

Last Daughter of Krypton

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Last Daughter of Krypton

by [Moirae \(TigerDragon\)](#), [TiaNadiezja](#)

Summary

Earth isn't what Kara Zor-El expected. Dirty, primitive, messy. She came expecting to raise her infant cousin and found him a grown man. She came expecting to raise him, and finds him trying to parent her.

This is the story of a lost girl who only ever wanted to be a scientist, and about the world she's about to change.

Notes

When the DCU relaunch was announced, my co-writer and I got into a bit of a discussion about what had been done wrong (and right) with Supergirl in the past, and how to make her a more compelling character. Then the inevitable "do you really think you could do better" question got asked, and here we are. Hopefully, you all enjoy it enough to make up for the metaphorical bumps and bruises accumulated along the way.

Obviously, we don't own Kara Zor-El, Supergirl, or anything else in the DCU. We hope the nice people at DC will forgive us for our little act of revolt.

Chapter 1

It certainly is a noisy, noxious little planet, Kara Zor-El thought to herself as she stretched her shoulders and back - harder to do in the air than she'd expected, but she'd never flown under her own power before. It was a little like riding an anti-grav pack, except that she just *thought* about where she wanted to go and she did. It was a dizzying, glorious experience - almost as overwhelming, in its own way, as the flood of noise that had lashed against her ears until she'd broken atmosphere into the peaceful silence of space. Or nearly silent, at any rate - there was an annoying buzz at the edge of her hearing that resolved into a babble of voices when she focused on it, and it took her a moment to place it. *Radio waves. I'm hearing radio waves in space. How remarkable... and how primitive.*

She concentrated, slowly focusing her attention on a single point on the globe below her, and suddenly it rushed up to fill her vision so swiftly that for a moment she thought she must be diving through the sky before it registered that she didn't feel the wind in her hair. *Telescopic vision. How helpful. Father predicted there would be benefits to my senses, but this* She watched a herd of horned, four legged brown animals moving across a great golden sea of grass, and the maned feline predators that stalked them, and sighed softly in wonder. *Oh, Kal, but I can't wait to show you all this beauty. From up here, it'll be no trouble at all to find a safe, perfect place for me to raise you when you get here....*

The thinness of the atmosphere hid the approaching object from her super-hearing until it was nearly on top of her - a sphere of green energy, shimmering in the bright sunlight above the sky, holding sufficient oxygen within to easily sustain human life for days. Also inside was a man.

"Well, this is a surprise. Superman said he's the only one of you left..." The man's Kryptonian was near enough to perfect - and in the Kandorian dialect! - that it took Kara a moment to realize that the motions of his lips and the sound of his words were not synchronous. "Jordan-Hal. Welcome to Earth."

"Super-man." She rolled the word around on her tongue, studying him. "I do not know of whom you speak, Green Lantern Jordan-Hal, but I have come to this sector to make a home for myself and for my cousin Kal, who will arrive after me. I will brook no interference in this sacred trust. You will make no objection."

"Your cousin Kal... Kal-El?" Jordan's eyes widened at the thought. "No way. You're Kal-El's cousin?"

She flexed her hands, eye blazing - literally, though she was unaware of it - with the sudden weight of her anger. "You will tell me how you know my cousin's name, Jordan-Hal, or your Oan rules and regulations will not protect you from what I will do."

"Once was enough, as far as getting flattened by Kryptonians goes. Kal-El is my friend... Superman. If we can go back to the planet, I can call him."

She narrowed her eyes, calculating the impossibility of his statement against the difficulty of verifying it, and felt the speed of her own thoughts accelerate toward the speed of light. *Another of my new abilities. How... fascinating.* Finally - a tenth of a second later - she nodded once. "Very well, Jordan-Hal. I will accompany you for now, but if you deceive me...." She smiled, then, and it was the smile of a people who had once made the galaxy tremble before them. "We will have words, you and I."

"No deception here." Then he was streaking toward the planet, the northern continent of the Western hemisphere.

She matched him easily, wind dancing through her short blond hair and the stark red of her cape flaring out behind her as she cut the sky. The long, rolling report of the sound barrier breaking behind her send a shiver of delight up her spine, and despite the tension of the moment she turned a long spiralling barrel roll just for the pure joy of it.

Jordan turned his head and smiled at her roll. "First time flying? Nothing like it, is there? We're almost where we're going... he spends most of his time in Metropolis."

"Metropolis." Her eyes narrowed. "Most of his time? He was due to arrive in three years as a child - has he been fostered? Do his parents move often?"

"A child? Maybe I know a different Kal-El from you." Jordan suddenly stopped flying, hovering over a great golden sphere atop one of the city's largest buildings, and lifted his fingers to his lips and delivered a piercing whistle.

Quicker than Kara could think, a man in his prime - coal black hair and piercing blue eyes, the symbol of the House of El on his chest and dressed in Kryptonian armor - was standing beside them in the air, his red cape swirling behind him.

"Lantern. What do you need?" His voice was strong, confident, and entirely at ease - untouchable.

"I thought you might want to meet our visitor, Superman. My ring says she's Kryptonian, and she says she's Kal-El's cousin. When she said it, I thought she meant you, but now I'm less sure."

Superman turned to Kara, his eyes narrowing as they passed over her. "My father's message said that our race was dead - that I was the only survivor. Who are you?"

She stared at him, some portion of her mind registering that she could see all of him - the lashes of his eyes, the muscle beneath that armor, right down to the twelve-stranded DNA in his cells. *I can see through things - see the orbits of electrons. Oh, father, but you would have loved this.* It was a fleeting, dancing thought, the echo of shock, and she flicked it away as she focused on those blue eyes and drew in a slow breath. "I am Kara Zor-El, daughter of Zor-El and Allura, Last Daughter of Krypton. I have come to make a place for my cousin, Kal El, in this new world. Jor El doubted that my father could succeed in building a second ship in time, so perhaps he did not wish to raise your hopes - if you truly are Kal-El. You wear his crest, at least, and you are of our fallen world. Still, it seems... impossible. I was meant to arrive first, though I departed last."

“I am Kal-El, son of Jor-El. So, if that is who you seek, you have found him.” Superman’s eyes lingered on Kara for another moment before softening. “Welcome to Earth... cousin.”

“Cousin.” Her voice broke softly, sounding her age for the first time as she flung herself into his arms and hugged him with a fierceness that could have shattered titanium. “Oh, cousin, forgive me - I failed you, I failed our fathers. I left you to be raised alone, by savages - I can’t imagine how you must have struggled, but look at you. Rao, look at you - strong and proud and tall. Your mother would weep for joy, if she could see you.”

“I was raised by good people. I’ll introduce you to them.” Kal-El caught her, hugging her tightly. “They took care of me and kept me safe, and loved me as if I was their own. Made me feel like I was their own.”

She held him to her, cheek pressed to his, and there were tears on her cheeks as she murmured into his shoulder. “Then I and the House of El owe them a debt I can never repay, Kal-El. Still... to be raised by strangers, not even by your own kin....” She clung to him fiercely. “I am so very, very sorry, *kaen* .”

He held her against him for a long time before whispering, “Come with me. We’ll go to my home.” He then turned to Jordan. “Lantern... could you make sure Bruce knows what’s happened? There’s no way he doesn’t know something fell into the sea, and if he’s not told it wasn’t a threat...”

Jordan winced. “He’ll have Aquaman ready to invade the cosmos before sundown. I’ll make the call. And, Superman?”

Superman tilted his head. “Yes?”

“I’m happy for you. And you, Miss Zor-El... you couldn’t ask for a better relative. Best man I know.”

“You are a credit to your ring, Jordan-Hal, and I regret that I spoke harshly to you. The House of El will not forget your help.” Kara gave him a warm smile, touching her hand to the symbol above her heart. “Bright stars and swift journeys to you.”

“A family reunited. It’s a good day’s work.” Jordan saluted, then turned, speeding off toward another of the continent’s great cities.

She watched him go, tracking him easily and marveling at the speed with which she was becoming accustomed to such a range of abilities, then turned to her cousin and fixed him with an inquisitorial eyebrow. “Is this Bruce a friend of yours, cousin? He sounds very rash.”

“Bruce is... profoundly human.” Kal-El shrugged. “A good man - a great man, who, without any of the powers we have, without a ring like Hal has or the genetic lineage of Aquaman, does as much to keep this planet safe as any of the rest of us do, and more than most. He’s probably the best friend I have. But... well, I suppose one could say that he is, perhaps, a bit paranoid.”

“Hmmm,” she said, in a tone that was not entirely approving.

“Well... Ma and Pa don’t much like him either. Speaking of... let’s go. I can’t wait for you to meet them.”

Chapter 2

Kara cut sky at Kal's side, letting the air roll over her, and frowned subtly as they passed another tiny human city and sailed out over wild hinterland - fields of crops, beasts wandering among them, and long strips of pavement that rolled on and on and on.

Cultivation. By vehicles. How utterly primitive. "How long have you been on Earth, Kal-El? You seem as though it must have been at least twenty of their years, though I would think perhaps longer."

"I landed as a baby. I've been here as long as I can remember." Kal-El bobbed and weaved over the wheat and the corn, taking obvious pleasure in the flight. "My father sent a large archive of information about our people and our world, but I'm looking forward a great deal to learning more about them from you. I wish I remembered... still, it's been a good life. Lonely, sometimes, but good."

Oh, Kal. She fought down a fresh wave of tears at how bravely he said it - at how serenely he seemed to take having been trapped on this insignificant planet with its under-evolved, limited species. *Our fathers would be so proud of you.* She did a slow, spiralling roll around him, brushing his shoulder as she passed him. "These... Kents. They were summoned by the beacon of your landing craft?"

"Actually, I crash-landed in one of their fields. Apparently, the fire started by the landing burned half a season's worth of wheat in the process, and they had a rough year because of that, but they saw a child who needed to be raised." Kal-El caught Kara's hand in passing, squeezed it, and released it. "And Ma and Pa aren't people who let something that needs doing go undone, or foist it off on someone else."

"A commendable trait, often lacking in less evolved species." Kara gave him a warm smile. "They sound... remarkable."

"They are." Kal-El slowed a bit. "We're almost to Smallville. I try not to be moving at supersonic speeds going into town... there's never been a military airport nearby, so sonic booms tend to make people a bit nervous."

"They do not use supersonic transport routinely?" Kara felt a tone of fascinated horror creep into her voice. *How primitive is this place?*

"No... they've had some supersonic passenger planes, but they've yet to figure out how to make supersonic travel economical... Earth doesn't have the crystals Krypton used for power; they're stuck burning fossil fuels and using nuclear fission. It's rich in iron and tin, though, and the local woods are strong. There's also more overall biodiversity across the planet... multiple continents instead of a single supercontinent, with more active plate tectonics. It's a wonderful planet, Kara... I can't wait to show all of it to you."

"Fossil fuels? *Fission?*" Kara's jaw nearly dropped. "They don't even have controlled fusion?"

“Not in the mass market... there’s a few companies that have developed fusion generators, but they’re a few years from being economical on a large scale and at least a decade from mass adoption. And here we are...” Kal-El flew over a large crater before descending toward a farmhouse. “Ma doesn’t speak Kryptonian at all, and Pa only knows a few words, but if your powers have progressed evenly, you should be able to learn English in a few minutes, if you haven’t already from bits of conversation picked up on the way here.”

“Remarkable,” Kara said, trying out the unfamiliar English on her tongue. “With our minds running at such an accelerated rate, we can absorb and learn languages subconsciously - like sleep-learning. Have you tried to discover how much you can process with that extra speed while you interact at their limited rate of conversation?”

“Not really... I can’t concentrate on the conversation when I try to do something else at the same time. I guess that, for all my power, I’ve got a one-track mind.” Kal-El laughed softly. “My mind’s always working on something in the background, but directing it is distracting.”

Kara looked over the broad wooden lines of the farmhouse with a skeptical eye, descending in a slow pivot until her feet touched the ground. “The female is in the kitchen cooking something horribly unhealthy from animal flesh and local vegetation. The male is repairing one of those primitive farm machines in the rear of the house near the...” she tilted her head, fishing for the word in her subconscious before finding it, “the barn.”

“Ma’s making her meat loaf, which is good news.” Kal-El smiled widely. “When she does meat loaf for dinner, it’s always apple pie for dessert, and Ma’s apple pie is wonderful.” He opened the door, stepping through. “Ma! I’m home, and I brought company.”

The kitchen door opened, and an older human woman stepped out. She smiled to Kal, hugging him tightly. “Clark... I saw something on the news about a meteor. Were you... there?”

“No, Ma, but Hal was. And, speaking of... this is my cousin. Martha Kent, Kara Zor-El.”

The woman froze for a moment before looking Kara over. After a long gaze, she smiled, and it was one of the most welcoming expressions Kara had ever seen. “Well, I’ll be... Clark has a cousin. Since you’re his family, you’re our family, and you’re welcome here any time you wish. It’s very good to meet you, Kara Zor-El.”

Kara touched her wrists in the ancient gesture of greeting, bowing her head subtly to indicate her respect for the older, alien woman. “I am given to understand that you fostered Kal-El when he was a stranger, when he had no kin and no home of which you knew. I and the House of El are in your debt, and if I can ever repay the service you have done our family it will be done at once.” She straightened slowly, tilting her head to fix the other woman with an inquiring look. “Why do you refer to him as... Clark? Is this an Earth endearment or a title he has acquired of which I am unaware?”

Kal-El laughed softly. “It’s my Earth name, Kara. When Pa pulled me out of the pod, they didn’t know how to activate the data stores - he figured that out years later. So I needed a name, and they gave me one. I usually go by Clark around humans.” He sobered. “There... really is a lot we need to discuss, after dinner. About my role here on Earth, what I do.”

“There will be time, <little cousin.>” She slipped into Kryptonian as she murmured the endearment, squeezing his shoulder, then gave him a slightly stern glance as if reproving him on his manners. “<It is not right to discuss family business while we are guests.> Forgive our poor manners, Lady Kent. Is it the local custom that I should offer assistance in the preparation of the meal, or that we should leave that to our hosts?”

“I believe it’s local custom to offer, and for me to decline.” Martha winked. “Clark, why don’t you prepare the guest room for Kara? Unless you’re planning to take her back to the city tonight. And, when you’re done, let your father know that dinner will be at seven?”

“I’ll do that, Ma. I hadn’t planned to go back to Metropolis tonight unless I’m called, and Kara’s just finished a long journey. A very long journey.”

“Too long,” Kara murmured, too low for anyone but her cousin to hear. Then she smiled politely to her hostess. “With your permission, Lady Kent?”

“Go ahead, Kara. And we’re very glad to have you in our home.”

Kal smiled. “We’ll go upstairs... I’ll get your bed made and we can talk a bit.”

“Very well.” Kara followed him out of the room, looking around herself as she went, and she brushed a careful fingertip along one of the walls as they climbed the stairs. “It is very small, and very fragile. I am surprised it survived your childhood.”

“It nearly didn’t... Pa was always having to repair things, once my powers started to manifest. If you use your microscopic and X-ray vision on the walls and doors, you’ll see where wood is newer and older... I ripped the door off the guest room twice on accident, and when my heat vision manifested, I burned a hole in the roof over my bedroom.”

“Heat... vision?” Kara considered thoughtfully, eyes narrowing, and then was at the window of one of the rooms a moment later and focusing her gaze on a small patch of earth outside the window which - after a few fractions of a second - burned to glass at a sudden flare of red light from her eyes. She closed them, shutting off the blaze, and opened them a moment later with a thoughtful smile on her face. “How curious.”

“Be careful with that... it can be incredibly destructive, and it channels the sunlight directly out of your cells. The more you use heat vision without recharging, the weaker you’ll get.”

Kal led Kara up the stairs and into a small guest room, and began to make the bed. “How long’s it been since I did this? Anyway... I suppose I should tell you about my... work.”

“Work.” She rolled the word across her tongue, eyes curious. “I had wondered, yes. Jordan-Hal called you a ‘Superman.’ It is a very strange name for a scientist, Kal-El.”

“I... suppose ‘scientist’ would be my third job. Father sent the seed of a Kryptonian fortress with me; I used it at the North Pole, and I keep the things I build and the things I dream up there. But my first job... and, I suppose, the title I’ve earned... is Superman. This planet is a beautiful, fragile place, Kara... I do what I can to protect it, and it turns out I can do a lot. I keep the people safe, from alien threats and from the humans who embrace the worst of their

nature instead of the best. With the power I have... it seemed like it would be shirking a responsibility not to.”

She frowned a moment, looking out the window of the bedroom and out over the horizon thoughtfully. “Keep them safe how, Kal?”

“There are a lot of ways. When I started... I stopped runaway trains with super-strength, used my hearing to detect crimes and my speed to prevent them, walked into buildings that were aflame using my invulnerability and saved the people or, once I learned about it, put the fire out with my cold breath. I still do those things. I also make clear to alien threats that, if they want this world, they have to go through me to take it, and I stand between the powerful and evil and the powerless and innocent. And... people have taken me as a symbol. Some call me the Man of Tomorrow, a sign that the future can be better than the present.”

“Superman. Clark. The Man of Tomorrow.” She turned at that, regarding him with scant favor. “They do not seem to tire of heaping names on you. Is your own insufficient?”

He smiled. “Humans like titles. You should see the list of acronyms after Lex or Perry’s names. But...” He sobered. “There is a danger to the work I do, beyond the physical. Some of the evil I face... does its work as much with influence as with strength. Earth has its own Zods. And, if they were to know who the people I love were - the people without powers - they would use them as a weapon against me. That’s why I use Clark in my daily life among humans... if the fact that Clark Kent is an alien were public, Kal-El’s enemies would pursue my family and friends.”

“Your... daily life? Among humans?” She looked at him, visibly confused, and there was a hard edge of disapproval growing behind her confusion. “Are your enemies fools, then, not to see the symbol of the House of El on your chest? To fear your just reprisal, should they seek to harm others? And while we are on the subject, cousin, what sort of backward and barbarous place is this that you - a son of the House of El - are reduced to rushing about putting out fires and stopping ‘crimes’ like a common Public Safety Officer, much less stopping trains? Have they no-one of their own to tend to such things? If these strong evils you speak of are too great for the humans to confront themselves - are strong enough, even, to threaten you or those under your protection - why do you suffer them to exist at all?”

“I think you misunderstand, Kara... I’m not required to protect them. I do it because I want to... because it is something I’m the only one who can do, and because I want to see it done.” Kal sat on the bed, patting the mattress next to him. “I love this world, and I love humans.”

She frowned, pacing slowly in the small room instead of sitting, eyes sweeping through the walls toward distant places. “I am sorry, cousin... I was not here, so it is perhaps heaping hypocrisy on my failure to reprove you, but surely you know who you are? You are Kal-El, the son of Jor-El, the greatest scientist of Krypton. Surely there are ways you can show your love for these humans which honor your ... there is no word in your English, your <calling> more faithfully than allowing yourself to be distracted with dancing about like one of the Old Gods of legend, dispensing favor and retribution from on high. Surely, if they are capable of caring for themselves and your protection is not *required*, that is not so difficult?”

“I... didn’t learn about the Kryptonian caste system until I was nearly as old as you are now, Kara, and even if I had... I’m not a very good scientist. I build things well - I have a way with machines that seems to apply as well to advanced robots as to Pa’s tractor. But if I tried to be a scientist, I’d be retreading work Bruce and Lex and others had already done before I even thought of the ideas. I’d be doing work someone else could do. But there’s no one else with the powers I have... well, apart from you, now.”

“Kal.” She turned and looked at him, her voice that of an elder sibling reasoning with a stubborn junior. “Surely, even if only a fragment of the databases your father meant to leave to you survived, you must see that applying what you know and what you can imagine would do more good for this world than any number of human scientists could. Why, the application of anti-gravity, robotics and fusion technologies *alone* would revolutionize their entire society. Even if you must dabble in being...” her lips twitched with a hint of disdain, but she plowed on, “in being an *engineer* because they would struggle with applying your theoretical discoveries, surely you can see how much better that would serve the people of the world you have chosen as your protectorate than merely saving people from momentary disasters or thrashing intruding aliens with your fists rather than leaving them to the Lanterns or simply eliminating those who do not accept your warnings.”

Kal sighed softly. “I’m doing a poor job of explaining myself...”

“Cousin, you had no-one to teach you how to live properly.” Kara’s smile was gentle and sad, but she squeezed his shoulder gently. “If you have failed to understand your <calling> or if you have allowed yourself to be lured into playing the part of a guardian spirit and ruler because it seemed that you must make up for all their faults yourself, I have only myself to blame that I did not come before you, as my father planned. We will reason it through together, and set things right.”

“Is *teacher* a proper role for a scientist?” The voice - gravelly, dark, and very human - came from the door of the room.

Kara spun in the distance of a neuron’s firing, moving to shield Kal with her body as her eyes flared with the first red gleam of heat and her fist clenched as she turned on the intruder. *I can hear the ripple of the wind in the leaves a thousand miles away, and feel the vibrations of movement in the air from over a mile. How -*

“Kara! He’s a friend.” Kal’s hand shot to her shoulder, gripping firmly but not painfully. “Kara, this is Batman.”

“Bat-man.” Kara stood facing him, still shielding her cousin as she looked the intruder over slowly - the ridiculous, inefficient human armor, the cloak around his shoulders, the cowl through which she was almost stunned to find she could not see. *Electromagnetic shielding? Some exotic material?* She lowered her hand slowly, still studying him, though her eyes did not lose their hard red glow. “Another human title. You are human, Bat-man, and you are not of the House of El. This is not your concern. If you truly are Kal’s friend, you will understand that some things are a matter for family to discuss.”

“Your first mistake is believing that you are the only family he has on this world.” Batman took a step into the room. “Your second, that it is a flaw for him to have family that is

human. Kal-El and I have fought gods together, Kara Zor-El. So, as his brother, I ask again... is teacher a proper role for a scientist?"

"I am no teacher." She bit the words out between her teeth. "I am his cousin. His blood. I was sent to raise him as if he were my own son. I am not absolved of that responsibility by my obvious failure thus far." She flashed a disapproving look at Kal, then went on without looking back at the Batman. "*Fought*, cousin? Are you a soldier now, as well as a public safety officer and an inspirational leader and an engineer? Perhaps you will add agricultural technician, teacher and builder to your roles, so that you may be everything but what you were born to be? Rao's tears, did nothing of what your father sent but the bare seed of the fortress and that armor survive your journey?"

"Honesty, a sense of duty, and an understanding that, when he came here, he would be the most powerful being on this planet." Batman turned to Kal. "Clark... I think she needs to see the message."

"Ma's cooking dinner..."

"And you miss dinner often enough that she will understand. Your cousin, on the other hand, needs to see the message Jor-El left for you. Then she needs to spend a week here, and get to know the people who raised you. But she needs to see the message now."

Kara bit down on her tongue, staring at the Batman so intensely that it took an effort not to burn him with her gaze. *When my cousin needs you to tell me what I need, human, he will ask you for your views! Brother, by Rao's tears? What in the Flamebird's name has become of you on this world, cousin?*

"I... think he's right, Kara. The recording is in the Fortress... maybe it will explain everything." Kal-El folded his hands together. "The North Pole."

"Then we will go to your home, cousin, and see this message. It would be well for me to see what there is of our homeworld to be salvaged there, in any case. It may as well be now." Kara stalked to the window, nearly tore it out of its frame, then very carefully pulled it open and stepped out through it into the open air. "Are you coming, Kal-El?"

"I am. Bruce?"

"You go. I will have pie."

Chapter 3

“....Live as one of them, Kal-El, to discover where your strength and your power are needed. Always hold in your heart the pride of your special heritage. They can be a great people, Kal-El, they wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you... my only son.

You will travel far, my little Kal-El. But we will never leave you... even in the face of our death. The richness of our lives shall be yours. All that I have, all that I've learned, everything I feel... all this, and more, I... I bequeath you, my son. You will carry me inside you, all the days of your life. You will make my strength your own, and see my life through your eyes, as your life will be seen through mine. The son becomes the father, and the father the son. This is all I... all I can send you, Kal-El.”

“Cease repeat of message.” Kara’s voice was a trembling thing in the air where she rested on her knees by the central crystal array, staring up at the hologram of Jor-El’s face with the eyes of a lost child - as though every prop and support of her life had been ripped away by those words, or perhaps as if they had finally made the end of everything clear to her. *Krypton is gone*, she thought numbly. *Krypton is gone, and we are all that remains, and now Jor-El counsels that we abandon even that. That we live among these humans, hiding, so that we may lead them to... what? Show them the way to what, if not knowledge and understanding?*

There were tears on her face, frozen in the cold air, and when she brushed them away with her fingers they chimed on the crystal beneath her. The towering outer crystals of the Fortress cast a steady, even glow down across the wide chamber, leaving no room for shadow, and the shelves spread about the wide circle below the central array were lined haphazardly with half-finished projects - a Superman robot here, a suit of Bat-armor using Kryptonian ore there, a small zero-point power generator on the side. Kal-El landed next to her, having set her ship down next to what looked like an attempt at an interstellar communicator, and rested his hand on her shoulder. “Kara...”

“I don’t know what to do, Kal.” Her voice was very quiet, and full of so many sharp edges that it hurt to hear it. “I thought... what my father told me... I thought I understood what I was supposed to do. To come before you, to make a place for you, to teach you how to be a man of Krypton. To carry on the legacy of our world inside us. But now I don’t know what I was ever supposed to do - or maybe our fathers never agreed at all. I don’t understand, Kal, and now I’m here and everyone else is dead and I have to know what to *do* and I don’t.”

“Here.” Kal-El knelt next to her, passing her a plate. “Ma saved some of the pie... and Batman suggested it might help. As for the rest... we live, Kara. And, now, we live together. I really thought I was alone... some of the archives were damaged; I didn’t know you were coming. We can’t have Krypton, but... we’ll have each other.”

“Always, cousin. I may have failed you by not being here for you, but I won’t ever leave you alone again.” She gave him a small, teary smile and took a bite of the pie like a peace

offering. Then she blinked, taking another, and looked up at him in surprise. "This is.... good."

"The small pleasures of Earth begin with Ma's apple pie." Kal-El squeezed her hand. "There will be time to figure out what you'll do now. But you won't face it alone, either."

She squeezed his hand. Took another bite. Gave him a lingering look. "I'm still not sure I agree with you, you know. Or understand how you can possibly pretend Clark Kent and Kal-El are different people, much less that one of them is human. Surely they must look at your accomplishments and suspect something?"

"I'll explain the how later - it does take me some work to keep them in the dark." Kal-El returned the squeeze. "So... you're my older cousin?"

"Yes." She smiled, very softly, and her eyes were shadowed with pain. "It seems like only yesterday that I was holding you in my arms, and you were barely enough to fill the space between my fingertips and my elbow. You were such a beautiful boy, Kal - Lara was so proud."

"I hope she'd be proud of me now. I don't really remember my parents... they sent holorecordings of themselves. Vacations, work, time around the house. They were kind, brilliant, and good... I know that from watching them. But I wish I'd known them."

"Oh, Kal." She finished the pie in one more quick bite, then set the plate aside and embraced him tightly. "They were... they were everything I wanted to be. I know Zor-El and Jor-El had their differences - how could they not? Brothers are like that. But I always knew that your father would make time to help me with a difficult astrographics problem, or that your mother would be there to hold me if the girls at the Collegium were making me sad. I remember how happy she was, the day she knew they were having you - so wonderfully happy. I told her I couldn't wait to have a husband of my own, and she laughed and told me to be patient - that there would be plenty of time for that." She squeezed him harder, and her voice broke a little with the thought. "All the time in the world, she said. I remember the words exactly, because they were so terribly appropriate later."

Kal-El turned and pulled her as tightly into his arms as he could, squeezing her close to him. "I'm here, Kara. Always."

She breathed into his shoulder for a long moment, feeling the strength and the certainty of him, and it broke her heart a little know that he was a man - his own man. That whatever part she might have played in shaping that man was long since past, and would never come again. She was his cousin and his blood, but he had been raised by other hands and that would always be true.

Krypton is gone.

Alone with the glow of the Fortress and the arctic wind, Kara laid her face against her cousin's shoulder and finally gave way to the grief that seemed - to her - only days old.

Chapter 4

“Farm life didn’t suit you? I can’t say I’m surprised.” Batman sat at a large array of monitors, facing away from the bulk of the large chamber - and from Kara - as he spoke.

And the chamber *was* large. Batman’s lair - it could hardly be called a home - was built in a huge cave, one that took as much space as the entire Fortress of Solitude. While the sheer size of the cavern and the variety of things in it - a wardrobe full of armor and civilian outfits here, a bank of mainframes there, a case of weapons near the computers, an enormous penny - made it seem haphazard at a glance, it had taken Kara less than a second to realize how perfectly planned it was.

The cave was shelter, work space, and fortress, and every single element of it contributed to all three of those functions. She stood beside him, where she had appeared as suddenly as a breath, and in the face of that perfect room was somehow unsurprised by his complete calm at the development.

“If you’re here, you can help. The House of El is of the Scientist caste... tell me, Kara Zor-El, what was your specialization?”

“Physics and Biology. I was still allowed two for a few more months before....” she trailed off, leaving the words unsaid, studying him with those alien blue eyes. “You know of our caste system - show more knowledge of it than my cousin does. How?”

“He gave me access to the historical data his father put onto the ship. Once I understood Kryptonian naming conventions, it became obvious that everyone mentioned of a given House always worked in similar positions. Zods were soldiers, Els were scientists, Mins were laborers. Had it merely been an overall pattern, it could have been social pressure - but it was universal. Thus, it carried the force of either law or tradition considered inviolable.”

Batman reached for a sample. “Clark - Kal - is brilliant, but he has a habit of missing the obvious in favor of the complex.”

“You are a logician. A deducer of things. You would have been a scientist, on Krypton.” She was over his shoulder, now, studying the material in front of him. “The sample with the three-stranded molecular bonding structure would induce death via asphyxiation in a human, due to the sudden elimination of hemoglobin from the body. It would exsanguinate without leaving a trace. How... unpleasant.”

“Fascinating.” Batman placed the sample aside. “I checked it against every chemical database on the planet, and found nothing... which means that the person who I am pursuing is themselves a scientist, or has one in their employ. A scientist capable of creating brand-new poisons. It also means that the victim murdered with that poison was... Vanessa Hopkins. 22, single mother of one five-year-old child, widowed. One sister. No known enemies. Almost entirely unremarkable...”

“Are the police in this world so incapable that they require the help of every exceptional man or woman on the planet?” She asked the question almost absently, her eyes still dark with the

shock of the idea of a woman - a mother, a widow - dying gasping for air.

“There is... something new, happening on Earth. Exceptional people, with abilities humans are simply not expected to have, have begun to appear. When I first heard of your cousin, I believed he was one of them - one of the first; the sightings of Superman in Metropolis were near the beginning of this. Some of these people can wield lightning or fire, or they can fly and fling automobiles about, or they can climb walls like an insect, or step through a closed door as easily as an open one. And some... some are simply so mad that any effort at predicting their next act is an exercise in futility. The police have been slow to adapt... they do a good enough job with the everyday crimes, the sorts of activity that have existed since the beginning of humanity, though even for those there are too few willing to fight. But these new things... the exceptional are the only ones capable of stopping the exceptional.”

She seemed to weigh the idea for a moment, turning it over in her mind, then nodded sharply. “And yet you are not possessed of any such power, Bruce Wayne, but here you sit. Though perhaps an exception can be made for ‘great men.’” The subtly mimicry of her cousin’s voice was uncanny.

“I am a genius, with resources that allow me to acquire any tool I may need to accomplish my goals. I cannot wield lightning, but one of the suits of armor I have will shrug off bolts.” Bruce began to type. “My parents were killed... a random act of violence, perpetrated by a man who was frightened and greedy. I work to prevent other children from suffering the same fate.” He sighed. “In the case of Mrs. Hopkins’s son, I was too slow, too late.”

“It is not given to anyone to always meet with success. When faced with failure, begin again from the facts and continue until success presents itself.” Kara kept a respectful, Kryptonian distance, but she quoted the axiom with a certain gentleness in her voice.

“Good advice.” Batman rose to his feet. “Unless you have further information on these substances, I believe the time has come for me to think on my feet. You may join me, if you like.”

She glanced over them for a moment, considering. “The one on the left is an organic derivative native to your world which induces a sharp increase in blood pressure - likely resulting in a cardiac failure or a ruptured blood vessel or both. The other sample is artificially created to disrupt the liver’s normal function in a human and thus cause any toxins that would normally be filtered to build up in the body with fatal or near-fatal results. I imagine you know these things?”

“The first, I did. The victim was a young man... college student, studying psychology. Perfect GPA, juggling three girlfriends, none of whom knew of the others. Kenneth Foster was his name. The victim for the second was a father of two, grandfather of seven, and great-grandfather of sixteen, who had never smoked or taken a drink in his life, but who was dying of throat cancer.”

“They seem unrelated, and yet your interest suggests they are not.” Kara paused beside his vehicle, considering. “I do not think I wish to ride inside this metal behemoth. Would it be possible for us to continue to speak while I keep up outside? I imagine you have such a communication device.”

“One moment.” Batman walked to one of the shelves, and returned with a small earpiece.
“Place this inside your left ear. It will be linked to my cowl’s communicator.”

“Thank you.” She settled it in her ear carefully, shaking her head slightly to get used to the sensation, then smiled. “Test pattern 1. Volume, pitch, broadcast strength.”

“Entirely functional.” Batman climbed into the Batmobile. “Let’s go.”

“Bruce,” she asked as they pulled out onto the highway toward the city, “are you in love with my cousin?”

“Clark is likely the person who it would be least healthy for me to fall in love with for whom I have managed to avoid the temptation.”

She was silent a moment, processing the idea. “You have a history of bad relationship choices, then. I thought I detected something unsuitable about you. It is good to know that I do not need to be concerned.”

“I suggest you take a great deal of advice from me, but if I offer you relationship advice, you are to ignore it, then tell Alfred at my manor.”

“I will remember that.” She slipped past a road sign, turning a slow spin in the air and casting a thoughtful look up at the stars. “When you asked me that pointed question about a scientist serving as a teacher, you were not speaking about me, were you? You meant Kal.”

“Clark has taught the people of Earth a great deal since his appearance in Metropolis. He has, perhaps, been the most important teacher on this world.”

“It feels... wrong, to think of him that way. It is not the tradition of our people to break free of tradition and seize a new horizon of possibility with little thought to the risks involved. Still... Jor-El was like that, too. Intuitive. Willing to take risks. Willing to break the rules, when he thought he was right. Perhaps I am the one who is inflexible, unwilling to adapt. Wrong.”

“There is a rightness to the way things have always been - after all, tradition does not develop without reason. However, as the situation changes, one must also be willing to change one’s approach to match. You are a biologist; you have studied the evolution of life. Societies and behavior follow those same laws.”

“And our situation has changed very radically indeed.” She frowned thoughtfully, arching up over the city and letting her eyes roam the streets and alleys. “There is a violent altercation three streets ahead of you and two to the west, and another five streets east. Should we notify the police?”

“Tell me... are any of those involved wearing red bandannas on their right arms?”

“One of the men in the western altercation.”

“I will contact the police on the eastern altercation. The western... that is one of the members of the Cards street gang. I have warned them about fighting; it seems I must warn them again.” Without another word, Batman ejected from the car, landing on a nearby rooftop, and

the car turned itself into an alley and parked. “Come down...” Then he was off at a run, leaping from building to building.

She flashed down after him, a dancing thunderbolt of blue and red, and came to rest a few feet above the heads of the combatants with a short, authoritative crack of her voice through the air. “That is quite enough of that. Cease at once.”

Two of the fighters fell dropped back, gazing at Kara warily, but another - the one with the red armband - looked up at her with a sneer. “And who’re you? A girl who thinks she’s Superman?”

Another, encouraged by his companion, spoke. “Superman don’t fit in this city, blondie. This is Gotham!”

“I am Kara Zor-El, and you are both rude.” She arched an eyebrow at them. “Now, cease disturbing the peace.”

“Why don’t you come down here, I’ll show you disturbing the peace...” The man with the red armband gave a gesture that would be lewd on any planet.

She frowned, and the knife in his hand abruptly glowed white-hot and spattered hot droplets of metal across his hands before he could drop it. “I do not think you would enjoy that, little human. I might break you.”

The man with the armband dropped the knife with a yelp, and one of his companions burst out in cruel laughter. “Aw, man, Raoul, girl flies in and gives you a glance and you spook?”

“Shut the fuck up.” Raoul’s hand entered his pocket, and came out with a chrome handgun, which he raised toward Kara. “Bitch is gonna get it now.”

“C’mon, man, this is getting too serious...” Raoul’s friend trailed off, starting to back away. “Raoul...”

“What’s one cape more or less?” Raoul spat.

“Not what I...”

Then a gauntleted hand lashed out, taking the gun and clocking Raoul in the head with it in the same motion. The man dropped to the ground, rolling to find Batman’s boot on his chest.

Then he screamed, and his scream was consumed by Batman’s cowl as the Dark Knight bent over him, whispering something in his ear that even Kara had to strain to hear.

When Batman rose, Raoul scrambled to his feet and ran.

“That took longer than I thought,” Kara observed. “Was my distraction sufficient?”

“I was giving you time... I wanted to see how you worked.” Batman offered her a tight smile. “It was... impressive. Most of the others I’ve worked with would have gone in swinging.”

“I am a scientist. I do not do...” she searched for the word, found it. “Fisticuffs.”

“For which I am quite thankful.” Batman tapped a button on his gauntlet, and a moment later his car pulled into the alley. “You would make a good partner.”

“For chasing around alleys reproving thoughtless young thugs who don’t consume the proper nutrients and are a few years from... what is the Earth word... scurvy? That sounds decidedly unpleasant, not to mention unproductive.”

“For investigation, with occasional pursuits. You have the right mindset, and are a very capable - and very clean - thinker.”

She considered that a moment, frowning softly, and then dropped down so she could look into his face at eye level. “Would it make it more likely that there will be fewer Vanessa Hopkins and Kenneth Fosters?”

“Yes.” Bruce met her eyes, gazing into them. “Your mind is perhaps the best on this planet. Of course, when you found something else you would prefer to do... I would also help you with that. Regardless of your response to this offer.”

“You are being kind to me.” She studied his face through that unreadable cowl, still frowning. “The Kents are kind because they love Clark, and because it is their way to be kind. You are not like them - you have a reason for everything. I would like to know what it is.”

“You have earned it. It would also allow me to keep an eye on you - as you will learn quickly, if you have not already, I trust no one entirely. Even myself.”

““A wise man knows that he himself is the most untrustworthy of creatures.”” Kara nodded subtly, almost approvingly. “You would have made an excellent Kryptonian. I accept.”

“Let’s return to the Cave.” Bruce turned toward the car. “Unless you are planning to return to the farm or to the Fortress tonight, I will have Alfred make a bed for you in the Manor.”

She considered that for a moment, eyes thoughtful, and then nodded toward him as she rose back into the sky. “I think that, of all the offers I have received today, sounds the least unacceptable.”

Chapter 5

“My cousin has a sexual partner,” she announced the next morning over a late breakfast. “A very vigorous one, apparently.”

Richard Grayson, a fork full of eggs halfway into his mouth, somehow managed to avoid spraying them all over the table. It was, however, a very near thing. Finding out the cute blond at the end of the table was the second known surviving Kryptonian in the entire universe was a bit of a rocky way to start the morning, but this was... different.

“Well... they would have to be vigorous, wouldn’t they?” Tim Drake chewed slowly on his eggs. “Though now I really need that image out of my mind...”

“He does.” Bruce’s expression was, as usual, unreadable. “He likely should have told you, given that you would hear regardless. Her name is Diana... she is an Amazon. She is nearly as strong and tough as Clark, capable of flight, and was given a magic lasso and bracers by her gods. She is a soldier, born and bred, but also a diplomat, sent from her homeland into the world outside to learn about it and form bonds with the nations of humanity.”

“Wait, hold on, Superman and *Wonder Woman*?” Richard thumped his head lightly against his hand, groaning softly. “How do I not know this?”

“Clark is capable of subtlety when he chooses - or, rather, he chooses subtlety so rarely that no one expects it of him.” Bruce sipped his coffee. “Alfred, Kara seems to have finished her donuts. Bring another three, please?”

“Donuts. Is that what they’re called? I like them.” Kara sipped some of the brown organic suspension in the cup in front of her, then made a face. “That, I do not like. What is it?”

“Coffee. Alfred, hot chocolate as well.”

“Right away, Master Bruce.” The older gentleman vanished into the kitchen, returning a moment later with the requested items.

“This Diana... she sounds well suited to him.” Kara sipped the hot chocolate slowly, then smiled. “This is much better. She sounds like a very successful soldier. You and she have fought together, I take it?”

“She is a member of the Justice League, along with Clark, Hal, and I. The others are Cyborg, Barry Allen - the Flash - and Aquaman.”

“Diana’s apparently the Princess of Paradise Island.” Tim spoke around a bite of hash browns. “Though their social structure is complex enough that I’m not entirely sure what that means.”

“Hmm.” Kara clicked her tongue against her teeth thoughtfully, her eyes subtly narrowed. “A very successful member of her caste, then. I shall have to meet her when they... finish.”

Tim's fork fell to the table. "Right... I'm... late... class... Titans... something." He was gone from the table before anyone could respond.

"He seems disturbed, and his pulse is elevated. Is Tim not well?" Kara looked between the two older men, her expression innocently curious.

Richard opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, and then thought better of it for a second time. *And the hits just keep on coming....*

"Among humans - particularly in the United States - it is generally considered embarrassing to know when someone else is... having time with a lover. Particularly when one considers the person who is having said time to be a parental figure, which Tim does for Clark." Bruce spoke calmly, as if discussing the weather.

"Oh. So you all cannot hear them, then? They are quite loud."

Richard gave her a sudden, suspicious look, then shot one at Bruce. *Is she having us on?*

"They are at the North Pole. Human hearing does not extend that far..." Bruce looked up, meeting her eyes. "As you well know."

Her smile would have done Diana on the battlefield proud. "I am practicing human humor. Have I correctly understood the method of a 'practical joke'?"

"We're doomed, Bruce. She's going to kill us all." Grayson dropped his head into his hands with a long groan, scrubbing his eyes with his fingers. "Alfred, I'm going to need more coffee for this. A lot more coffee."

"You have the method, though the topic was obviously disturbing to my wards." Bruce returned his attention to his meal. "I, however, am amused."

Grayson looked up, startled, and then shook his head. "Doomed. Definitely doomed."

Chapter 6

The room was a wreck, and only the nigh-unbreakable Kryptonian crystals of the Fortress of Solitude's main structure had kept the entire thing from collapsing on them. Diana lay panting under Clark, an arm wrapped around his hips to allow a hand to cup his ass, a wide smile on her face as she gazed into his eyes. Above her, Clark's hair was a mess, held against his head by the sweat of exertion, and there was a slightly wild look to his face when he pressed down to kiss her.

"Come again tomorrow." He breathed the words into her ear.

"No. Though I'll stay the night." She laughed, squeezing his ass. "So I'll still be here in the morning, and if neither of us is called away... and you promise to do that thing with your hand again..."

"You two are worse than human adolescents, you know." Kara Zor-El's voice was more amused than disapproving, though she clicked her tongue sharply as she floated down into the room. "Sixteen hours and thirty-two minutes, and both of you are still flirting."

"Kara!" Clark started to roll off of Diana before thinking better of it, and settled on staying put and blushing deeply instead. "Kara... Diana. Diana, my cousin Kara. I... hadn't exactly planned for the two of you to meet like this."

"Oh, it's no bother." Diana pushed Clark off of her and rose to her feet, floating up to meet Kara, nude apart from the bracers on her wrists. "Clark's told me about you... I'm glad we got to meet this soon."

"As am I. I have heard many promising things about you... though none of them from Kal-El." Kara gave Diana a formal but warm gesture of greeting, a delicate flush on her pale cheeks but her blue eyes steady. "At least, none that he intended me to hear. He was quite effusive in his praise in the last few hours, however."

"He gets shy about me. I'd be offended, except he's so very *cute* when he's shy." Diana smiled down to Clark. "Oh, if you're going to stammer until we have clothes on, go get your robe and toss one of your extras to me. I really don't see why you insist on it, though... I'm comfortable." She looked to Kara. "Unless you're offended by nudity... I'm not really sure if that's a human thing or a Kryptonian thing. Or, I suppose, both."

"It is somewhat improper by Kryptonian standards, but we are accustomed to the idea that other species have different customs when it comes to dress." Kara quirked a smile. "I am not offended, though if your senses are any match for my cousin's you doubtless know that I am both embarrassed and aroused by your appearance."

"You know... I'd be tempted if I didn't have a rule against sleeping with multiple members of the same family. It makes breakups... complicated." She reached out, catching the robe Clark threw. "Though I could set you up on a date with one of my sisters..."

“I do not think I am quite ready for ‘dating’ yet. Besides, it would be entirely improper for anything to occur between us while you are involved with my cousin.” Kara chuckled again, then glanced down at Clark and raised an eyebrow. “You realize, cousin, that with our eyes everyone is effectively naked at all times? It makes your modesty somewhat redundant.”

“It’s the principle of the thing...” Clark muttered.

“It’s pure Smallville prudishness, Clark, and you know it.” Diana pulled the robe on, winking to Kara. “Still, if you don’t have that problem, feel free to look...” She gave a toss of her hips before floating down to join Clark.

Kara laughed softly, floating down after her, and settled onto the crystal floor with a light click of her boots. “I like her, Kal. When do you plan to make her a member of the House of El?”

“Oh, he’s tried. But we haven’t worked out some cultural differences.” Diana leaned against Clark. “Like, for example, both American and Kryptonian marriages expect sexual fidelity. Amazonian marriages expect you to come home to sleep after you’ve been with a mistress.”

“A significant problem, though such informal arrangements were not exactly unheard of on Krypton. Discouraged, of course, but not unheard of.” Kara turned and arched an eyebrow at Clark. “She is a perfect example of her caste, a ‘hero’ worthy of your brother’s respect, a brave and proud woman, beautiful, a near match for you in strength and even genetically compatible. What more could you possibly be looking for?”

“Genetically... wait, what?” Diana blinked.

“I... didn’t know that.” Clark put his hands up defensively before realizing that Diana’s eyes weren’t angry.

“If Clark didn’t know that...” Diana turned to Kara. “How do you know?”

“I am a Kryptonian scientist,” Kara replied calmly, though with just a gleam of humor in her eyes. “Every speck of accumulated data on the subject of biology collected by twenty-seven galaxies has passed under my eyes, and I have an excellent memory. I can also, apparently, see finely enough to pick out the orbits of electrons, much less the DNA in the bodies of others. Everything beyond that is simple chemistry.”

“So... are Kryptonians genetically compatible with all humans, or just Amazons?” Diana tilted her head, both curious and thoughtful.

“I am uncertain. There would seem to be no genetic incompatibility with the general human population, except that the differentiation in the toughness of the Kryptonian cells with those of their human counterparts could produce serious secondary complications.” Kara paused, glanced at her audience, and then cleared her throat. “Too technical?”

“No, not at all.” Diana squeezed Clark’s arm. “I gathered the basics... essentially, theoretically yes but there could be trouble due to the powers?”

“Particularly our invulnerability: sperm would have difficulty breaching the eggs to enable mating, or do so with sufficient force as to ruin the whole process. Stellar-driven regeneration might produce a faster or slower pregnancy cycle, or unknown complications. Your system, unlike a baseline humans, would be resilient enough to handle any complications or shocks.” Kara crooked a small smile. “Not to put too fine a point on it, Diana of Themyscira, but you were practically made for my cousin. From a biological perspective, that is.”

“Oh...” Diana blinked. “Um... Kara, could you give Clark and I some time? And Clark... soundproof room. I think we need to talk.”

“Er... yes.” Clark’s face was pale. “Yes. Soundproof room. Talking. Good idea. Kara... I hate to ask this, but... could you leave us alone for a while? I’ll... let you know when I’m free.”

“Far be it from me to come between my cousin and his intended.” Kara stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek, smiling warmly. There was a bit of concern there, but only a bit, and it was roughly matched by her amusement at his sudden shock. “Cheer up, cousin. It’s good news, isn’t it?”

“I... hopefully?” Clark blushed. “I’ll see you later...”

“Men.” Kara shot Diana an amused smile. “Always so squeamish about reproduction. You’d think they were the ones who have to perform the carrying and labor. Good day, Diana. I trust I will see you again soon.” Then she touched her hands in the traditional gesture of parting, and was gone.

Once they were in the soundproof room, Clark stammered a moment. “Diana... I’m sorry...”

“Don’t be.” Diana squeezed his hand. “You didn’t know, and your cousin’s behavior... well, she was well-intended, and likely acting the part of a concerned Kryptonian relative. She’s a charming enough girl... I like her. But... this does complicate things.”

“Yes... it does.” Clark returned the squeeze. “Among other things...”

“Well, the first question is protection.” Diana met Clark’s eyes. “I honestly don’t have time for a pregnancy right now, and I’m not terribly enthused about the idea of us stopping.

Putting aside the idea that I might already be pregnant for later, since it can’t be addressed... you’re going to talk to Bruce. I’m going to talk to my mother and to Kara. And don’t think about the fact that you’re too embarrassed to bring the idea up with Bruce... I just volunteered to tell my mother I’m sleeping with an alien and didn’t know if he could knock me up until his cousin walked in on us in bed and told me.”

“Right. I’ll talk to Bruce...”

“Bruce...” Clark stepped off the elevator and into the Batcave.

“Kara told me.” Bruce turned away from the Batcomputer, walking to Clark. “To begin with... are congratulations in order?”

“I... don’t think so?” Clark sighed. “No way to know for sure for a few days, is there?”

“True. I don’t have time for you to stammer, so I’ll just answer the question: No, I don’t know of any effective methods of birth control for Kryptonians or Amazons, apart from the obvious.”

“The... obvious?” Clark blinked. “There’s an obvious?”

“There are parts of you and parts of her that end in pregnancy when put together. Put other parts together.” Bruce turned back toward the computer. “Go away.”

Clark stood, stunned, until Bruce barked out, “Go!”

Then he was gone.

Chapter 7

It was interesting, really. Unique. To begin with, there was the location - an offshoot of the massive cave complex in which the Batcave continued to be built, Bruce's machines continually burrowing deeper and deeper into the earth, tectonically stable and well shielded from exterior radiation by natural layers of minerals and metals. Bruce had shown it to her after a brief spelunking expedition, and Kara had taken to it at once. It was, for reasons she couldn't quite articulate, cozy. Seized by enthusiasm at having a space of her own, however modest, she had spent hours pouring herself into smoothing the room into a perfect laboratory and filling it with the best equipment she could find, salvage, or ask Bruce to buy for her. Within a few days, it bloomed with a virtual forest of computers - crystal, optical and silicon alike - and an array of experimental equipment the equal of Cadmus, S.T.A.R Labs, or the Batcave proper mated with the closest thing to a Kryptonian Master Computer she had been able to salvage from the unused components of the Fortress. It wasn't perfect, but it was a beginning, and Kara was proud of it. Not just of the place itself or the research she was starting, but also - as loathe as she was to admit it - of the work she had done for Bruce so far in it.

She was beginning to suspect that this 'crime-fighting' nonsense was addictive.

"Kara..." Diana's voice floated in from the main portion of the cave before the Amazon herself found Kara behind the banks of computers. "I... needed to talk to you. About my relationship with your cousin. I also needed to ask a question. For help... or advice."

"Of course, Diana. Please come in and make yourself comfortable." Kara smiled, stepping fully into view, and the sight of her was a bit of a shock. She had been imposing at the Fortress despite her youth - a hard shining thing of blue and red and gold. The armor was packed away somewhere upstairs now, and she'd chosen to work today in a sheer silk blouse with sleeves, well-fitted synthetic slacks and a pair of sandals. Her short hair was bound up out of her face, her hands covered by thin gloves that seemed to be made of liquid metal, and she had a slightly distracted air about her that could have been recognized on the face of any scientist or experimenter still half-buried in an idea. "Bruce didn't mind you letting yourself in, I trust?"

"He sent me down... I came in through the Manor. He's reading the paper." Diana pulled a chair over. "So... I guess I'll get the question out of the way first. See... Clark and I didn't know about the genetic compatibility thing, and we're not ready for children - and, between what Jor-El said about Kryptonian longevity on Earth and the fact that Amazonians are virtually immortal, we've got time. So... birth control? Is there any form of Kryptonian birth control that would be effective, and that we could replicate?"

"Either of you could die, you know. At almost any time, the way you carry on with that Justice League of yours." Kara moved between her computers, tapping a control here and a few keys there, the sudden focus on her voice belying her apparent distraction. "If Kal should know anything - if I do know anything - it's that nothing lasts forever. Especially the things that you're sure will."

“That’s... probably true.” Diana blushed. “I’m sorry. But... do you know of anything?”

“You’re embarrassed about this. When I saw you absolutely naked, you were calm as a spring day, but now you are embarrassed. May I ask why?” Kara turned, peeling off her gloves and dropping them into a jar where they seemed to liquefy together, and studied Diana with mercilessly gentle eyes.

“Sex, I’m comfortable with. Nudity, I’m comfortable with. Pregnancy?” Diana breathed out. “The Amazons are all women, Kara. When we want to find a mate, we leave the island, though that isn’t why I left. The idea of a surprise pregnancy... really, of pregnancy at all... it’s a bit new to me. So are the methods of preventing it.”

“Ah.” Kara’s eyes twinkled with sudden mirth. “Bruce gave Clark the Seven Manuals, didn’t he?”

“The what again?” Diana tilted her head.

“The Seven Manuals.” Kara frowned, then leaned over and tapped a query into her computer. “Ah. Equivalent to the Kama Sutra or your Scrolls of Aphrodite. It contains a number of sexual configurations suitable for pleasure without the risk of procreation. I imagine that when Bruce spoke with Clark on the subject, he made certain suggestions in that direction?”

“Yes... that is what Bruce suggested.” Diana smiled, finding her way back to something comfortable. “But I was still hoping there was a way we could continue what we have made a habit of, as well.”

“Of course.” Kara smiled gently, her eyes warming. “Forgive my wandering in coming to the point, but I can be a little given to curiosity sometimes. As for methods of birth control... well, any form of physical protection is obviously impossible. Even if we could develop something that would stand up to the stresses involved, the nature of the material would render it... uncomfortable, at best.” She paused, then chuckled dryly at Diana’s expression. “Given the force with which you two are fond of going at things, from the sound of it, the engineering problems would be staggering.”

“We do get... energetic.” Diana smiled, leaning over Kara’s shoulder to whisper conspiratorially. “Part of what I like about him... he can keep up.”

Kara blushed lightly, but laughed anyway. “I imagine he feels the same about you. I can’t begin to think what holding back with a human woman would be like. In any event, I think we can also rule out any form of internal blockage - at best, it would be ineffective, and at worst you’d wind up with hard shards in uncomfortable places. That leaves hormonal and chemical options, and I imagine you’re already guessing the bad news when it comes to my cousin.”

“Ah... yes. Super-healing.” Diana sighed softly. “Which means it has to be me.”

“Quite.” Kara looked her over slowly, eyes boring into her inquisitively. “Your own healing is at least somewhat augmented, is it not?”

“It is, though not as highly as his. I’m also less resistant to toxins and drugs than he is.” Diana leaned back. “Rather significantly. I can be medicated; he really can’t.”

“That’s what I suspected. Since much of your augmentation is mystical, rather than biological, I’m not entirely certain how it will interact with the cocktail I’d have to put you on to ensure you’d be unlikely to get pregnant. Have you considered talking to your ‘gods’ on the topic?” Kara’s eyes shifted, moving down through Diana’s belly and then back up through her torso.

“The gods don’t exactly answer phone calls. They talk to you when they feel like doing so. I have prayed, but... no response.” Diana shrugged. “I also tried talking to my mother, but... well, I guess that brings us to our other topic.”

“Well, let me finish with the first one before we move on to it.” Kara reached out and laid her hand gently on Diana’s shoulder. “I think I can do it, but it will be an experiment. A risk. Both that it’ll have uncomfortable side effects for you, or that it might be less effective than we think it is. If you’re willing to put yourself in my hands, I’ll do the best I can for you, but we’ll be breaking new ground and any scientist knows that’s where the *kushraks* come to bite you.”

“I can accept that.” Diana smiled softly. “I trust you, Kara, and Bruce says you’re brilliant, so I’ll put myself in your hands.”

“Though not as much as you have in my cousin’s.” Kara’s eyes twinkled as she gave Diana’s shoulder another squeeze and then released her.

Diana laughed. “No, not as much, tempting as you are.” She squeezed Kara’s shoulder in return.

“I’ll take the compliments where I can get them.” Kara chuckled gently, then settled into a sitting position in the air as if it were a chair. “Now, I take it that your other question is less medical in nature.”

“It’s more a discussion than a question... about my relationship with Clark.” Diana leaned back. “I love Clark... adore him. But, at the same time... traditionally, Earth courtships are long under the least complicated circumstances, and the more complications there are, the longer they get. Clark and I have known each other less than five years, and been... intimate... less than two. We’re also different species. So... before any wedding bells, it’s likely to be a while.”

“Hmmm.” Kara studied the older woman slowly, her eyes serious and thoughtful. “You mentioned Earth courtships - by which I assume you mean American human, which is Clark’s adopted heritage. What about Amazonian courtships?”

“We don’t marry within ourselves - there’s no formal ceremony for committed lovers; they simply move into a home together and are a family. When marrying a man, however, it is expected that we know him exceptionally well - and that we have the permission of my mother, which she gives neither lightly nor quickly for anyone, much less her own daughter. To marry without that permission is to court exile.”

"I see." Kara frowned softly, studying Diana's face, and those young blue eyes were too shrewd for comfort. "But neither of those is why you hesitate to give yourself fully to my cousin. You are not a woman who would back away from a fight - not even with your mother - if you thought you were right. Equally, you would give no more credit to his prescribed length of courtship than to his 'Kansan prudishness' if you were sure that you two ought to be married. I am not a fool, Diana, or a child. Please don't treat me as one."

"No... no, you're not." Diana sighed softly. "It's something I don't like to admit to myself. I... don't think there's a place for me in Clark Kent's life. The persona he's built for himself, that allows him to do the work of Superman - the work I fell in love with him for - so well. And he won't marry me if he can't do so in all the lives he lives."

"This is the third time that someone has spoken to me about 'Clark Kent' as though he were some other person than my cousin. I am beginning to become irritated with him about it." Kara put her fingers to her face and sighed softly, then shook her head. "Do I understand you properly, Diana, that you would marry my cousin if you thought he would have you on terms that allowed you to live as you are - as yourself - but that his need to preserve the fiction of being human prevents that?"

"His Clark Kent persona... is more than fiction and less than reality. It is a part of him, though less real than Superman. But... the answer to the question that you ask is, as much as the thought of marriage frightens me, yes. And he is, I expect, the only man I would give that answer about."

"Thank you, Diana." Kara stood up and walked over, kissing the Amazon's forehead, then gave her a quiet smile. "I think you've helped me to understand a number of things. Do you have any other questions for me? I need to be off soon, but not immediately."

"Just one." Diana smiled softly. "When my mother has decided to let people come again... would you like to visit my home with me?"

"I would be honored, Diana." Kara touched her face as gently as any sister. "Positively honored."

"Well then..." Diana winked. "I'll let you know when it's safe."

"Good." Kara glanced up through the layers of earth above them, then back at Diana. "Can you show yourself out? I need to speak with Bruce, and then be on my way."

"All right. Thank you for your time, Kara." Diana kissed the younger woman's cheek before walking toward the main exit of the cave.

Kara was upstairs in the study before Diana's foot had hit the decking of the walkway a fourth time, and she tapped her hand against the coffee table lightly to simulate a knock as she looked at Bruce through his paper. "I'm going out. I need something before I go."

"What do you need?" Bruce put the paper aside.

“The address and workplace of Clark Kent.” Kara smiled pleasantly. “Also, possibly, directions to Metropolis.”

“If you’re going to Clark’s workplace, there’s something else you need.” Bruce rose to his feet. “Well... a few other things, but the rest I can make using the computer.”

Kara followed him, eyebrow raised. “He works in a secured building?”

“He works in a building full of curious people.” Bruce reached the elevator. “People who question anything out of the ordinary. And his secret identity is likely more important to maintain than mine... the people I love can take care of themselves. Johnathan and Martha Kent cannot.”

“I see.” Kara considered that for a moment, then gave a single sharp nod. “Show me.”

“The first thing I cannot show you, because it is a concept.” Bruce stepped off the elevator into the Batcave. “A name. You will need a name by which to introduce yourself.”

“I have a name,” Kara said softly. “My parents gave it to me.”

“Your name is Kryptonian. One of Lex Luthor’s contacts at Clark’s workplace hears it, Johnathan and Martha are strapped to a missile on its way to China to buy time for one of Lex’s plans within a week... if the missile itself isn’t the plan, loaded with kryptonite to kill Kal-El when he comes to rescue them.” Bruce walked to the computer. “Still... your parents gave you the name Kara, did they not? Zor-El was inherited.”

“It is my father’s name. One of his gifts to me.” She sighed softly, running a hand through her hair and pulling it loose from the tie. “I understand your point, Bruce. You mean that I need an Earth name, the way the Kents gave Kal his.”

“You need not embrace it the way he does - for you, it can be pure fiction, a mask to wear when needed and removed at the first opportunity. But it is a mask that you will need, if you are to walk near him among the humans.” Bruce brought up a program. “Stand still... taking a photo for your identification.”

She made herself still, eyes thoughtful. “I cannot be a relative of his - it’s a known fact that he is adopted, with no known family. Do you have a suggestion, Bruce?”

“If a name is a gift...” Bruce leaned forward. “Would you accept a gift from me?”

“Bruce...” She reached out and touched him then, and her voice was very soft. “If I would accept a gift from anyone on this planet, it would be from you. If the Kents gave Clark a home... you have given me a place to build my own. You called Clark your brother, and I would call you kin as well - though I do not know the word for it.”

“I am certain that you will learn a proper word, and I would not presume to try to place one in your mouth prematurely.” Bruce leaned forward, typing into the ID, and sat back to let her see. “Kara Wayne. The fiction, should we need to develop it, will be that you are my

recently-discovered illegitimate daughter. However, for now, you will simply have the name, to use as you see fit.”

She was silent for a long moment - very silent indeed - and then she bent and kissed his cheek softly with a student’s affection, or perhaps a daughter’s. “Thank you, Bruce. For everything.” She studied the screen for a long moment more, and then reached forward and tapped a single modification into the computer. “Claire Wayne. If we are going to create a fiction together, we had better do it properly. A mask is only as good as its material, after all.” Another pause, and then a quiet laugh. “Like the lead in yours.”

Bruce laughed quietly. “Claire Wayne it is.” He tapped another key, and one of the printers began to buzz. “I will be making you a few items... a driver’s license, two credit cards, a Social Security card. By tomorrow, you will have a work history and school transcripts - a top-of-class graduation from a little-known but well-regarded school.” He smiled. “I have always enjoyed setting up false identities... one of the small pleasures of the work I do.”

“You’ll have to teach me how, then.” She squeezed his shoulder, her eyes warm and just a little teasing. “Anything that amuses you is bound to be interesting.”

“I will.” Bruce turned to the laminator, withdrawing the ID and credit cards. “Both cards are against Wayne Industries Credit Union... the credit card has a spending limit of two thousand dollars, and the debit card links to a bank account that will be active by morning with ten thousand dollars inside. I don’t expect that you are someone prone to impulse purchases, but this will cover you for any imaginable emergency.” Bruce smiled. “If you have an emergency, call me and I will make certain more funds are added to the debit account. When it is activated, the PIN will be 4222. You have watched enough drivers to have learned the skill, correct?”

“I have. Though driving to Metropolis seems pretty boring.” She frowned thoughtfully, then brightened. “There are people who drive you around for money and provide their own vehicles, correct?”

“Taxis, yes.” Bruce nodded. “Though I expect you’ll fly to the city if you’re not going to drive. In which case...” He produced a keyring from one of the drawers. “This opens a safehouse at 2080 Howe Street in Metropolis. In the underground garage is a Viper. If you need a car, use that... the wide key starts it.”

“Thank you.” She pocketed the key, smiling slowly. “You own some of those slow-flying aircraft, do you not? If it would be possible, one could arrive at Metropolis today - perhaps in an hour or so? Then ‘Claire’ could take a cab from the airport to ...” she checked the data on the smaller side screen with a glance, “the Daily Planet to meet with ‘Mister Kent.’”

“Of course.” Bruce smiled. “That would be perfect.”

“You see?” Kara smiled and slipped the ID into the purse he’d produced for her from one of his boxes along with the rest of it, then brushed a hand through her hair and flashed him a smile that was as carelessly aristocratic as any Wayne could have asked. “I have been paying attention.”

Chapter 8

“Mister Kent? Mister Kent?” Jimmy Olsen’s voice carried through the offices of the Daily Planet like a particularly tremulous chainsaw.

“I’m in my office, Jimmy.” Clark rose, walked to the door, and poked his head out. “What do you need?”

“There’s this girl down in reception, a Miss Wayne, and she says she has a meeting with you off the books about a story you’re writing, and reception would have just called you except Perry heard the name Wayne and went right through the roof, so she’s on the way up and you might maybe want to think about what you’re going to tell him when he asks him what you did to tick off the other richest guy in America on top of the one who already hates your guts.”

“Wayne? Perry... does know there are Waynes in the world who don’t have any relation to the man from Gotham, doesn’t he?” Clark shook his head. “Send her in when she gets up here.”

“Umm... I think you should see the girl, Mister Kent. She says money - Wayne money - all over her. Big flashing signs. So I’ll just, um, send her in.” Jimmy ran a hand through his hair nervously, smiled, then doubled back through the newsroom.

Clark stood at the door, watching the hallway, waiting for the arrival of this mysterious girl. *Wayne money? Bruce hasn’t mentioned a girl...*

“Clark Kent,” said a familiar voice from the door, “we have a lot to talk about. You don’t mind if I close the door, do you?” The question was punctuated with a particularly sharp click as the door snapped shut with a little more force than was strictly necessary. “We wouldn’t want to be disturbed.”

“Kara?” Clark turned as the door closed, looking up as he spoke quietly. “Are you the girl who was looking for me in Reception?”

“Voices down, Kal,” she sub-vocalized firmly. “Aren’t you the one who’s trying to maintain the pretense of being a normal human? Because if so, using your Kryptonian cousin’s name in earshot of the room - the remarkably crowded and unpleasant room, I might add - that you appear to work in might not be a good idea.”

“All right then...” He responded, equally quietly. “What do you need?”

“Several things. But you can start by calling me Claire in front of your co-workers a few times. Miss Wayne would be even better.” Kara held him very steadily with her eyes. “And then we are going to have a conversation about this ridiculous farce of yours, starting with the glasses.”

“Kara...” Clark breathed out slowly. “Claire Wayne. It’s a good name. Am I going to be lectured about my secret identity now?”

“Yes.” Her lips twitched. “And don’t think that pointing out the false ID in my purse is going to get you out of it, ‘Clark.’ There’s a world of difference between a mask I can carry in my pocket and a whole life being carried on in an iron straightjacket. What exactly do you think you’re doing, cousin?”

“My work, Kara.” Clark spoke slowly. “And my life. I’m Kal-El, and I’m Clark Kent, and both help the other be what they are. I like Clark Kent, Kara. I enjoy being him. I enjoy drinking coffee and writing stories for the paper and dropping things on my own foot. I enjoy walking into a room and not being noticed, or being seen as someone just like everyone else there. Superman speaks and the world moves, Clark speaks and nobody looks up, and I need both those things. Clark keeps Superman sane.”

“You’re talking about different parts of yourself like they’re different people, Kal. I think that leaves something to be desired as an example of sanity.” Kara’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Are you really telling me that being a clumsy, underestimated, socially isolated nonentity is something you *want* in your life? And before you try to tell me that’s not true, please remember that I can look through walls too. I had a very long lunch down the block a ways.”

“Yes, Kara, that is exactly what I’m telling you.” Clark leaned back in his seat. “It’s a life I’ve lived for a long time. I’m comfortable with it.”

“In Rao’s name, why?”

“Because it’s peaceful, and it’s quiet, and I’m someone who craves those things but who can’t stand by and let things go wrong that I can make right. I like the farm, I like typing stories in this office, I like not being noticed because it lets me live in peace, even if only for short periods of time.”

She sighed and turned her head, looking away from him and letting her eyes wander the city as she struggled with the impulse to tell him that no son of the House of El could possibly be content tapping out little snippets of prose on an old typewriter in a tiny office at a dying institution of information distribution. They were still printing on *paper*, for Rao’s sake, but there he sat - not giving a damn.

“What you really want,” she said before she could stop herself, “is to be either a god of old or an unnoticed, insignificant man and nothing in between.”

“Now that I think about it...” Clark sighed. “What I want is somewhere pretty much exactly in between, which is the one thing I can’t have. So I come at it from the ends instead.”

“Why can’t you have it, Kal?” She leaned forward, coming out of her chair, and put her hands on his desk. “Start one of these Earth corporations - one of your inventions would fund it, or even Bruce would. Build something that will change the world, one piece they can swallow at a time. Lead where they can see you - not just from the sky, always smiling and always vanishing, but on the ground. From the foundations of the city. You don’t need to throw mountains to reshape this planet - you have a mind and hands and all the recorded

history of the known galaxies to guide you. To guide them. *Make* something. You know Diana would help you. You know I would help you.”

Clark rose to his feet, retrieving a book from the shelf and handing it to her. *Musings on Living Well*, by Clark Kent. “Technology isn’t my passion... it’s my hobby. This, though...” He smiled softly. “If I’m going to do what you say I should, this is how it will be done. I’d like you to read it, when you have time... your opinion on it would mean a lot to me.”

“A book.” Some of the frustration bled out of her voice, replaced with a strange mixture of hesitation and resignation “You wrote a book, Kal?”

“I’ve written a few books, but this is the only one I’ve submitted to a publisher.” He returned to his desk. “The idea about the technology is a good one, but not for me.”

She turned it over in her hand slowly, scanning a few paragraphs through the cover, and then looked up at him intently. “Why not the rest?”

“Because I wrote four in one night, a year ago.” Clark smiled. “And they all reference things that happened that year. I’ll submit the rest, once enough time has passed that me having completed them wouldn’t point out to the world that I type on a Kryptonian supercomputer at a speed greater than that of the Earth’s orbit.”

“You really do love it, don’t you? Writing.” There was surprise in her voice, still, though he thought he could detect just the first few strands of approval. “That’s why you took the job here. Not to be invisible - you could have done that at a shoe factory. Bruce says they’re intelligent, curious people in this building - the sort who pick apart everything. Why risk bringing Clark here... except that this is where they do what you love?”

“I do love it, Kara.” He smiled. “I think I’m happiest when I’m sitting at a computer - either this old thing here or the newer one at my apartment or the supercomputer in the Fortress - and working on a story. And, whatever else the people here think of me, they all know I’m an excellent writer.”

She caught the edge of pride in his voice, and her eyes widened slightly as a fresh thought clicked. “Because it’s hard? Almost as hard for you as it is for them?”

“It’s hard, it’s creative, and it just... pushes the right buttons for me.”

“Hmm.” She turned the book over in her hand one more time, then tucked it into her purse and walked over to tap her finger against the frame of his glasses lightly. “I still don’t like them. But... I think I’m starting to understand a little.”

He smiled. “You won’t have to wear them. They’re comfortable, though. Would you like to get dinner out with me tonight, before you head back to Gotham?”

“The anything-but-dashing Metropolis reporter and Bruce Wayne’s freshly-accepted illegitimate daughter? People will talk.” She was teasing him a little, but there was something serious in her eyes. Even if she didn’t entirely approve of his choices, she was going to protect them anyway.

“That... might be a good point.” He breathed out slowly. “Then my apartment. I’ll leave the balcony door open; you can get in through that without being noticed using flight and super speed, and I’ll cook something. Ma did, after all, teach me to cook.”

“Kal.” Her lips crooked in a small smile, then shook her head. “All right. But if you get into trouble over it, it’s your own fault.” Her expression sobered. “You know that you’re holding Diana at arm’s length because of this. Because of all of this.”

“Yeah.” Clark nodded. “Yeah, I do. That’s the one thing about this I really don’t like, and if I can come up with a way around it...”

“She isn’t going to pretend to be anyone that she isn’t, Kal. You wouldn’t love her if she was the sort of person who would. I can’t imagine that Clark Kent dating the Princess of the Amazons would be effective, much less marrying her. Does it really matter more to you than she does? Hiding as deep as you do?” It wasn’t a criticism now - not even a plea. His cousin looked at him with sharp, probing blue eyes and asked the question like a scientist trying to balance an equation, and it made him feel a bit like a psychology experiment subject.

“No.” He tilted his chair back. “She’s more important to me than this. Marrying her, though, is less important to me than this is, I think. Which Ma would likely ground me for saying, but I think it’s true. She as a person, being with her, loving her... more important to me. Marrying her, less.”

She slapped him, then - hard across the face, and with enough force that he actually felt it.

He reeled backward, his hand going to the flesh of his cheek, and when his eyes came up to meet hers they found ice cold blue steel waiting. “She deserves better than that from you, Kal-El.” Kara almost trembled with the force of her anger, and it took a long breath to bring it back under some semblance of control. “She is a brave, proud, powerful warrior who would bring honor to our House, and you demean her, yourself and our family’s name by treating her as someone who will accept whatever terms you will give her. Ask yourself, cousin, if two halves of a life are really the same as a full one.” She snatched up her coat and pulled it on, then shot a smouldering glance over her shoulder. “I am going back to Gotham. If I can stand to see you without wanting to correct you like a child tonight, I will be back for dinner.” She threw the door open, lifting her voice to an aristocratic sneer with a fine undertone of gutter anger, and fired off her next words into the press room as much as into his office. “Good afternoon, *Mister* Kent, and you and your paper can go right straight to hell for all I care.” She swept past the row of desks, cleared the elevator with a haughty glower, and then leaned back in the elevator car as the door closed with a narrow glare that cut right back through the walls of his office at him.

Chapter 9

He's the fastest man in the world, but it always takes him forever to answer his phone. Clark sat in his kitchen, holding his home phone on his shoulder with his chin while he typed on his laptop. *I know he's home... I hear him there. What's taking so long?*

"Allen. What's up?" Barry Allen always sounded like a man who believed in taking it easy - a few minutes slow, a few minutes late, what was the difference? For a long time, Clark had thought it was a consummately acted disguise. Then he'd sat down and talked with Barry about life before the accident, and realized that it wasn't. It was real - it was exactly who Barry Allen had spent his life headed toward being, before lightning and a chemical bath changed everything. It would have been easy to let the speed change him - make him more like Central City, always rushing to the next moment - but he didn't. He kept being a minute or two late to work, letting the phone ring, taking his time on crime lab samples. Maybe it was his way of reminding himself that he was still human.

Mostly.

"Hey, Barry... it's Clark. I'm having some trouble, and could really use someone to talk to... do you have a bit?"

"Sure, what's up?" Barry said from the couch - Clark's couch - popping open the bottle of iced tea in his hand.

"You're as bad as Bruce sometimes." Clark hung up the phone and walked to the sofa. "It's my cousin, Kara."

"The cute blond? Speedy, nice legs?" Barry sipped his tea and crooked a smile. "We haven't exactly met, but I've seen her around."

"Yes, her." Clark raised an eyebrow. "You're commenting on my cousin's legs?"

"Oh. Um...." Barry cleared his throat. "Just a fact, you know? Making sure I had the right one. So what's the problem? You said there was a problem, right? Before I mentioned the legs."

"Yes..." Clark exhaled slowly, gathering his patience. "She arrived on Earth less than a week ago, and she's spent nearly every minute we've been together vocally disapproving of my life here, to the point that she's driving me a little mad." He sighed. "She's my cousin, and I'm glad to have her here - glad to not be the only one of my species left - but she's also profoundly self-righteous."

"Um... big S, not to point out the Emperor's got no clothes on this one, but isn't that kinda a pot and kettle thing?" Barry crooked a little smile, draining half of his tea. "Maybe it's a family thing, or a Kryptonian thing, but you can get a little preachy yourself sometimes."

"I'll accept that." Clark smiled crookedly. "But it's not constant... at least, I *hope* it's not as constant as she's been with me... and it's not as... I don't want to say venomous, but I don't have a better word."

"Well, let me see if I follow the story so far. Ships get launched, planet blows up, you get here first, she gets here last. She grows up in the ship, or ...?"

"She's a Kryptonian young adult. Grew up there, was in suspended animation the whole way here." Clark shook his head. "I don't suppose I can blame her... she arrived here with expectations and those haven't been met. I just... I've never had my patience tried like this. Lex Luthor doesn't try my patience like this, and I don't know what to do."

"Have a little more patience, Clark." Barry finished his tea in another light-swift swallow, then folded his hands between his knees. "Look, this girl... she grew up there, right? Everyone she knew, everyone she loved, everyone she hated or who hated her... they're all dead. Just plain gone. And it's not like it happened thirty, forty years ago for her - for her, they were all alive yesterday and now they're dead. They stuck her in a ship and shot her into space to... what, look after you?"

"Yeah... that's exactly why she was sent. Though apparently Zor-El told her different things than my father told me in his messages about what we were to do once we got here." Clark sighed. "I know I need to have more patience with her, Barry. I just don't know where to find it."

"Look... Clark, not to be rough on you, but you don't know what it's like. Losing your family. My mom, Bruce's parents... it tears your whole world apart. You remember them every day, you know? See them in everything. You never knew yours, and you grew up with two people who loved you to pieces - who *are* your parents, in every way that matters. Her whole family's dead, and you're all that's left, and whatever it was she was supposed to do for them - for you - she didn't do it. So maybe you might start by thinking about how much of the hell she's giving you is about you, and how much is about the pain she's got to be feeling. What she figures she owes her family, owes you - that's gotta be all that's keeping her going right now." Barry spread his hands. "You want to get defensive, that's fine, but she's a kid who's just lost her whole life and you're a grown man who at least says he's happy with the way his life is. So how come you're the one sitting here ready to lose patience?"

"Well... now I feel like a dick." Clark closed his eyes. "You're right. I don't know what to do about it, but you're right."

"Look... all I'm saying is, if she's getting to you, the only reasons I can think of are that either she's got a point or you're so glad to have even a little bit of your home back that it kills you every time she doesn't give you a gold star. Heck, maybe both. But family don't always agree - you have to know that, right? Especially family who grew up on different planets. That doesn't mean she doesn't love you, Clark."

"She does love me... that's obvious." Clark lifted his head. "So... now that we've sorted that out... how can I avoid being a complete disappointment to her without thoroughly rearranging my life and becoming a model Kryptonian scientist?"

Barry stared at him for a full second - an eternity, at the speed he thought - and then burst out in a gale of laughter that shook him against the seat. "She wants you to become a scientist? Oh, god, Clark, that's brilliant!"

"Apparently, Krypton had a caste system, and the House of El were scientists. If the planet hadn't exploded, I'd have been trained from birth in the sciences and chosen a specialization when I reached adulthood... and, given my natural talents, been terribly bad at it. Particularly since a red sun means no super brain." Clark let out a quiet laugh. "So... yeah. She wants me to be a scientist. I think she's backed off on that one, which I suppose is a good sign, but she still thinks I'm living my life wrong."

"Hey, she went from 'scientist or bust' to backing off in less than a week. Took my dad a lot longer than that to stop pushing me to be a doctor." Barry flashed him a grin. "Seriously, though - she have specific objections, or is she just cranked off that life's not like it was in the old country?"

"No, it's not life that's wrong." Clark paused. "Okay, not being fair, so going to back up. She has specific objections - they just can't be addressed without me throwing the life I've got away and creating a new one whole cloth."

"Yeah, that's probably a little much to ask, but remember that she's only been seeing your life a few days now. Give her a little time, she may see why you like it." Barry shrugged gently. "Meanwhile, maybe a little outside perspective might do you good. I mean, Clark, who's going to dare give you a hard time except Bruce and maybe Diana?"

"I thought Batman was supposed to be sufficient outside perspective for anyone." Clark smiled. "I'll give it time, and give her space. She's been spending a lot of her time in Gotham... and when she comes here from there she seems happier than when she's been here."

"Probably a good idea. Let her get her feet under her a little...." Barry paused in mid-stream, jaw dropping. "Wait, wait, wait - did you say Gotham? She's not staying with *Bruce*, is she?"

"She is." Clark shrugged. "I trust Bruce."

"Yeah, I guess, but...." Barry shook his head slowly. "Well, I guess if she's got skin like yours, it's not like she's not going to be safe, but I'd get the willies if it were my kid cousin growing up in Gotham. Much less hanging around with the guy who deputizes teenagers as crime fighters like the suits come at the bottom of cereal boxes."

"I hadn't thought of it that way... but, on the other hand, for all they've been through, Dick and Tim are remarkably well-adjusted, and so's Cassandra, who was... distinctly not... when she met Bruce. He seems to be good for troubled or lost youths. Which... I can't actually figure out a good reason for."

"Yeah, sure, except they spend their nights running around in tights using their ninja skills to beat people up and getting shot at. Not to mention Jason Todd, who seems to have decided to take up the shooting-at himself. Look, Clark, you know I think Bruce is a real asset to the League, and he means well, but he's not who I'd pick as a model of sane living, you know?"

“I think Jason would have turned out better if Bruce had been given more time with him... he was lost too soon, and Bruce never really got him back.” Clark sighed. “I didn’t send her to Bruce... she went. I don’t think it’s my place to stop her, and I expect, even if I thought he wasn’t good for her, that me telling her that would get me ignored.”

“Fair enough.” Barry crooked a small grin at him, spreading his hands. “Still, that’s gotta at least count for something next time she tries to browbeat you about your life. Live and let live’s a good place to start.”

“Yeah, I suppose it is. Thanks, Barry.” Clark smiled.

“Any time, man. You know that.” Barry flashed another of those broad smiles. “So... just on the off chance... you think maybe you could give her my number?”

“If you run into her, you can ask her for it yourself. I am *not* setting my cousin up on dates.”

Chapter 10

“You know, Mister Grayson, trying to sneak up on a Kryptonian - particularly in her own lab - is probably a waste of time.” Kara Zor-El’s voice had the same slightly snappish tone it’d had for most of the last week - since she got back from Metropolis, really - but she threw a smile over her shoulder toward the door of her lab that was at least trying to be welcoming. “Or am I supposed to call you Nightwing while you’re wearing that silly eye-covering?”

“Bruce can do it. I’ve seen him do it to both you and Clark.” Shaking his head slowly in wry amusement, Dick shut the door behind him and spread his hands as if to acknowledge the point. “And, around the Cave, we all go by name. I had a sample I needed analyzed, if you aren’t too busy sharpening your verbal rapiers?”

Kara started to glare at him, then seemed to catch herself doing it and dragged a hand through her hair as she laughed softly. “I suppose I have been a little out of sorts, haven’t I? All right, Mist... I suppose it ought to be Richard, shouldn’t it?... what do you have for me?”

“Blood sample. I’m pretty sure the guy I’m after is a metahuman; I’d feel a lot safer going into it knowing what he can do.” Dick placed the tube on Kara’s work table. “So... genetic workup.”

“Five minutes.” Kara squinted at the tube slightly, clicking her tongue, then leaned back in her chair. “Maybe ten - he’s got an impressive amount of genetic tampering for this planet’s technology. It’s running now, and the computers will have the core analysis shortly. Do you want some tea?”

“Tea would be nice.” Dick blinked. *Microscopic vision to scan the sample, superspeed to type it in? That’s the only explanation, unless she just looked at it and is going through the genes in her mind. No, impossible. Even for a Kryptonian, impossible. Must have typed it in.*

“Tea it is.” She offered him a gentle half-smile, and the teacup appeared at her elbow and in his hand before she finished the last word. “Let that steep for a couple of minutes, and then it’ll be ready. Even I can’t rush some things.”

“You’re showing off.” He pulled one of the lab’s chairs over, sitting next to her, and shot her a crooked smile. “Not that I mind a little showing off; ‘flaunt it if you got it’ was always the rule back in the circus, and I’ve never exactly been accused of being modest. But if you’re going to make a habit of trying to make me jump out of my skin, you could warn me first.”

That earned him another quiet laugh. “Actually, I hadn’t even thought of it that way.” Kara’s smile was guileless, though her eyes were anything but innocent. “I guess I’m just restless today. Between arguing with my cousin and this whole benefit dinner thing Bruce talked me into, maybe I have a right to be a little keyed up?”

“You’re still only... what, five days into living on a new planet? I’d say that, if anyone in the world has the right to be a little keyed up, it’s you.” Dick took a drink of his tea. “Though I

think 'restless' is a better term. How'd Bruce manage to talk you into one of those benefits? He used to have to drag me there with a ball and chain."

"No known sentient species flourishes in isolation - social contact will do you good. The appearance will also solidify your false identity as my daughter, should you wish to keep doing it." Her mimicry of Bruce's vocal mannerisms was so dead on that it startled a laugh out of him, and she flashed him another of those rare smiles - the real ones, not polite or for effect or because her lips remembered they ought to. "I thought he was going to end with Q.E.D. for a minute."

"Your impersonation of him was... uncanny." Dick laughed. "I actually had to stop myself from looking over my shoulder to see if he was coming in... and the way you pitched his voice matches what he does when he's reminding me that I need to get to work."

"Well, then, no wonder I couldn't find a good counter argument." His laughter drew out another warm gust of her own, and the sharp edges seemed to recede a little further back into those blue eyes. "Richard, am I correct in understanding that this is a social event to which it is traditional to bring an escort - usually of the opposite sex? I believe I heard Bruce arranging for two of his own, so perhaps I haven't understood my reading properly."

"Yes... usually, one brings an escort, and traditionally that escort is of the opposite sex, though that tradition is fading - for the better, I think. If you don't have someone, it's not a problem to hire an escort - at least half the people there who aren't married, and a quarter of those who are, will be there with a hired escort. Or, in Bruce's case, two - he always has to have more of everything than anyone else."

"I see." She frowned for a moment, eyes thoughtful, then lifted her gaze back to his and knocked all the air out of his lungs with a half-smile and a few words. "Would you be willing to escort me, Richard?"

So... I think Clark's cousin just asked me out. Unless she doesn't know that she's asking me out... well, she knows she's asking me out. Unless she doesn't know what asking someone out usually means, which she must not know. But still... Clark's cousin asking me out. "Yeah... sure, I'll go. It's not tonight, is it? My good suit's at the cleaner; I'd have to pick up a new one."

"Day after tomorrow." Her lips curved in the start of a smile, and she might have said more if the soft tone of the computer hadn't interrupted her. She glanced up, then hit a key to set the printer running. "Looks like your metahuman is artificially created - probably by something designed by Mister Luthor, if I read his signature on the work properly. Boosted stamina, increased strength - about enough to lift one of your small ground vehicles, I would say - and the ability to manipulate electricity. Probably best not to fight him near any power lines."

"Ah... thanks. I'll be at the event, then." Dick smiled. "Which I might not have, on account of being in traction, if I hadn't known about the electricity thing. He likes to do his work underground. Now I know why... lots of subway power lines."

"Glad to help keep you out of traction, Mister Grayson." She returned his smile with one of her own, warm and real. "Perhaps in return, you can teach me to dance tomorrow? I

understand that I'm supposed to know how, and if it isn't you then I will have to ask Bruce. You strike me as a much more pleasant partner."

"If it will make your life more pleasant, Miss Zor-El, then I am at your disposal. Though... probably late. After midnight."

"I don't sleep very much. It won't be a problem." She stood and handed him the printout, moving at a speed he could see this time, then touched her wrists together gently. "Good evening, Richard, and... good hunting. Isn't that how you and Bruce say it?"

"It is." Dick rose to his feet, flashing her a teasing wink. "You're starting to pick up his vocal patterns, you know."

"I believe the appropriate response to that in Earth vernacular is 'said the pot to the kettle.'"

Now the Kryptonian girl is drubbing me at verbal banter. I really, really need to get a couple hours of sleep before I go out and try to get my head knocked off. "At least," he managed on his way out the door, "he had to spend a few years on me."

For the moment, at least, he seemed to have gotten in the last word. Of course, that didn't eliminate the possibility that she'd make him pay for it during the dancing lesson. Or at the charity event. Or the next time he needed a favor.

Doomed, Grayson. You're definitely doomed.

Chapter 11

Kara Zor'El danced slowly and drank in the starlight far above the clouds, letting the night roll over her and the thin air at two hundred thousand feet caress her skin. As many hours as she'd been spending in her lab or out on the streets of a dozen cities in the past three days, there were still times that she felt the narrow confines of the world pressing in around her. It was a feeling that invariably sent her clawing for the sky and the stars - even if she had to clear the atmosphere entirely to reach them, it was still a relief to hang in that black sky and feel the light of a hundred million distant suns whisper across her skin. Strange, that something so unnatural - something she'd never dreamed of, back on Krypton - could have become so indispensable so quickly.

Maybe it was just the near-silence of escaping the endless babble of voices in her ears, or the privacy to cry without having to worry that her cousin would hear her.

Maybe it was just the chance to forget how alone she was in all that beauty.

The small black pager clipped to the edge of her slacks hummed, the distant musical tones of it almost inaudible in the thin air, but she felt the vibration of it against her clothing like a bolt up the back of her spine. She rolled and dived, the earpiece communicator already tucked into place before she broke the mesosphere. "I'm here, Bruce." The thin, icy wind pulled the words away, but the communicator plucked the vibrations from her jaw and send them flashing up to the Watchtower and back down to the Batman's cowl in the time it took a hummingbird's wings to beat. She was deep in the stratosphere and still accelerating when his voice caught up to her.

"Kara... I need you. Gotham University, near the student union. The poisoner has taken another victim... I'm with the victim now. We don't have long... he's experiencing pulmonary failure."

"I need data, Bruce. If he's like the others, he'll be dead in less than two minutes. Pull samples, dump them straight to the computer." She folded her arms to the body and wrapped herself in gravity's embrace, hurtling down out of the sky like Rao's own arrows, and by the time his voice caught her again twenty seconds later she was already pulling back the door of her laboratory while the echo of every door in her path through Wayne Manor slamming at once was drowned out by the thunderous transonic boom of her arrival.

"You should have the sample on your computer, Kara. I'm starting rescue breathing... I'll be out of contact, though I can still hear you." Bruce's voice had the sort of calm urgency that seemed unique to him among humans. It reminded her, for a strange and inescapable moment, of Jor-El. Then the data from the blood, saliva, tear and tissue samples were flashing by her on every monitor as fast as the screens could cycle them, and it was as slow as the flick of Lara's old mechanical metronome as she threw the acceleration of her mind and her metabolism to the limits. Dust particles hung suspended around her in their fall, particles of upper-atmosphere nitrogen caught in her slipstream still spinning away from her

in the air like delicate crystalline strands in thick water, and if she had been able to spare even a relative moment she might have reached out to touch one. *No time. A man is dying.* Barely a hundred thousand computations into the toxin identification program auto-loading on the supercomputer Bruce had built for her, she knew this poison was like nothing recorded on Earth. Its basic structure correlated to none of the major categories of poison manufactured or organically developed, which rendered every treatment and protocol in the computer's database useless. In .00008 seconds, she had eliminated everything the terrestrial databases could tell her. She killed the program and loaded the organic synthesizer instead, seven quick keystrokes that cost her another .5 seconds, and then she was across the room at the crystalline array she'd constructed herself three days ago. It took her and its database exactly 8.3 seconds to search the sum recorded databases of every known life-bearing world recorded by Kryptonian science, and to determine that none of them included a clear analog to the substance on her screen.

Across the city, she could hear the ragged rush of Bruce's breath as he pushed air into failing lungs. There was no time - no time, and no answers, and a man was going to die because all that she knew was not enough.

I will make it enough. I will make the time to save him. I am a Kryptonian scientist, not a witless child. Begin again from the facts.

Human anatomy. Chemical composition and interactions. Molecular bonding. Her computers flashed with data, the flicker of their screens almost as swift as light itself, and she drank it in. Visualized the molecules of the poison, their passage through the blood, their lodgement ... where? Not the blood - hemoglobin normal, oxygenation levels dropping ... the lungs themselves. Water. The chemical was made to bond with water in the presence of unbound oxygen. Unbound oxygen would be found in the body in company with water in the lungs. Assume optimum impact for minimum dosage - most vulnerable point of dessication. *Alveoli. Desiccate the membranes, destroy the ability of the tissue to exchange oxygen. Bruce's breathing isn't helping him. Brain damage begins within twenty to one hundred and ten seconds. No time for a specific antidote - engineer a counter-agent to manage the symptoms and a neutralizing agent to force the toxin into the bloodstream. Another to block absorption by the kidneys, ensure storage in the liver. Minimize the complications. Targeted water delivery, membrane reconstruction and repair, force detachment of the toxic particles. Avoid complications with other body systems.* Her fingers flew across the interface crystals, forcing her hands to slow enough to avoid overloading the reading system, and the array spun its orders to the design program on the custom mainframe at the speed of optical transmission. 4.5 seconds had elapsed since she had discarded the interstellar databases when the mainframe spit a final design back to her array. Then it was the array's turn to explain what she wanted to the molecular synthesizer she'd fabricated two days ago on the Fortress's central production console, and she watched the molecule taking shape inside its crystalline womb in an agony of frustration. *Faster. Faster. Please, Rao, let it be fast enough.* Seven seconds. Eight. Nine. Ten. She already had the vial in her hand, a syringe jammed into her pocket with desperate care, and then the synthesizer toned and it took an eternal second and a half for the delicate green liquid inside to pour from the finished crystal into the vial. Stopper in, and it was into her pocket before the crystal had even begun its fall toward the floor. She caught it, returned it to the table beside the synthesizer - .000007 seconds - and then she reached for the sound of Bruce's breathing and ran.

Thirty-five seconds after his last words to her, she was beside him. She could hear the bullet-sharp crack of her passage racing through the distant streets behind her, but there was no time for that now. She could see the oxygen starved blood in the man below Bruce - paper-pale skin and dark hair like Kal's, skin dusted with freckles - see his brain struggling to pull in enough fuel to keep from starving. See the dry, crumpling, delicate sacs in his lungs already cracking under the push of Bruce's breath. It took her almost .008 seconds - a relative eternity, counted by the hammering of her heart - to drive the needle home in the vial, and the .7 seconds it took to load the syringe without damaging either the vial, the needle or the molecules of her newly created drug seemed to stretch themselves until she thought they or her nerves might snap in half before it was done. The rest of the second went to tap the air from the needle, and then she picked the pulmonary artery out and drove her hand in around Bruce's shoulder to push the needle in and depress the plunger. Arterial pressure tried to force the drug and blood back into the syringe, but she held it down with ruthlessly careful force until she could see the last particles of her creation being carried away toward the lungs. She'd never tried to micro-cauterize a wound before, but the principle seemed sound enough - she practiced twice on the floor to make sure she had the intensity and the narrow focus right, and then sealed up the hole of her own making with a single tiny burst of heat from her eyes.

Eighty-five seconds. Please, Rao, let it be enough.

Then the man took a choking breath, and another, and, slowly, the cells of his lungs began to rehydrate. Bruce pushed himself to his feet, glancing down at Kara and mouthing one word: "Vanish." The man lay on the ground, gasping and in intense pain, but very much alive.

It took her all of half a second to look down, realize her mistake, and do as she was told. She took it a little slower this time - fast enough not to be seen by the eyes of those around her, but not so fast as to rip the air around them - and remembered to lift herself into the air in a long arc back to the mansion instead of tearing down the street. Her mind, fast as light, whirled around itself with fear and joy and a strange heart-shaking wonder. *I saved a man's life. Less than two minutes, and I saved his life. Thank Rao.*

It should have been enough, just knowing it. She should have left it at that - gone back to her lab, cleaned up, caught her breath and brought her heartbeat under control. She should have.

At least, she thought to herself fifteen seconds later as she reappeared on the floor of the room beside the gasping boy, flying back was more comfortable in the armor.

The victim looked up to her, his voice cracking as his eyes finally opened. "You... saved me. I think..." He gave her a weak smile. "You look like someone who saves people..."

"Easy, now." She didn't know why her first thought was to reassure him, but it was. "Your system has had quite a shock. Just take your time and breathe slowly - your lungs are still repairing themselves." She smiled, then, the way her father used to smile at his students when they were ready to give up on a particularly difficult problem "You're going to be fine."

"Thank you..." He closed his eyes again, laying back, and was unconscious in a moment.

She watched the beat of his heart, the flow of fresh oxygen in his blood, the damaged membranes in his lungs slowly knitting themselves together around her suture molecules. Felt relief loosen her muscles, and closed her eyes against the sudden lack of breath in her own chest. "He... he is going to be all right. The toxins are already trapped in his liver."

"You did well, Kara, and you saved his life." Batman stood behind her, letting a quirk of pride slip past his usual dour expression. "Thank you."

"I.... yes. Of course." She was still looking down at his face, seeing how very young he was. Not much older than she was. Not much older than Lara had been, when Jor-El had married her so scandalously early. He was young, and he was beautiful, and someone had tried to murder him.

Rage burst in her chest like the kiss of lightning.

"Where is he?" Her voice seemed very far away as she floated to her feet, her eyes already sweeping the city around her. Looking for traces of the poison she'd purged from that boy's lungs. Looking for a human monster enough to have carried it. A single molecule would be enough. Just a single molecule, and she would know him, and she would... she would....

"On his way to prison, Kara. With enough evidence that he will be locked away for life." Batman spoke quietly. "When we decide what the guilty deserve, how long until we are as guilty as they are?"

She turned on him, shaking with the force of her anger, and her eyes were as red as Krypton's sun. "What he did... what he did to all of them... I ought to... I *want* to...."

"Do you want to kill him?"

The simple question in that cold, crushed gravel voice snuffed the anger in her chest like a candle, and her eyes were suddenly blue and wide with shock as the color went out of her face. "Rao. Oh, Rao... I do... I *did* ..."

Batman stepped closer to her, wrapping his arms around her gently. "It is a natural response to true evil. Unacceptable to act on, but natural to feel. There is no shame in it."

Her knees tried to go out from under her, and she caught herself on air as she pressed her face to the armored roughness of his shoulder and fought with the tears that tried to shame her. *It is not fitting for a daughter of the House of El to show her pain so freely.* It was her father's voice, stern with disapproval, and she felt a sob choke the back of her throat in spite of everything and knew she was going to fail him. Again. Right here, in front of the human she had come to respect most on this entire backward planet for his keen mind and Kryptonian stoicism. Knew it, and couldn't stop it.

He simply held her, silently, until the last of her tears were spent.

She let him, and tried to hate herself for that, too. Couldn't, in spite of everything.

The sounds of footsteps outside shook her out of the silent, trembling stillness that had fallen after the last of her tears. She looked up at him, wiping the tears from her face with her hands, and forced the words through her aching throat. "Someone's here." She looked through him, through the wall, and frowned. "They have guns and are wearing uniforms. I think they must be police officers. I thought you said they were arresting the poisoner elsewhere?"

"They will need to gather evidence here, as well... the Gotham Police Department is quite large. However, their arrival means that it is time for us to be gone. Take me to my car?"

It was a gesture of trust, to let her help him, and she knew it at once. Knew how rarely they must come, from this self-contained man who seemed to anticipate everything. So she simply nodded, once, and lifted him into her arms in the same light-swift motion with which she brought him to the side of the great black behemoth of a vehicle that loomed like a sleek predator in one of the alleys nearby. She set him on his feet as quickly as she could - there was no need to slight his dignity by letting him be aware that she had carried him in her arms like a child - and then let the world catch up to her as she offered him a small smile. "I think that it will take a little more getting used to, this speed of mine. I wasn't sure I was going to be fast enough tonight."

"I was." Batman turned toward the car. "I will meet you at the Manor."

She stood there for a long moment as he pulled away into the night, holding the words in her hands like jewels, and then looked up through the thick, clinging smog and clouds of the night to the ivory of the moon and the few distant stars that struggled through the gloom. Breathed all the thousand, thousand smells of decay and ruin and life from the city around her. Closed her eyes.

A flash of blue and red and gold hurled itself into the sky, ripping apart the clouds to let starlight flood down on the city like a sea of soothing caresses.

Chapter 12

The Centennial Celebration of the Gotham University Library was a thousand-dollar-a-plate fundraiser, which had meant nothing to Kara when Bruce had said it. The elaboration that it represented roughly a third of the monthly income and living budget of a common family had shocked her, and she had grilled him for almost three quarters of an hour on how such an enormous inequality of means and comfort could be allowed in a civilized society. She had come to no useful answers, but the topic still nagged at her - she was not trained as a sociologist, but she had the basics in the field and had promised herself as she was dressing for the event that she would apply herself to understanding the matter as time permitted. It was one of a long list of such promises she was developing.

The outfit she'd chosen for the night was the nearest female echo she could find to the fine suits which Bruce wore with such well-trained casualness most of the time - it was a blue so deep that it seemed black until a highlight caught some stray strand of light, and she'd paired it with a white blouse she suspected from her research on human fashion would have seemed quite severe without the soft fall of the skirt beneath it. She'd chosen boots much like those she would have worn on Krypton, though black and with more human stylings, and finished the outfit with a few strands of platinum and jewels around her neck and wrists in what she understood to be a fashionable look. Styling her hair took a little longer, but the effect was worth it - Claire's soft dark curls were as different from her straight golden locks as a modest bit of artifice could make them. She hadn't been entirely sure she approved when Bruce presented her with what he called "smart-dye," but being able to change her hair color with a momentary focus on tuning her bioelectrical field was too convenient to pass up. Besides, with her hair turned dark and the natural blue of her eyes there was more than enough resemblance between her own features and Bruce's to make their little familial deception more plausible.

The sudden elevation of Richard Grayson's pulse rate and the dilation of his eyes when she opened the door to the front parlor wearing the ensemble told her that it suited Claire Wayne very nicely indeed, and she pushed away a chill at the thought that the face she could see reflected in his eyes seemed more like a stranger's than her own. *Sharp, authoritative, driven, but not afraid to trade on her sensuality. The consummate climber.* Bruce had spent only a few hours working with her on method acting, on the art of molding her body language into Claire's, but she had applied herself diligently - as much in the hope that it might help her understand her cousin's strange fascination with being Clark Kent as because she'd grasped after her trip to the Planet building how vital a survival skill this disguise-making would turn out to be.

"Shall we go?" Richard remained remarkably composed for someone whose involuntary biological processes were responding in the way Kara could see his responding. Most humans would stammer or stumble; he simply offered his arm. His suit would be, to a casual observer, largely unremarkable - a black sport coat, slacks, and bow tie joined with a white button-down shirt - yet for those who lived and died by the ability to display their means, it would allow him to dominate a room without speaking a word. It bore the subtle marks of

the work of Giovanni Rossi, the master clothing designer of Sicily, and was tailored to Richard's body so perfectly that two things could be seen - it was made for him rather than being bought off the rack and resized, and it was made very recently.

Richard Grayson was a man who could buy a Rossi and wear it once.

Kara slid her arm through his in what she believe was the proper formal gesture, taking only a little delight in the additional spikes that put in his pulse, and offered him a warm smile that was all her own. "I believe the correct term is 'fashionably late'? I haven't found a good explanation for what it means precisely yet, but I presume that you do." They started for the door, arm in arm, and Kara shook her head with a tiny chuckle. "Does it always feel this... sculpted, going to these events? Like a sort of formal dance that you have to watch all the steps for very carefully?"

"They are exactly that." Richard led her from the house, toward the long driveway where a car waited. "Though perhaps there is some jazz to them... the way to enjoy them is to take pleasure in the small ways you can change the script, the moments of improvisation during the scripted piece."

"The way you talk changes, you know. You're more relaxed normally. You sound almost like Bruce." She gave him a subtly teasing smile, settling into the car and waiting for him to climb in opposite her. "Did you learn how to do that, or is it just contextual absorption?"

Richard slipped in next to her. "Contextual absorption, I think. Everyone at these things talks like this; I have to make sure I'm in the habit before I get there."

That earned him a faint chuckle of sympathy, and she modulated her voice into a private murmur that could have sounded flirtatious or conspiratorial, if you couldn't make out the words. "On which topic, we ought to review my legend and make sure I have it down properly. Illegitimate daughter, conceived during Bruce's collegial wanderings, and my mother was willing to let him go back to his life without wringing him for money. Poor, honest creature with a lingering devotion to him. I clawed my way into college by studying hard, kept mostly to myself and published little of what I was working on, and presented myself on Bruce's doorstep six months ago with a B.A., a paternity test and 'no shortage of attitude.'" She rolled the last on her tongue, putting some of Bruce's crisp snap to the words. "He's agreed to acknowledge me, I've agreed not to hate him too much, and he's bought me a penthouse on the promise that I make a recent junk acquisition of his profitable. I haven't actually seen the penthouse yet, but I understand it's supposed to be very nice. A lot like the one he keeps trying to convince you to move into."

"And I am simultaneously uncomfortable with your emergence into Bruce's life and surprisingly attracted to you in spite of myself. Enough so that the tabloids will likely be calling us a couple within a month of this party." Richard met her eyes with a small smile.

She gave him a sultry smile she'd been practicing for two days, running her nails lightly up across his wrist, and the blue eyes looking up at him were suddenly wicked and very human in their driven, hard-edged ambition. Something farther from the open, innocent, alien inquisitiveness of Kara Zor-El would have been hard to imagine. Claire Wayne's murmur

turned subtly taunting, with an underlying spark of invitation that made his body tighten and heat. “Don’t worry, Richard. I won’t embarrass you too much in front of your lady friends. After all, it’s so much more fun if I make you work for it.”

That drew a blush from him that would be visible even to a nearsighted human. He stammered a moment before laughing softly. “Well... I think you’ve got it.”

Kara’s warm, bright laugh rolled over him, and the eyes that twinkled with mirth were hers again. “I understand that sexual frustration makes it very difficult for human males to concentrate. Will you find that to be a problem, Richard?”

“It would for most men, I expect, but I don’t expect it will be for me.” Richard’s lips curled in a small smirk.

“Secret breathing technique from one of Bruce’s hundred and one training masters?”

“I don’t intend to end the night frustrated.”

Her eyes flashed with a strange, bright interest that might have put a hint of a flush in her cheeks - in the dim light of the car, it was hard to be sure - and she dropped back into Claire’s sultry alto as much to cover her confusion about her own reaction to the thought as to tease him. “Even for an adopted Wayne, Mister Grayson, you *are* a fast mover.”

Richard leaned forward toward her, his voice dropping an octave in pitch and twenty percent in volume. “Well, one thing I’ve found is that I don’t like frustration, and one advantage of being an adopted Wayne is that you don’t have to suffer things you don’t like for long.”

She tilted her face up, her eyes flashing as she parted her lips with a smile that was far too well-honed and hungry for how little practice she’d had in performing it. Assuming either of them was still performing. “Don’t worry, Richard. I’ll make sure your suffering is exactly prolonged enough for our mutual enjoyment.”

“Then I will look forward to the end of the evening... or whatever the moment that my patience ends is.” Richard met her eyes, holding them for just a moment longer than would be appropriate in polite conversation.

“As will I, Richard. As will I.” Her fingertips brushed the line of his jaw, light as a breath, before she leaned back in the seat and smirked quietly. “We seem to have stopped.”

“Indeed we have.” Dick slipped from the car, circling around to open Claire’s door for her.

She glided out with an easy grace that was perhaps unfairly assisted by a close working relationship with gravity, lacing her arm across his, and they went up the red carpet together with the lofty disdain of those who had no need to curry public favor and no fear of public scorn. Claire flashed the occasional icy look at a reporter who got closer than she might have preferred, showing off her inexperience with this sort of thing, but she also seemed to take it as her due. *A very self-assured woman, Claire Wayne appeared tonight on the arm of Richard Grayson - virtually her brother, given the status of Mister Wayne’s ward - and seems to have*

taken Gotham Society by storm.... One of the reporters in the rope-line murmured under his breath as he wrote, and Kara let herself follow him for another paragraph or two in mingled amusement and disbelief that people on this planet really paid attention to such things before they reached the reception line and her attention was required for memorizing the faces and names of more ‘important’ people than most probably met in a lifetime. It reminded her of Uncle Jor’s dinners with Senate colleagues, and the distant echo of memory nearly cracked her mask with the sudden hurt in her chest. She covered it with an acidly dismissive smile, the sort Claire might fall back on when irritated, and excused herself from the local governmental busybodies who’d been trying to make an impression to get herself a drink. Pretending to drink, as Bruce liked to say, was a marvelous social camouflage for an endless number of problems. In her case, and with her metabolism, she didn’t even have to pretend - the only trick was to remember to appear appropriately intoxicated if she consumed a great deal without thinking about it.

“Ah, so this is the lady of the hour.” A remarkably energetic voice rose from behind Kara - far too close behind her for her not to have heard the woman coming. “And how are you enjoying the party, Miss Wayne?”

“At the moment, Miss Gordon, I’m finding it a little dry.” Kara turned and offered the slender red-head one of Claire’s restless, superior smiles. “Still, I live in hope that an enterprising conversationalist will come and save me from my dire fate.”

“Has Richard abandoned you, then?” Barbara caught a stool in her left hand, pulling it over to perch on it, eye-level with Claire. “I usually find these events more tiresome than anything else. In this case, at least the cause is actually good.”

“Books constitute capital. A library book lasts as long as a house: for hundreds of years. It is not, then, an article of mere consumption but fairly of capital, and often in the case of professional men, setting out in life, it is their only capital.” Claire’s smile was arch, but there was a hint of genuine passion in her voice that was both her own and Kara’s. *A life without learning is a life without worth.*

“Jefferson.” Barbara offered a small smile. “The library is where the free flow of ideas starts - a place where anyone can come and read about any topic they wish to read about, finding high-quality works written by experts with the resources to perform real research behind them. I don’t think I could ever get tired of the library.”

“I practically grew up in one. I inherited my father’s mind, and my mother had no intention of letting me waste it.” Kara buried a smile behind her teeth at the double truth of the words - they might have been Claire’s, but they could just as easily have been her own. That the research of her childhood had been in crystal-state circuits and not bound dead paper made no difference at all. She made a show of remembering to redirect the conversation onto safer ground. “Gordon... you were the girl who straightened out the entire library database when you were what, fourteen? Fifteen?”

“Twelve.” Barbara smirked. “And again every year thereafter.”

“Very impressive.” Claire returned the smirk with equal smugness, her eyes sparkling. “I

don't suppose you'd like a job, Miss Gordon? I have a lightly used company I'm in the midst of rebuilding, and if you were interested...."

"No, I already have quite enough work to keep me occupied. Thank you for the offer, though." Barbara folded her hands behind her back with a small grin. "I'm not sure what use you'd have for a librarian, though."

"Actually, what I'm looking for is someone who can make a comprehensive database of as much of the world's knowledge as I can beg, borrow or steal the rights to moderately user-friendly. Say, enough for a bright fifteen year old to find and vet sources on." It had been a fragment of an idea three days ago, but it had flicked into the front of Kara's brain when she'd recalled the article about Barbara's database work and now it was beginning to sprout like a *creseta* climbing vine. *Surely it wouldn't take that much work, and I do have a company I supposedly own....* "A New York Public Library in every small town, that sort of thing."

"I think they call that Wikipedia, unless you have a better approach to it." Barbara offered a small smile. "Though I think I see where you're going - a professionally-managed archive of sources, an electronic card catalogue with the works themselves accessible with a click."

"Exactly." Kara threw in a shudder at the mention of Wikipedia, which Claire found plebian and she personally found utterly confounding. The idea of a resource for learning into which just *anyone* could pour their ideas struck her as something very like heresy, and she'd actually chased Bruce down a hallway demanding to know how she could shut that monstrosity down before he took refuge in going on patrol. "Not mere summary or second-hand murmuring, but a comprehensive encyclopedia of knowledge with the raw source material readily available to back it up."

"And how much funding do you plan to give this endeavor? With the understanding that it likely won't ever be profitable - the only way it can achieve its goals is to be freely accessible."

"Two or three billion dollars ought to take care of it, I should think. As starting funding, of course - more would be available if it was required." Kara had the satisfaction of watching Barbara's eyes widen in surprise, and Claire's smile grew even more smug. "The matter of making it pay for itself will come with the new ways of accessing it - the project itself will not be expected to earn anything."

"You've got me." Barbara spoke quickly. "I'll put in my notice at my job tomorrow."

"Either I'm going to have to give the two of you some alone time or you just spent a great deal of Bruce's money." Richard spoke as he reached them. "What sort of plans are you making?"

"That, my darling Richard, is entirely confidential." It was definitely Claire's smile on her lips when she put her hand on his arm, stepped into him and brushed her mouth over his cheek and jaw lightly before drawing back and almost purring with delight at the sudden change in his coloring. "Suffice to say that Miss Gordon has agreed to come and work for me, an arrangement I expect to find immensely enjoyable."

Barbara's sudden, sharp intake of breath should have made Kara wince with sympathy, but it didn't. For some reason she couldn't put her finger on - maybe just that it was so much *fun* being Claire - that sound only made her bolder. She flicked her finger against Richard's slightly parted lips in a *hush, now* gesture, then turned and offered Barbara an outrageously flirtatious smile. "Richard and I are going to hit the town after the party, Miss Gordon. Perhaps you'd like to join us?"

"Certainly." Barbara leaned in close, whispering into Claire's ear, "Sounds like fun."

Claire stepped in on her, far closer than polite society would have found anything approaching respectable - close enough that on a club dance floor it would probably still draw looks - and bent down to brush her lips against Barbara's jaw as she murmured an answer that was almost dizzying in its unvarnished promise. "I won't permit it to be anything less, Miss Gordon."

"I'll be certain try not to disappoint." Barbara's eyes lingered on Claire's, her lips curling in a slow smirk that didn't quite hide the hard, shivery beat of her heart.

"I don't suppose," Richard drawled with forced joviality, "that I get any say in this?"

"You, dear Richard, can pick whose lap I ride in during the car-ride out of here." Claire drew back from Barbara far enough to give him a predator's smile. Then her head shifted slightly, over his shoulder, and the delight in her smile turned positively sadistic. "Bruce, I thought you'd never turn up."

"I'm not here for long." Bruce Wayne had a woman on each elbow - a blonde and a brunette - and somehow managed to juggle them and a drink. "I just wanted to make sure that you were enjoying yourself."

"Completely." Claire slid one arm over Richard's, snaking her hand around Barbara's hip in the same motion, and flashed him a smile that was a darker, fiercer and younger version of his own good-natured, roguish grin. "Mine are prettier than yours, Daddy. Smarter, too."

"I, fortunately am smart enough not to comment on that." Bruce offered her a wink before walking off with the women.

Claire, her arms still around her prizes, just grinned.

Chapter 13

There was a very particular sound that impacts on the armor Bruce wore as part of his costume made - one that Kara found particularly disconcerting, once she'd identified it, for the ease with which she could pick it out from all the other sounds of the endless growl of Gotham's pain. She heard it rarely - he was not in the habit of being seen while he was working, except to intimidate, and it was a rare opponent who could lay a hand on him. Gotham was full of such rare opponents, of course, but they were decidedly the exception rather than the rule.

When that rule was broken, she'd trained herself to endure the occasional thud of a fist or crack of a bullet spending itself on the armor with as much stoicism as her father or Bruce would have expected of her. It came hard, but they were few in number and rarely involved more than one or two sharp impacts before the reassuring, disturbing sounds of him settling the matter with his hands followed.

The night after the benefit, they started when she was halfway into bed and continued for almost five minutes, a triphammer spasm of impacts mirrored with hard flat grunts of pain that she knew at once were Bruce's. She endured four of them with the thought that he would call for her if he needed her, that she might spoil his planning by rushing in unsummoned. By the tenth, she'd pulled her family's armor on - just in case, she told herself.

By the seventeenth, she tore through the roof of a well-secured warehouse in the lower docks district like a blue and red thunderbolt, her eyes on fire with fury.

A group of men - eight in total - stood in a circle, with two of them kicking Bruce back and forth. They wore armor - armor definitely not of Earth origin. Bright chrome and visible hyperglass fuel cells marked the devices as being based on Bgzitilian military hardware, even without the emblem the Bgzitilians seemed to place in every possible place on everything they built. It enhanced their speed and strength sufficiently that even with his skills, Bruce would need a known weak point to overcome two men with it - much less eight - and the armor had no weak points known to anyone from Oa to Krypton.

Not that Kara would require weak points.

"I am Kara Zor-El of Krypton," she said in a voice that thundered from the walls, and concrete cracked under her heels where they struck the floor. Her eyes burned red with pent-up rage, and her hands were already clenched at her sides. "You have exactly ten seconds to lay down on the floor and fold your hands behind your head so that the relevant police authorities can arrest you, or I will confiscate that armor from you."

"Huh. Thought it would be the one from Metropolis." One of the men who was watching Bruce's beating looked to her before speaking into his helmet. "Tell Wilson we need him."

Six seconds after Kara gave her ultimatum, the crate immediately behind her exploded, and before she could turn, a punch strong enough to bruise even her ribs landed on her back.

She rolled with the impact instinctively, throwing herself up into the air with the thought that whatever it was, it probably couldn't fly. Whatever it was, it was *strong*. She threw the thugs in armor out of her mind - there would be time in a moment - and focused on the creature that had struck her. It was not, to her surprise, a human in armor. In fact, it was nothing she recognized.

It wasn't large - if it stood to its full height, it would only be a few centimeters taller than Kara, and hunched as it was it was nearly a foot shorter. It had no heartbeat, no breath, no neurochemical sound - nothing but the flow of the fluids in microhydraulic muscles and electrical impulses and some sort of dark energy neither scientific nor biological nor magical that surrounded it in much the same way a Kryptonian's telekinetic field protected Kara. It was vaguely humanoid, though its face held no expression and its limbs were proportioned more similarly to those of a gorilla than to a human, and it was sheathed in what looked like flame but neither crackled nor burned.

It was not as strong as Kara. It was not as fast as Kara, or as tough. That none of those things mattered was clear as day within seconds of its first attack - the second coming so quickly that not even Batman could have followed it, a rib-cracking punch that slammed into her belly and nearly folded her in half as it sprang into the air after her. It knew how to hit her, where to hit her, how to turn her untutored counterattacks that should have ripped it apart easily into undamaging glancing blows.

And, if it wanted to and had time, it would kill her.

There was no time for thinking - no time for anything, except floundering punches and kicks that did little to slow it down and struggling for breath. It wasn't as fast as she was, but it was fast - fast enough to push her, to leave her no room for the planning she reflexively knew was the only way she could hope to break away. When she tried to blast it back with her heat-vision, a quick back-handed jab knocked her head to the side, ripping away a dozen meters of the wall of the warehouse but do it no harm.

She was going to die, and she was afraid.

It's focused on me. It's focused on me. If I let it notice Bruce, it will kill him between one breath and another. I have to give him a chance to run. It caught her hand as she tried another wide punch, twisting her arm out of alignment so that the joint screamed, and she had no leverage to break the hold.

No leverage.

She went limp in its grip, the sudden imbalance of force spinning her, and it was hard to slice the fuel cells of all eight of the armored thugs with razor-thin bursts of heat vision that sapped her strength and tripled the burning pain in her shoulder. Hard, but not impossible. Her captor, in the fractions of a second it took to accomplish the shots, seemed to assume it was a desperate, reflexive attempt to hurt it.

Don't give it time to realize its mistake . She grabbed the planet's gravity, the atmosphere around her, and with an exertion that strained some intangible muscle she still hadn't properly identified she threw them both into the floor with enough force to knock the wind out of her.

The sounds of Bruce's beating stopped nearly instantly - to the perceptions of a human. She was painfully aware of every one of the six tenths of a second between her attack and the shutdown of the armor of the thugs, made moreso by the exact timing of the robot's strikes.

Throat, abdomen, one blow to her head that dazed her for three twentieths of a second. She could count her broken bones - four ribs, one arm, one finger, a damaged vertebra, internal bleeding from a kidney and an organ humans had no word for.

Then the world became red fire, and the robot was thrown bodily from her. The voice that spoke to it held a degree of quiet menace usually set aside for angry gods.

"You don't touch her."

Before the creature could pull itself to its feet, another burst of Kal-El's heat vision ripped its arm from its joint, spraying the room with black microhydraulic fluid. A third burst removed a leg, and by then Kal was standing over the creature.

So quickly that even Kara could not make out the whole motion, Kal plunged his hand through the creature's torso, ripping out its power source, and it fell silent.

"Cousin." She gagged the word around the blood in her mouth and the bruises on her lungs, but she managed to push the next few out more cleanly. "Is he safe?"

"He is... he got to cover." Superman reached down, taking her hand and helping her to her feet. "I'm going to take you to the Fortress for treatment. The police can deal with the rest of this."

She couldn't have explained her reluctance - he was her family, so she ought to have been instantly at ease with the thought of him tending her injuries, but her first impulse was to refuse. To say that she and Bruce would take care of it. Then she looked into his face, listened to the hammer of his heart, and could not bring herself to refuse. "All right, Kal." Another slow, painful breath through her aching throat, and an aborted attempt at a nod that stopped when battered muscles protested. "I'm not sure I can fly safely," she rasped out, and managed a faint smile.

"I will carry you." He pulled her to him, lifting her in his arms, and looked to where Bruce was moving out from behind a brace of heavily armored crates. "Nightwing will be here to pick you up." Then, in an instant, they were gone from Gotham.

Somewhere above the Arctic, she brushed the 'safe' key on her pager. *I'll be home soon, Bruce.*

Chapter 14

The Fortress of Solitude, as her cousin liked to call it, was surprisingly well equipped when it came to medical facilities. Apparently, Kal had a fair bit of experience with needing someone or something to patch him up.

At the moment, Kara was sufficiently exhausted and grateful that she was prepared to overlook the implications of that and take her medicine. The automated attendants were quiet, and the work careful and methodical - quiet enough, in fact, that she noticed how thoroughly silent the sterilization field rendered the world. *How long has it been since I heard real quiet? Practically since I came to this planet.* It was comforting and eerie all at once, and she was glad when the treatment - particularly the heavy bath of stored sunlight that recharged her cells and set her body to healing itself around the straightened bones with startling speed - took far less time than she'd expected.

Of course, she wasn't used to seeing any sort of injuries tended except Bruce's.

Coming back to the sounds of the world as the sterilization field dropped was a shock, and she leaned against the golden frame of the medical bed until her mind could start sorting that universe of sound into discrete chunks she could actually process. That was probably why it took an entirely seven seconds for her to recognize her cousin's voice. That it was half a world away at the moment was not actually a problem.

"... She was nearly killed, Bruce. She would have died, if I'd been a few more seconds. I've kept quiet this long, but I've been worried about this for a long time. You both go into a lot of danger, and she's too young."

"It is her decision, Clark. Her choice to make. Her power to use, or not use. She is an adult, by both human and, as I understand, Kryptonian measure. I believe she is who you should be having a conversation with, if you have an issue with what she is doing."

"You've facilitated this, Bruce, and you've manipulated her. I know you don't try to do so, in these situations... but how many young people have you drawn into your orbit so far?"

"That, cousin, is entirely unfair." Kara Zor-El could throw her voice with an impressive degree of force when she chose, but there was a hint of Claire Wayne's steel in her tone as well, and that was what shut both men up so soundly when she stepped out of one of the Batcave's numerous shadows and fixed Kal with a glare that should have come with its own thunderclap. "Richard, Timothy and Jason made their own choices, and I have not heard much in the way of regret from either of the two I've had the pleasure of speaking with. Not to mention that a man who lectured me at length about the importance to him of using his powers to help the world, over *my* objections, is in a very weak position to argue when I start taking his advice. Or do you really imagine I would be much safer sailing about with your Justice League fighting every alien menace and kryptonite-wielding mad scientist in sight?" She stalked over, still handling her side a little gingerly but too angry to be really careful, and

jabbed her finger into his chest with a decidedly un-Kryptonian emphasis. "Bruce has done absolutely nothing to manipulate me, and I'm entirely insulted that you think any human - even one as remarkable as he is - would be in a position to do so if he wished to. Now, where exactly did you plan to end this conversation? Demanding I move back to Kansas, or into that box of an apartment you keep in Metropolis? Because if that was what you had in mind, Kal - assuming you had anything in mind at all, which I doubt - you had better rethink your options."

Clark took a step back, letting his eyes fall on her with all the weight of Superman's irritation. When that failed to move her, he sighed. "You're... right. I don't have much of a leg to stand on. I'm worried about you, though... and maybe that's made me a little irrational."

"Worry is justified. I rushed in rather stupidly, without much of a plan, because I was thinking with my emotions instead of my head. I trusted my powers to take care of everything, and waded in for..." her lips twitched with memory and dry amusement, "fisticuffs like an idiot. None of which is in any way Bruce's fault. It's mine, for acting like an overcharged superhero adolescent instead of a scientist. I don't plan on allowing it to happen again... but I also don't think I can sit by and listen to someone I care about being hurt. I'm going to have to think about what that means. Fair?"

"Fair." Clark rested a hand on her shoulder. "I'm... not just worried about you. I'm proud of you."

"For being an idiot?" She smiled up at him crookedly, squeezing his hand, and her blue eyes sparkled with wry humor. "It must be a family trait."

"It must be." Clark smiled to her gently. "Am I forgiven?"

"For the moment." She leaned up and hugged him tightly for a long moment, her head resting against his shoulder, and murmured the next words so softly that only he could hear them. "Thank you for saving me, cousin."

"Every time, if I can. I will be there."

"I know." She drew back and smiled up at him softly, and her eyes shone. "Someday I might even return the favor. Now go back and put your paper to bed."

"All right." Clark turned, and a look passed between him and Bruce that needed no words. Then he was gone.

She waited until he was well out over the eastern seaboard before letting the ache in her side show in the slump of her shoulders, and until he was past the Atlantic coastline before walking over to sit on the edge of the computer terminal that wrapped around Bruce's favorite chair and pressing the button that activated the sound dampeners that ringed the cave's inner complex. Then she glanced at Bruce's face, and crooked her lips in a smile. "Didn't think I knew about those?"

“I thought you might have found them.” He returned the smile. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I was beaten well past half to death by an off-world automated fighting terminal. I don’t think I enjoy it. What about you?”

“Relatively well. I have a few broken ribs, but the good news is that they all broke in ways they’d broken before, so at least there is no new damage.”

“I’m not sure I ever want to become that comfortable with the idea of having my ribs broken.” She looked him over carefully, studying his bones, then shook her head. “Remind me to work on a better solution for those than wrapping. I’m sure my people have something in the database.”

“I am sure they do.” Bruce touched her cheek. “I am glad you are relatively healthy.”

“I heal quickly. By tomorrow, I estimate I’ll barely be sore.” She leaned into his hand, half-closing her eyes. “I was frightened I was going to die, but not as frightened by that as the thought that I might fail to save you.”

His fingers trailed along her jaw. “I worried about losing you.”

“I want you to teach me.” She turned her face into his palm, pressing her lips there for a long, quiet moment before lifting her head to give him an unobstructed view of those piercingly blue eyes. “Everything, starting with how to handle myself. I have watched you fight - it is a science, like any other, and I want to learn it. I never want to feel that helpless again.”

“I will teach you.” The words were a promise, and his hand slid to her shoulder. “Everything I know.”

“Good.” She slid down off the console and embraced him, quietly and fiercely, and then breathed a quiet laugh into his shoulder. “I am going to become a warrior, as well as a scientist. My father would not be pleased.” She paused, then, and laughed more softly as she kissed his cheek. “My other father. I suppose it is only right I should honor both of your chosen professions.”

Bruce laughed softly, holding her close. “I will see to it that you master it strongly enough that Zor-El could find no possible fault with the results.”

“I have no doubt of it.” She smiled again, face tucked against the roughness of his cheek, and rested her fingers on the battered armor of his shoulder. “We will begin tomorrow. You need to rest.”

“As do you.”

Interlude: A Day and a Night in Paradise

The sunlight was eternal on Paradise Island, and it flowed through Kara's veins almost like a drug. The sky itself seemed thinner, less of a barrier between a person and the heavens above it, and nearly every surface on the island reflected the light back upward, as if offering the gods a portion of their gift back with a helping of gratitude on the side. The leaves of the tall trees were deep green with a waxy sheen, the sand of the beaches a perfect white, the water clear enough to see the seafloor a mile off the coast, and the roads paved with bricks that, while as comfortable to walk on as clay, shone like perfectly cast gold.

It was as breathtaking a work of architecture and civic design as any in Krypton's archives, and Kara made a careful mental note to look more deeply into the history of this place. The gods might have been involved in its design and construction, but surely the Amazons had done just as much to make it the masterwork it was. They would have a great deal to teach her, if she could make the time to learn.

One more hidden wonder of this strange, backward, beautiful little planet. The thought amused her, and she allowed herself the smile.

"The Last Daughter of Krypton." An unfamiliar voice floated from between the golden columns of the Themyscaran Acropolis. "I was starting to wonder if the Princess would ever bring you here. We hear so many stories from the outside about your cousin... and so little of you." Moving with the characteristic silence of the Amazonians, even her heartbeat so quiet that Kara had not heard it until the woman was within less than a hundred meters, a tall, blonde warrior stepped into view, her dark armor and golden spear shielded from the sun by the walkway above. "There were whispers, when she kept you away so long, that perhaps she was ashamed of you... that she thought you would reflect poorly on the man she has chosen."

Kara Zor'El knew a challenge when she heard one, and as she drew herself up with every ounce of hauteur that a youth growing up among the scientists of Krypton had taught her she was silently glad that she'd chosen the armor of the House of El as her garments for this visit - the effect would not have been nearly as striking in slacks and a button-up blouse. There was a trick to projecting one's voice without the result sounding forced or aggressive - Kal and Bruce had each taught it to her separately, a coincidence that had amused her at the time, but she was grateful for it now. "I do not believe that we have been introduced, Warrior of Themyscara. Is it the custom of Paradise Island to shout at visiting strangers as if they were customers in a shanty market?"

"It is our custom to show those who visit our island the respect they have earned. In this case, Last Daughter of Krypton, I interpret that custom quite generously." The warrior lowered her spear from her shoulder, and the way the blade caught the light of the sun was entirely unnatural. "We are a warrior people, and there is only one sure way to earn our respect. I am Kallia, of the Knights of Hera, and I challenge you to first blood."

Kara's eyebrow arched subtly, and she allowed her expression to cool even further as she shifted her right foot back perhaps two inches to rebalance her weight. "Kallia of the Knights of Hera, I am Kara - daughter of Zor of the House of El - and if it is your wish to challenge me then I will not deny you. Let it be clear, however, that it is you who have sought this and it is you who will bear the responsibility of the results. Do you accept these terms?"

"I bear responsibility for any action which I take." Kallia shifted her own stance, raising the spear into a defensive position and resting her weight on her toes. "I am ready to begin, Kara of the House of El."

"Then you may begin, Kallia." Kara put just a hint of a barb into her voice with the words, her hands loosely relaxed at her sides and the edge of her mouth curved up in a sharp sliver of a smile. *She will be fast and aggressive, but disciplined. Goad her temper, but do not depend on it. Control the pace of the engagement. Keep her in sight at all times, and deny her sight of you when possible. Use just as much strength and speed as you need - no more - so that you always have something in reserve.* Bruce's training was a coiled serpent of steel at the back of her mind, waiting for the first provocation to activate reflexive muscle memory, but she made herself go through the analytical process of considering tactics and procedure. It was, as he never ceased to remind her, a good habit to get into. Victory is in the preparation was his favorite maxim, and it was one any Kryptonian could appreciate.

Kallia moved like the strike of a lightning bolt, her spear flashing in the brilliance of the sun and the reflected light of the Acropolis and Kara spared a single fraction of a second to admire the elegant falcon's grace of the motion before letting the training Bruce had been spending a dozen hours a week and more for the past month drilling into her off its leash.

The first motion was Aikido - the subtle shift of weight to the side, the drop of her right hand onto the haft of the spear below the cutting edges, the twist of her wrist to force the haft to revolve past the tolerance of Kallia's wrist - and it flowed smoothly into a chin-clipping elbow strike she'd found in one of the Kryptonian martial texts she and Bruce had been working through together. Kallia's flinch was equally reflexive, a twist that pulled the Amazon's jaw back out of reach and arched her back over the spear, but the persistence of her grip on the weapon exposed her wrists and Kara's left hand jabbed down into the joint with carefully measured force - enough to cause pain and break the woman's grip, not so much as to shatter the bones. The spear continued its forward drive, Kara's hand still twisting it instead of trying to alter its course, and she pivoted into a leg-sweep that dropped her torso as she threw the weapon precisely at the center of one of the golden pillars lining the Acropolis. It buried itself there with a metallic, resonant hum, the tip nearly two feet deep into the hard stone, and Kallia's backflip to avoid the leg sweep was still incomplete when Kara finished her own spin back to her feet and took three steps forward to catch the Amazon out of the air in a Judo throw that slammed the warrior hard enough against the shining golden bricks to throw dust into the air. It was still dispersing when Kara finished the combination with a spear-hand strike into Kallia's armored sternum that dented the metal and drove every ounce of air out of the taller woman's body. She took three steps back and returned to a relaxed guard, her hands back at her sides, and projected her voice sufficiently to carry across the whole of the Acropolis. "Do you yield, Knight of Hera?"

"I... yield." Kallia coughed the words out, still flat on her back amidst the floating golden

dust. “What I have heard of your strength... if anything, it was understated. I know when I am beaten.” Finally, she caught her breath enough to begin to rise to her feet, and let loose a softly ironic laugh when her legs gave out under her and sent her back to the floor, extending a hand toward Kara. “Particularly when I am thoroughly beaten.”

Kara reached down and caught the offered hand, pulling Kallia to her feet, and she reached out to squeeze the warrior’s shoulder with a reassuring smile. “I did not wish to prolong the matter unnecessarily. You have a swift spear, and I might not have been so fortunate on the second pass.” It was not precisely a lie, but it was not precisely the truth either - she was fairly certain fortune had had little to do with it, but Bruce had taught her something of the nature of a warrior’s pride and she had no wish to make enemies here that she did not need to. So she laughed, quietly, and widened her smile into an expression of friendly teasing. “Have you had the pleasure of sparring with my cousin, as well?” *Please, please say no. I’ve come a long way in my patience with his choices, but the thought of him wrestling with half of the women I’ve seen so far on this island would be enough to make my aunt turn in her grave.*

“No... I have never left this island.” Kallia took a few experimental steps before seeming to decide that her legs had returned to proper working order. “The Knights of Hera are tasked with the island’s defense... to leave the island requires leaving the order, because it is an abandonment of one’s post.”

“An admirable devotion to duty. You are a credit to your goddess.” Kara nodded her approval, and felt a part of her soul relax whose tension she had not quite recognized - a wary tightness that looked out at a world without boundaries, castes or comprehensible structure and saw a chaotic system a few iterations from collapse. She was coming to terms with her newly adopted home, certainly, but the occasions outside Bruce’s company on which she’d been able to relax fully were restricted to the grounds of Wayne Manor and a few moments when she’d become lost enough in performing Claire to forget her own reservations. This place was not home - neither Krypton nor Bruce’s cave - but it shared with both an unyielding order that comforted her.

She doubted she would be able to explain the insight to Clark, but Bruce might be able to understand. Then again, he was only human.

“And you are a credit to... I apologize; I do not know how to complete that sentence without risking offense. I know very little of your people, Kara Zor-El, and I do not want to hazard a guess as to who or what you might want to be a credit to.” Kallia smiled apologetically. “I will have to learn more, I think.”

“An equally commendable display of wisdom.” Kara’s eyes twinkled, just a little, and she leaned forward to kiss Kallia’s cheek gently. “You could fairly say that I am a credit to the House of El or to the people of Krypton, though both are so reduced in number that you could say that I am a credit to my cousin and carry much the same meaning, but it would come nearest to the sense of what I think you mean to say that I am a credit to my teachers.”

“Then you are a credit to your teachers, Kara Zor-El.” The warrior brushed her hand against her cheek where Kara’s lips had brushed her skin, then turned. “I must return to my own training. If you wish to speak with me, I live on the northern coast of the island, and can

usually be found in my home or on the beach when not on duty.”

“I will remember it,” Kara replied, and surprised herself by meaning it. Despite the nature of their meeting, she had enjoyed it, and it seemed an acquaintance worth maintaining. *What is it about this world*, she wondered ruefully, *that draws me so thoroughly to its warriors?* It was a fleeting thought, and she dismissed it a little more sharply than might have been strictly necessary. There were implications there she could do without. “Would you be kind enough to direct me to Princess Diana’s residence before you go? I came to see her, but I admit that I’m not entirely certain where to find her.”

“The Princess, when she is here at all, can be found at the palace... it is a long walk from here, about halfway up the central mountain. My mother always told me that Hera placed the palace where it is to ensure that any who took up Queen Hippolyta’s time had a concern worthwhile of it... to make travel to the palace troublesome enough that the Queen would not be bothered by trivial matters.”

“Well,” Kara chuckled, “apparently Hera neglected to account for me. May your duties be safe and efficient, Kallia.” She spread her hands and rose into the air, touching her closed fist to her heart in a Kryptonian salute, then allowed herself an almost whimsical grin. “I trust you’ll be able to get your spear out of the pillar?”

“I will attempt to do so. If I am unable, I will make clear that its location is a tribute to your prowess.” Kallia winked. “I will see you again, Kara Zor-El.”

Kara acknowledged the promise with a quiet laugh, then flashed up and across the brilliant blue dome of the sky to land on the uppermost balcony of the palace. She swept her eyes across golden walls, searching through layer after layer of building, then froze in sudden embarrassment as the shift in her attention resolved two voices from the background noise of the island into a coherent conversation.

“You have spent too much time in the world of Man, daughter, and the hold you allow this man to have on you is proof of that. If you love him, you must either wed him or cut ties to break that love; to do neither is to let him rule you, and that is unacceptable.”

“And you, mother, have gone too long without leaving this island. The world outside has changed, and he is a part of that change. There is still a need for women to fight against man’s shackles, but there are new ways of doing so - ways that do not require a spear or a ring. If you would just meet Clark...”

“Meet him? I do not need to meet him.” There was the sound of a hard object - a hammer, perhaps, or a scepter - impacting gold-encrusted stone. “He is a man, who holds your heart and refuses to promise you his own. I know all I need to know from that alone.”

Well, Kara thought with a rueful quirk of her lips, *my timing could be better*. She seriously considered taking off again then and there, but she *did* need to speak with Diana and there was a part of her that prickled at the thought of anyone speaking about her cousin that way - never mind that she’d voiced much the same sentiment to him herself a few months ago.

She was going to do something impulsive again, and knew it, and silently sent a prayer winging to Rao that whatever was affecting her better judgement would work its way out of her system sooner rather than later.

“Mother...” The combination of regalness and petulance in Diana’s voice was impressive.

“In all fairness to my cousin,” Kara Zor-El said from the foot of the dais of Queen Hippolyta’s throne, her legs neatly crossed and one elbow resting on them to support her chin in her hand - for all the world as if she’d been present for the entire discussion and was only now being noticed, “he isn’t really a callous and unfaithful brute. I can see how terminal indecisiveness, a tendency to put everyone else’s needs ahead of his and a severe over-attachment to the status quo could be mistaken for that, your majesty, but he doesn’t mean anything by it.”

“This is not a topic for outsiders, child... it is a conversation for family, for those who know our ways.”

“Family, mother, is what Kara is. She is Clark’s cousin.” Diana pulled herself up straight.

“Perhaps, but this is Themyscira, and we are Amazons. That she is the relative of a man is irrelevant here... all shackles are.” Hippolyta turned her eyes fully on Kara. “Yet I do hear things from elsewhere, and when I learned that another Kryptonian had arrived on Earth it piqued my interest. I have learned that you are intelligent, powerful, and clever. Whether you are discerning, however, is something I have yet to decide. Tell me, child, is your cousin worthy of the emotions my daughter holds for him?”

“Worthy is a complicated word.” Kara met the woman’s eyes without rising, her chin still cradled in her palm, and her free hand tapped out a slow beat against the hammered gold-alloy. “Kal-El is a good man, by what I understand of Earth’s standards - he has a strong heart that brims with compassion, an unyielding will when he believes himself to be righteous and a keen sense of justice that, while I do not always share its conclusions, I cannot help but respect. He is, in short, the very model of what Earth seems to consider a hero.” She lifted her shoulders in an elegant little shrug, her lips quirked in a faint smile. “On the other hand, I still haven’t made up my mind if he’s good for your daughter. They fight well together, are obviously in love, share a compatible personality matrix and encourage each other’s virtues, but they also seem to promote each other’s vices, not least of which is a serene confidence that they have all the time in the world to make up their minds about what to do when it comes to each other. It’s a topic on which I’ve had words with him, but...” her tone shifted to a hint of carefully metered irony, “that is a conversation for family and those who know our ways. Suffice to say that if it were up to me, they would have been married some time ago.”

“I am glad to see that what I have heard about your cleverness is not mistaken.” Hippolyta let a slow smile cross her face, then turned her eyes back on her daughter. “If the House of El can produce women of this caliber, perhaps - *perhaps* - it can produce a man worthy of you. I will withhold my judgement of your relationship with Clark Kent, for now, but Diana...” The Queen’s eyes narrowed. “Do not keep a relationship with a man from me again. Should you move on from him to another and not tell me, my... frustration... will not once more be spent on him alone.”

“I wouldn’t worry much about that,” Kara offered with a wicked sort of cheer. “My cousin isn’t the possessive sort, and I’m sure he would be very understanding, but *I* certainly wouldn’t be. I understand human men find being dangled by one foot in the stratosphere to be a strong disincentive to pursuing a romance.”

“You wouldn’t...” Diana looked at Kara for a long moment before sighing. “You would. Mother, is this conversation done?”

“You may go, Diana. Kara, you may stay or go at your convenience.”

“Thank you, your majesty.” Kara bowed her head slightly as she rose to her feet, her whole posture respectful but without a trace of subservience - every inch the foreign princess acknowledging the native monarch. “I would be honored to continue our conversation, but I need to speak with your daughter about a few things and if I let her out of my sight, she’s likely to go find trouble or my cousin and then it will take me far too long to find her again. If you will call for me at your convenience, I will make an effort to present myself.”

“Of course, Kara. Be well.” Hippolyta returned to her throne, closing her eyes, and seemed for all the world as if the room no longer existed for her.

Kara followed Diana out of the room, a small smile lingering on her face, and she waited until they were a decent interval from the throne room before speaking up again. “You didn’t tell me what a pleasant woman your mother was, Diana. If I’d known, I would have arranged to meet her sooner.”

“My mother is a shrew. A brilliant, beautiful, beloved shrew, and I love her a great deal more than even her most loyal subjects do, but she is a shrew.” Diana smiled wanly to Kara. “I think I might owe you thanks for what you said to her, but I’m not entirely sure.”

Kara tilted her head curiously. “A shrew - a small mammal, family Soricidae, externally similar to a mouse but most closely related to the common mole. Notable for its small size, sharp teeth, venomous bite, high metabolic rate and high brain-to-body mass ratio. I can see some similarities to your mother, but it is hardly the most apt of metaphorical comparisons. Unless you mean to indicate she is actually, literally a magically transformed small mammal?”

“I think you’re missing a few important bits of English literature.” Diana stepped out the front doors of the palace, stopping in the sun. “What did you want to talk with me about?”

“Oh, nothing terribly important. A fresh course of treatment I have in mind for preventing the early conception of a new member of the House of El, your opinion on a few minor matters and perhaps to pick your brain for a bit of gossip on how my cousin is taking my decision to pursue a full apprenticeship with Bruce.” Kara waved her hand airily, and her lips curved up at the edges as she smothered a smile. *You are far, far too easy, Diana. I can see why Richard says winding you up is so much fun.*

“You have a new course of treatment? Hopefully it involves less needles and less

remembering a dozen things a day than the last.” Diana smiled wryly. “I was becoming convinced that you had me on some of those chemicals entirely to amuse yourself.”

“I would never treat a patient with something *entirely* to amuse myself, Diana. That would be unethical.” Kara’s voice was positively saintly, but her eyes sparkled.

“You are a wicked young woman, Kara. Were all Kryptonian women so diabolical, or was that saved for the scientists?”

“I couldn’t possibly say.” Kara gave it a beat, then delivered the next words in an uncannily precise imitation of Hippolyta’s voice. “That is not a topic for outsiders. It is a conversation for family...”

“For those who know our ways. Is that going to become the most common thing we say to each other?”

Kara laughed softly. “No. I think that will remain, in my case, ‘my cousin is an idiot’ and, in your case, ‘be patient with him.’”

“Yes, that does seem most likely.” Diana grinned. “So... less needles?”

“Quite a few less. It will, however, involve rather more pills.” Kara extracted a long cylinder from the back of her belt, handing it across. “I’ve already pre-mixed them to the proper dosages, so you simply need to take three of them every eight hours from now until you and my cousin decide to be sensible, get married and start having children. It also has a marginally better chance of being effective than our last course - roughly eighty-five percent. As always, let me know what side effects develop - I strongly suggest taking them with food and water.”

“Full stomach, or just with food?” Diana laughed softly. “I’m starting to sound like someone from the outside... medicine, like everything else, works very differently here.”

“I’d advise at least an inch-thick slice of bread and a bit of cheese, but I honestly have no idea how your system is going to respond to something that would induce nausea in a human.” Kara shrugged, spreading her hands and smiling ruefully. “I did tell you that we’d be treading new ground.”

“It can’t possibly be worse than the thing that happened with the red pills.” Diana shuddered at the memory. “Nothing could possibly be that bad.”

Kara opened her mouth as though to correct the statement, then closed it again and simply crooked a smile. “Does your mother know about our little project?”

“She knows some. Enough to upset her.” Diana ruefully shook her head. “Her understanding of modern medicine is even less thorough than mine, so there was a limit to how much I could explain to her.”

“I imagine she’d prefer to let things take their natural course?” *And*, Kara didn’t add aloud

but was sure Diana heard anyway, *for you to have an excellent reason to stop sleeping with my cousin.*

“Whichever way the ‘natural course’ led, yes.” Diana shrugged. “She is used to controlling everything around her. That she can, and have things go as well as they do here, is a sign of her strength... but she is ill-suited to be the mother of a rebellious daughter.”

Kara’s lips started to twitch with amusement, and she covered her mouth with her hand to hold in the sudden giggles that threatened to explode into something half the island would hear. Diana blinked in surprise at the response, then, without any real understanding why, she felt her laughter rising up to join Kara’s.

“I’m sorry,” the younger woman finally managed around smothered bursts of mirth, “it’s just that Richard and Barbara and I saw a movie together a few days ago which involved young men in leather jackets on motorcycles and the women in long skirts who fell for them, and I had the most vivid image of you sidesaddle on the back of a motorcycle behind Kal in one of those jackets...”

“He’d look good in one of those jackets... and I expect I’d look good in one of those skirts. Of course, I’ve got about as much chance of getting him in a leather jacket as you have of convincing Bruce to actually let you market the micro-fusion reactor car, so I should likely dismiss the notion.”

Kara produced a positively girlish pout. “And it’s such a lovely idea, too.”

Diana’s eyebrow arched. “The clothing or the car?”

“Both.”

“Well... if you wanted to sneak me one of the cars, I could see about getting Clark to drive it in the jacket... and I’d wear the skirt. Then you’d have fodder for mirth and I’d have fodder for... other things.”

Kara’s eyes lit up with quiet laughter. “I think I could probably arrange that, if you promise not to tell my cousin it was my idea. I think he has enough reasons to be annoyed with me already.”

“Reasons to be annoyed with you? None at all. Unless, of course, you count all the reasons he has to be annoyed with you.” Diana sobered. “Which I guess brings us to his reaction to your newfound... vigor... in your work with Bruce.”

“Vigor. That’s very diplomatic.” Kara’s lips twitched, and she brushed a hand through her hair with a hint of self-consciousness she would rather not have had to admit to herself. “He hasn’t said a word to me about it since I made my feelings clear - a fact which is doing wonders to educate me about the potential eloquence of silence, I can assure you.”

“Humans are quite good at saying a great deal with no words at all.” Diana sighed. “He’s unhappy, but I think he’s less unhappy than he would be if you’d continued to work with

Bruce as you were before without this training. He wants to keep you safe, and he can't do that, and he feels a bit hypocritical for how badly he wants you out of danger, and even moreso for being upset with you for staying in danger, which makes him upset with himself. So... he's managing to make an even bigger mountain of a mountain."

"That sounds exactly like Kal." Kara matched Diana's sigh, then mustered a hint of a smile. "At least the training itself is going well. I don't suppose you know a warrior by the name of Kallia?"

"Kallia... she's one of the Knights, isn't she?" Diana smiled in recognition at the name. "She was taught by Eudora, the same mistress at arms who handled the last years of my training. Eudora has never had a negative thing to say about her."

"Ah." Kara's smile grew, turning just a little smug. "You might have to help her extract her spear from one of the pillars of the Acropolis in the next few days."

"So, she's the one who challenged you?" Diana laughed. "Someone almost had to. It's good it was her... she's well-respected and fairly well-disciplined. Her word will carry weight."

"She was very skilled, and I must confess that I liked her personally. I would have preferred not to have to bruise her, but I understand that warriors are fond of such things." Kara paused to shake the image of other ways it might be pleasant to bruise Kallia out of her head, then spread her hands. "I must take the time to thank Bruce when I return to Gotham. Perhaps, when it is convenient, you could arrange a sparring session for me with Eudora as well? Richard has been hounding me to expand my range of techniques beyond what Bruce has been teaching me, and I would very much like to make him eat his words."

"Of course I will speak with Eudora." Diana started down the mountain. "Even if you weren't working with Bruce, I would prefer to have you learn as much as possible about how to defend yourself... unlike Clark, I don't believe that reacting to danger by learning to counteract it puts one in more danger."

"My father wouldn't approve," Kara sighed softly, "but if I didn't do anything on this world my father wouldn't approve of, I would find things very difficult." She flicked the idea away with a snap of her fingers, then smiled shrewdly. "I wouldn't like to risk the bruises I'd likely acquire at your hands quite yet, Diana, but in a few more months...."

"Once you have learned the basics of Themyscaran combat arts, and armed combat, I will work with you myself." Diana nodded approvingly. "It's best you start with Eudora, though... I will be a better sparring partner, but she is a far better teacher than I am."

Kara signalled her acceptance of the thought, then shook her head and smiled. "I really did enjoy meeting your mother, you know. She would have been right at home among the Religious Caste on Krypton, and I can't help but find her clarity of thought and purpose pleasant."

"If there is something my mother has never lacked, it is clarity of purpose." Diana smiled. "She is the guiding light of this island, and it is probably best that she is as caught on our

traditions as she is - there are more than enough young people among us to press at the boundaries; her memory of the oldest times helps us remain who we are.”

Kara chuckled and arched an eyebrow. *From beloved shrew to guiding light in half the height of a mountain. I wonder if it's always this way with mothers and daughters...* . “I take it that strictness is why Kal has never visited Paradise Island?”

“Our law is clear - no men may visit Themyscira. It is a place of history and sanctuary.”

Diana turned her face toward the sky. “I may press her on tradition and etiquette, but the law was passed down by the gods. The only way I would ask her to violate it would be if doing so were necessary to save it - if it faced some threat that we could not possibly counteract without Clark, Bruce, and the others. I expect, even then, she would deny the request.”

“And you would do it anyway, regardless of the consequences.” Diana’s head snapped around, surprise on her face, but Kara’s smile was as quiet and certain as it was knowing. “Your mother is not the only woman in your family gifted with clarity.”

“Perhaps I have inherited a few of her gifts.” Diana laughed fondly. “I expect that somewhere, someone is preparing a banquet in your honor - we do, after all, have guests fairly rarely. Join me in the search for the feast?”

Kara laughed softly, her eyes glittering, and she rested a hand against her hip and lifted the other in a casual wave she’d thoroughly mastered in her role as Claire Wayne. “If I had know there was going to be a dinner party,” she deadpanned, “I would have brought more decorative clothes.”

“I imagine that we could find you something,” Diana offered with just a hint of mischief of her own, and Kara rewarded her with a smile that had more than a little of Claire’s wickedness to it.

This is going to be entirely too much fun, she admitted to herself, and then threw Diana a sly wink that ought to produce really delightful blush when the implications struck home. “I imagine you could, at that. Or I could wear the outfit you were wearing when we first met, by way of introducing myself to your friends.”

“No... I believe that ought to be saved for a second meeting.” Diana returned Kara’s wink. “Though no later, if you’re very fond of that friend.”

Now it was Kara’s turn to blush, but she refused to be daunted and answered with a challenging grin. “Only *one* friend?”

“Friend. Friends.” Diana grinned, linking her arm with Kara’s. “This is Paradise Island. It is a place of history and sanctuary... and of pleasure.”

Kara gave it a long three beats, then delivered her riposte with a remarkable simulation of wide-eyed innocence. “So when you said a *banquet* in my honor, did you mean...?”

Diana stared, blushed, then started to laugh so hard that she had to lean on Kara’s arm for

support. It was just as well she did, because Kara's own laughter required a little steadying as well, and they continued down the hill arm in arm to the accompaniment of their own mirth.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Welcome, welcome. Good to see you all again. Inspired by the fun we had writing *A Shining Star Over Gotham* and my co-writer's recent return to the graveyard shift, we're back with a fresh arc of Last Daughter of Krypton. We thank you all for your patience, hope you enjoy it, and remind you that life is always more fun with a little Kara in it.

Sincerely,
Dragon

Claire Wayne pulled her Lamborghini Aventador off the highway from downtown Gotham, feeling the almost silent hum of the electric engine ripple up her spine as she downshifted and shed speed. The bright orange and gold of the fall foliage rippled past as she pulled onto the long private road of the Wayne estate. Her eyes flickered between the road and the corporate accounting report scrolling on the smart lenses of her glasses, her fingers resting lightly on the wheel as she let the deep crimson and ebony supercar drop past sixty kilometers per hour and pulled in at the front steps. She slid out onto the pavement, the black patent leather of her boots catching the sunlight and the black wool of her suit drank it in like the pale ivory of her skin, and picked her briefcase up off the passenger seat before trotting up the steps and thumbing the keyless entry in her pocket. The door clicked open a fraction of a second before Alfred opened it himself, and she passed him the keys with a faint smile of acknowledgement that his gift for anticipation remained indisputable. She trotted up the stairs to the library, pulling the pins from her hair and tucking them into the pocket of her jacket, and brushed the piano by the bookshelves with her fingertips to tap out a sequence of six notes. The bookshelf swung open, and she stepped into the waiting elevator with her palm against the rail to allow the genetic scan to recognize her. The elevator dropped away, three hundred feet down to the heart of the Batcave, and she shrugged out of her jacket to hang it on the rack waiting beside the elevator door. Her boots clicked on the hard stone of the floor, filling the vastness of the cave with their echoes, and she drew in a deep breath as she savored the dark stillness of the place which was as close to a home on the planet Earth as Kara Zor-El could claim.

In one of the open spaces of the cave, Bruce and Damien stood. Bruce was speaking to Damien in a hushed tone, admonishing him on the importance of concentration to the task Damien had, apparently, been failing at. Damien stood, stoic, through his father's lecture before responding, "But you're wrong, Father. It isn't a question of concentration... just strength and desire."

Kara crossed one of the gantries to them, shedding her blouse as she went, exposing the dark carbon-fiber bodice she often wore beneath her work clothes - it was a convenient excuse in case an accident or inconvenient sniper attack failed to dent her unbreakable skin, and she

found the extra support comfortable. “If that were true, Damien, you would be doing it perfectly. Listen to your teacher and do it right.”

He glared at her for a moment, then visibly composed himself and picked up another batarang. She stepped off the platform and levitated across the chasm separating her from the workshop area, and listened with satisfaction to the ring of the batarang on the target. *Perfect. He does well when he listens.* It took only a few seconds to unlock the cabinets she wanted, and then she picked up the cold fusion welder and got down to work.

“New armor plating for the Batplane?” Bruce’s voice came from over her shoulder, just loud enough for her to hear it over the low hum of the welder.

“Your armor plating is adequate for the purpose. Anything more protective would require direct attachment to the frame and would fail to muffle the vibrations of high-energy impacts sufficiently to prevent damage to the internal equipment. If I were working on anything for that archaic contraption, it would be an improvement of the computers from your solid-state heuristic dinosaurs to something capable of independent operations.” Kara stepped back and blinked her eyes to clear a few metal slivers that ground between her lids and the socket of the eye, easing her grip on the welder and cutting the power. “This is a personal project. My laboratory didn’t have the space. It sounds as though your young *deshi* has found the mark on the disarm throw at last.”

“He has.” Bruce glanced toward Damien, who had by now placed nearly a dozen batarangs into the target. “And your training on Themyscira?”

“It was pleasant and productive,” she noted blandly, though the edges of her mouth quirked up in a smile. “The daughters of Paradise Island are very vigorous about their disciplines.”

Bruce pretended to miss the implication. “Very good.” He glanced toward the training area, where Damien was collecting his batarangs. “Care to show me some of what you learned?”

“And put on a show for your wayward child so that he understands that we still have things to teach him.” Kara laughed softly and nodded, setting her welder down and gliding toward the training mats. “Did you review my notes on the Triad case yet?”

“I have.” Bruce nodded, following her. “I think you’re missing something.”

“I’ve been over the data several dozen times. If there is an element I’ve neglected, I do not think I am likely to find it on further reflection.” She kicked out of her boots and stood barefoot on the mat, tilting her shoulders and drawing her right foot back to settle into her usual defensive posture. “You have an insight you wish to share?”

“The banking connection.” Bruce rested his weight on the balls of his feet, taking an offensive stance. “It’s there. I still don’t know what it means.”

They came together like a falcon striking at a swallow, a tiger plunging on a wolf. His blows came fast and sure, combinations honed into muscle memory so deeply that he was already selecting his next seven moves before he began the first, and she let the usual opening act

unfold between them - restricting herself to merely human speed and strength was its own kind of effort, albeit one with which she was becoming more and more familiar, but her reaction times were still as swift as his and her muscle memory had turned out to learn even more quickly. They fenced with their hands, with their feet, with the sharp brace of their forearms, and at last she broke the silence in the same moment she blocked an overhand blow from his right fist with one of the ripostes Eudora had demonstrated for her. It drove a grunt of expelled air from him. "Perhaps we should be considering the possibility of a government or megacorporate role in their expansion, either as management or investors."

"Not the Chinese government, though perhaps some of the provinces..." Bruce shifted his stance, dropping lower, his eyes sparkling in pride at her blow.

"Provincial potentates." Kara shifted and twisted, caught a kick across her knee and dropped with it, rolling and coming up on her feet again just in time to catch his left hand across her forearm and body-check him onto his back foot. "Sometimes your planet is scarcely past the paleolithic tribal stage, you know."

Bruce brought his leg up to block Kara's strike. "Did Krypton not have regional governors, then? People of authority over a limited area?"

"They were not allowed to run roughshod without supervision. The Science and Military Guilds, in particular, were highly effective at rooting out anyone who might use his office for personal advantage." They flashed and danced, her scythe-kick avoided and his open-hand strike deflected. "But we wander from the point. As you like to say, who benefits? From these financial ties, from the Triad's expansion."

"Where does the money lead? And where does the hand moving the money want you to think it leads?" Bruce delivered another palm strike, this one low, and, had she been human, it would have driven the air from her lungs. She dropped back two steps and recentered her guard, simulating the injury she couldn't feel, then waited for him to come in again and flipped up over him, kicking Bruce smoothly across the upper back as she ran the problem over in her mind. Money was power on this planet, but money could also bend and twist and turn like a *kavat* web, hiding itself from itself and its owner from the world. Bruce's own money was an exquisite example, layered so thick and intricately that to find where exactly he secreted the capital for his secret arsenal was a matter that would have required two minds as keen as Timothy Drake-Wayne's and four Level 5 supercomputers at least a year.

She was still thinking about that when she hit the ground rolling, snapping up a kick to deflect his charging palm strike, and it might have had something to do with why he managed to get a hard clipping left in behind her ear hard enough that the momentary discomfort was actually noticeable. "That was uncomfortable," she noted as she caught his wrist and pulled him in for a close grapple. "I should be aware that my inner ear is slightly less immune to disruption than the rest of my body. Thank you. As for the money, my best analysis thus far leads to Thomas Urchin, a back-channel investor in Kord Industries. I suspect this is a false lure, and that Mister Urchin is a ... how do you say... canary in a coal mine?"

"That they are watching him to see if anyone is aware of what they are doing, and if he is taken down, they will go to ground." They separated, Bruce's deft jabs into the nerves of her

arms sufficient to neutralize the grip of anyone with a thinner skin than a Kryptonian and Kara honoring the parameters of the exercise, then circled. Bruce nodded. “Good conclusion. Where do you look next, then?” He brought up his hand to block a series of blows, deflecting each with the minimum force necessary to turn aside her attack. She fell back again, reconsidering her approach - to the fight and to the investigation.

“I do not think he knows who is using him. I doubt Urchin is involved at all, beyond being carefully observed. It will be someone in his circle, a subordinate or acquaintance with access to his accounts.” Kara bit the corner of her lip, feeling the niggling edge of an idea worming around in her mind and digging for it mercilessly. “We know they desire money sufficiently to finance an expansion of the Triad’s base to improve their cashflow. We know they are not content to wait, because the Triad is being pressed to hurry. Therefore, it is likely to conclude that the money is a tool and not an objective. Granted that, the best lure would be money that could be obtained swiftly and easily with a minimum of risk.”

“Very good.” Bruce dropped out of his fighting stance for the moment. “Because they need the money quickly, they will be less careful about pursuing it.”

“Kidnapping,” Kara decided. “For money, and from someone wealthy enough that he will likely not involve the police.” She waited another fraction of a second, then drove her leg up into Bruce’s side with a carefully calculated snap-kick that should be hard enough to sting but not to batter the still-mending ribs on his left side more than their weakened strength could withstand. “The Wayne family, for instance.”

Bruce doubled over at the strike, but the grunt was as approving as it was pained. “You’re about to suggest yourself.”

“Claire Wayne is reckless and young enough to flout her security, adventurous enough to choose the wrong sorts of friends, and a PR embarrassment enough to her father to discourage any public appeals or calls to the police. Beyond which, it would be immoral to place anyone else in danger while I pursue this plan.” Kara slipped back, light on her feet, and offered her teacher a smile which was both proud and sympathetic. “You were the one who directed me to consider guile and misdirection as key strategies in our work.”

“I was.” Bruce nodded and straightened. “Very well, then. It is a good plan... and one I would not allow any of my other students to attempt.”

“None of your other students are bulletproof.”

“Indeed.”

“Thank you, *kashak’an*.” Kara bowed, signaling the formal end of the skirmish, then kicked off the ground and floated back toward her borrowed workspace. “I will begin tomorrow. Until then, I have a project to finish.”

Bruce’s lips curved in one of his rare, genuinely amused smiles. “Which you don’t intend to explain to me.”

“Timing is everything,” she told him with relish, her blue eyes glittering in the dim light of the cage, “and the victory is in the preparation.”

Chapter 17

Two weeks into trolling Gotham's nightclub scene, Kara had come to a number of conclusions about human nature and forms of entertainment. The first was that the more scant clothing, intoxicants and threatened violence was layered into a space, the more likely humans were to wish to have sex in it. It seemed almost to be a compulsion of the young men and women who thronged around her in to drape themselves over the most self-serving, arrogant and unpleasant customers they could find. It was embarrassingly primitive, a kind of adrenaline-induced estrous cycle with a remarkably short duration, and Kara had initially found it somewhat difficult to simulate. Fortunately, Richard had been able to make some suggestions she found helpful. How he'd come by that information was a matter for ongoing investigation, naturally, but that was a low priority matter.

Secondly, observation had rapidly convinced Kara that the human determination to have *fun* was a key factor holding them back from greater technological advancement. Since as best she could determine fun was chiefly obtained through sexual congress with inappropriate partners, consuming intoxicants damaging to the body, driving dangerous ground vehicles at speeds far in excess of the driver's safe reaction times, spending time in poorly lit places drenched with second-hand carcinogens and consuming large quantities of incredibly unhealthy food, she could come to no conclusion but that the average human - excluding those living a rural lifestyle such as the Kents - must be experiencing ongoing brain damage, a shortened lifespan and significant drains on their productive energies at all times. Kara found the entire 'scene,' as her new friends insisted on calling it, a disturbing sociological field experiment that suggested *homo sapiens sapiens* might be poorly adapted for an urban environment after all.

Lastly, she had concluded it was a small miracle that any of these frail vessels of rampant self-harm ever managed to arrive for work on time. If she had required regular sleep instead of solar radiation in order to recover her energy, her work would surely have suffered for it. That would have been very difficult to tolerate, even for the sake of putting down the Triad and their loathsome band of reprobates, because her corporate ventures were proving to be even more demanding of her time and energy than she had expected and producing results to match.

"Two months? That quickly?" Claire Wayne leaned back in the heavy leather chair that she'd bought on Alfred and Bruce's recommendation for its intimidating effect and put her feet up on her desk, checking the small rectangle of smart glass in her hand one more time for effect and then returning her attention to the (very flattering, she had to admit) flush of excitement on Barbara Gordon's cheeks. "I have to say that I'm impressed."

"Two months." Barbara smirked, the curve of her lips quite nicely interacting with the color of her cheeks. "The basic technological infrastructure is nearly in place already. I bought some old server farms in California, London, and Seoul for cheap, to get the fiber the buildings were wired to, and have ordered the new servers. We just have to take delivery and install them... two days' work, at most. And I worked out a very satisfactory deal with the

Library of Congress. Throw in Watchtower resources - the League has been surprisingly helpful - and we're well on our way."

"Superheroes." Claire snorted dismissively. "Still, nice to know they can do something useful beyond decreasing supply in the real estate market. I'll get in touch with marketing and see how far we are from launching the Corvus series - we'll time the launch of the library for release day."

"Corvus will make a lot of the server tech I've assembled obsolete, but it's not like it'll displace the PC out of the working-class home for a few years. The people who need the library most will need to be able to access it without a quantum modem." Barbara smiled. "Instant access, on the other hand, will put Corvus in every high-tech office by Christmas. Good bargain between making the information freely available and turning a very tidy profit, I'd say."

"Very diplomatic," Claire grinned and set the smart glass down on the desk, then stood up and slid around to sit on the front edge of it and look down at Barbara. "You ducked my whole snide remark about superheroes, complimented our tech and my business sense, and brought up the subject of all the money we're going to make - definitely a turn-on. Are you angling for another date, Miss Gordon?"

"Always, Miss Wayne." Barbara laughed. "The last one was, after all, quite enjoyable. But I'm more interested in the library... and making sure that it's profitable is essential to keeping investors interested, which in turn is essential to expanding it. I've still not been able to come to an acceptable figure with Random House, for example, and a few of the major scientific journals won't take my calls at all. I'm rather hoping to be able to drown them in money to deal with that."

"I'll get into it with Random House. They owe my father several different favors, and they'll either appreciate that it's good to get in on the ground floor or find out how they like it out in the cold." There was something disturbing about falling into a role so completely that you found its vices as well as its virtues coming through your mouth without thinking it over, and Kara suppressed a shiver at the vindictive note in her own voice. Claire was a young woman in a hurry, still carrying a chip on her shoulder and looking to take it out on the world, and that would bear watching. Shaping, so that it wouldn't trap her in an out of character moment.

Surrounding her with the right people. "About that date..." she began, already rationalizing her way out of a night of her scripted program of club-land debauchery.

The smart glass buzzed, and Claire set her teeth. Picked it up and answered the call from her executive assistant, who looked more harried than usual. "Lisa, I thought I was clear that I didn't want to be disturbed while I'm meeting with Miss Gordon. What could possibly be ... ah. Yes. I did say I wanted to stay on good terms with the *Planet* while we're working the merger in Metropolis. Yes, I understand. Since they're already here, send them up." She thumbed the call away, flicking off the omni-directional speaker as she did so, then offered Barbara a small, wry smile. "Can I finish that offer later? We have reporters in the lobby."

"Of course." Barbara nodded. "Just as long as we do. Call me when you're free."

“It’s a deal.” Claire walked her to the door, opening it for her with a studied courtesy and a wicked wink to suggest the entire purpose behind that courtesy was so that she could watch the lithe redhead leave, then stood in the doorway and tapped her fingertips lightly against her palm in irritation. “Kal,” she subvocalized softly, “this is not a good time.”

Her cousin didn’t answer, which was even more irritating. She thought about going back to her desk and pretending to work, decided against it as petulant. Instead, she waited for the elevator to finish its climb up the tower to the executive suite and focused on exuding elegant irritation.

Clark Kent stood awkwardly at the back of the elevator, hovering at the shoulder of a woman in a skirted suit. The woman’s hair was black, her figure shapely, her eyes clever and intense, and it was she who spoke first and asserted her dominance over the situation. Obviously a forceful personality, and unaccustomed to waiting. “Claire Wayne... exactly who we were hoping to see.”

“People who are hoping to see me usually make appointments, Miss...?” She put a note of boredom into her voice as she leaned back against the door of her office, glancing over her head to meet Kal’s eyes through his ridiculous glasses and gauging his reaction to the woman. Pulse subtly elevated, eyes slightly dilated - sexual interest, perhaps, or nervousness. The latter might be understandable if she was a particularly shrewd reporter and likely to notice his secret. The former was not impossible, but considering that Diana was still sharing his bed more nights than not it was slightly implausible. She filed it for later consideration.

“Lane. Lois Lane. And I rarely make appointments.” The woman swept out of the elevator, Kal lagging slightly behind, and started toward Claire’s office. “We can talk in your office. More comfortable for everyone, I think.”

“People who don’t make appointments don’t get to invite themselves into my office, Miss Lane.” Claire straightened and rested a hand at her hip, her eyes cold and blue and remote the way Bruce sometimes let his go during particularly recalcitrant meetings of the board. “Perhaps if you tell me what brought you all the way here from Metropolis, I might be inclined to offer you some hospitality. Rather than showing you the door.”

“Information. From a contact on the Watchtower.” Miss Lane produced a tablet from her shoulder bag. “A rather large amount of data has been backed up from their servers, apparently for delivery to a satellite office of your company.”

“Ah.” Claire’s lips curved up at the edges. “Looking for an exclusive, Miss Lane, or just rattling my cage to see what falls out? I knew girls like you in highschool, you know - pushy, driven, looking for a top mark or a big project that would win daddy’s approval. I never liked any of them, either. Is Mister Kent merely trailing along after you to carry your bags, or does he also have a topic on his mind?”

“Clark is a very accomplished journalist, and often thinks of questions I never would have. He’s no good at getting into buildings that don’t want to let him in, though.” Lois smirked. “As for an exclusive... I doubt there’s a journalist east of the Mississippi who wouldn’t love

an exclusive with Bruce Wayne's prodigal daughter. I'm more interested in why the Justice League is handing over data to you, though."

"That's private, corporate business that you're welcome to try to talk out of me all you like. Still, as a favor to the *Planet*, fifteen minutes of my time. Will that be sufficient, Miss Lane?"

"Quite sufficient." Lois gestured toward the office. "Shall we?"

"Mister Kent first," Claire corrected her dryly. "Then you." Without looking back, she walked into her office and let her voice drift back through the door. "Do shut the door, Mister Kent."

Kal stepped into the office behind her, closing the door. "I tried to talk her out of coming down here, but... well, Lois has a habit of knowing when's a bad time for her to be somewhere."

"Is she an eavesdropper?" Kara settled into her chair and arched a dark eyebrow, the edges of her mouth still curved up in the faintest sort of smile. "I wouldn't want her to scoop you."

"She can't hear through that door, and is currently interrogating your secretary." Kal glanced toward the heavy wood door, and his shy Clark Kent smile turned lopsided. "She's a very... focused... woman."

Oh, cousin. No. Please. Not a human woman. Really? Kara bit back a sigh and shook her head, putting her feet up on the desk and letting herself float a comfortable inch or so above her chair. "You know very well why the Justice League sent me the data they did, and why I don't want it in the papers. So what actually brings you to my doorstep, *kaen*, that a call to any of my various communications devices could not have accomplished?"

"Your plan. The one that involves you being kidnapped by someone who's financing the Triads." Clark shook his head. "Your exceptionally dangerous plan."

"Ah." She chuckled and reached into the bottom drawer of her desk, taking out a bottle of bourbon and a glass, then ostentatiously poured and took a long drink. "Don't you mean Claire Wayne being kidnapped? Probably from one of the notorious nightclubs she's been frequenting, likely by hired talent?"

"That. Yes." Clark shook his head. "That's why you've been in those clubs - to get yourself kidnapped?"

Kara laughed softly, shaking her head and balancing the glass on her fingertips. "You thought I was there for the decor? The company? The terrible, never-to-be-sufficiently-accursed music? Rao help me, Kal, how do these humans stand that noise?"

"I didn't know what you were doing... maybe business contacts. Those clubs are full of the sons and daughters of Gotham's elite." He shrugged. "But... trying to get yourself kidnapped?"

“I need to find out who’s behind the Triad’s expansion, which means following the money. That’s buried deep, so I need to shake things up. A kidnapping would be fast, dirty, outside the usual chain of things - the Triad in Gotham would never risk offending the Wayne family that way. Our friend in the shadows might tip his or her hand.” Kara smiled wryly. “Fortunately, they’re kidnapping Claire Wayne, who is merely a fragile human girl. They’ll have to handle with care.”

“Or they could try to hurt you, find it not working, and wonder what’s up. Expose you, Bruce, everyone.” Clark rested a hand on the desk. “You can’t know they won’t try that.”

“It’s a risk worth taking.” She set her jaw and leaned forward, meeting his eyes steadily. “Every day this goes on, the Triad put more drugs and guns on the streets of this city. Demand more protection money, extort more favors from local business owners just trying to live. I can’t stand by and do nothing, cousin, and I can’t send anyone else in my place. Not when they could be harmed by it. I am faster and far more intelligent than any opposition I am likely to encounter in this task. I am trained for it. I have no intention of backing away now. Bruce understands the risks, and he agreed to the plan, and I’ve taken steps to see that my other projects will continue in the event of any unfortunate revelations. Besides, they won’t hurt me. I’m a valuable young woman.” A grim little smile played on Kara’s lips. “They’re far more likely to try to take sexual advantage of me, which I also have no intention of allowing.”

“If you have all your contingency plans in place...” Clark began speaking, then sighed. “All right. I won’t try to stop you any longer. Just be careful.”

“Thank you, cousin.” The use of the human word was a deliberate olive branch, and she smiled when she said it. “Rest assured, I will take no more risks than I have to. Now, do you require any material for your newspaper, or will you be able to invent my stonewalling on your own?”

“I believe I can handle it. Shall we call Lois in?”

“Indeed. You will wait outside and try to talk to my secretary as well, will you not?” Kara stood up and offered him her hand, stepping on the reflexive cultural programming that told her it was completely inappropriate to offer touch so casually. It was out of place here, on this new world, and she had swiftly learned to suppress it.

He shook her hand with a small smile. “I will do that... and pry something out of her that will assemble whatever story Lois ends up writing.”

Kara laughed, leaned up enough to kiss his cheek, then headed for the door. “I’m sure Lisa will be properly apologetic when it comes out in the papers. Take care of yourself, *kaen*, and give Rao’s blessings to Diana for me.” She opened the door, instantly at home in Claire Wayne’s skin again, and clicked her tongue in a way designed to carry. “For the last time, that is a private corporate matter. If you’ll kindly get out of my office before you break anything expensive, Mister Kent, I’d appreciate it.”

“Of course, of course.” Clark ducked as if he were expecting something heavy to be hurled

at him as he retreated.

“Miss Lane,” Claire purred, modulating her voice to a smoky husky that said *playgirl* in any language and still carried the faintest hint of mockery, “please step into my parlor. I’m sure we’ll find something to talk about.”

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

So, just a quick apology to all our fans - we've been having a rough few months, and it's been cutting into our writing time. Throw in a lot of idea scatter, and a lot of our ongoing stories are lagging as a result. The good news is, we intend to get back to every single one of them. The bad is that it may take some time.

Fortunately, patient ones, we have updates today. Hopefully you'll enjoy them.

“The girl and I have a great deal to discuss...” The man who was speaking was large - the distance between his heart and lungs, not to mention the size of said organs, made that very clear. His voice was accented, but the accent was unrecognizable - obviously trained, rather than learned during upbringing - and the molecules of some sort of fluid scraped against metal tubes, following him wherever he went. “And we cannot talk if she is asleep. Wake her.”

Two hard slaps impacted against her face, one on each cheek, from large hands. Large, but not large enough to belong to the man who was speaking. Claire Wayne jerked awake with a gasp, dizzy and disoriented, thrashing instinctively against the darkness of her blindfolded eyes and the cuffed chains binding her to the metal chair that was in turn bolted to the cement floor beneath her. She was still weak and disoriented from the drugs that had been slipped to her in her fourth vodka martini of the night at Black Vertigo, plastered into the VIP booth between two women with scruples that carried reserve prices in four digits and the son of a media tycoon who cost his father half a million or more a year buying off sources to keep him out of the tabloids. The residual toxins in her blood were still trying to drag her back into black emptiness again, and Claire slumped as panic and adrenaline slackened under their merciful pressure.

It was important to understand the biological foundations of a performance like this, and Kara Zor-El had reviewed them relentlessly. The trick with moving subtly with a blow, for instance, to reduce the relative impact and spare the man waking her (180 centimeters, Blackgate tattoos, distinctive smell of gin and cheap aftershave, healed fractures in his lower jaw and two metal pins in his right shoulder) from inflicting a badly fractured hand on himself from the impact with her cheek - that had required quite a bit of practice with Bruce and Richard to perfect.

In many ways, it amused her to contemplate, she had more thoroughly prepared for this kidnapping than her would-be captors themselves.

She had been aware of the men watching her for over an hour before she smelled the distinctive tang of opiates in her drink, and the taut anticipation had made performing the

slow descent into stupor that followed a difficult proposition. Allowing herself to move as dead weight - cushioning herself subtly with her ability to manipulate gravity where necessary to conceal her greater density - had been a far simpler exercise, made more so when they had covered her eyes and then hooded her for anonymity. The layers of cloth were no more a barrier to her vision than the walls of the van into which they loaded her, and it had been a simple matter to watch and listen to every step of her own kidnapping - the cut-off points, the transfer between vehicles and guards, the neighborhoods through which they passed. Every detail was more data to be filed for further investigation, and her memory was more than sufficient to ensure a perfect recall when convenience allowed.

That would wait for later, however. For the moment, she had to convince her captors she was exactly what she appeared to be.

The man who stood before her was more than two hundred centimeters in height, and, from his size and musculature, had to weigh nearly 160 kilograms. His skin tone indicated mixed race, but his features were so distorted by overdeveloped musculature as to be no help in determining his genetic background. A tank, similar to one a scuba diver might wear, hung from his back, with four titanium-alloy tubes running from it into his neck and shoulderblades. He wore slacks (wool, custom, no labels), heavy boots (working-class commercial, untraceable) and a custom-cut suit jacket large enough to accommodate both his shoulders and the tank without waistcoat or shirt. Masculine display, then - an exercise in dominance over his surroundings or a reflection of ego unchecked. She cross-referenced the face with her memory of Bruce's files, found a name. *Diego Dorrance. Bane.*

"Miss Wayne..." Bane kept his voice urbane even as he began to pace, as if he had more energy than space. "I have heard that you are a woman who prefers to get straight to business. To get it done, so that pleasure can come more quickly. If your reputation is accurate, I encourage you to answer my questions with all the speed and clarity you can manage. Do you understand?"

Claire Wayne's voice was thick with drugs, with fear, with adrenaline, but it was still a thing of hammered metal and bone-deep anger - the kind of anger only an unwanted child, an outsider, a lifelong climber clawing at the windows of the manor house knows. "You could have just made a fucking appointment."

Bane spun toward her at the profanity, his face a mask of rage and hate, and the other men in the room fled to corners, putting as much distance between themselves and their boss as possible. But, within a second, the large man took a deep breath, and, when he exhaled it, the deformed visage was emotionless once more. "No, Miss Wayne, I do not think I could have. You just came very near to making me angry... if you do make me angry, neither of us will get what we want."

Kara studied his expression through the cloth hiding her eyes and took note of that rage. *Temper. That could be useful, when the time comes.* "I'm good at that. Making people angry." Claire's laugh was giddy and ragged, the adrenaline starting to wear down and the opiates and lingering alcohol in her system lubricating her mouth. "It's a character flaw. You should have heard the way my mother could bite her tongue when I came home late."

“Then, instead of you telling me what I want to know then going free, you will very likely be ripped to very small pieces - too small to identify - then fed to the fish in the harbor.” Bane walked to her. “Because that’s what I do, when I’m angry. Do you understand *that*, Miss Wayne?”

“Have to say that’s a new one.” Fear in the voice now - not too much, but enough to make it clear that it was stupid young pride talking and not a lack of proper fear for the man before her. “My father would be pretty pissed. But I guess that wouldn’t do me much good, would it?”

“It really would not.” Bane grinned, showing a mouth full of teeth - most crooked - before speaking again. “Now that we understand one another... your company is expecting a shipment of nitrium ferride. Four hundred gallons. The last man we took knew the night, but not the time or the ship... said only executives would have access to the full information. I need to know the ship.”

Kara considered for three-tenths of a second, weighing her options. Weighing the authenticity of Claire Wayne and the man in front of her who did not know she could see him. This was its own sort of laboratory, here in this concrete room in a warehouse on the lower east side, tasting stale air and listening to the distant whisper of the sea. An experiment like any other - one that necessitated developing a hypothesis and then executing the testing of it while minimizing risk.

She was enjoying herself.

“I’m not a shipping manager - I don’t do logistics.” A snap of confused defiance, layered with fear - a convincing simulation of a woman caught in a potentially lethal paradox. “I can get you the information you want, but I don’t know it off the top of my head. Is admitting that going to get me killed?”

“Bring the girl a laptop.” Bane glared at one of his men, who rushed off. “You, untie her hands. Everything you send, Miss Wayne, will go through our servers, and our people are *very* good at finding hidden messages or requests for location. It will then pass through multiple proxies. You will not find help by delaying.”

Perfect. Kara buried a smile deep in her chest. *This will do perfectly.* Her hands were loose now, and she lifted them and made a show of rubbing at her wrists as though to ease cramps and chaffing. “And I thought I knew about hostile takeovers, Mister... I have no idea what your name is and probably shouldn’t ask.” Claire’s laugh was rough and bitter, but sharp with genuine amusement at the irony of ‘negotiating’ like this. “Look, do I strike you as a woman who wants to die over a few barrels of chemicals?”

“Very clever girl.” The laptop arrived, and the goon set it in Claire’s lap before removing the blindfold. “Find me the name of the ship, then.”

Kara blinked as though letting her eyes adjust to the light, settling her fingers slowly onto the keyboard, and then dropped her eyes to the floor with the air of a child caught peeking. “Am I going to be swearing a blood oath not to describe you all to the cops or something, or did I just kill myself? Sorry, but I have to ask.”

Bane laughed, a booming thunder sound like the crash of stones. “You think I don’t already have a dozen arrest warrants? You think we’ll let you know where this place is? You think I give a fuck who you talk to? We get the chems, you walk. The boat doesn’t show, you lie to us, you die.”

“Payment on delivery.” Claire’s lips curved in a grim little smile, and she finally looked up to meet his eyes as her fingers began to tap at the keyboard. They were dark oak, bloodshot, too small for his head - another symptom of the chemical abuse that was slowly destroying his cardio-vascular and nervous systems even as it amplified his muscular growth far past any bodybuilder’s ambitions. *The things that human beings will do to their bodies*, Kara sighed silently in the privacy of her own thoughts. “Nice to know that even kidnappers can be businessmen, huh?”

“Just find the ship.” Bane turned away from her sharply, walking to a chair. The seat almost buckled under his weight.

Privacy at last. While Claire’s shoulders slumped resentfully and she returned to her work with all the enthusiasm of a schoolgirl at the end of summer facing her long-delayed homework, Kara was at work on the laptop. The security was good - remarkably good - but whoever had programmed it hadn’t been prepared for external penetration by a Kryptonian supercomputer aided and abetted by a user whose mind and reflexes operated at a significant fraction of the speed of light. The flicker in the security reporting lasted barely a thousandth of a second, and then she was in and the server was as convinced she and her tap belonged there as it was that its own primary operators had access. She signalled her own computer in the cave to cross-link with the Batcomputer, authorized it to begin a full-scale shadow copy of the entire system to which the servers and proxies connected, then actually set about accessing the shipping database of the newly rechristened Astra Technologies. That took rather substantially longer - about four or five minutes - not least because she was determined not to offer Bane’s computer-savvy friends a backdoor into her own systems.

There. Claire reached up to close the computer, hesitated, glanced up. “The ship’s the *Polar Sunrise*, due to arrive at the Burleigh Memorial Shipping Center, Dock 73. You want the updated manifest and schedule, too?”

Bane gave an affirmative grunt, then, a moment later, added “That would be useful.”

“Is there somewhere I can network a printer, put it on a flashstick, send an e-mail...?” Claire’s lip quirked in a tiny smile. “I can’t exactly have my people call your people.”

“Never mind.” Bane rose to his feet, then paused. A voice came from his ear - an earpiece, small and discreet, and quiet enough that anyone without Kryptonian senses could be cuddled up next to him - that thought would linger - and still not hear it. The voice was raspy, as if it did not get used often enough. “Bane. Trouble. I’m shutting down the server and rebooting the firewalls.” Bane began to whirl toward Claire again, then froze at the next words.

“Break-in came... not from you. The signatures... have hints of *chiroptera*.”

Bane grunted in response to the voice, then glared at Claire. “Servers are going down. I’ll have to wait on those manifests.”

“If you want help with your tech support,” Claire offered, her lip curling in the way a human girl’s would have were she to decide to risk a momentary flirtation with a very bad boy, “it’s just one of the services that Astra Technologies is happy to offer.”

“I have the *very* best.” The emphasis on the word seemed more targeted toward the man in the earpiece than toward Claire.

No affection among thieves, then. I wonder who his partner is? She contemplated the earpiece a moment, filing that voice away. Meanwhile, Claire slumped back in the chair and shrugged her shoulders almost casually. “See, everyone says that. But Astra is going to *be* the best, and everyone is is going to eat our dirt. So if you change your mind, let me know. Happy to help. In the meanwhile, would there be such a thing as a drink in this place? I’m drying out, and I wouldn’t mind a little of the hair of the dog.”

“Get the girl some water.” Bane spoke into the air, and three thugs rushed off at once to do as they were told. Another fear-induced organizational imperfection to remember. Claire just groaned her disappointment and slumped, lifting her eyes to the ceiling in silent protest.

The men returned, having only fetched one glass of water between them, and the one carrying it passed it to her. Bane returned to his pacing. “Only a few hours... only a few hours and I’ll have it...”

Claire glanced at the man who’d given her the water and pitched her voice low and rough, for his ears only and tinged with a hint of speculative promise. “He always like this?”

“I ain’t sayin’ nothin’ about him,” the man murmured, keeping his voice to a near-whisper.

“Fine, fine.” She shrugged, affecting bored nonchalance, then gave him a jaded smile. “So what do we do for fun while we kill a couple hours?”

“You sit in that chair. I watch.” The man shrugged. “I’d rather die of boredom than die of Bane.”

A sensible thug. How rare. Kara threw an ostentatious shrug and sigh into her performance, affecting a properly exasperated tone. “You people are no fun at all. I thought criminals were supposed to be... you know, glamorous. Exciting. Something.”

“I hit people and take their money. The guy over there usually steals cars. No clue what the guy by the door does, but he’s a mean one, and there’s a big knife hidden in his pant leg. He’s made sure the rest of us knew it. I hear Bane broke the Batman’s back, once... but that’s what everyone’s heard. I believe it.”

Cold anger coiled its way up through Kara’s chest at the thought of Bruce in that kind of pain, at the idea of what must have been required for him to regain mobility after that kind of injury, but she didn’t let it touch the disinterested skepticism in Claire’s face or voice.

“Breaking the back of an urban legend - now there’s something everyone ought to put on their resume. Do you think he does autographs? Photos for the *Gotham Inquisitor*, just ahead of the scantily clad model of the week?”

“I know I wouldn’t ask him. For anything. Ever.” The man turned his eyes nervously toward the door. “I... shouldn’t be talking to you.”

“You know, I never expected being kidnapped to be *boring*. I thought it would at least involve meeting interesting people.” Kara let her eyes roam the site one more time, locking details like the contents of her captors’ pockets and the serial numbers of their weapons away in her memory, then started in simulated surprise. “Do you hear that?”

“Hear... hear what?” The man looked away, toward the window. “Is someone there?”

“I thought I heard something outside,” Kara confirmed, playing Claire’s sudden nerves to the hilt. “Boots or some kind of whirring noise. If someone comes... the police or... or *him*... you’re not going to shoot me, are you? Because I’ve been nothing but cooperative.”

“Of course we’re not... we’re not suicidal...” The man murmured, looking out the window again. “Boots... could be him. Bane.”

Bane looked up from his pacing. “No Batman... not yet. I don’t feel him here... and I’d feel him before you heard him. Eugene, check outside for cops, or Cobblepot’s people.”

The man who stole cars nodded and started for the door, and for the first time that night not one of her guards was watching Claire. Kara smiled tightly, twisted her wrist to pop the handcuffs she was wearing, and pressed the hidden catch on the silver bracelet wrapped around her right wrist. The lights, the phones, the computers - everything electronic within a hundred and fifty meters, in fact - all died at once. While the EM pulse was still taking effect, she peeled the pearls from her left wrist to fling them out across the room with enough velocity to be no more than fragile blurs in the sudden dark, and her hands were back behind her in an approximation of their previous position in less than three tenths of a second.

She heard each ‘pearl’ shatter, detonating its small flash-and-smoke charge, and the suddenly lightless room flooded with a dense black fog.

“Pat, get the girl! Mark, the door!” Bane’s voice erupted from the darkness, loud enough to inspire instant obedience from his terrified goons. The mean one rushed toward the door, growling as he went, pulling the long, serrated knife from his leg as he went before nearly tripping over a piece of equipment on the floor. The one with whom Kara had been speaking started stumbling back toward her, away from the window.

Kara Zor’El smiled narrowly and went to work. It was fractionally harder in heels and an expensive dress - she had to be careful not to exert too much pressure on the garment and inflict tears that would be difficult to explain later - but she had the speed and the training to take her time about this. She picked the sensible fellow first and made it as gentle as she could, a sharp jab to the back of his head with just enough force to lightly smash the frontal lobe of his brain against his skull, dropping him to the ground in a senseless heap. She took ‘Eugene’ next, catching him just inside the door and using the frame to apply the necessary trauma to his temple to put him down. For ‘Mark’ she allowed herself a moment or two of extra time, dislocating his left knee and his right shoulder before bruising his trachea sufficiently to silence him, because if the injury patterns were going to match Bruce’s work...

well, better that it be this one than the others. He might learn something in his period of recovery.

Three targets, three seconds. That left Bane, and she watched him through a dozen layers of thermal and electromagnetic radiation not affected by the smoke with the hunter's patience that was much the same for this work as it was in the laboratory - stillness and consideration until the right approach was found, and prompt efficiency in the execution.

"I *do* feel you..." Bane's voice broke through the haze, announcing his location without any effort at hiding it. "Did you alert them on purpose, I wonder, or are you getting clumsy in your old age? Does the *murciélagos* even age?"

He ages. Kara compressed her lips and set her teeth to drive away the thought of the layered, healed fractures in Bruce's bones and the scars his carefully tailored suits and armored battle gear so effectively hid from the world. He was a remarkable man taking advantage of every medical innovation on the planet, but he was only mortal, and every time she looked at him she was reminded of it. Now this monster, this brutal thug who made a mockery out of the idea that human beings had evolved past the most primitive sort of bloodsports, had the temerity to make jest of it.

Silently, there in the dark between one tick of the distant Gotham clocktower and another, Kara decided that she was going to hurt him for that.

She kicked off her shoes and threw herself into the air, bouncing almost weightlessly from the ceiling, and her first blow tore the belt of chemical cylinders from his waist and hurled them across the room. Her second and third removed the already primed cylinders from the heavy injection apparatus in each of his gloves, scattering them across the floor, and then she drove her fingertips into the back of his shoulderblade to fracture the bone and force the shoulder out of joint. She took both knees before the shoulder had time to finish dislocating, then twirled away to hover a few inches from the ceiling on the other side of the room and watch. *I wonder, she speculated coldly, if he'll be able to avoid smashing his face when he falls?*

He was. Even with his injuries, even with his cylinders gone, he was quick. Too quick for a human. He caught himself with his one good arm, grunting as he hit the ground. Amazingly, he tried to rise again. Perhaps, had he been beaten just a little less past human endurance, he would have made it to his feet. Instead, he wobbled, fell, and the deprivation of his drug to his brain took consciousness from him.

The icy pleasure she took in seeing him fall that second time was probably not something the priests of Rao would have approved of in a scientist's heart, but she did not regret it.

"Kal," she whispered in the dark, "would you be so kind as to contact the Batman by his League communicator and inform him that the crime scene at Temple and East Shore is ready for him, and for a police response?"

Then she slipped back into her shoes, returned herself to the overturned chair to which she'd been bound, and arranged the broken ropes and handcuffs beside her before simulating

unconsciousness again. It was easier to be questioned by the police, after all, if one could plausibly claim not to know anything.

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