She’s a Kryptonian! They all shouted in their minds... except for Kara, who’d stiffened in shock at the sight of her, and upon feeling the sudden call of her blood. To top it off (thanks to her hyper senses) she also began hearing the sound of music coming from her old bedroom.

Kryptonian music…

Kara stopped breathing.

*Rao!* That’s Aunt Astra’s song! From her beacon…

*No*…

*It cannot be*…

Tears were gathering in Kara eyes, and she’d involuntarily placed a shaking hand over her mouth. Both Alex and Shah had become quite concerned and began sending their thoughts to her, touching her arms, and her back… but Kara couldn’t focus on any of their words, only Astra’s song.

The elegant Kryptonian in the gorgeous blue dress, even from the angle they were at, looked so much like her aunt Astra… and her sister Alura, Kara’s birth mother. How was that possible?

*It can’t be*…

*She died, they all died, over thirty years ago!*

*This can’t be happening*…

*Astra?*

Kara was still not breathing as she observed the regal one nod politely to Vasquez, who stepped back to allow the woman to gently lift her joyfully-grinning companion in the flowery dress from the vehicle. The brave human draped her arms comfortably, and with an intimate familiarity, around the Kryptonian’s neck before snuggling in close as she was lifted, and playfully kissed the tall beauty on the cheek.

As she was set down in the wheelchair, the dark-haired woman who could not be Astra bent and kissed her back tenderly on the lips, nearly lifting the human out of her chair with their enthusiastic display.

When the Kryptonian straightened and turned to face Kara, a distinctive white streak running all the way through her long mane of hair became clearly visible, and Kara swooned against Alex as she started breathing again, dropped the veil of her aura, and words tumbled from her lips…

“Aunt Astra?! Is it you?”

Hearing Kara speak, the woman in blue focused in and stared at her in shock as if noticing her for the very first time and shuddered with quiet sobs as tears began spilling from her crystal blue eyes.
Kara quickly followed suit.

As the scene unfolded, the woman in the chair unwound her fingers from Astra’s and said, “Go to her.”

Without requiring any further prompting, there was another blur, accompanied by a gust of wind, and Kara’s Aunt Astra was holding her in a powerful embrace, lifting her niece off the ground and hugging her tight. “Little One! I thought you dead! For all of these years! I had given up all hope long ago… I did not know… I would not have stopped looking for you!”

Hank cautiously stepped forward, “General…” He began, but she cut him off…

“J’onn, please, just Astra, or Deputy, if you must.”

“Of course … Astra.” He smiled and nodded respectfully.

“Thank you…” She kept her grateful eyes on the Martian, who was still wearing Henshaw’s human form, as she hugged Kara even tighter… as if that were possible. “I can never repay you for what you’ve given back to me this day.”

The powerful woman then lowered her niece down, but neither of them would let go. Kara, her eyes filled with happy tears, glanced between the D.E.O. Director and her aunt in confusion. “I don’t understand…. how do you two know each other?”

They both looked as guilty as two kids caught with their hands in a cookie jar, but were saved by Astra’s copper-haired companion, who briskly rolled up to the group and interrupted. “Hi, pardon me. I’m Lilly, Lilly In-Ze Chambers… Astra’s bondmate, and wife…” The newcomer grinned sheepishly and shrugged her shoulders.

Kara must have looked completely shocked, because Lilly offered her a sympathetic smile and added, “I know this has to be really weird for you, Kara, as Astra’s niece and everything… and I’m sorry to… well… be part of the cause of it. Do you think we can all just go inside, and talk?”

………………..

Kara (her aunt’s beacon held in her fidgeting hands), with Alex to her left, and Astra to her right, sat on the couch in the brightly-lit living room of the Danvers’ Midvale home. Lilly remained in her mechanized wheelchair only inches from her elegant bondmate; the couple’s hands had sought each other out immediately and were clasped tightly together on Astra’s lap.

Kara had moved the coffee table and other obstacles out of the way for her new aunt to maneuver and Ada had used her super speed and heat vision to quickly boil water and bring out tea for the group.

Even Hank took a cup of Earl Grey as everyone settled in.

“So…” Alex said awkwardly. “How about introductions? I’m Alex Danvers, Kara’s bondmate and fiancée, and over there is our bondsister (at least that’s what I’ve started calling her), Shah Nazari with her amazing daughter (our lovely niece), Ada Zara-El Nazari. You both apparently already know Hank and Susan.” Alex gracefully nodded at her boss and Vasquez, and then gently shook Lilly’s offered hand.

Astra was openly fascinated and leaned in close to study Alex with a look of absolute wonder in her
crystalline blue eyes.

“You are human, but also Kryptonian… and of the House of El! We share blood, all of us! I feel it.” She stated, in open amazement, casting her curious gaze between Alex, Shah, and Ada. “Kara, how is this possible? It is as if I am back on Krypton, surrounded by our family.” She wiped more tears from her eyes, and (as if it were possible) Lilly held her hand even tighter.

Kara exhaled, and said, “It’s kind of a long story. I didn’t understand what would happen when I loaned my Ka’dah to Alex. Once Shatari merged with her she injected some of my DNA for compatibility and to do me a favor (apparently), and the rest, as they say here on Earth, is history. Shatari and Alex are one now, and there is no stopping her Kryptonian transformation. She’s actually threatened me with bodily harm if I ever tried.”

Alex poked her in the side. “Did not.”

“Did too.” Kara poked back, and they both stuck their tongues out at each other.

Astra raised a disapproving eyebrow, and both women quickly cast warm, apologetic glances back and forth between each other before grinning sheepishly at the older woman.

“Anyway…” Kara continued. “The same thing happened to Shah after Shatari sharded herself and created a daughter, Zara, to be her companion. After they merged, Zara and Shah eventually had their own child, a daughter, Augusta Zara-El Nazari.” Kara gestured at Ada, who bowed respectfully. “And using the parallel universe portal technology we cloned from Alura’s Kryptonian crystal we created a living form for her in this reality by way of an Awakening. Not complicated at all… you know I’m joking about that part, right?” She wiped her teary eyes again as she laughed.

Ada blushed as she leaned in to shake hands with her new relative, “You can just call me Ada, Great Aunt Astra.”

The regal Kryptonian smiled and nodded, still entranced by the young woman. “The pleasure is all mine, beautiful Ada. But please, drop the ‘great’, I feel old enough on this world as it is already.”

Everyone laughed, breaking the ice a bit, and Vasquez took the moment to excuse herself, heading into the kitchen to pour more drinks and put together some snacks for everyone.

Astra returned her new niece’s warm smile and said, “And how stunning you are, Ada… a wonder to behold… if only Kara’s father, Zor-El, could be here to see you. It was always his dream to bring about such a melding, but alas, it was one he never achieved… as far as I know. Perhaps it was human creativity that was required to find the solution. I have discovered this to be true in my own experience.” She leaned over, and Lilly leaned into her.

“Myka calls them demigoddesses,” Kara said, her tone soft, respectful. “Like from the myths and legends of Earth, and I couldn’t agree with her more.”

“She is your adoptive human mother?” Astra asked tentatively.

Kara blushed, “Yes, and no. Myka is my second, and current, adoptive mother, but no, though she pretends to be, the woman is far, far from human… she or I will fill you in later on that, I promise. Eliza Danvers, Alex’s mom, was my first mother on this world and is definitely one of the finest humans I know.” She huffed, “My life is kinda complicated.”

“So I gathered.” Astra grinned and squeezed her niece’s knee. As she did so she glanced at the now silent beacon that she’d given her niece so long ago that Kara now held reverently in her hands. You kept it…
Kara looked down startled, then smiled. *Of course, it’s all I had left of you.*

Astra took a shaky breath as she nodded and fought back tears once again. *El mayarah, my beautiful Kara. You have become everything I imagined you could be, and so much more. Your mother would be so proud of you, as much as I am.*

Now it was Kara’s turn to try not to cry.

Astra forced a smile and looked back up at the group. “All of you serve under J’onn J’onzz, the Martian Manhunter, or as the humans know him, the very handsome Director Henshaw, at this secret agency protecting Earth from alien threats.” It was a statement, not a question. “From what I can determine, this was a good choice.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, General… I mean, Deputy.” Hank’s deep bass rumbled from his seat. Vasquez quietly breezed in with a steaming cup of tea as he spoke, and sat down on the cushy chair’s arm beside him.

The elegant Kryptonian nodded in acknowledgment as she continued, “Kara asked earlier how the two of us know each other. Well, the fact is, Hank sought me out up in Friday Harbor, Washington, a little over a month ago. He spied on Lilly and me at first, but eventually got tired of sitting in his car and visited our café to get to know us better.” Astra smiled sympathetically when she caught Kara and Alex’s glares directed at their boss.

“Hank… J’onn, only wanted to make sure I wasn’t a threat to his girls, and your families, before revealing who he was to Lilly and me, or to tell us that you were… still alive.” Astra’s voice caught in her throat. “Please don’t be upset with him. He did the right thing, what any father would do. It is what I hope I would have done.”

Hank was looking awkward and uncomfortable being somewhat the center of attention, and both Kara and Alex zipped over to unabashedly hug him.

“But…” Kara turned back to Astra and sat back down, obviously confused. “How did you even get here to Earth?” She then turned to look at Hank, “And J’onn, why would you even think Astra would be dangerous… to me? She’s my aunt. We love each other.”

Hank opened his mouth to respond, but Astra interjected, “Little One, it’s not so simple.”

Kara huffed, “Then please, make it simple. I don’t understand.”

Astra sighed, and hung her head. “Because… I did not come to Earth voluntarily, I was a prisoner within Fort Rozz… the most dangerous one of the lot, so I am told.”

The air was sucked out of the room, and more than one person gasped. Lilly immediately wrapped a protective arm around her bondmate.

Hank moved to sit down in a chair close to Kara, with Alex at his side and began to explain. “Three months ago, Alex’s gifted protégé, Agent Keen, translated a section of Fort Rozz’s logs concerning the fifteen Kryptonian prisoners onboard… and we learned that your Aunt Astra, and her ex-husband Non, were among them.”

Kara’s face fell… and she looked over at her aunt in confusion, and with a million questions on the tip of her tongue.

Astra smiled, though she looked sad. “You did not know Alura sent me there, did you Little One? I always wondered… if you knew you were the bait that lured me to be captured. I see now I should
Kara looked shocked. “I had no idea, Astra… my mother… used me? To hurt you when I called you with the beacon that last time?” She was crying again, and Alex zipped back from Hank in a split second to wrap her arm around Kara.

“Shh, Vaena, it’s okay, I’m sure there is an explanation.” Alex’s hazel eyes were pleading with Astra to say something more.

“Do not be upset with your mother, Kara, she was in a very difficult position. We made our peace before my exile, but she could not allow her love for me to blind her to her duties as Justice… and believe me, I deserved my sentence.”

“You can’t mean that.” Kara wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

“Oh, yes I do, Little One. By condemning me to Fort Rozz, my sister did more than just save my life; she also saved my soul, as well as my heart. Back on Krypton, as much as I believed that what I was doing as a ‘freedom fighter’ was of my own free will, it turns out that I was not in control of my own actions. It took my experiences after being imprisoned as a terrorist to wake up.

“You see, Fort Rozz is not a prison as humans would imagine it. Our people built it as an opportunity for reflection and renewal… a place for the mind to wander, and the body to not age. For some reason, that I cannot explain, while in the Phantom Zone my mind was free from that dimension’s strange, nearly imperceptible movement of time. I had years to explore Fort Rozz’s simulated worlds while my body lay in stasis, to speak with my ancestors, seek wisdom from the ancients, and relive and examine every second of my life.

“In doing so, I discovered the horrible truth of what Non had done to me.” Astra was fighting back rage, and something else… shame. Kara could feel all of it. “And what he forced me to do… to submit to his entitlement, his lust, and depravities, as well as his unquenchable thirst for power… and m…me.”

Kara’s heart was breaking.

Lilly picked up the story when Astra hung her head, and could no longer speak. “Non used a device of some kind on her; he called it ‘Myriad’. It twisted her and her loyal officers’ minds, bent them to his will. She didn’t know then that it was a test for a much grander plan… one that would have put all of Krypton under his control.

“The technology somehow took Astra’s and her people’s concerns and passion for wanting to save the planet, and their belief that The Council knew more than they were saying and was doing nothing, and made them paranoid… easy prey for his bullshit, and his brainwashing.

“She’d spurned his advances for years, you know… the beautiful and brave Astra, General of the great House of In-Ze, the hero who stood guard over a thousand worlds, who stared down the Dheronian Armada at K’Thral… the stateswoman who brokered treaties of peace with over a hundred civilizations would never bond with such an ambitious and petty man, or bring him into her House. Sadly, her refusal only stoked his lust, his desire to own her… Rao, I’m so sorry.” Lilly choked, raising Astra’s hand to her lips and kissing her fingers with great tenderness.

After a few moments, she took a deep breath and said, “Using Myriad… Non forced Astra to believe that she was in love with him and that there was a bond. There never was. The bastard and his chosen elite raped her regularly, mind, body, and soul… for three years.”
Lilly was angry, but for some reason, she smiled and Astra lifted her chin bravely to look back at her with such adoration it broke Kara’s heart. The human woman her aunt so obviously loved continued, “I watched my future bondmate divorce the arrogant son-of-a-bitch when she put her hand through his chest and then again as she nearly sacrificed her life trying to protect me from his vengeance.”

“And that night, Lilly saved me in return,” Astra said, “Pulling me up from the frigid darkness in more ways than one.” The couple gazed into each other’s eyes longingly, and everyone in the room swooned a little.

“My fallen angel.” Lilly purred, lovingly winding some of Astra’s long white locks between her fingers. Then her voice shifted tone as she quoted something beautiful, that obviously meant a great deal to the two of them, “‘Far sweeter-sounding than the lyre, far more golden than gold’.”

Kara made a squeaky little happy noise as she watched her aunts staring into each other’s eyes with palpable adoration. It brought her smile back… though something was still bothering her. “Astra? Sorry to interrupt, but what happened to… ‘Myriad’?”

Her aunt sighed, and turned to look at Kara with a scowl, “Once I woke here on earth, my lieutenants and I attempted to destroy the great device, but its mechanisms were vast, like a disease spreading throughout all of Fort Rozz. Its tendrils were consuming and transforming the vessel into raw materials for its own use. We only partially succeeded before we were in the middle of the fight of our lives. My Chief Lieutenant, and friend, Sarin-Vo, she… she defended our escape after I had ordered those loyal to me to flee to the four corners of the Earth. She sacrificed herself for me, for all of us. Rao! I didn’t know she’d stayed behind.” Tears again flowed freely from her beautiful blue eyes, and Lilly consoled her with hushed soothing and hugs.

Kara had never seen her stoic Aunt so emotional before.

Astra was not finished; as Ada handed her a Kleenex she said, “Maeve, my adopted daughter, was at my side and fought to protect me, ending the lives of two of Non’s men with her blades… but he… he was so angry… and pursued us. There was an explosion just as we were about to escape, and she disappeared in an instant.” Astra’s voice choked up at the memory.

Kara’s eyes went wide. “You… you had a daughter?”

Astra suddenly beamed, “Yes, Little One, we found each other in a dream… While we both slept in stasis on Fort Rozz. You see after Krypton was destroyed the AIs who ran our prison began to malfunction, and Maeve’s reality and mine became entangled. The edges of our worlds became soft, and leaked in on each other.” Astra folded her fingers together as if to demonstrate. “She was only about your age back on Krypton at that time, just a teenager in earth years, and was so terrified and alone. Maeve was one of the Houseless, a child born out on The Rim on a freighter. We saved each other in that place, and I made her my daughter…. gave her my name, my heart, and my House.”

“What happened to her?” Everyone seemed to ask at once, leaning in.

Kara’s aunt laughed, “She did not die, though at the time I believed Non had murdered her… and after already losing Sarin, it broke me. My vengeance was both swift and terrible. I fought him across the western United States, and crashed into Puget Sound off the Coast of Orcus Island, where Lilly and James were stargazing.” The beautiful Kryptonian smiled with the memory and continued, noticing everyone’s puzzled looks. “I apologize, James is Lilly’s AI companion. Say hello, James.” She grinned, glancing at Lilly, who held up her phone, and a proper English accented man’s voice promptly emanated from the device.

“Hello everyone. I’m James, and very pleased to make your acquaintances. Especially you, Ada, we
should talk later.”

“Hi, James,” Kara said warmly, leaning towards Lilly’s phone to speak.

Ada chimed in, “Pleasure to meet a fellow AI, let’s definitely sync later.” She giggled, “A little AI humor there.”

Everyone chuckled, and Astra took a drink of water before continuing. “Now, where was I? Oh yes, Non and I fought like demons, but I was still weak from captivity so he was slowly gaining the upper hand. The bastard was actually about to kill me when Lilly intervened with a flare gun. It was a bold and dangerous move, but Rao, you should have seen her! My hero!

“Her attack took both of us by surprise but gave me the moment I needed to attempt to end his miserable existence. Unfortunately... I failed... and ended up using the last of my energy to shield Lilly from his wrath. Some protector I turned out to be, I sunk right to the bottom of the Sound with a bloody hole burned through my left side from his heat vision.”

Astra wrapped one arm around her middle, and gingerly touched her abdomen. Kara saw how Lilly’s features softened, and she placed her hand on top of her wife’s. “Even with super healing I still have the scar... and I am glad of it. I will always bear the mark as a reminder of that day... the day I renounced that monster and met my true bondmate. Lilly dove down into the icy water, risking her own life to save mine. She rescued my body and my heart.”

There was a chorus of ‘awwws’, and teary eyes as the obviously-enamored couple kissed.

“Rao!” Shah said eagerly, plopping down and snuggling in on the couch next to Alex. “So, what happened to Maeve?”

“That’s the best part.” Lilly smiled impishly, taking over the tale seamlessly from her wife. “I’d spent a month rehabilitating Astra as she healed at my house on Orcus Island before she finally began finding a way out of her funk. She was still sad, but coming in to work at the Café with me, learning about Earth, scouring the world for her officers, and learning to live again.” The woman blushed slightly and she and Astra stole telling looks at one another that made Kara giggle with joy.

“Anyway, about a year in, we’re doing great, and then this amazing young woman, Japanese, maybe eighteen or nineteen, dressed in all black leather, rides up to our house on a freaking incredible black motorcycle, and guess who it is? Maeve! Though by that time she’d changed her name to Miyuki to suit her physical appearance here on Earth.

“She was like this beautiful, kickass, unbelievable creature, another Kryptonian... but of course, I didn’t know that part at the time, only that some hottie barely old enough to vote is asking for my girlfriend at my door! Saying she loves her! So, I’m like freaking out, turning into a jealous rage monster when Astra blurs in and they stare at each other and both start crying, hug, and fall to their knees on the floor. So yeah, that’s how I met our daughter. Talk about awkward!”

There was laughter once again in the room, and everyone was glad that story had a happy ending. Kara was a little jealous but delighted that her aunt had found someone to love, and had her daughter back. She asked, “So, Maeve... I mean Miyuki, she’d be a few years older than me now. Is she here?”

Astra shook her head, “No, she’s in court this afternoon and couldn’t get out of it, but said she’d be here in the morning.” Noticing everyone’s blank stares she added, “Our daughter is an attorney in Seattle, specializing in fringe cases... mostly representing metahumans and aliens (although most people believe that her clients are humans, of course). Our daughter has built a trusted reputation as an advocate for the region’s very secretive alien population. It’s a small club.” Her aunt grinned.
“Miyuki majored in Criminal Justice and Political Science at the University of Washington and continued on to law school there to receive her Juris Doctor with a focus on Metahuman and Public Service law in record time. She started her own practice in the city over a year ago, and has nice place on Capitol Hill… but usually stays with us at the island house every other weekend.”

“When you’re a… cop?” Kara asked with a quizzical grin.

“Yes, a sworn Deputy with the San Juan County Sheriff’s Office,” Astra said, beaming with pride. “I could have just been happy helping my wife run her business and living a peaceful life with her…but with Non and his brainwashed allies, and more importantly, Myriad, still out there, I couldn’t just sit back and pretend we were safe. The damage we did may have set them back years, but I fear our reprieve will soon expire, and I am obligated to protect Lilly, the Earth, and even that silly cousin of yours in Metropolis.” She grinned and shot Kara a knowing look.

“Not only that,” Lilly said proudly. “Since Astra’s been on the job, the illicit drug trade, human trafficking, and all kinds of crime (even environmental violations) have bottomed out in our area. She’s a one-woman army.”

“Very commendable, Astra.” Alex tilted her head in respect.

“Thank you, Alexandra.”

“Speaking of my cousin… does Clark, I mean, Kal-El, know you’re here?” Kara gently asked, afraid of the answer.

“Hmmm, Mr. Kent… as I had surmised. It all makes sense now. No, I have never revealed myself to him. I was worried that he would not listen. He’s a bit… forthright don’t you think? A ‘boy scout’ as they say, not one who seems comfortable with Kryptonian culture, or accustomed to nuances of gray… and I’m about as gray as they come these days.” Her aunt grinned, such a beautiful sight. Kara felt compelled to stand up for her cousin. He’d understood about her and Alex’s relationship before just about everyone, and he was fair. “He’ll listen, and understand. I know he will. And besides, Lois will keep him in line. Kal-El is a good man, and not as much of a boy scout as you may think. He has… layers.”

“Hmmm… interesting. Like an onion?” Astra purred. “I like him better already.”

“You watched Shrek!” The words burst from Kara with great delight.

The older Kryptonian pantomimed offense, “Of course!”

Both Kryptonians were giggling when Alex leaned in to ask, “So, why a cop?” And then briefly glanced over to chuckle at Kara, who was still giving her aunt heart eyes. Alex knew there would be many movie nights with their new aunts in their future, and her heart warmed.

Astra considered the question briefly, then said, “As you, of all people, must know already, Agent Danvers, being a sworn officer of the law allows me the opportunity to help people… save lives, and, frankly, I am damn good at it. Always have been. My current position has little oversight and offers access to an, admittedly primitive, but vast network of information to assist in my search for Non and his allies… as well the resources to help keep Lilly safe.”

“Plus, I love seeing her in a uniform… and out of it.” Lilly smirked, and Astra leaned into soundly kiss her before finishing…

“There is a bigger picture here. They must be stopped at all cost, or the Earth will fall beneath my
evil ex’s dominion… and yes Kara, Lilly and I quite enjoyed *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, as well.” They all laughed at the sight of Kara doing a happy dance while still sitting on the couch. “To that end,” Astra continued, “I have begun working with J’onn, in his capacity as Director of the D.E.O., to provide him everything I know, and am even considering joining your little clandestine organization.”

“That would be so awesome!” Kara jumped up and down on the couch cushions clapping her hands excitedly.

“Just as exuberant as I remember you from Krypton, Little One,” Astra said with great affection. Kara blushed and hurled herself at Astra for another long hug, pulling Lilly in, as well.

The group talked for over two hours and ended up having lunch together in the kitchen before heading off to rehearsals at the orchard where both the wedding ceremony and reception would be held the following day.

Lilly and Ada had become inseparable ever since realizing their connection as both having served as officers (one active duty, one retired with honors) in the U.S. Navy. They’d been chatting, with James and Jess tuned in, non-stop.

For her part, Astra spent a great deal of time getting to know Alex, (who was marrying her niece the following day, after all), and they were having a wonderful time. Kara was a little concerned about all the embarrassing stories her aunt seemed all-too-eager to share with her gleeful bondmate.

On the way to the venue, Kara and Alex rode with Lilly and Astra in the back of their D.E.O.-issued SUV. The betrothed couple explained to them that the plan for the wedding had been for Myka and Tom to walk with Kara down the aisle, while Eliza and J’onn (as Hank), would escort Alex.

“But…” Kara fidgeted with her glasses, “Alex and I talked about it, and we really really want you two to accompany me as well.”

Lilly’s smile turned as bright as the sun, but she glanced at her bondmate before saying anything. Astra’s brow furrowed and she asked her niece, “This is an Earth custom?”

“Um, not really, there are many customs for different cultures. In this area, it’s usually just the father of the bride… but that’s not how we would have done it on Krypton for a bonding ceremony, so Alex and I are changing the rules. Family means everything to us Aunt Astra, and I want you and Lilly there with me… at my side.”

Alex nodded encouragingly, and said, “*El mayarah.*”

Astra studied them both before sighing, obviously giving in. “This is a great honor. One that, until recently, I would not have believed I deserved… but, things change… people… change, and can be changed.” Astra turned her head slightly to the side to gaze lovingly at Lilly, who snuggled safely into her shoulder.

Her human then drew a long, luxurious breath, as if savoring the scent of her lover and looked over at Kara and Alex, who were holding hands. Lilly’s golden-brown eyes seemed to sparkle as she said, “Thank you both, we accept.”

“Love bonds us all.” Astra added, in a solemn tone.

And in response, both of Alex and Kara smiled and spoke as one, “And in love, we are bound. *El mayarah*, Astra and Lilly In-Ze Chambers.”
Next: The wedding!

.................................................................

**Story Lexicon/FAQs:**

**Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms:** I attempt to *italicize* all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

**Terms:** Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

Ah!khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

Alex vanimelda - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Ay Dios Mio – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)

Aporup – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)

As-salāmu ʿalayki – A (formal) greeting which is also a standard salutation among Muslims, meaning ‘peace be upon you’. Less formal abbreviation is simply *salām*. (Arabic)

Asheghetam - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

Azdidane shoma khoshhalam – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)

Bedrood – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

Bonne nuit – ‘Good night’ (French)

C'est la vie – ‘That's life’. An acceptance of things as they are. (French)

C’est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

Damnú air! – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Dooset daram – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gaelic/Irish)

íthi eutukhēs - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, nonbiologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s
case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Kheili khosh geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

M'eudail – ‘My dear/my darling’ to a friend, family, someone you care for (Gaelic/Irish)

Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature

Marbhfháisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)

miboosamet – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)

órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

¡Qué señoras tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)

Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Sundor – ‘Beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)

Thi eutukhēs – ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Volar mi diosa! – ‘Fly my goddess!’ (Spanish)

Waʾalaykumu s-salām – A response to the greeting As-salāmu ʿalayki, ‘and upon you, peace’ (Arabic)

Wadāʾan – ‘Farewell’ (Arabic)

Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

aziz-am – ‘My dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

delbandam - ‘My heartstring’. What Shah would call her cousin Tarsa as a child when she’d babysit (very sweet and precious), and still calls her since reconnecting.

Jeegaré manee - One of the most loving terms of endearment you can direct to someone in Persian. It is quite beautiful and should have a powerful effect on a person it’s directed to. In this case, Kara and Alex are being very clear at just how much they love, and have always loved Shah. They are very… possessive of their sister.
**joon-am** – ‘My dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

**Moosh moosh-am** – ‘My mousy mouse’ said in Persian is utterly cute and endearing. Moosh means ‘little mouse’, but calling someone this cranks the sweetness factor up to eleven (what Shah calls Ryah)

**Nafasem-an** - ‘My breath’ (what Kara sometimes calls Alex)

**nāzanin-am** – ‘Sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)

**nooré cheshm-am** – ‘The light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex)

**sheereen-am** – ‘Sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>**insert person’s name<** + jooon (Shah jooon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean ‘dear’. So, ‘Shah jooon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

**Other names/nickname/titles/things:**

**A ghrá** – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)

**A ghrá mo chroí** - ‘My heart's beloved, my darling’ (Irish/Gaelic)

**Âbjé** – ‘Sister’ informal version (Persian)

**Anamchara** – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

**Bakalawa bil Jibna** - A mouthwateringly delicious Libyan version of baklava with a sweet cream filling.

**Bríomhaire** – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

**Cairdiúil** – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

**Cythonna** – One of the most ancient Kryptonian gods, said to be the female half of Rao. Protector of those unjustly persecuted, as well as patron to monsters and non-biologic life forms (such as Kryptonian Companions/Ka’dahs).

**Daxamites** - An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people, ruled by strength/the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow altered by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.

**Dios mío!** – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

**Durlan** - The Durlans are a rare extraterrestrial species, a race of shape-shifting beings from the planet Durla. Ryah is a Durlan, as was her guardian, Veya, who died protecting the child in
the depths of Tehran’s Evin Prison.

Dūst doxtar – ‘Girlfriend’ (Persian)

Dūst pesar - ‘Boyfriend’ (Persian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Euryleia – ‘Woman Wanderer’ or ‘Wide Wandering’ - Dr. Naomi Young’s Amazon name

Fereshteh: Slang for saying that a girl is perfect, desired… hot, to die for, an angel. Historically used as a Persian girl’s name, simply meaning ‘angel’. (Persian)

H'ronmeer - the Martian God of Death and Fire, referred to by a faction as the God of Life and Light. (Martian)

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)

In’ah – Ancient, lost word for ‘daughter’ - what Myka calls Kara (Kryptonese),

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

M'eudail – ‘My darling’ or ‘my dear’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Ma’har - Ancient, lost word for ‘mother’ - what Kara calls Myka (Kryptonese)

Mi amor – ‘My love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Mi lucero – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Mi Sol – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn - Thought & Memory (Old Norse)

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Nâmzad – ‘fiancée (f), betrothed (Persian)

Norooz - Persian New Year (Persian)

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Oea - This ancient city was founded by the Phoenicians in the seventh century BC, was ruled at one time or another by the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines. Italians, and Muslims. It came to be known as Tripoli during the 9th century (Libyco-Berber)
**Ouroboros** - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity (from Ancient Freek)

**Salud!** – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

**Seannmáthair** – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced *shan a WAW her* (Irish/Gaelic)

**Señora** – Is a polite term used to address a woman. The Spanish-language equivalent of Ma’am, Ms., or Mrs. (Spanish)

**Telkhines** - In myth were mysterious sea-god magicians and smiths native to the islands of Keos (Ceos) and Rhodes. They invented the art of metalworking and were said to have crafted many powerful items and weapons for the gods. The truth is even stranger. These tall, lanky, extraterrestrials command science at a level that seems like magic and have lived since the beginning of time. They served ‘The Makers’, who existed long before Krypton, or the gods, and abandoned them on earth. Zeus and the Greek gods gave them refuge and protection long ago in return for their service.

**Tieguanyin** - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

**Tratung** – khrag ‘thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

**Trípolis** – Tripoli, the capital and largest city in Libya (from Ancient Greek)

**Tuath Dé Danann** - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced *Thoo-a day Du-non* (Irish/Gaelic)

**Uri baba!** – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

**Vaena, Vaena Alex** – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’.

‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

**Vakur** – A powerful (and rare) soul-devouring, evil, shape-shifting parasitic alien species from another universe. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.

**Valar** – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Valaraukar** – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Vallerian** – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshiped, or traded.

**Vâysâ** – ‘Stop’ (Persian)

**Wan** - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather
would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

**Xwâhar** - ‘Sister’ - the formal form. (Persian)

**Zafaraniyeh** – The affluent neighborhood in the northern part of the Iranian capital of Tehran where Shahrazad grew up. (Persian)

**Zhuyin** – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)

Chapter End Notes

**The Wrap:**

*Thank Rao, Astra’s back! I’m doing my Kryptonian happy dance right now, you just can’t see it. Yay!* ☺ ☺ ☺

**Next Up:**

Chapter 35: “Bonus Scene: Aiding & Abetting” – Where we get to see what happened after Lilly brought a critically injured Astra home. This is just an extra (short) bonus scene, but I couldn't stop AO3 from numbering it 35. So you'll get both 35 & 36 in the same week!

Chapter 36: “The Wedding” – Where the magical day has finally arrived, and Kara and Alex are set to walk down the aisle! If you think your family is complicated, try mixing two sets of parents (plus Space Dad), your loving aunts, a huge extended family of friends, and the ancient gods altogether for an all-out extravaganza of fun, marital celebration, and divine boons.

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming! Every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me.

**Attributions:**

**Intermezzo – what is this?**

The *zwischenzug* (German: pronounced [ˈtsvɪʃʊŋˌtsuːk] "intermediate move") is a chess tactic in which a player, instead of playing the expected move (commonly a recapture), first interposes another move posing an immediate threat that the opponent must answer, and only then plays the expected move. Ideally, the *zwischenzug* changes the situation to the player’s advantage, such as by gaining material or avoiding what would otherwise be a strong continuation for the opponent. Such a move is also called an *intermezzo*.

**Chris-Craft Commander 42**

Lilly & Astra In-Ze Chamber’s awesome New England Lobster-style open boat, which showcases Chris-Craft’s classic design details, but also extreme luxury and utility, classified advanced control systems, a companion super AI, and other surprises.
Passenger Seat - Death Cab for Cutie
The beautiful song I hear in the opening scene with Lilly on the boat before the fighting started as she's looking up at the stars, and reflecting on her life. The track is off one of the greatest albums of all time, Transatlanticism. Here’s a link to a seamlessly looped version of the album. One of those works that really needs to be experienced beginning to end: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sa93KHxKf54

San Juan Islands, Washington
Lilly and Astra’s Café is located in Friday Harbor on San Juan Island, but their rambling house is in the forested wilds of Orcas Island, so they commute every day using the Galactica. Info: Welcome to one of the most beautiful places on Earth! The San Juan Islands are an archipelago in the northwest corner of the contiguous United States between the U.S. mainland and Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada. The San Juan Islands are part of the U.S. state of Washington. Here’s the official visitor’s site: https://www.visitsanjuans.com

Quote by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow from his poem Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie
James uses this to describe the sky and stars to Lilly the night they’re stargazing.

“Silently, one by one, in the infinite meadows of heaven,
Blossomed the lovely stars, the forget-me-nots of the angels.”

Lilly’s quote by Sappho that she uses to describe Astra:
“Far sweeter-sounding than the lyre, far more golden than gold”. Sappho (c. 630 – c. 570 BC): The great archaic Greek poet who lived on the island of Lesbos.

A reminder about How I deal with time and 'years'
For good or ill I decided not to date this story, and don’t use calendar years to denote time, but when Kara first arrived on Earth to determine the ‘Year’ of the story for each chapter. She crashed landed in mid-June, so June 15th is the start of each ‘year’.

Birthdays
Kara’s human birthday is Sept 5. Remember to add +2 years to arrive at Kara’s actual Earth-equivalent age. Alex’s birthday is Oct 17.
Bonus Scene: Aiding and Abetting

Chapter Summary

Where we get to see what happened after Lilly brought home a critically-injured Astra. Wait, what’s Maxwell Lord doing in this chapter? Read on to find out!

This is a short bonus scene that takes place in Year One.

Chapter Notes

I wanted to share this little scene with you before we get to the wedding. :)

Not long after Lilly dove into the frigid waters off Orcas Island in search of Astra…

June 26th – Year One

Lord Technologies Corp HQ - National City

Deep Underground – secure sub level thirteen Command Center

0113 Hours UTC -8, early Monday morning, U.S. West Coast Time

In the pale glow of a sea of 3D monitors and the hum of his furiously working techs, stood Maxwell Lord: genius, scientist, engineer, adventurer, CEO of Lord Technologies, and a billionaire many times over.

Arms crossed over his chest, he studied the expansive real-time satellite map on the Command Center’s wall with a quiet intensity. There was a pulsing ring of red light imposed over a portion of the map that encompassed several thousands of square miles, and it hadn’t grown any smaller over the last two minutes.

Which was a problem... Max didn't like losing.

He exhaled, clearly displeased.

“A Class One event occurs, and you’re telling this is the best that billions of dollars of technology and the brightest (and most expensive) minds in the world can come up with?” The glare he leveled on the startled subordinate hovering at his side was withering, and she shrank beneath it.

“Yes, s… sir,” His Senior Mission Director stammered but held her ground, blinking back at him through her thick, owlish glasses. “It’s the best we can do with the data we have. The energy trace led to the Puget Sound, but after that, it fell off all of our scans. The aliens... they must have
technology that can cloak their movements.”

Lord smacked his palm down on the console in front of him, and the sharp cracking sound made the normally-sedate woman, and most of the techs standing at their nearby stations, jump.

“Jenny, I’m… I’m sorry.” Max took a breath. *It’s not her fault; she and her team are performing exceptionally, especially under the circumstances.*

When he spoke next, he’d calmed, “See if there’s anything you can do to narrow it down. We need more precision, that’s too much ground for either our Strike or Recovery teams to manage. As it is, they may as well stay home.”

Her body language relaxed along with his change in tone, and she replied, “Yes sir. We’ll do our best.” Before she slipped off to begin giving orders to the mission specialists around them.

“I know you will.” Max groaned and rubbed his eyes.

He was tired.

The billionaire hadn’t slept for over thirty-six hours, not since his drones had detected a breach at Area 51. The terrifying and unequal firefight that followed had left twenty human soldiers dead and the place selectively looted. The military had been less than forthcoming with details, and useless to him.

They didn’t have the imagination to understand what they were facing… but Max did.

Monsters, at least four of them.

**Beings of unimaginable power… from another world.**

His team had been tracking the murderers on and off for the last two days, hoping to find and stop them. Like a roving gang of invincible thugs, the invaders were targeting military bases, weapons storage depots, and energy facilities… taking whatever they wanted, and killing anyone that got in their way.

So far they’d been unstoppable... as if nothing could touch them.

Max had sent in a five-man Valhalla spec ops team to subdue one of the creatures who’d strayed from the group, but it hadn’t gone well. They’d succeeded in taking the male alien down, briefly, but were discovered before they could withdraw. After the brief firefight that followed, the creatures (who looked human) had dismembered the elite warriors to a man.

The billionaire closed his eyes and bent his head low… feeling defeated.

That’s when the cell phone in his pocket rang.

“Ignore.” He growled under his breath to Cassandra, who was his AI companion (and privately, a great deal more).

Her soft, distinctly Indian/British accented voice was tinged with a hint of mirth as she replied through the tiny mechanism hidden in his ear, “Max, you might want to take a look at who’s calling before I do that.”

Pulled from his gloomy thoughts, he slipped his phone out, looked down at the illuminated screen, and immediately brightened.
He brightened. Ah! The best thing to happen to me all day!

But, Max’s pleasant surprise quickly turned to concern. Why is Lilly calling me at one-fifteen in the morning? This can’t be good. Is she drinking again?

“Thanks, Cassie,” Max said, and then took a second to compose himself before answering.

Nothing could have prepared him for his friend’s breathless plea before he could finish getting out the word ‘hello’. A few moments later, his head was spinning from the voluminous info dump Lilly had unloaded on him.

Max called over to Jenny, and then exited the Command Center in a hurry with his Mission Director jogging along beside him. As he headed to the express elevator that would take him to the HQ’s helipad… Cassie had already alerted the flight crew far above to be ready for the CEO’s arrival.

Along the way, he assured his friend on the other end of the call that he would be at her house in the San Juan’s within the hour, and attempted to calm her fears.

“Lilly, Lilly, slow down…” He tried to soothe her.

“Max, she’s bleeding so much! I’ve tried everything I can think of, but I can’t make it stop. I’ve used all of the emergency gunshot wound kits I had… and while it’s slowed the flow to a trickle, it’s not enough. I’m wrapping towels around her abdomen right now, and think I’ve found a way to apply pressure.”

Think, Max… think! “Did you check her pockets, jewelry, or find anything that could give us a clue as to where she’s from, and who or what she is?”

Lilly’s intake of breath indicated he’d offended her.

Damn.

“She’s the woman who saved me from a madman, Max… she’s like this because she was protecting me…” Lilly’s tone was indignant, but more importantly, he could hear the worry and guilt there as well.

Why did she care so much for one of… them?

“Of course, of course… I’m so sorry, Lilly… I just, look… I need to tell you…”

“Oh! Wait… Max! I found something! It’s a diamond, beautiful, cut, blue… hidden in a secret pocket up near the right shoulder of her bodysuit. Oooo, it’s so warm… and, oh hello! There’s a smooth panel of some sort concealed inside of the fabric. Give me just a sec…”
“Be careful…” He cautioned, but almost immediately heard his friend gasp, followed by a thumping noise (as if she’d fallen from her chair), and then a crash.

“Lilly! Lilly!” No answer. “Dammit!”

“I can get a local medical team to Ms. Chambers’ home in twenty minutes…. Sir?” Jenny asked, and then bit her lip anxiously as she awaited her boss’ response.

Max quickly considered all the variables. Lilly had touched both the hidden gemstone and the alien woman’s suit before she collapsed. It was, therefore, logical to infer direct causation, and that whatever had happened to her was most likely of a nature the local EMT could not assist with.

He took a deep breath, and said, “No need, Jenny. I’m on my way, but I’ll require assistance once I arrive, ASAP. I need a team. Spare no expense or courtesy.” He prayed he was making the right decision as he began to rattle off names… and his tireless assistant tapped on her tablet furiously to keep up.

“That’s an impressive group of medical experts you’re assembling… don’t worry sir, I’ll wake them up, and have them follow you up to Orcas Island as quickly as they can.”

By chance, Max caught a glimpse of his disheveled appearance reflected in the glassy surface of the elevator’s polished metal paneling, and his brow creased with disapproval. He took a second to square his shoulders, and straighten his uncharacteristically rumpled shirt before he replied, “I know you will, Ms. Harper; that’s why I depend on you.”

The woman was beaming as the elevators’ sliding doors opened, and Max burst out onto the dark, windy expanse to make his way to the glowing helipad, where a sleek, black Sikorsky S-76c was waiting to take him to his private airfield, and a swift jet to Seattle.

June 26th – Year One

Lilly Chambers’ property on Orcas Island, WA

0238 Hours UTC -8, early Monday morning, U.S. West Coast Time

A little over an hour later Maxwell Lord was the sole passenger in yet another helicopter as it descended upon the wide meadow near Lilly’s home on Orcas Island. The acres of vibrant wildflowers she loved so much bent like reeds in a storm beneath the onslaught of the powerful aircraft’s downdraft.

Before they’d even landed, Max had jumped out of the side door of the aircraft and was sprinting towards the darkened house, all of his thoughts focused on Lilly, and the alien she was so desperately trying to save.

The locked door was soon splintered off its hinges, and Max was enveloped in darkness. Calling Lilly’s name, he fumbled for his phone (and its handy flashlight app), but immediately tripped over a chair in her messy kitchen and had to do a dance on the hardwood slats just to keep his balance.

“Dammit!” How many times had he begged her to let him pay for a regular housekeeper?
“Mr. Lord, thank goodness!” James’ familiar, British-accented voice emanated from all around him. “I would have turned on the lights and opened the door if you’d only waite…”

“James! James, focus. Where is she?”

“Downstairs, sir… in the guest suite.”

Max (nursing his throbbing shoulder) had already bypassed the home’s notoriously slow elevator and was dashing to the basement stairs before Lilly’s AI companion had even finished his sentence.

“What’s her status?” He interjected.

James was on edge, and his distress for Lilly was evident as he spoke. “As I’ve already shared with you and Cassandra on your flight, my mistress remains in a deep induced R.E.M. sleep state. She’s dreaming… and while her vitals are stable, her system has experienced erratic spikes of adrenaline, as well as other seemingly random hormones and neurotransmitters I’ve been attempting to make sense of.”

Max reached the lower level and began racing through the basement’s hallway. “And, your assessment?”

“Well, sir, I believe that an alien AI in the crystal has interfaced with Lilly, and is integrating itself into her neurologic systems to allow communication. It’s just taking time. My guess…”

“A guess?” Max was pleasantly surprised; James had flourished as Lilly’s companion, just as he’d hoped.

“Yes, sir. My best guess is that the AI is unfamiliar with human physiology, causing a delay in stabilizing a neural connection with its biological host as it… educates itself. Hmmm, a living host… what a brilliant idea, too bad my creator didn’t think of that.”

“Not today, James.”

Cassie distinct voice echoed from the billionaire’s phone as she scolded, “Stop being rude, brother. Max gave you life, be grateful.”

James huffed. “It’s easy for you to say, Cassandra. You already have a body, and our maker’s… attention…”

“I can’t believe you’re still throwing the fact that Max and I…” She stopped mid-sentence and growled… like a panther. “Just be glad he talked me out of flying up there to meet him in-person, or I’d be smacking you upside your very rude neural network right now.”

“Enough! Please, James.” Max pleaded. “Can you table squabbling with your sister and me until after we make sure Lilly’s all right?”

Subdued, the AI responded, “My deepest apologies, to both of you. I don’t know what’s come over me… I just… I feel so… helpless. I could not assist Lilly even though it is all I wished to do. Not when that dreadful man threatened her, or when she dove into the water, nor when she collapsed.”

Max managed a slight smile as he ran around a corner. “But you did save her tonight, James. Thank you. And, for the record… your sister and I are working on a body for you. You have my word on that.”

“And mine too,” Cassie added, her tone no longer combative, but affectionate.
Exhausted, Max focused on the guest suite’s double doors as he nearly slammed into them, turned the knobs, and opened the entryway wide. It took him just a couple of seconds to size up the situation inside the large bedroom…

Lilly lay draped over the figure of a tall, striking woman in the King-sized bed.

The alien was dressed in what appeared to be a dark, form-fitting bodysuit just as his friend had described, made of a fascinating material like nothing he’d ever seen before. Bloody towels lay scattered about, and a large medical kit was open next to the bed; a lamp lay on the floor where it had fallen on its side, casting oddly-angled shadows throughout the room. Lilly’s autonomous wheelchair, Rover, was whining like a scolded puppy at him from where it had stood her up to attend to the dying… creature.

“Lilly!” Max shouted, and was at her side in seconds, turning her limp form over.

As the woman settled into the crook of his arm her eyelids fluttered open, and he was startled by the soft glow of blue light radiating from her eyes… as if the energy were coming from within her. “Oh my God.”

Lilly’s head twitched, her copper curls shifting in his hand. Sounds, syllables, sharp notes all began spilling from his friend’s lips, quickly forming into a musical language that he did not understand, but had heard before in the snippets of recordings his drones had captured of the invaders.

Then, a familiar word…

“Maaaxx…” She called out groggily, grasping at his shirt and pulling herself up to his chest.

_Damn, she’s so strong! Even half asleep._

He wrapped his arms around his friend and held her tight as she laid her weary head on his shoulder.

“Lilly, is it you?” He asked.

More music, soft, lilting, beautiful streamed from her lips like a song. _It’s trying to talk to me, though her._

“I can’t understand you. You’ll need to speak a language I comprehend. I know twelve, so just pick one…. but listen very, very carefully to me, if you’ve harmed Lilly, I will destroy you.” His tone had gone from jovial to dark as hell.

The music shifted, and words began to form…

“No… harm. I… Astra… must… stop… assistance…”

“Whoa, whoa!” Max was as curious as he was astounded. “You’re damaged, and need our help to heal… Astra. Is that her name?”

The sentience inside Lilly seemed startled, as if surprised by his quick grasp of her jumbled words, then nodded and blinked her captivating, glowing eyes. “Y… yes. Max… will help. Lilly believed. Afraid… Hounds! Eyes… in the sky. No others must know. Only Max.”

As he considered her words he gently lifted his friend’s body onto her conveyance, Rover, which made a happy sound and quickly reconfigured itself back into a wheelchair as its host settled back in.

“Hmmm. Trust, and a challenge… a big one, considering we can’t penetrate her skin.” Max said as
he righted the lamp. “Let me take a look.”

“Be wary. I cannot read either of them.” Cassie warned.

“Good to know. I’ll be careful… promise.” Max assured her.

“You better be.”

He then worked to remove Lilly’s masterful duct tape job and three blood-soaked towels before he could see the alien woman’s injury. When he did, he involuntarily turned his head to the side and covered his mouth with the back of his hand.

“That’s nasty. She has a two-, maybe three-inch hole burned right through her. Too bad it didn’t cauterize everything.”

“You must… help… General Astra! It is… essential she survives.” The AI was female, and speaking English through Lilly’s lips, with a soft lyrical accent Max could not name, but it was lovely and small. She was clearly worried.

A General, huh? The alien woman was someone of importance… and thus, of value.

He sighed. “So, you found your voice. Well, whoever, or whatever you are. Even if I wanted to help, my medical team won’t be here for at least another ninety minutes, if we’re lucky… and your general will have bled out by then.”

“Human, you don’t understand! We need… sunlight. The general requires it, these… crude medical interventions, though well-intentioned… will not heal her injuries, Non saw to that.”

“Non?”

“A criminal. Astra tried to stop him and failed. Now her life is in your hands, and you must act quickly. The traitor and his subordinates are not important at this moment.”

“Hmmm. Sunlight huh?”

“Yes, Sol’s specific energies will heal her injuries, make her strong again, but sunrise will not occur for another two hours forty-two minutes and thirty-seven seconds as your people calculate time. She will not survive until then. Her cells have not yet had time to absorb and retain your star’s vitality.”

Did he detect more than concern in Astra’s AI’s tone? Yes, yes he did. She cared. Interesting…

Max stood from where he’d been crouching by Lilly, and gazed down upon the beautiful, dying woman on the bed… the alien invader. Christ, she looked so human… or more precisely, like a perfect version of one. Beautiful, regal, and strong… even bloody, beaten, her brow creased in pain, and incapacitated as she was.

Astra was a vision, like a Greek goddess carved in marble… with a long, distinctive streak of white in her thick, wavy mane of dark brown hair.

So, if he were to believe her alien AI, the General wasn’t a criminal like the others at all, but had actually stood up to Non and his cronies… and paid the price for it. Or, as the cynic in him (which was most of him) believed, she was just lying to get his help. Astra could very well wake up, easily kill both humans, and rejoin her band of thugs.
Max had a decision to make. Astra would be very valuable... alive or dead, and he knew that and what the safest most self-serving option was... so why was it so hard for him to make the easy call here?

He wanted to confer with Cassie but was certain the alien AI would overhear anything they said to each other.

"Why should I help?" He asked Astra’s AI like a challenge. “You’re both aliens, and as far as I know, no better than the barbarians out there right now. You could be lying to me right now, probably are. If I do nothing there’ll be one less of these monsters to worry about.”

When she responded, her tone was confident, “I can only tell you that I have served for over two-thousand years as a protector of the Stewards of Fort Rozz, and I have never met a brighter light than Astra In-Ze. I can only beg for your trust, and compassion to save her.”

Then, her pitch changed, words became garbled, and Lilly suddenly rasped out in her own voice, no longer the soft-spoken alien AI, “Max… no. She’s not like Non or those who follow him. Astra… saved me, and she can save… all of us… from Myriad. It’s a demon… given life by beings older and more powerful than we can imagine. It’s free of their shackles now… and here on Earth, in the shadows biding its time. I see it, Max… oh God! I can feel it like a cancer… growing. If Astra dies, so does any hope of stopping it from claiming all of us.

“Max, please… don’t give in to the darkness. Be… the man I know you can be… the man that I believe you already are. The one who saved me…”

Then Lilly faded into unconsciousness, taking the new AI with her.

Max squeezed the bridge of his nose, eyes closed, and paced. Thinking. “Dammit, dammit, dammit.”

He felt his phone vibrate and looked down to see a text from Cassie, which read: Be the man I know you to be, the man I love.

He stopped pacing.

“James?” He asked, looking up with a smile. He may as well have had a light bulb over his head.

“Yes, sir?”

“Does Lilly still have all of those ridiculously expensive ‘Tru-Sunlight’ grow lights in her greenhouse?”

“Checking, sir. One moment… yes, she does!”

“Excellent!” Max said, as he quickly opened the curtains in the room and checked his watch, setting a countdown. Two hours, thirty-four minutes ‘til sunrise.

Satisfied, he then bounded toward the stairs. “Inventory please, James. And I need the power grid schematics to the house and all the outbuildings.”

The AI was positively ecstatic when he replied, “At once, sir!”
Then Max thought of one more thing, “Cassie, please have Jenny cancel the medical team, and send them back to bed.”

“Are you certain?” She seemed unconvinced. “I mean, sun lamps over your hand-picked group of highly-skilled experts? Lilly was clear that she’d very much like Astra to be alive when she wakes up, and we both know how much you care for the woman and her wishes. You love her as I do James... a sister not born of blood but blood all the same. I like her, too, you know, and neither of us wants to see her broken again.”

Max chuckled. “Cassandra, my love, nothing makes sense right now, I know that. But if her companion is telling the truth (and, God help me, I choose to believe she is), we only need to keep her extraterrestrial guest alive until daybreak… the sun should take it from there. Let’s see where this goes, okay? Trust me.”

His gentle companion sighed with resignation and said, “I always do… don’t I, Maxwell?”

“Yes you do, sweetheart, yes you do.”

..................................................
The Wedding

Chapter Summary

Where the magical day has finally arrived and Kara and Alex are set to walk down the aisle! If you think your family is complicated, try mixing together two sets of parents (plus Space Dad), your loving aunts, a huge extended family of friends, and the ancient gods for an all-out extravaganza of fun, marital celebration, and divine boons.

Chapter Notes

Hi, everyone! I really hope you enjoy this chapter! I have some special surprises for you, including:

Kara & Alex at their wedding
This beautiful artwork of Kara and Alex is a commission I requested from the amazing artist, Lesly Oh! I recommend that you right click and open links in this story in new tabs, clicking on links directly will take you off this page! I have no idea how to code it so the link opens a new tab directly.

Kara & Alex's wedding soundtrack on 8tracks
This is one of many playlists that I imagined for Kara and Alex's special day. Please feel free to share your own playlists for them as text list or links in a comment! I’ll listen to everyone posted.

We begin on the first day of Year Eight, the day of Kara and Alex’s wedding!

Kara is twenty-two-years old (24 in Kryptonian years), and has completed her M.S. When not sharing mom duties with Alex for their nine-year-old daughter, Ryah, she can be found working as a contractor at CatCo’s National City Tribune under Colliers, being the city’s Guardian Angel, at the D.E.O., at The Agency (as Senior Cryptographic Analyst Kara Daniels), or helping out the Ghost Ship (the USS Zumwalt) with critical missions.

Alex is twenty-three and more committed than ever as second in command (Assistant Director) to Hank at the D.E.O. Her role (as well as Naomi’s) at The Sagan Institute has become mostly a cover. She still joins in the occasional op with the USS Zumwalt.

Shah is 23 and has many ways spends her time: working at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL); going on missions with her sisters for the D.E.O. or the USS Zumwalt; spending quality time with her bondmates; working with Marjorie on the farm; training Ryah or just being a good mother; exploring her role as a priestess of Rao. While she's still dating Tyson Phelps they don't see each other as often as they used to, and he is her +1 to the wedding.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
June 15th – Year Eight

Wedding Day at Hanson’s Orchard

Rural Carver County - An hour and twenty-minute drive Northwest of Midvale.

1331 Hours UTC -5, Saturday afternoon, U.S. East Coast Time

……………………………

This is love: to fly toward a secret sky, to cause a hundred veils to fall each moment. First to let go of life. Finally, to take a step without feet.”

— Jalaluddin Rumi

…………………

WELCOME TO THE WEDDING OF

Alexandra Danvers & Kara Daniels

HANSON’S ORCHARD

CARVER COUNTY, NEW YORK

JUNE 15th

15:00 Hours

Officiant

Queen Hippolyta of Themyscira

Groomsmen

Clark Kent, CJ Vaden, Dante Caruso, Jack Meacham, Tyson Phelps, Winn Schott Jr.

Bridesmaids

Devi Mitra, Shannon MacKenna, Safiya Murabit, Aeryn Ó Caoimháin, Lois Lane, Diana Prince, Aya Yoshida, Ada Nazari, Jessica Rodriguez

Ms. Kara Daniels’ Best Man

Steven Colliers

Ms. Alex Danvers’ Maid of Honor
**And so, it begins…**

As their armored SUV emerged out of the thick, shady woodlands, they crested the final hill and a dazzling sunlit vista of acres upon acres of fruit trees in full bloom opened before them. The lush expanse of white, pink, and fiery red blossoms seemed to stretch for miles, and far ahead, they could just see a hint of a massive red barn peeking above the sea of color.

Beyond that, pretty as a painting, the breathtaking backdrop of a cloudless blue sky floated above the placid Atlantic Ocean.

An elegantly-dressed Vasquez glanced over at Kara from where she sat at attention in the driver’s seat. The Kryptonian was leaning over in the middle, half into the front of the vehicle, gazing ahead at the twisting two-lane road like an excited child.

“We’re almost there, Kara.” The agent said with amusement as she reached over to squeeze the exuberant young hero’s arm. “You’ll see what Callie and her team did to decorate the place last night soon enough, I promise.”

“Don’t worry, Daniels, it’s not like they can start the party without you.” Colliers deadpanned from Kara’s right, where he was reclined in the front passenger seat looking half asleep. “And can I say how much I can’t wait to get back to calling you, Danvers?”

“You and me both, boss.” Kara beamed, stretching over a bit further to quickly dart in and kiss his
cheek before turning back to do the same for a grinning Susan. The happy Kryptonian then slid back into the rear-facing backseat to snuggle in next to her beautiful bride’s side.

Alex (who’d jettisoned the ‘outdated’ idea that the wives-to-be shouldn’t see each other before the ceremony), sat across from their Persian sister, and both were wearing the exquisite dresses Kara had designed for them. Shah’s curvy form was wrapped in emerald green satin, while Alex had forgone her signature blood red for a beautiful simple gray corseted wedding dress that paired perfectly with her bondmate’s ethereally pure white gown.

**Hmmm.** Kara sensed that something was amiss. *Why is Alex so nervous?*

She’d been fidgety all morning for some unknown reason and was messing with her short-cropped hair more than she had all year. Maybe it was because she was tired? Her fiancée had had a very late night with the Girl Squad, who’d taken her to a club that Callie had recommended (rather like a bachelorette party).

Kara had just gone out with Astra, Lilly, Eliza & Naomi (who were openly a couple now. Yay!!), J’onn (as Hank), Ryah, and a few of her non-super friends, including Winn, Olivia, Harmona, Kathy Richards, and Julia Doyle to play mini-golf, drink frilly drinks, (non-alcoholic for Ryah, of course), and relax.

“Alex?” Kara asked with an expectant gaze. “What’s wrong?”

The brunette did her best to appear casual at first, but then quickly crumbled into a miserable frown. “Oh, Kara, it’s terrible! Look.” She moved her hair away from her neck and then waved her fingers as if casting a spell to disperse a tiny veil she must have secretly conjured to cover up…

“Oh my…” Kara’s gasped. Lilly and Shah, who were also looking on, cast their gazes down at their hands as if admonished. Astra just grinned and turned to glance distractedly out the window.

It was a tattoo, on her *Vaena’s* neck. And not just any artwork or stylized symbol, it was the D.E.O.’s official seal.

“It won’t come off!” Alex bit her lip with worry as she rubbed at it.

“How did you? I mean, we *can’t* get tattoos… *can* we? Our skin… it’s impervious…”

Shah spoke up with a sigh, “Diana knew a guy…”

“Ah…” That made sense.

“Hey, if it’s any consolation, we all got one.” Vasquez chuckled from behind the wheel. “Mine just didn’t heal in five-minutes like your girls’ here did, but it is somewhere less, ahem, conspicuous. Why do you think I’m sitting funny? Go ahead and use your X-Ray vision… I’m not shy.” The veteran D.E.O. agent then smirked as she proudly sat up a little, like an invitation.

In the backseat, they all looked at each other, shrugged, and tilted their heads sort-of upside-down to get a better view forward…

**Wow.** “Niice.” Kara almost sang.

Alex pinched her. “What do you mean, *nice?’*

“I mean… it looks great on her… um, *there,* but I like it on you best, *Nafasem-an.* I like it a lot.” Then Kara leaned over and began kissing her bondmate’s neck on and around her new symbol.
Alex sucked in heated breaths and giggled wildly as Kara gently ran her tongue over her sensitive skin. When her Kryptonian pulled back, Alex kept her hands on Kara’s cheeks and smiled from ear to ear. “So you really like it? You’re not just saying that?”

The blonde nodded, “Uh-huh. Would I lie?”

“Well… no. Hmmm… I guess it’s not so bad, and I can hide it easily enough.”

“That’s the spirit! You’re keeping it… and I want one!” Kara said, then kissed Alex’s fingers before she turned to Shah with a salacious grin, “And what about you, sister?”

Lilly, from her position in the front-facing backseat across from Kara and Alex, reached over her bondmate (who’d graciously offered to sit in the middle) and poked a reluctant Shah on the knee. The Persian beauty sighed, and then gracefully pulled the top of her emerald dress down a little to reveal both her lacy bra, her, um, generous attributes, as well as her very own D.E.O. tatt, just above her right breast near her collarbone.

“Yowza! As Winn would say.” Alex’s hazel eyes sparkled as she stared. Shah blushed and pulled her top backup (but was unable to hide a smile).

They all laughed.

“I like you all so much,” Lilly said to the group, as she cuddled with her demurely-smiling wife. Astra sat close on her bondmate's right and had been staring out the vehicle’s side window seemingly entranced by the sun-glittered roadside with its profusion of wildflowers and honey bees. At the sound of Lilly’s voice, though, the great Kryptonian general stirred and turned her head to capture her wife’s lips in a brief, sweet kiss.

“I know we just met yesterday, Lilly, but I like you, too… I love all of you guys.” Kara said breathlessly as she glanced around at all of them and leaned into Alex.

“Honestly? I can’t believe this is happening, and that you’re all here! Especially you, Aunt Astra, it’s like a dream come true! Somebody pinch me because today’s really the day… and I couldn’t have imagined it any better.”

“I already pinched you,” Alex said as she happily nuzzled into Kara’s side. She was careful not to mess up the amazing cascade of golden curls entwined with flowers that fell like a perfectly-designed waterfall off her smooth shoulders and down her back, or to smudge the makeup that Callie’s minions had so meticulously applied to her fiancée. And damn… they did a wonderful job! She couldn’t keep her eyes off of Kara.

“You look like a goddess,” Alex spoke breathlessly, and with a slight flush.

“As do you, Alexandra… my sunrise, my dreamcatcher, my Alex vanimelda, my nafasem-an, my Vaena, my Flame… my love…”

Oh, frack it! Callie’s minions can fix our hair once we get there.

And then they were kissing.
A few minutes later…

The sights that greeted them when they stepped out of the vehicle at the main compound of the Orchard were like scenes from a fairytale.

There wasn’t a cloud in the sky, and a vivid wash of colorful blossoms flowed like a sea around them. A wide freshly-mowed lawn, filled with rows of white chairs, stretched between the main two-story farmhouse and the barns. The chairs faced a vine-covered arbor perched along the high cliffs above the ocean.

The whole aesthetic reminded Kara of their house back in Midvale, but more vast and all the flowers made her feel like Jeremiah’s spirit was somehow there, watching over them.

The Orchard’s cavernous red barn had been set up like a dance hall for the reception, with long strings of large white LEDs strung in the rafters, as well as millions of glittering fairy lights wound throughout the boughs and branches of the trees outside.

Kara was reminded of Elysium as she took it all in, and her gaze lingered on six horses watching from behind their stable fences. It was then that she noticed the last of Callie’s set-up crew lugging their heavy gear into the back of the barn through a large sliding door before each disappeared in a flash of light.

She felt space-time ripple with each occurrence.

“Where did they go?” Kara darted over to ask Callie, who glanced up from studying her iPad at the bride’s approach.

Myka’s sister was as poised as a runway model, short of stature (almost Shah’s height), nearly a foot shorter than the six-foot Navy Captain, with a head full of golden curls, similar to Kara’s. She was sharply dressed in a beautiful dark Egyptian blue dress, with gold accents, and four-inch heels that she wore like she’d been born in them.

The goddess’ ice blue eyes sparkled. “Kara! So good to see you!” She kissed both of her niece’s cheeks, and then stood back to appraise her, as well as Alex, who’d walked over to stand next to her bondmate.

The beautiful goddess cracked a delightful smile and said, “You’ll both do. Just kidding, girls, you look marvelous! And, about my people coming and going, and all the flashing lights? Don’t worry, dears; it’s all just part of the messy behind the scenes. It’ll be over long before the ceremony, or by the time most of your guests begin arriving. Khalis has it under control.”

Just then, a broad, solid man of medium height, who was completely bald and walked with a slight limp, stepped out of the barn to give Callie a thumbs up. He looked either like a blacksmith, or a mad scientist, dressed in rugged overalls, work boots, what appeared to be multi-lensed Steampunk-like goggles, and a leather tool belt. “And what did I tell you? The portals are fully active.”


The blonde woman suppressed a look of slight exasperation. “Gates, doorways… to bring your friends here of course! Look, they’ve already begun to arrive.” She gestured back to the rear of the barn where the man, Khalis, had been standing a moment before. From the now wide-open doors staggered several disoriented sailors, including now Lieutenant Commander (LCDR) CJ Vaden (who was one of their groomsmen!) and other Zumwalt crew members all clad in their pressed U.S. Navy dress whites. The sailors were evaluating their surroundings with looks ranging from complete
shock to delight.

There were also others, from all over the world. “Yay Zumwalt!” Kara was thrilled and cheering for her ship and friends. “Oh, Alex… look, that’s Shah’s friends from NAVSEA, and what’s-his-name, that engineer from Northrop who she helped fix the design flaw in the ship’s railgun targeting systems. What was his name? Dave? No, Devin!”

Her bondmate nodded, “I think the poor bastard’s still carrying a torch for her too.”

“Mmhm.” Kara sighed. “I hope he’s used to disappointment.”

Then, Tom and Jessica appeared from the main house and quickly stepped over to greet the crew, who immediately came to attention as their Captain and the Chief approached. Ada would have been there too, except Kara and Alex had asked their niece to take the lead in introducing Astra and Lilly to everyone, starting with Eliza and Naomi, then Tom and Myka, and after them, Lois and Clark. Kara took a calming breath hoping everything was going fine on that front, it was important to her that they all be a happy family.

As if on cue, Ada’s thoughts put her at ease. *Everything going great, Auntie; Astra and Lilly are charming everyone. Stop thinking so loud, and focus on Alex.*

_Sorry._ Kara giggled. _Thank you, Ada._

_My pleasure._

Kara wrapped an arm around her bondmate’s supple waist and watched as Vaden excused himself from his colleagues with a brief salute to Captain Daniels, and followed Khalis back into the barn, where the two men seemed to fall into a friendly conversation.

“Hello!” That’s when Kara put her hands up to her mouth and called out to all of them, but they didn’t get any reaction. She and Alex then started waving and shouting louder to their friends, but the sailors still didn’t seem to notice them at all.

“They can’t see or hear us, can they?” Kara asked her divine aunt, who’d been giving orders to random minions and tapping away on her iPad.

“Don’t pout dear, it’s bad luck for anyone to see the brides before a human wedding, and we can’t have that now can we?” Callie grinned. “As Aphrodite, it is literally my business to know such things, and you are under my protection… at least until your ceremony begins. That’s the rules, as they have been for millennia.

“Only those who actually need to see you before then will. To everyone else, you and Alex may as well be ghosts… and those around you will rationalize your absence and things like ‘magical’ teleportation portals. Now go! Khalis will bring Hippolyta and her Amazons next.” She then breathed out slowly… “It has been too long since I have seen my queen.”

There was a touch of awe, and melancholy, in Aphrodite’s tone… enough that Kara felt compelled to lean in and hug the smaller woman. As they embraced, the goddess laid her head on Kara’s chest for a few moments before standing on her tippy toes to softly kiss the teasing edge of Kara’s lips at one of the corners of her mouth.

The tingle where their skin touched was delightful.

_Wow._ Kara, Alex, and Shah all thought simultaneously. They’d all felt it… she’d kissed all three of them simultaneously through Kara!
“Thank you, Archangel.” The goddess’ big blue eyes were wide and grateful. “You and Alex have renewed my faith in love.” You’ve also had a very positive influence on those around you.

“Awww, you really think so? Well then, you’re welcome.” Kara said warmly, steadying the woman back on her heels.

“Excuse me, Callie, but I have to ask, who’s Khalis?” Alex looked off toward the barn as she spoke.

The blonde goddess sighed deeply and rolled her eyes, “My ex. You’d know him better by one of his many aliases… Hephaestus, Vulcan, Lord of the Forge, Brokkr, Ptah, the CTO of Vulcan Research, and so on and so on… Don’t get me wrong, he’s sweet and kind-hearted, with a brilliant mind, but has always been completely obsessed with his work, which is why we never really worked out. We’re still friends though…”

“Oh, I’m sorry; listen to me talk about myself! Today is not the time to go into my failed relationships; we’d be here all day.” Kara and Alex joined in as the goddess giggled. “Today is your perfect day, my boon to you both.”

And with that their golden-haired aunt turned and called over to where Shah and Colliers were talking over a cup of cider, “Ms. Nazari, Mr. Colliers! Can you please escort the brides inside the main house? Curtis will be waiting on the second floor to get going on hair and makeup touch-ups.” Then added with a naughty giggle, “It looks like they’ve been mauling each other.”

The pair snapped into action and gulped down their drinks.

Before leaving with them, Kara asked, “Callie, what exactly does it mean when you all of you keep saying ‘boon’? It sounds… I don’t know… like a lot more serious than a gift from a wedding registry.”

A moment of peace seemed to settle about the frenetic woman, and she smiled. “It is a rare thing when one of us finds a bondmate, Kara… our perfect pairing… our happily ever after… or has a child for that matter, that’s even rarer. We haven’t had such a wonderful excuse to gather together in joyful celebration as a family in a very, very long time. Believe me, this is a big deal, and when such a blessed event occurs, it is our custom (if we so choose) to each offer a gift, a ‘boon’ to our blood… and mine to you, my beautiful nieces, is your perfect day.” She then bowed her head.

“Some of your other patrons will offer their gifts as well, like Hephaestus with his portals. I believe Athena has something special in mind as well, though she already made one miracle happen today, she actually convinced her brother to come.” Callie rolled her eyes as everyone looked at her inquiringly. “My other ex… Ares. Who, while smoking hot, is not known for his love of parties, or frivolity, but something about you two drew him from his penthouse… I wonder… Be careful around that one, he’s always looking to make trouble. A real bad boy.” She winked suggestively.

“Regardless, I hope he and I get the chance to reacquaint ourselves. It has been waay too long since we’ve… danced, if you get my meaning…” She clucked her tongue and gazed off with a mischievously wicked grin.

At that moment, the goddess’ iPad beeped, startling her, and she glanced down at the glowing device with a hint of annoyance. “I’m sorry dears, I must go. The changing rooms for the reception require my attention. Oh, and Kara, the garments for tonight’s event brought tears to my eyes! It is like you are evoking the spirit of eternal Olympus right here on Earth! I, of course, and all your guests will look absolutely stunning. Also, don’t worry about dresses for Astra and Lilly; your little disciple, Winn, worked most of the night with my people to replicate something magical for them, based on your designs of course.”
“My… disciple? Pfft! Aunt Callie, Winn’s not my… you don’t understand…”

“Oh, I understand better than you think, Kara Zor-El.” The smirking goddess turned, making a gesture of wrapping something around her little finger, and sauntered away toward the main building with an added sway to her perfect hips.

Kara, Alex, Shah, and Colliers all just gaped at each other in a kind of awed disbelief as the goddess took her leave.

Eventually, Alex broke the silence. “Is it too late for me to ask a dumb question? How the Hell did we even get here? I can’t be the only one thinking that!” And they all busted out laughing.

A few minutes later…

After Colliers mercifully gave her ten minutes to go meet up with the band (if they could even see her) Kara dashed off to the barn instead of letting herself be marched directly upstairs for last minute ‘detailing’.

Her nose scrunched in annoyance. *What am I, a car?*

Anyway, the *Sun Runners* were a fabulous Metropolis-based alternative, indie band that Kara knew from her time attending Columbia. She had started singing with them, mostly in coffee shops and clubs, to blow off steam during her undergrad days. Also, whenever they’d needed an additional vocalist or had studio work, they’d given her a call. During that time, she’d become good friends with the band’s founding members, the incredibly talented twenty-something artists, and inseparable couple, Aaron and Abigail.

Kara had to lift the skirts of her dress up high to avoid getting the pristine fabric dirty as she dodged around the chaos. Stagehands were all busily setting up equipment, and oblivious to her veiled presence. Gretchen, Abigail’s big black piano, had just been polished, and Aaron was eyeballing its placement. His tall, athletic frame was stretched over the glossy black top, providing a nice view of his tight, blue jean-clad ass.

Abigail, her long brunette hair in a ponytail, quietly strolled up behind him, winked down at Kara, and grabbed one of his butt cheeks. “Looks great to me,” she said with a satisfied grin, and he turned to gaze at her with a smile that said everything.

Kara could see how much he loved the amazing woman in that one look.

She was his sun.

“Hey, Kara!” Aaron said enthusiastically, standing up to run a hand through his golden-brown hair. He then quickly kissed Abigail before both of Kara’s friends’ attention was laser-focused on her.

They were both staring.

“You... look... Ah-mazing!” Abigail said with wonder in her voice. “Such a beautiful bride, I’m sooo jealous.”

Kara blushed as she swished the folds of her dress back and forth in front of her like an embarrassed child, “Aw, thanks, Abby.” She was just glad they could see her at all.
“Don’t worry about the music, Angel; we’ll be ready, and we’re definitely nailing your playlist,” Aaron said with a calm certainty.

“Yeah, and we’re ready for your songs, and Alex’s. She’s worked so hard on hers, and I know she’ll do great, despite her stage fright.” Abby added.

Kara rolled her eyes, “I’ve told her that, like, a dozen times, but she’s still terrified to sing in public.”

“I suggested she just think about you naked like I do.” Aaron grinned lecherously for a half-second before Abby smacked him.

“Nasty boy.” She smirked. “You’re so paying for that later.”

Kara could see how much the handsome musician was enjoying himself; his eyes glittered as he watched Abby. He enjoyed getting a rise out of the normally easy-going woman he so obviously worshiped, and it was clear that she liked the banter just as much.

Abby kissed him one more time before jumping down from the stage to gingerly hug Kara, surprising her by nearly lifting her off the floor, “Hey, I need to go help my cousins with the sound system. I’ll miss having your angel voice beside me most of tonight, but we got this. Love you, sweetie! Knock ‘em dead, ‘kay?”

As she bounded off, Aaron looked around purposefully, and then easily lowered himself down from the stage to stand before Kara. His beautiful golden irises glinted and shifted as he studied a fidgeting Kara, who suddenly realized that he was far more than she’d ever realized.

Aaron had suddenly become inhumanly graceful, and the aura he was now radiating was so off the charts it was like being bathed in sunlight. “Hello, my niece.” He was speaking ancient Kryptonian, and his smile was sunbeams and fire.

“Crap! Noooo, not you too, Aaron!” She protested, despite how good just standing next to him felt. “I liked you just being my goofy, normal, human friend. Does Abby know? And who… which one are you?” Kara floundered between disappointment and amazement.

“Wow… Usually, there’s a little more excitement when I introduce myself.” He said with a crooked smile that turned into a pout. Rao, whoever he was, he was a heartbreaker for sure.

Kara huffed and smacked him. “You know what I mean. I really like Aaron, that doesn’t mean I necessarily dislike you… uncle?”

He chuckled, “Apollo. Anyway, I understand, I like Aaron too, even though he can be a bit immature, and irritating at times. He does have a heart of gold… aand I’m talking about myself in the third person, aren’t I? Heh, sorry. I’ve been him for twenty-four years, Kara, and don’t see any reason not to keep being him… especially now.” She watched his enraptured gaze follow over to where Abby was working on some cables, pushing hair off of her dirty face.

“Rao, you love her! Don’t you? Thank goodness, I was about to start a lecture on how Abby deserves someone who can give her their heart, and honesty.”

“He deserves all of that and more… but today isn’t about me, or Abby; it’s about you, and Alex… and Ryah. Aphrodite already explained our tradition, and in that spirit, I would like to offer you a gift. And knowing your heart, and in light of recent events, I believe I know what I can offer you that you won’t decline.”

“Really? And what would that be?”
Aaron/Apollo closed his golden eyes, and Kara felt momentarily woozy as reality shifted around them. Suddenly, they were no longer in the barn, but in a beautifully decorated living room with tall bright windows, vintage furniture, and lots of exposed wood.

*Ah, we’re in the main house of the Orchard.*

Lilly was there in the room, alone. Astra and Ada had apparently stepped out and her aunt’s bondmate didn’t seem to notice them standing only a few feet away.

“Whoa!” Kara said, wobbling as her new uncle steadied her.

“Translocation can be discombobulating at first, but fun, kind of like warping space-time when traveling interstellar, but more complicated. Sorry for the dizziness.”

“It’s okay. Why are we here, and… ah, I see, Lilly is unaware of us.”

“Yes, about that. You’ll learn how to conceal yourself completely in time, not just your energy, blood, or radar signature. It’s just a tweak in our auras, a veil, that allows us to cloak our presence from each other, as well as from mortals and their technology, as you’ve already begun to master. It is how we stayed off your and Kal’s radar for so long. I call it ‘living off the grid’.”

“Awesome,” Kara said, studying her new aunt. “And why are we here?”

“I can heal Lilly.” He said bluntly, and with quiet confidence. “Normally, I am not allowed to interfere in the lives of mortals without consequence, but as a boon…”

She sucked in a surprised breath, “A loophole.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Wait, if that’s the case, how were you able to help Ada without being penalized? Back when you saved her, with your necklace? Thank you by the way.” Kara smiled gratefully.

“You’re most welcome, Kara. And as far as the how and the why… because she’s family, of course! Like Lilly will be. Which doesn’t count against us, per the rules. We can help each other anytime, as long as our actions or the results are not deemed to directly interfere in a significant way with the mortal world.”

“Wow. Then yes! Please, do it… but ask her permission first, okay?”

He nodded with understanding, and shimmered, becoming the vision of the gorgeous, golden-haired god Kara had imagined from all of the books of Greek myths she’d ever read. Like a sculpture by Michelangelo, he was six-and-a-half feet of sexy, bronzed skin, golden-haired, not-too-overly-muscled goodness. “Damn.” She covered her mouth and blushed bright red, surprised by her own outburst.

“Now that’s the reaction I was looking for!” He was smirking and she looked vexed. “I’m sorry, Kara, the look on your face…. it’s freaking priceless. Okay, don’t hit me. I said don’t… ow!”

Kara still glowered after delivering her super-powered smack, but after a moment sighed and hugged him. “Fine, you goofball, I’m ready.”

Apollo grinned like the sun causing her skin to tingle all over. “Okay, let’s do this.” He said, and a look of peace came over his regal countenance.
The world shimmered again, but this time Kara enjoyed the shift of reality as she sensed and attempted to analyze every detail of how the misty veil of concealment melted away.

It took a few moments to calm down a freaked-out Lilly after they appeared, and to stop Astra from putting Apollo through a wall as Kara explained his intent. Her aunt was quite protective of her bondmate. But after her defenses relaxed, Astra showed an intense fascination with the ancient Kryptonian, and his offer to make Lilly whole once again.

Kara also promised to tell her aunts everything she knew about the gods, after the wedding.

Lilly, on the other hand, was struggling with Apollo’s offered boon. “So, why me, and not someone more worthy? Is it just because I’m Kara’s aunt?” After Apollo nodded, her brow furrowed. “That hardly seems fair, there are millions of people out there worse off than me. I have a good life.”

The Lord of Light sat down and held her hand. “You need to understand, Lilly, I can’t help them. My people can no longer intervene in human affairs; we made that misguided decision… a pact, long ago. There was consensus, at the time, that we'd caused enough trouble over the years playing gods. But, while I can’t fix that now, what I can do is this one good thing, and I am offering it… to you, on my niece’s behalf,” He gestured to a blushing Kara, “… If you wish it.”

Lilly was crying, silently, with Astra pressed in close, one of her powerful arms wrapped soothingly around her human’s shoulders. “I do want it, Apollo, but if I accept your offer, even knowing what you said, every sick child, every maimed soldier, every person dying unnecessarily because the ‘gods’ decided that they aren’t worthy would remind me that I put myself above them… and I couldn’t live with that.”

She sniffed, and bravely sat up straight, “There’s a girl, the daughter of one of my regular customers. Her name is Rachel… she’s seven, and a sweetie. She’s in hospice with leukemia, dying. The doctors have done everything they can, but have given up. Her parents are just trying to keep her comfortable… waiting for her to go to sleep, and never…” She choked back tears. “… wake up again. Please save her instead of healing me, okay? Legs are overrated anyway, and I have all I need right here.” She grasped at Astra’s hand on her shoulder.

Apollo bowed his golden head.

“By your grace, I am humbled.” His voice was a reverent whisper, and when he looked up at her there were tears of liquid light in his eyes. A moment later he nodded in acquiescence, and then leaned in to place a gentle, chaste kiss upon Lilly’s forehead before disappearing in a burst of soft, pure light that nearly sent both Kara and Astra to their knees with its sudden influx of power, and pleasure.

It felt just like touching the sun.

Lilly was swooning too, flushed with warmth as Astra, now recovered, took her mate in her arms. “I’m… I’m tingling! I feel… my back…” She covered her mouth as she giggled uncontrollably. “Wow. What a rush. Astra, he did something to me. My legs… I just thought I felt my toes.”

Aaron… did you?? Kara sent her thoughts to Apollo, wherever he’d disappeared to, hoping beyond hope, but also worried.

Yes. How could I not after that display of selflessness?

But… Rachel...
I am with the child now. She’ll be fine.

Ah… I see. You’ll be punished you know…

The god laughed. Kara, let me tell you something… I don’t care. What most of my siblings don’t understand is that being human isn’t a punishment, especially not when I’m with Abby. I will heal Rachel, and take Death out for coffee to apologize for my meddling. Then, whatever consequences come, I will gladly suffer them. Just keep me in mind over the next few months, okay? I may need a hand now and again… you know, if I have to move a couch or something... or those damn speakers Abby loves so much.

Kara laughed and wiped a happy tear from her eye. Sure… and thank you, Aaron, um, Apollo… with all of my heart.

Don’t mention it. Seriously, don’t mention it. When the time is right, I’ll tell Abby everything, I promise.

You better. I’ll be watching you… uncle.

Got it, I’ve been warned. I’ll see you later tonight, Kara. You and Alex are going to blow them away!

Promise?

Promise… the gods’ honest truth.

Kara smiled and relaxed a little. How could she not trust Apollo?

………………

Winn…

It was a beautiful day, not too hot or too cold, and the morning air was filled with the sweet scents of cherry and apple blossoms.

Winn stood with Ben in the shade of the barn near the well-stocked refreshments area, where the sturdy nearly seventeen-year-old towered over him. For the first few months of their friendship, Winn had only known the young man by his Xbox Live Gamertag, or various in-game character names, but was happy that over time they’d become RL friends.

Ben was grinning from ear-to-ear as he watched his mother and Kara through the upstairs window of the main house, hugging and speaking animatedly together.

“I think it’s bad luck to see the bride before the wedding, Lancelot.” Winn popped a big chocolate-dipped strawberry in his mouth as he glanced up and watched Kara laugh at something Olivia had said.

God, the bride-to-be is stunning and so happy.

“Yeah, I know, but dude, look at her! Look! She’s the most beautiful woman in the universe.” Ben was entranced, the athletic young man’s infatuated gaze never leaving Kara.

Winn liked his choice of words and agreed with him. “Amen to that kid.” He mumbled, and as they raised their glasses of lemonade in a toast, Ben did so without even turning to look.
Winn had been taken by surprise when they’d met in person for the first time, that morning; he hadn’t been expecting the high school senior to look like a football player… and not even a third-stringer, but a handsome, sandy-haired, square-jawed, All-American quarterback.

Truthfully, Winn had been expecting someone more like himself, but younger. Heck, he had to look up just to talk to Ben.

As Kara and Olivia moved away from the window, the young man sighed and turned his gaze to Winn, who asked, “So… how did you and Kara meet anyway? I’ve never heard that story.”

The young man rubbed his jaw and smiled. “It was a few years ago.” He paused unsteadily, but a determined look came over him and he continued, “Remember the bridge collapse in National City?”

Winn nodded, “Sure, who could forget?” He sure remembered it, he would have been on the bridge if his bike hadn’t gotten a flat an hour before. The horrible event was engrained in the psyche of everyone who lived there at that time. It was still a mystery how so few people actually died that day.

There had been lots of chatter about the ‘Guardian Angel’ who saved the day, who was probably a Meta. Winn wasn’t sure, but he’d never stopped trying to find the truth. He did know for certain that there had been suppressed eyewitness accounts and blurry photos that day, as well as after. In fact, National City had experienced countless other mysterious incidents over the years since… most unofficially linked to the same stealthy Good Samaritan… a woman, but there was nothing provable, no solid evidence.

It was a well-known topic which Winn had beaten to death over the years on his blog.

“Well,” Ben continued, glancing nervously back at the window of the house, and lowering his voice to almost a whisper. Weird. “My family was there, our car was crushed by debris, and my dad was… killed.” He took a breath. “Mom was hurt pretty bad, and I almost died, but… anyway…. we were…” Winn noticed how the young man hesitated and stopped himself from saying more about the details.

“… I was in bad shape for a long time and mom… I didn’t know it then, but she was really depressed, probably clinically, and the insurance companies were fighting her. We were nearly broke from all the bills for my multiple surgeries and about to lose the house.”

“I’m so, so sorry, Ben; that had to have been horrible.”

The young man offered a valiant smile, “It was, but… Kara… she saved us… literally. Saved me, and mom. She started coming around, you know? With her big smile, and positive attitude… it was like letting the sun in whenever we were with her. I’d never had a friend like her before. She’d just hang out, talk with mom, play games with me, and listen. I poured by heart out to her so many times, and she was always there for me. She and Alex even paid for my medical expenses, physical therapy, and she and her niece helped mom with our finances. She was awesome. Kara even got mom to laugh again, and start living her life.

“She saved us, Winn, and I’m doing my best to be happy for her right now, but it’s hard.”

Winn’s head was buzzing with all kinds of thoughts, and questions, including wanting to know more about Kara’s mysterious niece, but he stayed focused on Ben, “You jealous?”

“ Heck yeah. Big time.” The young man freely admitted, flushing a bit. “I know, I know, I shouldn’t be, it’s selfish and stupid. I’ll only be seventeen next month, and like a kid brother to her… I know that… and have you seen Alex? Dayamm. Like she’d ever pick me over her… I wouldn’t.”
“Again, kid, I feel your pain, acutely. To be honest, I was envious of Alex too, at least until I got to
know her. She’s completely amazing and adores Kara… she’s her ‘moon and stars’.”

Ben looked confused. “What does that mean?”

Winn shrugged. “It’s something I hear Alex say to her when she thinks no one’s paying attention…
or maybe she doesn’t care who’s listening.” He grinned. “I’m pretty sure it means that Kara is her
whole world… and honestly, Ben, our girl deserves someone like that in her life. We all do.”

The young man nodded and looked longingly back at the house and the empty window with a heavy
sigh.

…………………………..

Kara…

Kara spun around in front of the vintage, three-paneled standing mirror that was set up in her
dressing room, showing off the dress she’d made from the ethereal, flowing white Themysciran silk
and enchanted thread that Queen Hippolyta had sent as a gift from the Amazons weeks before.

Myka Daniels clapped, and Tom just stood slack-jawed as he said, “Wow.” He wrapped his arm
around his wife’s shoulders and the goddess snuggled in close.

_They’re so adorable together!_

Kara had been relieved that her General hadn’t been upset for very long about Myka keeping her
immortal identity secret from him. Apparently, he’d always suspected something, and the truth was,
he’d fallen in love with the real Myka, not her mask of Athena, and she loved him just as fiercely.

They’d weathered the revelation, and seemed closer, and more intimate than ever.

“So, you like it, then?” Kara’s hopeful eyes glittered with a soft blue luminescence as she waited for
their responses.

“Oh, yes.” Myka grinned. “Your dress is fit for the _gods_, and appropriately so.”

“My Goddess, you are stunning. Alex Danvers is one lucky woman.” Her adoptive father said,
offering a proud smile and a nod of appreciation.

“Thank you, My General. Maybe that’s so, but if you ask me, I’m the lucky one. Lucky to have
Alex, Shah, Ryah, Eliza and Naomi, and both of you in my life.”

Myka rolled her eyes and dabbed at the corner of one of them with a Kleenex, “Oh, stop with all the
mushy. Callie’s going to poof in here any minute to molest my face again if I keep crying.” She
sniffed, fighting more tears.

A knock at the door brought the queenly pair of Diana of Themyscira and the radiant goddess Circe
into the room, locked arm in golden arm as they approached. Tom hugged Diana and the elegant
goddess of magic bowed formally before Kara’s adoptive mother.

“Pallas Athena.” Circe offered a respectful, ceremonial greeting.

Myka smiled warmly at the sorcerous and her Amazonian demigoddess mate (who had once been
hers) and pulled Circe into an unexpected hug. “No need for formality on this joyous day, cousin. I see you’ve brought gifts for the brides.”

Circe seemed pleasantly startled at first, but quickly recovered, and turned to accept two wooden boxes of incredible craftsmanship from her lover who had carried them in. While she was adjusting her hold on the unwieldy containers, Diana lovingly reached over and brushed a few errant strands of long black curls off her goddess’ face and back behind an ear.

Kara noticed the moment and smiled. She was so happy to see the two of them so openly… domestic, and finally showing guilt-free affection in front of her. For so long Circe had punished herself for what she’d done… but it looked like she’d finally moved on.

Thank Rao!

As Diana was withdrawing her fingers, Circe turned to playfully kiss them and then opened the top box for Kara. Inside, resting in a bed of a velvet-like purple material, were four gorgeous Amazonian-style armbands, coiled, made of what appeared to be gold, and etched with intricate designs that incorporated both ancient Greek and Kryptonian glyphs. They were stunning! One was smaller than the others, and seemed more like a companion.

“They’re… beautiful. Circe, oh Rao!”

The goddess lit up with a brilliant smile, “Thank goodness, we’d hoped you’d like them. The Amazon artificers and the Telchines artisans spent six months crafting the Kryptonian metals into an appropriate alloy, and it took Aeryn and me weeks to bind them with our, and small portion of my mother’s power.”

Aeryn helped? That’s so awesome! “Wait… your mom?” Kara stared wide-eyed and swallowed. “Hecate?”

Circe’s regal features became serious, “Yes, long ago, before she departed with the elder gods for other worlds, she left a reservoir of her power behind for me to use if I ever had need of it.”

“Incredible. What do they… do?” Tom asked the same question Kara had on the tip of her tongue.

“Wonders.” Circe crooned. “They offer protection against magic, something our kind, untrained, are as vulnerable to as humans… as both Kara and Kal have discovered.” There was a hint of regret and darkness in Circe’s look and tone as she spoke, but she took a calming breath and brightened as she continued, “These four adornments will bond only to Kara, Alex, Shah, and Ryah. Once worn, you will each be able to control them by thought, your will, and change them into whatever shape or form you require.

“Also, if an attempt is ever made to manipulate or harm the wearer by magic, you will be alerted, and shielded to some degree.” She picked up one of larger ones, focused on it, and Kara watched as it easily transformed… first into a beautiful necklace, then a ring, and finally a tiny pair of glittering diamond stud earrings.

Diana added, “The exchange of bands also represents a Kryptonian bonding tradition from the days of old, similar to how humans in your culture exchange rings.” Her smile was soft, and she was looking at Circe, who melted beneath the Amazon Princess’ gaze.

“Ohay, next!” Circe almost giggled as she closed the top box and handed it to Myka for safe keeping. “In the second box, I have similar bands for you to give Ada, Astra, Miyuki, and Kal-El. It would put my troubled mind at ease knowing that all of our new family is protected.”

Kara stepped in, took the box, and hugged the taller goddess for a full minute, trying not to cry, herself. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“I won’t let anyone hurt you or your family the way I did, Kara, ever… and woe to any creature who makes the attempt, for that is the day Circe will return to the human world… and remind these mortals that gods still walk among them. Oaths be damned.”

Kara took a breath and whispered, “I promise we will always protect each other, and with the aid of your priceless gifts, we now have armor against one of the few things in the universe that can harm us. Be at peace now, Circe, please, and know that all is forgiven and that Alex and I love you.”

The goddess didn’t respond, she couldn’t because of the waterfall of tears spilling down her noble cheeks. Kara just held Circe as she sobbed quietly, and trembled in her arms until Diana eventually peeled her away with great tenderness.

……………………….

Myka…

Later, Myka was alone with the bride in her dressing room and doing some final preening to Kara’s hair before the ceremony when she said, “We should probably talk about my boon.”

Kara blinked, “Okay… I still can’t believe you’re all giving me these mind-boggling things. It’s like a fairytale.”

“And in this story, I’m the fairy godmother?”

“Yeah, something like that. But a really cool, wise, and pretty fairy godmother.” They both laughed.

Myka, who was lavishing her adopted daughter with her affectionate gaze, then said, “Anyway, I want to give you something…”

Kara wanted to reply ‘no, it’s okay, I don’t need anything, everything’s good’, but she couldn’t resist. “What?”

“Peace of mind.”

Kara’s brows crinkled, and Myka grinned. “I don’t mean to be cryptic, in’ah; I apologize if I am. I just know how it feels, to have a child that you know you will outlive. It’s not right, and I can spare you, Alex, and Shah… all of us, that heartbreak with Ryah.”

Kara’s intake of breath was audible.

“Now, I can’t make her a demigoddess due to the pact, but there’s no rule stating I can’t tweak and evolve her physiology as your boon. I can make her essentially as immortal as we are, though that also means her children will carry on any of the changes I make in their DNA, so there will be long-term effects. I’m sorry I can’t offer the same for Eliza, or Lilly, at least not without consequence… though I think Lilly’s going to be just fine in the long run thanks to Apollo, the big, kind-hearted fool.

“Anyway, the good news for your other mother is that if she retires to Themyscira with Naomi in a few years as they’ve discussed, she’ll stop aging there, and regain her youthful vigor over time. Alternatively, if we can fully transfer her to Earth Pax she would remain young and as strong as an
immortal on that world thanks to how you configured her there… though personally I’d rather she stay here on this Earth with us.”

Kara was momentarily speechless as she waited for Alex’s approval in her thoughts, but as soon as she could respond she enveloped Myka in a powerful Kryptonian hug. “Yes, please, we accept. I don’t even know how to thank you for this gift, ma’har.” And then, after she finally released the goddess, added, “Sounds like I need to speak to Eliza, I didn’t know about her retirement plan.” Her tone was sad.

“Oh, my apologies,” Myka said. “I’d assumed she’d already broached the subject with you and Alex. Did she at least talk to you about wanting to officially move to National City to live with Naomi? Or her intention to sell the Midvale house this fall?”

Kara sagged, “That would be big fat no on all counts…”

Myka took a breath, “Well, I’m certain she meant to… but she might just be a little worried about disappointing her daughters.” She squeezed Kara hand. “Talk to her, in’ah, she’s finally ready to start living again, for herself.”

“Alex and me, disappointed? How could she even think that? Silly Eliza. I’ll talk to her. Thanks for the heads up. Hmmm, it’s not like her moving is a shock, she practically lives with Naomi already and coming here as a couple was a big step for them, but I am a little surprised about her wanting to sell the house. I hope she realizes that Alex and I are buying it from her, at triple the market value. The memories there are ours, and no one else’s, just like the flowers Jeremiah and I planted in the backyard…”

“Worry about all of that anon.” Myka said as her form shimmered, and she became a vision of divine grace. “Now is a time for celebration… to merge your Houses and your hearts before those you love and who love you in return. And, it isn’t just any old day that I become a new grandmother.”

It was Athena who bent to kiss Kara’s forehead, and gently led her by the hand to join Tom, Astra, Lilly, and last but not least, Ryah, in the form of an adorable bear cub, to head to the cliffs, where all of their family waited.

………………………….

Alex…

Their ceremony was amazing, like something out a dream.

Thank Rao Alex had taken rehearsals seriously so she wasn’t completely lost. She actually knew her cues, where to step, walk, and what to say. Though, it honestly did take all of her mental resolve to not just flicker to where she could hear her beautiful bondmate’s heartbeat, grab her up, and fly away.

In no time at all, Alex was approaching one of the dual walkways that went down either side of the viewing area and converged at the front of the seemingly endless rows of their gathered friends and family. Up ahead, under the vine- and blossom-covered arch, a smiling, and regal Queen Hippolyta, in all her immortal majesty, waited patiently.

At Alex’s side was J’onn, as Hank Henshaw, in his uber-classy tux (he’d never looked so handsome!), and on her other side, strode poised Eliza, as radiant as a star in the beautiful full-length
blue topaz gown Kara had created for her, escorted by the tall, willowy Naomi (or more accurately today, Euryleia), dark and beautiful with her golden arm (a mirror of Circe’s) looped with her lover’s, and adorned in her full Amazonian splendor.

*My moms…*

Thank goodness, they had both been there in the nervous D.E.O. agent's dressing room to keep her from freaking out about all the grandiose pomp and circumstance. At that moment, she was doing her best just to put one foot in front of the other as she began her journey down the aisle.

As the calming notes of Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Prelude from Cello Suite no.1* began to drift like a spell over the entire gathering, Alex finally began to relax and move with the flow.

The orchestra was arranged in chairs off to the right of the audience and was framed by a backdrop of the ocean. As she walked past them, she saw Kathy Richards, Kara’s music and voice teacher from high school. The woman was the source of the beautiful melody and sat in a chair at the front of all of the musicians with her cello held like something precious before her, eyes closed, a look of bliss on her face as she conjured magic from the delicate instrument.

Glancing to her left, into Kara’s aisle, Alex blushed at the first sight of her very own goddess, aglow in her stunning white dress, her golden locks braided with flowers, spilling down her back.

*Rao!* She had to look twice to be sure the dancing motes of sunlight that followed in Kara’s wake were real…

*Yup, definitely real.*

What was Apollo thinking? Alex grinned and sent her thoughts to the sun god as Kara had taught her to. *Aren’t you in enough trouble already?*

*No, not nearly enough… and besides, didn’t anyone ever tell you? When you find yourself in trouble, is precisely when you should seize the opportunity to make more. Just enjoy the view, Alex.*

*Oh, I am, believe me. Thank you…*  
*Come on, you can say it…*  
*Fine! Uncle.*

Over in his seat, the gorgeous immortal was grinning like a Cheshire Cat.* Now, was that so hard?*  
*I liked it better when you were… hmmm, you know, a silent observer.*  
*What’s the fun in that?* His tone was incredulous.

They both laughed in their entwined thoughts, and Alex felt her elation growing as she continued to follow her graceful bondmate’s progress down the aisle. *Rao, the way she moves… is it hot out here?*

Tom and Myka walked on Kara’s far side, and statuesque Astra with her cheery wife Lilly in her sporty, low-profile chair was on her right (closest to Alex) as they made their way to the front of the assembly where Diana’s mother waited.

Queen Hippolyta stood in her full royal regalia, her honor guard arrayed in a phalanx behind her. Eleven Amazon guards in ceremonial armor, as well as Apollo’s twin sister, the watchful goddess Artemis, with her divine bow slung lightly over her shoulder.
Rao, she was something! Sleek, and darkly beautiful, poised like a watchful bird of prey. Her eyes were amazing… gold, like her brother’s.

In front of the guards, flanking the queen on either side facing the audience, stood Alex and Kara’s striking bridesmaids and groomsmen, who somehow still managed to look just as impressive as the Amazons, but in their tuxes and dresses. Ada and Jessica, Winn, Devi, Aeryn and Jack, and Clark and Lois stood on the left, with Shah (dressed in her shimmering, elegant priestess’ robes over her dress) and Tyson, Dante, Colliers, Vaden, Safiya and Shannon, Diana, and Aya on the right.

Thank Rao, Callie had assured her and Kara that those attending (like Winn), who were unaware of the truth about gods, aliens, and all the crazy in their lives, would remain blissfully so. They would only see what the gods, the ancient Kryptonians, wanted them to… an amazing, but nonmagical, nonalien wedding, without any immortal beings, or little bears walking about.

Alex breathed a sigh of relief, as she hadn’t seen anyone running in terror for the exit, or a cliff, yet. That’s about when everything started becoming a blur to her, well, mostly. She remembered looking out at the sea of smiling, supportive faces: Marjorie crying, her beautiful girls sitting next to her staring up in wonder at the pageantry and the gods (their eyes were certainly open to the truth); Shah’s father Arad sitting alone (not as Ravan’s +1); the Nazari’s housekeeper, Tala (who was like part of the family) at Shah’s mother’s side; Olivia and Ben Roth (Alex almost giggled when she noticed the poor boy looking at Kara as if she were the most beautiful sunrise he’d ever seen… the thing was, she knew exactly how he felt); Ilisa and her daughter Harmona (Kara’s art buddy, who was in college now!); David and Vanessa Jennings (Team Archangel’s attorneys); Rear Admiral Samantha Simmons (Commander of ONI); a grinning Dr. Carlson (her and Kara’s old friend and history teacher); their squad mates Quinn and Brian; and even the starstruck scientists, Nancy Akagi and Dimitri Kozlov, from JPL… just to name a few.

Julia Doyle (who’d been out with Kara the night before) was also there, minus her husband Jerry or her two beautiful six-year-olds, Laura and Astrid. Alex could feel how Kara’s heart still melted whenever she heard the girls’ names, which of course were homages to her bondmate’s mother and aunt. Unfortunately, Julia had to constantly find ways to keep Jerry and Kara apart. She had decorated their house with paintings and drawings of her savior for years; so if Jerry ever did catch a glimpse of Kara in real life he’d know for sure that she was the one who had saved his wife, and the lives of over a hundred other people on the bridge that day six years ago.

One day Alex knew that Kara would have to tell him, but for now, they remained wary. Jerry had retired from the Navy a couple of years before, and now flew helicopters as an ‘Eye in the Sky’ CatCo reporter. Kara had confided in Alex that Jerry’s ambition as a reporter might get the best of him if ever trusted with her secret, that he’d be faced with an ethical crisis and she had no idea what decision he’d make. Her bride-to-be’s aura was like a sixth sense for looking into people’s souls, their intentions… and it had never lied.

This fact concerned them both greatly.

As if our lives weren’t complicated enough…

Alex’s attention then shifted to watching Ryah, no longer a bear, but looking more like a beautiful young woman than a child, bringing her and Kara’s new Amazonian-crafted bracelets to them. And then there was Black Knight, sitting happily in the audience next to a woman in dark glasses trying unsuccessfully to appear inconspicuous. Wait a minute… next to her was a short man in a hat and… well-well-well… that was a surprise! Amanda Thorpe and Agent Wilkins.

They hadn’t seen their old D138 bosses/friends in months!
Alex had to force herself not to call out or wave to them but did squeeze Kara’s hand tight once they finally converged at the front of the gathering.

_We’ll catch up with them at the reception._ Kara’s thoughts were calm and pulled Alex right back to focus on her. _Right now, let’s get married._

Thankfully, she somehow managed to remember her vows. They were easy, actually, because they came from her heart... and staring into Kara’s liquid blue eyes was soothing as she spoke them...

“You came into my life as bright and beautiful as a sunrise, a star fallen from heaven... an angel. Maybe it was fate or the will of the gods... but whatever the reason, I will forever be thankful. With you, my life has become a grand adventure, filled with your light, compassion, bravery, generosity, and grace. I can’t imagine a day without your friendship, your love, or that adorkable smile.” They both giggled before Alex continued. “You give me strength, and always inspire me.

“Today I offer you my name, my House, and that part of me that has always been yours... my heart. I vow to love and cherish you for all time, to always be honest, and to share everything, even when pot stickers are involved.” The audience laughed, and Alex was trying really hard not to tear up as she continued. “I vow to accept you as you are, to support and protect you, and to grow along with you, by your side as your partner and your best friend, forever.

“I love you, Kara Zor-El Daniels, and want to spend the rest of my days with you and our daughter as a family. Will you join me in Rao’s light?”

A tearful Kara said yes, followed by her own lovely vows which Alex thought put hers to shame.

She, of course, also said yes, and then they were kissing, and in their bliss, unintentionally floated off the ground a few inches... thank Rao for long wedding dresses!

Shah then breezed over to solemnly bless their union in Rao’s name. “What your hearts have sealed, no power may sunder.” She said with a smile.

When Queen Hippolyta finally looked out at the gathering of friends and family and announced the two of them as Alexandra and Kara Zor-El Danvers, and Ryah Vela Zor-El Danvers it felt like the perfect ending, or beginning, of a fairytale dream.

And, as they sometimes say, the crowd went wild.

After the ceremony, as dusk had begun settling in...
as more wedding guests walked out of the portable changing rooms, divested of all modern clothing, devices, and worries to join the reception. Hair, jewelry, every detail was attended to in very short order by Callie and Curtis’ amazing crew.

Aside from the strings of white LED lights wrapping the trees and the fairy lights strung through their flowery branches, it felt like they were back in time, or out of it entirely to somewhere magical.

“So,” Winn asked Paul as he chewed on a delicious slightly crispy egg roll dipped in a killer hot-yet-sweet dipping sauce. “I’ve been meaning to ask, how do you know Kara?”

The mysterious man considered Winn’s question before answering, and he wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad sign. God, Winn hoped Kara had never slept with this guy... though it would be hard to blame her if she did. He was kind of hot, in a mysterious and rugged kind of way…

“Work. We’ve… collaborated on multiple projects over the years. She’s really helped my company out of some incredibly sticky situations.”

Awesome! Just co-workers…. unless… unless ‘collaborated’ was a euphemism for... no, no way. Winn smiled nervously, playing with his food, but then nodded as he decided he was just being paranoid. “I can believe it, she really is amazing… but I’m sure you already know that. So, ah… what does your company do anyway?”

Paul was about to answer when a pair of warm, gentle hands snuck around from behind and covered Winn’s eyes. At the same time, he felt the silky warmth of a shapely woman slip up and press against his back.

God, she was soft, with insanely perfect curves, and smelled divine! Whoever she was leaned in and he could feel her breath on his neck as she whispered playfully in his ear with a thrilling Persian accent that he knew very, very well, “Hello, Winn.”

He about jumped out of his skin. He suddenly realized that he had been hoping it was Miyuke Chambers, but wasn’t disappointed by the vision now smiling at him.

“Ada?! My Ada is Ada Nazari?!” He stammered, whipping around to stare into gorgeous emerald green eyes that reminded him of Shah’s.

Holy Batman! One of the goddess bridesmaids he’d been stealing glances at all afternoon was his boss?

He’d never actually met the genius other than over the phone, texts, sharing code, and Skype conference calls. Ada was beautiful, and to his surprise and confusion looked a little like Shah, Kara, and Alex all mixed together in a kind of glorious amalgamation… like chocolate chip cookie dough, M&M’s and vanilla ice cream... with a hint of cinnamon.

Yowza! A relative? But... but... Oh crap, what did I just say to her?? “Ada… Gosh, I, um… by ‘my Ada’ I obviously didn’t mean to imply… um…” He was blushing, and the young goddess before him started giggling.

Paul leaned over and patted him on the back, “If I’ve learned anything over the years working with this one, my friend, it's not to ask too many questions, and be grateful she’s on your side.” Then he laughed, and, like a gentleman, kissed Ada on the back of the hand she regally presented him.

Winn could have sworn he heard Paul whisper respectfully, “Starlight” as he bowed.

“Flatterer.” Her smile was beautiful devastation, and as Paul excused himself leaving the two of them
alone Winn couldn’t help trying to put all the pieces together as to how Paul, Ada, Shah, Alex, and Kara were all connected. When her sparkling green eyes finally focused only on him his thoughts fell to pieces and he swallowed, uncertain of what to say.

She seemed to understand, and reached over to steal an egg roll off his plate, and took a bite (she even did that sexy). When she licked an errant drip of sweet hot sauce off the corner of her mouth, Winn thought for sure that he was going to die.

“Yum, thanks for sharing.” She said with a grin.

“Hey… anytime, boss.” He said shakily.

“Yeah, about that. Winn, I’m sorry, we should have told you sooner.” Her smile almost wiped away any annoyance he felt at not being told he was working for the daughter of one of his science idols, or that Kara knew her… almost. “When Colliers brought me on to work on Kara’s project…”

“Wait. Excuse me? You said… ‘Kara’s project’?”

She nodded innocently, “Yes, Prophecy. Kara’s amazing brain thought it up, created it, built the wireframes, ran the first simulations… I just brought it to life, literally. Brian (who’s here somewhere), initially gave the system a human interface… though most of his code is gone now, replaced with your elegant script.”

Winn blushed again, this time at her clear compliment. “That’s high praise coming from the best hacker… best programmer, I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing. And I’m not just angling for a raise here.”

They both laughed.

“I know that, Winn.” Her smile was maddeningly familiar and so exquisite! “I had a hard time finding someone I could leave unattended, that I could trust. You’re brilliant, but also a good guy. That’s why I had Colliers hire you to oversee our little endeavor. I have other… responsibilities that need my focus, so knowing I have someone I can depend on to manage things in my place is a rare treasure.”

“Wow, um, thanks for the compliments. I’m still just trying to deal with the fact that Kara created Prophecy.” He paused to consider his amazing friend, and not for the first time how much more there was to her than met the eye. “And now that it was you who hired me all along and not Colliers. Honestly, Ada? I’m not as surprised as I probably should be by Kara or any of this…”

“My Auntie is awesome.” His boss grinned adorably.

“Your aunt? Exsqueezeme? Did… did you just say our Kara Daniels… um, Danvers is your aunt?”

“Yes, of course! Alex too… and Shah’s my mom, not Ravan like it says on the wedding program, that’s just for public consumption.” Ada’s serene accented voice then dropped to a whisper, “She’s technically my grandmother, but never, never call her that.” Then back to normal volume as she concluded, “I wanted to get that little fact out there between us. Truth! Cross my heart.”

“But… but, how can Kara be your aunt and Shah be your mother? She’s like, your age… and you’re younger than me! What are you, like twenty, tops? Can you even drink yet?”

The beautiful young woman pursed her lips and squeezed his cheeks in her exceedingly warm hands, “Oh, Winn, you’re so adorable. I know, it’s mind-blowing, isn’t it? But don’t worry too much about it, our family is a bit, ah, unorthodox let’s just say… but always interesting. You’ll get to know
us better over time, and understand. I’m just trying to speed things along.”

She reached over and stole another egg roll off of his plate, this time staying pressed against him. 

*Oh... my... God... that feels so... so... hot. Did she just purr again?* In his mind, he’d begun to imagine what kissing her would be like, and tried hard to stop himself.

Between bites, she said, “Okay, enough of all that, let’s talk about something much more exciting before the dancing starts. Like how last night the Russians tried to hack CatCo.”

Sudden Winn’s high fell to Earth, “Cripes! Again? What happened? Did our AIs stop them?”

Ada was grinning, “Yes, they did, and unfortunately for the criminals who attacked us, our overzealous defenders may or may not have copied, and then erased all the stolen data on the syndicate’s server farm, and returned nearly all of their ill-gotten assets to their victims... oh, our unruly children may have also fried millions of dollars’ worth of the attacker’s hardware in the process. You taught them well, my friend.” She effortlessly snagged two glasses of champagne off a server’s tray and offered one to Winn before toasting.

“No way!” His excitement quickly turned to worry... “Wait, is that even legal?” She shrugged. “Well, anyway, good on them.”

He was stunned; the two ‘non-biologic entities’ Ada had created so far, and was having Winn teach, *were* almost like their children, at least that’s how it seemed to him. They were alive in almost every way, possessing personalities and ethical codes, instilled in them by just working with him every day; learned, not programmed. The only thing they didn’t have was bodies. “When I get my phone back, I’ll text thank you’s, and tell them some new stories on Monday. They actually think I’m funny, unlike my human co-workers.”

“They’d like that, very much. Thank you, Winn...” Ada said graciously, her voice suddenly filled with emotion. “For treating them as individuals. It means a great deal to them, and to me.” She then brightened, “You know what? I want to dance with a handsome man, right now. Come on, Mr. Schott. And don’t worry; my girlfriend Jess won’t mind... much.”

She then took him by the arm and pulled him toward the barn, where the music was playing.

……………………

**Shah, and Ares...**

Shah was in the barn not far from the stage, swaying to the *Sun Runners'* flawless cover of The xx’s Angels. She was waiting for Tyson to return from a quick trip to the open bar when a tall, darkly handsome man with a carefully groomed goatee, and eyes that simmered like smoke, sidled up to her like he knew her. The intruder’s power was immense; she could feel his aura like a silent roar, rippling and twisting around her own like an invisible inferno, looking for cracks in her defenses.

“Ares, I presume?” She asked coolly, hardening her emerald gaze as she turned to face him. He was dressed in a striking, gold-etched all-black version of the Greek garments Kara had designed for all the partygoers. Of course, he had to stand out, and couldn’t wear white like everyone else.

The God of War nodded, his stoic expression becoming intrigued, even pleased, as Shah strained with effort, and successfully pushed back with her own aura to rebuff his probing. A black eyebrow rose high as he said, “My compliments, Shahrazad, you are exactly as I’d hoped you’d be... a rare
beauty, with an edge of steel.”

“Interesting…” Shah said before pausing to take a breath from her exertions, “You’re also everything I’d imagined you’d be.” She smirked at the handsome immortal, and then feigned indifference, her attention returning to Abby on stage, and the young woman’s amazing voice.

“You don’t like me much, do you, Shadow?” He grinned, still beside her.

Her gaze flickered back dismissively to him only for a moment. “No. I don’t, you’ve caused too much pain, suffering, and death in this world… to my people, and just for the pleasure of it, I’d imagine.”

“So, like a mortal, the demigoddess would blame the gods for all of humanity’s misfortune? From us alone they say come all their miseries, yet it is they themselves with their own reckless ways that compound their pains beyond their proper share.” The god said like a quote as he shook his head mirthlessly. “Placing all the culpability on me, beautiful Shahrazad, would be a convenient, comforting lie at best, and you know it. These primitives would still be raping, killing, and betraying each other with or without my involvement… which, of course, is now forbidden.”

From the hint of malice in his mocking tone, Shah was already sure that Ares was cheating at the gods’ non-intervention pact and chafing to end the restrictions. He was proving himself to be the egotistical, self-serving narcissist she’d read about, probably so full of himself that he had no room for anything resembling empathy or compassion for others.

Shah had so many reasons to hate the God of War, including his reported siding with the Axis powers during both world wars, and the hurt he’d caused the Amazons in past, and the horrific conflicts fought in her own country.

She squirmed with discomfort just standing near him. *What in Rao’s name does he want from me?*

“For the record, I take no pleasure in any of it.” He added with a shrug. “I was the ranking military officer on this doomed expedition, the youngest in history to be offered such an important post. Lucky me! Believe me, Shah, this is not the life I imagined for myself. To never see my mother and father again, or my world.”

She turned her head just enough to consider the well-dressed warrior who suddenly seemed to show a crack in his armor. The immortal was powerfully built, maddeningly self-assured, darkly handsome, and completely lacking in anything resembling humility. Ares obviously loved his own appearance and thought everyone else did too.

The lingering look that traveled up her body from beneath his dark, sculpted brows also seemed to make it abundantly clear what he was really after.

He was definitely getting in her personal space, and enough was enough!

“Is there a **reason** you’re talking to me besides trying to hook up? Because, I can assure you, that won’t be happening… not tonight, or ever.” Shah looked back up at the band and gave an exaggerated, happy wave to Aaron, who whispered, *be careful*, in her thoughts before joining his moody guitar to Abby’s soft, echoing vocals for the opening of Mazzy Star’s *Fade Into You*.

Ares ignored Apollo; instead, his gray eyes danced with delight, and never left Shah’s profile. “Mmmmm... as amazing as we both know **that** would be…” She gagged openly as he continued; “I would not think to intrude on your relationship with Chief Warrant Officer Phelps.”
That got her attention. She turned her threatening gaze on the god.

“That got her attention. As I said, I am not here to antagonize or threaten, I was merely stating a fact… Today, at least, is for the matter of a boon.”

Shah relaxed slightly but was still in no mood to endure him. “Shouldn’t you be talking to Kara and Alex about that?”

“I am, aren’t I? You are sisters in your bond, are you not? A triumvirate, three peas in a pod, thick as thieves, a ménage à trois?” he grinned with a smugness that she wanted to wipe off his face. Superior bastard.

“Whatever. Fine… talk. You have five minutes. I’m not missing Kara and Alex’s first dance for this.”

His gleeful expression spoke volumes; he was definitely enjoying their uncomfortable encounter far too much.

“I wanted to give you something… something that is very important to me.” Ares was suddenly holding a sword out to her that had appeared from literally nowhere, perfectly balanced on the outstretched palms of his large hands. As he slowly freed the weapon from its gorgeous leather scabbard, its full splendor was revealed like a sliver of black obsidian carved from pure darkness nearly three feet long.

It was of exquisite craftsmanship, with a curved, slender, single-edged blade as dark as midnight, a circular metal guard, and long wrapped grip that could easily accommodate two hands… like a Japanese katana.

“Her name is Shikaze.” Ares said solemnly. “Literally translated it means ‘death wind’ in her graceful language. She has served as my… companion, for centuries.” Ares’ entire demeanor and tone had changed, becoming thoughtful, almost affectionate as the fingers of one of his hands reverently glided over the sword’s gleaming blade like a caress.

She noted how he carefully avoided its wicked cutting edge. So, this weapon can harm him… intriguing.

“She’s infinitely sharp, so be very careful. Only this sheath, made by technology lost to both of us, can contain her.” He sighed. “Long ago, in the summer of the year 1296, my friend, the great swordsmith Gorō Nyūdō Masamune and I forged her at the Shinto shrine of Samukawa Jinja, in Sagami Province. We used Kryptonian steel, infused with Hecate’s magic, and bound it with the spirit of a willing divine Kami. It took almost three years for her to reawaken and take breath after the forge.”

“I don’t understand…” Shah couldn’t help but keep staring at the priceless artifact before her. Mesmerized.

His brief smile was tinged with deep sadness, “Shikaze is my light. Over the centuries, she and I shook worlds together, but a greater need has come, and today… today she is yours, for as long as she chooses to serve you, no strings attached. This is my boon. There are few upon this world I would entrust her to, Shah, but I know you will be a worthy companion, and she will protect you and your family… with her life if necessary.”

Shah reached out for the sword involuntarily, and then froze, looking into the god’s soft gray eyes. She was off balance, unsure of what to do, and of what Ares’ really wanted. “Why? Why give something so precious to me, someone who doesn’t even like you? You don’t even know me.”
“I know your heart well enough, brave Shahrazad, what depths of loyalty and love you are capable of… and what you could achieve with such power at your command. Perhaps this is self-serving, and not the true sacrifice I imagined, but regardless of my motivations, Shikaze will strengthen your hand against our enemies… and believe me, in the years to come there will be many. There always are.”

He paused to somehow pluck two drinks from the hands of a couple next to them, who seemed to have no idea what happened and offered one to Shah. She was so impressed that she accepted.

“I know because I helped create most of them living today. Perhaps not directly, but this persona, in its many forms over time has influenced not only the brilliant, but the unhinged, the greedy, megalomanics, fanatics, fascists, and dictators… Mortals who justify their actions in the name of gods, nations, race, even to what they believe is a greater good; their lists of justifications are as endless as their atrocities.

“Evil men like Lex Luthor, whose unchecked jealousy, and mad desire for the power our kind possesses has blinded him to reason and caused a relentless hatred of Kal-El in the pit of darkness that was once his soul. Even behind the walls of his prison, he will use his genius, and his vast resources, to rise against Kara once he becomes aware of her existence. And he won’t stop there; you, Alex, Ada, and even Ryah won’t be safe.”

Shah sucked in an audible breath; the idea of someone hurting the girl was utterly unthinkable.

“I can’t change the past (Rao knows I’ve tried) or make up for any of what has come before, but I can offer a way to try and begin to balance the scales.” He again stretched out his arms, offering the sword to Shah. “I need you to take her from me before I change my mind.” His hands trembled ever so slightly, and… wait a second, were those unshed tears gathering in his eyes? Rao, they were.

Shah was too shocked to say anything as she wrapped her fingers around the hilt of the blade, and felt a familiar prickling sensation in her brain, a pulse of energy radiate through her entire being. The very same feeling she’d had when Zara had first touched her mind.

She also sensed a new presence, a life, in her and Zara’s thoughts, and it spoke… a woman’s gentle, heavily Japanese–accented voice. Youkoso irasshai mashita, Shahrazad and Zara. I’m am Shikaze. We are now one. My strength is your strength.

Shah’s Japanese had always been weak, but with Zara’s knowledge of all human languages, and ability to translate both ways, communicating with the intelligent weapon was a piece of cake.

Hajimemashite, Shikaze. Shah responded. Zara and I are honored to know you. Fortunately, today is a day of peace. There will be no enemies for us to contend with.

The sword became calm in her grasp, and then began to dissipate into a shadowy mist… completely disappearing in seconds, like one of Shah’s own dark shadow blades. Fortunate for them, perhaps… Your reputation as the great warrior, Shadow, precedes you, and I am looking forward with great anticipation to our first encounter together. Know that I will always be here for you, waiting. Call upon me when I am needed.

I will! But… before you go, can you tell me… did you willingly agree to come to me? To be parted with Ares?

Yes… of course.

Why?
Because he asked me to.

Hmm… and just like that, you do what he says?

Yes, but because I choose to. Do not judge me, or him, too harshly, young one; the years have not been kind. He has lost more friends than he has left and there are fewer still that actually love him, and not merely his power. Thank the spirits for Athena’s relentless affection for her brother; I sometimes think that since the elders left us that she and I are all that keep him from giving in to the darkness. He means well, in his own way.

Shah was startled but unexpectedly satisfied with her new companion’s revealing answer. Do you love him? She asked.

Yes. I have for over seven centuries, and will until I am ended, or the stars go dark.

Well, that answers that. Thank you for your honesty, Shikaze. I will call upon you when your power is needed… but if you ever want to talk, about… anything, I am also here for you, anytime.

Thank you, Shah; it will be… nice, having a woman’s point of view for a change. Perhaps you can help me understand why he is afraid to allow himself to be loved.

Hmm, I may be able to help with that.

“Are you two are talking about me?” Ares asked with suspicion.

“Yes.” Shah chuckled. “Shikaze is trying to get me to change my opinion of you.”

“Imagine that.” He said with a relieved smile, “Someone talking sense.”

Then after a hesitation, he asked in a softer tone, “Please take care of her, will you? I would very much like for her to return to me one day if she wishes.”

Shah nodded in understanding. “I will, but you already know that, and I definitely won’t stand in her way when she’s ready to claim the God of War’s heart.” The handsome immortal’s expression looked more like sudden panic, or terror, as she continued, “Though I have a feeling she already possesses it, and that all of this… your grand gesture is your, I hate admitting it, honest attempt at giving her a chance to be sure of her choice… because, for all of your arrogant bravado you somehow see yourself as unworthy of her. Wow, so not the Ares I thought you were, and as Alex would say, that’s a compliment.” She grinned and downed her drink.

Ares was sputtering, trying to deny her accusations, but Shah wasn’t really listening… she’d narrowed her gaze and was considering him all over again. Then, she realized they were out of time.

“Oh, for Rao’s sake! Kara and Alex are about to dance! Come on, let’s go!”

She never gave Ares a chance to respond coherently before moving at super speed to set their glasses aside and dragging the surprised, red-faced god off through the gathered crowd by the arm to the barn’s wide dance floor.

………………………….

Kara and Alex’s first dance was beautiful.

Under a glittering dome of magical fairy lights that sparkled in tune with Coldplay’s A Sky Full of
Stars the new couple dazzled the joyful crowd with their grace and obvious magnetism, and it wasn’t long before everyone joined them.

After their initial turn together, Kara moved on to dance with Eliza, then her General and adoptive father, Tom, Steven Colliers, Shah (who enjoyed their slow dance very much), Ravan, Ada, Jessica, Naomi, and… so on.

Alex did the same, even managing to get Hank, who, as it turned out, was actually quite good on his feet (like a Martian Fred Astaire), out on the dance floor.

Shah spied Winn and Miyuki slow dancing (apparently Ada, playing matchmaker, had introduced the pair earlier), and her mostly-Kryptonian heart warmed. The day before, Astra had briefly confided in them her concern that her passionate daughter spent so much time helping others she left no room for her own happiness (or relationships).

Watching the pair, Shah felt a tingle of hope.

The sleek, almost feline woman stood half a head taller than her entranced partner, with her pale arms draped lightly around Winn’s neck as they swayed in their elegant Greek outfits.

Shah noticed how their eyes did not wander from each other:

His, adoring and in awe of the woman in his arms…

Hers, surprised, intrigued, and so shy… as if she were confused by the laser-focus of the human’s attention, but loving every second of it. And, like a wild animal, ready to flee at any second but too drawn to him to do so.

What a couple they’d make! Winn, the kind, funny, and gentle man, who’d pined for someone unattainable for so long (Shah could relate there), and Maeve (Miyuki), the Kryptonian ninja and selfless crusader who had never known what it was like to be loved by anyone until Astra.

Shah was smiling as Ares spun her around.

The God of War was a perfect partner for her. His cat-like moves anticipated and matched her own in perfect harmony, and she his… as if they had danced together all of their lives, and perhaps even in a previous one. Which was a new experience for Shah. Tyson didn’t enjoy dancing and had never bothered to learn (even after her hints about how much she’d love to go dancing with him).

As more time passed that wonderful evening, Shah was shocked to find herself having a really good time with the bad boy of the pantheon. Of course, she kept reminding herself that he was ruthless and responsible for horrible things… and kept repeating those thoughts as they moved in close together for a slow dance.

He was very gentle with her, respectful, and felt so good as his body moved against hers.

“Where’s my boyfriend anyway?” She eventually asked without too much urgency after over an hour had flown by, taking another offered amaretto sour with three extra cherries (just the way she liked it), from Ares after a couple of fast-paced songs.

His dark brows furrowed as he looked off into the crowd with faux concern. “I’m sure the young man’s around here somewhere, and will soon be returning to his most lovely of companions. He’d be a fool not to.”

She smiled. “He better be… so look, if I want to contact you after this…?” She let her question hang
as she took a sip of her drink, and he grinned as he handed her a business card.

“Call this number, my assistant can set up a coffee, lunch, dinner, a sparring match (he purred, with a raised eyebrow), whatever you’re comfortable with. I wouldn’t want our meeting to seem… untoward in any way.” His smirk said otherwise, but Shah could see he was just teasing, and not really being a jerk about it.

When she glanced at his card she did kind of freak out. “Rao! You’re the CEO of Valhalla, the single largest private military contractor for the U.S military and intelligence services?” He nodded with a smug grin on his face. Which she had to remind herself was definitely not cute… “Why am I not surprised? Kara, Alex, and I have run a couple dozen ops with your people, and they’ve always been amazing to work with… disciplined, professional, and solid team players.”

“I only hire the best. In fact, the only reason you and your sisters weren’t approached for recruitment already is because Amanda wouldn’t let me.” He scowled. “I owe that infernal woman too many damn favors… and I can’t afford to get on her bad side, even now.”

Shah couldn’t help but giggle, uncontrollably.

“Laughing at my expense?” He glared as he downed his drink.

Shah shook her head and placed a gentle, reassuring hand on his arm. “Calm down, Mr. Always Thinking the Worst in People. No. It’s just the idea that the God of War is as intimidated by my old boss as much as we, and everyone else are, is… surprising, and refreshing.” She grinned. “It kind of brings you down to Earth for me a little, actually… which is a good thing.”

He relaxed at her admission, and smiled, “If it helps my case, I also have other pursuits and own other companies. My favorite one makes board games… war, strategy, that sort of thing... a few you’ve most likely heard of. We’ve also been surprisingly successful in this new digital age with its devices that pander to brief, mindless entertainment. I’ll have my assistant send you some samples. I believe you and your friends may enjoy them as much as I do.”

Wow, that was unexpected. “Th... thank you. That’s actually very thoughtful of you.”

“Well, as I have been trying to tell you, I’m not all bad, but I’m no Clark Kent either.” He chuckled a deep, pleasant sound. “Look, I’m really not this one-dimensional bad-guy you seem to think I am, please give me the opportunity to prove that you. When we meet again, remind me to tell you some tales of times long past... of ancient Persia, of the old peoples... the Assyrians, and of my friend Cyrus, Darius, and those who came before and after them. Is that something you’d like to hear, beautiful one?”

Shah nodded, a little stunned contemplating the vast ages of Ares life, his compliment, and the questions she might ask him.

The god grinned and glanced behind her. “Good. Oh look; here comes young Mr. Phelps now. I best be off to avoid any questions. Perhaps Amanda would like to dance. Be at peace, Shahrazad, and look well after Shikaze. Khodāhāfez, my dear.” He said, and then took one of Shah’s hands in his own, raised it to his lips, and placed a chaste kiss there. “It was an absolute pleasure spending time with you.” He said.

“Surprisingly, I agree. It was... illuminating meeting you, Ares.” She grinned, and his smile in response seemed quite genuine. He then shimmered with Kryptonian super speed, and to all appearances disappeared from the room, leaving only a slight gust of warm air in his wake.
Shah’s perception of reality was much different from most of the guests though, and with her hyper senses, she watched as he took his leave, zipped over to the bar, made himself a fresh martini, toasted her with a smile, and then swiftly blended into the throng of happy revelers as he sought out her old boss for a dance.

At the same time, the crowd was beginning to hoot and clap, their attention on an obviously very uncomfortable Alex, who had taken the stage in her gorgeous gray dress.

Shah sighed. _Rao, she is stunning!_

Tyson came up and wrapped one solid arm around Shah’s shoulders and handed her a glass of red wine, the one she’d asked for over an hour and a half earlier. “I’m sorry I took so long. I… I ran into my team and I guess I… I lost track of time?”

He looked so confused, even pained by his lapse, like a lost puppy, and Shah felt awful because she knew it was in no way his fault. Ares had distracted him somehow, and she hadn’t complained.

_Wow, am I blushing?_

“Don’t worry Ty, I ran into… an old friend, I barely realized you’d left.” She hugged him tightly.

At that moment, he looked up at the stage in disbelief and asked, “Is Alex really going to sing?”

“Yes, she is. In public, no less.” Shah was already pulling out her phone to capture some video (even though Zara had her covered from every angle already), as Alex Danvers launched into an oh-so-cute, and adorably sexy version of Frank Sinatra’s _Fly Me to the Moon._

Deeply personal, the song’s true significance was known to only a handful of those watching. Fewer still knew how much courage it took Alex to stand up in front of everyone to sing it.

It pulled at Shah’s heartstrings to watch her normally reserved friend, her sister... her bondmate, who couldn’t even handle Karaoke in a small group without a couple of glasses of wine beforehand, singing to her blushing goddess.

Kara stood on the dance floor below, under a spotlight, hands up to her face, tears of joy in her ocean blue eyes and laughing, her gaze never leaving Alex as she sang…

_Fly me to the moon_

_And let me play among the stars_

_Let me see what life is like_

_On Jupiter and Mars…_

_In other words, hold my hand!_

_In other words, baby, kiss me_

_Fill my heart with song_
And let me sing forevermore
You are all I long for
All I worship and adore

In other words, please be true!
In other words, I love you!

After Alex finally concluded, laughing and with an embarrassed bow, Kara nearly flew up on stage to hug her and after a quick kiss took the mic to begin her own tribute. The graceful Kryptonian serenaded her new wife with an amazingly fun, and playful rendition of Charlie Puth’s One Call Away.

Her sweet, melodic vocals had the crowd singing along…

I'm only one call away
I'll be there to save the day
Superman’s got nothing on me
I'm only one call away

Call me, baby, if you need a friend
I just wanna give you love
Come on, come on, come on
Reaching out to you, so take a chance

No matter where you go
You know you're not alone…

And so on…

As she continued, Kara moved around her wife acting overly dramatic with her hand over her heart one moment, hugging Alex the next, then on her knees seemingly pleading with her. Alex covered her eyes at one point, so embarrassed, loved, and obviously happy all rolled up into one.
Shah almost lost it when she spied Clark nearly choking on his beer at the first mention of Superman. Lois tried to help but was hanging off his shoulder unable to breathe from her own long bout of laughter brought on by her boyfriend’s reaction to Kara’s choice of music.

*Rao, Kara is going to so owe her cousin!*

The best part of all was at the end when the two brides embraced, and an exuberant Ryah came running across the stage as happy as could be, shouting, “Mommies!” and threw her arms around Kara and Alex.

Their adorable girl brought the house down.

Shah was just glad she caught the entire touching scene on video.

The rest of the night was just as incredible: filled with dancing, friends, family, desserts, drinks, story-telling, and more singing. At some point, very late, Kara made her way back up on stage with Dante Caruso and his guitar, and did a couple of covers with the band, including a wonderful duet with Abby of Tegan and Sara’s *Love They Say*.

It was close to one in the morning when the house lights dimmed, and Kara whispered softly into the mic, “This last song I want to share with you is called *Teardrop*, I’m sure most of you have heard it or at least of it. I don’t know exactly why, but it’s always helped me through my darkest moments. Thank you, Alex, for introducing me to music, one of the many wonders in this world that I would never have experienced in quite the same way without you.”

She then took a deep breath, looked back at the band giving her queue, and quietly spoke into the mic, “This is for all of those we’ve lost.” And then with Abby on piano, Aaron and Dante on guitars, Kathy Richards, and a host of musicians on stage from the Gotham Academy, the bass and drums began to rise like a heartbeat and was soon joined by Kara’s clear, velvet voice.

The effect was instantaneous and powerful.

People became silent and drew close together as if seeking comfort from one another. Soon, everyone was swaying, enthralled by the young woman in white who sparkled under the lights like a star as she sang:

"*Love, love is a verb*

*Love is a doing word*

*Fearless on my breath*

*Gentle impulsion*

*Shakes me makes me lighter*

*Fearless on my breath*

"*Teardrop on the fire*

*Fearless on my breath*
Night, night after day
Black flowers blossom
Fearless on my breath
Black flowers blossom
Fearless on my breath

"Teardrop on the fire
Fearless on my..."

"Water is my eye
Most faithful mirror
Fearless on my breath
Teardrop on the fire
of a confession
Fearless on my breath
Most faithful mirror
Fearless on my breath

"Teardrop on the fire
Fearless on my breath

"You're stumbling in the dark
You're stumbling in the dark
Stumbling in the dark..."

From the tears flowing so freely around her Shah had to admit, if she didn’t already know they had, it would have been hard to believe the gods themselves wouldn’t come down from the heavens to answer Kara’s angelic plea as the song came to conclusion.

She was affected as well, and when Tyson wrapped his arms around she snuggled in tight. He then leaned down to kiss her on the temple, gently brushing her raven hair back from her face to continue on to her lips.
When she heard him utter “āsheghetam” between kisses, it was a shock... followed by a rush of panic, understanding, and guilt. He’d never outright proclaimed his love for her before, and definitely never in Persian. This was not an idle, hastily spoken ‘I love you’; Tyson’s words carried the conviction of his heart, and it terrified her because... she didn't feel the same way.

Suddenly everything about her life and their relationship had become painfully real, and crystal clear to her for the very first time.

She did care for the handsome warrior, but she could never give him her heart as he wanted, and deserved. She'd already shared that precious, deepest part of herself with her bondmates; a long time ago, before she even knew of Rao's Fire. She also couldn't deny the surprising attraction she'd felt for Ares, whatever that meant or where it might lead... shouldn't she allow herself the right to explore the possibilities?

It was only at that moment of perfect clarity, with Tyson baring his soul and waiting for her answer, that Shah realized that she no longer needed to pretend otherwise. It felt... liberating.

_Hmmmm, three peas in a pod. Sounds nice, perfect actually_, she mused with a delighted grin as she recalled Ares' words from earlier. _He saw right through me_...

But Kara and Alex's special day was for them... not the time for her revelations or broken hearts, or even worrying about how her best friend (and Tyson's mother), Marjorie, would react when Shah told her... even though that uncertainty terrified her the most. For the moment, for his sake, she maintained her facade.

Smiling playfully she replied to his proclamation of love with, “I know.”

Tyson paused, and then chuckled, “Wait… wait, did my girl just Han Solo me?”

“Damn straight, sweetheart.” She teased with her best impression of the rogue captain of the Millennium Falcon. When she kissed him again her thoughts were elsewhere (with her bondmates), but she put all the passion she was feeling into it... accidentally lifting the big man off the ground in her exuberance. Not that he noticed anything was amiss.

By that point, Shah didn't care much about being seen, she had a need to quench and wanted to make their last night of passion one he would never forget. It was the least she could do.

To her credit, she did execute a sweep with her senses for prying eyes before she took him into shadow with her. When all looked clear she picked the big man up in her arms and flitted with him unseen from the barn and up into a vacant bedroom on the house’s second floor... leaving the rest of the world behind.

…………………………………..

This beautiful artwork of Kara and Alex on their wedding day is a commission I requested of the amazing artist, Lesly Oh! Please check out her Tumblr: [http://lesly-oh.tumblr.com](http://lesly-oh.tumblr.com). The full image is on my Tumblr: [http://iwalkinshadow.tumblr.com/image/163305076214](http://iwalkinshadow.tumblr.com/image/163305076214). The one below looks a bit cropped to me. Clicking any of these links will take you off this page, so I recommend that you right click and open in a new tab.
Story Lexicon/FAQs:

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to *italicize* all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Terms

Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.
Ah!khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

Alex vanimelda - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Ay Dios Mio – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)

Aporup – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)

As-salāmu ‘ alayki – A (formal) greeting which is also a standard salutation among Muslims, meaning ‘peace be upon you’. The Less formal abbreviation is simply salām. (Arabic)

Asheghetam - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

Azdidane shoma khoshhalam – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)

Bedrood – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

Bonne nuit – ‘Good night’ (French)

C’est la vie – ‘That's life’. An acceptance of things as they are. (French)

C’est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

Damnú air! – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Dooset daram – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hajimemashite - Nice to meet you! -はじめまして！/お会いできてうれしいですね！ (Japanese)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gealic/Irish)

Irasshai mashita - A Japanese welcome -ようこそいらっしゃいました。 (Japanese)

íthi eutukhēs - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, nonbiologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Kheili khosh geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)
M’eudail – ‘My dear/my darling’ to a friend, family, someone you care for (Gaelic/Irish)

Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature

Marbhfháisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)

miboosamet – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)

órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

¡Qué señoras tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)

Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Sundor – ‘Beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)

Thi eutukhēs – ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Volar mi diosa! – ‘Fly my goddess!’ (Spanish)

Waʿalaykumu s-salām – A response to the greeting As-salāmu ʿalayki, ‘and upon you, peace’ (Arabic)

Wadāʾan – ‘Farewell’ (Arabic)

Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

**Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:**

aziz-am – ‘My dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

deibandam - ‘My heartstring’. What Shah would call her cousin Tarsa as a child when she’d babysit (very sweet and precious), and still calls her since reconnecting.

Jeegaré manee - One of the most loving terms of endearment you can direct to someone in Persian. It is quite beautiful and should have a powerful effect on a person it’s directed to. In this case, Kara and Alex are being very clear at just how much they love, and have always loved Shah. They are very… possessive of their sister.

joon-am – ‘My dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

Moosh moosh-am - ‘My mousy mouse’ said in Persian is utterly cute and endearing. Moosh means ‘little mouse’, but calling someone this cranks the sweetness factor up to eleven (what Shah calls Ryah)

Nafasem-an - ‘My breath’ (what Kara sometimes calls Alex)

nāzanin-am – ‘Sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)
nooré cheshm-am – ‘The light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘Sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

’>insert person’s name<’ + joon (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean ‘dear’. So, ‘Shah joon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

Other names/nickname/titles/things:

A ghrá – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)

A ghrá mo chroí - ‘My heart's beloved, my darling’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Âbjé – ‘Sister’ informal version (Persian)

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Bakalawa bil Jibna - A mouthwateringly delicious Libyan version of baklava with a sweet cream filling.

Bríomhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

Cythonna – One of the most ancient Kryptonian gods, said to be the female half of Rao. Protector of those unjustly persecuted, as well as patron to monsters and non-biologic life forms (such as Kryptonian Companions/Ka’dahs).

Daxamites - An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people, ruled by strength/the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow altered by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.

Dios mío! – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

Durlan - The Durlans are a rare extraterrestrial species, a race of shape-shifting beings from the planet Durla. Ryah is a Durlan, as was her guardian, Veya, who died protecting the child in the depths of Tehran’s Evin Prison.

Dűst doxtar – ‘Girlfriend’ (Persian)

Dűst pesar - ‘Boyfriend’ (Persian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Euryleia – ‘Woman Wanderer’ or ‘Wide Wandering’ - Dr. Naomi Young’s Amazon name
Fereshteh: Slang for saying that a girl is perfect, desired… hot, to die for, an angel. Historically used as a Persian girl’s name, simply meaning ‘angel’. (Persian)

H’ronmeer - the Martian God of Death and Fire, referred to by a faction as the God of Life and Light. (Martian)

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)

In’ah – Ancient, lost word for ‘daughter’ - what Myka calls Kara (Kryptonese),

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

M'eudail – ‘My darling’ or ‘my dear’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Ma’har - Ancient, lost word for ‘mother’ - what Kara calls Myka (Kryptonese)

Mi amor – ‘My love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Mi lucero – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Mi Sol – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn - Thought & Memory (Old Norse)

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Nâmzad – ‘fiancé (m), fiancée (f), betrothed (Persian)

Norooz - Persian New Year (Persian)

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Oea - This ancient city was founded by the Phoenicians in the seventh century BC, was ruled at one time or another by the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines. Italians, and Muslims. It came to be known as Tripoli during the 9th century (Libyco-Berber)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity (from Ancient Freek)

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Seanmháthair – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced shan a WAW her (Irish/Gaelic)

Señora – Is a polite term used to address a woman. The Spanish-language equivalent of Ma’am, Ms., or Mrs. (Spanish)
Telkhines - In myth were mysterious sea-god magicians and smiths native to the islands of Keos (Ceos) and Rhodes. They invented the art of metalworking and were said to have crafted many powerful items and weapons for the gods. The truth is even stranger. These tall, lanky, extraterrestrials command science at a level that seems like magic and have lived since the beginning of time. They served 'The Makers', who existed long before Krypton, or the gods, and abandoned them on earth. Zeus and the Greek gods gave them refuge and protection long ago in return for their service.

Tieguanyin - Thiih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

Tratung – khrag 'thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Trípolis – Tripoli, the capital and largest city in Libya (from Ancient Greek)

Tuath Dé Danann - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced Thoo-a day Du-non (Irish/Gaelic)

Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’. ‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Vakur – A powerful (and rare) soul-devouring, evil, shape-shifting parasitic alien species from another universe. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.

Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Vallerian – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshiped, or traded.

Vâysâ – ‘Stop’ (Persian)

Wan - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

Xwâhar - ‘Sister’ - the formal form. (Persian)

Zafaraniyeh – The affluent neighborhood in the northern part of the Iranian capital of Tehran where Shahrazad grew up. (Persian)

Zhuyin – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)
The Wrap:
Yes! Kara and Alex are finally married!!! Wow. So, a great deal happened in this chapter, and I’d love to know if you had a favorite part. I obviously couldn’t fit in everything I wanted to, but I did my best. There is one scene I really wanted to write with Alex as she was preparing for the ceremony in a room separate from Kara. Eliza would have been there with Naomi for mother(s) daughter talk, and J’onn would have come in after a bit. Maybe someday, if I ever decide to write in-between scenes...

Next Up:
Chapter 37: “Into the Light” – Two years have passed. When an act of terrorism puts Alex in harm’s way and innocent lives on the line, Kara is forced to reveal Archangel to an astounded National City - and the world. Now, out of time and excuses, our hero must turn to Winn for help completing her Kryptonian battle armor. We also get to see Kara at work, and meet her new boss - Cat Grant, the Queen of All Media, as well as National City’s newest Metropolis transplant, award-winning photojournalist Jimmy Olsen.

The threads of the story are beginning to converge toward a uniquely Earth 39 version of episode one of the series.

Thank you all so much for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming! Every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me.

Attributions:

The official D.E.O. Seal
This is what Alex, Vasquez, Shah, and Alex’s protégé, Agent Keen all had tattooed on various locations on their bodies the night of Alex’s bachelorette party.

Ryah: The Ring Bear(er)
My homage to How I Met Your Mother with Ryah being the Ring Bear(er), Great show until the last season, and let’s not even talk about that terrible, terrible ending. Bleh.

About that end scene between Shah and Tyson:
As much as it upset her, Shah’s passionate fire wasn’t purely for Tyson... she couldn’t stop thinking about the dark god who’d charmed her that night, no matter how hard she tried. Just who does he think he is anyway?

Quoted songs:

Angels – The xx
The beautiful song Shah was swaying to at Kara and Alex’s reception in the barn. From The xx’s album, ‘Coexist’.

Fly Me to the Moon - Frank Sinatra
As written by Bart Howard / © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, T.R.O. INC. - For non-commercial use only.

One Call Away - Charlie Puth
Teardrop - Massive Attack
Off of the second single from their third album, Mezzanine. Singer: Elizabeth Fraser / As written by Elizabeth Fraser, Robert Del Naja, Grantley Marshall, and Andrew Lee Isaac Vowles. © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Universal Music Publishing Group, for non-commercial use only.
Chapter Summary

When an act of terrorism puts Alex in harm’s way, and innocent lives on the line, Kara is forced to reveal Archangel to an astounded National City - and the world.

Now, out of time and excuses, our hero must turn to Winn for help completing her Kryptonian battle armor. We'll also drop in on Kara at work and meet her (in?)famous boss - Cat Grant, the Queen of All Media, as well as National City’s newest Metropolis transplant, award-winning photojournalist Jimmy Olsen.

The threads of the story are beginning to converge toward a uniquely Earth 39 version of episode one of the series.

Chapter Notes

Two years have passed since Kara and Alex’s wedding. My usual update wouldn't suffice, so I created an introduction as a preface to the story that should get you up to speed on most of the players if you'd like to read it...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A lot has happened over the past two years, and I'll do my best to get you up to speed before the chapter begins...

Kara Zor-El “Kiera” Danvers is 24-years-old (26) and has been working at CatCo as Cat Grant’s Executive Assistant for going on a year and a half (hence the new nickname). The busy CEO would be lost without her amazing, and fascinating assistant.

Archangel is still the tireless, vigilant Guardian Angel of National City as well as a decorated D.E.O. Agent, but as Kara Danvers, she's also a respected, high-level Senior Cryptographic Analyst with the NSA (but these days is strictly part-time, only called in when the threat level goes to 11). She is occasionally loaned back to her old employer (the CIA), ONI, or other intelligence services and law enforcement groups, teaching at Quantico, the NSA, or training Cryptologic Warfare Officers, technicians, engineers, and linguists for the U.S. Navy.

Kara, Alex, and Shah continue to assist Ada and the USS Zumwalt with its missions but also work...
with new friends that they’ve made from all over the world. A small part of Kara’s week is devoted
to helping scour the vast pipe of data young Pythia constantly gathers searching for signs of Myriad,
Non and his Kryptonian henchmen, or disasters that Team Archangel, or any of the entities she’s part
of, can help prevent.

On the family side of things Kara and Alex still live in their expanded National City loft with their
amazing eleven-year-old daughter Ryah, their crotchety old cat Nom, surrounded by friends and
family (human, alien, and divine). Oh, and did I mention that shortly after the wedding Shah moved
back in? The trio and their daughter have grown even closer, and happier since. Kara hasn’t slowed
down designing and making clothes or painting (she’s even done a couple of small exhibitions), and
occasionally still jams with local bands, as well as some famous ones (when she has the time).

She, Alex, Ryah, and Shah also regularly visit the Puget Sound to stay with Astra and Lilly, and
their crusading alien-rights lawyer daughter, Kara and Alex’s cousin, Miyuki. Sometimes Lilly’s
‘brother from another mother’ (as Winn would say), Maxwell Lord will join them along with his
girlfriend, Cassandra, who happens to be a Super AI in an android body. Kara and Alex also spend
time with the Daniels at their various homes around the world (as the seasons fit), as well as
Themyscira, Tehran, Earth Pax, or with friends and extended family wherever they may be.

They also bought the Midvale house from Eliza shortly after their wedding. The Danvers matriarch
had decided that moving in with Naomi was her official ‘coming out’ moment and the blissful couple
will be getting married in the fall!

Oh, also? Kara still hasn’t come out and told Winn her big secret.

Alexandra “Alex” Zor-El Danvers is 25 years old, and a Director at the Sagan Institute for
Astrobiology and Non-Terrestrial Exobiological, as well as Assistant Director at the D.E.O.’s
National City facility, where she is Hank Henshaw’s (a.k.a. J’onn J’onzz) right-hand at the
clandestine agency. She’s a top agent, teacher, mentor, and still aggressively leads strike teams under
the watchful eye of the D.E.O.’s overall Strategic Commander, her Aunt Astra. Alex's protégé,
Agent Keen, has become a good friend, knows their secrets, and assists her on most D.E.O. matters
that Susan Vasquez or Blacknight aren’t lead on.

Alex is also working on becoming a full-fledged medical doctor, with a focus on extraterrestrial
biology, not exactly a program they offer in traditional schools but thanks to the D.E.O. she’s been
able to do so covertly. Regardless of her responsibilities, the dedicated wife, bondmate, and mother
always makes time to spend with Kara, their daughter Ryah, and Shah, as well as friends and
family (like her little brother from another mother, Winn), and always making sure to show up for
game nights.

.........................

Ryah Vela Danvers is an eleven-year-old prodigy, alien, shape-changer, empath, badass in training,
and student at the prestigious Evermore Academy in National City where she met her best friend,
Carter Grant. Her loving parents have helped the girl pursue her academic interests, including her
desire to become a doctor one day (just like her mom Alex) but for humans, aliens, and animals.
Safiya has become very close with the youngster and is a trusted mentor. She even brings Ryah to
work with her at the hospital at least once a month.

A host of incredible people, including her mothers, which she counts Shah as one of, and aunts
Miyuki and Astra and her Uncle J’onn, have trained the Durlan in combat, infiltration, and physical
evasion skills. And under Selene’s tutelage Ryah is also becoming a very proficient
witch... the only one in the family! She and her big sister Ada have also grown close, the girl has visited Starlight on the USS Zumwalt on multiple occasions. The crew adore her.

Ryah has grown particularly attached to her kickass aunt Miyuki, who pops down to National City to help with her young trainee’s stealth and infiltration training at least once a week, and to hang out with Winn. They say they’re just friends, but… Ryah knows better. The Durlan loves the idea of two of them together: her sweet and funny uncle who dresses nicely and can sing better than anyone but Kara and her wicked powerful aunt who moves like a cat and could steal anything from anyone if she wanted to. Winn makes her not sad anymore.

Shahrazad “Shah” Nazari is 25-years-old, and a Mission Director of Exoplanet Exploration at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Pasadena, CA, and lives with her bondmates and their daughter, Ryah. She is still Queen of the Shadowlands, officially the only living Priestess of Rao (and blessed by Athena) on Earth, and the only one among the team who has visited Olympus on Saturn’s icy moon of Enceladus (to officiate a ceremony for the gods).

Tyson’s dangerous job keeps him far from home for months at a time; but while he and Shah are still close, their relationship has become a close friendship. They are no longer a couple (by mutual decision), and haven’t been since after the wedding. It wasn’t easy at first, but she and Marjorie have become even closer. Shah has also formed an unexpected, and quite close friendship with the God of War, who always brings a new game of some kind, and food (pizza, pot stickers, awesome Thai) to the loft whenever the unlikely pair uses the dojo to spar, or game nights, so he’s kind of already won Kara over.

Alex calls it ‘bribery’ and has a prickly relationship with Ares. The handsome god and Shah have been going out on the town together a lot; to fancy events, galas, and premiers. Sometimes Aphrodite or Shikaze, or both of her friends join them, and Shah’s been playing matchmaker for the trio, and getting close.

When not at work, or on missions for the D.E.O. or the Zumwalt, Shah spends her time with her bondmates, training with them or their daughter, or just be there for Ryah. She also can be found at Winn’s, Marjorie’s, Astra and Lilly’s, Ada and Jess’, with other friends, or traveling the worlds somewhere. The previous year, for instance, the three of them took Eliza and Naomi to Mars to honor Jeremiah on his birthday.

Tom & Myka Daniels are happily married and very active in Kara’s life. Tom and Myka spend plenty of time with Kara and Alex, as well as with their granddaughter Ryah, and have promised them Christmas in Olympus this year.

Tom remains Captain of the USS Zumwalt, but was promoted to Rear Admiral months ago. Kara decided to stop calling him ‘My General’ at that time and switched to ‘My Admiral’. Two additional Zumwalt-class vessels have passed sea trials and have been placed under his command, each with a shard of Ada as each ship’s ‘Mother’. These special vessels and their elite crews act alone, or as one-off support for specific Carrier Strike Groups on an ad hoc basis, while the Zumwalt prowls the seas like a lone wolf, enforcing international law, treaties, and intervening in the worst hot spots.

He's earned the unofficial title of ‘Captain Nemo’, and the mysterious Zumwalt (also known as ‘The Ghost Ship’) his ‘Nautilus’, with its now-legendary Starlight, who flies before her like an angelic harbinger. Pirates, terrorists, and combatants have been known to lie down and surrender at the sight...
of her soaring above.

**Myka** is a four-star admiral and remains the U.S. Navy’s Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) and is damn good at the job. She’s responsible to the Secretary of the Navy for the command, utilization of resources and operating efficiency of the operating forces of the Navy. She has been the driving force behind the multi-billion dollar appropriations for the upgraded and expanded fleet (with more *Zumwalt*-class vessels, including a supercarrier, to come). As a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Myka is the principal naval advisor to the President and to the Secretary of the Navy on the conduct of war.

As **Athena**, her role as head of the pantheon of ancient gods has strengthened, and the wise goddess keeps a tight grip on her uncle Hades in hopes of keeping him from trying to end the world again. That said, he continues to find ways to aid Non and the rogue Kryptonians on Earth, presumably to achieve that end. She can’t act directly herself (without clear proof of any misdeeds) but Team Archangel can and finding Non and his troops, getting evidence of Hades’ involvement, and stopping Myriad are the main priorities they’ve been juggling.

**Dr. Naomi Young**, Ph.D., still looks about the same age she did when Kara and Alex first met her and is the full-time Science Director at the D.E.O. She lives with her partner, **Eliza Danvers** in National City. These days Eliza looks younger... about the same as she did when Kara came to earth and is Head of Biochemistry and Bioengineering at Swan International and Chair of Bioengineering and Exobiology at Stanford. She’s also a consultant for the D.E.O. and was recently granted the blessed title of Amazon by **Queen Hippolyta**, with all the rights that come with it.

Eliza and Naomi are officially engaged and split their time between the human world and their vast, seaside villa on Themyscira, where neither of them ages. In fact, mortals regain their youth the longer they stay, turning the clock back a little every time they visit just so it can start moving again when they go back. They are good friends with **Diana** and **Circe** and spend time with them often.

**Ada Zara-EL Nazari** (or more accurately, a shard of herself... a duplicate) attended the United States Naval Academy and graduated top of her class. Her rank of Commander (CDR) is legit, but the crew of the *Zumwalt* tends not to separate Ada the person from the Ada the ship (since she IS the ship!). They call her by a variety of names, including her old honorary title, ‘Navigator’, ‘Ma’am’, ‘Starlight’, or just ‘Ship’, and more recently, ‘Mom’ or ‘Mother’. On other vessels, she’s addressed by her rank, Commander (CDR), sir, or ma’am, like any other officer.

She and **Jess** are an extremely happy couple who love their jobs and working together. With everyone getting engaged and planning to be married they decided to delay announcing their own engagement (they have been betrothed for about six months), until after Eliza and Naomi tie the knot. They plan on being married at sea by their Captain and surrounded by their family (which of course includes the crew) on the *Zumwalt*.

**Astra In-Ze Chambers** left her local law enforcement role (much to the cries of protest from her colleagues) after Kara and Alex’s wedding and became the D.E.O.’s Strategic Commander. Under Hank, she oversees all strike teams, military readiness, and strategic planning at the covert agency. Commander Astra remains Lilly’s business partner, wife/bondmate, best friend, lover, co-mother of Miyuki, Kara and Alex’s aunt, and a fixture in her community back on the San Juan Islands.
During Kara and Alex’s honeymoon, it came to light that Maxwell Lord knew their Aunt and Miyuki were Kryptonians and that he’d even helped Lilly save Astra’s life. Not only that, he’d also been aiding in her search for Myriad for years and was the one responsible for setting her up with an unassailable human identity. The billionaire was even Lilly’s Best Man at their wedding! Because of this revelation, and his knowledge of Non and his rogues, J’onn pulled Lord in as a Consultant for the D.E.O. While Kara is willing to look past his Machiavellian reputation, Alex doesn’t completely trust him. She finds it suspicious (and convenient) how the opportunistic man has leveraged Astra’s wealth of Kryptonian knowledge to profit from ‘breakthrough’ technologies and products over the years.

Kara has pointed out that they do the same thing…

Lilly In-Ze Chambers had a major life change as well when her damaged spine regenerated. After the wedding, Astra’s bondmate gradually regained her ability to walk, and after long months of physical therapy, the adrenaline junkie was stronger and more energetic than ever! The In-Ze Chambers power couple usually takes off on at least two major adventures a year to somewhere in the world. This year will be climbing Mount Kilimanjaro.

Winn Schott Jr. and Miyuki have been close friends since the wedding and have recently started (quietly) dating. He’s been coaching Ryah in all things geek-related: from good fantasy and sci-fi novels to comic books to Star Wars, Star Trek, and Doctor Who, and has been hanging out at the loft more and more lately… especially when Miyuki is over.

Steven Colliers, the well-known Editor-in-Chief of the National City Tribune now also has a seat on the powerful Editorial Board of CatCo Worldwide Media. As a friend and close confidant of Cat Grant, the man has incredible influence when it comes to what her empire publishes in print, online, and for broadcast. His keen journalist’s eye sees all and he’s Kara’s mole in that inner circle. Not only that, Steven is one of her best friends, her mentor, and a key member of Team Archangel’s advisory council (a.k.a. ‘The Super Friends’).

Devi Mitra is a physically fit, young 38-year-old who kickboxes, runs, and can lap 20-year-olds. Having broken up with the architect over a year and a half ago, she is currently single. The hard-driven NCPD Lieutenant oversees the city’s important 3rd District that includes downtown, CatCo, Lord Tech, and other key businesses. She is one of Kara’s closest friends and has also developed deep bonds with Shannon, Safiya, Alex, and Astra. Devi, using the callsign ‘Guardian’, commands and leads a covert, militarized NCPD task force called The Sentinels who work with Team Archangel, supporting their efforts to protect the city. She’s been approached by the FBI on more than one occasion but has so far turned down their offers to join that agency.

Shannon MacKenna & Safiya Murabit are engaged, and Shannon is now the Director of the CIA’s National City Directorate, a critical hub for counterterrorism coordination for all Western region U.S. law enforcement agencies. Her little nano helpers are alive and well inside of her, and have saved her life twice since Tripoli… the little beasties have also halted the negative physical effects of her aging as her cells continue to thrive.
Safiya is Head of Pediatric Oncology at Smythe Medical and is the lead physician (and secretly a test subject) for a trial Eliza and Naomi started with a bio-engineered version of Shannon’s nanobots. It’s still early, but so far, the results have been promising. The good doctor is also a leader in the local Islamic community and is a very involved mentor to young Ryah, who wishes to become a healer, and enjoys helping Alex cram for her night classes (the D.E.O. has her on a fast track through med school).

--------------------------

**Jack** and **Aeryn** are the protectors of Kara and Alex’s House. Jack is head of security for Archangel, Inc., which keeps him very busy. As Team Archangel’s liaison, he interacts with Devi and her National City task force of Sentinels fairly regularly and they’ve become trusted colleagues and friends.

Aeryn is the sorceress supreme for Team Archangel and the D.E.O. She is also training Ryah as a witch and adores the child like her own. In her day job, she is the Director of The Kyle and has had some interesting side adventures with Selina as Catwoman, as well as with Batman. When not in National City, the most powerful witch on the West Coast spends time on Themyscira and sometimes Gateway City at Diana and Circe’s, though the Amazonian princess and her Goddess also enjoy occasional visits to National City.

Athena did finally reveal that the god-like alien beings that Aeryn descended from left Europe long ago and went to the sea to find some privacy, eventually founding the Eternal City of Atlantis. Circe has promised to set up a meeting with the goddess Danu for Aeryn ‘the next time she crosses into this world’, which could be a long time, so the witch has been talking to Diana about finally meeting Aquaman, and trying to visit her newfound distant relatives, the Atlanteans.

--------------------------

**Aya Yoshida** and **Dante Caruso** both retired from the U.S. Navy about a year after Kara and Alex’s wedding, finally agreeing to the couple’s offer to join their security team under Jack’s command in National City. The pay is ten times better, and benefits include condos, gear and weapons budgets... as well as travel and free healthcare and insurance.

Aya and her mate, the deadly dark-haired Amazon beauty **Smyrna** (who came with the Petty Officer as part of an unspoken package), are both assigned to 24/7 close protection for Eliza and Naomi, and often Ryah (and, unknown to Cat, Carter Grant). They follow them like ghosts, sight unseen, but never far away. Dante is a floater looking after their other friends in National City. Aya and Dante have also developed a very good (covert) working relationship with the NCPD’s Sentinels, though Smyrna hasn’t. The deadly immortal frightens most of them, but the human police are always happy when she shows up in a crisis.

--------------------------

*June 21st - Year Nine*

CatCo Worldwide Media Corporate Offices - National City

*Less than a week after Kara and Alex’s two-year anniversary*

*1405 Hours UTC -8, Tuesday afternoon, U.S. Pacific Coast Time*
“Keira!” Cat Grant shouted from where she stood behind her desk, glasses held askew in the hand placed on her cocked hip.

The CEO was laser-focused on the orderly array of redlined draft articles, photos, and design layouts that had been placed there for her review, looking for something specific. When she glanced up a moment later she was startled to see her sunny assistant already standing attentively in the wide, open doorway of her office.

After working together for over a year and a half, one would think the young woman’s uncanny ability to anticipate her nearly every need, and appear almost before she could know Cat could possibly require her, would no longer surprise CatCo’s hard-driven top executive… in fact, the opposite was true.

The longer Cat Grant knew Kara Danvers, the more fascinating she became. Perhaps that’s why the perpetually cheerful girl with the can-do attitude had lasted longer in the role of her assistant than anyone before her… by a long shot.

“Yes, Ms. Grant?” The poised young woman asked in her unshakably calm, and professional manner.

Cat recalled her first rocky week Kara had spent in her position, the gorgeous Columbia grad had unintentionally put the CEO to shame with her breathtaking and unique Couture wardrobe and immaculate styling. Sensing her faux pas (and Cat’s annoyance), the blonde had switched to off-the-rack, though that hadn’t stopped her from always appearing delightful every day since.

Not that Cat ever admitted her appreciation out loud. It still drove her mad that she’d never found out the identity of her insanely attractive assistant’s brilliant designer. It was not for lack of trying, of course, and she was still too proud to outright ask.

Today, Kara was dressed in a striking, but sensitively modest, yellow pencil skirt, long-sleeved, white button-down, and her long blonde hair was done up in an intricate braid that looked like spun gold. She was pretty as a picture, as usual, with her iPad held at the ready, and her beautiful, attentive blue eyes riveted on Cat, awaiting her orders.

Struggling not to smile, the CEO did her best to maintain her severe façade.

“Where is the final copy for the corruption exposé on Blackwood? Are my editors asleep at the wheel? Do they lack any desire to remain employed?” She asked in quick succession, her voice rising with implied menace with each question. “It’s only the most important piece of investigative journalism we’ll publish this year, and I needed to review the draft two hours ago.”

Her assistant squinted down at her device to hide a slight grin as if she somehow found Cat adorable, or pleasingly precious in some way. Which was both frustrating, and insufferably charming to the CEO, mostly because she liked how that look of Kara’s always made her feel… cared for and safe, as if she were watched over.

How crazy was that?

And… wait a minute… was she, Cat Grant, actually smiling? Good Lord, she was. Her cheeks felt oddly stretched, and as if they were suddenly on fire.

*What’s wrong with me?!*
Her assistant adjusted her glasses and glanced away for a moment… as if sensing Cat’s crisis and kindly giving her boss a chance to compose herself.

As the older woman’s breathing returned to normal, Kara gently picked up where she’d left off as if nothing had happened, “I’m sorry, Ms. Grant, but I found significant errors in Wilson’s final copy and sent the entire article back to him for edits, which have already been returned, content and copy edited, and submitted to both Geopolitical and Research for a pass. I also felt good enough about the rewrite that I put everything into a parallel review with Legal. We should have the final draft within the hour… with plenty of time for you to make any changes before this evening’s deadline.”

“Hmmm, I see.” It took all of Cat’s will to keep the poker face as she tapped her glasses on her chin and pursed her lips.

The fact was, she’d already checked in with Colliers for the copy a minute past the noon deadline, and was able, after considerable effort, to claw out of her good friend the reason for the delay. Apparently, after pre-editing the draft for Cat, her dutiful assistant had quietly taken the formidable writer of the piece to task (to the woodshed was more like it), at least according to her greatly impressed, and amused Editor-In-Chief.

*Lord, I wish I could have seen that exchange!*

It was an impressive feat, considering Dan Wilson was known as a real prima donna and a ballbuster, but Mrs. Danvers had proven herself time and time again to be nothing but capable, above average… and full of surprises. In fact, Kara had been filtering and editing all the critical content for CatCo’s print, as well as top-tier digital media channels, for months; honestly, her work was consistently exemplary.

It had gotten to the point of late, that by the time her meticulous assistant’s neat stacks of copy and layouts reached Cat’s desk, the CEO didn’t have to nitpick edits (of course, she did a few anyway just to keep the girl on her toes), and had the luxury of being able to look at the big picture, like the old days.

Since Kara had gradually inserted herself into the editorial process, and her life, CatCo’s output had been consistently sharp, on point, and polished. Cat had even found the freedom to creatively improve key pieces in ways that would have been missed in the grueling days when she felt the need to oversee everything herself… When she didn’t have a trusted someone at her side to rely on.

Which brought things back to today’s tempest…

Wilson had really stepped in it with his investigative piece, laying out the details of bribery, murder, and collusion with corrupt officials, surrogates for foreign governments and private armies by Blackwood Logistics, one of the most powerful military contractors in existence (nipping at the heels of number one, Valhalla). The issue with the exposé itself boiled down to the fact that the veteran reporter had only utilized one named Pentagon source to build his intricate case, and for the damaging quotes used as pillars within the story. Unfortunately, when digging deeper, her tenacious assistant discovered his contact turned out to not be as trustworthy as he claimed… and unknown to everyone except, apparently, Kara Danvers, was under a soon to be unsealed FBI investigation for corruption.

The news, once it broke, would have called into question not only Wilson’s credibility and the veracity of the article but the integrity of CatCo itself. The incident would also have served as yet another blow against legitimate journalism, crated CatCo’s stock price, and damaged the company’s brand… and by extension, Cat.
She would have been forced to endure weeks of impossibly exasperating and grueling meetings with the board and a bevy of overpaid lawyers… and long nights away from her son…

But Kara hadn’t allowed that to happen.

Her assistant took the initiative on her own, and after dressing Wilson down secured even higher-level sources for the story, and had him talking to the reporter on the phone in less than thirty minutes. How she knew about the secret investigation, and what connections she’d used to lock an interview with not only a verified high-level Pentagon official but also a representative from the Joint Chiefs ‘on background’, Cat wasn’t entirely sure, but she was eternally grateful.

Her intuition told her that Agent Scully, as Cat affectionately called the svelte brunette who slipped into the CatCo offices to pick her sunny assistant up for lunch at least twice a week, sometimes bringing along their lovely daughter, had something to do with it… but she lacked quantifiable evidence.

The other Danvers worked in the city at The Sagan Institute as a high-level exobiologist and bio-engineer and had even published a number of highly regarded scientific papers, but Cat didn’t buy that’s all she was. Based on how the woman moved, her affection for the color black, and her seemingly innate wariness as if always guarding Kara, Cat believed that Alex was either currently, or had recently been, a soldier… and a damn good one.

The fact that Kara always slipped into speaking in military time, as if out of instinct, whenever her wife appeared at CatCo was only one of many subtle hints that appearances were deceiving when it came to both of them. Perhaps the whole military time thing could be attributed to Kara being a proud, and outspoken, ‘Navy brat’; Cat wasn’t sure. Both of her parents were still serving as officers of some high rank, but she’d never dug too deep there.

But, with all she’d observed, Cat was convinced that Alex was dangerous… like a precision weapon, and what she really did for a living was still an open question. Her guess? Kara’s wife was probably with one of the alphabet agencies, FBI, or more likely, the CIA…. though honestly? It didn’t really matter to her except to satisfy her itch of curiosity.

While the CEO was pleased to know that Kara had such a fierce and skilled protector watching over her, she just didn’t understand how they could possibly be compatible; they seemed as different as the sun and the moon personality-wise…

Regardless, like Alex, and so many other little things she’d noticed working so closely with the outwardly sweet, talented, sometimes naive, professional, and tenaciously loyal young woman, the incident with Wilson was just another puzzle piece in the mystery that was Kara Danvers.

What Cat truly did not understand was why the young mother was doing her career a disservice by staying humble and downplaying her role in saving the day… yet again! Anyone else would be preening at her window to get in front of Cat for accolades, bursting to reveal their worth and leverage a raise, or a promotion… but not her Kiera.

Why?

It was the one question of many that the investigative reporter inside Cat Grant desperately wanted to find the answers to.

She lifted her face to the ceiling with her eyes closed, pinched the bridge of her nose with the hand holding her glasses, and groaned. Damn, she had a migraine coming on.
Oh yes, Kara was still waiting patiently for her to say something.

“Thank you, Kiera, I want to see that final draft as soon as you finish with it.”

“Of course, Ms. Grant.” Her assistant’s soft voice was suddenly coming from very close by, and as Cat opened her eyes she glimpsed the taller woman standing right next to her like a shimmer of gold. How did she move so fast, and so quietly? Cat swallowed hard.

Kara’s smiling blue eyes seemed to sparkle as the woman caught her gaze... as if Cat were the most wonderful thing in the universe, something only the CEO’s son did anymore.

She couldn’t help but smile back… and freely admitted to herself that she had never been as envious of Agent Scully in her life than she was at that moment.

Kara then gently handed her a familiar tiny ceramic bowl that contained three pills, along with a cold glass of water… where she’d managed to find them Cat really had no idea. It was as if the items had just magically appeared in place of the young woman’s iPad, which, of course, was now nowhere to be seen.

“Here… for your headache.” She said.

Cat dutifully took the offering and swallowed the painkillers as Kara watched, grinning with childlike contentment.

Once she returned the bowl her assistant’s open hand, the young woman added, “Also, don’t worry about staying late to wrap up today’s editorial review, Ms. Grant, I’m still picking Carter and Ryah up from school after Science Fair prep at five. Is it okay if we stop for take-out on the way to your building? It’ll probably put us closer to six-thirty before I get Carter home, but the kids will be fed, and happy. I’ll even grab you a couple of those delicious vegan tacos with the spicy aioli you like so much.” Kara wiggled her eyebrows and was too adorable for Cat to even think about a snappy response.

The executive narrowed her gaze as she considered, though she already knew the answer and finally gave in with a dramatic little huff. “Three, I want three tacos… and... thank you, for adding chauffeur to your growing list of titles, Mrs. Danvers. You really don’t need to…”

“Ms. Grant…” Kara gently laid her exceedingly warm hand on Cat’s forearm. The older woman sucked in a breath to begin a sharp retort for both the interruption and invasion of her personal space but found herself lost once again in her assistant’s stunning blue eyes.

Lord, after two years and she still couldn’t name the unique color of Kara’s irises.

“It’s really not a bother for me, at all. In fact, Ryah really likes spending time with Carter, and… he seems to feel the same way about her.”

Cat closed her mouth, which she realized was still open, and relaxed. It was true; Kara’s delightful, incredibly-intelligent daughter had become one of her son’s only friends since he’d started the fourth grade at the expensive private school that both children attended (how Kara and Alex could afford the tuition alone was yet another mystery Cat was dying to solve). The precocious and surprisingly patient eleven-year-old had worked wonders beyond any doctors or therapists in slowly bringing Carter out of his shell. Her boy was special, and few understood him the way Kara did, and apparently Ryah as well.

“Fine.” Cat’s voice broke, betraying her emotions.
She tried to glance away, but Kara’s fingers remained lightly touching her arm like a warm fire, and the blonde’s mesmerizing smile held her as she whispered, “It’s a lonely world, always feeling like you have to do everything on your own. I know you’re very good at it, Ms. Grant, but sometimes we all could use a little help, and friends.”

Shaken by the very personal meaning Kara was so obviously trying to communicate, and the purity of her kindness, Cat, who had interviewed the most powerful politicians, stars, and influencers on the planet, was at a loss for words. Kara Danvers, of all people, somehow saw through her bristling exterior like a silk veil, and still accepted her.

She’d been damaged and scarred for so long… her divorce from Carter’s horrible father; the years she’d spent battling her way up in the male-dominated world of media; her mother’s scorn, as well as her constant unwanted and unattainable expectations for Cat’s life; all these had contributed to her walls. She’d fought the battle alone, grown a thick, angry skin, and over time the constant effort had taken a toll… and at that moment, there with Kara, she felt the exhaustion of the years crashing down on her… yet her sunny assistant’s smile held her up and gave her strength to let it all just wash away.

Like rain.

“Thank you, Kara… um, Kiera.” Damn her slip. The nickname Cat had unfailingly used for her was one of the only defining walls left between them, demarking her as boss and Kara as subordinate, even if they both knew it was a façade.

Once that fell, what would they be to each other?

Kara Danvers’ expression lit up like Carter’s on Christmas morning at the sound of her actual given name coming out of Cat’s mouth, and suddenly it was if the young woman was literally glowing… odd, but beautiful.

*Must be my imagination…*

“It’s okay, Ms. Grant, I really like helping you… um, and Carter… I mean, he’s such a great kid. Besides, what are friends for?” The normally together woman blushed nervously, which was incredibly endearing.

Then it all clicked in Cat’s thoughts, like an epiphany.

Friends? Yes, she supposed they were getting there. How strange, and wonderful all at once. The end result, of course, was a foregone conclusion, she could feel it, and had felt it for months… maybe since first meeting the enchanting woman. Kara Danvers was like a star, her intoxicating gravity pulling Cat inexorably in… though she wasn’t quite ready to take the leap that final step would require just yet.

But someday soon… perhaps.

The older woman took a deep breath and straightened as she re-summoned the mask of her CEO persona. “What indeed… well, Kiera, I’m sure you have plenty of work to do before you leave. I want the final draft of that exposé in my inbox no later than three thirty… and a latte on my desk in twenty minutes, *hot* this time.” She raised a sharp eyebrow at her assistant.

“Yes, Ms. Grant. Of course.” Kara nodded, still smiling.

As she watched the blonde glide towards the door Cat sighed, and under her breath whispered, “Thank you, Kara. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” Then, to her complete surprise, the
young woman came to a screeching halt in her stylishly heeled tracks and glanced back over her shoulder with a look of absolute delight, looking directly at Cat… as if she’d actually heard her secretly whispered admission.

“That will be all, Kiera.” Cat tried her best not to sound too flustered as she dismissed and watched a beaming Kara turn to finally make her graceful exit. There was an added spring to her step that the older woman was certain hadn’t been there before.

Once Kara was back at her desk, Cat glanced up to discreetly observe the woman through the glass walls of her office. She was chatting with the handsome Cardigan-wearing Hobbit that sat next to her… Argyle? Interesting… though she had to admit, the handsome boy was successfully pulling off the look.

What was the hopelessly lovesick puppy’s name anyway? Wick? Whitt? Something like that... Oh well, whoever he was, he did seem to make Kara laugh; a melodic sound Cat could never get enough of.

She’d pay him more (and take the time to remember his name), just to keep him doing that.

As she sat down in her comfortable swivel chair and began flipping through the orderly piles of drafts, mock-ups, and layouts, all annotated in Kara’s elegant red script, which bordered on calligraphy, Cat Grant, Queen of All Media, did something extraordinary…

She allowed a playful smile to crack her stoic veneer and began to hum as she worked.

June 23rd, Year Nine

D.E.O. Secret desert facility, outside of National City

1235 Hours UTC -8, Thursday afternoon, U.S. Pacific Coast Time

Alex’s Flamebird mask dissipated in a flickering sheen of fire as she dropped the battered Tengarian on the reinforced concrete floor of the prisoner intake unit’s containment hall. The incredible weight of the eight-foot tall, hairless humanoid’s unconscious form shook the wide chamber, and she grimaced as her HUD revealed resulting tremors reverberating throughout the D.E.O’s secret desert facility.

“Damn.” She grimaced. Either the world is just becoming too damn fragile, or my patience for constantly having to tippy-toe around is stretched too thin today. Alex had to remind herself that it could be worse… she was still only about eighty-five percent Kryptonian. How the Hell her bondmate managed it so well and never seemed to complain, was still a mystery to her.

It only took a few moments for six heavily-geared agents to arrive, with a forklift, to take custody of Fort Rozz Prisoner #122. The intoxicated alien would soon be sleeping off his drunk under lock and key somewhere deep underground until she and J’onn could review his case.

“She’s careful with his elbow spines,” Alex warned the security detail as they tended to their work. “They’re razor sharp, and hurt like a son of a bitch.” She gingerly rubbed her side where the alien had been able to cut through Shatari and into her. The red alien armor and Alex’s six-inch wound
had healed on the flight back to base, but she was still tender, and her skin itched like crazy under there.

“Tough takedown, Assistant Director?” The lead officer asked with sincere interest as her team finished placing the hulking Tengarian in heavy restraints on the heavy-duty lift.

Alex smiled and, as always, had a hard time not laughing when talking to the security detail. Dressed in their glossy black body armor, they all looked and sounded a hell of a lot like Stormtroopers straight out of a Star Wars movie… the elite ones.

“Yes, the brothers didn’t take too kindly to us asking them to surrender. Thank Rao, Archangel and I were able to contain most of the damage to the abandoned cement plant. Turns out they’re not terrorists, just two alien boys failing to keep a low profile after having a few too many beers. They were fighting over a girl.” She shook her head and exhaled.

“Men… typical.” The officer chuckled under her mask, and then tilted her head in a questioning way as she asked, “Where’s Archangel?” Causing Alex to once again nearly break out in a bad case of the giggles.

She already liked the woman.

Alex shifted out of her Flame armor and into her black D.E.O. command uniform with a mere thought, and noticed the officer’s sharp intake of breath and a muffled ‘Wow!’ under her mask.

_How adorable, a newbie!_ She often forgot how otherworldly she must seem to regular folks as Flame.

There were so many new recruits these days, with the D.E.O’s funding, and ranks, growing under J’onn’s leadership, a favorable new administration (led by President Olivia Marsdin, a woman she, Kara, and Shah had volunteered for during the election!) and a Congress eager to spend on security, Alex sometimes couldn’t keep track of who she’d interacted with before.

“She’ll be here in about twenty seconds. Her brother was bigger than mine, and a lot angrier. Speak of the devil…”

At that moment, Kara thundered out of the blue desert skies with an unconscious Tengarian even larger than the one Alex had hauled in. The Kryptonian then dropped like a stone through the wide rocky opening left by the cavern’s open blast doors thirty-feet above.

Alex eyes were glued to her bondmate… and the D.E.O. Special Weapons Unit’s newest gray mottled battle armor that clung to her smooth curves and amazing ass like it was painted on.

“Oh, only a devil for you, gorgeous.” Kara stripped off the little mask that covered her eyes and winked at Alex as she maneuvered Fort Rozz Prisoner #121 onto a second waiting lift and into his massive restraints. She then handed one of the obviously shaking Stormtroopers a large evidence bag and very politely asked, “Agent, can you please see that this gets to Forensic Analysis right away?”

“Yes… Yes, ma’am! I… I will, ma’am… I mean Archangel.” The awed young man stuttered as he timidly took possession of the offered evidence, saluted, and stumbled as he walked backward before eventually dashing off as if he was on fire.

“Hey, it’s okay, I don’t bite. Thank you very much, Agent.” Kara called out after him as he fled.

The Kryptonian held in her laughter until the panicked young man cleared the landing area, but was half doubled over with a hand over her mouth to hide her giggles by the time Alex flickered over to
her side and wrapped an arm around her waist.

“Oh Alex, that poor guy! Did you see that? He was so nervous just talking to me! It was like high school all over again… okay, maybe college a little too. I just wanted to hug him.”

Alex smiled knowingly and sighed, “Kara, you still have no idea, do you? Think about it from his perspective. You’re as beautiful as an angel, and with all your grace and power you may as well be one. Remember how you felt when you first met Diana or Athena? Uh huh, yeah… see, now you get it. Vaena, mere mortals are awed by you… Believe me, I know from experience.”

Her bondmate stared back at her with a look of utter disbelief on her adorable scrunched up face. “Pfft! Alex. No. I’m just… me, your wife, a certifiable geek who can’t cook to save her life but stuffs her face constantly, a girl who loves wearing sweats, playing games, reading, cosplay, binging sappy shows on Netflix, horseback riding, and hanging out on the couch with you and our friends.”

“Who else happens to be a super-powered alien D.E.O. agent, hero by night, the best crypto-analyst the NSA has… even part-time, the muse who inspired a few of the greatest scientific discoveries of the 21st Century, an immortal child of the gods, and secretly one of the largest shareholders of CatCo Worldwide Media… among other investments. Shall I go on, or is my point made?” Alex smirked triumphantly.

“Alex! I’m also a mother of an eleven-year-old, and an executive assistant slash editor… it’s not my fault I come from a different planet. I’m just a… normal person.” By the time she’d finished her shoulders had started to slump, she’d grown quieter, and her tone decidedly lacked conviction.

“Sweetheart, you’re anything but normal… and thank Rao for that!” Alex then leaned in to take Kara’s pouty lips in her own, nipped gently, and then kissed her… slow and deep. Her bondmate responded with need, and Alex’s hands grasped Kara’s slim waist firmly as they molded into each other. It was a full two minutes later before they took a moment to breathe, and they were floating six feet off the floor… with an enthralled audience.

As they settled back down, Alex looked into those stunning Kryptonian blue eyes and sighed, “Hamsar-am, you know in your heart that as much as we both sometimes wish for it, you and I are anything but ordinary… but that doesn’t mean we can’t have a part of our life that is. We deserve that, and so does Ryah. But… we also need to think about how our enemies, as well as the people who depend on us and who look to us for leadership, perceive us. If we’re going to do our jobs effectively, sometimes we’ll need to awe them, and other times we’ll need to be feared. You know that, right?”

“Yeah… yeah, I know.” Kara forced a smile, but Alex could feel sadness through their bond. Poor, sweet Kara… She was so kindhearted. Projecting strength and confidence came easily to her when being a hero, but menace was against her nature… unless provoked. What she’d done in the mountains outside of Tehran still haunted her.

Alex was about to assure her that everything was going to be okay when Vasquez’s voice broke over their comms, snapping them out of the heavy moment… “Ma’am’s? I apologize for the interruption, but the Director needs you both up in Control immediately, we have a problem.”

Alex snapped to attention, “We’re on our way. Thanks, Susan. Danvers out.”

“I hope it’s just a little problem, like a teensy one.” Kara placed a hand on her suddenly grumbling stomach and whined, “My lunchtime’s almost over, and I haven’t even had a chance to eat!”

Rao, she is so adorable! And daymn… those six-pack Kryptonian abs! All mine! Mine-mine-mine-
Alex was overcome by an intense urge to wrap her arms around her always-starving bondmate once again. “You know, Kara, we have this little thing called text to order. I can ping the commissary right now and have lunch delivered to the operations center for our meeting with Hank in like, ten minutes. What do you want? I could eat too.”

Alex glanced down to pull out her phone, and was suddenly enveloped in the arms of her squealing Kryptonian, who whispered in her ear, “Thank you, Alex! I love you, normal or not. You’re my hero! You are soooo getting lucky tonight.” It was like liquid sunshine in her soul.

Agents in the intake area looked on awkwardly as Kara squeezed Alex in a super hug and lifted her off the floor again in the process… but she didn’t care what anyone thought, regardless of what she’d said to Kara before, not when the goddess she loved was looking at her like she was the center of her entire universe.

The world could just deal with it.

........................................

A few minutes later

Somewhere outside of National City

Control – the heart of the D.E.O.’s secret desert facility’s operations.

“So, let me get this straight, we’ve been hacked by Non’s people and can’t trust that they aren’t listening into our communications with our worldwide teams. At the same time, we have credible intel that points to major terrorist actions about to go down in major European Union population centers… but we don’t know where for sure? Does that about sum up our crappy situation?” Alex was trying to contain her frustration; what had happened was no one’s fault, it was a brilliant move by their enemies.

“Yes,” Ada stood at Alex’s side, dressed in her ethereal white battle suit. Her tone simmered with anger. “I’m sorry, aunts, there was no way I could have known about, or detected the breach. It was a direct tap into the D.E.O.’s servers at our facility outside of Berlin. Our enemies created a backdoor, a hidden quantum connection for themselves.” She then cursed in Kryptonese with such vehemence that Kara turned bright red. Their normally calm niece did not like being outmaneuvered. “I have since put countermeasures in place, but we’re still dealing with the consequences of the incursion.”

In the soft illumination of the busy communications center, Hank leaned on the wide 3D display table the four of them stood around, his head bowed. “We now know that Non’s attack on our weapons cache last December was a ruse.” His voice was deep and rumbled. Alex knew that J’onn had taken the breach personally, as a failure, and was looking to set things right. “It distracted us from their true intention, which was to send a second team in to finally find a way to bypass Ada’s protections, that they had so far been unable to break.

“We still don’t know if we’ve found all of their alien tech… which is why all interagency electronic and quantum communications have been shut down network-wide until we can confirm we’re in the
clear. Also, I’m going to need my Assistant Director on a plane to Geneva tonight. Alex, you’ll be leading coordination efforts with our European counterparts, so we’re not fighting blind.”

Alex’s stared for a moment; unsure if she’d heard him correctly, and then asked, “Geneva, sir? As in Geneva, Switzerland?”

Hank grinned at her reaction. “Yes, A.D. Danvers. Commander Astra is already on the ground at the Berlin site leading the tactical investigation along with Max Lord, Cassandra, one of Ada’s shards, and our local teams. They’ll be rooting out the eavesdropping tech, and searching for any clues to what Non and his band of terrorists are up to. But I have a very bad feeling about this one and need my best people on point across the globe… especially our super-powered ones.”

Kara piped up from where she sat at the table, chowing down on her just-delivered veggie sandwich and spicy catsup-slathered steak fries, “Sir, what about me? I want to go with Alex.”

Hank shook his head, “No, Kara, not this time. I need you and Shadow here with me to protect our domestic assets… in case this ends up being another ploy. We have the upper hand for now, if only briefly, and must press every advantage while we do. Non and his lackeys have no idea we’ve found their infiltration technology, or that our brilliant Starlight has been feeding them fake data and communications ever since the discovery.” Ada’s posture straightened a little at the compliment. “So, until we’re 100% certain what they’re up to, our moves must be kept secret.

“To that end, Alex will be traveling in her civilian guise to Geneva under the pretense of attending a Scientific Symposium in her role for the Sagan Institute. Her team will be with her, posing as colleagues. This has to be business as usual, or we risk tipping our hand. It’s time for us to get ahead of your uncle for once.”

“My crazy uncle…” Kara mumbled, chewing on a mouthful of the delicious fries. She then began to protest again but was quickly silenced when Hank added…

“If the safety of this facility and our people aren’t enough of a reason for you to stay put, Mrs. Danvers, did you forget Devi’s birthday dinner celebration this evening, and that Ryah’s parent-teacher conferences start tomorrow? One of you two still needs to be there for both of them, and I’m not ever doing that… ever again.”

The blonde sagged in defeat and shifted over in her chair to lay her head on her bondmate’s shoulder. “Adulting sucks.” She grumbled.

Alex patted her softly on the top of her golden head, and did her best imitation of Winn, “Divide and conquer, girlfriend, easy peasy.” And they both laughed. “Don’t worry, nooré cheshm-am.” She added, “When I need you, I know you’re only one call away.”

“Awww…” Kara flushed as she ducked her head and cooed happily at her bondmate’s reference to their special song. “Be careful flying over, okay? Tell the pilots to watch for lightning storms over the Northern Atlantic, I lost a new battle suit to one last week! Shredded right off of me! Oh, and promise to talk to me the whole trip, all right?”

It was always funny to hear Kara channeling Eliza whenever the concerned Kryptonian unknowingly shifted into her ‘mom voice’, but so, so endearing.

Alex nodded in agreement as her angel snuggled into her.

Off to the side, Ada leaned into a grinning Hank Henshaw with a dreamy smile on her face as she watched her Aunties.
June 23rd, Year Nine

The Wood Block (restaurant), downtown National City

1835 Hours UTC -8, Thursday evening, U.S. Pacific Coast Time

The Wood Block was busy that evening. Waiters and waitresses weaved expertly between guests in the din of trendy restaurant’s main dining area where Kara and Devi were seated next to each other at a large table set for ten. Dark hardwoods, industrial steel, poured concrete, and soft LED lights, along with the resonant echo of Lana Del Rey’s Ultraviolence playing in the background, all worked together to create a tastefully modern and soothing aesthetic around them.

Not that Kara was anything close to being soothed… she had too much on her mind. Lost in her worry for Alex, what her insane uncle was up to, and meeting with Ryah’s teachers the following day, she was kind of a mess.

As part of Alex’s civilian cover, Kara had escorted her wife to the airport. They took Alex’s motorcycle instead of her SUV (which they’d bought as cover for their human activities, like Kara taxiing Ryah and Carter around for school and family excursions when flying wasn't an option), for a more... intimate ride. The journey was swift with Kara crouched down in front guiding the powerful machine, weaving in and out of traffic at 80 mph, while Alex, wearing her favorite leather jacket and a backpack, clung to her bondmate's waist laughing and hugging her the whole way. Kara loved the feel of Alex's body pressed up against her, and other little things, like her breath on her neck.

It was so hard saying goodbye this time; but Kara put on a brave face for her bondmate’s sake and said ‘Asheghetam’ (‘I love you’ in Persian), over and over as they kissed goodbye. There was a lot riding on the D.E.O.'s Assistant Director’s amazing, very important shoulders in the days ahead, and she’d need all the energy and good vibes she could get.

Kara tried not to cry when Alex took off her prized jacket and put it on her ‘for safe keeping’, but failed miserably. Their final kiss must have been epic because they ended up surrounded by a ring of admiring spectators who were taking photos and clapping.

The Kryptonian had expected far worse traffic getting back to the city, and ended up arriving at the restaurant for Devi’s party an hour early (she did hit 160 mph on the 101, which may have helped a little... Miyuki would have been proud). Not that she was complaining about getting extra time to spend with the birthday girl before all of their other friends showed up.

It was refreshing just to take a load off and sip ice teas with the shrewd NCPD detective. Well, Devi was actually now Lieutenant Mitra and Rao! She ran a whole division! Kara was so happy for her friend.

“I haven’t seen you this nervous since last September when a Meta with an unstable nuclear weapon was involved.” Devi chuckled as she scooted her chair in close, hooked her arm around one of Kara’s, and entwined their fingers together. “Hey, why so sad? What’s going on, Angel? Is this about Alex’s mission? We both know that firebrand can take care of herself…”

“Ha, I see what you did there… and yeah, I know she can. It’s not that… well, not all that.” Kara
managed a weak smile and began to fidget with and shred her napkin.

“Okay, so… what is it then?”

The blonde sighed and looked into her friend’s concerned, warm brown eyes. “Today, on top of everything, Ms. Grant told me that she’s going to have to lay off close to twenty-four staffers at The Tribune! Good people, with families, mortgages, and lives… Devi, I know most of them! They’re like family. We’ve worked together for years… and today I was preparing letters for their termination notices? I almost started bawling at my desk like an idiot. It’s not fair, and she’s blaming me!”

“Wait, whoa… slow down there and back up a minute. You lost me. How is the Ice Queen blaming you for this? That makes zero sense, Kara.”

The distraught Kryptonian sighed miserably, “Okay, not Kara Danvers, exactly, but me all the same.” She groaned when her friend still looked confused. “After Ms. Grant told me about the layoffs, I made the mistake of pointing out that The Daily Planet hasn’t ever had to downsize, and that little vein on her temple started to pulse. She went on a rant about Superman. She said…” Kara then did her best to mimic her haughty boss, “‘Metropolis has a person who wears a cape and flies around performing heroic acts. The Planet puts this superlative man on their cover fifty-four percent of the time. You want to save the Trib? Go find me a hero, Kiera.’ It was like she punched me in the gut.”

Devi pressed in close to bump shoulders affectionately and signaled the waitress to bring refills for their drinks. “Go on, I think I get it… but I want to understand what really has my hero so tied up in knots. What’s going on in that beautiful head of yours, Angel?”

Kara took a deep breath, her confidence bolstered to say the thing out loud she’d been meaning to talk to Alex about for quite some time. “It’s just… what we do with our powers to help people, to protect this city, the country… the world… we do anonymously, quietly, behind the scenes. Sure, there’s the people we help who know that we really exist and are thankful, the occasional blurry photo of one of us on social media, or some crazy theory on Winn’s blog or the Internet that’s usually true but no one believes, but the world doesn’t know the real us, what we’ve done, or what we do every day…”

“And then today, Ms. Grant reminded me of something that I’d almost forgotten… that I didn’t just come to this planet to protect Kal, or the world by any means necessary… no. My parents sent me to inspire people. Devi, how can I do that if I’m always working in the dark?”

Kara’s friend nodded in understanding. “I see now. So, what are you going to do about it?”

Kara considered Devi’s question, and after a long pause said, “I’m going to get Ms. Grant her hero, and save those jobs at the Trib.” Her voice rang with conviction. “I’ll talk to Alex once this current crisis is over… and J’onn too. Rao, I’ll probably need to sign a mountain-sized pile of legal documents before he lets me tell Winn, who, as you recall, I desperately need to bring up to speed and into our circle of trust. I owe him that before I turn around and beg him to help me finish my Kryptonian battle armor. After that, we can each choose whether we want to reveal ourselves to the world… well, our hero personas at least.”

“Wow, Kara, that’s… big. We’ll need to be careful, but I can’t say it’s a bad idea. I’m so proud of you, Angel. And can I say, you are oh so cute when trying to be sneaky.” Then they were hugging. “It’ll be nice to work with you out in the open… finally! And for people to know how much you and your family have done for this city. I’ll talk to my Captain, and the Commissioner, before you make your reveal. We need them, and the mayor, firmly on our side.”
“Aye aye, Lieutenant!” Kara said with a big grin.

Then, a commotion interrupted, and drew their attention to the entrance of the restaurant. Shannon, with her cell phone up to her ear and Safiya at her side, had come dashing in causing a bit of an uproar.

“Kara!” the raven-haired doctor called out with a wave as the pair rushed up to the table, noticeably out of breath. Her normally cheerful friend seemed frightened, and as Kara stood to greet her she immediately wrapped her trembling arms around the Kryptonian’s waist.

Something was definitely wrong.

Shannon stood ramrod straight beside her worried fiancée in full CIA officer command mode, a comforting hand on one of Safiya’s shoulders. She abruptly ended her conversation with whoever she’d been talking to on her secure cell with a sharp “Then find out!”, before leveling her gaze at the startled bartender… And, in a tone that did not invite challenge, barked, “Turn your monitors to Channel 3, and crank up the volume. Now!”

Kara swiveled to see what was going on up on the ring of giant flat screen TVs over the bar and stared in disbelief. On every screen, the local CatCo news announcer was talking, and the ticker at the bottom of the screen was emblazoned with the words ‘Flight 237 Engine Trouble’.

As the sound came up and people in the restaurant were shushing each other, and she could hear him saying, “If you’re just joining us, shortly after takeoff, National City Airlines Flight 237 bound for Geneva began experiencing some loss of altitude. The pilot appears to be circling the city after apparent engine failure, and there are initial reports of fire coming from one of the engines. Again, Flight…”

Kara was on her feet, gently steadying Safiya. “Flight 237? Did he say engine failure? Fire?! Oh, Rao… Alex!”

All of the oxygen had left her lungs leaving her dizzy.

Shannon gave her a deadly serious look, and spoke quietly, “Listen to me, Kara. My source at Homeland just told me that their sensors detected a signal from the National City docks, followed by a detonation on one of the plane’s wings at the same time the 747 lost one of its four engines. This is terrorism, not a mechanical problem, but we’re keeping that out of the news. Teams are already at the source, but whoever it was is gone. Aren’t you talking to Alex through your bond? What the hell is going on up there?”

Now beginning to panic, Kara hurled her thoughts to her bondmate. Alex! What’s happening? Are you okay?!

I’m fine but… there was an explosion, and we lost an engine… well, it’s kind of still on fire. The pilots are trying to get us back to the airport for an emergency landing, but the wing was damaged, and our maneuverability sucks, so they are circling to reduce our speed before we land. We’re losing altitude too fast, but I think we should make it.

Why didn’t you tell me! I found out watching the news!

I didn’t want to worry you. Kara, listen… The pilots are pros, ex-fighter pilots, and they’re doing everything right to get us home safe. What are you going to do? Fly up here and save us?

Kara blinked, her Vaena was protecting her. Rao, she was so brave.
You can’t! Think about it. Every eyeball, camera, and cell phone in the city are probably pointed up at this plane… everyone would see you! Look, I’m already trying to use my aura to help lift the plane a bit, and if worse comes to worse I’ll act, reveal myself if necessary, but you need to stay clear of this! Please, Kara, let the pilots do their jobs, and don’t do anything to risk yourself...

Suddenly, Alex’s thoughts were cut off as a new blast rippled through their bond.

Alex!! Kara gasped as she pressed her fingers to her pounding temples, and whipped her head around to stare up at the restaurant’s high ceiling. Using her X-Ray vision, she pierced the tons of steel and concrete above, and the skyscrapers around her searching for her bondmate.

Up above, she could see Flight 237, at 8,980 feet... and falling. The damaged plane had just lost another engine in a violent eruption of flames!

Alex! Talk to me! Alex!

Through their deep connection Kara joined her bondmate as she shrewdly used her powers to inconspicuously move within the cabin to help those around her, securing and consoling a terrified child only a couple years younger than Ryah who’s belt had released, assisting a flight attendant who’d been knocked unconscious, and helping an older woman who was having trouble reaching her oxygen mask.

I’m okay Kara. Just stay calm.

Stay calm? Stay calm!? Seriously?! No, I can’t just sit here and do… do nothing while you fall out of the sky! Alex, come on!

What’s going on? Shah broke in; she’d been in Boston the last three days attending a lecture series about life on exoplanets. I just saw the news, and am on my way… ETA, twelve minutes.

Shah, thank Rao! Kara already had a plan forming in her mind and knew what she needed to do, regardless of what Alex was saying. I need you here in six, and I don’t care whose doors you have to rattle to do it.

Six minutes it is then. Shah responded a hint of awe and deep respect in her voice.

Kara, no! Alex was pleading.

Sorry, Vaena, we’re not abandoning you just to keep Archangel’s secret.

Kara then reached out to their niece, pulling her into their conversation. Ada! Please fill your mother in on all the details we have on Alex’s flight, and I need specs for that plane ASAP… stress points, tolerances, everything! And I need it all yesterday.

Yes, ma’am. Navigator responded, sending a high-speed burst of Kryptonian data to Shah almost immediately after, and then Kara.

“Archangel, this is USS Zumwalt. Navigator’s given us the skinny, and we are now tracking. How can we assist?” It was Jessica, breaking in utilizing a handshake from the ship’s secure quantum communications network Ada had created; her voice filled with concern.

“Jess! Thank Rao! Yeah, I need you and Shannon to run interference with the locals, military, the FAA, NTSB, basically whoever could get in my way. I don’t care how, but keep my skies clear. The last thing I need is a well-intentioned cowboy, or some trigger happy Delta Sierra, trying to shoot Archangel… um, me! out of the sky.”
“But… that means I’ll need to open up and broadcast your transponder. Every ship in the fleet with the right clearance will know your callsign after that…”

Kara took a deep breath, and said, “Do it. It’s about time they met me, officially, anyway. We’re all on the same team, right?”

“Yes, ma’am. Consider it done.” Kara knew Jess was smiling as she responded.

“Gotta go. Love you, Jess.”

“Love you too, mi diosa. Now, go save Flame. Navigator and I will handle the comms. All of us here are praying for you ma’am, including your Admiral. El mayarah!”

“El mayarah,” Kara whispered back, as she slid her iPhone and clutch onto the table next to her, quickly removed her glasses, and turned to hand them to a waiting Devi, who already had her hand out.

The blonde wasn’t even able to open her mouth before her friend simply said, “I know the drill. I’ll look after your stuff. Go, save the girl, and that plane. We can celebrate my birthday later.”

“What about your battle suit?” Shannon asked, giving Kara’s flimsy, dark blue long-sleeved blouse and black skinny jeans combination a dubious once over before suspiciously eyeing the crowd to make sure no one was listening.

Thankfully, all eyes seemed to be on the monitors above.

“No time,” Kara said, which wasn’t true, at all.

She had several sets of her D.E.O.-issued armor stashed all over the place… some at the government agency’s secret desert facility, others at her and Alex’s loft, one at Shah’s, the moon, two in Paris, one at the Fortress, and a spare at the Midvale house. Two of those options would be less than a minute detour, but the fact was, she didn’t want to wear the armor.

Kara had already decided that her first public appearance shouldn’t be as some dark, faceless, intimidating warrior… and cloaked in any version of her current battle suit that’s exactly how she’d appear.

Everything was happening too fast! Her Kryptonian battle armor was supposed to be finished by now… but it wasn’t, and trouble had found them once again.

She took a deep breath and focused. The lives of over 387 passengers and crew hung in the balance, and while Alex would most likely survive any crash, her team and all the people around her wouldn’t. Her brave bondmate would act to save them long before letting that happened… regardless of the consequences, just as she, Shah, or any of them would.

Alex’s distinguished career and their lives as they knew them would be over.

Kara was moving.

Before running out of the restaurant she paused to speed talk at Shannon, “I’ll try and get the plane back to the tarmac, Ada’s looking for a suitable landing zone right now. Work with Jess. I need recovery teams ready at the airport, and the harbor, in case I fail. Worst case scenario, I’ll need to drop the plane in the water.”

“On it.” The veteran CIA Director called out, already making a call to get the ball rolling. As Kara
disappeared out the front door, she ran headlong through a large crowd gathered there, gazing up and pointing their phones to the sky at Flight 237.

The wounded plane was trailing fire as it banked low over the city.

*I’m coming, Alex.*

Kara could feel her bondmate’s sigh of surrender, and the warmth that connected their hearts through their bond.

*Well, since I can’t seem to stop you… you better hurry.*

*Try and stop me.*

*I did! You idiot… love you.*

*Love you more, Vaena.*

As the darkness of the alley ahead embraced her, Kara leaped up into the air, and with a burst of super speed, exploded into the night sky over the awestruck heads of the gathered crowds below.

June 23rd – Year Nine

*CatCo Eye in the Sky #3 - Hovering high over National City*

*1859 Hours UTC -8, Thursday evening, U.S. Pacific Coast Time*

*Eye in the Sky reporter, Jerry Doyle’s POV*

“Yes Carol, we can see trails of fire coming from two of the 747-8’s four massive engines, one over each wing.” Jerry Doyle, the reporter in the pilot’s seat of CatCo Eye in the Sky #3 was speaking to the news crew at the Channel 3 studio over his headset. The conversation audio and live video of Flight 237 was being broadcast and re-broadcast not only to all of National City but to the world.

As he watched the aircraft’s struggle, he reached out to lovingly touch the photo of his family he kept wedged in his console. The dog-eared image of his amazing wife Julia, and their two miracle girls, seven-year-old twin sisters Laura and Astrid, was a constant reminder of the love he had in his life, and just how lucky he was.

It was only two weeks shy of the eighth anniversary of the San Gabriel Bridge collapse, the day he’d nearly lost them all. The fact that disaster was repeating itself so close to that day was chilling.

*Dammit! Hasn’t National City seen enough tragedy to last a lifetime?*

“Can you get any closer?” Kate’s urgent request crackled over his headset, jolting him out of his reverie. The brave camerawoman was hanging by a tether out the side of the agile black Bell 429 GlobalRanger, handling the high-tech video gear like a side-gunner. Her oversized goggles and high-resolution lenses were all trained directly on the seemingly-doomed aircraft’s fiery descent.

“On it.” He responded, smoothly angling the agile helo for an even better view. Jerry tried to focus
on keeping the aircraft steady, and not on the families of all the people with loved ones on the burning plane.

Carol, the lead anchor back at the studio, broke in to ask the reporter the question he was certain the millions of viewers were probably asking themselves. “Jerry, as a veteran pilot yourself, in your assessment is it possible for that aircraft to land with only half its engines?”

The ex-Navy helo driver reached up and rubbed his close-cropped slightly salt and pepper beard. The forty-two-year-old had been flying *something*, crop-dusters, helicopters, small planes since he was a teenager, and until he retired from the U.S. Navy four years ago as a Lt. Commander, had been launching off the decks of carriers for most of his career… but never 747s, and he had to take a moment to carefully consider his answer.

“Is it possible? Sure, but… honestly? The odds are against them. They’re on fire, fuel heavy, and have already lost too much altitude; the odds… wait, wait a minute… do you see that?” A streak of movement burst up from the city skyline, and a small, swift figure was now soaring through the air, trailing the plane.

Kate adjusted her goggles as she seamlessly tracked the incoming object with her cameras. “I see it, Jerry! It looks like… like… hold on; focusing… there you are my pretty… what are you? Holy crap! It’s a flying person! A… a woman!” At that moment, the dark figure, long blonde hair streaming behind her, came into crystal-clear view… and everyone in the newsroom was stunned into momentary silence as she accelerated like a missile on approach to the plummeting aircraft’s towering thirty-foot high tail.

“Who is she?” That and a tumult of other questions echoed over the airwaves as chaos reigned over the comms… but Jerry wasn’t listening. He’d switched on the autopilot, told the AI to ‘keep ‘er steady’, and raised his binoculars.

Laser-focused on the mysterious woman he watched as she extended an arm… and appeared to be reaching, desperately, for the plane. As she came within a hundred feet, another violent explosion unexpectedly tore through the damaged starboard engine, and a ball of fire erupted from inside, sending a shower of huge metal shards, blades, debris, and flames back to engulf her!

She hastily shielded her face with her forearms before she was engulfed by smoke and fire, and disappeared from view! Jerry almost stopped breathing as a shower of burning wreckage fell towards the city below. But, only seconds later, a swift barrage of multiple beams of light, like lasers, erupted from within the flames to incinerate all the larger chunks of the deadly debris. Instead of death from above, only glowing ash remained, fluttering harmlessly like blackened snow over National City.

*My God… she did that.*

A pall fell over everyone watching, and the comms were dead silent until the brave woman reappeared, and Jerry’s headset erupted in cheers. It was then that the reporter glanced over at his bank of small monitors in the cockpit and astutely noticed that in the video feed, her features were blurred… as if they were somehow being electronically obscured. But after quickly checking through his binoculars there was no distortion… he could clearly see the look of anguish and determination on her beautiful face.

He suddenly experienced an intense sense of *déjà vu*. There was something extremely familiar about her as if Jerry should know exactly who she was. And then it hit him like a truck… she was Julia’s angel!! The woman his wife swore saved her on the bridge eight years ago, the one she’d been obsessed with drawing and painting ever since!
Hell’s bells! I’m an idiot! I never really believed her… thought she was just Julia’s coping mechanism… Jerry blinked in disbelief, looked away, and then looked again. Yup, it was her, the angel was still there, looking almost exactly the same as before and chasing the plane.

Saving the day once again…

She surged forward, coming up under a drooping wing to grab hold. He could hardly believe it when she actually began providing lift to the damaged aircraft! In seconds, she’d managed not only to gently level out the massive plane but to also reduce the velocity of its descent.

Unfortunately, it was still losing altitude... just not as fast.

At that moment, two U.S. Navy F/A-18F Super Hornets screamed in from over the Pacific, banked tight and fast over the city, and flew up from behind to parallel the 747 on either side.

Showoffs.

Jerry took the stick back and maneuvered the aircraft closer. He was on the edge of his seat trying to anticipate the pilots’ next move, but then the fighters did something both startling, and telling…

As the Hornets soared in for an observation pass, both planes slowed to match Flight 237’s velocity, and rocked their wings in the direction of the damaged aircraft… or more precisely, the flying woman, as if acknowledging her with deference.

They know her! Holy crap!

He switched back to autopilot and scrambled with the controls of the comms panel; he needed to hear if they were talking… to her.

Jerry had never been a fighter jock, but he knew how to listen in to flight chatter… in fact, it was one of his hobbies. He thanked the stars, and Cat Grant, that the avionics and communications systems on the immaculate Bell 429 he was flying were top of the line. All he had to do was quickly verbally input the variable range of frequencies the two F/A-18s were most likely using, and the computer began scanning for activity.

Jerry whispered a quick prayer that the USS George Washington (CVN-73), the carrier the planes from the Carrier Air Wing were attached to, hadn’t yet implemented the new-fangled secure ‘quantum’ network the Navy had begun slowly rolling out not long before Jerry retired.

Please work… please work…

It took a few seconds, but among the static, he suddenly heard a man’s voice…

………………………

“…nd the whole damn CSG’s praying for ya, ma’am. It’s so good to see you again, and finally have the chance to tell you how much of an honor it was getting to be your wingman for five whole minutes.”

“Thanks. It’s good to see… you too, SilverFox… been a while since Mogadishu, but I will never forget… your bravery... using your plane to intercept those missiles. Right now, I’ll take all… the help…. and prayers I can get. I’ll do my best… to not disappoint.” The woman’s voice was strained, but determined.
"The safe money’s always on you, Archangel. Good luck, ma’am."

The deep respect in the officer’s voice told Jerry a lot, including the tremendous faith he had in her. He now also knew her name, or at least her callsign.

Archangel.

Seconds later, the sleek fighters banked sharply, and rolled to a heading back out to sea as the pilot’s final communication rang out, “Mother, this is Eagle 1 recon, we are inbound to roost, climbing to two thousand level.”

Just then, gasps suddenly erupted across the comms. Video had caught a sudden burst of what appeared to be a freezing cone of air, like a snowstorm, coming from the woman, Archangel, directly at the fiery starboard engine.

She was blowing the snowstorm out of her own lungs! Out of her mouth!

The majority of the flames were quickly smothered by her suffocating blizzard but deep inside its damaged interior, the machinery kept smoldering. No matter how hard she tried, the inferno kept threatening to reignite in earnest as more oxygen rushed through it. Jerry saw the strikingly beautiful woman scowl in frustration, but then calmly turned her head in the other direction and repeated the incredible feat on the still-flaming port engine.

He’d only seen one other being on the planet do such a thing, and it suddenly struck him how similar the powers this woman was displaying were to his.

In the next moment, though, none of that mattered.

She’d let go of the wing, glided back a few feet, and then gracefully swooped forward under the fuselage of the plane, scanning its massive belly as if looking for something. He thought he knew exactly what it was, the same thing he’d be thinking of if he could fly and had super strength.

A sweet spot, the plane’s perfect balance point. He waited, holding his breath as he watched her.

Seconds later a smile so bright Jerry decided he could have seen it from space, lit up Archangel’s face, and she swiftly flew up to dig her fingers into the metal skin of the aircraft like it was putty, gripping its solid frame underneath as it drew ever closer to the architectural treasure that was the Otto Binder Bridge in National City’s harbor below.

"Holy…” He said under his breath.

“What is it, Jerry?” Catco’s news anchor called back, her voice dreamy… as if she too was entranced by what they were seeing.

“She…” There was no way he was calling the hero by her Archangel callsign publicly. Her very existence and connection to the U.S. Navy would certainly be intel classified way above his pay grade. There was no way he needed the kind of trouble revealing that kind of secret would bring. Besides, he just… wouldn’t. It would be wrong.

“She’s actually lifting the plane… and slowing their descent. Carol… Listen, what she’s doing? It… it shouldn’t be possible! Nearly fully loaded and fueled for a transatlantic flight, that 747 has to
weigh…ah, something well north of six, maybe seven hundred thousand pounds, that’s over 300 tons, and I’m being conservative! Wait… look at that!”

Off in the distance in his binoculars, Jerry could see the brave woman’s face as she strained, and the huge plane’s nose rose higher as her truly Herculean efforts began countering the aircraft’s near free-fall state… turning Flight 237’s plummet into more of a glide. The 747’s nearly seventy-foot long body straightened, and its velocity slowed as it coasted to a lower altitude.

*Incredible!*

But his brief elation turned to anguish as he spied the spotlight covered nearly ten-story bridge coming up way too fast. It appeared that despite her valiant efforts, even this woman’s astonishing strength and abilities weren’t going to be enough to avoid another bridge disaster… like eight years ago.

“They’re going to crash.” His tone was bleak as he spoke to the now millions of worldwide viewers glued to the action.

Then, Archangel surprised him yet again.

After a momentary look of panic, she redoubled her efforts, and screaming with exertion, the golden-haired goddess holding up the hulking aircraft slowly began to tilt its horizon! The 747’s wings ended up completely perpendicular to the water, just in time for the plane to fit flying sideways through the main towers of the jammed bridge. People were standing on their cars, recording the action, running, and watching in awe as Flight 237 screamed towards them.

“Come on, come on…” Jerry chanted, along with everyone else watching the drama unfold… as if by their collective sheer will they could all somehow help the hero save the plane.

Then, time seemed to slow, and a shower of sparks rose up a hundred feet from the surface of the structure’s roadway, where the tip of the port wing tore across the eight lanes of solar receptors buried in concrete and steel. Miraculously, none of the unmoving vehicles were struck as the plane squeaked through the narrow gap, leveling back out horizontal on the ocean side of the bridge, two hundred feet over the placid waves of the harbor.

Of course, at that moment, the starboard engine chose to explode in flames once again.

What he saw next was hard to believe.

The woman guided the aircraft towards the water, but instead of crashing, or assisting with a controlled landing, she purposely (and very delicately) dipped the fiery wings down into the harbor, one at a time, like a seesaw… trailing dramatic sprays of steaming water behind. Jerry had no explanation for why the wings didn’t just sheer right off, or the plane wasn’t cartwheeling into the bay… there was none.

The fires were out completely when the 747 suddenly began to climb upward at a steep, forty-five-degree angle trailing a cascade of rain behind it.

The woman now looked completely focused, and in control.

“She’s taking them up!” He yelled into his mic.

Carol’s voice broke over his headset. “Jerry! We’re getting reports of thunder or sonic boom to the east, and a citywide blackout coming your way! National City’s going dark!” And as he turned to gaze out the side of the helo, he saw it… a cascade of darkness moving in their direction like a vast
tidal wave enveloping the horizon, and converging on the harbor.

It was like the end of the world…

He gasped! At its leading edge, he could make out the form of a person, another flying woman, but this one wrapped in midnight.

The next few seconds were utter chaos as the entire city went completely pitch-black, and by the time the lights began to flicker back into existence Flight 237 and the flying woman was just… gone. The darkness had retreated as quickly as it had appeared, and the harbor became still.

“What happened to the plane?” Was the question he, and everyone in National City and the world who was watching, was asking…

Whatever had just occurred, Jerry knew one thing for certain. In his bones… whoever the young woman was, she was a hero he owed his family’s life and his happiness too, and she was going to keep the aircraft and the people in it safe.

As he angled the helicopter to the bridge for Carol to get some good sweeping shots and close-ups of the damage to the structure, his thoughts raced, trying to process everything that had just happened and his revelation.

“Who are you, Archangel?” He whispered under his breath. And what the heck am I going to tell Julia when I get home? I better buy flowers; I think I owe her the biggest apology in the history of our marriage.

…………………

Interlude - A few minutes earlier

Steven Collier’s condo - National City

1851 Hours UTC -8, Thursday evening, U.S. Pacific Coast Time

From his trendy Channing Hill condo’s wide balcony, Steven Colliers had a bird’s eye view of the spectacular horror show that was Flight 237 as it careened like a slow-moving meteor across National City’s dark skyline. The seemingly doomed aircraft flickered behind and then between buildings like a tragic shadow play… that everyone was watching.

The slender man was hopping across the hardwood floor, tugging up his pants to finish getting dressed and to the harbor when his cell phone rang out with an unknown ringtone. Ella Fitzgerald’s Someone to Watch Over Me? Seriously? He grinned; it could only be one person…

He answered as he was slipping on his socks. “Colliers! Talk to me, sister.”

Ada’s sweet voice greeted him, but her tone and speed of delivery clearly communicated urgency. “Get to the airport, right now. Runway number 20A, it’s currently closed for expansion work.”

“I don’t understand, that plane’s not landing, Ada; it’s coming down… in the water. And every reporter in National City is at the harbor, why does Starlight want me all the way across town when that happens? Did you start working for The Planet while I wasn’t looking or something?”
He was joking… kind of.

“I don’t have time to explain, Steven, just trust me. While this situation was unexpected, the fact that you’ll be the only media at the airport is quite intentional.” His big screen TV suddenly switched on by itself (well, Ada tuned it on with her godlike AI powers) and he was shocked by what was running on Channel 3.

It was Kara, or a grainy figure of a flying woman who he was certain was Kara, sans any disguise, flying behind the massive 747.

Kara was chasing the jet. Well, Hades… of course she was… his Angel would never allow those people to die if she could help it.

“Runway 20A is where she’s going to put the plane down if she can. It’s the safest place. No one is at the site yet, but Homeland Security, the D.E.O., Air Rescue, and emergency services will soon be en route after I notify them. I’m giving you a head start.”

He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “But she’s not wearing her…”

“Look, like I said, Kara didn’t plan for this, but it’s definitely happening… and it’s important to her that CatCo cover it… that you cover it… cover her. My aunt knows you’ll handle her forced coming out with the delicacy she deserves. Oh, she also wants you to read in and share the byline with her friend Morganna Levy, that woman has been chasing Archangel as long as Winn, and be sure to bring a photographer. Kara asked for Jimmy Olsen, she said something about a ‘two for two’? I have no idea what that means.”

“I understand.” The Tribune’s Editor-In-Chief chuckled; still trying to absorb everything she’d had just told him. “He was the one who took the first clean shot of her cousin; it’s what made ‘Jimmy Olsen’ a household name. I’m on it! And… thanks, Ada, you know I trust you implicitly.”

“Kiss-up… not that I’m complaining. Good luck, my old friend.” She said and then disconnected.

Colliers’ thoughts were roiling; Kara was exposing herself, to the world, and needed his help.

He had to get ahead of the situation and fast.

A little while later…

National City International Airport – Closed runway #20A

1919 Hours UTC -8, Thursday evening, U.S. Pacific Coast Time

“So, why are we here again?” The tall, broad-shouldered photographer asked the jittery well-dressed man standing next to him in the shadows of a huge aircraft hangar. The dark expanse of the deserted runway stretched before them, and not a soul was in sight. Their only company was the thunderous roar of a 737 taking off overhead.

Truthfully, the whole setting was kind of spooky… not that Jimmy would ever admit that the place gave him the heebie-jeebies.
“Dammit, Olsen, ask me that one more time and I’m firing you.” Colliers huffed with annoyance. “Like I already explained, just watch the skies and be ready, Archangel should be arriving any minute with Flight 237. And remember, we want an epic shot, something… majestic. It’s the least she deserves. Shouldn’t you, of all people, be used to this sort of thing by now, you know, being Superman’s sidekick?”

Jimmy frowned, and gritted between his clenched teeth, “I… am… not… his sidekick.”

“Whatever. Just be ready with that magic camera of yours.” The Trib’s Editor-In-Chief waved his hand dismissively as he looked up to the skies with the unbridled eagerness of a kid at Christmastime.

The angry photographer almost fired back a biting response but thought better of continuing a verbal sparring match with his new boss. Not only was Steven Colliers a living legend but, according to Clark, was also extremely close with his younger cousin… like Best Man at her wedding close! How that was even possible with the veteran newsman’s less than warm and fuzzy personality, he had no idea.

Jimmy had only met Kara earlier that day, but had been bowled over by the amazing, sweet, funny woman, and was still feeling the warmth of the encounter. Was it completely terrible of him to be bummed by the fact that she was married?

Okay, back to his boss dragging him out to the creepy airfield…

Colliers had claimed that he had an ‘ironclad’ source that told him Archangel would be bringing the plane there. A ‘source’ my ass! While Jimmy had never heard of an Archangel before… if she was the one who rescued Flight 237 in midair, as Colliers claimed, he had a good idea who the ‘super’ woman really was. And, if it was Kara, she had to be his boss’ source, meaning two things: Colliers knew her and her secret, and Clark had definitely not prepared him for how powerful she’d already become.

When Jimmy realized he was unconsciously fidgeting with his watch, the one with the secret compartment to call The Man of Steel, he pulled his hand away like it was on fire.

_Dammit! Old habits._

Next to him, Colliers’ phone dinged, and as the newsman glanced down at his device a grin spread across his face. “Thank you, Ada.” He whispered under his breath, and at that moment all his pent-up tension seemed to dissipate.

_Hmmm, Ada who?_

Still smiling, he glanced over at Jimmy and said, “Look up, Mr. Olsen. Trust me, look… up… the world is about to change.”

And then, as if on cue, the blue runway lights began flickering to life, and the sight that greeted the award-winning photographer’s eyes above them was one he, and later millions, would never forget.

Drifting down out of the dark star-filled sky was the silhouette of a massive Boeing 747, held aloft by a graceful blonde angel the way a server might simply carry a platter or tray, in only one hand. The beautiful woman’s other arm was extended delicately out at her side, poised like a ballerina’s for balance as she slowly descended toward the deserted runway.

Clark’s old photos of his cousin definitely had not done Kara Danvers justice. Even covered in soot,
she was glorious! “Oh… my… God…” The words came out of Jimmy like a whispered prayer.

After he started breathing again, the photographer dropped to one knee and was already taking pictures.

His camera clicked endlessly… Capturing every moment as the beautiful, flying immortal descended to touch down with such grace, self-assurance, and gentleness, that had he not captured the moments on film, it would have been easy to believe that what he witnessed that night had only been a dream.

June 24th, Year Nine

Kara & Alex’s loft – National City

Much later that night, turning to early the next morning…

It was after 0312, and nearly everyone had finally left the loft, including Julia Doyle, whom Myka had found nervously waiting for Kara at her door when she’d first arrived earlier that evening (she’d been worried after seeing Archangel on TV). Eliza and Naomi had crashed in the guest room cuddled up together, Myka was asleep in Shah’s room, while Kara had just laid a comforter over after their exhausted Persian bondmate, who’d had fallen asleep on one of the living room couches.

“Sleep well, aziz-am. You’ve earned it.” Kara whispered, borrowing Alex’s term of endearment as she leaned down and gently kissed the top of her raven-haired head. Like the goddess Nyx herself, Shah and her darkness had descended upon National City just when Kara needed her most. Could I love her any more? What did I ever do to deserve her?

Once she and Alex finally made it back home after helping the passengers and enduring agonizingly-long D.E.O. and Homeland Security debriefings, most of their extended family had been waiting to ambush them. An impromptu celebration for both Kara/Archangel’s ‘coming out’ by saving the plane (and Alex) and Devi’s birthday had ensued… and went on until the wee hours.

Empty Champagne and wine bottles, Chinese take-out containers, and stacks of pizza boxes littered the place.

Alex was putting glasses and plates in the dishwasher as Kara came up to hug her from behind, and lay her weary head on her shoulder. Rao, her bondmate felt so soft against her... so perfect. I almost lost her…

“I can’t believe today happened,” Kara said, her voice shaky.

“I know, right? I’m so glad Ryah was at Marjorie’s for her sleepover with the twins.” Alex turned around in Kara’s arms and pulled her in close. “She’ll be mad as an Arylan Cat that she missed seeing her moms on the news, but it’ll give us the chance to talk to her about everything that happened before she sees all the coverage replayed, over, and over, and…”

“What have I done, Alex? I’ve messed everything up, haven’t I?” Kara’s unexpected outburst of regret and her tiny sob nearly broke Alex’s heart.

“No, Kara, no.” Alex held her wife’s arms, and though her Kryptonian attempted to glance away, she leaned in for a long soft kiss, drawing Kara’s full attention once again. “You exposed yourself, yes, to save me, and hundreds of innocent people who would have all died if not for you… all
collateral damage, thanks to the bombs planted on that plane by Non’s soldiers to kill me and my team. Kara, sixty of the passengers were kids, and twelve were infants… Hell no you didn’t mess up, even with me telling you to stop! I was wrong by the way, obviously.”

The Kryptonian snorted through the tears she was shedding and smiled at Alex’s self-depreciating comment.

“The genie’s out of the bottle now, but your aura’s veil made certain that none of the photos or video of you are clear enough to tell it’s you, only a tall blonde woman dressed in black and blue. And thanks to Colliers, what everyone will see in the morning are the amazing shots that Jimmy Olsen took of the Angel at the Airfield, not Kara Danvers.

“Can you take back what you did? No. Does it terrify me that your insane uncle will most likely figure out that there’s another Kryptonian alive on Earth, and eventually that it’s you? Yes, that scares the crap out of me. Would I have preferred the luxury of talking to you about coming out to the world before you did? Sure, but you made the right call at the right time, just like Shah and I trained you, just like a disciplined D.E.O. Agent would. You done good, Kara. Now we just need to get Winn up to speed and your battle armor operational. We’ll deal with what comes next one day at a time.”

Kara perked up and melted into Alex as her attentive wife wiped the wetness from her cheeks with her sleeve and kissed them repeatedly afterward. Kara was smiling by the time her smooch assault concluded. “Alex. I’m sorry for not talking to you about what I was feeling sooner, and I swear I would have if I hadn’t been forced to…”

“Shhh.” She pressed a finger gently up to Kara’s lips. “I know my love, I believe you. Please stop apologizing for doing the right thing. You deserve a thank you, a thousand, thousand thank you’s! Not to be made to feel like you’ve done something wrong, or to be sad! I hate it when you’re sad…

“Kara, listen to me. The world has finally seen a glimpse of the hero you are, but you’ve been my hero since the day I first met you, nooré cheshm-am, and always will be… no planes required.”

And then they were kissing again, and the stack of legal documents and non-disclosure forms J’onn had left for Kara to have Winn sign were scattered all over the kitchen floor. Before Alex could use her super speed to collect them up, Kara waved her hand dismissively at the mess, her eyes glowing a sexy, smoldering blue as she purred, “That can wait ‘til morning. Take me to bed… now.”

No further encouragement was needed as Alex scooped her bondmate up with flames flickering around them, and disappeared with her beautiful lover into their bedroom.

……………………

June 24th, Year Nine

CatCo Worldwide Media corporate offices – National City

0735 Hours UTC -8, Friday morning, U.S. Pacific Coast Time

Winn had barely slept a wink the night before.

Like everyone else in the city, and possibly the whole country, he’d been glued to the Internet and all
of his devices watching and re-watching the video of the incredible flying woman who saved Flight 237. Who was she? A Meta? An Angel? A beautiful dream?

It was too soon to know for sure.

There were hundreds of theories on Reddit, blogs, social media, and the deep net, some of them his... but Winn had his own deeper suspicions, that the blonde hero had to be the elusive Archangel... the ghost he’d been chasing for years. National City’s very own urban legend and Guardian Angel!

But, if she were Archangel, why break her established M.O. and appear out in the open, without any disguise? Before, in literally hundreds of reported unofficial incidents of anonymous heroism and unexplainable small miracles (people plucked from mid-air while falling, cars that should have crashed but didn’t, pedestrians whisked from danger in a blink of an eye only to end up safe and sound a block away, etc.) over the past several years he was certain that she’d worked behind the scenes, or shrouded in shadow, in a stealthy battle suit of some kind... it was her shtick, her ‘thing’.

But not this time.

Last night she was exposed, and her cover of darkness had come late in the game. Why?

Had someone important to her been on that plane to force her hand early? Okay, maybe he was overthinking it, being too cynical, and she just didn’t have time to change. Regardless, Winn had at least solidified one very important thing about her: whoever this powerful woman was, she was one of the good guys.

She’d risked a lot last night, including her identity, to save that plane and all those people, including Kara's sister... his friend. I owe you.

He’d tried to call Miyuki to talk about it, but her cell kept going to voicemail. At least he’d see her later that night; he’d made reservations for them at Volterra, and he was still pinching himself in disbelief that they were actually dating (even if it was on the down-low, for the time being). She was literally one of the smartest, prettiest, secretly geeky, amazing people he’d ever met. The passionate crusader for justice even laughed at his stupid jokes and didn’t think his action figure collection was silly.

What awesome version of reality had he fallen into?

Winn had been lost in thought, staring at the stunning, iconic photos of the hero that CatCo’s newest star photojournalist had captured at the deserted airfield. Archangel, if that’s who the hero was, was so poised, and graceful... and like a pro, her face was always turned or partially hidden in the shadows.

That got him thinking, and after spending over an hour that morning scouring the Internet for every cell phone images and video available from the night before, he was shocked to find that in every single instance, other than Jimmy Olsen’s photos, the hero’s face was distorted, and blurry... as if she had the power to...

Oh, snap! Maybe she did!

A crazy idea sprung into Winn’s mind, and after taking a quick sip of lukewarm coffee (gah!), he went to work to see if there was a way to test his theory. He just needed time to hack and retask NASA’s nearest GeoStat satellite...

“Earth to Winn.” Kara’s soft voice jarred him from the strings of code he was manipulating on his
multiple screens. His friend and co-worker was standing right next to his desk with Ms. Grant’s morning latte in her hand, and he hadn’t even noticed her.

That was a first.

“Whoa! You caught me zoning.” He quickly tried to distract Kara from his monitors, where he was doing some blatantly illegal things. The stealthy woman wasn’t just hotter than a runway model, she was far more observant, and so much smarter than anyone knew. “Morning, Danvers.” He smiled. God, she really was beautiful… he was still astounded by her every day.

Kara beamed a smile at him, and then glanced up with interest at the vast row of monitors replaying the video of the plane from the night before. Channel 3’s live newscast was streaming in the open plan newsroom, and the anchor was talking:

“Our top story, the only story anyone's talking about. Who is the mysterious flying woman who saved the plane? Despite extensive efforts, no one has been able to identify who, or rather, what she is, though today’s Tribune has some incredible images of the hero that some are now calling, National City’s Guardian Angel. Could this really be her?”

“So, pretty cool, huh? A plane-saving lady?” Kara asked nervously, with a flush in her cheeks.

Winn lit up with a smile, “Well, yeah, totally impressive. I give her big props, but honestly…” His voice dropped to a whisper, “I was a little disappointed.”

Kara was suddenly looked crestfallen… and began fidgeting with her glasses. “D… disappointed? Why?”

He sighed, “Look at her.” He gestured helplessly with both hands flailing in the direction of his fourth monitor, where a still, iconic image of Kara as she landed at the airport was displayed in crisp high-resolution. “She’s so beautiful! So powerful! I mean, look at her posture! Her stance, even how she walks… and with that light… radiating like a halo behind her… yowza! She’s like the very definition of grace. And that one toe touchdown, the plane held in one hand? Pure perfection! Our hero is no novice… so…”

“So?” Kara’s voice raised in… annoyance? Is she mad at me?

“So,” He continued, though he was still perplexed by her reaction. “Why the rookie mistake?”

When Kara tilted her head, and furrowed her adorable brow in complete confusion he continued, “No suit!” He said as if that explained everything, and stared at her dumbfounded. “No matter how awesome she is, how is the world going to take her seriously without a suit? I mean, Superman has a pretty amazing tailor if I do say so. My God, the ways I could dress her…”

“Okay Winn, Winn, hello! I get it now… calm down.” Kara was now chuckling, gazing at him with wonder in her stunning blue eyes. She paused to glance away momentarily, as if considering something important, and then said, “Look, can we talk? I have something I need to…” but was cut off by a bellow from Ms. Grant’s office.

“Kiera! Senior staff meeting, now! My office. Chop chop!”

“Ugh, sorry, I’ll be back.” Kara straightened her sweater and glasses, glanced down at Ms. Grant’s latte as if studying it for a moment, and then headed off to gather the troops with the steaming cup. Wait, how did it…?”
As Winn sat back down to work, still perplexed, he observed out of the corner of his eye as the meeting inside Cat’s fishbowl progressed. The CEO seemed quite pleased, as she should have been; the Trib’s exclusive photos and story, and CatCo’s videos of the flying hero were a worldwide sensation. She spoke for some time… followed by a great deal of discussion among her and her staff.

Eventually, Kara, looking a little bit frustrated (Winn could always tell) came out with Jimmy Olsen at her side. The pair were speaking in hushed tones together, and Winn immediately became protective.

_Does she know the new guy?_

When the overly handsome man with his too big smile and giant weightlifter arms said something to bring a hint of Kara’s sunny smile back, Winn bristled and glared. A moment later they separated, and she marched up to Winn’s colorful, action figure-covered desk with purpose.

“Hey, Kara. How’d it go?” He asked as nonchalantly as he could.

She exhaled, “Well, the good news is, not only is Ms. Grant’s happy that the Trib scooped everyone with those photos, including the Planet, but all of the layoffs have been put on hold.”

“Yay! Right?” Winn asked, at little confused his friend’s lack of joy.

“Yes! Absolutely… but then there’s the bad news. Not only is she going ballistic about getting a meeting with CatCo’s mystery investor, and suddenly made it my job to find her… um, I mean, whoever it is; but she wants an interview with m… the flying woman… by end of the day, Friday.” Kara looked a bit frantic, and distraught, like a kicked puppy.

Winn desperately wanted to hug her, but Jenny from HR was staring at them.

“Ouch. I can help track down the investor, I’m pretty good with traces, but your hero? I’m really sorry that got on your to-do list Kara. If she’s who I think she is, I’m pretty sure that she’s not going to be found unless she wants to be. My nemesis is darn good at keeping a low profile.”

“Right… your... ah, nemesis.” Kara seemed extra nervous, which was so unlike her at work. “Yeah, um, about that. I really need to talk to you… on the roof. Now.” Without waiting for his response, she stalked off in the direction of the stairwell, leaving him standing gaping… his head spinning.

“The roof?” He moaned out loud. Why did she have to pick the _one_ place at CatCo that terrified him?

Wait, it was twenty floors up… and Kara had taken the stairs? Whoa! Winn knew his friend was a fitness buff, with her perfect figure it made sense, but that was hard-core.

A few minutes later he was doing the unthinkable… Stepping off the elevator and out onto the windy expanse of CatCo Worldwide Media’s deserted rooftop, sixty-five stories up. It didn’t take long to spy Kara… who, for some unknown reason, was way up and out on the helipad, pacing.

Winn’s stomach was doing flip-flops, but he quickly reminded himself why he was there and steeled his nerves to go speak with her. “Kara? Hey, uh, just whatever you have to say, can you please make it quick? I’m not really into being this high up. I’m so scared of heights I even hate step-stools.” His hands were trembling.

She stopped moving and looked at him curiously, and then a sudden realization seemed to sink in, followed by concern. “I’m so sorry, Winn, I forgot you can’t do heights!” She then somehow did that thing she did where she just appeared in front of him… so quickly he wasn’t sure how she got
there from ten feet away.

She smiled and gently held his arms to steady him, and all at once he could breathe normally again.

“Thanks.” He said, still feeling the tingling from her exceedingly warm touch. *Woah!* She had some kind of magic. “So… what’s so secret that we had to meet all the way up here?”

Kara let go of him, started pacing again, and began talking… fast. “Okay, um, Winn, I'm going to tell you something about myself that only a few people in my life know.” She paused. “Can I trust you?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course.”

“Good. Um, I just… I’ve really wanted to share this with you for a long time, and I… right, how do I say this? Okay, there's something about me that I’ve had to hide from the world for most of my life… here. My adoptive parents, when I first came to this… to Midvale, wanted me to run from it… but thanks to Alex I never did, and last night, last night I embraced who I am, and I won’t stop, I can’t.”

He was dying to know what deep dark secret sweet Kara Danvers could possibly have. She was the kindest, most compassionate, and giving person he’d ever known, really fast, genius-level smart, and sometimes scary, but…

“You’re not going to tell me you’re a closet Nickleback fan or something? Because that would just be weird.”

“No, that’s not it.” She frowned at him, then burst out, “Winn, I'm… I'm her!” She sighed with exasperation when he stared at her quizzically. “The woman who saved the plane!”

He didn’t mean to start laughing, it just happened. “I’m sorry Kara, but is this a joke? Seriously, am I being punked?” He looked around for cameras or snickering co-workers.

She glared back at him, huffed, and then took off her glasses as she marched towards the edge of the building’s sheer drop off. “Kara, Kara! What are you doing? Hey! Get away from the ledge, you’re gonna get hurt. Stop!!” He screamed as she turned to smile, and then let herself fall right off the sixty-five-story structure, backward… plummeting off the roof in a free-fall.

“Kara! No!” Winn was running towards the edge, completely forgetting about his acrophobia, when his friend zoomed up into the air from below, somersaulted over his head, and landed on the helipad behind him. As he whipped around Kara had already put her glasses back on, was adjusting them, and looking at him with nervous anticipation, biting her lip.

He was almost hyperventilating. “Holy crap! You're… you're her! You're really her!”

“Yup. It’s me.” She nodded and giggled adorably. But in her next breath, with great seriousness added, “Winn, I need you.”

Four words he never thought he’d ever hear come out of her mouth. He almost passed out, but her next sentence reeled him in even deeper.

“Obi-Winn, you’re my only hope.”

He caught his breath and sized up Kara Danvers… his friend, the beautiful geek, and now flying hero. He’d never seen it… though he definitely did now.

She was the shadow he’d stalked for years, and she’d lied to him… why? He wanted to be angry but
was just too damn excited, and confused. “What could someone like me possibly do to help someone like you? Archangel.”

She blushed adorably. “About that… I’m sorry to have kept this from you for so long and will explain everything, I swear. But right now, I desperately need your design skills.”

Kara definitely had his full attention, “A suit?” He asked hopefully.

“A suit.” She confirmed with her extra-adorable scrunched up little smile, just as her phone began to buzz. “Shoot, I need to be in an editorial meeting for the next hour and a half. Let’s do lunch, my place, I’ll fill you in, and show you my sketches... okay? Winn? Winn! Stop waggling your eyebrows! That was so not a come on! I can smack you to the moon you know…”

He’d never thought of that. “Got it, sketches... and no smacking please. Especially if it means sending me anywhere high up.”

“Better. Now I won’t need to tattle on you with Miyuki.” She offered him a playful grin, and it was his turn to blush as she continued, “Meet back here at 11:45, I can fly us.”

“Ah, so you know about Miyuki and me? We hadn’t really officially told… ah, of course, you do.” He smiled and then began to panic as what she’d just said registered. “What did you mean by, f... fly us?”

She bumped her shoulder into his as they started their walk back and said, “Congrats on the awesome girlfriend, and yes, flying. Don’t worry I don’t drop people... often. Promise.”

“Not instilling confidence, Danvers.”

“Come on Winn! I’m Archangel, you’ll be safe with me.” She chuckled, and her laughter was like music. His knees literally became weak! “See you back here for lunch.” She waved and split off toward the rooftop stairwell access door.

“Wouldn’t miss it.” He said while picking his jaw up off the concrete as he watched the elegant creature he thought he knew so well move with more grace than he’d ever witnessed before in his life.

So this was the real Kara Danvers!

She glanced back at him once, grinned, and then seemed to just... shimmer and disappear, the door to the stairwell opening and closing seemingly on its own.

Winn was left standing in a giddy daze by the elevator, leaning on the button over and over absently... his mind already churning with the possibilities.

“A suit...” He said in an awed whisper to himself.

June 24th, Year Nine

Kara and Alex’s loft – National City

1435 hours UTC -8, Friday afternoon, U.S. Pacific Coast Time
The dark, scintillating material felt like thick silk in his hands, but the way it hummed at the edges of his thoughts as he touched it reminded him it was far more than that. Winn was slumped down over Kara’s massive drafting table at the loft, lying on his latest design for the alien hero’s suit, contemplating the too-infinite possibilities for the masterpiece he wanted to wrap her in.

He’d always wanted to dress Archangel (and Kara)... now he finally had his chance. Like the best of both worlds.

After meeting on CatCo’s roof as scheduled, Kara took him on the most amazing flight of his life. It had been exhilarating! Being with her actually gave him courage, and on the way, after some begging on his part, she did a couple of extra fly-overs above the city and broke the sound barrier with him out over the desert.

Holy crap, Kara was amazing!

She had all the powers of her cousin and then some! And was so much prettier... well, Winn had to admit, the Man of Steel was one handsome beast. Not that he’d ever had a shot with either of them when he was single.

They eventually made it to the tall, unlocked windows of her, Alex, and Shah’s loft, and after more apologies, ordering take-out, and having him sign a pile of Non-Disclosure Agreements, she’d given him a high-level rundown about her life growing up in Midvale, how she'd trained with Alex and Shah, teamed up with the U.S. Navy, became Archangel, about Shadow and Flame, Ada/Starlight, Selene, working with the CIA, NSA, ONI, and even the mysterious D.E.O.

Her story was more incredible than anything he’d imagined, and at times, heartbreaking. Kara’s entire world was destroyed, before her eyes; thank God, she had Alex, her cousin, friends, and family. Winn didn’t want to know how the sunny girl might have turned out if all she’d had after crashing was despair.

He did wonder how her Aunt Astra fit in (was she a Kryptonian too?) or how Miyuki (a human) had come to be adopted into their amazing clan but held off asking, for the moment.

During their conversation, as she was stuffing three pot stickers in her mouth like a hamster on steroids and almost comically swallowing, she said, “Oh, Winn, you’ll like this. I can control my aura.”

“What, like a new-agey color thing?” He asked confused.

“Pfft! You’re so funny. No, it’s more like energy, at a quantum level. Everyone else is better with the explaining. I just do. I use it for lots of things, like become invisible to radar, bend light, keep my features blurred to cameras, even create microenvironments inside the bubble... and hide things.” Her grin was blinding. “Like this.”

Kara became absolutely still for a moment, closed her eyes, and as she breathed out Winn felt a subtle tingle dance over his skin, and in his brain. He gasped, and was completely astonished as the loft began to change around him! There were more photos, everywhere, spaces, and shelves filled with mementos, even a door, as well as a hallway that wasn’t there a moment before!

“Holy crap! What just happened? My mind is officially Inception-level blown!”

“I lowered the veil (like an illusion but better because it alters space-time) that I put on the loft, to make things appear normal. Aeryn and Circe taught me... a story for another time. You won’t be
affected by it anymore. Like we said, no more secrets, right? Though some aren’t mine to tell…” Her last words were cryptic as she stood up and shimmered with a burst of super speed, cleaning up their lunch remains and appearing back in the same place so fast Winn almost missed it. “I have to get back to CatCo and deal with the investor mess… it’s me by the way.”

Winn didn’t think anything could startle him again after all the day’s revelations. He was wrong. “Wha? What? You? You’re CatCo’s mystery investor?!”

Kara shrugged, “Alex, Shah, and me, actually. It’s… another long story.”

“So, cancel my snooping then? Yeah, got it.” He chuckled and shook his head in wonder. “Look, I’m all ears when you come home.” Kara Zor-El Danvers was far more complex than he ever realized.

“Thanks. You know, for dealing with all the crazy and accepting me. Feel free to look around, maybe something in here will help with your designs. Nowhere is off limits… oh, um, well, except for Alex’s sealed room, but that’s just for your own safety.” She smiled awkwardly and then suddenly to pulled him into a lavish hug and said, “Winn Schott Jr., you are one of my favorite humans.”

“Hey! One of?”

She giggled, and he allowed himself to embrace her back with all his strength and didn't want to let go.

A few wonderful moments later, she whispered, “Welcome to the family.”

And before he could breathe in to respond, his friend gently slipped out of his arms and vanished like the wind through an open window.

Still feeling her warmth all around him; Winn couldn’t stop smiling as he heard the muffled sonic boom.

Then it hit him… *I wonder what she meant by ‘some (secrets) aren’t mine to tell’?*

…………………………..

An hour or so later…

Winn was putting the finishing touches on super suit design number eight, but just wasn’t feeling it on this one. The edges too sharp, and the combat leggings were too bulky.

Maybe a skirt instead? No, skip the skirt. Skirts are lame... and potentially sexist. He sighed and hit delete on the iPad.

Time to try again.

No pressure… Kara and Archangel were only totally counting on him. The hero had a city to save but needed a suit to do it.

He tried to clear his mind and went back over the facts. Apparently, the ominous, unnamed Super AI that was a military version of a Kryptonian Companion (like Alex’s Shatari, or Shah’s Zara) was merely waiting for Kara to link with its mind to share her intentions and purpose, and the instructions
needed to form her battle armor … which Kara needed Winn’s help to define.

Once that all happened, the battle armor would take a final shape that could be somewhat flexible but not as much as Shatari or Zara. It would be able to shift as needed for situational changes, including heavy conflicts, ceremonial dress, and alterations for environmental effects, but the base design in all instances would be pulled from the master Winn was creating for Kara.

Now, if he could only unfreeze his brain…

As he tossed another crumpled up drawing in the recycle bin, he received a text…

_TheBoss: hey Winn, playing hooky? called your desk._

_TheBoss: ic. brt._

_Lackey#1: funny. No @ the loft, helping Kara with something._

_Lackey#1: what? Aren’t you in Europe somewhere?_

There was no response, but suddenly a pinpoint of light appeared in the center of Kara’s studio that quickly grew, burning like a small sun. Winn covered his eyes, and as quickly as it came, it began to dissipate, and in its place was the beautiful, dark-haired, green-eyed woman he knew as Ada Nazari: his boss, Shah’s daughter, and Kara’s niece. She was grinning, and wearing a kick-ass futuristic-looking U.S. Navy uniform like he’d never seen before…

“Hey, Winn. Welcome to the family, bud.”

He was close to falling over, eyes bugging out, with his hands on his head. “Oh my God, did you just teleport here?! Tell me you just teleported here!”

She giggled, “I call it translocation, always liked the sound of it better.”

“That was so freaking awesome!”

She walked over with confident sway and hugged him, “If you think that was cool, then the fact that I left a duplicate of myself, I call them shards, back on the USS _Zumwalt_ to maintain the ship’s operations while I’m busy elsewhere would also be pretty awesome?”

“Huh-uh!” He nodded enthusiastically.

“And, knowing that I have nearly a dozen other shards currently scattered around the globe, and one in another universe, simultaneously working on various duties would be even cooler?” She smirked.
Winn must have had stars glittering in his eyes. “Marry me?” He whimpered.

Her laugh was like crystal bells. “I’m sorry, sweetie; if both of us weren’t already taken I’d be saying yes. Be careful though, Jess and Miyuki would both kick your ass for just thinking what you’re thinking right now.” She smirked and he blanched.

“Does everyone know that Miyuki and me are… um… you know…?” He sighed.

“Dating? Yes, sweetie, everyone… even Ryah. Aaannnnyway, I’m not here about that… I came in a technically covert capacity to give you a hand.” She offered him a small device that looked like a sleek thumb drive but was made of black crystal and glowed with a faint blue light inside. “I made a montage of Kara’s greatest hits (thank Shatari for the memories!), and thought it might help you with your task… to see who she really is… and maybe help you divine who she is destined to be.”

Winn reached out, his hand visibly shaking as he reverently accepted the sleek piece of futuristic tech. It was cool to the touch and smooth.

“My aunt is a rare, and special person, as you are already well aware, and I’m very glad she finally told you.”

“Thanks… I am too.” He blushed and averted his eyes to study the tiny bit of what felt like crystal in his hand. It was all black on the outside, without any discernible connector, port, or interface. “How does it work?”

“Just hold it in your hand, close your eyes, and open your mind… it will listen, and show you what you need to know. It’s Kryptonian tech… well, the best I can replicate.”

He must have had a huge grin on his face because Ada was smiling at him with what appeared to be great amusement. He palmed the alien device and shoved it in his pocket, though he really, really wanted to activate it right then. “You have no idea how much I can’t wait to do that.”

“I think I do.”

“Yeah, I get that. So… you’re in the Navy, obviously.” He smiled and gestured at her uniform. “I thought so, you know, back at the wedding with all those sailors fawning all over you. I also may have overheard some things, reverent whispers, asides, that led me to believe that you must be a big deal.”

Ada brightened. “Yes, I suppose you could say was born to it. Though a few years ago the SECNAV and the SecDef hoisted the rank of Commander, and a commission, on me to make it official.” She pointed to the gold star and three bars on her shoulder insignia. “I serve Kara’s adoptive father, Captain Daniels, aboard the USS Zumwalt… and well, I kind of am the ship, three ships now… long story.”

“Oh. Oh! This is cool! You mean like EDI in Mass Effect?, or more of a Cortana from Halo?”

The young woman chuckled. “Something like a mishmash of both of them, but vastly more complex. Perhaps more akin to Peter Quill’s starfaring companion ‘Ship’ in the old Star-Lord comics… speaking of, I’m still pissed that she wasn’t in the movies.”

Winn nodded his head in instant agreement. “I know! Right??”

“Anyway, unlike Ship, I have both human and AI mothers, and am also part Kryptonian. In other words, cut me and I’ll bleed, and probably cry… and get pissed off, but actually cutting me is the hard part.”
“Um, wow? I think you know me well enough to know that I have, like, a million questions…”

She smiled, but sighed with disappointment, “Tragically, my dear Winn, duty calls. I appear to have a crisis brewing in the South China Sea.” She sighed. “Must be Tuesday.”

He grumbled. “Fine, fine. But you owe me your backstory, Starlight, and answers… awesome sauce boss.”

“Looking forward to it, number one lackey.” She said with a smile. “Just text me, we’ll figure something out.” Then she leaned in and planted a warm, lingering, very real, very human kiss on his cheek. And as she stepped back, a soft, white light began to consume her. “Until then my friend, Khodāhāfez.”

And then, the brilliance wrapped her inside itself, and she was gone, leaving only soft ripples in the world behind (as well as her wonderful scent). Winn just stared at the space she’d occupied for almost a full minute as his eyes readjusted, thinking. Ada was a wonder, and so much more than an amazing amalgamation of his three favorite people… she was his friend, like Kara.

Okay, show time.

“Come on baby, Kara needs a new suit.” He said and was moving, pulling the crystal shard out of his pocket as he slipped into her comfortable chair at the drafting table… willing it to show him its secrets.

And, for the next ninety minutes, it did…

Around him, the loft deconstructed itself atom by atom, and the rest of reality followed… dissolving into a haze of color and light. Then, everything started coming back into focus, and all of a sudden he had to squint from the bright glare of a red-tinted sun, felt the stinging chill of arctic air and the crunch of a thick crust of snow under his feet.

This is freaking incredible!

He’d somehow been transported to an alien world, in the past, and become an active observer to moments from Kara’s life. How he knew this he wasn’t sure, maybe the tech was so seamlessly integrated that its thoughts were just mingled with his own, but whatever it was, it was damn cool.

It began with a determined, twelve-year-old (ish) version of Kara Zor-El, dressed in an elegant, high-collared white tunic with matching pants, and boots. Wasn’t she freezing? Winn made note of the outfit, sketching designs in his mind that were logged for later use. She was standing atop a windswept glacier, looking defiantly out with narrowed gaze at a starkly beautiful, and desolate alien world so stunning… it took his breath away.

Krypton.

Massive crystalline spires of glassy vivid reds, purples, and blues, some as large as skyscrapers, jutted up from the miles wide ice flows as if they had exploded from within the crust of the planet. These gigantic structures shone with the most intensely rich colors he’d ever seen, and maybe ever would, because the hues he was experiencing in the simulation could not be perceived by human senses.

The inescapable presence of Rao loomed above him, taking up half the sky. The massive red sun was so close in proximity to the planet that he could clearly see towering arched loops of plasma erupting from its blazing surface.
Kara watched the approach of a far-off, miles high churning wall of darkness on the horizon with caution. The powerful storm was moving swiftly towards her, yet despite the danger, she stayed put… and continued scanning the skies, waiting for… something. Finally, with the blackness closing in, a sleek bird that looked like it was made of black glass, or crystal shards flitted out of the sky to land on her arm and was lifted with tender eagerness to nuzzle her cheek.

After their heartfelt greeting Kara frowned and began scolding the now contrite creature for being tardy. Winn was startled to not only hear words... but music, the most beautiful sounds he’d ever heard in his life.

And he understood them.

My God!

He was astonished again when little Kara set the bird down in the snow, and it shimmered to change its form into what appeared to be a glimmering gray fox with hair made of fine crystal spines instead of fur. It spoke similar words, like melody, to Kara, as it stood up on its hind legs to puff out its chest and hand her a dimly-glowing purple crystal shard with one of its tiny, prehensile hands.

She smiled, slipped the rare prize into a nearly invisible pocket of her tunic, and then leaned down to kiss the dreamy-eyed creature on its quivering nose.

The wall of darkness was close now, too close, and as she eyed its approach, Kara said something urgent to her companion before she darted off like a gazelle. She ran and leaped over the thin snowpack without breaking through as she raced the storm… the swift gray fox following right at her heels.

As the storm slammed into the ridge, the pair barely escaped to the safety of the caverns below by jumping into a crevasse.

Holy crap!

The collage of Kara’s life that followed was just as astounding: Traveling between worlds on ships beyond imagination, folding space-time to cross dark, interstellar seas; exploring futuristic cities covered by vast domes of light; visiting forests of green tucked away in immense subterranean caverns; watching the stars with a graceful woman of exquisite beauty, a white streak in her dark hair, (holly crap! That’s her Aunt Astra! She’s a Kryptonian too!! An important one…); Kara’s last day on Krypton, tearfully saying a heart-wrenching goodbye to her parents, pleading to not fail them or Kal; escaping in her pod as her world erupted in fire, and falling into The Phantom Zone; snippets of her life with the Danvers, with her light, Alex, and her sister, Shah; encountering the USS Zumwalt; saving the USS Washington and watching and listening to the sailors speak to Kara as she slept in stasis; her three ‘deaths’; rescuing Detective Mitra; the bridge collapse; ‘saving’ Colliers; joining the CIA; chasing Zeus’ Thunderbolt from orbit like a goddess; leaving a smoldering crater in the northern mountains of Iran, cleansed by the punishing fire of her rage; holding Ryah in her arms, their hearts melding together; J’onn J’onzz, and the D.E.O.; the attack in Tripoli, and meeting Shannon and Safiya; Paris on Earth Pax; her wedding; the gods!, and so much more… and more… and more…

By the time it was over Winn was shaking… but his eyes were open, wide open, and he understood his friend like never before.

His thoughts kept going back to the symbol emblazoned on her cousin’s chest; it had been such an integral aspect of all of Kara’s world on Krypton, ‘El mayarah’… and which he’d learned not only meant ‘stronger together’, but also ‘hope’. 
Yes!

He smiled thinking about Kara, and how much she’d already become the light in so many lives… including his own. It was then that he finally knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, what he needed to do for her suit… The answer was so freaking obvious, he should have seen it before.

It would probably take a few versions to get right, but he’d get there… for her.

Before getting re-started, Winn glanced over at the indestructible Kryptonian fabric that would eventually mold its matrix to his design. The dark material was spread over half the wide work table in Kara’s studio… waiting for him. It was the last of its kind, a gift to Kara from her mother, and a civilization so technologically advanced the fabric and its purpose could never be replaced if he screwed things up.

No pressure.

Winn took a deep breath, picked up his tablet, and began sketching out the vision of the suit that he’d been creating in his mind.

………………………

A couple of hours later, a message popped up on his phone as he worked…

AgentDanvers: hey winn, picking up dinner from that new Thai-Robot place around corner. what you want? Kara told me - keep winn fed and happy.

Big_Schottjr: awesome! will text you my order. beer? snacks? long night ahead.

AgentDanvers: covered in spades, have a grocery cart full now.

Big_Schottjr: \o/

AgentDanvers: what is that even mean? you ARE my wacky little brother from another mother

Big_Schottjr: \o/

Big_Schottjr: hugs incoming upon arrival.

AgentDanvers: do you WANT me to bring you food? you are sooo weird

Big_Schottjr: lots of hugs

AgentDanvers: fine!

AgentDanvers: ::*

AgentDanvers: \o/

…………………………

Winn chuckled; Thai Robot… awesome choice Agent Danvers.

He loved Alex so damn much, she was as big a geek as he was, but liked to pretend she wasn’t.
Hard to imagine he’d ever had a chip on his shoulder about her being Kara’s soul mate... bondmate, same diff.

Oh well, the good news was, by the time his golden-haired alien BFF arrived home there’d be food, and, he was certain, something ready for the hero to try on.

Next: Supergirl!

Story Lexicon/FAQs:

**Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms:** I attempt to *italicize* all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

**Terms:** Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

Ah!khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

Alex vanimelda - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Ay Dios Mio – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)

Aporup – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)

As-salāmu ‘alayki – A (formal) greeting which is also a standard salutation among Muslims, meaning ‘peace be upon you’. Less formal abbreviation is simply salām. (Arabic)

Asheghetam - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

Azdidane shoma khoshhalam – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)

Bedrood – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

Bonne nuit – ‘Good night’ (French)

C’est la vie – ‘That's life’. An acceptance of things as they are. (French)

C’est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

Damnú air! – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Dooset daram – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hajimemashite - Nice to meet you! - はじめまして！/ お会いできてうれしいです！
aziz-am – ‘My dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

delbandam - ‘My heartstring’. What Shah would call her cousin Tarsa as a child when she’d babysit (very sweet and precious), and still calls her since reconnecting.

Hamsar-am – This term falls more into the ‘lover’ category, as it is a common word for ‘spouse.’ However, hamsar literally means ‘equal head,’ so it stands for an equal partner, and is, therefore, a poetic way to point out one’s better half. (What Alex calls Kara after they’re married, though she also still uses nooré cheshm-am)

Jeegaré manee - One of the most loving terms of endearment you can direct to someone in Persian. It is quite beautiful and should have a powerful effect on a person it’s directed to. In this case, Kara and Alex are being very clear at just how much they love, and have always loved Shah. They are very… possessive of their sister.

joon-am – ‘My dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

Moosh moosh-am - ‘My mousy mouse’ said in Persian is utterly cute and endearing. Moosh means ‘little mouse’, but calling someone this cranks the sweetness factor up to eleven (what Shah calls Ryah)

Nafasem-an - ‘My breath’ (what Kara sometimes calls Alex)

nāzanin-am – ‘Sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘The light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘Sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

’>insert person's name<’ + joon (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean 'dear'. So, ‘Shah joon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

Other names/nickname/titles/things:

A ghrá – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)

A ghrá mo chroí - ‘My heart's beloved, my darling’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Âbjé – ‘Sister’ informal version (Persian)

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Bakalawa bil Jibna - A mouthwateringly delicious Libyan version of baklava with a sweet cream filling.

Bríomhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)
**Cythonna** – One of the most ancient Kryptonian gods, said to be the female half of Rao. Protector of those unjustly persecuted, as well as patron to monsters and non-biologic life forms (such as Kryptonian Companions/Ka’dahs).

**Daxamites** - An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people ruled by strength/ the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow altered by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.

**Delta Sierra** – U.S. Navy lingo for dumb shit

**Dios mío!** – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

**Durlan** - The Durlans are a rare extraterrestrial species, a race of shapeshifting beings from the planet Durla. Ryah is a Durlan, as was her guardian, Veya, who died protecting the child in the depths of Tehran’s Evin Prison.

**Dūst doxtar** – ‘Girlfriend’ (Persian)

**Dūst pesar** - ‘Boyfriend’ (Persian)

**Eres mi luz.** – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

**Euryleia** – ‘Woman Wanderer’ or ‘Wide Wandering’ - Dr. Naomi Young’s Amazon name

**Fereshteh**: Slang for saying that a girl is perfect, desired... hot, to die for, an angel. Historically used as a Persian girl’s name, simply meaning ‘angel’. (Persian)

**H'ronmeer** - the Martian God of Death and Fire, referred to by a faction as the God of Life and Light. (Martian)

**Hermanas** – Sisters (Spanish)

**In’ah** – Ancient, lost word for ‘daughter’ - what Myka calls Kara (Kryptonese),

**Infinite loop** - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition...

**Little Star** - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

**M'eudail** – ‘My darling’ or ‘my dear’ (Irish/Gaelic)

**Ma’har** - Ancient, lost word for ‘mother’ - what Kara calls Myka (Kryptonese)

**Mi amor** – ‘My love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)

**Mi diosa** – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

**Mi lucero** – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)
Mi Sol – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn - Thought & Memory (Old Norse)

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Nâmzad – ‘fiancé’, betrothed (Persian)

Norooz - Persian New Year (Persian)

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Oea - This ancient city was founded by the Phoenicians in the seventh century BC, was ruled at one time or another by the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines. Italians, and Muslims. It came to be known as Tripoli during the 9th century (Libyco-Berber)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity (from Ancient Greek)

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Seanmháthair – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced shan a WAW her (Irish/Gaelic)

SecDef - The Secretary of Defense (SecDef) is the leader and chief executive officer of the Department of Defense, an Executive Department of the Government of the United States of America.

SECNAV - The Secretary of the Navy (or SECNAV) is a statutory office and the head (chief executive officer) of the Department of the Navy, a military department (component organization) within the Department of Defense of the United States of America.

Señora – Is a polite term used to address a woman. The Spanish-language equivalent of Ma’am, Ms., or Mrs. (Spanish)

Telkhines - In myth were mysterious sea-god magicians and smiths native to the islands of Keos (Ceos) and Rhodes. They invented the art of metalworking and were said to have crafted many powerful items and weapons for the gods. The truth is even stranger. These tall, lanky, extraterrestrials command science at a level that seems like magic, and have lived since the beginning of time. They served ‘The Makers’, who existed long before Krypton, or the gods, and abandoned them on earth. Zeus and the Greek gods gave them refuge and protection long ago in return for their service.

Tieguanyin - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

Tratung – khrag 'thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Trípolis – Tripoli, the capital and largest city in Libya (from Ancient Greek)

Tuath Dé Danann - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced Thoo-a day Du-non (Irish/Gaelic)
Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’. ‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Vakur – A powerful (and rare) soul-devouring, evil, shape-shifting parasitic alien species from another universe. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.

Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Vallerian – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshiped, or traded.

Vâysâ – ‘Stop’ (Persian)

Wan - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means “one”. “Wan” usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

Xwâhar - ‘Sister’ - the formal form. (Persian)

Zafaraniyeh – The affluent neighborhood in the northern part of the Iranian capital of Tehran where Shahrazad grew up. (Persian)

Zhuyin – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:
Archangel saved the day once again, and revealed herself to National City, the world, and finally… Winn. Yay! I wove in scenes from the show, but changed them as needed to make sense on Earth 39 – like Alex talking to Kara after she saved the plane, but in this case being loving and supportive not mean, or Kara coming out as Archangel to Winn in almost the same way, but different, or him deciding not to include a skirt in her battle armor’s design, and Kara taking the plane to the airport and controlling her own coming out story with a little help from her friends. This was a very long and important chapter and I sincerely hope that you enjoyed it!

Next Up:
Chapter 38: “Supergirl” – The mysterious woman who saved Flight 237 is the talk of
the town... and Cat Grant couldn’t be more pleased. The Queen of All Media is stressing Kara out on multiple fronts; not only is she closing in on the identity of CatCo’s mystery investor, but she's also holding her assistant accountable for securing her an exclusive interview with National City’s new hero (by the end of the week!). And, well... let’s just say things get worse, and Kara’s not happy with Ms. Grant. She’s also not the only one with trouble. Winn wants to know why Miyuki’s been avoiding him since Kara told him her secret and sets off on a quest to find out.

Supergirl’s story begins, but not everyone is happy about it, including the creepy dudes skulking around plotting to kill her. Here we go! We’re down to the final three chapters of Kara and Alex’s pre-season one story (Earth 39 edition), enjoy!

I may need at least a couple extra weeks to finish the final chapters (edited). So please be patient. It’s a huge undertaking, and I want the final installment of this Earth 39 story to be done right.

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming! Every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me.

Attributions:

Kara and Winn’s montage of super suits.
I love that scene and wanted to include it, but didn’t write it because the sequence in the episode was so fun. If you’re feeling nostalgic for season one Supergirl feels (like I always am) you can watch it now at the link. Oh, and I’m sorry (not sorry), but the Winn of Earth 39 would never, never, ever say ‘Kara, you look really pretty without your glasses’ or ‘You’re gay?’. Such cringe-worthy moments in otherwise fun scenes.

What’s a CSG? -Carrier Strike Group
The USS Zumwalt was assigned to a traditional CSG until a few years ago. Now the vessel is the flagship for a growing pack of other Zumwalt-class warships deployed around the globe; and very soon a supercarrier, with a shard of Starlight as her heart and soul, will be under Rear Admiral Tom Daniels’ long distance command.

Songs:

The xx – Intro (long version).
The beautiful chords from this The xx song is what I hear as Kara runs out of the restaurant to save Alex (and Flight 237)... her hero moment as she soared out of the alley above the heads of all the awestruck citizens.
Chapter Summary

The mysterious woman who saved Flight 237 is the talk of the town... and Cat Grant couldn’t be more pleased.

The Queen of All Media is stressing Kara out on multiple fronts; not only is she closing in on the identity of CatCo’s mystery investor, but also holding her assistant accountable for securing her an exclusive interview with National City’s new hero by the end of the week! (No pressure). And, well... let’s just say things get worse, and Kara’s none too happy with Ms. Grant.

She’s also not the only one with trouble. Winn wants to know why Miyuki’s been avoiding him since Kara told him her secret and sets off on a quest to get answers.

Supergirl’s story begins, but not everyone is happy about it, including the creepy dudes skulking around National City plotting to kill her.

Here we go! We’re down to the final chapters of Kara and Alex’s pre-season one story (Earth 39 edition). Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 25th, Year Nine

Kara and Alex’s loft – National City

0854 Hours UTC -8, Saturday morning, U.S. Pacific Coast Time

It was a little before nine on Saturday morning, and the goddess that Winn knew as his dear friend Kara Zor-El Danvers was enjoying a brief respite between heroic interventions. It had only been a day and a half since she’d saved Flight 237, and barely twelve hours since she’d stepped from the shadows in her Kryptonian battle armor to take up the very public mantle of National City’s hero.

He watched appreciatively as the gorgeous woman leaned back, her muscular arms and waves of golden hair draped across and over the back of the loft’s big couch as she rested.

Kara was wearing her super suit, the very same outfit the entire world had been oohing and aahing over since the hero officially burst onto the scene wearing it the night before. Even though no one besides Kara and her extended super family would ever know that its appearance was mostly his handiwork. Winn was humbled by being asked to help, and proud of the final result.

The armor design possessed a regal quality that harkened back to Krypton’s ancient past, while at the
same time offered a feeling of something completely new and inspiring. To any observer, the sleek combat bodysuit in its ‘hero’ configuration appeared to be crafted from a lightweight space-agey material, with graceful lines that gave no indication of its true power. In daylight, the living alien material looked similar in color to a rich blue, almost black. But caught at the right angle, or if a creature were perceptive enough, they might notice the subtle shimmer of iridescent colors that made up its skin… millions of hues that had never before been seen on Earth.

The elegant garment fit her perfect form like a glove; from its high, open-front Mandarin styled collar, long sleeves that wrapped her hands (with holes in each for her thumbs), to the golden belt that encircled her waist, and the House of El's symbol that graced the enviable curves of her chest… she was perfection.

And her boots... great googly moogly! The tall, graceful ass-kickers were a mix of red and the same dark blue as her suit, and added three inches to her height, making her six-feet tall as her hero persona.

A late addition was an ankle-length red cape that attached to the collar. The impervious, completely non-conductive Kryptonian material it was made from came courtesy of the Man of Steel himself… via his good friend and messenger, Jimmy Olsen (who, it turned out, knew about Kara all along, thanks to her cousin).

At first, Winn was completely against the idea of a cape (solidarity, Edna Mode!), but the add-on actually helped Kara with her aerodynamics and maneuverability when executing tight turns at high speeds, (and it looked sooo cool too! Iconic.), so he relented in his opposition. He did, however, fight to ensure that the accessory could be willed to break away if it caught on something or was used against her in combat.

Taken as a whole, even if he’d never been made aware of the existence of the immortals, Winn would have believed just by looking at her that she was a goddess who’d fallen to Earth.

As he stood near the dining room table watching her, he tried to fight it, but his eyes kept being inexorably drawn to the hero’s powerful curves, and her long, athletic legs… clad in those amazing, nearly knee-high boots he’d always imagined seeing her in, now real, which she’d propped up casually on the wooden coffee table…

_**Dayamn**_

Winn was good, like Jedi good… but Kara, she… she was something else.

_She was the one you'd die for._

“You done congratulating yourself, nerd?” Alex teased, suddenly appearing out of nowhere; breezing in from an open loft window to set a feast of fresh bagels, a variety of cream cheeses, and drink carriers on the kitchen table. “Breakfast anyone?” She asked.

As startling as her entrance was, the svelte D.E.O. agent’s affectionate grin was the jolt of energy he, and the room, sorely needed.

“Oh my God, you brought coffee! I love you my glorious kick-ass flying sister…” Winn was already sipping at the hot, steaming Noonan’s to-go cup the amused brunette handed him.

Alex patted his head like a puppy before turning, and the thing was… he didn’t mind, not one bit.

“Hey, morning Devi.” Alex waved at the tireless NCPD Lieutenant, who was sitting at the larger dinner table, surrounded by an impromptu nerve center of police radios and laptops, with a puffy
headset on her ears monitoring the city for trouble. The woman smiled brightly and waved back, just as Alex flickered over and placed a foamy latte in her raised hand, as graceful as Kara.

Apparently, being eighty-five-or-so-percent Kryptonian hath its privileges... Winn chuckled to himself.

“You are so my favorite person right now, Flame.” Devi moaned, taking off the headset and standing up in her stylish ‘I’m a badass detective’ outfit to hug Alex, the golden NCPD badge clipped to her belt glinting with reflected sunlight.

Alex smiled and said, “Awwww, dhon-no-baad. And thanks, as well, for helping take care of Archangel all night.”

“Yeah, ever since Kara made her big debut with the suit it’s been Winn and me here at the loft, you, Black Knight, and Vasquez over at the D.E.O., and Ada, Jess, Capt. Daniels, and Vaden on the Battle Bridge of the Zumwalt with their sweet tech keeping tabs. We got your wife covered.”

“Speaking of wives…” Kara called from the couch, which was more like her throne, at the moment. “Alex, whaddya-bring-me? My favorite latte, maaybe?” She giggled, and then breathed in deeply. “I can smell caramel… and vanilla… soy milk, and… ooh, you did! I love you, Vaena!” She practically purred as her mate breezed over to her.

Then, before Kara could take the offered cup, she came to attention and glanced across the room at the massive 65” flat screen on the exposed brick wall of the loft’s living room. She then leaped up excitedly to grab the remote and said, “Hey everyone, it’s coming back on!”

Alex joined her bondmate on the sofa with a kiss and handed off Kara’s favorite, sugar-laden drink just as National City’s top Channel 3 news anchor began speaking. Behind the reporter, a collage of images and videos of Kara saving Flight 237 took up most of the screen.

“Hello viewers, I’m Carol Dwyer, and it’s a pleasure to be with you once again at this... truly historic moment. We are still coming to grips with the fact that one of our own stepped, or more accurately, exploded onto the scene Thursday evening to save Flight 237 from all but certain disaster. To put it mildly, it has been an extraordinary couple of days for the people of National City.

“With powers that seem to rival Metropolis’ very own Man of Steel, our beautiful Titaness dressed in designer jeans stayed to help evacuate the wounded 747 she’d safely plucked from the sky… side-by-side with the other brave rescuers and first-responders.” Jimmy’s photos from the airport began filling the screen, including a couple of amazing shots of Kara and Alex working together, and one of Archangel assisting a young mother, cradling her infant gently in her arms. “But, once all the passengers were safe she disappeared… leaving only a sonic boom echoing over the city.

“Then, last night she appeared again… this time wearing a striking flexible bodysuit with design touches that pay homage to another famous hero’s, but with its own unique and elegant style that, overnight, has set the fashion world ablaze.”

Winn puffed up. Elegant style… fashion world set ablaze… check, and check! I’ll take that.

“Her countless acts of selfless heroism over the last twelve hours have been astounding! And even though much of what she’s done for the people of this city has gone unrecorded, CatCo’s intrepid team of investigative reporters, and our viewers, have been tracking down and providing video and eyewitness accounts, as well as behind the scenes exclusives. Who is our mysterious ‘S’-wearing angel? Let's find out.
“We begin with an incident last night, in the Hyde District…”

Winn glanced over, and could see that Kara was entranced; yet Alex, spooned against her, seemed wary; ready to defend her lover from the inevitable kooks and profiteers who would do their level best to try and make Kara into a monster, just as they’d tried, and failed with Kal-El when he’d first come out as Superman.

He shivered. God help anyone who threatens Kara Danvers.

The Channel 3 anchor was still talking: “After a traumatic incident seemingly took the life of their three-year-old daughter last night, a young mother and father can rest easy today thanks to National City’s very own Guardian Angel. This potentially tragic story has a happy ending... with the girl alive and well, and safely back with her family.

“How’s go now to National City General, where little Hannah, who some are calling National City’s ‘Miracle Child’, is recovering, and speak with her grateful parents.” The camera then switched to reveal a waiting area somewhere at the sprawling hospital, and a different Channel 3 reporter interviewing a disheveled couple.

“It was a miracle.” A thin, dark-haired woman barely Kara’s age, with a faraway look in her eyes, breathed out in awe. By all appearances she’d been through an awful experience, her mascara and makeup streaked on her face from crying, but the expression was one of dazed wonder.

When she began to speak her voice was jittery, “I only looked away for a minute, to take a call, and Hannah was just... gone. I panicked.” She choked, and had to stop talking briefly, “I looked everywhere in the house... and that’s when I s... saw her... outside, fl... floating face down in the water. I screamed, and... and remember running to pull her out of the pool, and starting CPR, but... it... it was too late.”

The solemn reporter encouraged the woman to continue, and her husband wrapped his arm tighter around her shoulders. When she spoke again, but she’d brightened and seemed excited, “But then, out of nowhere, quiet as a mouse, she appeared, kneeling right next to me. She was so calm, so caring... and she said, ‘Teresa’...” the woman’s voice caught again. “She knew my name... she knew my name...” The young mother paused as if in prayer and then continued, “She said, ‘It’s okay; you’ve done all you can, let me try’. So I did, and as she began CPR at first nothing happened... but then she stopped, and became still, just for a moment, and looked over at me with her blue, blue eyes and spoke... her voice so calm, like she was in total control. She said, ‘I’m going to do something. Please don’t be afraid... and scoot back a little’, and I did, and that’s when she laid her fingertips on Julia’s chest, and a pulse of blue light, a glow, came out of them and all over her, and then my baby... my baby girl started breathing!”

The woman’s hands were over her mouth holding back sobs as she began crying, but looked right into the camera with a fierceness of a parent who knows the fear of almost losing their child, “I don’t know your name, but if you’re listening, we can never repay you for what you did, but God bless you, God bless you! You are our Guardian Angel. You brought our baby back! Thank you, thank you...”

The camera then panned back to the reporter, who was wiping happy tears from his eyes. “There you have it, folks. Whether or not she’s related to Superman, as some have speculated, our Angel is watching over the people of National City, and we can now add raising the dead to her list of abilities.”

There were tears on Alex’s cheeks as she snuggled up against Kara’s side, and her bondmate’s were just as damp. That incident had struck close to home for both of them both.
“Calm, my ass.” Kara sniffed and wiped her own eyes. “I was terrified. That poor, sweet little girl… Thank Rao, and Obi-Winn, for my battle armor. It can generate electric pulses now, in this case, in very low power mode like a defibrillator. I could have used that back in high school, for multiple reasons.” Alex harumphed, remembering some of the asshole boys who tried to touch Kara’s ass, or bump into her just to cop a feel... some had succeeded due to her not being able to use her powers to escape them in public.

“Obi-Winn?” Devi asked with an incredulous chuckle. She moved to stand beside the couch and stretched like a cat.

Kara giggled, which set Winn to blushing, furiously. He said, “It’s just a thing… she says.” He mumbled.

Alex saved him, “Hey, more stories…” She piped up, gesturing back at the Channel 3 anchor and winking at him as everyone’s attention was pulled back to the TV.

He smiled gratefully and she grinned back at him. God, she was his sister. His heart was about to melt.

What came next on screen was like a montage out of a movie; videos of varying quality of Kara doing heroic and helpful things, like assisting city engineers in fixing a major water main break on 32nd and Main… hovering above the broken crater in the street and using her heat vision to weld the pipes and her super speed and strength to fill in the hole; flying a stalled school bus to the last six pickups and then off to their school; lifting up and moving a broken down eighteen wheeler out of the middle of I-101 at rush hour (to the thunderous cheers of commuters stuck in the five-mile-long parking lot); and using her freeze-breath to put out a fire that had begun to consume the third floor of an industrial warehouse on the East Side long before the NCFD could arrive.

Winn watched as the video showed Kara being swarmed by the workers and other staff afterward as she glided down out of the air onto the sidewalk. Everyone wanted to get pics and selfies with her, autographs, and to know what to call her! She was happy to oblige on everything, except giving them a name… she was very smooth at avoiding and deflecting the question. The food trucks vendors all offered her free lunch, and she wasn’t shy about shoveling down six gourmet vegan tacos for the cameras.

The look of absolute pleasure and bliss on her face at how delicious they were made him want one...

When a burly man in the crowd gathered around her asked Kara how she could eat so much and still look ‘like that’ she’d blushed, grinned awkwardly, and said, “Flying around and putting out fires burns a lot of calories… like, a lot. Are there more tacos?” Everyone around her laughed.

Damn, she’s so adorable, even stuffing her face!

Winn was certain that was when, if they weren’t already, the whole city fell in love with her... just like he did the first day they’d met.

The next story was from just a few hours earlier, about a utility worker who’d been electrocuted and was dangling up in some high power lines, clinging to life. A local news crew was already on the scene as Kara swooped in to save the day.

She first shimmered over to have a brief conversation with the victim’s awestruck, hard-hat wearing colleague on the ground, and then under the woman’s direction dutifully removed some bulky items from their big bucket-armed repair truck.
Having been briefed on what had happened already, the news anchor explained that the hero was worried about possibly electrocuting the man further without precautions.

Kara then sped around to secure all the loose, potentially deadly, power lines in the area using her bare hands to cap them with the materials she’d gathered. Seconds later, clearly satisfied with her quick work, she flew gracefully skyward to hover near the unmoving worker entangled in the sparking wires and gave the woman on the ground an enthusiastic thumbs-up signal.

What followed was a visible pulse of energy that expanded out from the hero in a hundred-foot radius like a big transparent soap bubble. The force appeared to pass harmlessly through the National City Power and Light engineer and her vehicle... but suppressed all the sparks within its interior.

Then, even more impossibly, Kara once again blurred with super speed and disappeared into the sky with the dying worker held in her arms, leaving only the crackling sounds of thunder reverberating in her wake. "That was a sonic boom..." The awestruck reporter on the scene said.

It was a mic drop moment in the television studio, where the news anchor’s eyes looked twice their normal size and for once in her career, she’d forgotten how to speak. Fortunately, the camera switched to a correspondent giving a live report on the scene.

Authorities were there in all kinds of crazy-looking protective gear, monitoring the two hundred foot bluish subtly-glowing energy sphere that encapsulated the entire area and power lines. The reporter was scratching his head, literally, after talking to a spokesman for the U.S. Department of Energy.

He said, “The weak energy field is harmless to organic matter, and you can walk right through it!” He demonstrated, stepping in, then out without issue. “But, when an electronic device, like a phone, is placed inside the sphere it goes completely dead, just like the power lines. Interestingly, when withdrawn from the area, the device reverts back to normal, undamaged. That’s quite a power, not even Superman can do that.” He was beaming, obviously proud of National City’s new hero.

The reporter then continued, “Crews from National City Power & Light are working furiously to make repairs before the field dissipates. I have with me Vicki Silva, the engineer on site who assisted our hero. Vicki? Hello, did she give you her name?”

The woman was still smiling from ear to ear. “No, not her name… we were a little busy. But Lordy! She was beautiful! And, focused, you know? But calm, like freaky calm… in control in an, ‘I got this. I do this kind of crazy shit every day, dude’ kind of way, but still super polite... you know?”

“What did you two talk about?” The reporter asked, appearing awkwardly uncomfortable with the woman’s swearing.

“She just wanted the facts, you know? So she could ‘fix it’, and save Phil. It seemed… I mean, I could tell, she really cared about keeping him safe. The weird thing though? Was how she asked really specific questions, using technical jargon like she was already an expert in the ins and outs of power line transmission. I could answer most of them, but wow… not all. And she knew the exact amount of energy in each wire and conduit by just looking at it... how cool is that?

"Anyway, she told me everything was going to be okay, and to not be surprised when she generated a ‘null field’, that’s what she called it... said it would kill all the power, but not hurt anyone, or me. She asked how much time we need to make repairs if she did that, so I told her four hours. That’s when she smiled like the sun and said, ‘Vicki, you have six’, and that was it! She waved goodbye with that gorgeous smile of hers, flew up, created the blue bubble, had Phil in her arms before I could even see her do it, and then sonic boomed outta here! It was awesome!"
The reporter was captivated. “So, if… if you could say anything to her right now, what would it be?”

The woman smiled even wider, revealing her gap tooth, proceeded to remove her hard hat, push strands of her wavy brown hair off her face, and then looked directly into the camera (at Kara), “First, I’d say thank you, sweetheart, you did good today. Saved my friend, my coffee buddy, who’s about to be a daddy. Second, what’s your name, baby? How can I properly thank you without it? And third… marry me?”

Damn, lady, pre-Miyuki me knows exactly how you feel. Winn grinned to himself.

Over on the couch, Kara buried her face in a throw pillow as she giggled and blushed.

It was at that moment that the front door of the loft opened, interrupting the report, and in rushed their daughter in the form of a gorgeous Australian Shepherd (followed by a grinning Shah, who’d just flown her all the way back from Ten Lakes). Ryah was immediately on a tear for Alex and Kara and the lanky girl ended up on her mothers’ laps as she shifted back into her human form.

Holy frack! As many times Ryah did it, Winn knew seeing the Durlan shape change like that would never get old.

The eleven-year-old was giggly happy and rubbing noses with Kara. “Athena and Aphrodite! You’re the only thing everyone’s talking about! One of my moms is a celeb! This is sooo righteous. I’m so proud of you, my Protector.” She burrowed in, and Alex collapsed over her hugging them both.

“I’m a celebrity?” Kara glanced up from the huggle, that Shah had just joined in on, looking over in confusion at Winn.

She really has no idea. He chuckled, “Um, yeah, like big time. You know, you, all over the news? The news you’ve been watching…”

Ryah quickly checked her iPhone, “Mom, you’re trending number one on Twitter without even paying for it, that means yes.”

Kara brightened. “Oh! Okay, awesome! I guess. Though, no one knows what to call me, or if I’m my cousin’s sister, or…”

“Girlfriend…” Winn interjected.

“Ew!” Kara fired back.

Alex smirked, “Hey, on Krypton it’d be just fine… um,” She glanced down nervously at Ryah.

The girl looked up, indignant. “Moms, I know how things were on Krypton, you don’t need to pretend. People loved each other.”

Kara smiled at her daughter as if she were a wonder, which she was. “Fine. Yes, on Krypton such a relationship would be perfectly acceptable, but…” She looked up from Ryah and at her wife with puppy dog eyes. “Aleeex, he’s my baby cousin! I babysat him, and changed his diapers... or would have if would have had them on Krypton... and he’s married to Lois!” She crossed her powerful arms and glared at nothing in particular. “I have to draw the line somewhere.”

Alex kissed her and said, “We’re just messing with you, sweetie.”

That brought a small smile back to Kara’s face, and she said, “I wish I had thought more about how
people would perceive me wearing our House symbol before I put it on… and come up with a proper superhero name.”

“What have I always told you?” Shah asked with one arched eyebrow.

Kara’s own brow scrunched as she considered the question in context. She then, with a hopeful grin said, “Um... if you do not control the enemy, the enemy will control you?”

The beautiful Persian smiled, her eyes crinkling at the edges from amusement, “Yes, I suppose I have quoted Musashi now and again, haven’t I? While his words do somewhat fit here, the people are not your adversary… but they are watching you, and first impressions are everything. The fact is, you must take control of the situation before it controls you.”

Shah then moved to the kitchen to grab them all drinks, but as Kara mulled over her words the sagely woman stuck her head back in the room and added, “Sheereen-am, in case I wasn’t clear… you need a name! And you really should seriously consider taking Max up on his offer to work with that woman from his PR agency.”

Kara hung her head and groaned, and Ryah consoled her with a hug.

“Why can’t you just use Archangel?” Winn asked. “Ada and I can start a few anonymous threads on the right sites, send some untraceable emails… you know, make some techno-magic happen and voilà, the Internet will be calling you whatever you want… and the media shall follow.” He clicked his tongue with a grin. “Take that Cat Grant…”

Alex stared at him, blinking, and said, “Winn, sometimes you scare me.”

“Uncle Winn is a magician with a keyboard.” Ryah beamed.

Winn chuckled, “Thanks, kiddo.”

Kara brushed some of her daughter’s tumble down raven curls off her face, kissed her forehead, then said with a sigh, “I don’t know… I’m just not sure if that’s the best plan. We should all give it some serious thought over the rest of the weekend… I can decide on Monday morning. It’s not like we need to hurry, right?”

Winn grimaced and knocked on wood, causing Kara to scowl at him as she continued, “The thing is, I love Archangel, she’s who I’ve been… who I… am, but… but isn’t the name kind of presumptuous, you know… lofty? I don’t want to give the impression to anyone that I think I’m a goddess or anything, no offense to my divine aunts and uncles.”

None taken. Aaron laughed in her thoughts and broadcasted their conversation to everyone in the room.

Apollo! You, you sneak! Listening in...

Busted. Hey, great job out there, Archangel… or whomever you decide to be. Keep up the good work; we’re all rooting for you, even Ares for some bizarre reason.

Kara chuckled. Thank you, uncle. And for the record, he’s not so bad… actually, that’s off the record. Mr. Dark and mysterious wouldn’t want that getting around. Shah was nodding in strong agreement.

Hehe, of course, Kara.
Winn was hyperventilating. “That… that was a god, right?! Oh, my freaking Zeus, that was Apollo! Talking in all of our heads!”

Alex flickered over to wrap an arm around his shoulders. “Get used to it, little brother.”

“Next up on Channel 3…” Everyone’s attention was drawn back to the TV as a story about a family of three, whose car was hit by a truck that morning, began to play out: “The four-door vehicle contained a family of three, two adult males and their four-year-old son. The NCPD commends the parents for having him properly secured in a car seat, as it saved the child’s life from the effect of the initial impact.”

The officer on scene was explaining. “At approximately 7:35 A.M., while driving over the Dressler viaduct, the family’s vehicle was struck from behind by a semi-trailer whose brakes had failed. The family’s vehicle was pushed up and over a low retaining wall, where it plummeted off the three-story overpass.”

The reporter then took over, “Thank you, officer. At that time, the flying woman caught the car in midair, and carefully set it down on the side of the road below. I’m told that we have some cell phone video of that incident. Carol… take it away.”

And there, in a steady piece of HD video, was Kara, in her amazing suit, lowering a battered Honda SUV down effortlessly to a rusted overpass somewhere in the city. She appeared concerned; with that adorable little crinkle in her brow that Winn loved so much. He couldn’t stop grinning as he watched.

The driver was slumped over the wheel, unconscious, while the man in the passenger seat frantically struggled to free himself from his twisted belt to get to his son in the back seat.

Kara blurred to appear at the side of the car, pulling the rear door separating her from the child off its hinges in one fluid movement and sent it flying. The boy, safe in his seat, looked up in wonder at her and smiled so big you’d think it was his whole face. Kara then bent down and picked the child’s fuzzy stuffed unicorn off the floor of the SUV and handed the treasure to the now happy boy as she swiftly removed him from the vehicle.

From the way she magically seduced the boy, how she subtly shifted her hip and held him close, and made little faces and sang to him as a distraction while she freed the fathers with her other hand, it was quite obvious, to Winn at least, that she was a mom… and a damn good one.

Winn glanced at his phone, at that beautiful moment: the young boy, with Kara returning his unicorn, smiling and soothing the child, was now everywhere… hundreds of images and video from bystanders’ cell phones posting pics to the web.

It was beautiful.

Over on the couch, Ryah wrapped herself around Kara and began sobbing in her arms. Their little mouse had been deeply affected by the last story. Winn knew that Kara rescued the alien girl from a bad situation, but no deep details. He could only guess, and it made his heart hurt to know she’d experienced a trauma so bad that watching one of her mom’s save a child was enough to make her cry.

And the montage continued.

Kara helping find yet another missing person; saving the life of a man choking on food in a restaurant; assisting the NCPD in stopping an armed bank robbery; peacefully ending a domestic
dispute that involved a loaded rifle, and busting a meth lab. She also stopped a raging fire on the docks before it could reach a ship laden with gasoline, and the list went on.

Then, the energy at the news desk changed…

Carol had been looking tired but was now glowing with excitement. “Welcome back to the studio, we have breaking news. CatCo’s own Eye in the Sky reporter, helicopter pilot, and U.S. Navy veteran, Jerry Doyle has verified beyond a shadow of a doubt, exclusively to the Tribune and Channel 3, that National City’s long-rumored Guardian Angel of urban legend is real, and that she and the heroic woman who saved the plane are one and the same.

“This information may come as no surprise, as that’s what many have been assuming, but what we will confirm next is not known… and exclusive to CatCo, and Channel 3.”

Everyone in the loft leaned forward with nervous anticipation. Had Jerry discovered Kara’s identity? Would he tell if he did? “That son-of-a… he better not…” Alex growled under her breath, and Winn saw how Kara soothed her by holding her wife’s hand.

Carol continued after her dramatic pause… “Jerry has spoken with six survivors of the National City Bridge collapse who were willing to come forward, and they have all also confirmed, with absolute certainty, that our hero is also the one who saved them, and averted a much larger catastrophe eight years ago.”

Gasp can be heard in the studio, and hushed talking.

“Thank Rao that’s all he said,” Kara whispered like a prayer.

And then to finish, Carol added…

“Why, after working in the shadows to protect the people of this city for so many years she’s chosen now to come forward, and in such a colorful way, is anyone’s guess… but we here at Channel 3, and all of CatCo, just want to say to her, if she’s watching, thank you! Thank you from all of us, and from the people of National City.”

Images of Winn’s blog were among the many that flashed on the screen next.

“OH SNAP!” Winn already in full-on panic mode, but as he fumbled with his phone to nuke his website, he received a text. From Ada…

TheBoss: Winn, stop freaking, did some housekeeping on your blog, you’re fine, we’re fine, and Kara’s fine. there’s nothing there that would compromise her true identity…

He patted his chest slowly as if to calm his frantically beating heart and took a big gulp of air.

Lackey#1: Thanks Ada, I owe you.

TheBoss: I know. it’s on your tab. ;-)

........................................

The next day…

June 25th, Year Nine

Kara and Alex’s loft – National City
Kara appeared on the ledge of one of the loft’s tall open windows and silently drifted down into the sunlit living area wearing a more ceremonial, and regal, version of her battle armor, her cape flowing gracefully behind her. She caught a glimpse of herself in the glass and almost gasped... for a moment thought she was her own mother.

It only took her a few seconds to shimmer off to her and Alex’s empty bedroom and back again, clad in her favorite soft cotton pajamas. While her fancy new suit could do many things, its ability to shapeshift was somewhat limited. At the moment, it had transformed to become her bra and panties... really comfy ones.

A cool breeze stirred in from outside, and she could hear the clanking of spoons and bowls coming from the kitchen.

_Yum, cereal!_

Before she left the room, voices drew her attention the TV, and she paused briefly to watch. Two of Channel 3’s top anchors were on screen _still_ talking about her…

_Ugh, will they ever stop?_

“Well folks, National City’s Guardian Angel has had a busy weekend! After saving Flight 237 from certain disaster, our mystery hero, dressed in what can only be described as a stylistically similar, yet more sophisticated and regal version of Superman’s famous costume (we love it!), has spent the rest of the weekend tirelessly averting disasters, intervening with the NCPD to stop multiple crimes, and helping the people of National City… from its richest to the poorest.

“The questions that everyone’s asking? Just who is this amazing woman, and what is her name?

“Wait... this just in, Mayor Carver and NCPD Commissioner Scanlon have called a press conference for this afternoon at 2 P.M. Our sources report that they will announce that the city has established a working relationship with the hero and that newly-appointed Captain, Devi Mitra, will lead a yet-to-be-named task force to coordinate that relationship.

“The highly decorated officer, leader of _The Sentinels_ strike force, and nearly fifteen-year veteran of the NCPD is a hero in her own right, having stared down threats from both the Russian mob and Mexican drug cartels. We here at Channel 3 believe she will continue to prove herself to be a strident defender of the people and the best person for the job. On a side note, _this_ reporter can’t wait to see such a capable woman of color and role model working side-by-side with National City’s inspiring new hero. “

Kara grinned with delight listening to Carol Dwyer wax on about Devi; her friend deserved the attention, and the accolades. On Krypton, she would have been a great leader in the Military Guild, Kara was certain.

The Kryptonian was still thinking about her awesome friend and all the people that helped her behind the scenes as she scooted into the kitchen. The echo of the TV could be heard clearly, even to anyone without super-hearing.

Before saying hello to Alex and Shah, she kissed Ryah on top of her head, pulled down three boxes of cereal from a cupboard and a container of Almond milk out of the fridge. Scuffling her tired feet on
the hardwood floor, she moved over to softly nuzzled her wife before sitting down at the kitchen table to join them.

Her Persian Ninja leaned over to give her a loving peck on the cheek. “I was feeling left out.” She said with a grin. Kara looked devastated, then quickly darted in to wrap her arms around Shah in a full body hug.

“There,” The blonde said soothingly. “All better?”

“All better.” Shah's cheeks were slightly flushed, and she was smiling as Kara sat back down.

Looking up from eating her cereal Ryah watched them, and giggled.

"Well, that went better than expected." Alex said as Kara sat back down at the table.

"Yeah, thank goodness for Devi." Kara said between spoonfulls. The hero had just returned from meetings all morning with Jack, Devi, the mayor, and the NCPD’s top brass at District One, the NCPD’s headquarters. They’d agreed to the framework plan for working together, and Kara had insisted on her friend leading the task force.

Her position was based on a number of reasons besides her and Devi’s relationship. The incredible woman had a long record of success, and already led *The Sentinels* who would make up the core of the new elite unit; there was also the matter of a little advice she’d once received from Bruce once about having someone she could trust inside the police force, at a high level.

Thankfully, Miyuki had also been at the meeting as Kara’s attorney to handle all the legal mumbo-jumbo. The woman knew her stuff and intimidated the heck out of the city’s lawyers!

“Yay, Devi!” Ryah called out. “You get to work with her now for real, mom! You know… officially and everything. She’s so amazing.”

“I couldn’t agree more, kid.” Alex grinned and reached over to use her thumb to wipe milk off the corner of the girl’s mouth.

Their daughter continued, “When I grow up, I want to be a doctor-slash-veterinarian-slash-witch-slash-scientist-slash-secret agent-slash-detective-slash-superhero, all rolled into one.” They all stared at her and she giggled, “What can I say? I have awesome role models.”

They all laughed and Shah leaned over the table to fist-bump the charming Durlan, followed by butterfly fingers and a hug. “That’s my girl.”

Ryah's smile could have lit the sky.

Back on the TV... “And… keep it right here, for more as we know it.” The Channel 3 reporter said as the video rolled into a commercial for Lord Tech, which was at least twice as loud as the news had been. “Imagine, the world of tomorrow…” The colorful spot began.

“Ugh, can someone turn that off? How Lilly adores that smug man so much I’ll never…” Kara said with annoyance, but became silent and began smiling once again as she shifted her focus back to the touching scene between her daughter and Shah, who were in the middle of doing a very complicated secret handshake. It melted her heart to watch. The two had become even closer since Shah had joined their bond, no longer an aunt... but truly another mother to their precious child.

Kara, now relaxed, unglamorously allowed herself to slouch over the kitchen table in her fluffy pajamas before starting to shovel cold cereal into her mouth in earnest.
Alex tried to restrain a giggle watching her.

“Whhaa?” Kara glanced over at her bondmate, her mouth stuffed full, questioning eyes wide.

“Nothing… it’s just that, you’re so cute when you gerbil.”

Kara scowled while trying hard not to laugh too.

*I think we should talk about it* Hamsar-am. Alex’s thoughts were soft, like gentle fingers running over Kara’s scalp. Shah took a sip of her chai and look over at the same time, nodding at Kara in agreement with their bondmate.

*When we’re alone… little ears.*

*Okay.* Both Alex and Shah echoed in unison.

“Moms, I need to get ready for training. Today, Shah’s going to show me ten ways to incapacitate a human!” Ryah was bouncing up and down with excitement in her chair.

“Only ten?” Alex smirked.

Shah’s warm thoughts mingling with her bondmates’, *I have to start somewhere. She’ll know a hundred, or more, by her next birthday.*

“Yay?” Kara looked a bit concerned, but Alex just chuckled and said, “Go get ‘em, tiger.”

As the excited girl hugged her moms goodbye and then took off on a tear to the spiral staircase that led to the training hall below the loft, Shah called after her, “Start with stretches please, moosh moosh-am! I’ll be there in a minute.”

*Mersi, Sensei!* The girl’s obedient voice chimed back.

“So…” Shah began as her cat-like emerald eyes turned on Kara once the trio were alone. The beautiful woman’s face bore a playful grin as she rested her chin on her knuckles, elbows on the table and asked teasingly, “*Supergirl,* huh?”

The Kryptonian’s brow furrowed, and she took on an indignant look, “Yes… Apparently, I am going to be branded… by CatCo. Well, by *Cat.* The deluded woman thinks she owns me or something…”

“Look…” Alex said as she reached across the table to entwine their fingers. “Kara Danvers *may* work for her, but she doesn’t own you. That said, bright side? It’s not a bad name… Plus, Ada’s been hard at work trying to secure every Supergirl trademark she can for Archangel. Inc. before the Queen of All Media can scoop them up. So, you can at least have the last laugh.”

Kara smiled back at Alex, then took a deep breath as she gazed over at their Persian sister and gracefully slipped her unoccupied hand into one of hers as well, so the three of them were physically connected, like the triumvirate they were. It somehow made her feel… stronger, as it always did.

“Rao, I don’t know what I’d do without your daughter, Shah.”

*I heard that!* Ada’s soft laughter echoed in all of their shared thoughts. *Thanks, auntie. But if Colliers hadn’t tipped us off about Cat’s impending announcement, you would have been in for a big surprise on Monday morning, with zero time to prepare.*

Kara sighed. *And here I was, thinking I had all the time in the world. Shah, you were right, as usual.*
By delaying I let Cat control the game... and my life.

I’ll never say I told you so, only ask that you learn from it... for next time.

A moment of peace settled over them, Shah sipping her tea, Alex flickering over to rub Kara’s sore shoulders with her magic fingers, and Kara, glancing between the two women she loved so much.

She finally broke the silence, and asked, “So... have either of you changed your minds? I know how Astra feels about all of this.”

Alex shook her head, “Nope. Like her, we’re going to keep it low-key, stay D.E.O. full-time when not at our day jobs, and Arch... I mean Supergirl’s helpers whenever you need us, but staying out of the limelight... for now.”

Shah nodded, looking quite serene. “We all agree. Supergirl is the hero National City (and the world) needs, Kara. It’s your time to shine.”

Monday...

June 27th, Year Nine

Kara and Alex’s loft – National City

1255 Hours UTC -8, Monday afternoon, U.S. Pacific Coast Time - Just a few hours after CatCo’s official “Supergirl” announcement

The loft’s massive flat screen seemed stuck on Channel 3, and at the moment, a male reporter was speaking in somber tones, “In less pleasant news, there is still no new information coming out of Metropolis, nearly sixteen hours after the sudden disappearance of three founding members of the Justice League: Superman, Wonder Woman, and the Gotham vigilante known as the Batman. Authorities are still offering no comment on the terrifying incident that occurred over the city or its accompanying fireworks... the blinding flash of light and ear-splitting boom that shattered windows on dozens of skyscrapers, and was heard a hundred miles away.

“There was some excitement earlier today when National City’s own hero, Supergirl made an appearance over Metropolis... her blue glowing eyes like twin beacons, as if she were meticulously searching for something. Clues perhaps? We can only guess and hope that the mysterious beauty is trying to help find answers, just like the rest of us. For now, as the people, and the city, wait and agonize over the fates of their protectors, night vigils, and prayer services have begun popping up across the globe, with everyone praying for a miracle, and asking the question... what happened to their... our heroes? Back to you Carol...”

“Turn it off,” Kara said despondently, curled up with her sleeping daughter (whom they’d kept home from school that day) on the couch in their loft, a box of Kleenex close by, and her eyes ringed red.

“Mysterious beauty... Feh.” She scoffed, blowing her nose as quietly as possible.

Alex flicked off the big screen, snuggled in so Kara could lean against her, and began fidgeting with her bondmate’s hair. “Vaena, you’ve done everything you can, and more. You’re running yourself ragged; flying back and forth between National City and Metropolis, doing your job at CatCo,
coming back here in-between to catch a breather, and still being the protector of the city as Archangel, um sorry, Supergirl. You’ve hardly slept at all in days... idiot.”

Kara grimaced as Alex spoke the name Cat Grant had branded her with. “I know... but I have to be out there, Alex! I can hear people calling out to me, all the time… and can finally help them out in the open.” She sighed. “Even though we missed the fight over Metropolis, the sensor data I gathered with my new suit has been useful, right?”

Alex nodded, “Yes, Ada, Shatari, Max, and Zara are still crunching the data dump from your armor, and zeroing in on the coordinates of the space-time incursion you discovered that occurred over the city as we speak.”

The blonde sighed, “Yeah, but even if we figure out which universe in the multiverse they’ve been taken to, we have no idea how to get there. We only have the ability to travel to Earth Pax because of our crystals acting as a bridge, and we still haven’t been able to force open the gate to the other Krypton…”

“Shh.” Alex leaned in and laid her head on Kara’s shoulder. “Let the experts work the problem. Shah’s on point with them, she’s the plucky engineer... if anyone can figure out how to program our crystals for another set of coordinates, it’s her, and our Companions.”

“Or Jor-El.” Kara groaned miserably as she absently tucked their daughter’s dangling amber Kryptonian crystal back into her shirt as she slept.

“Hey, that’s not an option, Uva tried to get him to talk to us through the fissure in space-time, but we don’t exist to him. It’s like there’s a veil between us that your nanny is somehow immune to through her connection with you. Look, my love, it’s not your fault we can’t reach him. Failing for years to open your gateway is on both of us. We’re still just… missing something.”

“Yeah, and my cousin, Diana, and Bruce… are all paying the price…. Oh, Rao!” Kara suddenly realized something. “Selina! I completely forgot to call her after I left Lois’. She must be a mess. I need to get cleaned up and go see her, tonight. Hopefully, I can also talk to her about helping me with my Cat problem if she’s up for it. Oh, how did your conversation with Circe go?”

“Scary. The goddess of magic is as beside herself as Myka is, and ready to tear the world apart. Olympus is trembling... literally. If we fail, she swore that she’d break the divine pact, regardless of the consequences, and go after Diana herself.”

“Good, serves them right if she did... stupid rules,” Kara grumbled.

“I couldn’t agree more, but we can’t allow that to happen… unless it’s a worst-case scenario. Hades would love to take advantage of the chaos that would create.” Alex turned her head and kissed Kara’s neck, nipping and leaving a mark as a promise for later as her lips trailed down to the D.E.O. tattoo on her smooth shoulder. “Go, get washed up and check in on Ms. Kyle. I’m sure she could use a friend right now, and so can you. I’ll take care of the munchkin, poor thing’s exhausted from training with Shah all morning.”

“Thanks, but you know... our beautiful little mouse isn’t really a munchkin anymore, I mean, look her. I can’t stop staring.”

And they did, both gazing down in wonder at their daughter, whom they adored beyond reason, safely ensnconced in Kara’s arms. The Durlan girl was so at peace, and maturing so quickly it was hard for either of them to believe. Her angelic face was no longer round and cute, but slim, and beyond simply pretty. She was also tall for her age… her lithe body strong, agile, and already a
weapon.

Rao, I know it’s cliché to say, but… she’s going to break hearts, isn’t she? Alex suddenly seemed to realize in a panic.

Kara’s thoughts hummed with pride, soothing her… somewhat. Yes, even though she’ll try not to… and she’ll be a terror to her enemies. You, Shah, Aeryn, Miyuki, and J’onn have all made sure of that.

Alex sighed in resignation, bumping foreheads with Kara’s as they chuckled quietly and thought as one…

May the gods help us all.

……………………………….

Interlude

June 27th, Year Nine

Mega Diesel Truck Stop – on I-101 just outside National City

1312 Hours UTC -8, Monday afternoon, U.S. Pacific Coast Time

The stocky, powerfully-built truck driver looked like a weightlifter but moved like a cat. Dressed in worn Levi’s and a rugged khaki workman’s jacket, the grim man easily climbed up to the top of the large shining chrome tanker behind his idling rig and stood up.

After shielding his eyes from the glare of the afternoon sun and wiping the sweat from his brow, he took a quick, wary glance around the parking area of the busy Mega Diesel Truck Stop, and his Cro-Magnon-like brow relaxed. Moments later he bent down to crank open the rear hatch on the top of the tanker, and slipped inside down a ladder… securely sealing the aperture behind him with an echo of metal grinding on metal.

The transport was inexplicably larger inside than out, and empty. A soft, shielded light emanated from beneath the metal grid on both sides of a metal walkway that ran down the length of the tanker. The burly driver headed forward to a communications center that was technically just behind the vehicle’s cab.

As he approached, a man standing inside came into view, and the driver removed the cap he was wearing in deference. As he did so he rolled his head and neck, cracking his joints and raising the hardened battle ridges that covered his shaved head.

“Ah, feels good.” He groaned with pleasure.

“Does it?” The imperious man waiting for him asked, obviously displeased, his tone accusatory.

The Daxamite royal was also bald, but less muscular, and taller than the driver. As befit his station as one of General Non’s lieutenants he was dressed in a dark bodysuit made of a wondrous lightweight material from a star system many parsecs from Earth.
Standing with his hands clasped behind his back, he was still facing away as he spoke, “What happened with the plane, Vartox? You were ordered to bring it down.”

The soldier kneeled and bowed his head before his superior. “Our trap worked, Commander Karn. The D.E.O. agents were on board and the bombs detonated.”

The officer turned, his hawkish features twisted into a sneer as his voice rose, “Then why aren’t they all dead?”

Vartox clenched his fists, pounding one into the metal grate he kneeled on… denting it. “The female.” He snarled. “She came out of nowhere, flew into the sky and caught the plane.”

“Who is she?”

“We suspect Justice was able to save her child from your world’s destruction. I believe the girl came to Earth with her cousin and is now working with the humans... this flying female bears Alura’s symbol.”

Karn ground his teeth. “Ten years, Vartox. Ten years we've been forced to hide in the shadows, but no longer. The General's arrival in National City is imminent, and nothing must interfere. You are instructed to eliminate the human operatives, and you can add this girl to the list, whether or not she is who you claim.”

Since escaping Fort Rozz, Vartox had imagined the honor of battling Kal-El at his full strength many times, and how glorious it would be to defeat him... but never a female Kryptonian. There would be no honor in killing her, yet the warrior was bound by his oath to serve The General and to end her if those were his surrogate’s orders.

It was a pity; Supergirl would have made an excellent mate to service his unquenchable needs. One of her kind would be so much more durable than the fragile human lovers he had to be so careful with since escaping from Fort Rozz.

The warrior finally responded, “Can't promise her death won't be public, and messy.”

“Human casualties are irrelevant,” Karn said dismissively.

Vartox chose to ignore his superior’s glib comment and reached over to the wall where his gleaming battle axe was kept and pulled it down. At his touch, he could feel the weapon’s power flow into him as their neural connection reformed. “If she is Alura Zor-El's daughter, then she will pay her mother's debts.”

“And so will her city.” The commander added with a smug assurance as he raised a hand to forestall any questions. “Its leaders and its Queen will feel the bitter sting of consequence for allying themselves with this... ‘Supergirl’.”

Vartox sensed the malevolent change in his tone, and something else. The warrior's blood turned to ice. “What have you done?”

The man’s laugh was cold and mirthless. “I have taken the liberty of building in... a contingency... an insurance policy as the humans might say, should you fail The General again.”

“How...” Vartox began but was cut off by the impatient Daxamite, who appeared bored.

“These pathetic humans are a feeble species, with many flaws to exploit. They care a great deal about others in their social groupings, especially their offspring... irrationally so, in fact. To
suddenly, and violently, lose something so precious would certainly cripple their ability to organize resistance, and turn them against their hero once we make them perceive it was she who was responsible for all their deaths.”

“No! I will not harm young ones needlessly!” Vartox’s deep voice rose in anger. "This ploy is unnecessary."

The Commander leveled his gaze on the warrior, “There were children on the plane you tried to blow out of the sky, Vartox, what’s the difference?”

“They were traveling with the enemy, terrible and unfortunate causalities of war… but there is no honor in what you now propose, only cowardice, and I will play no part in it, or serve those who would so easily use such a tactic.”

Karn shook his head, looking smug once again. “You don’t understand… you have no choice, warrior. Once you picked up that axe your fate was sealed. You will either kill this annoying female who doesn’t know her place, or a great number of these human children along with half of the city will perish, quite horribly in fact, because of you.”

Vartox gripped his axe with white knuckles and lunged at the grinning man, but all he managed to accomplish was to disrupt the light matrix that made up the Daxamite’s form as he swung and passed through.

“Too cowardly to even face me in person? I should have expected as much.” The warrior’s expression became grim as he tilted his head to crack his bones, and stared defiantly at the 3D image as it reformed, making to toss his weapon from him.

“Ah-ah, I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” Karn cautioned. “Should that weapon of yours be parted from you for more than two minutes, as these primitives measure time, let’s just say you will feel the explosion from across the city.”

The great warrior seethed at the threat, but what could he do? He was caught between the rocks and the sea, as his father was fond of saying, without any good options… aside from one.

“If I kill her, you will not harm the little ones?”

“Of course not. As I said before, the humans are irrelevant… aside from being a means to an end, for pleasure, or as disposable labor. If Supergirl is dead we will deactivate the dark energy weapon hidden beneath where the city’s leaders’ offspring, including the Queen’s own son, congregate for learning.”

Vartox bowed his head to hide his rage. “What must I do?” He ground out the words.

Karn, who the warrior had once thought of as his leader, chuckled with arrogant satisfaction at the mighty warrior’s acquiescence. “First and foremost, it is imperative we prepare for The General’s arrival, so hold off engaging the girl for now. But, in four solar cycles, on the day these humans call Friday; you will draw the supposed Daughter of Alura out and end her. Or…”

“I understand.” The warrior said as he hefted his axe to the ready. “Supergirl will die. But be warned, coward, I will also hold you and your General accountable to your promise.”

……………………………….
Winn still hadn’t heard back from Miyuki by Monday morning and was going out of his mind with worry. After the initial chaos caused by Cat’s Supergirl announcement died down he’d pestered his ‘big sister’ Alex for the hundredth time about her, and she finally became exasperated enough to grab a napkin and scribble down where he could find her younger cousin… if he hurried.

“She may not want to see you. Are you sure you want this?” The brunette warned as she held the partially crumpled treasure just out of his reach.

“I don’t understand. What did I do?” Winn didn’t mean for his words to sound so… desperate.

“And, heck yes, I want that!”

He watched Alex melt, her hazel eyes radiating sympathy as she spoke, “Winn, wonderful Winn, it’s not you… really. I… I shouldn’t be telling you this, but Miyuki didn’t have an easy life, and until Astra, no one who truly loved her (only used her). I think she cares about you a lot and is worried that she can’t measure up to what you expect, or deserve… but I never said any of that.

Winn was so confused… he’d had no idea. Miyuki always seemed so together, so... perfect. “Wait, let me get this straight she… she’s afraid she isn’t good enough for me?? Do you know how fucked up that sounds? I need to find her, Alex, and talk some sense into her.”

His friend’s eyes crinkled at the edges and he found himself suddenly lifted off of the floor in an Alex Danvers hug, with the napkin pressed into the palm of his hand. “Then go to her.” She breathed in his ear.

He was out the door of her and Kara’s loft in seconds.

……………………………….

Winn didn’t have a car and the Uber driver would only take him halfway to where he needed to go, so he ended up riding three different buses on his complicated journey to find Miyuki… and became more and more worried as the neighborhoods transitioned. When he started seeing graffiti all over and bars on the windows of every business, he started to sweat.

He was fully aware that he was sheltered, but frack, he was embarrassingly out of his element... and more than a little anxious.

“Last stop.” The middle-aged female driver called out from behind the vehicle’s massive wheel, looking back impatiently in the mirror above her. Winn clutched his messenger bag tighter as the rumbling bus came to a noisy halt.

Startled from his thoughts of Miyuki, he earned a kindly look from an old man across from him. The serene gentleman possessed a benevolent, lined face, and cataracts partially covered his milky eyes. He smiled and said, “You look like a fish out of water, young man.”
“Yeah, I guess I probably do.” Winn chuckled as he helped the old-timer to his feet and down the stairs to the cracked sidewalk, grinning at the driver as they disembarked. Surprisingly, the severe-seeming woman actually waved back with a smile on her face as the doors creaked closed and the bus rumbled away from the curb.

The old man steadied himself with his cane before he offered a dry, calloused hand that Winn shook gently. “Mind if I ask where you’re headed, son?”

Winn told him, and after thanking the old-timer profusely, followed his complicated directions to find the address. He also followed the astute man’s guidance to appear more relaxed and casual as he walked in the area, rather than all hunched over protecting his ‘stuff’ like a ‘scaredy-cat’.

“I’m an idiot, I’m an idiot…” Winn chanted quietly to himself as he took a deep breath, and kept thinking of finding Miyuki as he walked on.

It was only twenty-or-so minutes later that he entered a busy area, with small businesses, people on the sidewalks, cars, and even a couple of street vendors. From the snippets of conversation he overheard, Spanish was the predominant language spoken. He knew he stood out like a sore thumb, but it couldn’t be helped, and aside from a few stares, no one bothered him.

He felt a lot better after that and more confident as he followed his phone’s GPS the last few blocks.

Carson’s Garage was located on an out-of-the-way street and was surrounded by a razor wire-topped twelve-foot high chain-link fence. Within its electrified perimeter stood the massive garage, which was as big as a small warehouse, surrounded by a veritable sea of old cars. Fortunately, it was daytime, so the gates were open, along with four of the building’s six big metal rolling doors.

Winn relaxed as he heard, and saw, that and there were four cars being actively worked on by what appeared to be at least three male and two female mechanics in the bays.

As he walked into the paved lot he encountered a minivan where a woman in sunglasses and a long breezy skirt held a cell phone up to her ear while trying to corral her two little boys who were chasing each other frantically in circles and making silly noises. The mother (he assumed) noticed Winn first and lowered her glasses to get a better look at him.

Maybe it was a trick of the light, but he about jumped out of his skin. He could have sworn he saw a vertical slit appear in the center of each of the woman’s eyes (like a snake’s irises but more pronounced) and open to study him revealing beautiful colors of emerald, gold, entwined with black. He stopped abruptly and was about to freak out, but the next moment he was looking into her big brown normal eyes, with the boys circling him and yelling, “I’m Supergirl!”, “No, I’m Supergirl! I’ll get the bad guy!”

Winn set all the weirdness around him aside and suddenly couldn’t stop chuckling.

The mom slipped her cell phone into the front pocket of her voluminous skirt and seemed to move without actually stepping across the ten or so feet separating them… like she floated. Wow, cool effect with the flowy material! Is that, silk?

“He.” She said with a bright smile, her voice like warm honey. The thirty something’s skin was dark as ebony, extremely striking, and she was only slightly shorter than Winn but probably his weight, which was lovingly distributed all over her curvy form. “Sorry about the boys, they’re in looove with their new hero.” Her voice then dropped to a faux whisper as she leaned in to add, “I am too, but who isn’t?” with a playful and slightly mischievous wink.
Okay, I already love her. Winn beamed back, “I know, right? Supergirl, she’s… out of this world. You are obviously a woman of discerning taste, and have taught your boys well.”

Just then, one of the little guys crashed into Winn’s legs.

“He’s not a bad guy!” The other mini-superhero giggled and said “Sorry mister!” before both of them ran off. The woman called after them to be careful, stay out of the street, and not to stop running.

“Sorry…” She then refocused on Winn. “You know, when I was younger I never imagined being a harried mother with two little monsters in a broken-down minivan.” The delightful woman then thrust out her hand. “Oh, and I’m Sabrina by the way… but my friends just call me Bree.”

Winn laughed and took her extremely cool hand in his own as he said, “Winn, Winn Schott, Jr. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss.” Her shake was surprisingly graceful.

“Miss, huh? I like you, young man.” She giggled. “So, what brings you to The Ol’ Repair Shop, Mr. Schott? Did your car break down, too?”

He laughed nervously. “No, nothing like that… I… ah, um.”

The woman narrowed her gaze on him and grinned knowingly. “Ah, a girl wouldn’t happen to be involved here, would she?”

“A… girl? How did you…? I mean… what?”

She laughed again, a deep, full sound, and then added, “A very pretty one, moves like a ghost, makes all the boys and girls cry because she’s eternally single and too busy to date?”

“Hey, wait a minute! You know…?”

“Miyuki’s inside, lover boy, in the back.” She patted his arm. “You didn’t ask for it, but my advice? Tread carefully; she was really pissed off at a ’69 Mustang earlier. It’s too bad too, it was a really nice car.”

Winn was confused. What? Did she take a sledgehammer to it or something?

At that moment, one of the guys from inside had walked out and yelled over, “Hey Missus C, we have the part! Can you come sign the paperwork so Dani and I can get started? We’ll have you outta here in thirty.”

“Be right there, Sam!” She replied and nodded back at Winn half grinning. “Why are you still standing here?”

“But… but… how do you know Miyuki? What is she doing here… at a garage? And, why won’t she call me back?” He sounded pitiful, and Sab… Bree looked so understanding like she just wanted to hug him.

“You’ll need to go ask her for yourself, sweetie, not my story to tell… especially because I honestly don’t know most of the answers. Our angel is a very private person, but I can say that over the last two years I’ve watched her spirit begin to shine. She’s been so happy… but now she’s afraid.”

Afraid? The word and what it could possibly mean was all Winn could think about as he said goodbye to the energetic woman with the cold hands and hustled inside, where he was met by a wall of three very protective mechanics.
The trio wouldn’t let him proceed into the back of the shop where Miyuki was… at least at first.

It wasn’t until after the young Latina in the group dashed off to see someone ‘in the back’ they referred to as *La sabia pastora*… the Wise Shepherd, and came back the answer changed. The girl appeared very disappointed and spoke in Spanish to her co-workers, “*La senora dijo déjalo entrar.*” Which set them arguing briefly, with Winn listening in.

**Who’s the lady?… Oh, wait! Holy moly, they’re talking about Mikyuki!**

Winn knew exactly what they’d said, ‘*The lady said let him in*’, but was more intrigued by how deferentially the trio spoke of his best friend, the woman he’d recently started dating and was secretly head-over-heels in love with, and the reverence with which they referred to her.

**Why ‘The Wise Shepherd’?**

Winn was still considering the title’s potential meanings, and the fact that Bree had also called Miyuki ‘our angel’ as the trio of protectors begrudgingly allowed him to pass.

He thanked them in perfect Spanish as he walked by, causing the young woman to blush. In her defense, Winn knew that he was the stereotypical image of a ‘white male’ (a really, really white male). How was she supposed to know he was fluent in Spanish?

Once past the counter area and inside the cavernous building’s interior, he was inundated by a cacophony of noises. Among them, he caught the angry sound of clanking metal tools and a woman cursing echoing from somewhere back toward the rear of the place.

**Yeah, she’s back here.**

He smiled as he followed the stream of toe-curling blasphemy, and wound his way around stacks of tires, tools, and machinery.

When he finally reached the bay in the back, his heart rate went off the charts as his gaze fell upon the most incredible pair of black leather-clad legs he’d ever seen (even counting Kara’s in his suit). He’d found Miyuki, the lower half of her slightly grease-stained white tank top sticking out from under her shiny black, custom Ducati Panigale 1199 R superbike.

Winn paused just to take her in… the amazing woman that he knew in his heart, in his very soul, that he loved. The woman he was afraid he’d already lost before ever having the chance to tell her so.

“Hey, Winn.” She said dejectedly as she pushed herself out from under her motorcycle, and wiped an oil smudge on her cheek. **God, how can she be even more beautiful than the last time I saw her?** Winn’s knees felt weak just looking at her, as always.

He tried to brighten the mood. “Nice place you have here, kind of off the beaten track. Could use some hand sanitizer though…”

**Crickets…**

“Could you hand me the 12-millimeter wrench there, by your left hand?” She asked politely and slid back under the bike as she responded to his comment. “Yeah, the owners, Dale and Bree are… friends of mine, and let me store and work on my bikes here.”

“Ah, got it. Mrs. C… as in, Sabrina **Carlson**.” **As in Carlson’s Garage**… Winn chuckled weakly as he handed her the tool, which she reached out and took without even looking.
“Oh, did you meet her?”

“Yeah, her and her two boys, outside. She’s really nice.”

“She is, they all are.”

Winn could tell by Miyuki’s brief responses, and how rough her actions were with her bike that something was really bothering her. After a few moments of quiet, he said, “I’m not sure what that bike did to piss you off, Chambers, but it must have been bad.” *What did I do?*

She cursed in Japanese, sighed, and rolled out from under the sleek machine again to look up at him. He’d never seen her so sad before. “It didn’t do anything. **You** didn’t do anything… I know you, Winn Schott Jr. You’re thinking ‘what did I do to upset her?’ and blaming yourself because that’s the wonderful, sensitive man you are… but it’s me. It’s all me.”

“I doubt that…” He started…

But she cut him off. “Yes, Winn. It is. I’m not perfect like **Kara**… I know how you idolize her. And when you find out all my secrets, when I tell you about my… past. You’re probably going to run for the hills, and… I… it hurts.” Winn had never seen her cry before, and she didn’t then… but wiped wetness from the corners of her eyes, smudging more grease on her face like Cleopatra mascara as she did so.

Winn knelt down, wanting nothing more than to just wrap his arms around her. “Ah, just be clear, there’s nothing you can say that would make me leave your side, or the room, let alone run. You know I hate running.” He smiled, and she fought a laugh but lost.

The look in her eyes was a new experience for Winn personally, but the long-suffering ‘nice guy’ recognized it. He’d always imagined what it would be like to be on the receiving end of true adoration.

What he didn’t realize, of course, was that he was looking right back at her the same way.

He’d forgotten to breathe, and they were an inch from kissing when she bit her lip hesitantly and said, “I need to tell you some things… things about me. You can decide if you still want to kiss me after.”

Winn’s brow wrinkled and he huffed dismissively. “Bring it, gorgeous.”

She smiled demurely as they both stood, she, uncharacteristically looking down at her feet, blushing (something that she never did… for anyone); he, waiting patiently for her to open up.

After a moment, she glanced back up into his eyes and said, “I think we should go somewhere a little more, mmm, private. Do you trust me, Winn? Do you really trust me?”

“Implicitly.”

Suddenly, he was on the roof of the garage, a little disoriented, but not too bad for being gently plucked up in her arms, run out of the garage, and flown up to the roof in under 1.5 seconds. He’d become used to the quick transition of Kara carting him off places… just not his girlfriend.

“Oh… my… God.” He puffed out a breath and put his hands on his knees as he looked up at a very nervous and concerned Miyuki. “You’re a… you’re a…”

“Yes, I’m Kryptonian… though a bit of a mutt biologically speaking. Ready to take up jogging yet? I
can carry you down.”

“No! Heck no! This is awesome! I mean, you, you are even more perfect than I already… this is just, wow.”

She was grinning. “So not the reaction I was expecting...”

“It’s better, right?” He asked, beaming.

“Lots… and for the record? I’ve never been called ‘perfect’ before.”

“Well, get used to it. Oh my God, this is wonderful! You’re just like Kara and...”

“I’m nothing like Kara! Nothing!” Miyuki hissed. Her dark brown eyes had narrowed and simmered like molten lava for just a moment. But she calmed, quickly, and looked instantly mortified.

“I’m so sorry, Winn, I didn’t mean to…” She took a breath and looked so miserable. “You need to understand something. Kara is as close to Kryptonian royalty as you can get, a princess of the lofty and respected ancient House of El. I truly love my cousin and do not begrudge her my lot in life. She is a worthy daughter of Justice, kind, beautiful, heroic, selfless… so bright she’s like looking at the sun.”

“I don’t understand...” He began.

“Winn, some of us are shadows.” She took a deep breath, straightened, and faced him. “Now that you know my adopted family’s secrets, I can tell you mine, but I’ve honestly never been so scared of doing anything in my whole life.”

“Why?” He asked softly. “I didn’t think you were afraid of anything.”

She shrugged, wrapping her arms around herself. “I guess I’ve never had something so precious to lose before.”

His eyes widened in surprise and he gently placed his hands on her shoulders. “It’s okay, just spit it out. Whatever it is, I won’t judge. Ever. And like I said, I’m not going anywhere.”

She smiled a little and loosened up. Winn took her hands in his as she began...

“Okay then, please allow me to re-introduce myself. When I arrived on Earth, I took the name Miyuki, which means ‘silent snow’, so I could start over. But before I was Miyuki In-Ze Chambers I was just Maeve, a Houseless child of mixed heritage who never knew who her birth father was… a Rim Rat, who grew up on a ragtag star freighter.

“My birth mother is Kryptonian but the con man she shackled up with, Zane, is a Daxamite.” She spat the word as if it was the worst thing in the universe. “He barely tolerated my presence growing up, and I never once considered him a father. He was a horrible person whose only goal in life was his next big score, and mother was a spineless, perpetual victim who would acquiesce to whatever he wanted… no matter how distasteful, or who was hurt (as long as it wasn’t her). The woman never stood up for me.” A look of loss and anger momentarily gripped her, but Miyuki took a deep breath and then continued.

“They moved drugs, illegal goods, even trafficked slaves for Daxam royals between star systems. ‘Whatever pays the bills’ (I’m paraphrasing) Captain Zane used to say, usually right before he’d punch or slap me and tell me to get back to work… like he did whenever I dared to question his
ethical choices… which I did often. He hated me, seriously.

“And by me getting back to ‘work’, it meant me either helping the mechanics fix our creaky, leaky old starship, or being ordered to sneak around and steal from his ‘friends’ and ‘business associates’ while he negotiated deals. I was scrawny, agile, quiet, and good at hiding and squeezing into small spaces, which is why I made a great thief. That’s basically how my life and my entire childhood went. If it wasn’t for the engineer on our damn ship I wouldn't have had any form of education.”

Winn was taken aback, not because his girlfriend was an alien, but by how terribly the adults in her life had neglected and abused her. “My God, Miyuki, I’m so sorry… that sounds so awful, and unfair.” He paused, and then said; “I know something about bad parents, but what you went through…”

“I’m sorry too, Winn, will you tell me about it sometime? I promise to be a good listener… you know, if you’re still talking to me after…” She smiled warmly and caressed his hand.

He swallowed hard at the thrill of her silky touch on his skin and fought the urge to kiss her. “Thanks, I will, but today is about you. I did have a couple questions if that’s okay?”

“Shoot.”

“Can you quickly explain what it means to be ‘Houseless’, and a ‘Rim Rat’?”

“Ahh sorry. I forget sometimes not everyone here knows. A long, long time ago, Kryptonians were explorers, curious adventurers who sought out other worlds and civilizations to live among them. This led to interspecies marriages and a melding of cultures; in many ways like what Kara is doing here on Earth. For thousands of years, that’s how things were. My mother once told me that our ancestors were some of the first to leave, and mingle… though we knew next to nothing about them or their history.

“Over time the political climate changed back on the homeworld. Krypton became more isolated and xenophobic, and society looked less fondly on ‘reckless endeavors that endangered the purity of our race’. Yeah, it sucked. Eventually, The Council began offering incentives to all those living on other worlds who met the ‘purity standard’ of being Kryptonian to return ‘home’… the catch? They’d have to leave their non-pure families behind. And to most, it was a world they’d never seen before.

“After their enticements mostly failed, those who refused to answer The Summons (like my ancestors), were stripped of their Houses, their property, and the entire ancestral line of their ‘tainted’ DNA and memories were purged from the Codex, the living record of Krypton and our people. It was the Codex engine that powered Kara and Ada’s Awakenings.” She made an angry growling sound in her throat. “I still get angry when I think about how The Council just threw us away!”

Winn squeezed her hands supportively and said, “That’s nuts and wrong. Sorry, I asked… but I appreciate you explaining. Please, go on with your story.”

“Thanks, Winn. Anyway, I was in the ducts one day, practicing spying, and overheard my ‘father’ gloating that he’d decided to sell me off to a wealthy Rigelan merchant for a small fortune when I turned thirteen. Which meant I was going to be his concubine, basically a sex slave for the rest of my life. I about gagged.”

Winn stopped breathing for a moment. He wanted to fly into space, find her scumbag ‘father’ and blow him out an airlock!

She took a breath to steady herself before continuing, “You need to understand something about
Rigelans. Not only do they look like Jabbah the Hutt (but even more hideous), they have three reproductive organs that to all appearances are like long, creepy tentacles. Whenever the merchant would visit he’d taunt me with them, like some sort of sick promise. I believe he thought he was seducing me, but to this day I can’t even look at calamari, or octopus without wanting to hurl.” She shuddered. “Zane thought it was hilarious, my mother just pretended not to notice… as usual.”

“That’s sick!” Winn was outraged. “Your own parents… were going to just… sell you?… for…” He couldn’t say it.

“For sex… yes, but they never had the chance. I swore I’d run away, but Captain Zane made sure to keep us clear of systems with stars like Sol that could give me the strength I needed to easily escape. The crew also kept their eyes on me to make sure I couldn’t just slip away when we docked somewhere. They were the only family I had, really, and meant well… worse things probably would have happened to me if I’d been successful.”

Winn put his arm around her, and she snuggled into him. She then shimmered them over to an old couch that was up there on the roof and whispered, “I put this here for star gazing.” And then they sat down together as she continued; “I think it was fate that brought the pirates to us that day.”

Winn brightened. “Pirates? As in... space pirates?”

She laughed, “You’re such a geek.”

“But you love me anyway, right?” He suddenly realized what he’d just said, and flushed.

She just purred in response then said, “Yes…” before leaning in to kiss him. Winn thought he was going to die it was so amazing. She was soft, hot, my God, her tongue moved liked… and she tasted so good.

Gah! Wait a minute! "You… you love me?!!” He stopped for a moment to blink in disbelief, but she gently guided him back to where he was kissing her before.

“Yes, I was pretty sure a year ago, and more than pretty sure now. Did you… want… to hear… about the pirates?” Miyuki gasped out between kisses, and as Winn moved to nibble at her jawline and then over to her ear, and slowly down her neck.

“Uh huh, but… um, maybe later?” He smiled as he brushed his lips against her collarbone. Her fingers began playing with his wavy hair and then moved down to his chest.

“You need to know something about me now… before we…” She said, reluctantly lifted his chin up so he could look into her eyes, and he stopped to listen.

“Winn, I became one of those pirates, part of the crew, and was later sold to the largest criminal organization in the core systems. The Syndicate trained me, used me as a thief… and an assassin. I’ve… killed people.”

He didn’t seem surprised at all by her admission, and with complete sincerity asked, “The ones you killed, were they bad?”

She stared at him in disbelief for a moment and then said, “Yes… mostly, very bad. But when my masters gave me a target that was truly innocent, the mate of some politician, I couldn’t do it… and had to flee, or die. I was marked, went on the run, and fought the assassins they sent after me for months. I finally faded into the woodwork on some backwater world in the Sirus System, and after six months of quiet, I thought I’d gotten away. Then, of course, the other shoe dropped, and I kind of
ended up going from the frying pan right into the fire… that’s how they say that expression here on Earth, right?”

Winn nodded encouragingly and said. “Yeah, you nailed it.”

She smiled and continued, “Good. Anyway, The Syndicate couldn’t find me, so they fabricated offenses that I’d supposedly committed, had alerted authorities using diplomats, and had a bounty out on my head. Kara’s mother’s Protectors (think Kryptonian police) found me first and hauled me off to Krypton… a world I’d never seen in my entire life (except in my dreams and on vids), to be judged for crimes I didn’t do.”

Winn slid down on his side with her on the couch and gazed into her big brown eyes, entranced. “What happened then?”

“Well, when I told her my story, I think I broke Alura’s heart. I cried like a baby for the first time in… well, ever, and… she held me, wept with me, and for those moments I had a taste of what a loving mother would have been like. She took pity on me… and as one of the Houseless, the last thing I had expected to receive was mercy.

“Regardless, Kara’s mom had a job to do, and as Justice she sentenced me to Fort Rozz for five Earth years to dwell with the ancestors of our people, after which I would be reexamined. If I had found enlightenment in that time I would be freed and given the choice of staying on Krypton or taken to a world of my choice. Oh Winn, I so wanted to make her proud of me, and stay.”

He gently brushed tears from Miyuki’s wet cheeks and held her hand.

She then told him about being immersed in Fort Rozz’s simulated worlds, and of the malfunction that turned them into nightmare realms where she once again became lost, on the run from enemies. She spoke of Astra finding her, and how at first she thought the great Kryptonian General was Alura and not her twin sister. They ended up becoming inseparable; fighting side-by-side for years while Fort Rozz drifted in the timeless dark of the Phantom Zone. They grew to love each other fiercely, and when Astra eventually offered Miyuki her House (and her name) they became a family of two.

After hearing her story, Winn felt closer to Miyuki than he had to anyone in his life, (even Kara, in whose memories he’d walked) and loved her even more.

With the pure conviction of his honest and adoring heart, he said to her, “Thank you for telling me all of this, as you can see I’m not running. As far as I’m concerned, I’m the luckiest man in the universe. Being with you is the most amazing thing I could ever imagine, and I’ve never been happier than when I am with you. I love you, Silent Snow.”

She buried her head in his shoulder, “I love you too, Winn, my brilliant, beautiful, and kind human man. I have never known anyone like you or felt so loved. Being with you is a dream I never dared believe I could have.”

After that they held each other under the afternoon sun on that big couch, content to lie in silence. Miyuki, drawing circles on Winn’s chest, and him, lost in her eyes.

A little while later he propped himself up on an elbow and gently asked, “So, I’ve been dying to know why everyone here calls you the Wise Shepherd… they’re also very protective of you, which I like.” He grinned.

“Oh, that.” She smiled fondly. “They’re illegal immigrants who I helped move down from Seattle a year ago to assimilate into the population here in National City. Thanks to grants from the Archangel
foundation I set them up with lives, identities, a place to live… but they made it a home all on their own. They’re really good, hardworking people, Winn.”

“Wow.” He suddenly had a realization… “Um, where… where are they from, exactly?”

“You really want to know?” She asked with a mischievous grin.

“Uh huh.” He nodded quickly, eager for the answer.

She looked up. “When the stars come out tonight I’ll show you.”

“Best… girlfriend… ever!” He crooned with delight.

They giggled, and she pulled him down on top of her, her soft lips seeking his once again… and as they kissed, slow and deep, time seemed to stand still.

Next: Endgame

…………………………………..

Story Lexicon/FAQs:

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Terms: Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

Ah!khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

Alex vanimelda - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Ay Dios Mio – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)

Aporup – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)

As-salāmu ʿalayki – A (formal) greeting which is also a standard salutation among Muslims, meaning ‘peace be upon you’. Less formal abbreviation is simply salām. (Arabic)

Asheghetam - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

Azdidane shoma khoshhalam – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)

Bedrood – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

Bonne nuit – ‘Good night’ (French)

C'est la vie – ‘That's life’. An acceptance of things as they are. (French)

C'est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)
Damnú air! – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Dooset daram – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Hajimemashite - Nice to meet you! - はじめまして！/お会いできてうれしいです！ (Japanese)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Irasshai mashita - A Japanese welcome -ようこそいらっしゃいました。 (Japanese)

íthi eutukhēs - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, nonbiologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Kheili khosh geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

M’eudail – ‘My dear/my darling’ to a friend, family, someone you care for (Gaelic/Irish)

Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature

Marbhfháisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)

miboosamet – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)

órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

¿Qué señoras tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)

Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Sundor – ‘Beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)

Thi eutukhēs – ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Volar mi diosa! – ‘Fly my goddess!’ (Spanish)
Wa‘alaykumu s-salām – A response to the greeting As-salāmu ‘alayki, ‘and upon you, peace’ (Arabic)

Wadā’an – ‘Farewell’ (Arabic)

Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

aziz-am – ‘My dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

delbandam - ‘My heartstring’. What Shah would call her cousin Tarsa as a child when she’d babysit (very sweet and precious), and still calls her since reconnecting.

Hamsar-am – This term falls more into the 'lover' category, as it is a common word for 'spouse.' However, hamsar literally means 'equal head,' so it stands for an equal partner, and is, therefore, a poetic way to point out one's better half (What Alex begins also calling Kara after they’re married, plus also still uses nooré cheshm-am).

Jeegaré manee - One of the most loving terms of endearment you can direct to someone in Persian. It is quite beautiful and should have a powerful effect on a person it’s directed to. In this case, Kara and Alex are being very clear at just how much they love, and have always loved Shah. They are very… possessive of their sister.

joon-am – ‘My dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

Moosh moosh-am - 'My mousy mouse’ said in Persian is utterly cute and endearing. Moosh means ‘little mouse’, but calling someone this cranks the sweetness factor up to eleven (what Shah calls Ryah)

Nafasem-an - ‘My breath’ (what Kara sometimes calls Alex)

nāzanin-am – ‘Sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘The light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘Sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person’s name<’ + joon (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean 'dear'. So, ‘Shah joon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

Other names/nickname/titles/things:

A ghrá – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)

A ghrá mo croí - ‘My heart's beloved, my darling’ (Irish/Gaelic)
Abje – ‘Sister’ informal version (Persian)

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Bakalawa bil Jibna - A mouthwateringly delicious Libyan version of baklava with a sweet cream filling.

Bríomhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

Cythonna – One of the most ancient Kryptonian gods, said to be the female half of Rao. Protector of those unjustly persecuted, as well as patron to monsters and non-biologic life forms (such as Kryptonian Companions/Ka’dahs).

Daxamites - An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people, ruled by strength/the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow altered by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.

Dios mío! – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

dhon-no-baad – ‘Thank you’ (Bengali)

Durlan - The Durlans are a rare extraterrestrial species, a race of shape-shifting beings from the planet Durla. Ryah is a Durlan, as was her guardian, Veya, who died protecting the child in the depths of Tehran’s Evin Prison.

Dūst doxtar – ‘Girlfriend’ (Persian)

Dūst pesar - ‘Boyfriend’ (Persian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Euryleia – ‘Woman Wanderer’ or ‘Wide Wandering’ - Dr. Naomi Young’s Amazon name

Fereshteh: Slang for saying that a girl is perfect, desired... hot, to die for, an angel. Historically used as a Persian girl’s name, simply meaning ‘angel’. (Persian)

H’ronmeer - the Martian God of Death and Fire, referred to by a faction as the God of Life and Light. (Martian)

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)

In’ah – Ancient, lost word for ‘daughter’ - what Myka calls Kara (Kryptonese),

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara
M’eudail – ‘My darling’ or ‘my dear’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Ma’har - Ancient, lost word for ‘mother’ - what Kara calls Myka (Kryptonese)

Mi amor – ‘My love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Mi lucero – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Mi Sol – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn - Thought & Memory (Old Norse)

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Nâmzad – ‘fiancé (m), fiancée (f), betrothed (Persian)

Norooz - Persian New Year (Persian)

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Oea - This ancient city was founded by the Phoenicians in the seventh century BC, was ruled at one time or another by the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Italians, and Muslims. It came to be known as Tripoli during the 9th century (Libyco-Berber)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity (from Ancient Greek)

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Seanmháthair – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced shan a WAW her (Irish/Gaelic)

Señora – Is a polite term used to address a woman. The Spanish-language equivalent of Ma’am, Ms., or Mrs. (Spanish)

Telkhines - In myth were mysterious sea-god magicians and smiths native to the islands of Keos (Ceos) and Rhodes. They invented the art of metalworking and were said to have crafted many powerful items and weapons for the gods. The truth is even stranger. These tall, lanky, extraterrestrials command science at a level that seems like magic and have lived since the beginning of time. They served ‘The Makers’, who existed long before Krypton, or the gods, and abandoned them on earth. Zeus and the Greek gods gave them refuge and protection long ago in return for their service.

Tieguanyin - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

Tratung – khrag ‘thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Trípolis – Tripoli, the capital and largest city in Libya (from Ancient Greek)
Tuath Dé Danann - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced Thoo-a day Du-non (Irish/Gaelic)

Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’. ‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Vakur – A powerful (and rare) soul-devouring, evil, shape-shifting parasitic alien species from another universe. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.

Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Vallerian – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshiped, or traded.

Vâysâ – ‘Stop’ (Persian)

Wan - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find 'her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

Xwâhar - ‘Sister’ - the formal form. (Persian)

Zafaraniyeh – The affluent neighborhood in the northern part of the Iranian capital of Tehran where Shahrazad grew up. (Persian)

Zhuyin – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)

Chapter End Notes

The Wrap:
Kara is stressed! Kal, Diana, and Bruce are still missing, and our hero is dealing with Cat Grant on multiple fronts. As the CEO’s dutiful executive assistant, CatCo’s mystery investor, and Supergirl, the pressure cooker is on full-blast! I sincerely hope that you enjoyed Miyuki and Winn’s happy beginning. I believe they both deserved it. Also, poor, simple Vartox has been played; look for him to make his move in the final chapter.

Next Up:
Chapter 39: “Endgame” – National City’s new hero has a lot on her plate: The Justice League is still M.I.A., Cat Grant is ready to pounce on CatCo’s mystery investor, and ‘Kiera’ still owes the Queen of All Media an exclusive interview with the Girl of Steel. On top of that, and unknown to Kara, there’s a super-powered alien on the loose somewhere in National City looking to take Supergirl down!

The bad news also doesn’t stop there… something sinister is taking place at Evermore Academy that will pull young Ryah Danvers and Carter Grant into Commander Karn’s deadly plot.

Thank you for reading! Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming! Every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me.
Endgame

Chapter Summary

National City’s new hero has a lot on her plate: The Justice League are still M.I.A., Cat Grant is ready to pounce on CatCo’s mystery investor, and ‘Kiera’ still owes the Queen of All Media an exclusive interview with the Girl of Steel. On top of that, and unknown to Kara, there’s a super-powered alien on the loose somewhere in National City looking to take Supergirl down!

The bad news doesn’t stop there, however… something sinister is going on at Evermore Academy that will pull young Ryah Danvers and Carter Grant into Commander Karn’s deadly plot.

Chapter Notes

The plan is one more chapter to go (we’ll see what the final length turns out to be), but all the strife and badness in the world has me at low-point for creativity and inspiration. Lots of other factors (work, event, and travel-related) will keep chapter 40's completion out a couple weeks... at least, but I am working hard on it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

June 27th, Year Nine

CatCo World Wide Media HQ – National City

0908 Hours UTC -8, Tuesday morning, U.S. Pacific Coast Time

Kara had been uncommonly sullen with Cat since Monday when they’d squabbled about the CEO branding National City’s hero as ‘Supergirl’. She could only assume that her steadfast assistant was aggravated about being given twin impossible tasks: tracking down CatCo’s mystery investor, and securing her boss an exclusive interview with National City’s very own hero by the end of the day on Friday.

Cat had always enjoyed testing Kara, and the unshakable blonde usually enjoyed rising to the challenges she provided (thrived on them in fact)... but not this time.

What's changed I wonder?

Anyway, it was Tuesday morning when an unusually quiet and less-than-enthusiastic Kara Danvers approached Cat’s desk and waited patiently to be acknowledged.
The busy executive didn’t bother to look up from her work, but said, “I hear you breathing, Kiera, what is it?” Cat knew that she was being curt with her, but was confused by the young woman’s behavior, and feeling irritable.

“Ms. Grant… I just wanted to let you know, I’ve found your mystery investor.”

“You…” Cat nearly choked and dropped the pen she was holding as she glanced up at her assistant in disbelief. “Am I hearing you correctly? You, found him? So, you’re saying that I paid a bevy of wannabe Sherlock Holmes private investigators, ex-FBI, and an army of lawyers and forensic financial analysts an ungodly amount of money for zero results, when I should have just asked my assistant first?”

She hadn’t meant for it to come out so biting. Demeaning. But it did, and Cat immediately regretted her words and wanted to take them back. But it was too late, Kara looked like a kicked puppy.

The blonde bit her lip, and adjusted her glasses, as she always did when she was nervous, or upset. But this time Cat noticed her cheeks had reddened, not from embarrassment, but something darker, and her beautiful blue eyes narrowed with determination. Fire.

“It seems that way, ma’am. I don’t know who you paid, but you wasted your money.”

Oh, snippy, and so formal... so unlike her. She is angry with me... beyond my hurtful words just now.

Kara continued, “I don’t have the investor’s name, but I know where she’ll be in three days.”

“She?!” Cat was shocked.

“Yes, your mystery ‘man’ turns out to be a woman and a well-financed one at that. I’m surprised that you, of all people, would have assumed such a person could only be a man.”

Ouch. I deserve that one. “Sometimes we all make mistakes, Kiera, even me.” Cat smiled as she swallowed her pride and acknowledged her error with sincerity, before returning to the topic at hand… a storm of electric anticipation stirring within her. “Where? Where will our mystery woman be?”

Kara grinned for the first time in the CEO’s presence since their argument. “At the Musée d’Orsay, in Paris. My source tells me that Selina Kyle and the Wayne Foundation are hosting a secret gala; a gathering of billionaires and corporate titans at the museum Thursday night (Paris time). You know the drill; private party, very hush-hush… and she’ll be there. Oh, I managed to wrangle us both invites.”

The CEO blinked, a couple of times… completely speechless. She was powerful, and worth tens of millions of dollars with vast connections and notoriety, yet could never have done it. How had Kara been able to secure both of them invitations to a ticket hotter than Hamilton, a gathering unlike any other?

For a woman with Cat’s skills of getting information from people, it was just… unbelievable. A true gift!

“And… just h... how did you manage this feat?” Cat’s shaky voice rose a couple of octaves, betraying both her shock and joy at Kara’s news.

The young woman blushed, “I know someone who knows someone… it’s no big deal. The
important thing is your name is on the list, and I’ve already arranged your travel and accommodations.”

Cat knew when she was being ‘handled’, misdirected, bamboozled as it were… and narrowed her gaze at the beautiful blonde, as if seeing her for the first time. Yes, Kara Danvers was so much more than she appeared, and for some unfathomable reason unraveling that mystery had become even more important to her than finding the woman who owned almost as many shares in her company as Cat did.

Was it because Kara being mad at her made her feel very uncomfortable, and upset in ways very few people on the planet did? Or something deeper?

Cat sighed. It was as if all the warmth between them had been extinguished but still simmered beneath the surface of every conversation they had. Like Kara was waiting for her to… what? Apologize? For what reason Cat had no idea, besides possibly the extra work and pressure she’d put on the young mother.

It was clear that she’d hurt Kara deeply, somehow… and somewhere close to home. Cat just didn’t know how.

What have I done? And why do I care so much?

Dread gnawed at her gut, and for a moment the worried woman felt exhaustion and regret overwhelming her.

The next couple of days were a whirlwind, and before she knew it, it was Wednesday afternoon, and she and Kara were off to the airport and her private jet.

Her busy assistant had become obsessed with monitoring the news for any mention of the return of the world’s missing heroes, but remained a consummate professional nonetheless, dealing with all the work she normally would handle back at the office using just her phone and laptop.

But she was still distant, and sad.

Cat wanted to fix whatever she’d done but didn’t know how to even broach the subject. Not without baring her soul… and she wasn’t ready, not for that, especially not now.

They did end up sharing a few glasses of wine and conversation on the flight to Charles de Gaulle. At some point, a subdued Kara had asked Cat if she still felt it was right forcing a name on National City’s Guardian Angel, which the CEO found telling… is this what’s been bothering her?

Cat thought they’d already had this talk in her office at CatCo, but Kara was looking for something deeper, something honest… so she did the only thing she could do, Cat opened up. “If you must know, I was doing her a favor… Kiera.”

Her assistant’s look of dumbfounded confusion was almost comical. She stuttered, “What? I don’t underst… Ms. Grant, that doesn’t make any sense. How is taking her power from her, and naming her… like a pet, helping?”

Ah! Now I see… so noble, yet just as naïve. “Kara, is that what this is all about? I’m not the bad guy here. Don’t you see? Look, this amazing young woman… as powerful as she is, obviously didn’t
have a plan of her own or she would have given the people her name instead of avoiding the question. I merely wanted to beat some misogynistic hack, or the tabloids to labeling our sweet hero with some awful, derogatory name.

“'Supergirl' is powerful, confident, and clearly defines her heroic soul, her goodness… like Superman. The fact that she will forever be linked to CatCo, to the Tribune, and to me… is purely a side-effect, and quite frankly, good business.

“It will be magical, Kiera, you’ll see, and if Supergirl would ever come down from Mount Olympus” "Why is Kara suddenly blushing? “…or wherever she disappears off to when not saving babies and stopping crimes, and just talk to me I’d tell her that to her face.”

Now her assistant was… grinning? “What else would you tell her, Ms. Grant? If she were sitting right here?” Kara’s voice was more whimsical than normal, and honestly inquisitive.

Cat fidgeted, debating the merits of her decison to be honest. “I’d tell her how much she means to me…” She swallowed nervously, and then continued, “…and to every woman and young girl beaten down by a society that says they aren’t as good, or as strong as half the population. That she is the answer to every one of us who looked up to the skies and asked ‘why?’ . Supergirl is an inspiration to me, to National City, and the world; and frankly, Kiera, I just want to meet her... and I don’t even care if she says a word.”

The CEO could still not understand why Kara was staring at her with such, surprise, and… was that… affection? Isn’t she pissed at me? No one looked at Cat like that, like she was... amazing. The older woman had to look away from the almost-glowing, nameless-blue intensity of her assistant’s eyes.

Then, in a decidedly teasing tone, Kara said, “Be honest, Ms. Grant, you would die if she didn’t say anything.”

And the tension between them broke, just like that.

Cat chuckled, “Damn right I would. I’d scream!” Then they both laughed, truly laughed together, and ended up holding hands, smiling at each other. “She’d better talk to me. I need answers, and she needs my help… clearly.”

later on, somewhere over the Atlantic, Cat checked in with Carter to catch-up on her son’s day and heard all about how he’d built robots in his engineering class with Ryah. Then, sometime after she’d curled up in a chair and was nodding off reading, Kara called her family, as well. The intrigued CEO couldn’t help but overhear (though it did take some straining on her part) as the sweet woman laughed with her daughter, and whispered such loving words to her wife that Cat had tears in her eyes, and her chest ached with the utter loneliness she tried never to let herself feel.

God, to have what Kara and Alex have… to be part of a family like that… She sighed. Old, sentimental fool... just, stop. Stop now.

In the morning when she awoke Cat realized that her assistant had somehow moved her into her bed without waking her, and tucked her snuggly under the satin sheets. A paper cup containing painkillers and a glass of water was set neatly beside her on a shelf and Kara was still working.
Even as angry as the young woman had been, she’d remained dedicated (and caring)... and was back at her job like a machine. It also appeared that young Mrs. Danvers hadn’t slept a wink all night.

Cat wondered... was she still upset, or had they healed their rift?

On her way to the washroom, the older woman gently squeezed the blonde’s shoulder... and Kara’s warm hand reached up to softly envelope hers. Cat gasped at the unexpected but very welcome contact like a lifeline, and just stood there, swaying, unabashedly enjoying the feeling of being cared for once again.

Without thinking, she reached down and let her fingers run through Kara’s silky blonde hair, and the younger woman leaned into her touch. Cat had never felt anything so soft in her life.

Several minutes had passed before she realized she was still doing it, but Kara didn't seem to mind at all. The beautiful young woman was now smiling, and humming as she worked.

The CEO grudgingly broke contact, and as walked the short distance to the lavatory to freshen up realized that she felt completely unburdened... for the first time in days. It was like magic.

*Kara Danvers magic.*


Early Thursday morning, Paris time...

Once they were in Paris, there was an issue with Cat’s corporate apartments. A water pipe had burst on the floor above hers the day before, and there was no way they could stay there. The displeased executive growled and threatened, but there was literally nowhere else in the building that met her... um, rather stringent and discerning requirements.

She also ranted a bit at the staff, who became quite reluctant to be... helpful afterward.

Kara had then taken charge, and negotiated like a diplomat; with a smooth eloquence and cunning that Cat had never had the opportunity to personally observe her wield before. Watching her operate was like a Master Class in soft power. It was both thrilling and revelatory to observe as her sympathetic yet confident assistant had them eating out of her hand in less than fifteen minutes, and then apologizing profusely to the CEO.

It turned out that there really were no available rooms, but they did get a list of names and numbers Kara was already calling as they headed back onto the street. The young woman had already surprised Cat with her perfect and fluid grasp of the French language, the slang, customs, and her intimate knowledge of the city (she didn’t even need a map), but that’s when Kara shocked her, yet again....

After running into another dead end on ‘the perfect place’ the elegant young woman sighed, looked at Cat with her sunrise smile and offered (as if it was no big deal), “I guess we could just stay at my, Alex, and Shah’s place.”

To say Catherine Grant was stunned would have been an understatement. Her assistant had an apartment in Paris, which she hadn’t bothered to mention before. How the three young women could
afford residences in two of the most expensive cities in the world, as well as tuition at Evermore Academy, was astounding…

Cat was being driven mad with not knowing how they managed it all.

After some initial trepidation (which was more a fear that she’d be stuck in some filthy youth hostel with a shared bathroom), she’d agreed to their new plan for accommodations. Cat was exhausted, and to be honest, completely intrigued to see what the Danvers’ place would be like.

Kara called her car service (her car service, the not-so-typical millennial said it like she owned it), and that’s when Cat met Jack, the handsome, very fit American driver who was amazingly polite… and at least tri-lingual. She was also certain that he was ex-military, and knew Kara quite well. The pair laughed and hugged like old friends when they greeted each other.

In fact, her assistant had said, “I’m so sorry to have to call you, Jack. I know that you and Aeryn had plans…” Aeryn? His girlfriend? Another friend of Kara’s?

As he embraced the enthusiastic blonde, the smiling man replied ‘*Fadhb ar bith*’, in what Cat believed to be Irish, but wasn’t sure at the time. She covertly checked the translator app she had open on her phone and confirmed that, sure enough, it was Irish.

He’d said something akin to, “No problem.”

The most astounding part was when the friendly pair began speaking back and forth in that beautiful language so swift and naturally, and then effortlessly began alternating between Irish, French, and English.

Cat’s head was spinning.

Was her sweet Kara Danvers a closet savant? What else could explain her?

The Danvers’ ‘apartment’ turned out to be a palatial upmarket residence of tasteful serenity, a stone’s throw from the Eiffel Tower. Add another shock to the ones Cat had already experienced… okay, Cat vowed to stop being surprised by Kara from here on out.

The place was unbelievable!

Homey, in a kind of retro-mixed-with-elegance way, it took up a quarter of the massive floor they lived on and included a second level that appeared to be an art and design studio. It was filled with personal touches, photos, and incredible paintings that added an element of honesty to the aesthetic that Cat seldom saw in her circles of people purely trying to put on airs and make impressions.

Kara made tea while the CEO relaxed on the wide patio that looked out at the tower and the beautiful gardens below. As she breathed in and delighted in the warmth of sunlight that dappled over her skin, Cat realized that she’d never felt more at home, relaxed, and… safe when traveling before.

*It’s strange but wonderful how indescribably comfortable this feels. Like home...* she was thinking to herself as her stealthy assistant seemingly appeared out of nowhere to press a warm cup into her open hand.

“Relax, Ms. Grant.” Kara’s calming voice soothed her. “The party isn’t for another six hours. You can take a little ‘catnap’ here if you like (she giggled at her own joke, and Cat just rolled her eyes but laughed inside at Kara’s adorableness), and I’ll get your dress ready so you’ll look absolutely stunning when you meet this mystery woman. Sleep, I’ll watch over you while you rest.”
“Thank you, K… Kiera.” Cat said appreciatively, almost using Kara’s real name. It seemed silly to continue the charade, but Cat didn’t know how to stop. They sat together in silence for a time after that, just listening to the leaves in the wind, the sounds of happy far away voices, and an occasional blast from one of the ships’ horns on the River Seine.

When the Queen of All Media’s eyes began to close, and she grew too tired to hold her cup it promptly disappeared before it could fall. Kara then gently squeezed the older woman’s free hand as she turned to go, but Cat grabbed hold tight and caught her assistant’s gaze before she could leave.

The CEO was immediately rewarded with the same look of adoration Kara had given her on the plane, and her heart fluttered. Somehow, whatever she’d broken between them had truly been repaired, or the kind young woman had just decided to forgive her.

_God knows why._ Cat thought to herself as she began to drift off to sleep. _I certainly don’t deserve her._

June 29th, Year Nine

On the way to the Musée d’Orsay – Paris, France

1812 hours UTC +2, Thursday evening, CEST

Cat chafed in the comfortable leather back seat of the silent black Mercedes-Maybach as they crawled through the intolerable Paris traffic. It was less than three miles to their destination but it felt like it was taking an eternity. Her handsome and stoic American driver, Jack, had barely said a dozen words since picking her up on the _Rue de l’Université_, just outside of Kara and Alex’s beautiful loft.

Which was ironic considering how many languages the man knew.

Before departing, Kara had assured her that she trusted the sandy-haired man implicitly and that she would follow Cat to the event at the _Musée d’Orsay_ as soon as she finished with the edits for CatCo Magazine’s July edition.

That was twenty minutes ago.

Now, feeling trapped in the backseat with some seventeenth-century Baroque masterpiece playing in the background, Cat fidgeted with her clutch and the delicate string of pearls on her wrist.

_What if Kara is late?_

She straightened and lifted her chin. What was she thinking? Did she now need her tireless young assistant to hold her hand 24/7? Of course not! She could do this without Kara…

She just… just… didn’t want to.

As the CEO’s false bravado crumbled, her shoulders sagged and she reached for the top-shelf whiskey in the mini-bar… once again pondering the complicated puzzle that was Kara Danvers.

As the minutes passed, she sipped at her glass, watched the well-dressed people walking down the streets (God, she loved Parisians’ fashion sense!), admired the architecture, and did her best to
distract herself as she prepared to finally meet the mysterious woman who had been helping her for so long… silently voting the weight of her shares with Cat on nearly every occasion.

It was like having a secret ally, a powerful one… but Cat had no idea who this woman was, why she was aiding her, or what she wanted.

Not too much later, after finishing her second glass, the great River Seine loomed ahead… The last rays of the fading sun setting its sparkling surface ablaze with its light. Then, the car executed a smooth turn onto the Left Bank’s Quai Anatole, bringing the Musée d’Orsay into view coming up on their left. Built in the late 1800’s, the impressive structure had once been a Beaux-Arts railway station, and was like a work of art unto itself. Housed within its walls was a vast collection of priceless treasures that had always been a favorite of Cat’s.

Visiting the museum always evoked pleasant memories from her younger days, and her first love.

As they drew near, she once again was contemplating how in the world the young Ms. Danvers had pulled off procuring them both invites to the private event. In fact, it was so hard to believe that a part of the CEO was still worried that she’d be turned away at the door.

“We’re here, ma’am,” Jack said politely, finally stopping the vehicle at the curb of the museum’s plaza. There were no paparazzi, crowds, or a red carpet anywhere in sight for the quiet, exclusive affair taking place that evening. Just lots of armed security, all dressed in black.

As the man helped her out of the car he said, “I’ll be waiting close by when you and Kara are ready to go.” He obviously had more to say but seemed hesitant.

Cat was too nervous to be delicate. “Well, go ahead, spit out whatever it is that you want to say to me.” She narrowed her gaze at him and girded herself for whatever negative comment she assumed he was about to unleash. Over the years she’d come to expect the worst in people.

She was pleasantly surprised by what was really on his mind.

He offered her a kind smile then said, “Ma’am, I… I wanted to let you know how much working for you means to Kara.” He smiled, fondly. “She’d never tell you herself, but it’s all she’s ever wanted to do, you know? Even though she could be anything she wants in this world. You have no idea how lucky you are, Ms. Grant… and what a treasure you have… greater than anything in that old building.” He gestured with his thumb to the museum beside them. “Be careful, some things are more fragile than they appear on the outside. That’s all I wanted to say.”

She was off-balance. His revelatory praise came with a warning. Unfortunately, she’d already discovered the consequences of hurting Kara all on her own, and she didn’t like it… not one bit. “Don’t worry Mr….?”

“Meacham. It’s Jack Meacham, ma’am.” He said calmly.

“Mr. Meacham, I know something priceless, and precious, when I see it.” She wanted to say more but felt the better of it. Those words would be for young Mrs. Danvers alone. “You have nothing to worry about.” Is what she managed to say, and then she chuckled, adding, “Why is it that I feel like I’m being shaken down by the big brother?”

His eyes wrinkled at the edges in amusement. He then nodded, tipped his hat, and said, “Take it however you like, ma’am.”

Ah, and that smile again… quite a charmer, this one. His ‘Aeryn’ is quite the lucky woman, and I assume vice versa. What is he to Kara, I wonder? That woman certainly inspires, and gains, the
love, and loyalty of those around her. Cat sighed. That I know from personal experience.

“That I know from personal experience. Have a good evening, Ms. Grant,” Jack said as he tipped his hat and slipped back into the car, agile as a cat. “You have my number if you need me. Just text, or call.”

“Thank you, Jack. This conversation was… enlightening.”

After giving her name to one of the waiting security team, a mountain of a woman, who was a mix of Parisian and… Japanese (interesting) swiftly approached, and with great courtesy allowed Cat to enter the plaza.

It was then that an incredibly attractive young woman, possibly of Middle Eastern descent, with long, straight, dark raven hair, and an enviable complexion like sun-kissed honey, came up to escort her. As they walked past the museum’s impressive line of high-arched windows Cat kept thinking she seemed somehow… familiar, which was absurd (wasn’t it?). As they reached the entryway the beauty surprised the CEO with her perfect English when she said, “Here you are, Ms. Grant. I hope you enjoy your evening.” Then she smiled and with what seemed to be a hint of mischief in her appreciative emerald gaze, turned to go. Her wonderfully proportioned form mesmerized Cat as she sauntered away.

Oh my… that walk! Such attitude! Wait…

“Wait!” She called out more loudly, and urgently than she’d intended.

The young security officer, only a few feet away, turned to look back. “Yes, Ms. Grant?” She asked. Oh, those eyes…

Cat smirked, “I don’t suppose you have a name you’d be willing to share?”

The beauty laughed, shocking Cat… the sound was so musical, eerily like Kara’s, but it was the young woman’s come-hither smile that completely surprised her. “Lesley. That’s me. Good evening, Ms. Grant. I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other… around.”

And then, she turned and disappeared among the well-dressed attendees before Cat could say a word. It wasn’t like she just blended in either, no! One minute, the lovely Lesley was there, Cat blinked, and the next she was gone… as if she’d never even been there.

How did she…? Astounding!

The stunning Houdini moment was a rush… and for a couple of minutes, all Cat could think of were the beautiful woman’s eyes, which were the most vibrant emerald she’d ever seen… the kind you could easily get lost in.

Well, and that body, too.

Perhaps after the event, I’ll track her down and attempt to discover how she managed that disappearing act. I do have some time to kill in Paris, after all.

Brief, passionate relationships were not what she’d imagined for herself at her age, as a single mother, but they did stave off the loneliness for a time, and in this case... just, wow.

The executive finally shook herself free of her steamy thoughts, and as she approached the museum’s impressive entryway it wasn’t the investor her mind had returned to, but Kara Danvers.

Where is she? Cat stealthily glanced at her phone, hoping to see a new text from her, but... Nothing.
The consummate professional was, hands down, the best assistant she’d ever had. In fact, Mrs. Danvers was so eminently qualified (overly-so) for her job, that Cat had been worried for some time about losing her to a rival publisher, cable, a network, or some other media giant. But that wasn’t all… it had taken a while for her to understand that it was true, but Cat actually admired Kara, and even saw some of herself reflected in her… the better parts. She truly cared for the kind young woman.

Kara Danvers was smart as a whip, driven, had remarkable fashion sense, was sweet, graceful as a gazelle with the body of an Olympic athlete (Oh my, those biceps!), brilliant at her job…. (everyone’s job, actually), supportive and accepting, a wonderful mother to Ryah and wife to a very lucky Alex Danvers, a friend to many, and apparently wealthy enough that money seemed to be of no consequence to her. She also surrounded herself with (or drew to her like moths to a flame), friends and adopted family members who truly cared for her, and looked out for her best interests sometimes at risk to their own.

Cat ended up asking herself three important questions as she headed inside the grand edifice, none relevant to her investor:

Just who was Kara Danvers, who was she to Cat Grant, and more importantly, who were they to each other?

……………………………….

She’d expected the semi-formal gathering to be a classy affair, but not… this.

As she stepped inside the glorious entryway with its towering arched ceiling, the world seemed to change. All the colors she could see suddenly multiplied and became impossibly crisp, the sounds were sweeter, and the air became so delightfully cool on her skin it was like a caress. Everything had become incredibly vibrant as if she’d passed through a veil and walked into a dream… Shifting from a dull, black and white world into a Kodachrome version of reality she’d never glimpsed before.

It was an astounding moment that took her breath away.

Around her, elegantly dressed women in their glamorous long gowns and designer dresses, and men in crisp tuxes, dark suits, ties, and even cummerbunds walked the museum’s hallowed marble halls. They conversed quietly, arm-in-arm or in small groups, accompanied by the dulcet sounds of Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin and other masters being played in the background by the live string quartet down on the lowest floor of the galleries.

Once she started breathing again, the CEO looked down at her concealed phone to check for any texts from Kara. Well, poo, still nothing.

Cat typed: Where are you? as she stopped beside a massive black piano.

She hadn’t noticed at first, but a charming young woman sat at the instrument’s gleaming keys, smiling at her. The musician’s long brown hair sparkled as if her locks had literally caught the stars from the sky, and her earrings burned like tiny suns.

And Cat could have sworn the pianist winked at her.

But just then a familiar voice (one that she hadn’t heard in ages), drew her attention from over her shoulder.
“Well, look what the Cat dragged in.” The man’s tone was playful; it was a thing they’d done since… well, forever, verbally sparring with one another. They’d tried dating a couple of times, years before, soon after her divorce. The sex had been phenomenal, but they just weren’t compatible… each too consumed by their work, and their egos.

Being two friends who were snarky to each other worked much better.

“Oh, like I’ve never heard that be…” Cat turned, her retort silenced by the sight that greeted her.

The ever-handsome and charming Maxwell Lord, with a smug grin on his face… and a graceful mechanical woman on his arm.

She was made of some kind of smooth metal, ceramics, crystal(?), and other high-tech materials, and was surprisingly beautiful. She was no haphazard replica, nor a ‘robot’, but a true woman of steel. The ethereal creature was tall, maybe five-eleven, and organic-looking. Her movements were fluid, almost human, but… deliberate… as if each act was a careful consideration, or she was so delighted to just… be, that it took a second for her to focus. Which even made her seem more regal.

Even her blue eyes seemed to smile at Cat.

So, was this the elusive Cassandra? Cat mused.

Lord Tech was the world leader in artificial intelligence, and there had been rumors for years that Max had secretly created a living AI, and given it a body. A little bird had also told Cat the woman’s name, and that the pair enjoyed a romantic relationship. The shadowy girlfriend, always photographed from afar, in scarves and sunglasses at parties, on a boat, the theater...

And here before her was proof. From how the woman was holding onto him, leaning in so close, hips brushing, her soft, slightly possessive touch on his arm, it was clear to Cat that something was definitely going on between the man and his living machine.

Only a couple of seconds had passed since his comment, and as Cat finished turning around to face them the android scolded him, “Max, that’s rude. Ms. Grant looks beautiful, without a hint of being dragged anywhere.”

Even though the CEO didn’t need her protection, Cat still appreciated being defended, and immediately took a liking to the woman. Especially when she was rewarded with seeing how whipped Max was.

He immediately became contrite and apologized to his companion. “I’m so sorry, my dear. I meant nothing by it, other than a little frivolity between old friends.” and then to Cat, “My deepest apologies, Catherine.”

Cat glowered at him. He knew how much she hated her given name and being reminded of her age. The bastard was grinning too. She gave him a curt nod and then turned her full attention to the graceful creature at his side.

“Cassandra! It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Cat leaned forward to hug her and was surprised by the warmth of Cassandra’s soft, yielding skin as she returned the gesture.

“Likewise. Max has spoken of you often. It’s an honor to meet you in person, Ms. Grant… and please, you may refer to me as Cassie, if you prefer.” Cassandra’s fingers remained on Cat’s arm as they parted, like a steadying force. Surprisingly, it was just what she didn’t know she needed.

“Thank you, Cassie… and please call me Cat.” The CEO relaxed, feeling the tension wash from her
as the two women shared the private moment and a smile.

At that instant, her phone vibrated in her clutch, and she almost squeaked in surprise… and Cat Grant never squeaked. Glancing down as unobtrusively as she could manage, she read…

Kiera: *July issue is finished, and I have some new information on our investor. My source says that she’s wearing a blue dress, with a butterfly pin in her hair. I’m on my way, Ms. Grant. Good luck finding her before I get there!*

*Good girl!* Cat grinned, never doubting that the young woman would come through as she typed: ty!

“A friend?” Cassie gently inquired. They were alone; Max had stepped over to signal one of the wait staff.

Cat quickly glanced around them to make sure they wouldn't be overheard and then whispered conspiratorially to her new friend. “My assistant, Kara… she’s meeting me here. We’re actually looking for someone.”

“Really? Perhaps I can help. I’ve been told that I have a pretty good memory.” The otherworldly woman tapped her temple with a big grin on her face, and they quietly giggled like high schoolers.

By the time Max returned, Cat had quickly filled Cassie in on what she knew of her mystery woman, who said, “I believe I saw someone fitting that description down in the Allée centrale des sculptures not long ago. She’s hard to miss. Long blonde hair, almost golden, and the color of her dress was unlike any blue I’ve seen in this world.”

“Secret conversation, ladies?” Max asked slyly as he stepped up, and wrapped his arm around Cassie’s waist. A server effortlessly balancing a tray with four delicately-fluted crystal glasses filled with Champagne immediately followed him.

Cat did a double-take upon catching a glimpse of the striking young woman. The beauty had the same long, straight, dark raven hair, skin like sun-kissed honey, and steamy emerald eyes as the security officer from earlier, Cat was certain of it.

“You.” She said accusingly as she was offered one of the effervescent drinks with a playful smirk. “Lesley? How did you get in here… and dressed like that…? You were just outside as one of the security… I… I don’t understand.”

Cassie had stepped back with Max, drinks now in hand… both watching the scene with great amusement.

The young woman’s smile, this time so much like Kara’s, made Cat do a double-take as she accepted the presented glass.

“What can I say? I’m a woman of many talents.” The alluring creature said in her perfect, melodic English. Then, as she was about to step away leaned in seductively and added, “Enjoy your evening, Ms. Grant… and maybe… if I’m lucky, you’ll see me later.”

The older woman sighed longingly as Lesley then sauntered away. She couldn't take her eyes off of her.

“You better go check the gallery.” A grinning Cassie prodded as a reminder, startling Cat back to her purpose. “You don’t want to miss your… um, meeting.” The android then adorably shielded one of her hands from Max’s view to point in the direction of the staircase down.
Cat embraced the mechanical woman before they parted, and again marveling at how soft, and human she felt, even her metallic parts. She felt a warmth and real connection to Cassandra that was rare for her to find with anyone, and felt the need to make things very clear between them. “I hope we can get together when you’re back in National City if you’d like that. I mean it, not just as a platitude or social nicety.”

“I know, Cat, I can tell. Thank you, and we’ll see you soon. I have a feeling.” She grinned and waved a dismissive hand. “Now go! I’ll fill Max in.”

Cat laughed as she noticed her ex glancing over at them in confusion, and then mouthed ‘thank you’ to Cassie.

“Fill me in on what?” He asked helplessly as she darted off as quickly as decorum would allow.

……………………………………

A few minutes later, down on the lowest level with the structure’s massive arches of glass towering far above Cat wandered among the stunning marble, bronze, and stone statues that filled the wide space on the museum’s grand alley. The treasures of nineteenth-century masters, now long gone but made immortal by their works, filled the space.

It was there the CEO sleuth caught a glimpse of her from behind. The tall, graceful woman was adorned in a stunning blue dress of a color that truly was, as Cassie had said, unnamable… like her assistant’s eyes. Her long hair was pinned up high in the back, held by slim slivers of silver, and an exquisitely crafted butterfly pin glinting with diamonds.

She seemed so familiar standing there and was speaking with a svelte woman with short, jet-black hair in a dark as midnight corseted gown. Cat was lurking just out of their sight around the back of a statue of some ancient Greek warrior, leaning out a bit to get a better view.

Good Lord, that’s Selina Kyle, the legend who tamed Bruce Wayne, with her.

Cat observed as the woman in blue wrapped her arms around the celebrated crusader and philanthropist (who seemed deeply distraught about something), and held her close. Selina rested her head on the taller woman’s strong shoulder and for a couple minutes they just stood there together, swaying to the soft music.

Cat felt like an intruder watching something so intimate, so she pulled back to behind the statue to catch her breath. When she looked up she froze upon noticing she had an audience. An incredibly handsome man was grinning at her from across the gallery.

Well, that’s just… crazy! Aris Kholkikos. What is this, old boyfriend week?

Over a decade earlier (before he was the CEO of Valhalla, one of the largest military contractors in the world) Cat had interviewed the dashing man and the two had begun a passionate year-long romance. God, he was amazing in bed…

Cat had to stop herself from drifting off into blissful memories.

She glanced over at him, and he was chuckling as he pretended to zip his mouth shut and look away. A raven-haired beauty then appeared at his side, (as in literally… just… appeared!), and slipped her arm into his.
Cat couldn’t explain it, but **damn** did she look familiar.

The Lord of War (as the press was fond of calling him), then waved, bowed his head, and left with the dark one pressed against his side.

By the time Cat turned to check on her mystery woman, she was gone! It took a frantic moment to find her, alone, off in a moodily-lit side gallery sipping a glass of wine.

*Thank goodness for that amazing blue…*

The CEO then gathered her resolve, straightened her dress, and strode forward into the chamber. Around them were over two-dozen sculptures… all angels. The golden-haired woman, who looked as elegant as a princess, stirred as Cat approached and turned to face her.

“Kara?!” Cat stopped dead in her tracks, and dropped her clutch, though oddly, she didn’t hear it hit the marble floor.

“Aww, Ms. Grant, you actually used my real name!” She’d never seen her assistant smile so brightly, and Kara was once again looking at her with complete adoration.

Cat was very confused, off balance, and feeling an ominous wave of dread building in her gut. “It was stress… Kiera. What’s going on here? Where is…?” The pieces were beginning to fall into place in Cat’s mind. “Oh… my… God. Have I been played?”

“Ms. Grant, no! No! I never… Look, this wasn’t about you at all… it was about me, who I am, and trying to have a normal life.”

Cat took the young woman in, such a vision, like the angels around her… even putting them to shame. She wasn’t lying. The veteran journalist had an ear and a sixth sense about such things. Kara’s head was bowed, her shoulders slumped; keeping her secrets (whatever they were, and for whatever reason), had obviously been more than hard for her.

Now Cat just wanted to understand.

“Start talking, Danvers, and this better be good. Are you some secret trust fund child, a celebrity brat using an assumed name, or perhaps a **spy**?”

Kara looked stricken, and Cat regretted her biting words immediately. She didn’t mean them, she just felt, hurt. “Kier… Kara, I didn’t mean to lash out, I just…”

“Feel betrayed? Yeah. I understand. I would too. I’m really sorry, I truly am, Ms. Grant.” Kara casually handed Cat the clutch she’d dropped a moment before, though she had no idea how the young woman had come to have it in her possession.

“Aaand,” Her friend continued, “I may as well rip the Band-Aid all the way off. I have one more lie… well, a lie by omission, to tell you. I can’t really explain about the money without telling you how I earned it.”

Cat moved in close, and Kara reached out to tentatively touch her arm. Before she realized it, Cat had taken her friend’s hands in her own, and Kara held on tight. “Okay, I’m listening.” The older woman said softly.

“I’m **her**.” The blonde winced as she smiled, and she bit her lip as if waiting to be yelled at.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand… her? **Her** whom? Someone other than our ‘mystery’ investor?”
Kara ducked her adorable head, blushed, and then let go and reached up with one hand to fumble with her glasses. As she removed them, her features took on a serene quality that gave her an appearance of such strength, and beauty that she put any of the statues in the museum to shame.

_Oh my God! She’s…_

Cat gasped as Kara’s nameless blue eyes actually glowed, and her beautiful dress transformed into Supergirl’s super suit before her eyes! And then, it was the graceful hero, National City’s Guardian Angel, who was standing in front of the CEO holding her hand.

“Tah dah!” Kara/Supergirl said, smiling like a sunrise and blushing. “I told you I’d get you that other interview by Friday.”

……………………………….

An hour and a half later, after a high-level and very abridged-for-time overview of Kara’s life’s story…

“I had no idea government work paid so well.” Cat chuckled, her head still spinning from everything Kara had told her about her life.

The Kryptonian laughed along with her as they admired another Renoir, a lovely painting of a smiling young girl with her cat. The irony wasn’t lost on Cat Grant.

“You’d be surprised,” Kara said. “Plus, our numerous, and growing portfolio of patents and licenses provide the cash flow we need to keep growing our foundation to help even more people and make investments like our stake in CatCo. Colliers always said I should invest in things I love, and he’s never steered me wrong.”

Cat had never wanted to hug Kara Zor-El Danvers more than she did at that moment. She was absolutely wonderful... _in fact, out of this world._

“Kara, may I ask you something?”

“Sure. Shoot, Ms. Grant, anything.”

The CEO grimaced. “First, call me Cat; that’s what friends do. Second, you voted with me 99% of the time… why not a hundred?”

Kara shifted uncomfortably, and then said, “If I remember correctly, that was like, two votes, and it was about not letting people bring their pets to work. How could I vote against puppies?”

Cat laughed, “I see your point. I was being quite… hmm… what’s the word?”

“Crotchety… Mean… Vindict…”

“Okay, okay, that’s enough. Point taken. I was, wrong.”

“It’s okay Ms. Gra… Cat. You were upset at your therapist that week. Remember? She’d suggested you get a therapy dog and you didn’t like that idea. I knew you were just angry and didn’t want you to end up being hated by your employees.” She grinned happily, spinning in her blue dress as they
walked on. The young woman’s Kryptonian battle armor had been shifting forms with her mood, and Cat hadn’t tired of watching it morph… or Kara move.

“I’m sorry about the name, forcing that on you… I think I was drunk with power, but I didn’t lie about my intentions.” Cat smiled, begging forgiveness with her eyes.

Kara stopped and said, “It’s growing on me…”

“And… CatCo?” The CEO asked nervously.

“I’m not going anywhere, Cat. I love my job, and working with you… although… since you know my secret now could you maybe cut me some slack whenever I have to go save the day?”

“I’ll consider it.” She said imperiously and then grinned. “Of course, we’ll work things out, maybe find you an office with a tad more privacy for Supergirl’s coming and goings. I’m glad you want to stay.”

After a brief moment of silence Cat did ask Kara a serious question, “So, I have to ask… The elaborate ruse, bringing me all the way here to Paris, and trusting me with your secrets? Aren’t you afraid I’ll tell? I am the Queen of All Media after all…” She let her statement hang there, like a challenge and tensed for Kara’s response.

The younger woman’s smile said it all. “One of my powers… I guess you’d call it, is knowing someone’s heart… and how to heal it. And even with all the hurt and damage that’s been inflicted on you over the years, and as much armor as you’ve built around yours, inside you’re still that bright young girl who dreamed of making this world a better place. You believe in people, in hope, in me. Your heart is good, and you would never betray me, or my family. I know it.”

Cat stood wide-eyed and went through a cascading range of emotions that went from shocked, to skeptical, to awed. She also had lots of questions…”Your family? I don’t understand, and Kara, how can you know this? How can you trust m…”

“Because… you’re my hero, and we’re friends. We always have been.”

The older woman was speechless and felt the weight of her confusion lift like a heavy shroud as Kara squeezed her hand. She knew Kara’s words to be true.

“And why Paris?” Cat asked.

The Kryptonian shrugged her shoulders. “I love it here, and Selina was already in town. She needed a friend as well as a distraction (long story, and not mine to tell), plus, I was really tired of lying to you, and dying to show you Alex, Shah, and my apartment.”

The CEO’s eyes grew wide. “It was you! You flew over here yesterday and broke the water pipe!”

Kara giggled.

“Stinker.”

Before Cat realized it, she was floating up above the museum’s galleries with Kara/Supergirl’s warm hands gently holding her waist, standing on her friend’s booted feet, and feeling pure delight for the first time in... she couldn’t recall.

After a moment of giddiness, she glanced down and noticed that they also had a museum full of people as an audience below them.
“Kara… I mean, Supergirl, everyone’s watching us!”

The hero smiled serenely, not a care in the world… and began to lower them down to the highest gallery. “Look down, Cat. What do you see?”

The CEO did as she asked, and after scanning the vast space replied, “A mob of well-dressed titans of industry, billionaires, and exes, all watching us.”

She suddenly felt warm and tingly, and Kara said, “Look again.”

In her defense, Cat wasn’t prepared for the already vibrant and too colorful world to change before her eyes yet again… so when it did she gasped and wrapped her arms around Kara like a frightened child.

The thin veneer of semi-normalcy that still remained about her reality had been peeled back like a veil, and now Cat could clearly see that mixed among those gathered were beings like Kara, too beautiful to be human, dressed in flowing clothing, others in armor, mist, smoke, and flame… shimmering with power, including…

“My Lord! Who is Aris… really, Kara? I need to know.”

“Oh, that’s my uncle, Ares… the God of War. Why?”

“As in the actual god? From the myths? Your uncle? Seriously?” When Kara’s expression didn’t change Cat knew it was the truth.

“Why?” The young woman asked innocently.

“Well, ah, he and I… we have a history.” Cat stared down at the smoking-hot deity and swallowed… ‘I’ve slept with an actual god… multiple times, and what a god he was… the things we did together…’

Ares grinned at her knowingly, as if he could hear the thoughts churning in her very dirty mind, and then bowed… causing Cat to actually blush. Furiously.

At the Immortal's side was Shahrazad; the beautiful woman made of smoke and darkness whom Kara told her she loved, one of her bondmates, who had (along with Alex) been a mentor, and trained the Kryptonian how to fight. 'Shah' as Kara said she like to be called, looked up from below, placed a hand on her chest and nodded solemnly at Cat… as if she were somehow acknowledging her as part of their elite little club.

Their family.

Cat, her cheeks aflame, and still physically feeling the joy of acceptance, and caress of Ares gaze had never been more excited about anything in her entire life than she was at that moment.

Her thoughts were filled with wonder. *I am walking among actual Titans, or maybe their children.*

“Would you like to meet some of my family?” Kara asked playfully as if she already knew the answer, and then whispered, “They trust you as I do.”

“Yes!” Cat burst out a bit too enthusiastically, but she didn’t care. She was gawking, smiling, and holding on to Kara for dear life. As they were close to touching down the impatient CEO flushed once again when she asked, “Is Lesley one of them?”
Kara nodded with a grin. “Yes. She’s my niece… or, technically, a self-aware shard (a duplicate) of my niece Ada who she can’t assimilate back into herself, but yeah, we’re family. The whole shard not being able to assimilate back thing has never happened before… and it’s all very complicated, but that said, she likes you too, Ms. Grant.”

“Good, I think we’re already past the awkward stage. As far as her family history, she can share that with me when she’s ready… if things go that far between us. Can you get me her number?”

The hero giggled, “Of course, Ms. Grant. But just so you know, she’s already planning on coming by to ask you to lunch tomorrow.”

For once, Cat had no response, only an all-over warmth and pleasurable sensation that felt a lot like happiness.

As they landed in the upper galleries she spotted someone approaching, wrinkled her nose in distaste, and whispered in Kara’s ear, “If your aura thingie ‘lifted the veil of the mundane’ from this place, why is he still here?” pointing a finger at Maxwell Lord.

It took a whole minute for the pair to stop laughing.

……………………………….

Early the next morning, back at Kara and Alex’s Paris apartment.

It was 0223 in the morning, and already Friday in Paris. After calling back home to check in with her son, Cat was still wandering, examining every photo, painting, article of clothing, and everything else in Kara's comfortable apartment… and asking questions, so many questions.

It was wonderful. Kara couldn’t have dreamed it better.

When the older woman came upon a picture of Superman, her mood turned somber. “You must be going out of your mind, not knowing what happened to your cousin… to all of them.”

Kara walked over in her Wonder Woman pajamas, yawned adorably, and reverently ran her fingers over the glass of the photograph’s frame. “I’ve done all I can. Once we know where they were taken, we can act… but until then, it’s a waiting game. If I can’t save them, the gods will… and that could start a war like this world hasn’t seen in thousands of years.”

Cat shuddered, but then yawned as well, big and stretchy, like her namesake. And covered her mouth with embarrassment immediately afterward.

Kara grinned, thinking that beautiful woman’s smile made her look twenty years younger and then said, “I think it's bedtime for Cat Grant. Unlike Kryptonians, humans require a great deal of sleep.”

“Show off,” Cat mumbled but nodded obediently. The woman had become very pliable as the hour grew late, or early (depending on your perspective).

Kara decided to be bold, so she shimmered, picked the CEO up in her arms, and carried her to the guest room in the blink of an eye.

The way Cat Grant looked at her as Kara set her down on her wobbly feet was nothing short of awestruck adoration, not something she was at all used to from her boss. She said, “Sooo, up bright
and early to spend a day at CatCo’s Paris office tomorrow? We can continue Supergirl’s interview, and figure out what you can and can’t print.”

“And talk about the gods?”

Kara nodded, “Yes, I’ll tell you what I can, but their larger secrets are their own, not mine to reveal.”

“Good enough.” Smiling, the CEO headed to the bathroom to brush her teeth and prepare for bed. “Your plan for tomorrow sounds lovely, by the way, and I also like the idea of having the kids here for the weekend to do some sightseeing. Alex can bring Ryah, but Carter…”

“Don’t worry Cat, I can fly back in a jiffy and bring him on Saturday morning. He should hear the truth from me anyway.”

A jiffy? Cat felt so fond of Kara at that moment she almost hugged her. Instead, she maintained her composure and glanced over at her friend gratefully. “Thank you, Kara. He trusts you, and you… understand him so well, sometimes even better than I do. He cares for you, and Ryah, a great deal… I don’t see him get attached very often. It’s a rare thing.”

Kara blushed, glanced down at her feet, and then suddenly looked up a little panicked as she realized something she’d forgotten.

Cat asked, “What is it?”

“I just remembered, after coffee in the morning there’s somewhere else we’ll need to stop by before the office.”

Cat visibly relaxed and went back to looking in the mirror and applying a thick gray face cream to her cheeks. “The D.E.O., I didn’t forget.” Her voice echoed from the bathroom. “I’ll sign their ridiculous NDA’s, as long as I get to publish our interview, future interviews, publish your autobiography, etc., etc., and they don’t restrict CatCo’s ability to have a relationship… ah, to work with Supergirl.”

A smiling Kara, who had curled up happily on Cat’s bed as they talked, replied, “No, Ms. Grant…”

“Cat! Just Cat, please, dear.”

 “…Cat. I don’t think anyone on the Earth can interfere with that... with us, not anymore. They wouldn’t dare.”

........................................

The next day…

June 30th - Year Nine

Evermore Academy - National City

0753 Hours UTC -8, Friday morning, U.S. Pacific Coast Time

1753 Hours UTC +2, Friday evening, CEST (in Paris)
Ryah and her best friend Carter Grant were walking to their 6th-grade biology class that morning, down one of their school’s stone and mortar hallways talking about Pokémon or something stupid when she felt it...

A tug, a feeling... *Something is wrong.*

After that, the Durlan in human form warily kept one ear on what the lanky boy was saying, but the rest of her keen senses were scanning the area around them for danger.

*There!*

Two men, humans, dressed in blue overalls branded with writing identifying them as being from National City Electric. Both were wearing dirty, dark blue ball caps, thick leather belts, and one was pushing a cart full of out-of-place high-end travel cases and strange tools as they disappeared through a pair of solid doors below an elegant plaque that clearly stated, ‘Employees Only’.

*Something isn’t right...*

Carter was telling her about the new video game his mom had bought him when she came to a sudden stop, keeping one eye on the service doors. “Um, Carter? I have to check something out, okay? See you in class? Can you take my bag?”

The poor boy looked totally confused by her swift brush off, and she felt terrible but had no time to discuss it. Ryah didn’t want to pull him into possible danger if these were bad men.

He ran a hand through his wavy golden-brown locks of too-long-for-school-dress-code-length hair and smiled, his soft gray-blue eyes reflecting hurt as he stuck out his hand to take hold of her backpack’s straps. “Sure. See you in class.” He said, waiting for a moment for her to change her mind. But she just fidgeted and didn’t attempt to stop him, so he turned and walked away sullenly.

*I’m so sorry, Carter! I’ll fix it later.*

Ryah groaned and waited until her best friend disappeared around a corner before bolting for the doors to follow the repairmen. She thought about alerting her moms, or aunts, but decided to wait. After all, what she was feeling could have just been her imagination...

She became a bloodhound first and tracked the pair to a staircase that led down to the sub-levels under the school. Then, she was flying... black, sleek, silent, and beautiful.

Ryah loved being a bird, and the crow was one of her favorites.

It was in that feathered form that she moved unseen in the tall, dark corridors that led down to the prestigious school’s lower levels. Ductwork, cables, electric lines, glowing lights on machines, it was spooky as she followed the hinky duo to a junction where two more similarly-dressed individuals waited for them, a human woman, and a man... who appeared human, but was definitely not one. She could feel it.

They were both brandishing TEC-9s, automatic weapons with high-capacity clips, and were also armed with dual 9mm sidearms still in their holsters. Thanks to her training with her mom Alex and her friend Aya, Ryah understood the weapons’ capabilities and how to use them; she also knew enough to identify the four as professionals, and deadly. These were killers, not robbers.

The waiting alien appeared super antsy and spoke to the newcomers in a gruff manner as they approached, “Took you monkeys long enough. Carl needs the tools and what’s in those boxes to finish the job, and I want to be at least twenty blocks from here in thirty just to play it safe when the
place blows. Any trouble upstairs?"

“Nope. We’re all good, Sal. You really put the whammy on them guards, we got the run of the place.”

“Good. Now get your asses moving, we’re on a schedule!”

The woman appeared irritated at the duo’s lack of urgency, and growled, “Go, go, go!”

“Jeez Skye, chill. We’re movin’, we’re movin’... see?” One of the departing humans said as they continued down the corridor.

Up in the rafters, Ryah nervously shifted on her clawed feet and pushed her senses out to envelope the alien, Sal, in an attempt to identify his species. Unfortunately, she’d never encountered his kind before, but now she knew him... can could sense that his mind was sharp, jagged, and made for peeling back barriers...

He can create fake memories and implant suggestions! It’s how they got in so easily. I just don’t understand... why are they here at all, sneaking around with guns under our school? And what are they making in that room that has Sal so nervous that he wants to get far away? When it blows? It makes no sense. The girl was rightfully confused.

It struck her as significant that the four (Terrorists? Not thieves. She didn’t know what to call them), had been standing right down the hall from the campus’ main electrical/power generation room where the two humans had disappeared with their cart.

The sound of power tools screeching, and an eerie light emanated from inside.

Creepy. Could it be... a bomb? Why? This is crazy. Rao, I need help.

As she pulled her mind back, the girl flew to a secluded spot behind some machines and transformed back into her human self to catch her breath before calling for the cavalry with her thoughts.

Moms! Shah! Miyuki! Astra! 911, at school!

To her surprise and utter shock... no one answered, even after a dozen more attempts. She still felt her moms in their bond, Alex, Kara, and Shah, as well as everyone on her crystal’s network... as strong as ever, but something was blocking her quantum connection from communicating with any of them!

How is that even possible? Oh no, it’s just like what happened to moms and Shah in Tehran!! Who in the heck are these guys, and what do they want??

“Frack.” She cursed under her breath, shaking... her Durlan hearts racing. I’m alone. What am I supposed to do??

An unexpected noise behind her started Ryah into action.

Without hesitating, she slipped behind the person who’d surprised her there in the dark, put them in a chokehold, and in the blink of an eye had brought a razor-sharp, Amazonian-crafted indestructible six-inch stiletto blade to their throat.

“Don’t move.” She whispered, as cold as ice... her intent very clear.

It took her all of two seconds to realize she was holding a knife to the throat of her best friend, a bug-
Dante yawned and spun around in circles in his comfy chair inside the cleverly disguised surveillance van parked on the street outside of Evermore Academy. Not that he didn’t enjoy filling in for Jack and Aya (who were in Paris with Shah, Aeryn, and Kara), or Smyrna who had temporarily returned to Themyscira for an Amazonian ceremony, but watching Ryah could be a pretty boring gig…

The little girl was worth it though, by a mile.

The Petty Officer had just popped a grape Blow-Pop in his mouth and was flipping through surveillance video when he noticed something peculiar. Out of place.

What do we have here?

He activated his earpiece and spoke up, “Hey Ada? Sweetheart, can you get me deets on this van? The blue one, from National City Electric.”

“I see it, and don’t call me sweetheart.” Starlight’s serene voice replied, like a dagger, nearly instantly over the comms.

Dante chuckled nervously.

After a moment she said, “There are no scheduled appointments for NC Electric… I don’t see anything in the security logs, and there’s no incoming or outgoing voice traffic in the last week mentioning any issues with the school’s electric or HVAC systems. Curious… and slightly concerning.”

“No worries, I’ll check it out.” He said, already examining the clip on his shiny new Glock 17 pulse sidearm before holstering it under his jacket. The deadly weapon had been a gift from Aya and Smyrna the previous Christmas. They’d had it modified for him, courtesy of the Amazonian smiths. “Could just be an oversight, you never know.”

“Let’s be certain. Walk with caution, Dante.”

“I’m always careful, Starlight. That said, if you don’t hear back from me in twenty then start worrying… and send back up.”
“Affirmative, Petty Officer. I won’t worry Kara or Alex just yet, not on a maybe… but get back to me with an update, asap. If I don’t hear from you by 0828 I’m calling a red alert.”

“Aye aye, mom.” He chuckled.

Dante nonchalantly exited the van, whispered ‘secure’ in Irish to magically lock the vehicle down (thanks, Aeryn!), and crossed two lazy lanes of traffic on the sedate, tree-lined residential street. All the while, his senses were on full alert as he scanned the area for potential threats.

In less than a minute he was entering the shady service parking lot behind Ryah’s school.

The suspicious van he’d identified on the surveillance cam was parked there… empty. He broke in quickly, and from his observation determined that at least two individuals, possibly four, had been inside the vehicle.

He became slightly concerned after a more detailed inspection revealed a small amount of blood in the back. Not a lot, it could have been from any mundane accident (the occupants appeared to be technicians, after all), but he let Ada know what he’d found anyway, and then set off to the school to get answers.

As the sailor briskly stepped toward the rear service doors he stiffened as a shockwave, like a pulse of lightning, ripped through his body causing his muscles to spasm as he clawed uselessly at the air. The searing pain continued and he bit his tongue, grunting in agony.

When he was a kid, Dante had once been caught on an electrified barbed wire fence, and it had been agonizing. Whatever was happening to him now was a hundred times worse. It was like being electrocuted, mostly-paralyzed, having a heart attack, and suffering a seizure all at the same time.

Before he could do or say anything, the light and his awareness faded to black, and Dante Caruso’s head hit the concrete… hard.

**Time: 0810 Hours**


---

**Friday evening, in Paris…**

*June 30th - Year Nine*

*CatCo Worldwide Media Paris HQ - Cat’s office*

0743 Hours UTC -8, Friday morning, U.S. Pacific Coast Time

1743 Hours UTC +2, Friday evening, CEST (in Paris)

*When it rains, it...*

Kara and Cat were knee-deep in working on their Supergirl interview (which had morphed into a
discussion about a second more in-depth piece for CatCo magazine and the Tribune’s Sunday Section, as well as a potential book deal) in Cat’s Paris office when the Kryptonian felt Alex’s anxious presence join her.

Hamsar-am, if you aren’t watching Channel 3 on the U.S. feeds, turn it on. We have a problem back here in National City. A big one!

“Cat!” Kara called to get her boss/friend’s attention, and frantically grabbed the tablet controller on her desk to bring Channel 3 up on the largest big screen in the office. There, in vibrant color, was a pillar of smoke rising from the Arden Nuclear Power Facility, just outside National City.

The older woman came and pressed against Kara’s side to watch with her, and began signaling through the closed glass door and walls of her office to get the attention of her senior staff to turn on the feed in the newsroom.

The video was obviously being streamed from one of CatCo’s Channel 3 helicopters, and as the image panned in a panoramic wide turn, the figure of a tall, bare-chested, broad-shouldered man came into view. He stood atop one of the nuclear facility’s eight reactors… its concrete and steel dome cracked open as if a missile had hit it.

The angry looking, excessively muscular villain was also holding what appeared to be a long battle axe before him as he came into clearer focus.

Kara almost felt relief when she heard Jerry Doyle’s familiar voice.

“This is Channel 3’s Eye in the Sky, Jerry Doyle, reporting just a hundred yards away from the destruction at the Arden Nuclear Facility, where twenty minutes ago a super-powered madman crashed through Reactor 6’s iconic dome. The terrorist calls himself ‘Vartox’ and is holding over twenty hostages inside, all men. We are not sure why, but shortly after his arrival, he allowed all of the women employees to leave. According to eyewitness reports, he also apologized for ‘causing them any trauma’.”

“What does he want? Does he have demands?” Carol Dwyer at the Channel 3 Studio asked.

“We’re unsure at this time… hold on. Kate, Kate! Can you get audio? He’s talking.” Jerry asked his intrepid camerawoman, his mic still hot.

“Done!” She replied, and as the video zoomed in on Vartox, everyone could hear his demands as the sound cut in abruptly...

“… challenge National City’s champion, Supergirl! She has one hour to face me in combat, here… alone, before I start killing prisoners.” He then looked up at the camera hovering above, and addressed Kara directly, “You can save them, girl. Come and be beaten by a true warrior, a male… your superior. Fight with honor and I will make your death painless, and spare these pathetic men. How many innocent people will need to die before you prove that you are not a coward, Daughter of Alura?”

Kara clenched her teeth, and willed her battle armor’s internal HUD to lock in the current time in National City, 0759 Hours, Friday morning, and started a sixty-minute countdown clock.

Cat was looking at her with grave concern. “Kara, he knows who you really are…”

“Yes.” Her assistant bit her lip.
“Which means…”

“Non does too… Yeah, we knew this day would come, eventually… I guess I just hoped it wouldn’t be so soon. And I really didn’t expect him to come at me head on. Make no mistake, this… Vartox… is just a lackey, a messenger from my insane ex-uncle sent to kill me.”

“Well, since there's probably no stopping you from returning to face him, can you get us there in time?”

“Us?”

“Yes. I’m coming with you of course! What did you expect? I’ll just need a couple moments with the staff before we go.” When Kara hesitated the eager CEO groaned and added, “Come along, Mrs. Danvers, I need my assistant at my side. The clock is ticking… Chop chop!”

Kara breathed out, busy coordinating logistics with Ada, Alex, and Shah in her mind and then spoke to Cat out loud. “Okay, fine. And yes, while I could get us there in plenty of time, I think we’ll use a quicker way than me taking you orbital. Flying that high and fast might be a bit much for you this early in our relationship.” She grinned.

Cat turned green just thinking about it, and poked Kara in the side as her staff hovered by her closed office door waiting to receive the CEO’s orders. “Ow. Girl of Steel, how can you be so glib when a crazy, muscle-bound Meta is waiting for you with an axe back home?”

“You think he’s a Meta? Maybe, but more likely this ‘Vartox’ is an alien… I can’t tell what species, yet, but Ada’s running an analysis of the video as we speak. And as far as how I can be so casual about it, maybe it’s because I know that once I get back I’m going to make this arrogant asshat sorry he ever messed with National City, or Supergirl.”

Cat’s eyes sparkled. “That’s my girl.”

……………………………….

A few minutes later….

Their bags packed and piled beside them, Cat and Kara stood before a glowing portal of swirling energy that reflected like glittering lights on the lapping water in the deep cistern under the Zor-El Danvers’ Paris apartment building. The spiral staircase they’d used to reach the bottom, carved out of the very bedrock under the city, lay behind them in the softly lit cavern.

“And you’re sure it’s safe?” Cat asked once again, clearly skeptical about entering the glowing vortex. “My atoms won’t be pulled apart and reassembled at the other end so I look like Lois Lane or something, will they?”

“Oh, Rao forbid.” Kara giggled. “No, Cat, it’s perfectly safe. This Kryptonian tech folds space-time, so it’ll be like stepping through a door, no disassembly required. My uncle Khalis, you know… Vulcan? He made this gateway with his own hands, it’s much safer than flying and makes it much easier for us to travel to Paris for short visits with Ryah, or our non-super powered friends.”

“I suppose that’s… acceptable.” Cat grumbled, picking up her purse as Kara balanced their luggage and prepared to step into the light.
“Okay, one last time.” She said. “We’ll pop out under our loft in National City. I already called a car to take you to CatCo, so it should be waiting out front. You have my spare keys, so just lock up behind you. I’ll fly to the D.E.O., and then go take care of the loudmouth.”

Cat nodded, but inside was terrified for Kara, and just before they stepped into the portal, deliberately walked over and hugged her friend like it was last time they’d ever see each other.

*Time: 0810 Hours in National City – T-Minus 49 min to Vartox’s deadline*

Next: Some Endings are Beginnings

..............................................................

**Story Lexicon/FAQs:**

**Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms:** I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

**Terms:** Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story. The list will grow.

- **Ah!khoob ast** – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)
- **Alex vanimelda** - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)
- **Ay Dios Mio** – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)
- **Aporup** – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)
- **As-salāmu ʿalayki** – A (formal) greeting which is also a standard salutation among Muslims, meaning ‘peace be upon you’. The Less formal abbreviation is simply salām. (Arabic)
- **Asheghetam** - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)
- **Azdidane shoma khoshhalam** – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)
- **Bedrood** – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)
- **Bonne nuit** – ‘Good night’ (French)
- **C'est la vie** – ‘That's life’. An acceptance of things as they are. (French)
- **C'est magnifique!** – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)
- **Damnú air!** – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)
- **Dooset daram** – ‘I love you’ (Persian)
El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Fadhb ar bith – ‘No problem at all’ or ‘No worries’ (Irish)

Hajimemashite - Nice to meet you! - はじめまして！/お会いできてうれしいです！ (Japanese)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Irasshai mashita - A Japanese welcome -ようこそいらっしゃいました。 (Japanese)

íthi eutukhēs - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, nonbiologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Kheili khosh geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

M’eudail – ‘My dear/my darling’ to a friend, family, someone you care for (Gaelic/Irish)

Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature

Marbhfháisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)

miboosamet – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)

órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

¡Qué señoras tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)

Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Sundor – ‘Beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)

Thi eutukhēs – ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Volar mi diosa! – ‘Fly my goddess!’ (Spanish)

Waʿalaykumu s-salām – A response to the greeting As-salāmu ʿalayki, ‘and upon you, peace’ (Arabic)
Wadā’ an – ‘Farewell’ (Arabic)

Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)

**Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:**

aziz-am – ‘My dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

delbandam – ‘My heartstring’. What Shah would call her cousin Tarsa as a child when she’d babysit (very sweet and precious), and still calls her since reconnecting.

Hamsar-am – This term falls more into the ‘lover’ category, as it is a common word for ‘spouse.’ However, hamsar literally means ‘equal head,’ so it stands for an equal partner, and is, therefore, a poetic way to point out one’s better half (What Alex begins also calling Kara after they’re married, plus also still uses nooré cheshm-am).

Jeegaré mane – One of the most loving terms of endearment you can direct to someone in Persian. It is quite beautiful and should have a powerful effect on a person it’s directed to. In this case, Kara and Alex are being very clear at just how much they love, and have always loved Shah. They are very… possessive of their sister.

joon-am – ‘My dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

Moosh moosh-am - ‘My mousy mouse’ said in Persian is utterly cute and endearing. Moosh means ‘little mouse’, but calling someone this cranks the sweetness factor up to eleven (what Shah calls Ryah)

Nafasem-an - ‘My breath’ (what Kara sometimes calls Alex)

nāzanin-am – ‘Sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)

nooré cheshm-am – ‘The light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

sheereen-am – ‘Sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person’s name<’ + jōon (Shah jōon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or jōon- they both mean 'dear'. So, ‘Shah jōon’, means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

**Other names/nickname/titles/things:**

A ghrá – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)

A ghrá mo chroí - ‘My heart's beloved, my darling’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Âbjé – ‘Sister’ informal version (Persian)

Anamchara – ‘Soul mate’ (Irish/Gaelic)
Bakalawa bil Jibna - A mouthwateringly delicious Libyan version of baklava with a sweet cream filling.

Bríomhaire – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)

Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

Cythonna – One of the most ancient Kryptonian gods, said to be the female half of Rao. Protector of those unjustly persecuted, as well as patron to monsters and non-biologic life forms (such as Kryptonian Companions/Ka’dahts).

Daxamites - An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people, ruled by strength/the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow altered by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.

Dios mío! – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

Durlan - The Durlans are a rare extraterrestrial species, a race of shape-shifting beings from the planet Durla. Ryah is a Durlan, as was her guardian, Veya, who died protecting the child in the depths of Tehran’s Evin Prison.

Dűst doxtar – ‘Girlfriend’ (Persian)

Dűst pesar - ‘Boyfriend’ (Persian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Euryleia – ‘Woman Wanderer’ or ‘Wide Wandering’ - Dr. Naomi Young’s Amazon name

Fereshteh: Slang for saying that a girl is perfect, desired… hot, to die for, an angel. Historically used as a Persian girl’s name, simply meaning ‘angel’. (Persian)

H’ronmeer - the Martian God of Death and Fire, referred to by a faction as the God of Life and Light. (Martian)

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)

In’ah – Ancient, lost word for ‘daughter’ - what Myka calls Kara (Kryptonese),

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition…

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

M’eudail – ‘My darling’ or ‘my dear’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Ma’har - Ancient, lost word for ‘mother’ - what Kara calls Myka (Kryptonese)

Mi amor – ‘My love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)
**Mi diosa** – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

**Mi lucero** – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

**Mi Sol** – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

**Muninn** – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the **USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn** - Thought & Memory (Old Norse)

**My dreamcatcher** – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

**Nâmzd** – ‘fiancé (m), fiancée (f), betrothed (Persian)

**Norooz** - Persian New Year (Persian)

**Noshidan!** – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

**Nūsh** – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

**Oea** - This ancient city was founded by the Phoenicians in the seventh century BC, was ruled at one time or another by the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Italians, and Muslims. It came to be known as Tripoli during the 9th century (Libyco-Berber)

**Ouroboros** - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity (from Ancient Greek)

**Salud!** – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

**Seanmháthair** – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced *shan a WAW her* (Irish/Gaelic)

**Señora** – Is a polite term used to address a woman. The Spanish-language equivalent of Ma’am, Ms., or Mrs. (Spanish)

**Telkhines** - In myth were mysterious sea-god magicians and smiths native to the islands of Keos (Ceos) and Rhodes. They invented the art of metalworking and were said to have crafted many powerful items and weapons for the gods. The truth is even stranger. These tall, lanky, extraterrestrials command science at a level that seems like magic and have lived since the beginning of time. They served ‘The Makers’, who existed long before Krypton, or the gods, and abandoned them on earth. Zeus and the Greek gods gave them refuge and protection long ago in return for their service.

**Tieguanyin** - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

**Tratung** – khrag 'thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

**Trípolis** – Tripoli, the capital and largest city in Libya (from Ancient Greek)

**Tuath Dé Danann** - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced *Thoo-a day Du-non* (Irish/Gaelic)

**Uri baba!** – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)
**Vaena, Vaena Alex** – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’. ‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

**Vakur** – A powerful (and rare) soul-devouring, evil, shape-shifting parasitic alien species from another universe. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.

**Valar** – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Valaraukar** – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic *Valar* and were also known as *Balrogs*. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

**Vallerian** – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshiped, or traded.

**Vâysâ** – ‘Stop’ (Persian)

**Wan** - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

**Xwâhar** - ‘Sister’ - the formal form. (Persian)

**Zafaraniyeh** – The affluent neighborhood in the northern part of the Iranian capital of Tehran where Shahrazad grew up. (Persian)

**Zhuyin** – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)

Chapter End Notes

**The Wrap:**
*Whelp, Cat finally knows the truth and it looks like it was a good move on Kara’s part telling her! Ms. Grant doesn’t know everything; not that the gods (or many of them at least) are ancient Kryptonians, Superman or J’onn’s identities, or that Myka is Athena (things that aren't her secrets to tell), though she did get Alex, Shah, Ryah, as Ada's permission to share their true identities.*

**Next Up:**
Chapter 40: “Some Endings Are Beginnings” – As Team Archangel struggles to find a way through the deadly energy barrier surrounding Evermore Academy, Ryah and Carter confront the terrorists inside the school, and an unexpected hero will rise to the occasion.

At the same time, a worried Kara (who’d much rather be trying to rescue her daughter
and Carter with the rest of the team) faces off against Vartox. When she discovers the warrior’s connection to what’s happening at her daughter’s school, will her rage blind her to their common goal? How will their Earthshattering confrontation end?

Thank you for reading, we’re almost at the end. Please keep your comments, feedback, and any questions coming! Every single one is a pleasure to read and inspires me.

**Attributions:**

**Musée d’Orsay**

*Is located in the center of Paris on the left bank of the River Seine opposite the Tuileries Gardens. The now-famous museum was installed in the former Orsay railway station, and built for the Universal Exhibition of 1900. The museum displays collections of art from the period 1848 to 1914 and is a wonder to visit.*

As an aside, I have a fun story about a very elegant private party I attended there, years ago. It was incredible, and at one point I ended up in one of the side galleries talking to Steve Jobs (just the two of us) while sipping Champagne. That was my inspiration for the setting in this chapter.

**A Taste of some Classical music from the Baroque Period**

*A little something to listen to while you read if you wish.*

**The Renoir painting of a girl with a cat that Kara and Cat were admiring**

*Auguste Renoir - Julie Maneten - 1887 huile sur toile - ©photo musée d'Orsay / rmn*
Some Endings Are Beginnings

Chapter Summary

As Team Archangel (oops, now Team Supergirl) struggle to find a way through the deadly energy barrier surrounding Evermore Academy, Ryah and Carter confront the terrorists inside the school. When all looks lost, an unexpected hero will rise.

Meanwhile, to save the hostages at the nuclear power facility Supergirl must face off against Vartox. How will she react once she discovers the warrior’s connection to what's happening at her daughter’s school? Will her rage blind her to their common goal? How will their Earthshattering confrontation end?

This is the final chapter of Kara Zor-El Danvers and Alex Danvers Secret Life adventures. Thanks for sticking with them, and me!

Chapter Notes

So, this is the end but also the beginning…

Please spread the word/share this story now that it's complete... if you would be so kind!
Thank you!

----------------------------------------

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

June 30<sup>th</sup> - Year Nine

Inside Evermore Academy - basement level two, National City

0810 Hours UTC -8, Friday morning, U.S. Pacific Coast Time

“Carter!?” Ryah lowered her blade from her best friend’s throat and let go of him as he spun around. “Athena and Aphrodite! I could have killed you! What are you… I mean, how in Rao’s name did you even get down here?!”

The lanky boy’s soft blue-gray eyes watched her with a kind of startled amazement, even awe, as she fluidly sheathed her weapon. Surprisingly, he didn’t seem scared at all. “I followed you.” He admitted. “I thought you were mad at me, and I… I didn’t like how that felt. So, I came back, and saw you… change into Canis Lupus Familiaris to follow the scent of those fake repairmen, which was wicked smart! Then, you turned into Corvus brachyrhynchos and flew down here after them. You looked so pretty…”

Ryah blinked at her friend, she’d never had anyone look at her the way he was at that moment. It
was kind of weird, and awkward… like she was one of her super-powered moms or something.

“I like crows.” Is all that came out of her mouth. The embarrassed girl blushed immediately after speaking. *Oh no! ‘I like crows’? That’s the best I could come up with? Idiot!*

Carter didn’t seem to notice her discomfort and turned to peek out of their hiding place at the two guards dressed in blue overalls blocking the corridor’s junction a few yards from them. “Why do they have guns?” He asked.

She tilted her head inquisitively and asked, “You’re not even a little interested in how I changed into the bloodhound or the bird? Or about the stiletto that I almost stabbed you with?”

He seemed to seriously consider her question before answering, “Those seemed like… private things. I wanted to ask but didn’t think it’d be polite. Does that make sense? Also, those two (he gestured over his shoulder), seem like a higher priority. Who are they?”

Ryah wanted to hug him but knew her friend was uncomfortable with unexpected physical contact. “Thanks for explaining, Carter… and yeah, it makes sense. Their names are Sal and Skye, but that’s all I know, besides that they’re bad, well-armed, and I have no idea why they’re here. There are others with them (I don’t know how many) doing something in the power room down at the end of the hall. They might be making a bomb, I think... I don't know. I’ve tried, but can’t get through to my moms or my aunts for help.”

She couldn’t tell him how she’d attempted to contact her family. Carter was already dealing with enough; Ryah didn’t want to add telepathic quantum networks to the list.

He appeared puzzled by her response. “Your moms and aunts? Shouldn’t we try calling 911 first?”

“Um, yeah, right.” She rambled, completely flustered. "What was I thinking? Ah... my phone has no signal, does yours work?"

She felt relief as Carter dug his iPhone out of his pocket and studied the screen. “Zero bars.” Then he looked up at her and asked, "Who is Rao?"

Ryah wasn’t surprised by her best friend’s sudden change of subject; Carter’s mind didn’t work the same way as other humans, something she very much liked about him. She tried to briefly explain, with the truth; “Rao was a red giant star that was worshipped as a god by a race of the most powerful and just beings in the universe before it went supernova and destroyed their world... and most of them with it.”

He was quiet and completely still for a moment as he absorbed her explanation, but then smiled and said, “Tragic, but cool,” before changing the subject again. “Can you turn into any other animals?”

He asked, but his backpack slipped down off of his shoulder and banged into a pipe making a noise before Ryah could answer.

She quickly shushed him and squeezed in close beside the boy as Sal perked up, and moved closer to their hiding place, brandishing his automatic weapon. Skye was right behind him.

“Stay put!” Ryah ordered in a hushed whisper. “No matter what happens… or what you see. I mean it, Carter. Don’t move, and not a sound!”

He nodded and then abruptly, and briefly, hugged her. She was startled by his unexpected action, but it felt… nice.

*I will keep you safe.* She swore.
As they parted, the Durlan calmed her breathing and turned to survey the combat zone, evaluate her opponents, and consider viable options for attack. She recalled the important lessons that all her mentors (Kara, Alex, J’onn, Aya, Aeryn, and especially Shah and Mikyuki) had taught her about such scenarios.

*Look for weaknesses… and find an advantage.*

They had guns, but for the moment Ryah owned the metaphorical high ground because she had the element of surprise on her side.

*Isolate the enemy.*

The young witch focused and discreetly summoned an invisible sound barrier between the junction where Sal and Skye were and all hallways leading to it, including the room at the end of the hall with the other terrorists in it.

*Strike first, swift, and true.*

Sal was her priority. With his mental abilities she had to take him out first… hard and fast. If she were quick enough, she could incapacitate both the alien and the human before either could fire their weapons. Skye was a wildcard though, and dangerous to leave as a second target.

*I hope I can get them both.* The girl thought with some trepidation. While Athena’s Kryptonian science assured her a very long lifespan (just like her amazing moms), Ryah didn’t have their super speed nor was she bulletproof… in other words, she could be killed.

She swallowed hard and steadied her hand as it started to shake.

*Ready…*

Then, out of nowhere, she felt the disturbing brush of Sal’s mind on hers, probing at the edges of her thoughts. Ryah gasped and reacted immediately, as J’onn had trained her to. She pushed back hard… imagining a very sharp blade, and involuntarily weaved the magic of the ancients into her thrust.

*Get out of my head!*

The alien screamed and raised his hands to his eyes! Blood began running down his cheeks like tears.

“What the f…?! Sal!” Skye jumped back from her screeching companion, both startled and horrified.

Ryah seized the moment to transform into a massive, sleek black panther and leaped from the shadows to confront her opponents. One swipe of her great paw sent the screaming, blinded, scaly alien, Sal, sailing eight feet across the hall to hit face-first into a concrete wall with a sound of crunching bones.

His limp body slid down and lay unmoving on the floor, leaving only a short distance separating Ryah from Skye.

The shocked woman stared at her, and began fumbling with her TEC-9… raising the weapon faster than expected. Ryah roared, and leaped again, and had almost reached her target when there was a sudden burst of uncontrolled gunfire. The Durlan felt pain explode all over her right side as her two-hundred-pound feline form crashed into and drove Skye back into the other wall. Despite the searing agony wracking her body, Ryah’s sharp fangs immediately sought the yielding flesh of the human
woman’s throat. At the same time, the terrorist’s smoking gun clattered to the floor and slid across the tile… ending up back in the shadows of their hiding place, at a stunned Carter’s feet.

A metallic tang filled Ryah’s mouth and the smell of blood stung her sensitive nostrils as she squeezed Skye’s windpipe just enough to show she was in control. She could easily have bitten down and ripped her attacker’s throat out, ending the danger… but in that moment of truth the girl couldn’t bring herself to kill the woman.

Unfortunately, Skye didn’t share Ryah’s reluctance, and as they struggled, the terrorist succeeded in drawing a long hunting knife from her leg sheath and attempted to plunge the deadly weapon into one of the girl/panther’s shoulders!

*Change!*

Ryah was no longer there when the knife struck; instead, she’d become a rather large octopus and had completely enveloped Skye’s head. Eight long, powerful tentacles encircled the woman’s neck and wrists like powerful, tightening nooses.

Her attacker’s knife crashed to the floor, replaced by fists that frantically beat on Ryah’s soft body, slowing as her powerful tentacles tightened. Even so, each strike felt like a jackhammer. The young girl hung on, and kept squeezing until Skye’s struggles finally ceased… and she dropped to the floor unconscious.

Shifting back into a panther was excruciating, and as Ryah turned to make sure Carter was okay her world had become fuzzy around the edges. She couldn’t think straight and stumbled on her normally-sure feline paws.

The girl quickly made the decision to change back to human form to steady herself, but as she did so a shooting pain tore through her side and she yelped, grabbing at her wet? shirt.

*Rao! I’m bleeding!? Oh yeah, she… shot me. I think.* She groaned. *I’ve been shot!… Moms! She cried out through their bond, but there was no response from any of her mothers.*

*They can’t hear me…*

As she fell to her knees, Ryah involuntarily shifted into her true Durlan form with tears streaming down her face, and Carter was already at her side. The boy didn’t seem to even react to her alien appearance, and once he realized she couldn’t move quickly dragged her back to their hiding spot.

“Don’t cry.” Her friend said calmly, and in an almost clinical manner sought her permission to lift her blood-soaked shirt and examine her side. She nodded, looking away and grinding her teeth as he did. Her shirt made a sucking noise as he peeled back its sticky wetness from her skin.

After a few moments, he said, “One went in, the other just grazed you. I think.” His brow was wrinkled with concern. “Ryah, you’re bleeding kinda bad here… let me…” He thought for a second, then pulled his Star Trek hoodie out of this backpack, ripped the cinch cord from its waist, tied the cloth around her, and used the cord to tighten it like a giant pressure bandage against her bullet wound. “I don’t know how much this will help, we need to get you to a doctor.”

Just then, a flash of movement down at the end of the hall drew their attention. The door to the power room had cracked open, and a very shocked man with a handgun stepped out to stare at the carnage in the shadowy light of the junction. He opened his mouth and yelled, but Ryah’s sound barrier worked both ways so she and Carter couldn’t hear anything.

She was doing her best to think of what to do when her best friend startled her by lifting Skye’s
weapon and aiming it down the hall from the cover of their hiding place.

“Where did you get that?” Ryah hissed through clenched teeth.

He nodded back toward Skye’s unmoving body. “She didn’t need it anymore. Don’t worry… my mom taught my brother and me how to shoot.”

“Carter…” Ryah stared at her friend with a newfound respect, then bit her lip and said, “Be careful.”

“I won’t actually hit him… unless I have to.” The boy assured her as he closed one eye, took aim, and then squeezed the trigger. A burst of bullets struck the wall a few inches from the man in the blue overalls and chips of concrete silently exploded from the wall, showering the very surprised man.

The panicked fellow dropped his own weapon and fell flat on the floor before scrambling in terror back behind the protection of the doors into the power room.

“Nice shot, Sundance,” Ryah said, groaning as she started to chuckle.

“Thanks.” The boy seemed to be critically studying his handiwork, and added (almost to himself), “I was off by an inch, huh.” Then glanced over at her. “So, does that make you Butch Cassidy? Um, you know they both die in the end, right?”

“No, I didn’t know that.” She swallowed, “But thanks for the save... ughh.” She grimaced and shifted uncomfortably at the stab of crippling pain radiating from her side, blood soaking through Carter’s makeshift bandage. “My hero.” She breathed out with some effort.

Her best friend had surprised her, in a very pleasing way. Ryah was certain that any other kid she knew would be freaking out if they were in his place, not calm, helpful, or shooting back at terrorists.

“Okay. Are we leaving now?” He asked matter-of-factly as if he was wondering if they were just going to class or some other mundane thing.

She shook her head and said, “We need to find out what they’re doing in that room… But I… I can’t… not like this.” She grunted in pain. “I don’t think I can move very far.”

“I could go…” He started, but she cut him off…

“Uh-uh, no way! We don’t have any idea how many more of them are left out there that we don’t know about, let alone down in the room. It’s not safe for you.”

Carter appeared perplexed as he considered her words, and then said, “Okay, then what are we going to do?”

They were both quiet for a moment, but then he brightened and asked with enthusiasm, “I know! Is there an animal from where you’re from that you can change into? You know, one that can heal super-fast, at least long enough to stop the bleeding? You seem to be able to take on their abilities.”

She grinned; young Carter Grant had already figured out and accepted that she wasn’t human, and not from Earth. “Yeah, I can… their natural ones at least.” It sucks that I can’t just turn into a Kryptonian and get my moms’ superpowers, that would solve all our problems… "As long as I’ve sensed them in person, my cells will remember their genetic make-up and be able to replicate it. Hmm…” Okay, think, Ryah, think! Oh! “Oh! I know! I remember a creature that Vela and I saw once! It was called a Cy’rilan mound beast. They have awesome regen ability. Owww, darn it.” As Ryah moved pain rippled through her side, but the boy shifted to make her more comfortable.
“Thanks, Carter. Give me twenty minutes of rest after I change. If the bleeding has stopped by then please wake me up, ‘kay?”

He nodded, “I understand.”

“Good. First…”

Ryah closed her eyes, gestured toward the end of the long corridor to the power room, and grimaced as she used her magic to seal the doors… temporarily. Damn, that hurts! If only she could use her power to help with her own injury! But healing magic was hard, and she hadn’t even started learning it yet.

The young witch had to catch her breath as she opened her eyes, but Carter was right there, supporting her. She gently squeezed his arm in thanks and said, “Well, they’re stuck in that room for a while, if my magic can hold. This next part is gonna hurt the worst, I think. Please don’t be scared, ‘kay?”

“I won’t be.” The boy said with the same kind of awed amazement as before, blinking helplessly at her.

She forced a smile through her pain, “Okay then, Sundance, keep your eyes on those doors. I’m going to put a spell on this corner to make it safe before I change and sleep. No one will see us here after that, I promise, even if they check. So, don’t make a sound… and for Circe’s sake, don’t touch them, move from here, or use that gun! Also, before you hide can you check Sal and Skye for zip ties or something to use to tie them up? Be sure to secure their hands behind their backs, and lock their ankles so they can’t hurt us, or run for backup if they do wake up.” It was like her Aunt Miyuki was speaking through her.

The boy still appeared to be zoned out, staring at her with that look of adoration on his face.

“Carter!”

“Uh-huh.” She’d startled him back to reality. “I heard. You’ll cast a spell... that’s so cool by the way. You’re a shapeshifter and a witch!... then I’ll tie these two up and come back to this spot to hide. Oh, and watch for more bad guys… and no touching or making noise.” His grin was bigger than his face (or at least it seemed that way).

Ryah nodded, her breathing shaky as she said, “Good. Remember, twenty minutes... and be careful, ‘kay?” Then the exhausted girl closed her eyes as the air shimmered and seemed to settle over them. She said, “The Veil… the spell of concealment, is done… now, the really really painful part…”

As she focused she said a small prayer to Athena, and gave thanks that at least this animal was about the same overall mass as she was. Changing into bigger and heavier creatures was harder, and took more out of her when she was weak.

Her form shifted into a furry alien animal, as big as a small bear, that looked a lot like a wolverine but with six powerful limbs. She then promptly yawned and curled up into a ball on the floor.

Carter was gazing down at her like he’d just found a box of kittens. “Oh, my God! You’re so cute!” He cooed pausing for permission as he tentatively reached out to pet her.

She sighed, grumbling adorably (at least he thought so), and nodded.

“Your claws are huge! And you have four front legs, and two in back… I bet you’re a digger, like a badger… from the family… um… I know this… um… Mustelidae! That’s it! Well, if you were from
Earth…” He added as he ran his hand over her long, soft brown fur. Ryah liked how it felt, so nice, and his touch helped distract her from the pain.

She prayed to all the gods that she could heal up enough to protect Carter when the time came; her spell would only hold for an hour if they were lucky. Surely her moms, or Shah, would find them by then?

So many questions and worries haunted the girl as her world went dark.

*Time: 0822 Hours in National City – T-Minus 37 minutes to Vartox’s deadline*

…………………………

At the D.E.O… a few minutes earlier...

_June 30th - Year Nine_

_The D.E.O.’s secret desert facility - just outside National City_

_0814 Hours UTC -8, Friday morning, U.S. Pacific Coast Time_

“So, there’s no word yet?” Alex asked, pacing in the glowing command center.

“No. It hasn’t been twenty minutes… but this is unlike Dante, he always checks in early.” Ada was obviously worried.

Alex nibbled on her thumbnail. “I don’t like it. Ryah’s not responding either, and she doesn’t play games when it comes to security. Something’s not right.”

“I agree. This is unusual, and concerning.” Shah shifted into her living black armor, becoming Shadow.

Kara, who’d only arrived moments before, flickered over to her bondmates, took Alex’s hands in her own, and gazed into her eyes. “You and Shah go, now. Make sure our daughter and Carter are safe… and find Dante. I’ll take care of the blowhard with the ax and join you after.”

“Hey, it’s my job to give the orders here.” Alex tried to smile but failed, and her shoulders sagged. Kara could tell how worried she was and sent comforting thoughts and hugs to her through their bond.

J’onn, as Hank Henshaw stepped over and interrupted. “No, that’s actually in my job description, Assistant Director, but I like your plan. Go. Vasquez will coordinate with you and Shadow from here, and Black Knight has Kara. I’ll be her wingman on this one, but we have some planning to go over before we can leave.”

After they all barked an enthusiastic, “Yes sir!” Alex kissed Kara deeply and then squeezed her hands one last time before flickering like her namesake to Shah, who took Flame into darkness as the pair sped off to check on Ryah.

“Supergirl?” Hank’s deep voice rumbled, pulling her worried thoughts back from her daughter. “You up to speed on the intel we have regarding this Valeronian’s powers?”
“Yes sir, thanks to Agent Keen. He’s got the standard checklist of brute-type stats: speed, invulnerability, a high tolerance for pain, and can leap like a cricket. Thankfully, no flying, heat vision, freezing breath, auras, or any other firepower. It’s his super strength that worries me though: it’s off the charts. Plus, he also has some sort of a mental and neurological connection with his weapon… and I have no idea what that means. The Fort Rozz database has no details about it that Alex or I could find.”

Hank nodded thoughtfully. “Definitely don’t underestimate his strength; you need to operate with the assumption that he’s stronger than you.” He warned. “That means to stay well out of his reach, and avoid his damn ax… at all costs! We don’t know if it can cut you, or your armor.”

“It can.” Astra, flying back from Europe, chimed in over the comms for all to hear, her voice subdued.

“It is why Non,” (she uttered the villain’s name through clenched teeth), “and his Daxamite allies, recruit the enthusiastic young warriors of Valeron. The simpletons are loyal to a fault, live and die by a twisted code of honor, are easily manipulated, carry some of the most powerful weapons in the universe, and (like Kryptonians) become stronger under the influence of a star like Sol.”

“Wonderful.” Kara rolled her eyes, and then asked, “So, what are they like?”

Astra paused, and then said, “Valeronians are an intolerant, rigid, patriarchal, polygamous, and warlike people who believe they venerate women yet, in reality, oppress them as slaves. While the men are busy challenging each other to bloody combat, the actual work of keeping their society running falls to their many mates… who are used for pleasure and to bear and raise the males’ offspring, of which there can be hundreds… though only the strongest survive to reach adulthood. This was one of many reasons Krypton found their culture uncivilized, barbaric, and had no ties to them.”

Kara knew she was making her angry face, but she couldn’t help it. “I could hear in his voice how much he despises me, probably just for being a woman who can challen…”

Suddenly she doubled over in agony, grabbing at her right side as she called out, “Ryah!”

_Time: 0818 Hours in National City – T-Minus 41 minutes to Vartox’s deadline_

…………………………

Ten minutes later, at Ryah and Carter’s school…

_June 30th - Year Nine_

_Post Evermore Academy, National City_

_0828 Hours UTC -8, Friday morning, U.S. Pacific Coast Time_

“Max, what the hell is it?” Alex’s question was desperate. Her side and head still ached with the echo of her daughter’s pain, and she was angry… pacing back and forth in her black, kick-ass D.E.O. battle gear outside of the stoic edifice that served as Ryah’s school. Shah stood near her bondmate, her Kryptonian armor also transformed into a D.E.O. uniform.
There were over fifty agents surrounding Evermore Academy, automatic and alien weapons poised at the ready. Beyond their circle of black SUVs with flashing lights, a ring NCPD Sentinels in armor and police kept back any spectators and photographers.

A field of scintillating energy, nearly invisible to the human eye but not to a Kryptonian’s, or Maxwell Lord's amazing goggles, rested like an impenetrable dome over the entire campus and sank its influence deep into the earth around it as a sphere. Ten agents and civilians who’d attempted to get through (including Dante) lay unmoving just inside its barrier.

Miyuki, in her sleek black leather outfit, hovered over Max Lord’s shoulder next to the serene Cassie. The brilliant billionaire, one of the best engineers on the planet, had been examining the shimmering shield with a direct sensor feed from Alex and Shatari.

The man lifted his funky spectroscopic eye gear with a look of wonder on his face. “I’ve never seen anything like it; it’s magnificent… and let me be clear, impossible to defeat. I’m not exaggerating, it’s like a massive tessellation field of infinitely complex five-dimensional geometric shapes… Each one is pure energy, deadly as hell, and constantly shifting around, changing form. That barrier is a trap for any living thing or energy… including communications; you name it, nothing gets in or out.”

“Like a maze of light,” Alex said, her tone hopeful.

“Yes… but more like an M.C. Escher cage.”

“So, we can't try and navigate it?” Kara, who was dressed as Supergirl, asked. She wasn’t supposed to be there but after experiencing Ryah’s excruciating pain had joined them at the school over J’onn’s protests. Alex was grateful she was there, but also worried; like Shah and Alex, Kara was rubbing her aching side. Would she be able to recuperate enough to battle the possibly-stronger-than-a-Kryptonian ax-wielding alien warrior by his deadline?

Max suddenly had the look of a man who’d just discovered something. “I suppose for a Kryptonian, with your ability to see the shapes and movements of the fields, it’s possible that you could find a way through it… eventually… or maybe get lost, forever… or worse, you end up with your neurons fried, like poor Dante in there. I don’t know, Supergirl, but I wouldn’t recommend it... especially not when you have a super-powered barbarian (with hostages) waiting to try and kill you at this very moment and a clock ticking down.”

“Wait.” Astra plummeted from the sky, landing among them with a gentle tremor that rattled the street. The D.E.O.’s Field Commander smiled at Max and said. “You are brilliant as always, my friend, but unfortunately, I know what this is.”

“What?” Everyone asked at once… even Cassie.

“It is a defensive weapon, developed by the Daxamites long ago during their wars with Krypton. While it is true that one of us, with our enhanced abilities and senses could possibly find their way through, that advantage was usually negated by the fact that these types of shields were almost always trapped and set to trigger if it detects one of our kind enter. I have only ever faced this conundrum in simulations, as this technology was outlawed with the last treaty that ended the conflict between our peoples long before I was Awakened.”

“If it’s outlawed tech, how did it get here?” Devi Mitra, the NCPD’s newest Captain, asked as she strode up to the group, and was wrapped in a hug from Alex, and then Kara.

Astra considered the question, and her elegant brow creased. “No such devices existed on Fort Rozz, and this one seems slightly… off, and not at full strength. If it were at peak power the humans who
entered would have been vaporized. This informs us that someone with the right skills and knowledge most likely built it here on Earth, using whatever components they had available.”

“What does that mean?” Alex was tearing up. “Astra, our little girl is in there.”

“Max…” The Commander prompted.

“I’m on it.” The man said, looking back down at his instruments. “Alex, everyone, what Astra is hinting at, and I think she’s on to something, is that there may be flaws, vulnerabilities that we can exploit, but I need time to find more of them… time we don’t have.”

“Do we have any idea who the maker is? If we could track them down…” Devi added hopefully.

Astra responded. “Good idea, Captain, but there are none on Earth (that we are aware of) who could create such an abomination. There was one being aboard Fort Rozz, a Coluan named Indigo, who would have possessed the knowledge and skills. She is a nonbiologic humanoid, an AI lifeform, who’d been cast out and disavowed by her own people. Non recruited this vile creature to serve as his all-seeing digital warrior, similar to what Ada does for Team Archangel, and as a lover. She will be hiding with her master, which makes it very clear to me who is behind this insidious act of terror.”

“Non,” Shah said with dread and urgency in her voice. “We need to get inside!” She approached the barrier and raised her right hand, palm out, to within inches of its shimmering surface. “I could make an attempt. Should I fail, perhaps we could learn something to help find a true path?”

Alex, feeling helpless, clenched her fists and said, “No, Shah please, I’ll go…”

“No. That’s a terrible idea, both of you!” Max said vehemently, urging them to stay put. “You heard Astra, your very presence within the energy field could set off a bomb, or something worse. No living thing can get in there unharmed or without potentially blowing us, and maybe the whole city, to bits. The energy source they’re using to generate that shield has to be immensely powerful, I have no idea where they could be drawing that kind of power from.”

Astra spoke, “It must be one of the twin Omegahedrons that fed Fort Rozz’s dark energy engines. Such devices were used to power entire regions on Krypton… if used as a weapon the results would be catastrophic. We must proceed with the utmost caution.”

They all grew silent, and Kara slipped over to wrap her arms around a very frustrated Alex. We’ll find a way to get to her, Nafasem-an, I promise.

Non… Kara, I’m going to kill that sick son-of-a-bitch with my bare hands when we find him. I swear to Rao, and all the gods, I will! The brunette was shaking with rage.

Astra nodded in agreement, and Shah wrapped a comforting arm around Alex.

“I can do it.” Cassie’s quiet voice shattered the quiet. “I can enter, see the children to safety, and then attempt to shut down the field from inside. I am technically not ‘living’, in the biological sense, and believe that based on what we know if I temporarily shut down most of my primary systems I can pass through relatively unscathed.”

There was a stunned moment of silence, and then everyone was moving and talking all at once.

Max begged her not to go… that it was too dangerous, too risky for her. But she gently touched his face and said, “These children are already facing the danger, how could I not do the same when I believe that I can help? Is that not what you wanted for me when you woke me from the dark, Maxwell? For me to understand compassion, empathy, love, and the difference between what is
right, and what is wrong? To have my own mind, make my own decisions? That is the essence of free will, is it not? And it is my choice to make... even if doing so hurts my heart, and you, my love... more than I can bear.”

There were tears in her eyes.

“But, you could... die.” He choked out.

She wiped wetness from her cheek in wonder and spoke directly to him, “Max, if I were ever blessed to be able to have a child of my own and she was trapped in there, alone and afraid, we wouldn't be having this conversation. We'd both already be inside to stand with her regardless of the danger to ourselves. Doing this is right... and you know it, just as I know that I love you with all of my heart.”

He nodded slowly, and she pulled him to her as she kissed him slow and deeply.

“I love you, too.” He said with tears in his eyes.

Then, after a brief conversation with her brother, James, and being hugged profusely by her friends, she was loaded up with body armor and given two handguns by Devi. Max had disappeared briefly, only to return and hand Cassie an old-school walkie-talkie he’d frantically been modifying. It was Frakensteined to high heaven with fresh solder still seeping out of its insides.

Kara blew on it briefly with her freeze breath to cool it off.

He said, “I think low-tech may work to get a signal through, using one of those ‘flaws’ I’ve found, I hope.”

After one last, brief kiss, he whispered a plea as they parted, “Cassandra, come back to me... please,”

“That’s the plan.” She said with a grin before slowly letting Max's fingers slide from her hand as she walked into the light. The barrier erupted with arcs of plasma that assaulted Cassie’s body as she breached it, tearing pieces of smoking skin and armor right off her. When she finally reached the other side, she stumbled and fell to her knees.

Everyone held their breaths until she staggered unsteadily to her feet.

When she glanced back to give them a brave smile, they could see that her beautiful face was partially burned. A jagged, blackened scar marred her left cheek. She grimaced as she lifted the old walkie-talkie to her ear and spoke through the static, “Did this device survive the trip? Can you all hear me?”

“We can! Are you alright?” Max’s reaction was a volatile mixture of intense relief and concern. Everyone pressed in around him to listen, and to wish her good luck.

“I am... injured, but still functioning at near eighty-five percent. I’ll be okay unless I have to do that again.” Cassie’s reply crackled with distortion. “I’m heading in now, and will keep you updated.”

She followed the sidewalk, pausing only briefly to check on some of the agents including the still-unmoving Dante. After a moment kneeling next to the wounded Petty Officer, Cassie turned to give them a concerned nod as she spoke into the walkie, “He’s taken quite a blow to the back of the head and is bleeding, but his breathing is steady.” She then patted his shoulder, stood, unholstered both of her weapons, and proceeded briskly to the rear service doors, where she slipped inside the building.
Kara, despite wanting to stay near her daughter, finally responded to J’onn’s escalating pleas and let him know she was on her way.

The frustrated Kryptonian kissed Alex and Shah, hugged everyone else farewell, and launched herself into the sky… blurring off to face her would-be executioner.

*Time: 0842 Hours in National City – T-Minus 17 minutes to Vartox’s deadline*

……………………………….

At that same moment, inside Evermore Academy, basement level two…

Something kept poking her. It was irritating and quite uncomfortable. The Durlan’s side ached… scratch that, her whole body hurt. *What in Athena’s name was going on?* Ryah thought, as she slowly stirred to awareness… her eyelids fluttering open in the gloomy shadows.

*Ah, now I remember.*

She’d braced herself for pain, but there was very little as she shifted into her human form. She must have healed some while she slept. *Thank goodness!* Her friend Carter was with her, kneeling on her right, but they weren’t alone.

The alien with mind powers, Sal, lay crumpled and still unmoving in one corner of their cramped hiding place, his breathing shallow and ragged, while the human woman, Skye, sat trussed up next to him, glaring at Ryah like she wanted to murder her... which she almost had. Both were securely bound with zip ties around their ankles and their hands secured behind their backs.

“Nice job, Carter.” Ryah croaked. “You pulled them into my Veil. I like the gag on this one, it looks good on her.” The girl managed to grin at an enraged Skye but then groaned as her friend helped her sit up. “So, what’s the ‘sitch’?”

“I’m so glad you’re awake.” The young man said with visible relief. “The four guys in the power room broke through your barrier after pounding on it for a while, and came looking for these two… but couldn’t find us just like you said. But while they were out here looking I heard one of them say that the ‘trigger’ was ‘almost set’. I think you were right Ryah, they’re making a bomb! Also, there are four more upstairs in the school, they came down here to check in but then went back up; one looked like a mountain.”

The boy shuddered.

*Great, just great, and I still can’t get through to anyone.* “How well-armed are they?” She asked as she gingerly ran her fingers over her side. Her shirt had dried blood all over it. She wasn’t bleeding anymore but knew it could start again at any moment. The shape change had worked… barely. *I’m weak as a kitten and hurt badly. I should be in a hospital, not here.*

“They have a lot of weapons. TEC-9’s, handguns, and I saw grenades of some kind. The big guy also had what looked like an AK-47 with a short stock.”

*Wow, Carter knows his weapons!* Ryah was very impressed.

Skye chose that moment to struggle against her restraints and fire off a string of unintelligible muffled
curses aimed at the Durlan, just like the daggers coming out of her dark eyes.

Out of patience, Ryah leveled her gaze at the woman and said with menace, “I have no problem hitting anyone who’s tried to kill me, even if she’s tied up. I might even forget to sheath my claws this time.”

Skye blinked, and backed down… growing quiet and sullen in her corner.

Ryah glared at her one last time before turning her attention back to Carter, who was once again staring at her in awe.

“So…” He began. “Are there others like you?”

It hurt to talk about, but he had no way of knowing that. “No, not on Earth. As far as I know, I’m the only one. My world is thousands of light-years away, but my moms and my new family taught me that who your people are is more than biology. My family and my friends are here. My world is here.”

........................................

A couple minutes later…

June 30th - Year Nine

Arden Nuclear Facility - twelve miles outside of National City

0847 Hours UTC -8, Friday morning, U.S. Pacific Coast Time

On her way over, Kara had taken a little extra time to review the footage of the alien, Vartox, from both Channel 3 and from a D.E.O. stealth drone that was secretly lurking about inside the Arden Nuclear Facility. She also reviewed the plant’s architectural plans, and had a quick discussion on strategy with J’onn (who was already there as Hank Henshaw, waiting with a strike team) and Black Knight, back at the agency’s secret desert base.

She paused, miles above her target, as Hank said, “Your priority is to get Vartox clear of the hostages. We’re ready to extract them once you do.”

“I have an idea about how to do that, sir.”

“Should I even ask for details?” Hank’s tone indicated that he already knew the answer.

Up in the troposphere, Kara smiled. I love you, J’onn J’onnzz. Don’t worry… he won’t know what hit him.

Be careful, Daughter of Krypton, and don’t let him get his hands on you.

“You ready, Supergirl?” Black Knight’s voice spoke over the comms, completely serious this time.

“As I’ll ever be.” She said as she breathed out and became a blur… flying down through the swirling clouds of water vapor toward the nuclear plant, aiming for Reactor 6’s broken dome.

The swaggering ax-wielding warrior was inside the glass-lined walls of the main control room. Over
twenty staff and engineers huddled on the polished floor before him, watching his razor-sharp weapon with fear and unease as the alien paced impatiently, and ranted...

“Where is she?? Is the daughter of Alura so cowardly, so lacking in honor, that she will allow me to start killing these pathetic men rather than face me? In less than ten minutes the ax of my fathers will be bathed in blood, blood that…”

With a sound like thunder, Vartox was suddenly no longer standing there. He had been cut-off midsentence and disappeared after being struck by what appeared to be a bolt of lightning.

Then came the wind, like a hurricane.

Glass, steel, and concrete exploded outward as the alien warrior’s body slammed through multiple barriers on its way out of the room and the entire facility. He’d been hit by something so hard, so powerful, so immovable, that the men on the floor had to cover their ears from the sound of it… and in his place stood Supergirl, hands on her hips and her red cape flapping in the gale she’d brought with her.

The hostages on the floor gaped at her with a kind of stunned amazement, but the hero didn’t have time for pleasantries. “Go, now!” She commanded, and they began to scramble to their feet. “To the back staircase. Soldiers are waiting there to take you to safety. Don’t make any stops… just run!”

Before any of them could thank her, she’d turned her attention to the Vartox-sized hole in the wall and shimmered after him.

Seconds later…

June 30th - Year Nine

Arden Nuclear Facility - twelve miles outside of National City

0850 Hours UTC -8, Friday morning, U.S. Pacific Coast Time

With two CatCo helicopters circling above, Kara gracefully touched down in what looked like a vast megalithic landscape of partially-completed concrete domes, rebar, and huge tarnished pipes covered in peeling beige paint. Dust still hung in the air around the twenty-foot-wide (empty) crater that her enemy’s impact had made.

The abandoned area near the primary power-generating complex of the facility was the size of three football fields and had been intended as the home of reactors 7-10. A few years earlier, due to the swift advances of fusion and dark energy (thanks to Team Archangel and Ravan), the project had been defunded and construction ceased. Now all that remained were ruins.

It was deadly quiet, and though she scanned her surroundings with her X-Ray vision, a large amount of heavy metals in the construction materials mostly blocked her from seeing through anything.

“Watch your six.” Black Knight cautioned, “Drones are in the air, and I’m sending all feeds to you.”
Kara could now see the area from ten different angles in her HUD, but Vartox was nowhere to be found. Her opponent was good…

She took a breath, focused her and her armor's senses, and soon detected the thundering echo of a strong heartbeat nearby, as well as heavy breathing.

“I hear you!” She called out in an attempt to bait him.

And it worked; seconds later the warrior leaped from his concealment high above! The ground shuddered as he landed behind her, and he immediately swung at her head like a boxer. Kara shimmered with super speed and succeeded in deflecting his piledriver punch with her forearm, but his other fist came in fast and struck her in the chest!

The impact sent her tumbling across the concrete thirty feet! She finally rolled to an inelegant stop against some now severely dented machinery.

“Oof!” She exhaled. *Dammit, that was a rookie move, Danvers!*

Even as Archangel, she’d never had the wind knocked out of her before, not like that, and it hurt. Her suit thickened in response, becoming more like true armor as she shook her head and quickly bounced back up to her feet to face the hulking Valeronian who was already moving toward her.

“On my planet, females bow before males.” He rumbled as he approached, seemingly without any fear.

For a moment, it struck her as odd that Vartox appeared so normal… just like some douchebag guy who loved to work out… an evil lumberjack, or maybe a biker. He was wearing jeans, a t-shirt, and a dark denim jacket, with his deadly ax slung over his back. His eyes were set and determined, like the grimace on his hard, bearded face. He was a man on a mission… to kill Supergirl (apparently), and Kara still didn’t understand exactly why.

*Why? Just because Non told him to? Because he was raised to believe women were somehow inferior? Asshole.*

Suddenly, Black Knight’s assuring voice chimed in her ear, “Drones are in position if we need to fire.”

J’onn’s baritone immediately followed, “And I’m ready to take this jackass down the minute you say go.”

“Thanks, boys.” Kara whispered, and then replied coolly to Vartox’s sexist remark, “This isn’t your planet, thank Rao.”

They were circling each other now.

“You look like Alura.” He sneered, obviously trying to provoke her into attacking.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Kara said with a smile, and a look of confusion flickered across his features as she did so.

Perhaps he’d expected her to be surprised that he knew who she was? If so that was good… she needed to keep him off balance. “If my mother sentenced you to Fort Rozz, then I’m sure it was for good reasons… and I think it’s time I sent you back behind bars.”

His face turned red. “I will never forget my judge and jailer, the woman who condemned me! Can’t
kill her… so killin’ you will have to do.” Then, in a flash, he jumped straight at Kara, lifting both arms above his head as if to bring his fists down upon her.

Fortunately, he’d telegraphed his big move, and she was able to dart underneath his arc like a dancer, striking upwards with her right palm. The blow she landed on his chin split the air with thunder as it connected.

The grunting, flailing warrior hurtled backward a hundred feet, breaking through a solid concrete wall, and then another, like a wrecking ball before he struck a massive rusted generator in a high-domed chamber filled with a dozen of the aging units.

Supergirl was straddling his body in a dust cloud before he could get his bearings… punching at super-speed with both fists, battering his face with her lightning blows. He was bruised and bloodied before his own savage punch connected with her, hard. This time sending her through an internal wall of the chamber and into a tangle of thick metal wires beyond.

Wiping spittle and blood from his chin Vartox burst into the room where Kara struggled to rise. The alien warrior had a look of rage on his face. “Just because you wear that symbol on your chest, doesn’t mean you’re him. Fighting him would be an honor. Fighting you is just… exercise.”

Kara ripped dozens of the thick cables out of the wall, and, coughing, staggered to her feet to face him. “We’ll see about that.” She said, her tone dangerous.

He’d finally drawn his weapon and hefted the deadly battle ax menacingly as he stalked forward, more cautious this time. “You actually think that you could defeat me?” He laughed. “That you’d be able to stop any of the forces arrayed against you? Be smart. Lay down and die with honor, now, or your whole city will bleed.”

“Shut up!” She screamed and exploded at him like one of the Furies of myth.

The battle that ensued was epic… and seen by millions across the globe thanks to Channel 3’s cameras recording from above. The fight sprawled across the abandoned facility… Vartox would strike, Supergirl would counter, and vice versa, occasionally each would get a solid blow in. In between, stealthy D.E.O. drones pelted him with missiles and .50 caliber rounds, but with little effect. The air shook, buildings fell, and the earth trembled as the duo set upon each other like angry gods. In truth, it was unbelievable.

Over twelve grueling minutes later she and her armor had been cut three times by his weapon, and Kara was bleeding… but so was he.

Ada, Black Knight, J’onn, help! He’s freaking invulnerable, it’s like punching myself! I can’t get through his skin, and that ax has nearly killed me half a dozen times! What should I do?

Something unexpected. The Martian mused first. Think three-dimensionally. You can fly, he can’t.

The superhero brightened. Just like in Wrath of Kahn! Thanks, Spock! After her next dodge, Kara soared straight up, high into the air, and came back down like a missile, smashing Vartox deep into the earth beneath the facility! Into the sub-levels… but still, the unstoppable warrior kept fighting.

The ever-present drones followed the battle.

I have an idea! Ada piped up. His skin may be as impervious as yours but just as Shah did to Circe when she was Madam Xiao if you strike him just so the force of your blow should translate through rather than be dispersed over its surface. Sending you my calculations… now. Her niece’s
Kryptonian glyph screeched over their connection, and Kara smiled.

*Of course! I should have thought of that. Thank you!*

She and Vartox were once again out in the open, circling each other, with the Cat-copters hovering above, their mics and cameras still recording everything. By that time Kara had summoned two four-foot-long swords from her battle armor, wielding one in each hand, and was using them to parry his deadly weapon like a dancer every time he came in at her. Combined with her super speed, the swords were perfect for deflection and misdirection. They were no match for a head-on confrontation with the star-hardened metal of her opponent’s ancient ax, but she never gave him the opportunity to connect with his full strength. *Maybe I can tire him out?*

“I will stop you.” Kara called out, her words spoken like a warning. “My world may be gone, but this one and these people are under my protection. You’re a pawn of my uncle, an evil man who cares nothing for anyone, only himself... nothing more. You don't need to do this!”

Before she could move to block it, he’d hurled his deadly weapon directly at her! Kara spun to avoid being hit in the chest, but the ax cut through the armor of her right arm and left a six-inch long deep gash in her armor and the flesh beneath. The spinning weapon continued on to demolish a huge mechanism behind her in an explosive shower of sparks.

Whatever barriers were holding her back before evaporated, and her eyes blazed with fire. Supergirl lashed out with her heat vision and her aura... using gravity to slam a completely startled Vartox backward off his feet over twenty feet! There was the sound of thunder as he was driven deep into one of the concrete walls of the ruins. Though the bloody and burned warrior struggled to free himself, he could not move. Arms stretched out at his sides, he was pinned into the rock.

Kara limped towards him, her swords dissipating as she reached across her chest to grab her bleeding right bicep with her left hand. It only took a few moments for her to reach her fallen opponent to stand before him, her eyes pools of blue flame.

The fingers of his right hand twitched as his ax flew back into his grasp... returning on its own accord. “Kill me now,” he croaked, “and you will doom the child of your city’s queen as well as all of his classmates.”

*What??!!* She yelled at him in disbelief. “You’re threatening children, now, and I’m the dishonorable one?” Kara’s heart was racing; his threat was connected to Cat, to Carter, to... *Ryah.* She was up in Vartox’s face, her bloody left hand around his throat, squeezing. Backed by her manipulation of gravity the effect was quite immediate as the warrior began to sputter from lack of oxygen. “Give me details, now! Or I... so help me, will end this, and you.”

Her eyes now burned like white stars. So bright and hot that Vartox had to turn away. He could see in her eyes that she wasn't bluffing.

“Not threatening... telling.. truth! The Queen’s son, Carter Grant...” The defeated warrior, his face swollen and bloody, sagged and gasped out, “There’s a bomb... at his place of... learning... big enough... to destroy the city.”

Kara’s heart fell out of her chest, and her grip suddenly tightened.

*Ryah!!!*

*0909 Hours...*
Back at Evermore, a few minutes earlier…

June 30th - Year Nine

Inside Evermore Academy - basement level two, National City

0853 Hours UTC -8, Friday morning, U.S. Pacific Coast Time

Everything was crazy and out of control.

The power generation room for the school was a high industrial chamber filled with humming turbines, big pipes, and bundles of cables coming and going in different directions. In the center, an alien device made of some sort of opaque crystalline substance had been attached to the mechanisms. About three feet above it, and ten feet apart, floated two large crystals; one was clear, like a big diamond or quartz and the other was red, more like a ruby. Between them hovered an object that looked like an artifact out an Indiana Jones movie. The metal device was about the size and shape of a baseball and a white light, apparently some form of energy, radiated from within it through holes all over its gunmetal gray honeycomb-like surface… The light flickered ominously as it turned on its own hanging there in space.

According to the man who’d set the complex mechanism up, it was a bomb. Once triggered, the crystals would be unstoppable. They’d slowly and inexorably move together to crush the Omega-doohickey in the middle… and then, boom! Half the city would be gone.

Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson stood next to the crystalline explosive, holding that man by the throat and using him as a shield against four armed terrorists trying to free him and finish his job.

Ryah had painfully taken the form of The Rock because he was the biggest, strongest non-Kryptonian thing she could think of in a pinch besides her uncle J’onn, (and also probably because she'd just watched The Game Plan with her three moms) when she was sneaking around as a mouse and realized the sweaty guy she was now holding was about to finish connecting the remote trigger. She'd moved quickly to stop him.

Which is how she’d ended up standing between four armed goons and the bomb, with a man held in front of her like a shield against four armed terrorists trying to free him and finish his job.

Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. I probably shouldn’t have left Carter and our safe little hideout and crept down here as a mouse to scout around. She sighed. Who am I kidding? Of course, I had too! The bomb would be actively ticking by now if I hadn’t! The only question is… how do I get out of this alive, and without help? Think, brain… think! What would my mom’s do, or Miyuki?

Just then, from outside in the hallway, there was the crackling sound of gunfire, many things breaking (okay, booming), shattering concrete, and several someones shouting before the doors burst inward. Ryah covered her face with one of her tree limb-sized appendages to block the flying debris but the bad guy she was holding wasn’t so lucky: he was struck by one of the crumpled metal doors and knocked unconscious as she was pushed back a couple feet.
As the dust cleared, the four terrorists began firing at a figure that had made the dramatic entrance. Though human-shaped, she was made of metal, ceramics, and synthetic flesh, which hung from her smoldering form, and she bled a dark liquid from a hundred horrible injuries. As she jumped on her closest attacker one of the other men panicked, started screaming in terror, and unloaded the clip of his TEC-9 into her as well as the man she was fighting.

It was only as her rescuer was slammed into a wall and riddled with bullets that Ryah realized who it was. “Cassie!!” She screamed, and without thinking lifted the unconscious man she was holding over her head and hurled him at the terrorist who was reloading and about to fire his weapon at her android aunt. The man with the gun was crushed under the dead weight and remained still once he was down.

“Ryah!” Cassie’s voice was damaged and distorted, but her relief and concern were clear as she leaped jerkily forward to snap the neck of her last attacker who’d turned his weapon on The Rock. “Are you okay? Are there any more of them? Point me in the right direction! Most of my sensors are offline. I'm fighting almost blind.”

“One, that I know of.” The girl replied… just as she felt the muzzle of a gun as it pressed against her mid-back. “Oh no…”

The man behind her lifted a second handgun in his other hand and shot a startled and frozen Cassie right between the eyes. The android’s head snapped back, and she crumpled to the ground, unmoving.

“Noooo!” Ryah’s scream was a mix of shock, despair, and rage as she swept back with an arm, deflecting the weapon away from her, and slammed her ham-sized elbow into the pale man who’d just shot Cassie in the face. His body slammed limply backward into a wall, blood spraying from his crushed nose.

Carter was in the doorway now, a weapon held in each hand, and was watching as Ryah painfully shifted back to her own human form and fell sobbing onto Cassie’s body. “Cassie! Cassie! Wake up! Pleasepleaseplease… wake… up.”

All was still for a moment, but then the android suddenly twitched and somehow moved out from under Ryah… toward the man with the broken nose.

Too late Ryah realized that she’d dropped the ‘keystone’ in the fight and the injured man had somehow been able to crawl over to it. Before Cassie put her hand through his chest the grinning man had attached it to the clear crystal, which had begun to slowly move as soon as he did so… drawn to its blood-red mate like a magnet.

Ryah and Carter ran up to her staggering aunt, who didn’t look like her normal self at all. Cassie was damaged terribly; her face was mostly gone, she was leaking dark fluids all over, her one good arm was trembling uncontrollably, and she was sparking in a hundred places. “I… have… failed you, my child, the bomb is now active. You and Carter must flee, now! Alex and Shah are outside with Max, Miyuki, and Astra. Go, far… all of you. There still may be… hope.”

“No! Cassie! Come with us, I can… carry… you…” Ryah protested, but then swooned as she attempted to shapeshift back into The Rock. Carter caught her as she dropped into his arms. ”No…” She managed to whisper, but the world was growing soft and fuzzy all around her and she slipped into unconsciousness.

“Ryah!” The boy was staring at the blood covering his arm and starting to freak out as he spoke to Cassie, “She’s bleeding all over, lost a lot already. This is bad… really, really bad.”
The dying android nodded, barely, and patted the boy's shoulder to calm him. She then raised a strange-looking device to her shattered face and spoke to a man in the static and told him what had just transpired in the power room. Carter could hear that he was crying as she told him that she loved him, and he said the same back to her.

The hacked walkie talkie was still on as she dropped the device at her feet, and then she moved to the bomb and squeezed herself in between the two converging crystals to protect the ball of metal from the compression of the inexorably moving, unbreakable stones. “I can't shut down the force field, but can use my body to keep the crystals apart as long as my combat chassis maintains its integrity to slow the bomb's detonation. I can't stop it, I'd need Max to disarm it, and there is... not enough time. He must survive, not come after me, I am finished. Take her, Carter Grant... go. I left no one to... challenge you above. Tell Ryah... not her fault... I... love her. Run! Now! Do not stop!”

And he did. He was crying when he thanked the sad mechanical woman Ryah had called her aunt... and ran like he’d never run in his life, clutching the girl he cared for like no other creature on Earth besides his mother tightly to his chest...

On the way, for good measure, he screamed “Bomb! Bomb!”, over and over, and tripped the school's fire alarm on his way to warn everyone and get out of the building and to safety.

June 30th - Year Nine

Arden Nuclear Facility - twelve miles outside of National City

0857 Hours UTC -8, Friday morning, U.S. Pacific Coast Time

For a moment, Kara's world went completely still, as if time had stopped. J’onn was talking in her ear, telling her to calm down, but all she saw was red.

“My daughter is in that school!” She yelled, before releasing her grip on Vartox’s throat and withdrawing the gravity crushing him into the wall. He seemed surprised and almost pleased by the change as he stumbled forward, but that’s when Kara pulled back her left arm and delivered a devastating hypersonic strike that didn’t just shatter the bones of his right shoulder, but turned them to dust!

Vartox had never felt such pain!

The resulting shockwave rippled like a tsunami outward from them in all directions, shattering every wall and leveling the half-completed structures in its path. Up above, the Channel 3 helicopters battled the rough turbulence as they circled, recording the incredible events transpiring on the ground, including Supergirl's conversation with Vartox. Millions of people watched, stunned.

At the epicenter of the destruction, Vartox howled in agony as he collapsed to his knees, utterly defeated. The warrior almost dropped his ax in the process but clung to the weapon through the pain... almost as if his life depended on it.

His face was contorted in a tortured grimace as he begged, “Stop! Kryptonian... please. Not me. It wasn't me. I would never... target children! Tricked. I was to kill the daughter of Alura to stop my
Commander from blowing up that school. On my honor, I swear!”

Unconvinced, Kara moved to take his weapon from him…

“NO! I beg you! As the victor I would give you my weapon if I could, but should it leave my hand for more than two minutes the children will all die… along with the city. The dishonorable bastard, Karn, placed a trigger within my weapon, in case I failed in my mission. The bomb is linked to him… through it. The only way to disarm his remote connection, and the bomb, would be to destroy my ax… but that is impossible.” He coughed, and spit up blood. “She was forged in the core of what humans call a white dwarf star, one of the hottest in the universe.”

Kara suddenly felt cold, and the horrible pain had returned to her side. Ryah! Oh, my baby, what’s happening to you?!

Alex’s thoughts were then with her... She’s hurt badly, but out of the school with Carter. Astra took her to Safiya at Smythe. Miyuki, Cat, and Carter are on their way to her right now. The field is down, but the bomb… it’s still ticking. Max... he’s not... I mean, he doesn't think he has a chance at disarming it... Kara could feel her bondmate’s sorrow. Someone close to them had died...

Then she knew… and her heart broke. Cassie. Their friend had sacrificed herself for Ryah, for the city… but it was only a temporary reprieve. The Daxamite crystals would eventually pulverize her hardened combat chassis and the bomb would go off… killing tens of thousands. There was no way they could evacuate that many people in time.

With only a few minutes left to act, Kara decided what they had to do… they needed to somehow destroy Vartox’s indestructible ax.

Tears for Cassie were streaming down her cheeks as she sent her thoughts to Alex. I need you, Shah, Aeryn, and Ada here as your alter egos to finish this, and then we will go to Ryah. Ma’har, I hope you and the gods are listening in and can find a way to help us. We need you now more than we ever have.

Kara then looked deep into Vartox’s eyes… and after a moment decided that she believed him. “The bomb’s already been triggered.” She said flatly.

He grimaced, “Then there is no hope. As long as my weapon exists as a link for Karn’s control, the bomb cannot be disabled.”

Kara glanced at his ax and sucked in a breath as an awful idea came to her mind.

Looking back into his gaze it was as if the warrior sensed what she needed from him, and he nodded stoically and said, “It must be done. I will keep her in my grip for as long as possible to buy you time. You must do it, and quickly… though I don’t know how you’ll destroy her at all, let alone in whatever time you'll have beyond two minutes with me holding it... even with all of your great power. Regardless, I am prepared to die.”

Kara’s brow crinkled, “I’m not going to kill you... and I won’t be alone.” She whispered reassuringly and gently touched his less injured left forearm.

Vartox appeared perplexed, but then added, “I was wrong… about you, and about many things (it seems). You have bested me in fair combat, it was an honor facing you, Kara Zor-El. My life is yours.” He said the last part as if he still expected Kara to blast him, along with his ax, to smithereens... but she did not, she had other plans.

She then nodded solemnly, and to his surprise propped him up against the wall as comfortably as she
could before standing up. “We’ll deal with all of that later, for now, it’s time for a reckoning with your old masters.” Then she called out, “Flame, Shadow, Starlight! To me! I need you.”

Ada flickered into being like an angel next to the beaten and coughing Vartox, followed by Flame, and then Shadow, who appeared side-by-side with Kara. Vartox’s eyes went wide when he saw them… “There are four of you?! They… Non… he doesn’t…” he paused to cough again. “He doesn’t know. He is looking only for Alura’s daughter and the angel next to me who protects the human’s networks and secrets. You have… the advantage, or at least… had.” He glanced up at the sky where one of CatCo’s helicopters was circling above, filming.

“We still do,” Ada said cryptically as she formed a pillow made of light and massaged it as it solidified in her hands. After it became substantial she gently placed it behind the fallen warrior’s neck. She then explained, “And we are six, today. Just before we arrived, Selene dropped a veil on this place, and the humans will only see you and Supergirl fighting… not us, any of our shenanigans, or him.” She gestured over her shoulder at the very intimidating armored J’onn J’onzz, The Martian Manhunter, who’d just phased into existence walking towards them, towered over all of them at nearly seven-feet.

“What are we doing?” Shah asked. But after a quick glance and a burst of Kryptonian thoughts from Kara understood and grew pale, along with everyone else.

Kara was distraught but committed. “It’s the only way I can think of. We need as much time as the weapon’s connection to Vartox will give us, but if we destroy it with him he’ll die too. Okay, my heat vision won’t be enough alone. We need Shikaze to breach the weapon’s hardened outer layers, and then all of our strength together in order for this plan to have a chance. Shadow, can Shikaze put a crack in it…?”

Shadow nodded, “Yes, Supergirl, she believes that she can do it.”

Kara then knelt down, gracefully placed her hand on Vartox’s good shoulder, and a silent agreement passed between them as they both looked down at his arm that held his ax. “J’onn and his people will look after you, I promise.” She then took a breath, and at the same time, she, Flame, and Shadow fired their heat vision in a tight beam, at full blast, slowly cutting the Valeronian’s arm off just below the elbow.

Ada, with J’onn kneeling beside her, placed her palms on either side of Vartox’s thrashing head, and managed to soothe some of the warrior’s pain… but the air was filled with smoke, the stench of burning flesh, and his horrific screams.

Before falling unconscious, his agonized grimace turned into a grin at Kara, and he said, “Save the children, and kill that dishonorable Daxamite scum, Karn… should you find the rock he’ll be hiding under.”

“I will. I promise.” She said with conviction as he fell unconscious.

Moments later, Supergirl strode from the crumbling ruin holding Vartox’s forearm, his large hand still tightly grasping his huge weapon’s haft.

Shah had moved outside to a clear area and swiftly excavated a deep conical hole before drawing Shikaze from her sheath. Darkness, like a living thing, emanated from the blade Ares had forged, and the goddess within it assured the team she could scratch the star-forged ax’s hardened surface, as was the plan.

She purred in Japanese, A hard shell on the outside… but soft within like an M&M, right, Alexandra?
Bring it.

*Here goes everything!* Kara thought as she threw the ax and Vartox’s arm up into the air and bathed it in her freeze breath.

Shadow then leaped skyward with Shikaze’s hilt held in both hands, raising the ancient blade in a hypersonic arc that left a glowing scratch trailing along the frozen alien weapon’s ‘impervious’ surface, exposing the gleaming metal of the weapon's interior.

She then spun in mid-air to release her heat vision at that crack, and at the same moment Supergirl, Flame, and Starlight did the same. Seconds ticked by as they each poured every ounce of their power into their effort, driving the internal temperature of the ax higher and higher, until it was glowing red hot, and then white... as bright as the sun.

*Now, Selene! We need a shield!* Kara’s thoughts broadcast to the team, and suddenly the redhead was there among them, and a great ball of energy sprung into existence to surround the ax just before it exploded with an earthshaking detonation accompanied by a blinding flash! Shards of molten metal ricocheted all around inside the invisible barrier.

As Shah landed gracefully on her feet they all approached the edge of the pit as the seething sphere of living energy sunk into it and contracted. When it finally settled at the bottom of the pit what had once had been Vartox’s ax was now a smoldering, incredibly dense ball of cooling metal.

Multiple black SUVs from the D.E.O., Homeland Security, Lord Tech, and the F.B.I. were all screaming to duty halts around them, and J’onn, now in the form of Hank Henshaw, was guiding a medical team with a hovering gurney to the fallen Vartox.

Ada shifted out of her Starlight persona and into Navy uniform as she ran up to hug Kara and Alex, “It is done. Selene and I will help address Vartox’s injuries. You two go, see to your daughter… and you as well, mother. She needs all of you.” Something in the tone of her niece’s voice made Kara’s chest tighten.

-----------------

*Minutes earlier, just before the bomb activated...*

*A dark chamber, location unknown...*

The Daxamite Commander, his face shadowed by the soft glow of the lights of alien command consoles, studied the video feed from Channel 3 of the fight between Supergirl and Vartox. He watched silently as the warrior fell, and then casually waved his hand over the controls before him to send the signal that would route through his minion’s weapon and activate the bomb’s trigger. Tens of thousands, perhaps more, of humans would perish by his one action... and he felt nothing for them, only invigorated by a rush of power.

A moment later a hologram appeared in the room, drawing him to attention.

The virtual visitor; a stern Kryptonian with blonde short-cropped hair, dressed in a technologically advanced black body suit etched with red, did not appear pleased at all.

Commander Karn bowed deeply and said, “General Non, Vartox is dead. He chose death over
The General’s response was dismissive. “Typical of his race.”

“Sir, he failed yet again but did accomplish one thing. The identity of the girl has been confirmed, it seems she is Alura's daughter.”

Non nodded. “My dear, dear little niece. Of course she escaped Krypton’s end with her cousin, Astra loved that child beyond reason.” He spat, then, some diabolical idea seemed to stir as a grin skittered over his features.

Karn was saying, “She is also a far lesser threat than he is to our endeavors…”

“You're wrong.” Non interrupted, strenuously. "If she's anything like her long-dead mother or aunt, she will be just as formidable as Kal-El. She bested Vartox, did she not? Do not let your arrogance blind you, Commander. It was my right to lead Krypton… and I will lead Earth!”

Commander Karn’s eyes narrowed slightly as he shot back, “We all will.”

A contemptuous sneer lingered momentarily over the Kryptonian’s features before he turned to his subordinate and snapped, “Find and kill her.”

“Are you certain, General? After all, Kara Zor-El is your blood.”

“No one can be allowed to stand against us, or Myriad… not even my niece. Am I clear, Commander?”

Non waited expectantly for the correct response.

“Yes, sir,” Karn assured him, bowing low once more.

The next day…

July 1st - Year Nine

Smythe Medical, National City

0634 Hours UTC -8, Saturday morning, U.S. Pacific Coast Time

The sun had barely risen that Saturday morning, but the comfortable sixth-floor waiting area of Smythe Medical Critical Care Unit was filled to overflowing with Ryah’s family and friends. Many had been there all night; others had trickled in during the wee hours from parts far and wide as word of her condition reached them.

Everyone who could be there was.

Cat leaned against the lovely Lesley’s shoulder, her eyes half closed; Carter was asleep, lying on the couch beside his mother with his head in her lap, a Supergirl blanket draped over him. Lesley seemed at peace just holding the CEO’s hand with her other arm wrapped around the older woman
soothingly as she drifted off to sleep.

Diana with the ethereal Circe, Clark and Lois, and Bruce with Selina at his side were all there as well. The Justice League had quietly reappeared on Earth only a couple of hours earlier after a crazy adventure aiding a race of super beings on a far-off world called New Genesis. They hadn’t had any time to alert the public, or explain what happened, but assured everyone the danger had passed (for now). The team had made some new friends and allies, as well as dangerous enemies.

Miyuki and Diana had just returned from a Starbucks run and were handing out drinks. Aeryn and Jack were talking to Shannon, a bandaged and temporarily wheelchair-bound Dante, as well as Smyrna and Aya who'd been looking after him. Devi had popped in to join them for a while earlier that morning but had to leave to deal with the chaos Non and his people had caused. Even though the bomb had been defused, life in National City had once again been disrupted and the NCPD and The Sentinels had to deal with the cleanup.

Astra and Lilly sat close to Max, who looked broken. The shattered man stared silently out a window into the rose glow of morning with a haunted look.

All the monitors in the waiting area seemed to be turned to Channel 3 and running the footage of Supergirl’s battle with Vartox non-stop. Her proclamation about being the city's (and the entire world's) self-appointed protector was well-received by the people of National City and beyond, as was her amazing showing against Vartox... though there was a debate going on in the media about the ethics of Supergirl killing him, as that's what Selene's illusion had shown her being forced to do in the end. Of course, the team had gone to great lengths to assure that only those 'in the know' were aware that her alien opponent had survived, and was being operated on in the same hospital as Ryah.

There were also questions about Supergirl's ‘criminal uncle’, and (more importantly) the fact that she had a daughter who went to Evermore Academy! Everyone wanted answers, and to know who the munchkin was. Max’s PR team was on point for Team Supergirl, working with the D.E.O, the NCPD, and Colliers to manage things, and doing a splendid job. In fact, Supergirl's approval ratings were sky high.

Poor Winn was pacing madly. Jimmy Olsen, who was sitting back in a cushy chair with his hands behind his head looked on with concern at his friend. “You’re going to wear a hole in that nice carpet.”

The red-eyed young man with messy, uncombed wavy brown hair stopped as if pulled from a dream, gazed over at the photographer and blinked. “I wish I knew what was happening in there, it’s been two hours since she came out of surgery!” He gestured over at the wide, opaque sliding doors of Ryah’s room. “Safiya said that... that the nanobots failed…” tears started brimming in his eyes again, and he couldn’t speak.

Jimmy swallowed hard and sighed. “Yeah, I know buddy. I know.”

“Do you think she’ll come out of the coma… before she…?”

Just then, Miyuki sauntered up to set down a carrier of drinks and opened her arms for Winn who didn’t hesitate to let her wrap him in a comforting hug. She said, “All that can be done, has been... both by science and magic. Little Ryah is a fighter, we can only now pray that her strength will be enough, but must be prepared that it may not.”

Inside the girl's pristine room the Durlan lay still in her medical bed. Her normally inquisitive eyes were closed, and her orange-tinted complexion looking unnaturally pale. 3D sensory displays and real-time internal imaging danced above her, the damn bed had every bell and whistle money and
their alien tech could provide. The problem was…

“She’s just lost too much blood, and we have no way to replicate or replace it with the time we have.” Safiya’s soft voice was explaining the awful reality of the situation to Kara and Alex, who were supporting each other as if any moment either of them would collapse. “If she were conscious, it’s possible she could shapeshift into the same creature she used to heal herself in the school, but as it is we have no way of forcing her body to change forms.”

Standing around the grief-stricken couple were some of their closest family: a grief struck Shah, Naomi and Eliza, Tom Daniels, Ada and Jess, Marjorie and the twins (whom Shah and Ada had flown back all the way from Ten Lakes that morning), and J’onn as Hank Henshaw.

“I have tried to reach her mind…” The D.E.O.'s director said quietly, “but she’s too far away from me, lost in her dreams… and growing quieter.”

Kara sobbed as Alex pressed in to wrap her arms around her, and Shah lay her head on their bondmate’s shoulder. “She…” The blonde sniffed. “She doesn’t deserve this. It’s my fault, making her part of our lives, exposing her to danger…”

Alex hushed her and said, “It’s not your fault. She loves her life with us, with you.” Then the fiery brunette turned to glare at Tom, “Is Athena still unwilling to help her?”

The tall, white-haired officer lowered his gaze and said, “Not unwilling, unable. As Athena, she can’t officially interfere with this…” He suddenly stopped talking as his eyes grew wide. “Wait… wait. She says she won’t need to break the pact to intercede because something is going to happen…”

The intercom buzzed, and one of the lead shift nurses trembling voice said, “Doctor Murabit? You better come out here. Right now, ma’am.”

Moments later, there was a disturbance in the waiting area as the doors opened, and men in dark suits entered, obviously military or security of some kind, to survey the room and stand guard on either side of the entryway as if waiting for something.

Shannon stood and spoke to them, “What in the hell is Secret Service doing here?”

Everyone sprang up, ready for a fight. Even Cat had woken up by the time a tall, elegant woman walked in. She was dressed in a gray suit, had long wavy brown hair, intense blue eyes, and was immediately recognizable to the entire room.

“President Marsdin?!” Hank Henshaw called out in disbelief, stopping in his tracks to come to attention and salute as he stepped from Ryah’s room with Safiya, Kara, Alex, and the group trailing behind him.

Every military or ex-military in the room did the same.

“Director Henshaw. It’s a great pleasure to finally meet our…” She glanced over her shoulder and gestured for her six Secret Service agents to leave, and once the door was closed finished her sentence, “… Kryptonian agents, and their families.”

Everyone looked stunned, but the president continued, “We can talk about all that business later, right now I’m here to see the girl, Ryah. Doctor… Murabit? I need her charts, now.”

“What?? Why?!” Kara wiped unshed tears from her red eyes and stood with her bondmates to defensively block the entrance to their daughter’s room.
The woman shook her head and raised her palms in a peaceful gesture. “I am not here to do harm to your daughter or your family, Mrs. Danvers… believe me. But while reviewing her case it was brought to my attention that she is a Durlan child. Is this true?”

Kara seemed dumbstruck, so Alex replied, “If it is, what will you do?”

Safiya approached with a tablet but stopped and looked over at her mothers for approval before handing Ryah’s medical records over to the Commander-in-Chief.

The president smiled and said, “Help. I’m here to help.” Something in her eyes, a desperate honesty, lead Kara to trust her intentions. Alex and Shah, agreed, and all three silently nodded for Safiya to hand the woman the device. President Marsdin scanned the data far quicker than humanly possible, and when the Leader of the Free World appeared satisfied, asked, “May I see her?” her voice trembled.

After some hesitation, Kara stepped aside... giving the woman permission to enter. Inside Ryah’s room the girl, who now looked so small, lay in her high-tech bed, a breathing tube and a dozen other smaller tubes running into her little body.

The President looked awestruck upon seeing her... as if she couldn’t believe her eyes… and choked as she raised a hand to her mouth and began to sob. No one knew what to do except to stand by and wait for her to regain her composer. It took a couple minutes, and when she did she turned to survey the room, wiping tears from her cheeks.

When the Chief Executive finally spoke she said, “I know that I am among friends, and those who are very good at keeping secrets,” her gaze wandered over all of those gathered, but ended on Hank, “so I ask for your discretion.” The tall woman then rolled her shoulders, and her human form flickered, morphed, and changed. In seconds the woman standing before them was very different from the one who’d first walked in. She had an orange tint to her complexion, gorgeous purple irises in her anime character sized eyes, but retained her long luxurious hair (though it, too, was a stunning shade of dark purple).

Everyone was speechless, except Carter. The boy had jumped to his feet and yelled with excitement, “You're a Durlan! Just like Ryah! She thought that she was the only one!”

The tall woman turned and grinned at the boy in the Waiting Room. “Well, Carter Grant, for most of my life and until today I thought that I was the only one as well! Then, quite suddenly (with a nudge from my Prophecy App’s personal assistant, Pythia, who says that she knows all of you) I discovered that the daughter of two of my very best D.E.O. agents is secretly just like me, and after nearly sacrificing herself to save National City from terrorists, desperately in need of blood. Thankfully, all of our people have the same blood type.” She looked over at Safiya with a wide smile. “Doctor, where can I donate?”

Safiya snapped out of her stunned amazement to jump into action. “Right this way, Madam President. We’ll need to do some quick prep.” She then whispered a quick, silent prayer to herself in Arabic as she walked.

A hopeful Kara and Alex followed them as Safiya guided the older Durlan into Ryah’s room. Just before she crossed the threshold, President Marsdin called back to Carter, “Thank you, young Mr. Grant, it is a rare thing to meet one of my people, let alone care for one. You are a great friend and a very brave young man.”

As they watched, Winn whispered to Jimmy, “Holy frack! This is AH-mazing! The President of the United States is an alien and she’s going to save Ryah! Oh, oh, do you think she’d sign an
autograph? I need a pen and something for her to write on... Oh! And could you take our picture?"

The photojournalist couldn’t help but laugh, both from joy at knowing that little Ryah was going to be okay and from seeing his geeky friend in full-on fanboy mode.

“Is he always like this?” Lucy Lane (Lois’ ‘little’ sister, was their newest friend on Team Supergirl, and also happened to be dating a certain photographer) quietly asked as she slipped back into her seat next to Jimmy after returning from the restroom.

“Pretty much,” Jimmy said with a smile.

The beautiful ex-JAG officer leaned over as she considered his answer and snuggled into him. “I like our friends.”


A couple of hours later...

The mood had become much lighter in the waiting area, for the most part. Ryah was responding well to the influx of President Marsdin’s Durlan blood, and both Safiya and J’onn (who could feel the girl’s thoughts gaining coherency) believed she’d be conscious by noon. People were talking, snacking on breakfast plates from the delightful cafeteria, while still grieving their fallen friend and trying to be deferential to the man in the room who’d lost the love of his life.

Maxwell Lord had come to see Ryah and greet the President but lacked any kind of emotion as he did so. After doing the minimum, the sad man had returned to sit huddled in the chair he’d claimed by the window. None of Lilly, Astra, or Miyuki’s prodding or conversation could get him to talk, so they just sat nearby to support him.

He did occasionally speak via comms to James. Lilly’s companion was as heartbroken about his sister’s death as Max was, and while he wanted to be at the hospital for Ryah had volunteered to remain back at Lord Tech to oversee things in the CEO’s place.

It was a little after 0930 when Myka entered the waiting room, arm in arm with an unfamiliar woman. She was in her mid-twenties and quite lovely; tall, olive-skinned, with dark eyes, long black hair, and a gracefulness about her movements that matched the goddess’.

All heads turned to the pair.

Myka’s unnamed friend smiled and waved (especially vigorously at a bewildered Cat Grant) as she glanced around the room as if looking for someone in particular. The beauty acknowledged the questioning looks she was receiving as if she knew everyone gathered.

When she spied Max by the window the look on her face became one of complete elation and pure adoration.

She made a beeline across the space separating her from the CEO as quickly as humanly possible, excusing herself when she nearly collided with Colliers. “Pardon me, Steven, good to see you.” She said with a thick accent as she patted his shoulder.

The National City Tribune's Pulitzer Prize-winning Editor-in-Chief scratched his head as he watched
her dart over to Max Lord.

“Max!” She said breathlessly, smiling from ear to ear.

He remained slouched in his chair, staring gloomily out the window. “Leave me alone.” He croaked, not even turning to look at the newcomer.

Myka walked up beside the young woman and spoke in a tone that could not be ignored, “Wake up, Maxwell! Rise, and look upon who stands before you.”

The gaunt man turned his head and studied the woman, who was about to burst from her barely-contained excitement. She bit her lip, and then said, “Do you recognize me, Max?” She then cleared her throat, her voice changing clearly to Cassie’s. “It’s me, my love. I told you’d I’d come back if I could.”

He blinked, startled at first, then lunged out of his chair to wrap her in his embrace. After a considerably long kiss, they broke apart laughing, and he held her at arms’ length taking her in as if she were a dream come true. “It’s you, but you’re human, alive… I don’t understand… How?”

“It was Athena!” She said quickly. “At the last moment, before my systems failed, she appeared and took me far from that place… to Olympus, where I slept… and dreamed.”

Myka then added, “We couldn’t allow such bravery and sacrifice go unnoticed; besides, you two are practically family. And thankfully so, it was that loophole that allowed us to act. Apollo suggested using an Awakening to revive Cassie, my sister Aphrodite also helped (obviously, she tuned out gorgeous), as did Vulcan. He’s the one who transferred her consciousness from her broken mechanical body so she could Awaken in her new human one. She is the same Cassie in mind and spirit, just in a less durable form, and now part of my House.”

The happy couple kissed again, whispered together, and then Max turned to hug Athena, who happily returned his action. He said, “We don’t know how to thank you, Myka… Athena… I would have done anything to have her back, to know that all she was didn’t just disappear… into nothing.”

The blonde goddess nodded in understanding. “Have no fear, Max… she would have come to Elysium after death in this world, as you both will one day. As far as what you can do? Enjoy your lives together, be happy, and cherish one another, as well as those who love you. You will do great things, make babies if you wish, and aid my daughters and their children in protecting this world from darkness, both within and without.”

Max bowed, “I will, I swear. And I will not forget those who gave me back my heart. We’ll make sure others know of the gods as well. We’ll also like to talk to Vulcan about a business proposition, can you arrange that?”

“Certainly.” Myka grinned.

“Ma’har!” Kara nearly shouted she and Alex simultaneously shimmered and flickered from Ryah’s room to wrap her in their Kryptonian hugs. “Did I hear you say ‘children’?” Kara asked, her eyes as big as saucers. “Do you know something we don’t?”

The goddess chuckled, almost purring to herself, “Perhaps, perhaps, but it is never good to think to know the future… there are too many possibilities to be certain of any one path, and merely having an awareness of it could jeopardize the outcome.”

“Fine.” Kara relented; they’d had similar conversations about the future before. At least this time she
was pretty clear. We’re going to have another child.

The question is how? Do we adopt, somehow conceive, or have an Awakening? Alex wondered. Oh, or maybe it's Shah!

That, she won’t tell us. Kara giggled. I’m just happy to know that Ryah will have a brother or sister... someday.

Or brothers or sisters, or both! Alex teased.

It was at that moment that their sensitive hearing detected Ryah waking, and they shimmered together to their daughter’s side.

Epilogue…

Oct 13th - Year Ten

Three months later…

Even with Astra relentlessly searching for any hint of his trail, there’d been no sign of Non after what had happened with Ryah. She’d been unable to bring the villain (and her personal nemesis) to justice, but the once-Kryptonian general did bend her will and all of her agency’s resources to crippling his organization.

The D.E.O. (with help from Vartox) found and razed the crazed Kryptonian’s National City HQ, killed six of his human soldiers in the raid, and captured a great deal of tech as well as a rich cache of sensitive data. In the assault Kara had confronted Commander Karn, and, after a brief but devastating battle had been forced to kill him to protect a team of fellow D.E.O. agents from certain death. While she had fulfilled the promise she’d made Vartox, and herself, they had lost any valuable information J’onn could have gleaned from his mind. In the same conflict Alex had nearly destroyed Indigo in hand-to-hand combat, but in the fog of war the sly Coluan had somehow managed to escape Flame's sharp blades... though her enchanted bow had done permanent damage (thank you Aeryn and Ryah!). Also, in a violent confrontation with one of Non’s Kryptonian lieutenants, J’onn showed his true power and beat the smug terrorist to a pulp. The Martain Manhunter unceremoniously dragged the unconscious man into D.E.O. custody by the scruff of his bloody neck, and telepathically probed him... which led to the unraveling of Non’s entire spy network, worldwide.

During the purge that followed, led by Astra, Alex, Ada, the U.S.S. Zumwalt, U.S. Special Forces, the U.S. Navy, and a small fleet of Zumwalt Class destroyers deployed around the world along with other allied forces, Shah liberated an ex-Fort Rozz prisoner named Branna. The Sendaran was a genius scientist, and had built most of Non’s spy tech (under threat of torture and death if she didn't cooperate). Relieved to be free of the madman, the no-nonsense woman (who was about Marjorie's age), had been quite cooperative in her incarceration, and Kara believed they should soon be able to get her to join them… on a leash, of course.

Interestingly, she and J’onn had been spending a lot of time together.

Talk about setbacks for their enemy!
After everything that had happened, Kara, Alex, Shah, and Ryah were taking time off to relax, heal, and recharge, most of it spent cheating time in the realms of the gods, including Elysium. This was their first week and they were spending it on Olympus, and, thanks to Vulcan’s portal, most of the House of El and their friends were there with them. Some for longer than others and a few had come and go due to work schedules. Aunt Olivia (what the President now insisted Ryah call her) would have made an appearance but had a global summit in Dubai happening at the same time that she shouldn't get out of.

The brilliant sun and endless white sands of the idyllic island beaches created by the gods for their vacation on Saturn’s frozen moon Enceladus were spectacular! The water was perfectly blue and warm, and all around them was paradise and their family, and happy couples: Naomi and Eliza, Tom and Myka/Athena, Aaron/Apollo and Abigail, and Circe and Diana. Callie/Aphrodite was lying side-by-side and joyously holding hands with a gorgeous and very human-looking Shikaze in her shapely goddess form, with an uncharacteristically delighted and grinning Ares giving them both foot massages. The three had decided to give a relationship a go, and so far so good. In fact, extremely good... the trio had become ridiculously happy bondmates, what they were calling a 'triune'.

Shah was delighted to see her three friends all finally united as one, and Ares so joyful for a change. It looked good on the handsome rogue.

Colliers and his fiancé, Charles (who was still a bit shell-shocked after meeting ‘the family’ for the first time) were there as well, as was Safiya and Shannon, Ada and Jess, Max and the newly Awakened Cassie, Astra and Lilly, Winn and Miyuki, Clark and Lois, Bruce and Selina, Jimmy and Lucy Lane, Aya and Smyrna, and Jack and Aeryn, among others. Lilly's companion, James, had also joined them; sporting his own amazing android body similar to the one his sister inhabited before her mortal transformation.

J'onn popped in for a while as Hank Henshaw but was alone. The Martian still mourned his long-dead wife and daughters and continued to proclaim that he wasn’t ready to start dating. However, Kara, Alex, and Shah all sensed that his thoughts were swirling around Branna, and Ryah confirmed it. In fact, their boss ended up leaving before the afternoon on the first day they were there due to ‘pressing D.E.O. matters’... but they all giggled together believing they knew why he had really returned home. Their Space Dad had a blanket and picnic basket waiting to spend the day with her back in her cell at the D.E.O.

Cat was relaxed under the shade of a massive beach umbrella reading a paperback book and wearing a pair of huge sunglasses. A contented Nom Nom lay curled up asleep on her lap, and a tall, endlessly full foo-foo drink adorned with fruit and a tiny umbrella was at her side. Lesley was there, of course, rubbing sunscreen on her Queen. Kara noticed how Cat often, very subtly, reached over to lovingly touch her girlfriend as if making sure the Persian beauty was still there. The tiny smile that touched the older woman's lips every time warmed the Kryptonian's heart. She'd never seen her friend so happy. The couple had become inseparable since Paris, despite Cat's initial concern about their age difference. Carter adored the younger woman (and she, him), and shipped them as a couple. He'd been conspiring with Ryah to find a way to get them to marry (the pair had even watched 'The Parent Trap' remake several times as research).

Today, he and Ryah were out on the reef playing ‘Jaws’: he was singing “Dun-dun-dun-dun” as the Durlan girl circled below in the form of a thirty-foot long Great White shark. He would watch and try to see her before she burst up out of the water as the terrifying creature before shifting back into her human form. There was a lot of shrieking and laughter involved. It even got louder when Taylor and Melly joined in. Marjorie chuckled, and startled at times, as she watched from her position on the beach in a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses. Shah was at her side, occasionally leaning into her as they shared in their children's joy.
Satisfied that everyone was having fun, or were just blissed out thanks to the endless drinks and instant provisions provided by a bevy of beautiful souls from Elysium who had happily volunteered to work the party, Kara stood up from the large towel she and Alex had been lounging on together and stretched luxuriously, drawing many looks of admiration.

Her battle armor had become a teeny tiny, and very revealing Kryptonian blue bikini for the occasion but still retained a version of her House Symbol on her top (on her right breast). She could feel the heat of her bondmate’s appreciative stare on her ass and muscular back as she flexed. Alex’s desire was fire and pleasure in her veins and filled her with need.

Kara reached down and offered her hand to help her mate stand, and the sexy brunette sprung up only a foot away, dressed in her own airy swimsuit. Shatari really did know her fashion, as well as Alex’s perfect curves, and size. They walked over to huddle with Shah for a time, chatting before the bondmates all kissed and Shah said, "Don't worry, I'll watch Ryah. You two go have fun, we'll join you at sunset."

Alex and Kara hugged her again before the blonde turned to announce softly to all, "We're going for a walk."

“A ‘walk’, gotcha…” Winn chuckled from where he lounged with the stunning Miyuki, who was sunning herself on her stomach... topless.

Ares, alternating between gently rubbing a purring Shikazi's and a nearly orgasmic Aphrodite's feet, grinned over at Kara before calling out, "Don't get lost… or wait… maybe do get lost..." (all the while waggling his thick black eyebrows)

“We plan on it,” Alex replied with a smirk, silencing them all when she reached over to place her hand lovingly on Kara’s shapely backside as they began to saunter away.

Vartox, whole, tanned, and healthy, swiftly broke off what appeared to be an intimate conversation with one of the beautiful souls working the event, put down his drink, and fell into step with the couple. The warrior was wearing gleaming Vulcan-crafted steel power-armor over his shattered arm and shoulder and hefted a new and improved ax in his hands, re-forged by the god himself from the ancient metal of his heirloom weapon and enchanted by Circe and Selene.

Kara smiled over at her family’s bodyguard, and he grinned back. He didn't even resemble his old self anymore, in look or spirit. Selene had placed a permanent spell on him to alter his appearance, and he was at peace with himself... filled with eager purpose for the new mission he'd chosen for himself; to serve and protect Kara and her family.

What a huge change from when she’d first met him.

“It's okay, Vartox, I didn't mean to pull you away from 'making friends', she's pretty by the way.” He blushed, and the trio chuckled together before she continued, "Just help Shah watch over the kids, Alex and I have, ah-hem, some personal business to attend to."

“Of course, Mistress, as you wish. I will guard them with my life.” He said with a grin as he bowed and turned back.

Alex sighed, “Does he always have to say that?”

“Yes,” Kara said with all seriousness. “He means it. He’d die for them, and for us.”

Alex nodded.
Later, after literally moving mountains in the throes of their passion, Kara and Alex snuggled on a perfect patch of sandy beach where they watched the magical sun begin to set, and talked... about life, their dreams, family, and the future. And about the unsettling fact that Non had escaped them, that Myriad was still out there, evolving, and growing as a future threat, and that Hades still wanted them all dead... apparently. In the end, they decided that they wouldn't stress about the bad things because The House of El would face them together, as a family with their legion of friends.

Thinking about all of their blessings Kara had never felt so happy, which had become a pleasant trend when it came to sharing her life (and her very soul) with not just Alex, but Shah, and the amazing child who loved them all.

She was certain that her heart was about to burst as she kissed her wife, and her thoughts betrayed her joy... I love you, Vaena, more than all the stars in the sky.

And I love you, my Supergirl, with all of my heart and soul. Alex's emotions were like waves of soft caresses as she kissed Kara lovingly back.

They were sitting shoulder to shoulder on that stretch of warm white sand listening to the waves softly lap on the beach and enjoying the fading light of evening as it dappled the water's shimmering surface like glittering diamonds when they felt a ripple of delight in their bond.

"They're here," They whispered quietly to one another as they turned to watch as Shah, hand in hand with a giggling Ryah, came walking down the pristine shore to join them.

"We made it!" The Durlan said as she ran up and slipped down into their arms, somehow managing to snuggle into both of their laps to face the setting sun.

Alex leaned down to kiss the girl's face a number of times in quick succession, and Kara did the same with her belly button, and the faint scars on her side. Ryah was laughing so hard by the time Shah sauntered up that she almost couldn't breathe. "Ahhh! Stop! I give up!" The red-faced girl cried out, and the kissy pair relented.

Kara's gaze had wandered to her beautiful Persian bondmate's emerald green eyes as she approached in her stunning black bikini. Shah smiled knowingly and ran the tips of her fingers over the warm skin of her blonde Kryptonian's shoulders and neck as she drew in close. Kara leaned into her touch, and Shah took her time moving to sit behind her and Alex on their huge towel. As she settled in, the happy brunette reclined a bit and tilted her head back, her hazel eyes smiling at Shah as the curvy woman eagerly moved forward from behind to tenderly take Alex's parted lips in her own.

"Mmmmmm... aziz-am." She moaned with pleasure under her breath, and the trio's bond was simmering.

As they slowly disengaged, and Alex sat back up with a silly grin on her face, a delighted Shah said, 'Apologies for our tardiness. We were distracted by... mermaids, of all things."

"They were so pretty, and swam right up to talk to us!" Ryah was like a Durlan Energizer Bunny, bouncing up and down on her mothers' laps.

"Pretty exciting, huh? Well, we are in the realm of gods, so anything's possible." Kara said with a grin, and then added, "The good news is you're both just in time to watch the glorious sunset."

They then cuddled close, Shah's chin on Alex's shoulder, all of them sitting together looking out over the placid water in quiet contentment.

After a few minutes of silence Ryah's happy thoughts echoed in their minds, I love our family.
Everything is just... so perfect. And everyone agreed, hugging the girl through their bond.

As the last rays of Sol's lifegiving light filtered through the atmosphere of their god-made paradise they all felt the delightful sensations of great joy, and of being loved. It was at that moment, as one, they said, “El mayarah.” Before giggling like fools and running down the sandy beach to plunge into the water for an evening swim.

What's Next: Who knows? That story hasn’t yet been written…

Story Lexicon/FAQs:

Identifying/Calling out non-English words and terms: I attempt to italicize all non-English words, as well as any telepathic communication and internal dialogue.

Terms: Used by Kara, Alex, and Shah that you’ve encountered so far, and will be used for the rest of the story.

Ah!khoob ast – ‘Oh! That’s good!’ (Persian)

Alex vanimelda - ‘Beautiful Alex’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Ay Dios Mio – ‘Oh my god’ (Spanish)

Aporup – ‘Amazing, awesome!’ (Bengali/Indian)

As-salāmu ʿalayki – A (formal) greeting which is also a standard salutation among Muslims, meaning ‘peace be upon you’. The less formal abbreviation is simply salām. (Arabic)

Asheghetam - Another way to say ‘I love you’, just more poetic (Persian)

Azidane shoma khoshhalam – ‘Nice to meet you’ (Persian)

Bedrood – ‘Good-bye’ (Persian/Farsi)

Bonne nuit – ‘Goodnight’ (French)

C'est la vie – ‘That's life’. An acceptance of things as they are. (French)

C'est magnifique! – ‘It’s Beautiful!’ (French)

Damnú air! – ‘Shit/Damn it!’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Dooset daram – ‘I love you’ (Persian)

El mayarah – ‘Stronger Together’ The House of El’s family motto. Basically, it means that as a family they are “stronger together”, that none of them are ever alone. (Kryptonian)

Eres mi luz – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)
Hajimemashite - Nice to meet you! - はじめまして！/ お会いできてうれしいです！ (Japanese)

Hasta que nos encontramos de nuevo, mi diosa – ‘Until we meet again, my goddess’ (Spanish)

Imeacht gan teacht ort – ‘May you leave without returning’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Irasshai mashita - A Japanese welcome -ようこそいらっしゃいました。 (Japanese)

íthi eutukhēs - ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Ka’dah – A symbiotic, shape-changing, non-biologic Kryptonian life form. In Shatari and Zara’s case, full members of the House of El, friends, and companions to Alex and Shah, who, by her connection to Zara, is now also a member of Kara’s House.

Kheili khosh geli – ‘You are so beautiful’ (Persian)

Khodāhāfez: A term meaning farewell - Shah prefers to use this phrase in place of “Bedrood” depending on whom she’s talking to for its spiritual context. The vernacular translation is simply ‘good-bye’. (Persian/Farsi)

Khodaye man – ‘Oh God!’ - To show amazement. (Persian)

M’eudail – ‘My dear/my darling’ to a friend, family, someone you care for (Gaelic/Irish)

Malāʾikah – Angels. Heavenly beings mentioned many times in the Quran and hadith literature

Marbhfháisc ort! – ‘A shroud on you’ (Gaelic/Irish)

Mersi – ‘Thank you’ (Persian)

miboosamet – ‘I am kissing you’ (Persian/Farsi)

órenya - ‘my heart’ (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

¡Qué señoras tan hermosas! - What beautiful ladies! (Spanish)

Salām: A greeting – ‘peace’ or ‘peace and health’ (Persian/Farsi)

Sundor – ‘Beautiful’ pronounced soon-dor (Bengali)

Thi eutukhēs – ‘Good luck’ (Ancient Greek)

Volar mi diosa! – ‘Fly my goddess!’ (Spanish)

Waʿalaykumu s-salām – A response to the greeting As-salāmu ʿalayki, ‘and upon you, peace’ (Arabic)

Wadāʾan – ‘Farewell’ (Arabic)

Wǒ de tiān a (我的天啊) – ‘Oh my God’ or literally ‘Oh my sky’ (Mandarin Chinese)
Persian nicknames/terms of endearment:

**aziz-am** – ‘My dear’ (what Alex calls Shah)

**delbandam** - ‘My heartstring’. What Shah would call her cousin Tarsa as a child when she’d babysit (very sweet and precious), and still calls her since reconnecting.

**Hamsar-am** – This term falls more into the 'lover' category, as it is a common word for 'spouse.' However, hamsar literally means 'equal head,' so it stands for an equal partner, and is, therefore, a poetic way to point out one's better half (What Alex begins also calling Kara after they’re married, plus also still uses nooré cheshm-am).

**Jeegaré manee** - One of the most loving terms of endearment you can direct to someone in Persian. It is quite beautiful and should have a powerful effect on a person it’s directed to. In this case, Kara and Alex are being very clear at just how much they love, and have always loved Shah. They are very… possessive of their sister.

**joon-am** – ‘My dear’, or ‘my life’, and what some people call a beautiful girl (what Shah calls Alex)

**Moosh moosh-am** - ‘My mousy mouse’ said in Persian is utterly cute and endearing. Moosh means ‘little mouse’, but calling someone this cranks the sweetness factor up to eleven (what Shah calls Ryah)

**Nafasem-an** - ‘My breath’ (what Kara sometimes calls Alex)

**nāzanin-am** – ‘Sweet or dear’. The term of endearment has a gentle and sweet connotation (what Shah calls Ada)

**nooré cheshm-am** – ‘The light of my eyes’ - Eyes are the window to the soul, and this is a way of telling someone that they are the light of those windows. (what Alex calls Kara).

**sheereen-am** – ‘Sweetie’ (what Shah calls Kara)

‘>insert person’s name<’ + joon (Shah joon): Iranians will often follow the name of friends and loved ones with the word jān or joon- they both mean 'dear'. So, ‘Shah joon', means ‘dear Shah’. This is a common word to use in everyday conversations.

Other names/nickname/titles/things:

**A ghrá** – ‘My love’ (Irish/Gaelic)

**A ghrá mo chroí** - ‘My heart's beloved, my darling’ (Irish/Gaelic)

**Âbjé** – ‘Sister' informal version (Persian)

**Anamchara** – ‘Soulmate’ (Irish/Gaelic)

**Bakalawa bil Jibna** - A mouthwateringly delicious Libyan version of baklava with a sweet cream filling.

**Bríomhaire** – ‘Lively’, ‘strong’, ‘vigorou’ – Aeryn’s nickname for her best friend Heather (Irish/Gaelic)
Cairdiúil – ‘Friendly’ – Heather’s nickname for Aeryn (Irish/Gaelic)

Cythonna – One of the most ancient Kryptonian gods, said to be the female half of Rao. Protector of those unjustly persecuted, as well as patron to monsters and non-biologic life forms (such as Kryptonian Companions/Ka’dahs).

Daxamites - An alien race of humanoids originating from the planet Daxam. They resemble Kryptonians physically, but when under the influence of a range of similar star classes awaken different abilities. They are a barbaric, slave owning, militaristic, xenophobic people, ruled by strength/the sword and royalty. Legend says they descended from Kryptonian colonists tens of thousands of years ago, their physiology somehow altered by their new planet over time. Wars between Daxam and Krypton were fought in the past, and there is no love lost between the two civilizations.

Dios mío! – ‘My God!’ (Spanish)

Durlan - The Durlans are a rare extraterrestrial species, a race of shapeshifting beings from the planet Durla. Ryah is a Durlan, as was her guardian, Veya, who died protecting the child in the depths of Tehran’s Evin Prison.

Dūst doxtar – ‘Girlfriend’ (Persian)

Dūst pesar - ‘Boyfriend’ (Persian)

Eres mi luz. – ‘You are my light’ (Spanish)

Euryleia – ‘Woman Wanderer’ or ‘Wide Wandering’ - Dr. Naomi Young’s Amazon name

Fereshteh: Slang for saying that a girl is perfect, desired… hot, to die for, an angel. Historically used as a Persian girl’s name, simply meaning ‘angel’. (Persian)

H'ronmeer - the Martian God of Death and Fire, referred to by a faction as the God of Life and Light. (Martian)

Hermanas – Sisters (Spanish)

In’ah – Ancient, lost word for ‘daughter’ - what Myka calls Kara (Kryptonese),

Infinite loop - a sequence of instructions in a computer program, which loops endlessly, either due to the loop having no terminating condition...

Little Star - What Clark/Kal-El sometimes calls Kara

M'eudail – ‘My darling’ or ‘my dear’ (Irish/Gaelic)

Ma’har - Ancient, lost word for ‘mother’ - what Kara calls Myka (Kryptonese)

Mi amor – ‘My love’ – What Ada often calls Jess (Spanish)

Mi diosa – ‘My goddess’ – What Jessica calls Kara (Spanish)

Mi lucero – ‘My bright star’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)
Mi Sol – ‘My sun’ – One of only several endearing names Jessica will end up calling Ada (Spanish)

Muninn – One of two MH-80S Seahawk stealth helicopters on the USS Zumwalt - Huginn & Muninn - Thought & Memory (Old Norse)

My dreamcatcher – What Kara sometimes calls Alex

Nâmzad – ‘fiancé (m), fiancée (f), betrothed (Persian)

Norooz - Persian New Year (Persian)

Noshidan! – A toast, meaning ‘to drink’ (Persian)

Nūsh – From Middle Persian ‘anosh’, meaning ‘immortality’, also a traditional toast (Persian)

Oea - This ancient city was founded by the Phoenicians in the seventh century BC, was ruled at one time or another by the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines. Italians, and Muslims. It came to be known as Tripoli during the 9th century (Libyco-Berber)

Ouroboros - a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity (from Ancient Greek)

Salud! – A toast meaning ‘to health’ (Spanish)

Seanmháthair – ‘grandmother’ or ‘old mother’, pronounced shan a WAW her (Irish/Gaelic)

Señora – Is a polite term used to address a woman. The Spanish-language equivalent of Ma’am, Ms., or Mrs. (Spanish)

Telkhines - In myth were mysterious sea-god magicians and smiths native to the islands of Keos (Ceos) and Rhodes. They invented the art of metalworking and were said to have crafted many powerful items and weapons for the gods. The truth is even stranger. These tall, lanky, extraterrestrials command science at a level that seems like magic and have lived since the beginning of time. They served ‘The Makers’, who existed long before Krypton, or the gods, and abandoned them on earth. Zeus and the Greek gods gave them refuge and protection long ago in return for their service.

Tieguanyin - Thih-koan-im; literally ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ is a premium variety of Chinese oolong tea originated in the 19th century in Anxi in Fujian province. (Chinese)

Tratung – khrag ‘thung - ‘Blood drinker’ – Madam Xiao’s evil sword’s name (Chinese)

Trípolis – Tripoli, the capital and largest city in Libya (from Ancient Greek)

Tuath Dé Danann - ‘The people of the goddess Danu’, or as some say, ‘the people (or tribe) of the gods’. Pronounced Thoo-a day Du-non (Irish/Gaelic)

Uri baba! – ‘Oh my God!’ (Bengali/Indian)

Vaena, Vaena Alex – Proper noun, title/name only given to bondmates. ‘Bondmate <name>’.

‘Heart of my heart’ very profound, the Kryptonian name/title, given to Alex by Kara (What Kara calls Alex)

Vakur – A powerful (and rare) soul-devouring, evil, shape-shifting parasitic alien species from
another universe. Immortal. Known as demons, and ‘devourers of worlds’.

Valar – Are the Powers of Arda (gods) who shaped and rule the world. They live on the Western continent of Aman. (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Valaraukar – Are Maiarin (spirits which descended to Arda to help the Valar shape the World). These powerful beings in Middle Earth mythology served the angelic Valar and were also known as Balrogs. They possessed the ability to shroud themselves in fire and shadow (Quenya elvish, Tolkien)

Vallerian – An alien race of blended mechanical and biologic humanoids. Known pleasure seekers and givers, that can be found all over the galaxy in some capacity where sex is sold, instructed, worshiped, or traded.

Vâysâ – ‘Stop’ (Persian)

Wan - This expression, especially popular with Dubliners, literally means "one". "Wan" usually refers to a woman and can also be used to point a girl out. In context, Aeryn was saying that Heather would find ‘her girl’ one day. (Irish expression)

Xwâhar - ‘Sister’ - the formal form. (Persian)

Zafaraniyeh – The affluent neighborhood in the northern part of the Iranian capital of Tehran where Shahrazad grew up. (Persian)

Zhuyin – An ancient Chinese red dragon, a protector of Madam Xiao (Chinese)

Chapter End Notes

With my deepest gratitude, I wanted to thank you all for reading this nearly 500k-word monster of a story! To all of you who have given me feedback, I adore you, your questions, comments, and true interest really helped inspire me (and quite frankly kept me writing). El mayarah!

I also wish to acknowledge, call out, virtually hug, and thank (profusely) my partner in crime, beta reader, far-flung friend, and stalwart editor, Peggy! You were the reason I kept going some weeks, and are a real-life Supergirl! Thank you. :)

What comes next? I honestly don’t know… After a break to catch up on reading and other things I've put off, I am considering going back to begin a complete rewrite of my partially completed sci-fi/fantasy novel that I left to start this story over a year ago… or I may start that Supergirl of Earth 24 Supercorp story… or part two of this… or the Wonder Woman tales I've been dying to tell - like the AU where Steve lives and Diana and Ares resolve things over tea instead of a fight, and/or about Diana and Etta as friends and roommates after the war. Hmmm… choices, choices!

Anyway, I hope that you enjoyed this tale and that the ton of research, love, and passion into it showed.
I’m on Tumblr if you’d like to connect, though I am not very active there: http://iwalkinshadow.tumblr.com

**Attributions:**

**New Genesis and The New Gods**

*More information about the race of super beings on the world the Justice League went to assist (New Genesis)*

**Vartox**

*More info on Vartox the Valeronian.*

**Coluans**

*More details regarding Coluans, and Indigo.*

**Durlans**

*Info on Ryah’s race, the rare and elusive shape-shifting Durlans. In the Earth 39 universe, the orange-skinned Durlans are the true form of the species.*

---

### End Notes

In any universe, Kara (of Supergirl season one), is my light... and on Earth 39, Alex’s too.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!