Prey Mate

by Malkavian Logic

Summary

Raven's second heat is upon her, and she has been forced to her extremity. This time, she allows her Demonic instincts to come to the fore. Raven is on the prowl... Who might catch her eye, and what will she do when that happens? The paths of Fate that open as a result take the entire world by surprise.
It had rained earlier and the streets of Jump, now darkened and damp, glistened in the light struggling to pierce the overcast and freshly unburdened clouds. The atmosphere was slightly humid—warm, but not hot in the latter half of May. Kamala’s black Converse with pink skull-and-crossbones treaded over the sidewalk, meandering her down random blocks and across varying streets.

Eventually, the sound of something... unique—something for her—came to her ears. It was loud, carrying from several blocks away, and she knew that was her destination. She always sought out the same place on Wednesdays, but that place often moved. Therefore, sometimes it was a bit of a walk to hunt it down. The closer she drew the louder and more distinct the sound became. It was fast, driving, and percussive.

Kamala adjusted the shoulder strap of her case and picked up her pace. Even as she neared, she was able to pick out the djembe’s rhythm from beneath the driving force of sticks and buckets. Her destination would be on the sidewalk beside some subway stairs on summer and spring days like this; when weather was worse, her destination took to the underground. It didn’t take her long see a small gaggle of people idly hovering about two blocks away.

Kammie’s grin grew. Already, her steps began to move to the beats. She was blissfully unaware that she had a tail.

Last year had been unbearable. Raven had warded her doors to keep everyone out—and even then, she had nearly broken down those barriers herself after going stir-crazy. There was no way she was
going to go through that again... even if it meant doing something she had never done before. Worse, it wasn’t going to be a one-time thing, she was sure. She had 15 days to endure. Raven hoped she could keep this low-key... and that it wouldn’t demolish whatever reputation she had.

A Demon’s heat wasn’t something anyone could just ignore and she came close to doing something catastrophically stupid last time. This time, she would choose the healthier—if seedier—approach. That was why Raven, in a pair of loose, black pants and a blue hoodie despite the warmth of the humid day, wandered the streets. She was on the prowl.

Raven wasn’t driven by any shallow set of parameters. The mystic Titan didn’t really know what drove her, honestly. It was purely guesswork, supposing she would realize what she wanted when she came across it. Up and down the blocks and streets, random districts, in alleyways, on sidewalks, in clubs... So far, nothing had caught her fancy.

The demi-Demon had just cut through a random alley when she caught sense of something—raw power, potential, and the heady scent of magic undetectable to any nose. Raven’s head jerked up and she blinked several times.

‘What was that?’

Almost instinctively, she stepped out onto the sidewalk and began tracking the mystical, mystifying sense. Her empathy picked up emotions of camaraderie and anticipation. Underneath that was a chaotic swelling of joy and self-assurance. Altogether, it was irresistible and Raven scanned the heads for someone to pinpoint.

‘Mm, who might you be?’

Then she saw it. Under a black baseball cap, shocks of pink stuck down in a mass of spikes. There was some kind of black, nylon case—an instrument case?—over the carrier’s shoulder. The purple tee and pink sports bra beneath were all she could make out from the back and in the gaps of people moving along the sidewalk.

Raven caught another whiff of that pungent magic hanging about the woman. Oh, yes—this was the one. Their emotions, their obvious capability due to the residue of magic around them... this was clearly a keeper. Her mind locked onto the girl, found herself almost forcing back tunnel vision... and restraining herself from shoving people aside, likely into the street, just to reach the girl.

She stamped down hard on those notions and took a deep, steadying breath. Raven needed to control herself, ignore the curling and coiling heat in her gut just a little longer. She hadn’t even introduced herself and she would prefer at least to know the name of the person she was trying to seduce...

‘How the mighty have fallen. Behold—Scath; Goddess of the Cult of Blood, Overlord of the Eighth..., virgin seductress. ...I’m so glad I killed Father before he could witness this particular disgrace.’

-=Kamala=-

Kamala almost flinched. Something had nudged—kicked—her probability sense and it took everything she had not to bolt down the nearest cul-de-sac and scramble up a fire escape just to get a bird’s eye view. What the Hell was that?

Jinx let her feet carry her unconsciously even as her frown deepened and she tried to divine what the best course of action to take would be. Sure, she felt that swift shift in the future, but there were no
further urges. She supposed that meant that either she had absolutely no control over it... or the outcome was totally up to her.

For now, she decided to wait it out. If whatever she felt wasn’t going to endanger anyone, then she would just continue on to her destination and see what unfolded. Kamala shook her head and blinked. She was fast coming upon her destination; somehow, she’d managed to ignore the loudness of the street performance until she was practically on top of it.

Kammie slowed and hedged around the edges of the small crowd for several moments. Finally, she found a little niche and slid toward the front of it. The street performance in question consisted of two men. The performer on the left from Kamala’s perspective was a black man in a black tank and dark blue jeans sitting on a bucket. In front of him were several buckets that he was pounding with an amazing proficiency.

To the right stood a man in a red tee and some wide, denim shorts in dark grey. He was a tanned Caucasian—not unusual for the area. This guy wore some frameless, rectangular glasses, and had a mass of curly brown hair peaking under a dark grey flat top cap. Strapped around his waist was a djembe, which he was using to provide an accompaniment of wicked, varying bass lines for his fellow drummer.

She waited for the rapid beats pounding out from the buckets and the djembe to reach fever pitch. They had a wicked beat going, but they eventually broke it with an intense finish to set up for the next round. There was an all-around applause and even a few whistles. She waited as the people’s praise began to die down and stepped forward.

“Ah, yer drummin’ sucks!”

The crowd looked mildly affronted, and both men looked over to her with raised brows. She broke into a grin. Seconds later, they did, too.

“Hey! Kammie!” they warmly greeted.

Kamala wandered over and settled herself to the left of the bucket drummer, who poked her with a stick. She stuck her tongue out at him through a Cheshire smile. She pulled her case off her shoulder and began unzipping.

“You two been at it long?”

“Only about half an hour. Darryl happened along not ten minutes after I got started,” the drummer jerked a thumb behind himself, “but we figured you’d be along. Amp’s all good to go, jus’ plug yourself in.”

“Wicked. Gimme a minute to make sure I got tune an’ everything. Pick a beat out and I’ll hitch on your rhythm.”

The two nodded and took a few more moments to catch their wind. They could go on for hours, which was impressive given Terry’s drumming frenzy, but that didn’t mean they didn’t need a break every now and then. It wouldn’t take her long to set up, anyhow.

Kamala removed her instrument—a lovely sitar gleaming in the soft daylight—then took off her hat and shook her head. Those spikes, no longer held down under the hat, sprung into her signature horns and she took a quick moment to bind them with two black bands. It was the work of only a few seconds to jack her sitar into the amp. Afterward, she did some quick, soft tuning; most of it was already good to go... Still, she liked to check rather than leave it to her unique brand of ‘chance.’
Darryl’s djembe provided a deep base line, and she began nodding her head. It sounded familiar, but it wasn’t until Terry began a more sedate pace on his buckets that she knew it was a cover. She quickly tried to place it.

Suddenly, she smirked and leaned over to bump Terry’s shoulder, ‘Ah, you do love your grunge. ‘Heart-Shaped Box’ it is, boys.’

They gave pause to their drumming and she nodded, picking up the initial bars to start the song off on the right foot. As she played those few notes, she felt another slight nudge, and pressed herself to bring out her best. She wasn’t sure why she had to play so deeply to her heart, but whatever it was, she began pouring more passion into her sitar—throwing those tricky extra chords to cover for the lack of a second guitarist.

Terry and Darryl perceived her almost frenetic emotion and threw all they had into it, as well. Soon their little crowd had become a much larger crowd. All three of them pitched into chorus when it came about.

“Hey! Wait! I got a new complaint! Forever in debt to your priceless advice...”

‘Certainly am that, aren’t I, Mr. Chaos? No, don’t answer that. I’ll just sing your song, ‘kay?’

-=Raven=-

The thrumming, buzzing chaos in her mind was hard to control. She could scarcely think at times and that was bad in such a crowded place. The gawkers were growing in number—and she was among them. However, as the new song began, she felt her heart ease its slamming thrashes against her ribcage. It felt like she could breathe again...

She had the vague but firm impression that she had narrowly avoided a major blowout; she could have lost control—so tightly pressed amongst so many people and boxed in by their emotions. It had been overwhelming. Now all she could sense was a harmony. Everyone seemed in agreement, somehow, and they liked what they heard. Raven closed her eyes, listening to Jinx sing.

She had been surprised for all of five seconds before an entirely new surprise took her. Jinx’s voice was intoxicating, just like everything else she felt about the girl. In that moment, Raven didn’t care what their history was... she just knew she had to have that bewitching witch.

‘I have heard that music has charms to soothe a savage breast... I wonder, Jinx, what else will you soothe within me?’

Slowly, the driving compulsion that had been troubling her slowly began to abate, and she focused purely on the song and the music Jinx and her friends evoked. The burning didn’t completely douse itself, but became far more manageable. It was a simmering heat, nestled warmly just below the pit of her stomach; it was less aching and almost... sensual. As far as Raven was concerned, that was by far a more endurable sensation than when she’d been too stir-crazy to remain in the Tower.

However, Raven was also aware that these things came in waves. She wondered if she would be able to rein herself in a second time. She supposed time would tell...

Raven saw someone approaching from her right; the only reason she really noticed them was due to their asynchronous emotions from the crowd. The young woman that approached had more in common with the bucket drummer than Jinx or the djembe-player. The case carried in the girl’s hand gave away the intent.
It was only her first song, but she had already attuned herself to her friends. She could feel the order of the songs, mixed with the chaos of their off-instruments’ improvisations and their personal additions of flair to the grunge piece. Kamala felt improvised music and cover songs like this in an entirely different way than other people could. Even as her mezrab plucked the strings of her sitar, her mind plucked at the strings of Fate—traced the song along all its possible paths.

As she concluded Nirvana’s grunge, she took in the subtle shifts in probability. Kamala decided not to start another song. Something was about to happen and she might as well let it.

“Hey, Pinkie. Go home and learn to play a real guitar.”

Jinx grinned, her eyes flicking to the edge of the crowd. There was a Thai girl standing there, case in hand, with a mischievous look on her face. The young woman wore light blue jeans and a lavender tee. She and her percussionists exclaimed as one.

“Nintendo!”

Nin took her place beside Darryl and opened her case to reveal her Yamaha electric violin. It was a cool ocean blue and charcoal black. Kammie motioned her to the amp sitting between Darryl and Terry.

“We saved you a spot. Hop on in. I got one for us, but it needs backing on the vocals.”

With the four of them together, their little group was complete. As Nin got herself situated on the amp, Kammie took them into the beginning of their next song, repeating the opening few bars in minimal for them to see where she was going. Once she saw Nin pull her bow, she began to throw in chords.

“Cherish,” her voice rang out, “Two circular views of blue with a grey shade; So captivating; More than you know…”

Even though she had just started, Kamala could feel that urge again... that nudge to play above her typical. However, this time, she decided to open up her senses. There was a tangible aura hanging in the air. It wasn’t Human, that much was sure; it had an almost electric effect, making her feel as though the hair on the back of her neck and arms was standing on end. She suppressed a little shiver as the hairs followed her aura’s example. Kammie felt the light brushings of mental contact sweeping out through the crowd—and against her.

Nin backed her up as her voice drew louder to be heard over their louder playing, “False perceptions; That brought forth these questions; Of truth, love, and hope…”

When it brushed her mind, she tensed only slightly. Whatever was hovering about them didn’t press; she was infinitely grateful for that mercy. Kamala had typically... violent reactions to any sort of mental contact. So long as whatever was in their audience respected her privacy, she wouldn’t mind it basking in the auras.

Likely, it was just some random Demon out on a feed... possibly a Conditional Demon. Considering Fate’s urge to play better, she felt it was likely a passion Conditional soaking up her love of music... possibly one of happiness? Well, regardless of what it was, the best path was probably to just immerse herself and give the Demon a nice snack.
“Now that you’re injuring; I’ll carry you with me; Just please hold on...”

Darryl and Terry ramped up the group for the chorus. Kammie knew she was pushing the envelope and Nin was probably not expecting all the little extras she kept throwing in—forcing the woman to play catch-up for a bit. However, she couldn’t shake the feeling that she needed to delve deeply and utterly into the song.

“Disappear and dissolve; A weakening wall; Will one day fall... It’s wise to sever our loss; A redefined pulse; Through your iris...”

She felt the four of them finally fall into synchronization, a harmony between them as they each discovered their place in things. It was probably the fastest it had ever happened. Jinx knew she was mostly responsible, pushing out minute bits of power to manipulate probability. Her friends struck more spot-on chords, were on the ball with all their beats, and everything went swimmingly.

Kammie didn’t really feel guilty about manipulating things like this; if Darryl, Terry, or Nin weren’t good musicians, no amount of luck would have helped them. She was merely promoting the best they had to offer. Their audience slowly swelled, and was starting to push pedestrians toward the edges of the sidewalk.

The applause to their song was quite loud and she decided it was about time to see if she could get Terry to bring his actual drum set to a club. They weren’t a typical band by any means, but she was certain that they would get some positive reaction—not to mention the pocket money they would make. It would be better than the occasional donations.

None of them did this for the money, and likely none of them would stop playing the streets even if they did the occasional club, but it could prove fun.

“Wow, Kammie. What got a hold of you, today?” Darryl asked.

Nin looked confused, “What, this wasn’t some big finish for you guys?”

“Only her second, she started like this.”

Kammie shrugged inelegantly, “Hey guys, can I discuss something really quick with ya before we get up to our next song? I have one more idea for this one.”

“We were about to break for lunch,” Terry mentioned.

Kamala nodded; the sun hung high in the sky and she was getting a stirring of hunger.

“I gotta do one more—there’s someone out in our audience and I feel the need to impress.”

“Oh, does someone have an admirer?”

“Not the way you think, Nin. I wish,” Kammie laughed, “Whoever’s out there, we’ve never met.”

They looked at her oddly, but they didn’t really argue with her. One thing they learned early on was that, no matter what Kamala’s idiosyncrasies, it was always better to go with them. Somehow, things seemed to work out for them. Jinx hadn’t explained a whole lot to them, and to this day remained thankful they never asked her any hard questions. Some questions they had might not have had answers she could readily give.
At least they didn’t have problems with the fact that she was a Meta. They didn’t really get what she said about her powers, but it was a moot point. None of them had ever even seen her so much as flick a mini-hex off her fingertip. The random, favorable probability thing was inherent, and they just accepted that she had some strange kind of preternatural sense.

“You guys mind covering something for me? It’s a little different than our usual stuff.”

“Shoot; if we know it, we’ll do it for ya,” Terry supported, “Jus’ name your beat.”

“You guys listen to Evanescence? Know that one, ‘Lose Control?’”

“I know that one,” Nin supplied.

Terry had heard it a few times and he could at least improvise what he didn’t know. It wasn’t really in Darryl’s interests, but he said he could support whatever Terry put out. That was more than enough for Nin and Kammie, who would lay down everything they needed to fill in the blanks.

Kamala started with a high plucking in replacement of the piano. Nin was supporting some vocals, supplanting them with violin and voice. Terry slipped in with a soft beat shortly before she began singing.

“You... don’t... remember my name,” she slowly sang out, “I... don’t really care. ...Can we play the game your way? Can we really lose control?”

Then Nin took to some harder playing and Terry followed suit as the song caught its pace. Kamala could feel the aura of her Demon patron practically throbbing and she couldn’t really figure it, but smiled nonetheless. She wasn’t usually about vocals all that much, even though she had been greatly complimented on it before, but she was going to push herself for it today.

As Nin brought their song back to a softer note, Darryl provided a subdued bass line for them that had feet tapping. Their supernatural lurker’s aura practically pulsed in time, as well. Jinx grinned.

“Mary had a lamb... His eyes black as coal,” she crooned almost flirtatiously, “If we play very quiet, my lamb... Mary never has to know!” Nin and Terry brought their song to higher volumes again. Kammie brought a wispy rasp to her next lines, “Just once in my life; I think it’d be nice...” Then her voice rang out over the instruments, “Just to lose control, just once!”

As the song progressed with her sitar soloing for a little, she looked to Terry and bobbed her head. His buckets came in mutedly at first, but began gaining definition as he fully brought them to bear. Soon Darryl issued a bass-line as Jinx came in with a few more soft vocals before Nin brought in the heavier lines.

When they concluded their song, Terry wiped his brow and grinned. The man loved to play. Jinx was sure he hadn’t really intended to do as much with the past few songs before she had raised the bar... but he couldn’t say it wasn’t fun.

The applause was more than she was expecting. From her sitting position, she couldn’t see the whole of the crowd... Kamala idly wondered just how large a gathering they had drawn. If there was a Conditional involved as she expected, then it was entirely likely they had quite an amassing.

“Thanks for enjoying, everybody! A late lunch beckons, but we’ll be back in a bit.”

-=Raven=-
Raven knew, on some level, that Jinx had played for her. Somehow, the hex-caster had felt her presence. Empathically, she sensed that the girl had calmed herself and then threw herself into the songs—practically projecting her emotions right at the demi-Demon. Well, that was as good as an invitation. She did wonder, however, if Jinx knew just to whom she had catered. On the tail of that thought, Raven concluded that it didn’t really matter.

She followed the four as they made their way to a small pizzeria. She ordered a pepperoni slice to keep appearances, but her hunger was fixated in another direction entirely. The sorceress seated herself in a booth set beside theirs to listen to the conversation. Raven wanted to know more about her chosen prey.

As the supreme pizza slid onto Jinx’s table with breadsticks, the friends got to chowing down. Raven patiently waited; learning about someone took time. At least this way, she could hear and sense their emotions, rather than only getting vague notions from her empathic senses from a distance, as some of her stakeouts often entailed.

“What time ya got?” the other girl asked.

“It’s 2:12,” Kammie replied, “You wanna pick up at 3 or 3:30?”

“I’m good for 3. How do you do that, anyway? You don’t even wear a watch.”

“Well, I could mention the sun’s position—which helps—but the truth of the matter is that I got a superb internal clock, even when I sleep. I wake up at 5 AM on the dot, most days. I never had need of an alarm clock.”

“Okay, okay—so you’re awesome... Now, how ‘bout you tell us about this special somebody?”

Raven heard Jinx sigh.

“I can’t really say much, Nintendo; I don’t know who it was. Just some random passer-by.”

At that, she could feel the other three emitting cloudy miasma of doubt. It must have shown on their faces, too. Jinx pushed her earnestness.

“Really. It was just some Demon who happened on us.”

“A Demon,” the drummer, Darryl, dubiously clarified.

“I know you guys don’t really have a lot to do with that side of my life, but yeah. There’s a whole mystical element to the world around you. Some Demon taking a moment to listen to us play isn’t that farfetched.

“Demons are people just like you and me. Their society is different, but they live lives just like we do; they have wants and desires, likes and dislikes. So it’s not entirely unheard of that one might have happened by while we were playing.”

Raven canted her head to the side slightly. At least Jinx didn’t sound like she had problems with ‘otherworld entities.’ More and more, the demi-Demon felt confident she had chosen the right person.

“So... why play so hard for someone you barely know?”

“Well, I could feel their aura... I imagine they were trying to get a feed off the crowd or us or somethin’. So I just kinda gave over and threw myself into it. It reminded me of a passion
Conditional and I figured that’d help.”

“Who else is lost?” their violist inquired.

Raven heard the shifting of others, likely in show of hands.

“Okay... uh... quick lesson. Demons take in energy to grow stronger. Certain Demons can absorb some pretty abstract things—states of being or emotions and such; those are called Conditionals. As the name implies, they get power from a certain condition being met. Passion Conditionals are known for looking for people who have great passion... and we love our music.

“Historically, Humans know them as Succubi and Incubi. The sexual connotations were all sorts of misplaced. I mean, not that sex doesn’t bring about passion... but that’s not the sole or best source of it.

“Anyhow, it felt like they were feeling out the crowd, so I played it up.”

‘Nintendo’ put forth her concern, “That’s not dangerous or anything, is it? It’s not like... trying to steal our souls or something?”

“Nah,” Kammie negated, “it’d defeat the purpose. That’s another stereotype. I’m not saying Demons don’t have things to do with souls... but not generally in the negative way movies show ‘em.”

Their drummer cast a curious flavor across the table that seemed to mingle with the moderate interest from the others, but he didn’t say anything just yet. Raven wondered if she might sometime try to find friends that she could have without bringing in the Titan side of her life. Honestly, she had never thought it would work out well. Jinx seemed to have a handle of it, though... maybe it could be done.

Before she could contemplate it further, the man finally mustered up his courage.

“...This is actually pretty interesting. I mean, we have aliens and weird creatures all over the place, but I never hear much about the real thing. The internet is too full of shit. We definitely gotta sit down and talk about this more. I mean, we don’t hear a lot about—that side of your life. Never wanted you to feel obligated, but I am curious.”

“Sure thing, Terry. It is some pretty interesting stuff. I can’t really mention much about the extraterrestrial side of things; I’m more the supernatural type. How about we sit down this weekend and I’ll spin a tale or three for you guys?”

The other three met this proposition with enthusiasm. Jinx was about to bring up something else—the topic Raven would never know, as the hex-caster was interrupted. There was a humming noise and she felt Jinx’s sudden apprehension.

“Oh... speaking of the other life.”

“You need to go?”

“Nah—it’s my day off, they know that. Just lemme... remind them of that.”

-=Kamala=-

Kammie flicked open her communicator, “Jinx. Go.”

“Jinx, we got an offer,” Gizmo informed.
“It’s my day off, Mike, you know that.”

“It’s not a job for today. They wanna schedule a briefing next month; mission appraisal and starting date TBA.”

Jinx paused, and then sighed. Digging into her pocket again, she pulled out a small notepad with a pen in its spiral.

“Alright, alright—shoot.”


“Wait, wait,” she interrupted, “While it’s good they listened when we went Vanilla, they wouldn’t bother saying all this if there wasn’t someone.”

“Yeah, just getting to that. Guest list reads no white, no blue, no red, no green, no grey, no black. Estimated 6 purple. No capes.”

“Standard or private firm?” Kamala clarified as her notepad page slowly filled to the halfway point.

“Standard, but they said they’re not worried about that. It’s the system they need us to beat.”

Kamala’s pen scrawled lines of Devanagari script on her notepad, completely focused on the details of the mission the following week. She missed the strange looks her friends were giving her.

“Uh-huh. Score, Package, or Mark?”

“Package.”

“Where and when?”

“Biratnagar, it’s-”

Gizmo froze when her eyes stabbed the communicator. Her friends, who had never seen such an intense look on her face, felt somewhat uncomfortable as the conversation took a negative turn.

“South-east Nepal. As in bordering Bihar.”

“I checked into it; no India involved.”

“...Double—no, triple check them. You know how much they want me after I fried their big dog at IMRO. This is the kind of shit I’d expect them to pull.”

Mike nodded grimly, “I’ll look into it. Promise. I’ll tap the big H and set up insurance and extraction, too. I’ll let you know what I find.”

“Thanks, Mike.” Flipping the communicator shut, she stared at it for a moment before sighing. She capped her pen, closed her notepad, and stuffed all three items back in her pocket. “Well, that escalated quickly.” Finally, she turned her eyes back to her fellow musicians. Noting the look on their faces, she winced slightly. “Uh... sorry about that. Kinda went the exact opposite way I wanted that conversation to go.”

“Well, I guess it’s as good a jumping point as any, so... what is it that you do, exactly?”

Kamala squirmed for a moment, taking a sip of her coke before answering. What could she say,
really? She didn’t want to jeopardize her friendship, but she didn’t want to lie to them, either.

“...Short answer or medium? We don’t have time for the long, drawn-out answer. It’s 20 ‘til 3...”

“How about we just go with short? You can tell us more when you’re ready. No stress, okay?”

“...Thanks, Darryl—you really don’t know what that means,” Kammie claimed sincerely, “Okay, uh... Short answer: I’m a mercenary.”

The three civilians exchanged glances, and then they turned back to her. Terry and Darryl’s brows had risen. Nin’s had dropped into a frown. Finally, their resident violinist pressed.

“Can... we get a slightly less short answer?”

Jinx rubbed the back of her neck, “In my business, I’m known by my codename: Jinx. I’m a freelance mercenary; agent-for-hire, jack-of-all-trades. I take solo and team contracts. I’m the team leader, so only I can authorize team contracts; that’s why Mike called me. I’m part of a paramilitary, Extra-Normal organization specializing in civilian and business contracts...

“If—if you want more than that, then I can tell you I never really went to a normal school. I went to Dark Way Prep, then finished my education at the privately funded Academy for Extraordinary Young People. Both are schools that specialize in teaching and training Metahumans and Extra-Normals.

“It’s always been my dream to be a mercenary. As you just heard, someone located in Nepal’s southern border wants to hire my team. ...For reasons I can’t go into right now, that makes me extremely suspicious and edgy.”

“So... a soldier of fortune, huh?” Darryl said.

Jinx was reassured by his accepting tone, “With me, that’s kind of a pun. Considering my Metahuman powers are related to probability, ‘fortune’ isn’t a bad way to put it. Misfortune might be more apt, though... hence, the name—Jinx.”

“So... do you know all sorts of martial arts? Got a stock of weapons hidden in some secret place at your apartment? Have you fought ninjas? Y’know, all that Steven Seagal stuff?”

Kamala blinked and stared at Terry. For the moment she wasn’t sure quite how to respond. Her mouth opened, and she frowned when no words came with it.

“Ignore him, he’s being childish again,” Nin suggested.

“No, it’s just—I’m just trying to figure out where to draw the line on that stereotype.” After a few more seconds, Kammie shrugged and barreled on with her response. Instead of thinking it over, she just decided to take the questions at face value. She nodded in affirmation and tried not to think about how her life was like a C-list action flick. “I utilize Muay Thai, Krav Maga, Silat, and Eskrima; sometimes I use a dash of Jeet Kune Do. I do have a weapons locker, in fact, but it’s not hidden—just very, very secure. ...And... Yeah, I actually did fight a ninja, once. It was only an exhibition match, though. Didn’t win, but gave ‘im a run for his money.”

“Wow,” Nin muttered, “So... um... You travel the world doing missions? Are they dangerous? ...And does that pay well?”

“Some are. And they better pay impressively, since I’m risking my health and life on some of them. My team was top of my class at the Academy, and our organization has always kind of fast-tracked
us; we don’t take the small jobs. Recently, I’ve taken to... *lighter* contracts. More ethical ones, too. Still, the jobs we’re doing now are heavier than those they’d give to my other classmates.”

“I take it you’ve done some... unethical missions, then?” Terry asked tentatively.

Kamala took a breath, “That’s... one of those things I’ll *really* have to go into later. Yes, I’ve done a lot of questionable things in the past. ...The kind of things that put me in conflict with the Titans. However, in my defense, there was brainwashing and mind-control involved. I’ve... mostly put that behind me.”

“Whoa, the Titans? ...That’s—wait, mind-control?”

“Sorry, Nin, but I really... *really* don’t want to talk about that, just yet. That’s not something I think I’ll be able to address for a while, actually. I’m not ready.” Jinx rubbed her right temple, eyes locked on her plate with a half-eaten stuffed pizza crust and frowned. “Just... suffice to say I had about two-and-a-half years of my life stolen from me. I could think and see and hear and *feel*... but I wasn’t able to do anything. The fucker had me all twisted up; I was locked inside my own body and—”  Jinx ground to a halt with a slight shudder, forcing the words to stop spilling out. It was absolutely too raw for their current setting. She looked to her left fist, which had—at some point—clenched to the point of aching and slowly opened it. “That’s all I can say. That’s all I can stand to say for now.”

“Shh, it’s okay,” Nin reassured, “You don’t have to say anything else. Let’s talk about something else. All this other stuff can wait. What covers were you thinking about this evening?”

Kammie drew in a slightly shaky breath and let it out slowly. She hated how Blood was still affecting her. Bastard was still kicking her from beyond the grave. Still, there was the satisfaction that he was *gone*... and she was living her dream. Kamala was happy, now, and that was all that was important.

“Sorry for the drama. I’m still dealing with it.”

“No worries, Kammie. If you ever need us, we’ll be here to listen.”

Kamala nodded and took in another, cleansing breath, “So... feel up to doin’ some Seether covers?”

---Raven---

Talk turned to their music, and she could feel the gloom that hung over Jinx like a pall slowly beginning to dissipate. She wondered if the hex-caster might not need therapy, but it wasn’t like she could suggest anyone or anything—their line of business was... rather exotic. There weren’t many people qualified to help with the kind of problems superheroes, super-villains, and super-mercenaries faced. At least *this* super-mercenary had some friends who would listen to her.

Jinx’s reveal went over quite well, all things considered. Raven wasn’t sure how people might react to her lineage, but probably not as positively as the witch’s friends had responded to her mercenary career. As Jinx’s explanation broke down, Raven was at once sympathetic and enraged.

‘Blood,’ Raven seethed, ‘It’s been three years, and we still haven’t found him or had word of him. After hearing this, I might have to urge Dick and Vic to review that case and do some follow-up. That kind of abuse of power can’t go ignored.’

Raven hadn’t known that Jinx had effectively been trapped in her own mind. That was a unique and horrific form of torture that made Raven cringe. Victor had described Brother Blood’s powers—how
they had partially affected him, but he had said the others were under tighter control. She doubted any of them knew just what it must have been like in HAEYP.

Jinx was something of a conundrum and a puzzle for Raven. Here was a girl filled with dichotomies and other fascinating quirks. Outside the purely physical and metaphysical—which were endlessly pleasing to her sense of the aesthetic, she would admit—Jinx had a personality that Raven was swiftly coming to respect. The more she considered her choice of partner, the more sure Raven became.

That someone—that Sebastian fucking Blood—had done something to Jinx... something that could reduce that sugary-sweet, pale and pink, grinning gremlin of a girl to a state of shellshock? It was intolerable; made her Demonic instincts balk, made Anger thrash about inside Nevermore. Even though Raven was seeking a purely physical release regarding her heat, she wasn’t frivolous. Jinx had many, many merits if looked upon objectively and without the bias of certain legal trappings. After her heat had run its course and she could string two thoughts together without sexualizing them, she may well wind up courting the hex-caster...

She would have to protect her interests. That meant finding Brother Blood and breaking him... grinding him into nothing—slowly, but completely. The fantasy evolved in her head; Raven would sweep back from some secret base to the Tower, where Jinx lay in wait. In their room, with curtains drawn and the lanterns casting dim, romantic light, her mate would recline in sensual repose upon the bed. Raven would prowl across the room, slink to the girl, and victoriously loom over her. Their lovemaking would be frenetic, cathartic, triumphant...

The sorceress shuddered as the heat swelled within her again and she almost doubled over. She needed to make this stop. She needed Jinx. It took an inordinate amount of will-power to keep from lunging over the seats and throw Jinx upon the tables—to take her right in front of her friends and the other pizza patrons. How clear and definite it would be, then, that the pink vixen was hers forever...

Raven gave a little gasp and clenched at the table. She could hear it creak in protest and she swiftly let go before she broke it. The mystic Titan squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

‘Black Hells...!’

Finally, Raven’s will forcibly took hold and she pulled herself together at length. Jinx and her friends had left. She stood, dumped her empty plate and cup in the trash, and moved to follow the quartet. Those jutting pink horns were like flames, and she wandered after them as the enthralled moth. Once the group went their separate ways, Raven would isolate Jinx... steal her away, back to the Tower... and then...

‘...then we purr, kitten, like dragonflies buzzing around frog bellies.’

-=Kamala=-

As they made their way back to their typical spot by the subway entrance, a tension worked its way into her spine, and she felt the hairs on her neck and arms stand. She still had a tail. Even though she supposed it could be the Demon from before, it made her no less edgy. That level of paranoia was profoundly ingrained and it was hard to shake.

“Hey, Kammie, you okay?”

Jinx jerked her head up, staring into the concerned face of Terry. Her eyes had been focused on her
footsteps, allowing her general senses of fate to guide her and prevent any collisions. She blinked and adjusted the strap of her carrying case.

“Uh—yeah. Just... we’re being followed and it’s kinda tweaking me.”

Nin’s head whipped around behind them with a worried glance.

“Not there, Nin. It’s probably just that Demon I mentioned; meaning it could be anywhere—and possibly invisible to most of our senses. I just have a... thing... about covert surveillance. It puts my instincts on high alert and just... yeah. Don’t mind me—if there were actually something wrong, I’d know it.”

Kamala could tell the others weren’t exactly comforted by that fact and neither was she. However, there was nothing to do for it. They made it back to their spot without incident and they proceeded to set up as they had before. With everyone there, it went quickly and they had come to mutual agreement on the set of songs they were going to play. Seether was the general set for now, and they’d narrowed down the songs they knew how to play between them.

Jinx began with a series of low sitar plucks, setting the first song for them. It was somewhat haunting... a little sinister. Darryl picked up a support and bass rhythm that Terry slid in to accompany. Nin was waiting for her cue to play the fuller lines of the song.

The hex-caster’s head bobbed with her plucks, head bowed over her instrument. Then she began with an almost vindictive tone; the others took note that she was once again pushing herself, but she couldn’t be bothered. The recent topics had wound into her head and she had found the perfect way to vent that feeling.

‘This one... goes out to Blood and the IMRO,’ she silently and angrily dedicated.

“Leave your mark under my skin,” she crooned with a malevolent tone, “Oh my, how strong you are...” Her expression was straight—perhaps even blank, but her voice was full of emotion. “And feast your eyes on my disdain; And hope this one won’t scar.

“I will never belong... to you, again. I will never belong to you...”

Terry and Nin brought them to the hard part of the song as Kammie belted out a harsh, vicious vocal. The others picked up on the weighty, personal nature of the song, but nevertheless continue to play. Jinx refused to make eye contact with anyone as she sang.

“Push—if you still need my pain; ‘Cause I will never tell... And scream—if you still hate my name; ‘Cause I’ll be where I fell...”

She lightened a bit, finally a smirk covering her mouth as she beckoned.

“Come sit close to me...”

-=Raven=-

The emotions that rolled off Kamala were bittersweet. She loved how honest Jinx was being, but she could tell that the conversation back at the pizza parlor had influenced this song. What she was sensing had the same flavor. Already, people had made a small gathering; several had come back from last time. She slowly sifted to the front before it became more packed.
She could intimately understand the feelings running through Kamala. Trigon inspired a similar reaction from her. That was why, when the dangerous request came, Raven accepted. She pulled her hood lower and pulled at the overcast murk that created, reinforcing the shadows to hide her features more fully. From the small half-ring the listeners made around the musicians, the demi-Demon stepped out and squatted down in front of Kamala.

“Come sit close to me...”

The other three took notice, but continued to play. However, she could feel their concern. That didn’t matter to Raven quite so much, at the moment. They couldn’t possibly hope to be a threat to her; they also cared for and felt protective of Kamala. Those were good things.

When the chorus started, she closed her eyes and listened to the little Siren weave her tones...

“If I decide, that I am alive; Then I’m diseased and ungrateful. And if I confide, that I am a liar; Then I’m diseased and ungrateful. Push it in! ‘Til it breaks! If it bleeds! I’ll be okay!”

Kamala’s almost shouting voice sent a shiver through Raven’s body—not all of it heat, but all of it desiring the pink-haired girl. There was a slight shift, her Demonic side was coming out to play more and more as the heat progressed. Raven found she had little will to fight it.

She opened her eyes—four, bright red gems that cut through the darkness she’d pulled over the upper half of her face. The lower half of her nose and her mouth were still in sight. Under those lips, she hid a few more fangs than her heritage typically showed when she was in full control.

The song neared its closing, and Jinx was in high form.

“Come sit close to me!”

She idly considered stealing the girl away right then and there... Somehow, she resisted that particular notion, even though it was clamoring within her. She found herself somewhat relieved that Jinx’s singing had strangely settled her heat into less violent forces. It made Raven at least feel like she was in control of herself, even if that was a barefaced lie.

She reached out and put a finger under Kamala’s chin, slowly lifting her head up. Gently, she pushed a few feelings of reassurance, trying to assuage those raw emotions and nerves that had riled the pink-haired mercenary so much. Jinx’s eyes opened as her head lifted—she didn’t look surprised. Judging from the fact that the girl had somehow sensed her presence, she supposed it was probably rather obvious.

Raven grinned, her fangs on slight display. Her witch didn’t look bothered, though. Instead, Jinx’s lips quirked into a half-smirking smile.

-=Kamala=-

“Well, hello there...”

The hand withdrew and she gave the Demoness a quick once-over. She was a little inhuman, obviously. It made sense why she was still wearing that hood up when the day had cleared. While her curiosity had her wondering what was under that hoodie, she wasn’t going to push. At least their lurker had come forward.

“Dai mos alkerzi.”
The voice had a slightly scratchy, but smoky quality to it that sent warm chills through Kamala. Everything about it was elusively reminiscent. In spite of its vague familiarity, but she put that thought aside almost immediately. She didn’t know that many people that spoke the Daemos tongue in the first place—most of them Demons to begin with—and this wasn’t anyone she had summoned once upon a time or bumped into recently.

The hex-caster held her hands up. She supposed that previous song was a little dark, emotionally speaking. It was probably for the best if she did slip into a more peaceful frame of mind.

“Alright, alright...”

The grin lessened into a softer smile; her red-eyed patron canted her head to the side, “Erlin kel im?”

Now Jinx’s grin grew, “Sure. You wanna make a request?”

“No im?”

“No. Course. If we know it, we’ll give it a whirl.”

The Demoness took a moment to look to her right, taking in the other musicians. After what Kamala saw as considering them and their instruments, the female turned back to her. Those shining gems hidden in shadows squinted slightly in response to her broadening smile. There was a nod of the Demoness’ head.

“Aerials, orem System of a Down?”

Kamala burst into laughter, somewhat startling her Demonic patron. Even as the hooded woman leaned back a bit, Kammie was waving her back and looking over to her friends. This was something she needed to clear with them before launching into it.

“Hey, guys... You know that one we’ve been kickin’ around at Nintendo’s apartment?”

“She wants Aerials?” Nin asked.

“You feel ready for that one?”

“We’ve hammered out most of the variations we wanted. I can do the rest on the fly. Sure, I’m good for it.”

Terry and Darryl were good for it from the start, as the beat wasn’t anywhere near as frenetic as their normal improvisations. It allowed them to throw more intricacies or flair to the performance anyway, so they immediately agreed. Kammie grinned and nodded to Nin to start them off. She then turned her Cheshire gaze to the Demoness.

“That’s that. Enjoy, hon.”

Nin’s violin began soft and low, and Jinx’s rhythmic plucking soon accompanied. Both Darryl and Terry brought a swelling percussion. Jinx noticed the Demoness’ grin blossom onto her face again as the song exploded with her lyrics.

“Life is a waterfall; We’re one in the river and one again after the fall!” Kamala’s voice rang out over the instruments, clear even over the drums and the amp. “Swimming through the void, we hear the word; We lose ourselves, but we find it all!”
They played and sang for another three hours. Raven settled herself into a meditative position in front of Kamala the entire time. The songs varied between Seether covers, wordless improvisations, Evanescence, Metallica, and even a few songs they’d come up with on their own. Raven enjoyed the latter most—as not only did she get to hear Jinx sing, but she could also sense the personal nature of the songs and the joy the group derived from performing them. She could vicariously share their love of the music.

Between songs, she would softly converse with Jinx. She didn’t say much about herself, though. However, Jinx was also rather circumspect with her personal information, so she didn’t feel quite so bad. Always, she spoke in Daemos, so as not to rouse suspicion. Already, her ‘disguise’ was lacking; a hood wasn’t much help and were it not for the shadows she’d darkened around herself, nothing would have prevented Kamala from seeing her face. Revealing her identity too soon would likely ruin things.

It was six when they announced their last song of the day. All of them were tired—Terry especially and Darryl wasn’t far behind him. Jinx laced her fingers and pushed them out in front of herself, cracking her knuckles. She then proceeded to pull each arm behind her head and pop her shoulders.

“Oh, everyone. This’ll be our last one for the day. It’s one of our own. We call this one *Rabbit Hole.*”

Darryl started them off with a light rhythm on his djembe that Kamala piggybacked with sitar plucks at an eerie, bouncing tempo. Shortly afterward, Terry came in—and Nin brought in the actual song with a sedate, haunting violin notes. Jinx shifted her tune away from Darryl’s rhythm and provided an extra layer to the song.

Just past a minute into the song, Jinx opened the first verse.

> “An uneasy creeping; This kind of feeling,” she sang as if serenading insanity, “Like a spider hiding, Hanging and biding; Its time on the ceiling...” They played out a couple bars before she continued to the second half of the verse. “It’s coming over me; How can I get free? I see my path winding, The darkness blinding; And I have gone crazy...”

Terry and Darryl ramped them up near the end brought the song to a more complex beat and put Jinx’s fingers to flying over the sitar. Despite the discomfiting nature of the song and the overall chilling tones it laid down, Raven didn’t sense any negativity from Kamala. Indeed, the hex-caster thoroughly enjoyed singing of the madness; she raised her voice over the instruments’ frenetic intricacies.

> “I wanna fall in; And watch the fallout. Things are not looking up; ‘Cause I’m falling down. I’m falling down—The rabbit hole again!”

She stretched the last few words out, and Raven was impressed with the steadiness of her voice as well as the volume. Not for the first time since she started listening to the group, she wondered if they had given any serious thought to putting together some kind of album or making some kind of official performance. Surely, it would be profitable...

Before she could contemplate more, the song settled and the second verse began.

> “Lucid for a second; I hear it beckon. It’s such a siren song, Never gone for long; And all help I’m beyond.” Kamala grinned despite the somewhat gloomy lyrics. “It’s coming over me; I can barely breathe. A madness so full, Inevitable; No one can hear my pleas.”
This time, Jinx and Nin alternated the chorus lines. That was when Raven knew that they had not one, but two talented vocalists. Jinx was a little more solid on key, but Nin had better volume and carrying capacity for notes. Nin started them off as Darryl once more pounded them into the chorus.

“I wanna fall in.”

“And watch the fallout.”

“Things are not looking up.”

“Cause I’m falling down.”

They joined for the final lines, their voices twining in helix, “I’m falling down—The rabbit hole again!”

Suddenly, Darryl and Terry percussion fell sedate for a bridge, and Jinx began a willowy cantillation that sounded like true madness.

“Poor Alice doesn’t know; I’ve something to confess—I’m not late; there’s no date. I have nowhere to go; It’s too late, and I guess—I gave into my fate...”

Then it was back to the duet of a refrain, but this time Jinx started them. Afterward, they returned their gentler dynamic for the second verse. Raven was utterly sucked in; they must have rehearsed this quite a bit for them to be so well synchronized and coordinated.

“The hole’s so dark and deep; And I just cannot keep,” Nin took the verses this time, “All my wits together, I can’t tell whether; I’m awake or asleep.

“And now I’m falling fast; Into depths so vast. Should I just go farther? Should I even bother; To escape from my past?”

Like Jinx before her, Nin did her first chorus solo. However, immediately on its heels, they broke into a partial bridge, and Jinx was back to that almost spooky voice again. It sent shivers down Raven’s spine.

“Poor Alice doesn’t know; I have nowhere to go. But down... and down...”

Nin followed with the alternating chorus. Jinx took the even lines of it. Once again, their percussionists settled for the pink-haired mercenary-cum-singer. Raven could feel them hyping up for their big finish even with the softness of the current lines.

“Please don’t tell Alice; I think I like it here. Sometimes... sometimes...”

And then it was their big finish. Nin and Jinx sang the totality of the final chorus together, belting out lines over the enthusiastic buckets Terry pounded with a vengeance, over the violin and sitar blowing a whirlwind of notes out of the amp.

“I’m falling down—The rabbit hole again!”

As they finished, they graduated back to the verse’s notes and played without lyrics a few more bars before the sitar and violin drew out their final notes. Raven only then took notice of the quite impressive crowd almost spilling into the road around them. They had to be obstructing some other pedestrians, but no one seemed to care. They really should have performed in the park or some other open space... perhaps with a stage. She determined to bring it up to Jinx—perhaps after whisking the girl to bed.
Kammie had a smile upon her face as she trotted down the street. Having said her goodbyes to friends and fans alike, she was making her meandering way back to her apartment. Today had been a good day; she even got to meet a local Demoness! It wasn’t often she saw one out so blatantly. Sadly, the woman had all but dematerialized from view once they had finished. Hell, for all she knew that was exactly what the otherworldly woman did. Still, maybe they would see one another again when she played next week.

Nearly four blocks away from the subway entrance where she and her friends performed... and about six blocks away from her apartment, Kamala’s powers of probability—her own little early-warning system—blared in her head like an alarm bell. While her mind jolted and adrenaline flushed her body, her startled reaction caught her flatfooted and nearly sent her to the ground. As it was, Jinx’s highly trained instinct to react to her powers had her bolting down an alleyway. Fate still buzzing between her ears, hissing corrosively of ill portents, she unhitched her sitar case after traveling nearly three quarters of the way into the alley. The alley was a dead-end, but she was confident in her abilities to fight off whoever was unlucky enough to follow her inside. After all, with her powers... that was anyone. Without her sitar weighing her down awkwardly, she was prepared to deal with just about anything.

“Alright, who the—Fuck.”

But not that.

“Me.”

The black mass blotted out her view of the sidewalk and street. It was a solid wall of shadowy nothing, like a cascading layer of pitch. It seemed to ripple and writhe in a boiling, liquid curtain. Whatever this thing was, it reached up nearly two thirds of the four-story buildings to either side of her. Jinx’s sitar case clattered to the ground. And then the assemblage vomited forth its burgeoning mass in perpetually growing volume, like an open floodgate... Viscous, darker than night, but crashing faster than water, it rushed toward her. Jinx immediately turned and ran—then trailed partway up a wall. At the apex of her wall-run, she coiled and shoved off toward the opposite wall. Her hands groped out in desperate hope.

The opposite building’s fire escape was just within reach and she exulted as the dark tide whipped beneath her feet by a few meters. It continued down the alley and slammed into the end of the cul-de-sac. Kammie wasted no time in hauling herself up; she skipped the stairs and lunged up a floor at a time along the outside of the fire escape. It made her muscles burn, but it was the only answer. Already, she could see the mass of liquid recoiling like surf against a cliff-face, climbing higher as more of the voluminous fluid built beneath it.

Finally, she hauled herself to the highest floor and quickly grabbed the roof access ladder. Barreling up it three rungs at a time, she made it four sprinting strides before her nigh tangible link to Fate went from a frantic buzzing to a low-key hum. Her sprint almost immediately died to a few exhausted steps and she panted at the sudden exertions she had made. She gulped down air and hung her head. There were only two reasons her sense of probability practically went to white noise on her. The first entailed her choices being so myriad and open that it was too incomprehensible to grasp all the possibilities... The second merely meant that all choices led to the exact same conclusion. A low,
thunderous rumble behind her answered in muted roar.

Kamala turned to face her fate; she had always embraced her fate, no matter what it had been. Since her powers kicked in fully, the girl followed its prescribed, karmic paths. She would greet Fate on her own terms...

There, from the mouth of the alley, had risen the oily mass in a broad wave the full width of the building upon which she stood. It hung there, defiant to gravity, its curled crest reminiscent of a cobra—hood flared and imperiously peering down upon her like the petrified mouse she felt she had become. Kamala’s pupils slowly widened until the pink was but a sliver surrounding rotund, black ovals.

She drew in a breath, settling and steeling herself. The young woman exhaled in a cleansing sigh, as though trying to cast off her karma so that she might rise above. Drawing in another breath, she spoke softly to anyone and anything listening even as she solely focused on that murky wave of power before her.

“Vishnu... be merciful.”

The stygian matter broke its tableau and descended. It roared over the rooftop and washed over Jinx in a swift swath. The darkness reigned supreme.

~§~END CHAPTER 1~§~

Author’s Note:

Hey, all! Welcome to the new Rae/Jinx story! This one’s gonna be a long one, just over 400 pages. Each chapter consists of about 10,000 words. So the chapters are not tiny, but not huge. There’s 19 chapters and a short Epilogue. The story is actually already finished, but I’m going to be posting it in chapters on a weekly or bi-weekly basis just to keep some pace.

Eh, this is something of an addition; at the time of writing this, I’d previously just ended the chapter. But now that I think about it, one of the things I recall people liked was reading some of my commentary on the story. So here it is!

This story will go heavily into my version of how demons and demi-Demons like Raven work. There’s just absolutely tons of glimpses into my system. Yes, some of it will likely be a little info-dumpy... but it kinda fit the bill for what was going on in the scenes. I know if I were ever to meet someone like this, I’d just spend hours talking to them. And that’s exactly what Jinx is offering to Nin, Terry, and Darryl.

And that’s why I kick this off with a bang by throwing in these three OCs. They will play as a foil to Jinx and Raven; a mortal point of view and something to keep us all grounded. They’re not always around, but they’ll help me enrich this story.

Of course, what would I be doing writing a story about Jinx without her teammates, too? I don’t skimp on Gizmo and Mammoth, and you’ll be hearing more from them as this story progresses. These boys have matured, much like Jinx, and they were never exactly little-league players. They’re full-fledged mercenaries now, ready to take on the world and make sure nobody forgets their names.

You may notice the conspicuous use of music within this story. No, I don’t skimp on it and yes, it’s
important both to the characters and to the plot. Sometimes it’s referential, other times it’s just because. Still, in this story music is a very important tool. I put together a list of all the songs in the story at some point, but I’ll have to find it again for later, if anyone wants it. I’ll say now, though, that it’s not exactly a superb playlist when put together back-to-back.

That said, I generally dislike song-fics, so I’m not likely to put in the full lyrics to any song unless it’s a song that’s never been heard before. And yes, I did write two original songs that will appear in this story, written out in full... so yeah, there’s that.

There will also be a moderate amount of ‘Daemos’ in this story. Daemos is both a race and a language, the latter of which I created and am still developing. Nevertheless, it’s got just about all it needs to carry on a conversation for a good while. On that note, however, I will never leave you wanting for understanding. As chapter one stands, I have some Daemos that you probably can infer but not actually understand. At no point in this story will I not translate what was said at some point, so don’t stress out about that. I think this is the only chapter that doesn’t get a translation in the very same chapter; the beginning Chapter 2 will clarify.

And so that brings me to the close of Chapter 1. I hope you’ll enjoy this new story, I know I did. It took me 5 years to write, but I had a blast. As promised to all my deviantArt readers, here it is: “Prey Mate” on FFnet! Let me know what you think! Thoughts, comments, critiques; all are welcome!

-Lynx

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**Story Mirrors:**

Now Available on Archive of Our Own!

“Prey Mate” on FanFiction.net

“Prey Mate” on deviantArt.com
“...love will find its way / Through paths
where wolves would fear to prey...”
-Lord Byron, The Giaour

Prey Mate

by

Lynx Klaw

Chapter 2

~§~

The universe tumbled and twirled aimlessly for a moment. Gravity was above her and then below her, at once inside her head and pressing upon her from all outward angles. She was unconscious, and knew it... and somehow that just wasn’t right. Rather than wake up, she tried to make sense of it. Kamala couldn’t remember falling asleep; why was she not awake?

...dai mos alkerzi...

Flickers of sounds... hints of words or phrases... fluttered like butterflies just above her reach. Jinx found it difficult to focus on them, as if merely looking at the trails of thought made them disintegrate into ash. Determinedly, she grasped at the snowy fire-flakes, trying to gather enough of them to complete some part of her jigsaw puzzle memory.

‘No more anger...’

That soft, scratchy voice with a smoky allure. Yes, she remembered that. Kamala clung to the sound, sought more of it for clarity; another butterfly, more ashes...

...erlin kel im...

A wisp of memory, a hint of fangs flashed Cheshire under a cloak of shadows. The smile, that voice... was a person she’d never met. It was so familiar, though!

‘Sing for me...’

Yes—yes, she had done so. She had sung her heart out for that voice. ...Kamala would do it again, if asked.

...pare im...
The woman was polite. Kammie felt her brow twitch at the sudden intrusion of memory. She was so close to understanding...

‘*May I?*’

Jinx had granted that request, and done so happily. Did this really have anything to do with what she was doing, right now? It was connected, somehow. It had to be; everything in her being told her this was vital. She strained for more...

...*aerials, orem system of a down*...

They’d been practicing that one for a while, now. About time people heard it, Kamala reckoned. Everyone had loved it! They would have to do that again. Maybe that woman would show herself, again.

‘*Aerials, by System of a Down. ... Life is a waterfall.*’

Black and dominating, it overtook her after all!

Jinx’s eyes flicked open. She then took the time to blink three more times just to make absolutely certain she actually had them open, that this wasn’t another strange not-dream. There was a ceiling; hanging lanterns dimly lighting the room. So—she was in a room. Kammie knew she had been on a roof.

Kamala reasoned that she was *probably* still alive... somehow.

Turning her head to the right, she saw a dresser. Upon it resided two golden chalices; above it, an irregularly shaped, pentagonal mirror hung. Kamala knew that wasn’t the mirror she should worry about, though. Squinting, she realized her mental faculties were still a little slow—because for the life of her she could not recall how or why she knew that. Putting that aside for the moment, she focused on the more important aspect: her sitar case was propped up against the dresser.

‘*I dropped that in the alley. I know this place, though. Where am I?*’

Just then, a weight settled on her hips. Hands landed beside her shoulders. Kammie’s head whipped to stare at the person currently straddling her. Suddenly, the last 47 seconds before she lost consciousness made perfect, horrifying sense.

The cloaked Titan smirked down at her, “Hello, kitten.”

“Poe-bird,” Kamala greeted.

In the next instant, she had reversed Raven’s position, pressing the other girl into the mattress. That smirk, however, hadn’t changed. She stared into the unrepentant expression with perplexed dread. Questions jittered and scrambled awkwardly through her head like epileptic spiders. Her heart slammed her ribcage as she realized how this could go *all kinds* of bad. That smirk still hadn’t left, letting Jinx know that they both knew who was really in control, regardless of their positioning.

Rather than pointlessly wrestle further with the demi-Demon, she pulled back and ran pell-mell for the door, flinging a finger-dart of hex at the access panel to send the door sliding open. Light from the hallway broke through the dim setting of Raven’s room. If she could just get out there—well, she wouldn’t exactly be any safer, but it would be *closer* to being safer. Kamala would take what she could get. She made it half a step out the door before Raven tackled her right leg.
Jinx wound up faceplanting the carpet of the hallway, and she could feel the slight abrasion on her cheek. Ignoring that, she twisted just enough to get her other leg out from under the one Raven held. Tucking her leg to her chest, she did something that made her question her sanity: she kicked Raven square in the face.

“Ow!”

It garnered her freedom, but she knew the sorceress’ resilience as a demi-Demon. Even as Raven tumbled back, Jinx was pulling her legs out from the room and under herself. That had probably done more to piss Raven off than actually damage her in any appreciable way. Kamala needed distance—now.

‘Oh, shit, she’s gonna kill me for that!’

Hauling herself to her feet with a slight stumble, she hurled her body down the hallway toward the common room. Nightwing stepped out of his room and had enough time to look surprised before she spun around him, flushing her body against his back. She snared his right arm and put it in a hammerlock, then slid her left arm under his chin to keep him a little compliant.

It wasn’t exactly a great hold in any way—he probably knew several dozen ways out of it, but he was currently the least of her worries.

“Jinx...? What the Hell?”

“Wish I knew, Nightlight.”

She slowly began walking backward with him and, probably more out of curiosity than anything else, he played along as her hostage. A loud, low growl sounded from the room she had just vacated, and a cold shiver ran down Jinx’s spine. Kamala thanked Vishnu for the Boy Wonder’s acquiescence, as Raven literally flew out of her room in the next instant. The mystic Titan shot for Jinx like a witch-seeking arrow, but pulled up short—likely due to Nightwing’s presence. Settling upon the floor, the demi-Demon stalked forward.

“Come here, karma kitten...”

“How about no?” Her voice wavered a little, and she cursed herself for it. That sign of weakness was probably just blood in the shark tank for the sorceress. She then leaned in closer to her hostage and whispered to him. “Your mage has gone psycho, Nightwing. By the way, I’m really sorry about this...”

So saying, she let go of her hammerlock and chokehold, instead placing her palm flat on the small of his back. With a shove and a flash of fuchsia hex, she sent him rocketing into Raven. The two collapsed in a heap and Kammie once more made a bid for freedom via the common room.

By some miracle, she reached it. She took half a moment to look around—it wouldn’t be but a few more seconds before Raven could extricate herself from the Boy Wonder. Then all bets were off. There was no real good way out of the Tower... but there was a way.

‘Oh, God, I can’t believe I’m about to do this...’

The other Titans took note of her presence about the time she tossed a hex at one of the floor-to-ceiling windows, breaking it into thousands of pieces and blowing the shards outward.

“Ka-ma-la!” came the feminine roar from the hall.
“No time to explain, sorry!” she rambled while charging a basketball-sized orb of hex energy in hand.

She took several bounding lopes to the window and, at its edge, pounded the orb into the ground. The windowpane buckled as her hex exploded under her, and Jinx hurtled through the air over the ocean, spinning wildly heel-over-hair-horns. She reached the apex of her launch and felt her insides shift uncomfortably as descent began.

Kamala managed to get her spinning under control to get herself steadily perpendicular to the water and feet-first. Hopefully, her fall would eventually go full-vertical, else it was going to be a hellacious splashdown...

-=Richard=-

Dick had been tweaking the gyros on one of his homing birdarangs at the small worktable in his room when he heard the thump. He knew the sound of a body hitting the ground. Having sent many criminals to the ground across myriad surfaces, he could say with certainty that it was a relatively light body hitting short carpet. Its origin, then, was the hallway and close to him—Raven’s room?

He frowned, on his feet and moving to the door even as he pondered the strange sound. It could be that Raven’s cloak caught in a door or something, but that didn’t make much sense. Raven was as likely to phase through her door as she was to open it; if she was caught, extricating herself wouldn’t have been a problem.

“Ow!”

Now concerned, he opened the door and stepped out into the hall. At about that time, he saw a blur of pale and pink zipping toward him. Then said blur seized his arm and wrenched it behind him in a classic hammerlock. He felt the svelte, feminine body press behind him. Her grip wasn’t anywhere near as restricting as it should have been—he could probably break it just by pulling.

No, the hold was merely there to direct him the way she wanted him to move. The following arm across his neck was more there to move him. The arms were a steering wheel and a gas pedal, respectively. When she put them in reverse, he decided to see where this was going. He couldn’t fathom what Jinx of all people was doing here.

He could feel and hear her breathing; it was accelerated, agitated. The way she squeezed at his wrist, the measured way she took her steps backward... She was on edge and being extremely cautious. Something about this wasn’t right. Jinx wasn’t even among the rogues, anymore. The last he heard, she had gone free-lance mercenary.

Hell, he’d even contracted her for a few things through a third party to provide distraction elsewhere while the Titans completed a main objective. Her team was professional and, if he thought they wouldn’t throw a communicator back in his face, he would have attempted to induct them into the Titans. ...So what was she doing here? She didn’t seem like she wanted to be here—getting any of the HIVE Five to do something they didn’t want to was notoriously difficult.

“Jinx...? What the Hell?”

“Wish I knew, Nightlight.”

There was strain in her voice, her words even and measured. Her mind was elsewhere, and from the set of her head behind his shoulder, he could tell it was entirely focused on the open door—Raven’s
door. When a growl sounded, one that he had only heard a few times, he felt her grip clench at his wrist again, pulling his arm just a fraction higher and closer to uncomfortable. He felt a light tremor against his back and heard a deeper inhalation... not quite a gasp.

‘So I’m a human shield, am I? From Raven?’

And then Raven flew from her room, headfirst and beelined for them. Four feet away, her body abruptly righted and she all but prowled forward. She barely glanced at him before focusing on Jinx. Her movements were predatory and he knew it wasn’t typical of her. He wondered if this was another one of those ‘Dr. Light’ moments... if she was just faking it. But with every line in her body taut and restrained as though barely keeping herself from launching herself at Jinx... that wasn’t fake.

‘Okay, something’s up here.’

For every stalking step of Raven’s, Jinx shuffled them back two smaller paces.

“Come here, karma kitten...”

The tone was malevolent and... something else he couldn’t define. Whatever it was, it didn’t sound anything like Raven. Her tone was husky, deeper. With the way her eyes fixated on Jinx... he wouldn’t have done as Raven said, either.

“How about no?” Now Jinx’s tone was unsteady. Raven had scared the living daylights out of Jinx and Nightwing was on edge. Jinx’s chin came to rest on his shoulder and she hissed to him, “Your mage has gone psycho, Nightwing. By the way, I’m really sorry about this...”

It was all the warning he had before she fired him at Raven. He collided with their mystic, and—limbs all a-tangle—they collapsed to the ground. Even as he clambered to his hands and knees, Raven was shaking her head. Suddenly, she shoved him by the shoulder and forcefully rolled him off her. Then she sat up, eyes beginning to burn red.

“Ka-ma-la!” she bellowed.

She rocked forward and shot to her feet, and Dick recovered himself quickly. He managed to snag her forearm before she could march into the common room. Nightwing managed to cut through her haze of anger with a terse demand.

“Raven.”

Her eyes flicked to him and he could see that she barely had the patience for him. That was too bad, because he wanted answers. As much as he hated to think it, Raven was probably to blame for something in this mess... he just didn’t know what or why.

“What’s going on?”

“She kicked me in the face!”

There was a slight redness to the right side of her cheek and around her right brow. To her it was probably no more damaging than a slap to the face, but that didn’t mean it hadn’t hurt. He could tell most of the actual injury was to Raven’s pride.

“Why was she in the Tower to begin with?”

Raven stared at him for a moment, her eyes no longer glowing, but her gaze piercing. Her silence was telling, but not telling enough. Just then, they heard a crash—quickly followed by something
like an explosion. She yanked her arm out of her grip and stormed into the common room. Dick followed on her heels, soon discovering the shattered window.

“Where is Jinx,” Raven demanded.

“Dude, she just... totally catapulted herself out the window! She went flyin’ out over the water—made a Hell of a splash. What was she doing in the Tower?”

Raven looked shaken as the full gravity of that statement registered. On some level, as angry as she had just appeared, she was deeply worried about Jinx. She moved toward the window purposefully and Dick moved to block her.

“You’re not leaving the Tower until you explain this to me, Raven.” The demi-Demon bristled and actually growled at him. The others looked confused, but awaited his orders on the matter. “Gar, get out there—find Jinx, help her if necessary. At this height, she might not be conscious after hitting the water.”

“You got it,” and Changeling was zipping out as a falcon, going for speed...

When he turned back to face Raven, he found her gripping the counter with her left hand, her right arm over her stomach. She looked to be sweating and there was a full-body tremor running through her. Her eyes were unfocused, but staring out the window with an almost maddened intensity.

“I have to find her.”

“Raven, tell me what happened. What’s going on with you?”

“I need her. I chose—she could be hurt. I need to get to her.”

Her tone was fervent, almost obsessed and he didn’t like it. She was acting as though she was going through withdrawal. It made something twist in his stomach uncomfortably. Dick wondered if he was going to have to restrain her, somehow... He wondered if he even could.

“Gar is out there looking for her. He’ll help her-”

He’d barely gotten the words out before Raven erupted, “She’s mine!”

“Raven, calm down, now—before you hurt someone. At this rate, that’s a very real possibility. I’m not letting you anywhere until you’ve explained to me what’s wrong and how Jinx got involved. You just terrified her into jumping out of a twentieth-story window!”

Raven’s expression went slack, stunned as though he’d slapped her. She blinked several times, and then swallowed thickly. Finally, she just closed her eyes and took a few, long breaths. When she had gathered her composure, she opened her eyes to him again. The intensity was still there, but so was some modicum of control.

“I need her, Richard. I made my choice. She’s the one I want.”

“For what?”

“This is too hard to control. I had to choose someone. I want her.” Grimacing, she clutched her cloak against her body and hunched in on herself. He watched her carefully, watched the flush of her face, the dilation of her pupils, the quickening of her breath. The wild look in her eye wasn’t unfamiliar to him—but he’d never really thought he’d see it in Raven. “Richard, I’m aching and I can’t make it stop. Bright Azar, I need her. Now.”
While Dick had never thought Raven emotionless, he hadn’t really thought about her in a sexual sense, either. She had never allowed her passions to rule her. Her anger sometimes slipped through, and she had rare moments of levity... but this was something different. Raven wasn’t just aroused—she appeared to have long since passed that stage. She looked like she was *in heat*.

Her eyes locked onto him, and he knew that she had picked up that thought through their link. Her lips pursed and she straightened with a nigh growling-huff. Raven’s faced settled into a firm, determined facade... but the heated look in her eyes hadn’t changed.

“They need her,” she stated again.

“Raven, can we just slow down and think about how-”

Unfortunately, it seemed as though Raven was done talking. A shroud of her soul-self ensconced her... and then she had more or less just melted into her shadow on the floor, which then shrank away to nothing. Nightwing frowned; he had realized there was really no keeping Raven there if she really wanted to leave—not with her powers. Now he just hoped that she would manage at least to think about what he’d said before she hurt Jinx.

---Kamala---

She had made her drop safely, but she was a long way from shore. She hated to think what might happen out here before she reached the beach. There was a possibility she’d become shark-food before long. The waves were having fun tossing her about and she wasn’t making as much headway as she liked. No matter how hard she swam, it seemed as though the beach never got any closer.

Just then, something splashed into the water beside her. A green head popped out of the water beside her. She blinked her teary eyes that stung from the saltwater, and tried to focus on him.

“...Changeling?”

“Think ya could use a lift out here...?”

“Can’t go back to the Tower,” she said shortly, “Raven fuckin’ kidnapped me. What the Hell is-”

A wave washed over her head and she pulled back to the surface sputtering.

“You just hold on; I’m gonna take you ashore.”

She coughed and gave him a thumbs-up. He sunk under the waves and, moments later, she found herself levered upon the back of a blue whale. Well... a green whale—a green blue whale, more precisely. Whatever, that’s what he was. Exhaustedly, she slumped down and rested her head on his warm, smooth back. It was certainly better than the somewhat chill waters.

The sun was just lowering when they reached the shore; the temperature hadn’t changed and the sand was still sun-warmed. Kamala trudged out of the water and made her way toward the boardwalk. She sat down on a bench and sighed as she tried to get herself together. What was she going to do? If Raven really wanted to find her, it probably wasn’t best to hang around here for long. She would merely have to fly along the coast.

Changeling sat beside her, but mercifully said nothing. His communicator beeped its typical tone
after a few moments of their just sitting there. He pulled it out and answered it, fully aware of Jinx’s position right next to him.

“Changeling.”

“Did you find Jinx?” Nightwing asked.

“Yeah, she’s fine. A little tired, but okay.”

“Good. That was some jump she made... Is she still there with you?”

“I’m here, Boy Wonder,” Kamala sighed, “Whaddaya want?”

There was a pause on the other end; she knew he was measuring his words. Great, she didn’t have time to tiptoe across eggshells at this point. Then again, she was still a little too tired to bother standing, much less walking; she was still waterlogged.

“Raven’s not herself; I’d tell you to stay out of her way until this blows over, but...”

“-but if she wants to find me, there’s not much anyone can do to stop her,” Jinx finished with a lamentable shake of her head. “So what you’re saying is I’m dead meat.”

“She doesn’t want to hurt you. I’m just not sure if she’s fully in control of herself at the moment. ...Changeling?”

“Yeah,” the verdant shifter answered.

“If Raven stops by, tell her to at least attempt to keep calm... maybe even talk things through, if she can. Jinx has needs and concerns, too.”

Kamala glared at the communicator, “You know what this is about, and you’re not telling me! She ran me down—she coulda killed me! You’re not even trying to help me, are you? Fuck, I’m just sitting here like bait on a string! Fuck you, bird-brain!”

Dredging up her energy, she shoved off the bench and lurched herself into a jog. It wasn’t much more than a token effort to escape and she knew that. Changeling could probably restrain her, but she was hoping she wouldn’t have to hex him. The last thing she needed was to make an enemy of the Titans again...

-=Gar=-

“Jinx, wait—we’re not-”

“She’s already gone. You want me to follow her?”

“...No.” On the screen, he saw Nightwing run a hand through his hair in frustration. “No, chasing her will just make her more paranoid. Do me a favor—you spot Raven, try to talk to her. Get her to think about Jinx’s well-being in this, you got it?”

“Raven really kidnapped Jinx?”

“I’m sure that wasn’t how she was viewing it... and her intentions aren’t—exactly bad, either. I just don’t believe she’s thinking this through, or thinking clearly at all. Don’t expect her to sit around listening to you, though; she seemed pretty single-minded in finding Jinx.”
“You want me to stall her?”

Nightwing hesitated, “Do what you think is best based on how she seems at the time.”

It was rare that Dick gave them an ‘act on your own recognizance’ order. This must be one of those exceedingly bizarre situations. He got the feeling it was also delicate... Gar hated dealing with delicate situations. His animal senses twitched, the same twitch they always gave when he could feel Raven’s aura... He looked up to see Raven descending toward him.

“Gar.”

‘Here we go...’

-=Kamala=-

It took her almost two hours to reach their base of operations. The boys liked to live there, as it garnered them less questions. Jinx, though somewhat conspicuous, didn’t have many problems getting an apartment. Neither Mammoth nor Gizmo was well suited to dealing with landlords, never mind other tenants. She trudged her way down the stairwell and into the basement of the shell-company built over the HIVE bunker. Her clothes had dried, but she was tired and smelled of saltwater; she looked rather haggard, having lost her hair bands that kept her hair from fanning out wildly. She may have garnered a few odd looks on the way here, but she ignored them.

The wall with a workbench set into it looked solid. She spun the vice on the left all the way open and pulled the third and fifth drawers on the right open. Jinx then swiped her thumb across a small slot that could have been mistaken for a line of melted soldering on the wooden surface of the desk. The green light that flashed three times inside the metal strip proved otherwise. She closed both drawers and wound the vice shut; only then was there a soft click, and that section of the wall slid open on silent, hidden hinges. It closed behind her just as quietly.

Her entrance into the bunker down the ramps was anything but.

“Pack your shit!” she bellowed, and almost instantly, the two young men burst out of their respective dormitories. Kamala reiterated, “Pack your shit! We gotta go!”

She started for the console, putting everything on hard lockdown—the kind that required a decryption code, where an improper code purged all the data banks. Mikron squawked over that, it always made him nervous. Jinx was past caring, though.

“Kamala...”

“We got one or more Titans that’re gonna be hunting. Grab your gear, stock up, and get the transport ready!”

The boys exchanged glances. She was already slinging weapons into a mobile storage unit; pistols, rifles, plasma casters, daggers, tonfas... they all clattered into a jumbled heap at the bottom. Snagging boxes of ammunition and energy cartridges up by the armfuls, she deposited them almost haphazardly like sprinkles over icing. This was nothing like the organized leader they usually had, but she couldn’t lose her momentum—it was the only thing sustaining her.

“Kamala,” they tried together.

“We should probably head east, maybe Steel or Gotham. Gotta call HIVE, get us set up with a safe
house. It might not be far enough. Dunno just how hard she’s coming after me... So you best get your asses in gear!”

She grabbed her horns, threading her fingers through the frayed, frizzed strands and mussed them even more, “Used their fuckin’ leader as a meat shield, too.”

Kamala reached in for more ammunition from the weapons locker and ferried it over to the storage unit.

They hollered at the top of their lungs, “Kamala!”

She returned in kind, “What?”

Gizmo stared at her disarrayed and disheveled appearance, “Thought this was your day off.”

She stared at him with uncomprehending, blackened eyes. Slowly, the pupils shrunk to slits and her irises nearly glowed... and then dropped her armful of 7.62x51mm rounds, spilling them to the floor.

“Of course it’s my day off. That’s why I thought I’d go over to Titan Tower and kick Raven in the face.”

The little man paled, “You—wh-wha-... Why?”

“Because I thought it would bring closure to our rivalry over the years!”

Baran’s expression was no less haunted, “You kicked... kicked...”

Kamala threw her arms up in frustration, and spun around, scooping up more ammunition in the process and forgetting what had fallen to the floor. They had dual expressions of concern; this was not at all like her usually composed and ordered self. It was unequivocally clear to Jinx that they were worried about her. She was worried about herself, too!

“Kicked what? Kicked fuckin’ what, Baran? The deified demi-Demon who could disassemble us on the atomic level? Yes! I did! Now let’s go!”

-=Raven=-

Raven shadowed Jinx on her two-hour trek, silently observing the determined movements from the worn and weary girl. She could feel the sense of impending doom and the countering resolve as Kamala coerced her body into movements that had to be straining already tired muscles. Despite the heat roiling just beneath her skin like lava in her veins, the quiet anxiety was like a dive into polar waters.

Her mind turned back to the conversation she’d with Gar. It hadn’t been pleasant, but it was probably necessary. Raven’s will was never stronger than it was now. She was going to do this right.

“Raven. Lookin' for Jinx, huh?”

Raven nodded. He was staring at her almost contemplatively. He had always been someone she could count on, and now was no different. She could feel he was determined to help her. She just had no idea how he intended to do that...
He pointed down Halcyon Avenue, “Went down Halcy like an arrow. You gonna kidnap her again?”

Raven’s head whipped to him, demanding an answer for that comment. Slowly, she landed beside him to wait for his explanation. Her stance was impatient; Jinx was gaining ground while she dawdled here.

“When I pulled Jinx outta the water, she told me that we couldn’t go back to the Tower. She said you kidnapped her; ran ‘er down, almost killed her.”

Raven opened her mouth to deny that. Her posture shifted, and she crossed her arms somewhat insecurely. Jinx had never been in any danger from her—ever! Okay, she may have been a little overzealous in corralling her, but she didn’t want the girl to escape. ...That really didn’t help her ‘not kidnapping’ case, she realized. She grimaced and Gar continued when she didn’t argue.

“Nightwing called while we were sitting here while she recovered. He wants me to tell you not to forget about Jinx’s well-being in all this—whatever it is. Jinx wanted to know what was going on, but the FL wouldn’t say.

“Jinx took off about two minutes ago,” Changeling pointed down Halcyon again, “Said she didn’t wanna hang around like bait on a string.”

Raven sputtered, “I-I wasn’t—... She’s not—...”

He shrugged.

“You seem pretty adamant about finding her. If you’re gonna do it, I’d get goin’ before you lose her. ...But... I guess I just wanna say... Follow—don’t chase, y’know? It is a search, not a hunt, right?”

Her eyes cut to the side and her shoulders slumped just slightly as she tried to relax all the tension that had wound into her throughout the day. She sighed out, took in the scent of the sea so close. Finally, Raven nodded.

“Right.” She moved forward and wrapped her arms around Changeling for a moment. “Thanks, Gar.”

Then she took to the air once more. Her focus was single-minded, her attention honed. For once during this miserable day, her mind was calm. The heat still coiled within her belly like liquid hellfire, but she had a cold, hard strength of will to temper that, now.

She stood in the basement for a moment, sensing out the wards that had been placed on the hidden floor beneath her. They were expertly done. Unfortunately, Raven had long since divined how to circumvent this specific type of warding. It was typical of witches and no reasonable amount of raw power was enough to breach it. There weren’t even any loopholes in the warding. Kamala knew how to cover her ass, and that only made Raven swell with pride. She had chosen well.

The wards specifically forbid any ill intentions against those protected within it. Anyone looking to harm or even manipulate them were barred from entry. It was fortunate, then, that Raven didn’t intend to harm anyone inside. She gently phased through the floor and sank through the ceiling. Her feet gently touched on the ground—mostly.

Raven lifted the toe of her boot, and then nudged aside an assault rifle round. They were spilled all over the floor from their cardboard boxes. It looked like a miniature hurricane had hit the room. The
rifle round she had nudged rolled along the ground and tapped a metal desk leg with a small clink.

The three busybodies stuffing a durable-looking container with wheels froze. As one, they turned to her. She slowly lowered her hood.

“Mammoth!” Gizmo barked as his hands whipped two plasma casters from the container.

In silent understanding, Mammoth had grabbed Jinx by her tiny waist and shoved her behind his massive form. He took a broad stance with those paint-can-sized fists in a hefty boxer’s stance. Raven’s brow furrowed as they came between her and Jinx. Even so, she swallowed her instinctive reaction and checked her stance and expression.

‘They’re protecting her... from me,’ the demi-Demon ascertained while adopting a non-threatening posture.

The expressions on the two young men were nothing like their earlier days. There was a fire in their eyes and their grim expressions were imposing. Gizmo’s child-like face was disconcerting with the level of heated hostility it conveyed. Mammoth’s large mug reminded her of that coldly inhuman, piercing gaze she had seen in Richard’s files of Killer Croc. This wasn’t playtime, anymore.

Small, pale hands gripped at Mammoth’s midsection and tried to pry him to the side. He didn’t even budge. When Jinx’s head poked around his huge torso, he gave a half-shuffled sidestep in front of her.

“Guys! Guys, stop—you can’t fight her!”

The short man sidled in front of the larger. It was clear to Raven that Gizmo intended to keep her occupied just long enough for Mammoth to escort Jinx away from her. It was flawless, unspoken actions choreographed without words. All three knew the play and coordinated as one, uniform entity.

Well, they would have if Jinx wasn’t breaking protocol, “Mike, don’t do this. Just let me go with her—I just wants me.”

“Fuck that noise!” Gizmo hadn’t taken his eyes off Raven. “Get ‘er out.”

“I’m not going to fight them, Jinx.”

“Good, saves us the trouble. Pick ‘er up if ya hafta!”

Mammoth barely shifted before Jinx put an end to it.

“I still lead this team.” Her tone had risen to a stark volume that had both boys instinctively tensing. It was the voice drilled into them for instinctual obedience. It was accompanied by a popping, electrical hiss as coral light began to stain the room from behind Mammoth. “Stand. Aside.”

Behind her commanding voice, Kamala was terrified. Raven could feel her apprehension; the girl didn’t want her boys hurt. The sorceress moved not a muscle; she didn’t want to tip anyone into a reaction they might all regret.

“Kammie...”

Jinx’s malevolent aura of hex faded, though her stern disposition remained. Mammoth’s cautioning went largely ignored as she moved around him to stare the giant into submission. Raven found herself equally impressed with both their loyalty to her and Kamala’s dauntlessness.
“I am not putting you two at risk over this,” the hex-caster snapped while stepping around them and approaching Raven. Jinx stopped about three meters from her. “You will let me handle this.”

“No one is at risk, Kamala,” Raven assured, “No one.”

It was clear that Jinx didn’t believe her. She would grant that her past actions didn’t lend to any sense of security. The scrape on Jinx’s cheek made her wince internally—she had hurt the girl. She had let her control slip earlier... and she was probably lucky that a scrape was the only consequence. Raven held her hand out, calmly and invitingly.

Kamala stepped closer and she could tell it was against the girl’s better judgment. Hesitantly, she put her hand into Raven’s. The mystic Titan quietly glanced to the boys—they looked as though they wanted to tackle her, but they were restraining themselves. She took a moment, tried to stare her reassurance into them... even to push some empathic feelings of relaxation into them, but they were entirely too high-strung for her to reach. That was to say nothing of the mental barriers she encountered. *Those* weren’t normal.

‘Blood,’ she realized, ‘*those are preventative measures against anything like him ever happening again.*’

She turned her gaze back to Jinx, “We’re going down. Ready?”

Kamala’s gaze flicked to the floor, but quickly lifted back to her eyes. With a sharp nod, Raven slowly began to blend them into the shadows. Their bodies sank as though in mud for a few moments before gaining a little speed. The whole while, Kamala’s electric pink orbs never left Raven’s, though she noted the pinched creases near her nose and the tense jaw.

-=Richard=-

Dick sighed and sat down at the console next to the blown-out window, ignoring the damage for the moment. After a few minutes, he had found the file he wanted. He expanded it to fill the entire monitor.

Jinx was a hardened warrior, who had been fighting for every scrap of freedom and every penny she could earn since she was a teenager... and likely before then, too. There was next to nothing in her file about her history. Jinx—real name unknown, even HIVE Academy’s records that Vic had managed to copy didn’t list her name. Apparently, Gizmo and Mammoth were on a retrieval mission in East India, of which Jinx was the target. Any other details of the mission were classified. Nevertheless, they had found Jinx and returned to the States with her. The three had been inseparable since.

She had enrolled at the age of 14 and immediately began her education at HAEYP, with her first two summers of remedial classes at Dark Way Prep. The possible reasons she didn’t have a formal education prior to that point were endless. She also took the HIVE Mysticism and Occultism Workshop concurrently with her HAEYP classes. She received some of the highest marks in the history of the HIVE Academy and was class valedictorian.

He glanced through her HIVE activity during her days as a student: 46 successful missions for HIVE, 19 successful outsourced missions, and 3 scrubbed missions citing insurmountable complications or unsatisfactory circumstances. Her personal missions’ record was a little blotchier, considering Brother Blood’s control of HAEYP for two years had tampered many of the students’ goals and accomplishments. Notes were present in all files of students attending the Academy during
Blood’s tenure that their performance during said times were not an accurate reflection of the student’s aptitude.

So... what had Raven done to turn someone like that into a frightened girl willing to launch herself out of a window into uncertain waters for a tactical dive with no guarantee of any degree of success—or survival—just to escape their resident mystic?

He didn’t have much time to ponder that, as the main com had a direct, incoming call. Dick frowned; it was from a restricted number. Considering the Tower’s remarkable prowess, designed by Vic himself, that was a little surprising. Things like this didn’t happen often. Dick checked to make sure the recorder had started, activated the tracer, and then accepted the call.

The visage before him belied the true age of the boy before him. The begoggled head held burning eyes, a searing green. Behind him stood a contrastingly gargantuan man, his arms like redwood-trunks and his head topped in a fiery mane and beard.

For the first few seconds of the call, no one spoke.

“Hurt her, we burn that Tower down an’ sink the island. Fuckin’ wipe it off the face of the map. We got an understanding?”

The large man loomed over the smaller one, suddenly filling the screen with his massive presence.

“Kill all o’ ya,” Mammoth made the meaning unmistakable.

They were both in full tactical gear; no uniforms, no motifs. Both of them had on what Nightwing easily recognized as a kevlar-nomex mesh common to many advanced military forces and vigilantes across the world. Gizmo had strapped himself with several plasma casters and his signature backpack housing God-only-knew-what diabolical surprises. The Boy Wonder had spotted some shock-gauntlets on Baran in the brief moment the man had uncrossed his arms before the hands went out of view of the camera.

The old days of yelling curses and battle cries were gone. There was no malevolent glee as there had been in times past and, he hoped, as there would be in the future. Sometimes, he contracted them for exactly that—their boisterous, chaos-inspiring abilities. However, he knew they had the wetwork training just like every other student of the HIVE Academy.

They were ready to go in hot and hard. He knew from previous missions what they could do with concentrated, driven effort. Dick had no desire to see how far they would go to rescue their leader.

“We have an understanding. It won’t come to that. Raven isn’t the threat you think she is.”

Dick hoped to God he wasn’t bluffing. The two men didn’t look convinced with his explanation. Unfortunately, without Jinx present, he couldn’t corroborate anything. This was going to be a difficult conversation...

-=Raven=-

Their arrival in her room was probably expected. Kamala stumbled, but steadied herself with the hand Raven still held for just that purpose. Once the commute had finished and Jinx’s regained her balance, however, the girl jerked her hand away as though Raven were a hot iron.

Raven reached out toward Kamala’s cheek and the hex-caster flinched from her questing hand.
“You’re still afraid,” she spoke softly, with a small amount of disappointment.

Jinx looked ready to lash out, but clearly restrained herself, “You... flooded that alley! And you’ve been chasing me since six!”

“Earlier, actually,” Raven muttered.

Kamala scowled at her.

“I don’t care—I’ve seen what you’re capable of, Raven... That could have killed me!”

“No. It could only have done what I wanted it to do—just as it did now. It was to bring you here.”

“And just why is that?”

Kamala’s anger and indignation were overriding her fear by small degrees, and she became more relaxed in her own body, more animated. Seeing Jinx angry... with that spark in her eyes... with her hip defiantly cocked and arms folded so imperiously, however, was nearly Raven’s undoing. Even full of ire, Kamala was beautiful and Raven felt the urge to grab her—to press her against the wall just a few feet away and tear off the girl’s clothes.

Raven bit her lip and crossed her hands over her stomach. She couldn’t give into this... Everything had been going so well, she couldn’t ruin it now. Jinx noticed her sudden distraction, but still waited for an answer. The sorceress forced herself to speak when all she felt like doing was growling like an animal.

“H-how,” Raven swallowed and tried to stifle the molten emotions roiling within her, “How about we discuss that after you wash up—clean off some of that saltwater. You can borrow some of my clothes. Once you’re more comfortable, we’ll talk.”

‘And I’ll have some time to gather my composure around you...’

-=Kamala=-

Kamala wasn’t sure if Raven was trying to pull something over her or not. She was starting to appear slightly less psychotic than earlier. However, she had fought Raven on and off for nigh upon two and a half years. The eyes that stared at her currently were not the jaded, disinterested, and controlled gaze from the past. They still held that fixation, that unrestrained quality that made her edgy.

‘Well, I’m already in the deep end. I agreed to come here, so I should be thankful she’s at least willing to talk for whatever reason.’ Kammie sighed, “Alright, but I’m not wearing that leotard.”

Raven shook her head with a hint of a smirk, “I do have some civilian clothes. I’ll find something appropriate.”

As the girl went off to her closet, Jinx took a calming breath and moved for the bathroom. Her clothes felt slightly stiff from the awkward way they’d dried. If something was going to happen, at least she would be clean for it. Purity of body would help her gain purity of spirit... well, as much as her karmic powers would allow. Sometimes the witch wondered just what Vishnu thought of his little Agent of Chaos. Other times, she feared the answer.

Shaking away her loose thoughts, she focused on the here and now—always a good thing not to be distracted with a demi-Demon in the same room. Kamala pulled off her tee and dropped it to the
floor; it wasn’t exactly clean, so it wasn’t as if it mattered where she dropped it. Her sports bra followed suit. Jinx had begun undoing her belt when Raven came in.

“I have some sweats and a—uh...”

Jinx looked over her shoulder and saw Raven holding some black and blue clothing. However, Raven was frozen to the spot and seemed to be... checking her out. Kammie blinked twice to make sure her eyes weren’t playing tricks on her. The sorceress unconsciously set the clothing upon the counter next to the sink. She watched as Raven’s gaze trailed down her back, over her jeans, then back up.

She even saw the exact moment Raven’s eyes drifted to the tattoo. It was then that Kamala cleared her throat. Ravens eyes jerked up to Jinx’s... and then slammed shut in a contortion that wasn’t embarrassment. In fact, the girl seemed to be in pain. She watched, bewildered, as Raven nearly doubled over, leaning against the counter. Slowly, Raven sank into a squat, tensely sitting on her heels.

The hex-caster took a half step toward Raven before she heard the growl and froze.

“Don’t,” the demi-Demon spoke over the rumbling, and clarified, “Don’t come any closer... Just—give me a moment. Then take your shower.”

The terse words through gritted teeth did nothing to reassure her. Kammie watched as Raven gripped the door and squeezed it. Like many of the doors in the Tower, it was metal. She heard it make a squeaking groan while Raven underwent a full-bodied shudder. When the girl stilled, she was panting lightly.

Raven pried her fingers away from the door and exited with a slightly staggered gait, leaving Kamala to herself. The door slid shut and formed a mostly solid seal, but not near the bottom. Jinx took two steps over to it and crouched down so the spot was at eye level. Raven had put four, clear, finger-shaped depressions into the door.

It didn’t surprise Jinx that the girl could do that—she was half Demon, after all. No, the question on her mind was just what had prompted it. The only correlation had been that it happened shortly after Raven ogled her. Jinx stood and rubbed the bridge of her nose.

‘Just what have you gotten yourself into, Kammie?’

-=Raven=-

Raven sat on her bed, sans cloak, with her legs crossed in easy pose. She could hear the water running in the bathroom. Her hands gripped her ankles tightly to keep them from worrying the covers into ribbons. Sure, she had known that having Jinx in the same room alone would be difficult... but she hadn’t even begun to consider what the thought of Kamala naked less than ten meters away would do to her.

Kamala had come within a ghost’s breath of a ravaging. If that girl had been within arm’s length, she couldn’t be sure what might have happened. She couldn’t get the smooth figure, the pale skin over tight muscles out of her head. The audible sound of her growling filled the room, but she couldn’t do anything to stop it.

Instead, she tried to garner some control with meditation. It hadn’t worked last year, but she had to do something. If she just sat there stewing in fantasies, she might just wind up interrupting Jinx’s
shower, anyway.

“A-azarath... Metrion... Zinthos... ...Azarath... Meh...” Raven paused, and then gasped as a pang deep and low inside her made her hunch. In the next moment, her back arched and she bit her lip, grunting out a moan. She could feel the second tier of her eyes forming, and forced the syllables out. “Met-ri-on... Zinthos... Azar-ath... Metrion—ng... ...Fflick...”

Even as the words issued through her mouth, her mind had taken to a mantra far removed from any of Azar’s teachings.

‘Don’t move. Don’t take her. Don’t move. Don’t take her...’

Her fingers flexed and clenched against her ankles in time with her thoughts. She could make it through this wave. If she could make it through this wave, things would be okay for a little while—long enough to convince Jinx to help. She hoped.

~§~END CHAPTER 2~§~

Author’s Note:

It’s that time again! It strikes me that there’s a few reasons I chose a PDF format for deviantArt when I originally posted this. First and foremost, of course, was the freedom of formatting. I had proper paragraph indenting, line spacing, I could make fancy Chapter headings, and even put specialized fonts for an important aspect of the story. I miss that, but I do what I can with what I’ve got. All in all, it doesn’t look too bad, if I do say so myself. A good writer won’t need graphical assistance to tell their story. Not that we often turn down the offer, though.

So here we have that promised Daemos-to-English translation. Due to the break-up of chapters into separate links, readers on FFnet don’t really get this as a long stream of pages the PDF has, so it does kind of separate the original Daemos lines and their English counterparts here. However, I didn’t want people to rely upon memory, which is why I rehashed the Daemos in particular to specifically link Jinx’s thoughts to the translations running through her muddled thoughts.

Raven’s physicality has never often been addressed. We’ve seen her take mystical fire-blasts from Slade, though. She’s been blown through walls—both wood and concrete—and suffered only perhaps bruised ribs and disorientation... because she got up and continued to fight. So kicking Raven in the face? Yeah, unlikely to really do much of anything.

Then, too, there’s the whole ‘just how strong is she?’ question. I’ve never really charted her abilities myself, but as you can see here, she can squeeze imprints into their steel door frames. In another fic, I had her bend one of Dick’s staves into a pretzel shape. I tend to think of this as a purely material, physical strength. If she were to augment herself using her essence (much in the way Magneto of Marvel Comics could enhance his strength using his magnetic powers), I’d probably have to consider that a disqualifying factor for being nigh unquantifiable. I couldn’t even use Superman as a reference because he has a weakness to magic, but... Eh, I think I’ll just leave that open to interpretation.

And here we see the introduction to the Titans. They will all feature eventually, but here we see Nightwing and Changeling. Dick’s pretty much the same as ever, and I’m playing him more akin to how we see him in Under the Red Hood. He’s still ‘Fearless Leader’, and he’s always ready with a quip, but he’s also matured in his leadership. Sure, he can be obsessive—it’s a Bat-family trait—but he’s not so much blinded by it as he used to be.
Gar, I think, has shown the most change in my 5-years-later versions of him. He’s still ever-ready with a joke—and they might have even improved—but he’s faced a lot of serious things and he’s not quite so happy-go-lucky and silly. However, he’s also not quite so beast-rampage prone as he was whenever the Terra/Slade situations arose. I play him a bit like I play Werewolves in any of my stories where they exist. He’s got more in common with the Comics version now, I feel. I like how he feels more... dependable.

Here, too, we have the introduction of the HIVE Five, with a Boondock Saints reference to boot! The Boys have matured, as well. Sort of. These are full-fledged mercenaries. They’ve taken the worst Brother Blood’s thrown at them and came out the other end sane after Blood’s fall. They’re loyal and protective to a fault. This team is as much a family as it is a militant enforcer group.

Baran is intellectually underdeveloped, but he’s not stupid. I’m not sure of the exact nature of it, but I kind of play that role with him straight. Over the years, he’s taken to his combat training... he’s much better with handling close-quarters melee combat and, to a lesser extent, heavy firearms. These days, he’s a bruiser type more suited for occupying, blocking, and focusing the opposition’s direction of action. In another fic, I made him a bouncer. It seemed ideal for him.

His role is to sit there and be imposing—the thing you gotta beat down before you can do anything else. His teammates thusly control the field and funnel opposition toward the “problem” while also making sure to harass the opposition so they can’t actually succeed in taking him down with concentrated cooperative effort. He’s a ‘Wall’ version of Tank.

Speaking of distractions, we have the ever-immature, foul-mouthed genius as the harassing DPS. While the opposition has to deal with the tank, they’ve got his rockets and lasers firing from all these odd angles. Aerial support, too, now that I also have him employing drones. Mikron is still young and easily annoyed, but his focus lacks for nothing. In these five years, he’s only perfected his role and he loves a good skirmish. He’s good with planning and plotting, but the actual field command he leaves to Jinx because she can make better tactical decisions utilizing her nudges.

When we tack on Kamala as crowd-control, this creates a steam-roller effect that we saw initially take down the Titans when they first fought. A lot of this was hidden or tamped down when Blood came in. I really like these two, and I think you’ll enjoy their future interactions!

Raven’s got a lot of instinctual drive piling on her, but if there’s one thing we’ve learned about Raven, it’s that she’s stubborn, prideful, and controlled. I know some people were worried this story would have her going mindless. The instincts exacerbated during her heat don’t overshadow who she is, it merely adds a layer of imperative need to her. How she deals with those needs, those are all of Raven’s design. So far, she’s done... okay. Not great, but at least she’s not acting in wild abandon. Raven’s not one for thoughtless action.

Anyhow, that’s it from me, I’ll see you next chapter! Things get really steamy next chapter—in more ways than one—so keep in mind Chapter 3 will very likely be considered NSFW. This update was a bi-weekly, and I think I’ll stick with that unless something changes. See you all in two weeks!

-Lynx

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**Story Mirrors:**

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“Prey Mate” on FanFiction.net
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“...love will find its way / Through paths where wolves would fear to prey...”
-Lord Byron, *The Giaour*

**Prey Mate**

*by*

Lynx Klaw

**Chapter 3**

~§~

-=Kamala=-

Raven had gotten her a pair of black sweatpants and panties and a dark blue tank. There was no bra, but she didn’t expect that. Raven’s bust was larger than hers was. It didn’t really bother her, but she had considered where this might lead with Raven’s lack of control. Strange thoughts were running through her head—reasons that Raven seemed so obsessed with her... and what that could mean for her.

Even though she had only spent about ten minutes in the shower, it was enough to form a rather lengthy pros and cons list of possible reasons for Raven’s obsession. For a moment, those cons had her hesitating to open the door.

‘*Idiot, she could pry this door off its hinges with minimal effort. Don’t give her a reason to get pissed at you...*’

When she slid the door open, she was immediately aware of the soft rumble suffusing the room. It wasn’t from any noisy vent or pipes. She glanced toward the bed and found her answer. The demi-Demon sat there with a deep frown on her face, a light beading of sweat on her brow. Lines of tension knotted through the Titan’s frame and her breathing looked a little heavy.

Kamala slowly tracked around the bed, unsure if she wanted to get too near it, just then.

“Stop—” Jinx froze mid-step. Raven drew in a slightly shaky breath. “Stop worrying. I’m not... going to hurt you.”

The growling hadn’t stopped; if the girl was trying to reassure her, Raven wasn’t doing too hot a job. The demi-Demon’s eyes opened to stare at her... all four of them. She knew for a fact that wasn’t a good sign. All the rogues and even some heroes agreed—bad things happened when Raven dipped
into her Demonic side.

‘Shit.’

Even so, Kammie tried to talk her way down from this, “That was you.”

Raven seemed to be having trouble focusing on her words. The Demoness was entirely too focused on staring at her. She blinked both sets of eyes slowly.

“...What?”

“I’ve been sensing you all day. The whole way to my friends. During our playing. On the way back from lunch. You asked for Aerials. That was all you.”

Raven remained quiet, listened to her spell out everything.

“Yes.”

Kamala frowned, “Why?”

“You have no idea the difficulty I’ve had... am having... with you being so close, but out of reach. I’m not at my best, right now. Your music is probably the only thing that kept me from taking you before now.”

“...Explain, please.”

“Come sit close to me,” she beckoned.

‘There’s a familiar line,’ Jinx thought, but slowly approached. She sat on the edge of the bed, “Alright, Raven. I’m here now. You’ve drawn this out long enough...”

Raven raised a hand toward her again and, rather than flinch away, she forced herself to stay still. The demi-Demon cupped the right side of her face and lightly brushed her thumb over the abrasion there. A soft white glow suffused from the mystic’s hand and Jinx felt the tingle of magic—healing magic, she knew instinctively. She’d used it enough times.

“I’m sorry,” Raven murmured as her hand fell, “I’m not myself. I didn’t think about what I was doing when I came after you.”

“Why did you chase me? For that matter, what was that ‘wave of doom’ shit you pulled in the alley?”

Raven had a helpless look about her, despite the slightly sinister effect of her quadruple eyes, and shrugged a shoulder, “You ran.”

Jinx opened her mouth, an indignant expression crossing her face. That was when she noticed that Raven was staring at her again—hard; this time with those glinting rubies. She couldn’t exactly tell, but she would bet all her savings that this was the equivalent of that wild, obsessed look she received when the sorceress had first taken her. She was pretty sure the girl wouldn’t hear anything she said at that moment.

Raven’s spine jerked straight, and her free hand clamped upon the opposite ankle likes its counterpart. The mystic’s eyes cut away and Jinx was quick to spot motion in another part of the room. She saw her sitar case drifting toward them. It landed on the bed between them.

“Sing for me...”
Raven’s voice was husky, bordered on ragged. It was partly a demand, but more than half a plea. Kamala decided not to agitate the Demoness by refusing her, but she wasn’t about to let the matter drop entirely.

“You still haven’t explained anything,” she uttered as she unzipped her case.

“Won’t be explaining anything if I don’t calm down,” the girl almost grumbled, “Your voice... beautiful, and kept me sane—if just. When you stopped, I couldn’t hold myself back. Help me... Give me something else to think about, and I’ll explain.”

Kamala pulled her sitar free; she had adjusted everything this morning, so it was unlikely she needed to do anything now. She settled it in her lap and retrieved the mezrab. She glanced at Raven, noticing the sorceress had shifted a little closer, but didn’t comment.

“Any song in particular?”

“I’m-... I’m having a little trouble thinking about anything else at the moment, sorry. Pick anything you like. Please...”

Well, *that* sounded urgent.

“Okay... Well, here’s anything.” Kammie took a breath and improvised some chords for the beginning of the song that was typically percussion. Her voice dipped deep for the beginning lines, “Stoplight, lock the door; Don’t look back. Undress in the dark; And hide from you. All of you...”

She drew everything she could think of into the song, tried to pour her emotions into it. Her fear, her anger, her confusion, her helplessness... Kamala infused all of it through every word and every pluck of the mezrab. Jinx had never felt so emotionally charged while singing or playing...

Jinx was acutely aware of Raven drawing closer throughout the song. She almost missed a chord when she felt Raven brush up against her. Managing to keep her composure, Kamala continued to sing solidly despite her nervousness. Raven settled just inches behind her, and she could almost feel the demi-Demon’s gaze staring over her shoulder.

‘*This doesn’t seem like it’s working,*’ she mentally muttered as she moved into the finish with an almost desperate intensity, “I’m losing my mind and you just stand there and stare as my world divides!

“You belong to me! My snow-white queen... There’s nowhere to run, So let’s just get it over... Soon, I know you’ll see; You’re just like me... Don’t scream anymore my love; ‘cause all I want is you!

“All I want is you! All I want is you! All I want is you!”

When she had finished, she became aware of the deep, bass growling underlining the last of her chords. Raven shifted flush against her, her knees settled on either side of Kamala’s thighs. She could feel the heat of Raven’s body and the powerful vibrations from the girl’s chest against her back. Then the demi-Demon was nosing into her neck, trailing up her carotid until the girl’s lips were at her ear.

Raven’s whisper was sensual... overtly so.

“You would choose the one song that seems tailor-made to make me lose all control.”

Oh, that *would* just be her luck. It looked like #6 in her ‘List of Pros for Theories Why Raven Is Obsessed With Me’ was correct: Raven may want to fuck her senseless. Really, she had just tacked it
on there when she started considering the girl’s blatant staring earlier. She hadn’t actually thought that might be the case, but it had been entertaining.

‘But why? I mean, honestly... She’s never expressed interest in me before. Now she’s stalking me, running me down; what’s seductive about that? Like she can just overcome me and we’ll start rutting like animals?’ Kamala froze, thunderstruck, as a new theory occurred to her. Raven was what—around twenty years old, now? That was about the time a Demon—or a demi-Demon—would reach full, physical maturity. It wouldn’t be a year until they entered their first heat. ‘Vishnu’s grace, she’s literally in a rut! Hn, and now things make perfect, Demonic sense; the flare of her aura all day, the display of power—it was all to attract a mate to court. She probably didn’t even know what she was doing, and probably still doesn’t. ...Okay, let’s just handle this maturely, and very, very carefully...’

“...Raven?”

“Mm?” the four-eyed girl half-answered, half-moaned into her shoulder. Raven’s hands slid over her waist, thumbs brushing the bottom of her ribs.

Kamala slowly and circumspectly set aside her sitar, “You promised to explain, remember?”

The hands trailed down to her hips, then slipped under the tanktop. Fingers splayed over her belly, tracing over muscles at random. Kamala twitched a bit and took a breath. She had to get this under control quickly, or it was likely the demi-Demon would be too far gone to stop.

“Raven.”

“Aching... Couldn’t take;” she huffed against Kamala’s neck, “Had to make it stop. Had to choose. Mng.”

The noise rippled through Jinx where Raven’s breasts had firmly pressed against her back. Kammie swallowed; she didn’t know Raven could make that kind of noise! Mustering her willpower—willpower the sorceress undoubtedly lacked, currently—she managed to keep still. Raven’s hands, however, didn’t; they slid up her torso and played at her solar plexus. Still trying to slow things down, she leaned back from the hands. Unfortunately, all she managed to do was lean deeper into the demi-Demon.

“Chose you. I sensed... so powerful—mm... magic, vitality, chaos. Your mind... was concentrated, filled with purity. Serene, and such anticipation.”

Raven’s body was hot, even through her leotard. Her hands were especially heated, and she took particular notice of this as the girl cupped her breasts. This time, Kamala’s drawn breath was sharper. Her hands moved back, clutched at the seducing sorceress’ knees. Raven pulled her tighter, and she felt lips planting almost burning kisses up the left side of her neck.

“Body... soft, curving... so kissable.” Raven lingered at her neck, alternately kissing and drawing the flesh into her mouth for her tongue to trail over. Kamala opened her mouth, but couldn’t draw sound from her throat. A gentle squeeze to the flesh in Raven’s hold had her squirming. The sorceress continued unbidden, caught up in her monologue cataloguing, “Soul like a fountain, energy throbbing... throbbing. Then I heard your voice... Your voice...”

Finally, said voice cracked out, “Raven... we—wait just a—”

The groan that elicited just after she had squeaked Raven’s name was so erotic that she found herself shocked into stillness. Whenever she heard things like that in porn, it always sounded so fake that
they actually turned her off. Even her past lovers hadn’t quite set her body aquiver with such noises. The sound Raven just made shot straight to her groin and Kammie pressed her thighs together. Jinx closed her eyes, tried to blank everything out. All she managed to do was pull down screens for all sorts of images to project from her dirty, debauched mind.

“Your voice,” Raven murmured again through a series of kisses, “Enchanting, irresistible. Had to hear you... want to hear you. Make you sing—and moan—and scream...”

Thumbs brushed over her nipples once, then twice and thrice. Her grip on Raven’s knees tightened. That only seemed to spur the girl on, and the growl settled into a constant purr. For now, it appeared that the girl was content to grope her tits—Jinx didn’t think that would last more than a handful of moments more. The sex-crazed Demoness was too caught up mumbling half-coherent exaltations.

“Wanted you so bad. Couldn’t wait, not again. Need you... So beautiful. So very...” Kamala couldn’t say that the kisses Raven was lavishing upon her neck weren’t affecting her. The running dialogue was also arousing. She realized that she was probably half-driving Raven, who could probably sense her building lust empathically. “Very... gamaza... ban gamaza. Mmm—im stet ter-olvenekam heban rast... ex al desarast... esi al spetra...”

The slip into Daemos was a bit of a surprise.

‘Oh, fuck... she’s definitely gone.’

Speaking in Daemos for most mages, Vampires, Wers, and just about any other supernaturally inclined person was typically second nature. It was something one almost had to become fluent in, as it was the designated bridge-language. Often times, it helped describe or explain something when one’s native language just wasn’t conveying the idea across a lingual or cultural barrier. However, Kamala had never heard it used as a lover’s language.

“Se kam hal im... hal im, Kamala...”

And one certainly didn’t say something like that thoughtlessly! ‘Be one with me’ wasn’t seduction, wasn’t just some idle phrase; that was an emotionally intimate thing. It was said between mates... or during final stages of courtship. She understood how caught up in her heat Raven was, but this was something to bring up later. The demi-Demon was making overtures that... that she just shouldn’t.

Unfortunately, none of this helped her steadily awakening libido. Raven seemed to be having great fun with her upper hemispheres, but was all this just instinct, though? Did Raven even know what to do with her? This may well be the girl’s first time...

Kamala wasn’t sure how she should react, just then. But, rather than take the risk, she decided to ask. That was assuming she could get Raven’s attention, of course.

“Hon, is this your first heat?”

A wobbling nuzzle was a near approximation of a headshake, she assumed.

“Secon’,” the mystic jabbered into Jinx’s trapezius while nibbling at the skin there.

Considering how Raven had acted, she was rather surprised. Hadn’t the girl seen this coming? What kind of plan had stalking her been? ...Probably a desperate one, Kamala realized.

“What did you do last time?”

“Stayed inside. Couldn’t ignore it. I was going crazy. Touching... just made it worse. Ached so
‘So... she locked herself in and masturbated two weeks away... And she couldn’t bare that again. And that led to me...’ Kamala sighed; this situation would require some care. ‘Shit. If she’s a virgin, I should probably help her with this. But her instincts won’t let me do all the work, they’re gonna make her dominant... push her to take me—but she doesn’t have much of a clue what else to do.

Another squeeze to her breasts merely affirmed this. Anyone else would have moved on or at least experimented—something, anything. Raven seemed to have hit a sexual roadblock. ...This was going to be tricky.

=Raven=

She was swiftly reaching fever pitch, and her frustration was beginning to grow. Now that she had the pink, pixyish girl, she was having a hard time moving forward. Raven knew that she wanted to whip Kamala’s clothes off and just... just have her way with the hex-caster. Unfortunately, Raven didn’t know what ‘her way’ entailed, exactly.

The monks of Azarath had been conspicuously lacking on any sort of sexual education. She recognized that rather quickly upon her arrival on Earth. Sexuality was everywhere, and she was confused with all the interactions she kept seeing. After learning the basics of navigating a computer, Raven had hoped those answers would be at her fingertips. She had, initially, begun to research what she could about relationships and sex.

The internet, she quickly learned, was often a filthy place filled with degenerates. Disgusted, Raven had shied away from further electronic research. Libraries had plenty of books, though, and what she found there posited that there was some natural imperative to breed. She learned more about psychology and interpersonal relations—of a sexual and non-sexual nature—in those first few pages of books than she had in her two weeks of searching the internet.

From what she gleaned, the books and the pornography were somewhat concurrent. The physical act of sex was fairly rote and simple, but apparently gratifying. Unfortunately, most of what she read clearly and assertively stipulated the requirement of certain functional organs she lacked.

And yet, despite what anatomically correct figures and scientific exposition told her, she knew that two females could—and did—have sex. It couldn’t be a mass, male hallucinatory fantasy. She knew there were lesbians; she had seen them. ...Well, she hadn’t seen them having sex, but she knew lesbians actually existed. That did rather imply they were also having sex, somehow.

At parties, wherein she performed admirably as what Vic titled a ‘man-eating wallflower,’ she noted that the usual set of pranksters would gather. During one such occasion, she had heard Gar, Roy, and Wally talking. That brought her to her current situation and conclusion.

The boys had been right; breasts were amazing. Her own hardly held the same fascination—were practically negligible in her last heat. However, she now had an appreciation for the stares she received and comments she overheard. Apparently, Kori reigned as champion; Raven firmly held second place, followed closely by Karen, with Toni and Tara trailing. Following the boys’ scale, Raven could appreciably rate Jinx between Karen and Toni. Kamala’s breasts were soft... buoyant... gropable. Their weight in her hands and the way they made Jinx shift between her thighs was utterly satisfying on a visceral level, as were the emotions she could tell her attentions inspired.

Kamala’s nipples were downright fun, and Raven enjoyed the way the girl would arch or gasp with
a tug, a slight twist, or just a quick circling of her digits. After a while, however, she could sense that Jinx wanted more. Raven desperately wanted to give her more... and it was driving her to the brink of madness trying to figure out how.

“How about you lemme put away the sitar and we really use the bed?”

It was... tempting, but Raven was almost afraid to let go of Jinx now that she had her, as though this might all be some ephemeral dream. She didn’t think she could bare that. Almost as if she’d heard the thought itself, Kamala turned her head and gently bumped it against hers.

“I’m not going anywhere... Get up there and I’ll join you in just a moment, okay?”

Reluctantly, Raven turned about and crawled up closer to the head of her bed. When she flopped onto her back and expectantly glanced to the foot of the bed, she found Jinx staring at her. Raven raised a brow at her in prompt. In response, Kamala blinked rapidly a few times and shook her head, then turned to her sitar.

---Kamala---

‘Put away your sitar, you idiot... You’re just standing there, staring at her ass,’ she insisted to herself, but quickly and plaintively replied, ‘I can’t stop!’

Then Raven was on her back and quirking her brow. It was a seductive pose, not because it was lewd or in any real way planned as such. It was just that natural way the girl propped herself on her elbows and slightly bent one knee; Kamala could make out her soft contours and trace the lines of her muscles from years of a Titan’s workout regimen. And, topping it all, was Raven’s expression—as though daring her to crawl over that pale body and fuck the girl thirteen ways from Thursday.

‘Down girl, she needs you to help her do this,’ she reaffirmed as she shook herself and tended to her sitar, ‘Okay... okay, so it’s time for some Sapphism 101.’

Zipping up the case, she set it aside and came to the foot of the bed. Those four, red eyes were wide and wanting. It sparked a thought in her mind.

‘Twice the sight, double the fun...’

Kammie idly swayed her hips to a silent beat and slowly pulled at the hem of her tank. She slowly raised it, displaying the top of her gyrating hips and her undulating belly. Raven’s rumbling purr gained an octave or two. The hex-caster grinned and paused; a giggle followed when she heard Raven’s indignant, huffing grunt.

“What do you want, hon?”

Raven blinked at her as if confused and answered bluntly, “I want your clothes off.”

It was so honest that it made Kammie want to squeal; in an uncontrolled, Demonic way, the girl was absolutely adorable. Instead, she dropped her tank and let it cover her once again. Raven made an almost keening noise in the back of her throat.

“Alright, but if that’s what you want, you’ll have to earn it.”

Kamala slinked up the bed on hands and knees as Raven had done before, her movements slower and purposefully sinuous—aimed to arouse. The demi-Demon didn’t even attempt to pretend she
wasn’t staring right down the tank top. The honest look of infatuation on her face was adorable and sexy at the same time. She was swiftly coming to love how expressive those solid, gem-like eyes were, even if they didn’t have pupils or irises that she could discern.

As she closed in on Raven, Jinx reached for the girl’s knees again. Pushing them apart, she settled herself between them—this time facing her soon-to-be lover. The Demoness leaned up, and Kamala accepted and drew her into her arms. There, she kissed Raven—fully and without reserve.

If they were going to be at this for the next fifteen days, there was no way in Hell she was going to start this off without a proper kiss. Raven lacked technique, but she was swiftly learning to mimic... and was a very quick study. Soon, it was Raven kissing her—repeatedly and eagerly. Kamala moaned into her seductress’ mouth encouragingly.

‘She’s like a kid at Christmas with a bunch of new toys...’

At first, she had figured Raven was a boobs-girl. Now Kamala saw that the sorceress was just utterly enthralled with just about anything they could do. The girl threw herself into everything aggressively and whole-heartedly. Currently, Raven was all but plundering her mouth and didn’t seem much inclined to stop anytime soon. The witch had to break them apart and grinned.

“Well, you lack for nothing in enthusiasm! You’ve well earned it—undress me.”

She could tell that almost broke Raven; muscles bunched, jumped, and strained as the mystic Titan held back from setting herself upon Kamala. The idea rather excited her, honestly—to see Raven lose control and composure. She was okay with a little roughness. She put a finger under the girl’s chin to bring her eyes up from their mammarian fixation.

“Raven... This time, it’s okay. It’s your clothes, after all. I’m not going to get upset.”

It only took about two seconds for the permission to sink in.

As she had done earlier that day, Raven took her by the shoulders and rolled them. Kamala easily went with her and wasn’t surprised when Raven straddled her midsection in a classic MMA mount—Nightwing probably drilled it into her. The sorceress’ hands slowly slid over the tank and rested on her breasts for a moment. Then, clenching into the material in both hands, the Demoness sundered it by pulling in two opposite directions.

‘The Hulk Hogan,’ she smiled reassuringly up at Raven, who now sat staring at her bare bosom, ‘Always a crowd-pleaser.’ The hands returned to her chest, but Jinx allowed it only for a few seconds before putting her hands on the other girl’s wrists. “Now, now. You should really unwrap all your presents before you begin to play.”

Kamala had just enough time to lift her hips before the sweatpants were yanked to her knees then whipped off her ankles. Those went sailing across the room. She was expecting another crowd-pleaser for her last article, but Raven surprised her by skimming fingers up her thighs, almost reverently peeling the panties away, and then stripping them off her legs.

After that, however, the heat-swooned Demoness stared at her with something akin to awe—like she was moksha. Nobody had ever looked at her like that. Her completely bare figure, to which she welcomed Raven, seemed to have dumbstruck the girl.

“Y-yeah... natural pinkette,” she said with that nervous titter she always had and hated.

The sorceress reached out and lightly ran her right index finger through the soft, inverted isosceles there, stopping just above her hood. The muscles in Kammie’s stomach twitched—as did those in her
thighs. However, the demi-Demon didn’t progress farther.

“...*Hebgamaza,*” Raven whispered.

Kamala’s face heated, flushing to fit her hair. There wasn’t any time to reply, as Raven descended upon her with renewed kisses, hands seizing her breasts again. Her back arched as the girl began mixing her lessons with an almost startling proficiency.

‘*Oh, God, she’s gonna make someone so happy one of these days.*’

Jinx knew that she was swiftly losing control of this encounter, and there was still more she needed to show the girl or this would all just be an elaborate tease for the ages. She’d get through this if she had to use binding wards to keep Raven still enough to listen to her.

Shockingly, she felt Raven’s right hand surrender the high ground, and trail down her ribs, then down to her hip. Her thumb swept over the dip of her iliac. Jinx bucked, whining desperately into Raven’s mouth. This wasn’t fair! If Raven started dawdling down there, the Demoness was going to have competition for most out-of-control.

The girl’s fingers trailed down the outside of her thigh with tantalizing gentleness, rounding about her knee. When Raven traced her way up the inside, Jinx couldn’t stop the way her leg drew outward. Kamala’s head fell back and away from Raven, her chin tilting upward as she bit her lip. Undaunted, Raven merely moved her kisses back to Kammie’s neck. Still higher, Raven’s hand moved up her right thigh.

Her lips moved in susurrous rhythm. She wasn’t aware she was even making a sound until the breathy pleading became evident. Kamala was slowly working up a begging prayer.

“...please, please, please...”

--Raven--

Raven wasn’t exactly sure what she was doing, but she knew Jinx liked it. She had just wanted... to feel more of Kamala. After all, she had just bared the girl to her sight—touching the skin she had unveiled was just too tempting. As her fingers drifted closer to that soft patch of magenta, she felt her lover become more frantic. Everything within the young woman—body, mind, and soul—were all crying out for the same thing.

“...*please, please, please...!*”

The palm of her hand nestling into that lower triangle, her fingers found themselves resting in the natural contours of Jinx’s petals. She pulled back slightly, settling herself to the side for a better view. The girl’s labia were flushed darker than her hair, and the way Kamala’s other thigh slid away to part for her only seemed to display this blatantly. Kamala was open to her, bloomed like the lotus her name implied. Vaguely, she was reminded of the Muladhara chakra.

The witch’s back arched and her hips pressed that heated part of Jinx against her hand. With a sighing moan, the girl’s hips seemed to tremble in a miniature, bucking twitch. A glance to the sides revealed Kamala’s hands had fist in her covers in a white-knuckle grip. She recalled the pressure during her last heat... how her hands had been drawn this way, clutching at this part of herself in a vain attempt to stop the burning inside her body. It hadn’t, of course, but her research had suggested that masturbation wasn’t typically like that.
“Ah!”

Her middle and ring fingers moved closer, nudged the labia majora aside, and pressed against the minora. Raven watched interestingly, the way Kamala’s body seemed to freeze in place. She slowly saw their digits back downward before drawing them up. As with regular intercourse, the suggested method involved the tried and true mechanic of friction.

“Ng—Rav-...!”

While it seemed that her hex-caster’s ability to speak had been lost, she heard the thoughts loud and clear. They pled—this was what Kamala wanted, needed—and yes, yes, yes, Raven was finally where she belonged. And yet, despite this, the girl’s longing swelled almost threefold.

It wasn’t long before those exploratory digits were slick with Jinx’s arousal, and the air heavy with hitched gasps. While pornography was probably no firm example to follow, she did know that she didn’t exactly need certain parts to mimic the effects. There was more than one means of penetration...

Raven slid those two fingers slightly lower, pressed slowly until they had just passed those nether lips. She paused, trying to gauge Jinx’s reaction. Was this right? The demi-Demon would readily admit she had no idea what she was doing... just that it was working and she wanted to do it more.

-=Kamala=-

‘Holy... fuck!’

She didn’t know where all this was coming from; how Raven had gone from fumbling to exactly what she wanted... but she no longer cared. When she felt the girl prodding at her entrance, but stop, she lifted her head to take in the momentary tableau.

Raven had situated herself slightly to her right, sitting on her calves. Kamala’s right thigh was half draped over her lap, and Raven’s left hand now resting on that knee. Her right hand held at the ready below her. The demi-Demon’s expression held a clear question.

“Yes—th-that’s okay. Go ahead.” Then the girl’s fingers were sliding inside her and Kamala’s eyes squeezed shut. “P-preh... Press up!”

And so Raven did. It had been at just the right moment for that instruction, Kammie reflected, and Raven’s questing pads snuggled against her g-spot. Kamala cried out again, and tiny fireworks were starting to go off behind her eyelids.

Raven bottomed out, and then began to pull. Her lover kept firm pressure, same as she had going in, and dragged over that spot again. She was pretty sure Raven hadn’t a clue exactly what kind of finesse she was employing, but oh fuck it didn’t matter. Kamala could explain it later. Right now, it seemed the demi-Demon at least knew enough about what was happening to keep doing it—just... like that!

Kamala came with a keening wail, her body shuddering and hips heaving wildly.

-=Raven=-
‘This... is incredible!’ she exulted.

If she could do this for 14 more days and a handful of hours, she was pretty sure she could die happily. Kamala’s orgasm, empathically, was absolutely glorious. It had risen upon crescendo like a symphony, crashed like a wave, and resonated afterward like the air during a well-cast warding. Raven wanted to do it again—to see her chosen lover writhing so beautifully... feel the girl squeezing around her in that erotic way that made her swell with pride.

“Wai—w-... wait,” Jinx gusted, “Nn-... need a momen’... b’fore more.”

Those eyes finally opened to stare at her; she saw the pupils had dilated and there was but the barest hint of rose rings. Jinx’s chest rose and fell like ocean waves with every pull of breath and drew her eye. Unable to resist, her left hand slid up to rest on the soft flesh residing there.

Kamala’s lips twitched into a small smile while the girl breathily regarded her, and Raven could tell the witch found her fascination with her breasts amusing. Raven shifted her body forward and bent down, showing Kamala that her breasts weren’t the only fascination she had found. Jinx sighed softly and contentedly against Raven’s lips.

She could sense that Kamala’s exhaustion from the day’s stressful events was pulling the girl away from consciousness. She had rather put the girl through quite a bit, so when she felt Jinx’s mind settling into a peaceful doze, Raven shared in the experience. Settling herself slightly to the side, she nuzzled into her hex-caster’s neck and let a relaxing stillness fall over her.

She could feel Kamala’s warmth where she still lay partially within the girl, and gave an affectionate squeeze to the breast in her other hand. The girl murmured wordlessly and the empath felt consciousness slowly slip away from them both.

-=Kamala=-

Jinx’s eyes slid open and she stared at a pair of lanterns hanging above Raven’s bed. As her eyes slid along the ceiling, she realized that no two lanterns had the same shape. Was Raven a collector of lanterns? The one she was staring at didn’t hold any wick or candle. Kamala was willing to bet that every lantern merely had some small bindings drawn inside them, and that they all held focals for channeling a locus of elemental fire.

It was about 9:46, if her internal clock was correct. She’d been out for about an hour. They’d missed dinner hours ago, and Kammie could feel her hunger rising from her earlier exhaustion. She probably could have slept another half hour, honestly. Her Metahuman metabolism was honed and she was used to extended activity due to her physical conditioning... but today had been a different set of exertions from her typical. At least she wasn’t feeling bruised from a fight.

So what woke her up? In answer to her question, her sense of probability twitched almost pleasantly—as did another part of her. Kamala let out a slow breath as she realized Raven’s fingers were still inside her, and the thought was kind of turning her on. The girl’s other hand was still unconsciously latched onto her right breast. There was a gust of heated air against her neck where Raven was napping.

Another, longer sigh punctuated with a slight moan followed. Her shoulder pressed against Raven’s sternum, and she could feel the girl’s heart rate picking up. At some point, the sorceress had swept a leg over one of her own. Now she felt Raven’s knees clamping around her thigh. The demi-Demon’s body was warm—almost too warm.
‘Right... her heat. Poor thing, it’s not even letting her sleep peacefully.’

Raven hunched, the girl’s body pulling away from Jinx and curling in on itself. The intimately placed hands left Kamala’s body to hug Raven’s midsection. Shaking her head, Jinx rolled the girl onto her back and pushed the clenching knees apart. The demi-Demon’s arms snaked up around her and instinctively pulled her close. She ran her hands over Raven’s leotard-covered breasts and down to her hips. She knew these things had a seam or something in the back of the neck, but she’d be hard-pressed to find it and work the leotard off Raven.

“Open your eyes, Poe-bird. We need to take care of you.”

Raven’s eyes opened—four of them. It was adorable to watch them blink sleepily in concert. In the next moment, Jinx felt hips grinding against her own. She leaned down to kiss Raven’s lips and used her grip on her purple-haired lover’s hips to pull Raven flush against her.

It wasn’t surprising when Raven gently rolled them and began grinding against her in earnest, moaning those smoky tones with undertones of growls. She was sure Raven probably wasn’t always so assertive, but there really wasn’t any way to fight that natural need to either dominate or be dominated that came with a Demonic heat. Jinx might have attempted to take top tomorrow, but she simply did not have the energy for that just yet—because Demons in general just couldn’t give submission... It would be an entirely different kind of fight with Raven.

Her Demoness leaned up and sat back, then bore down her weight to press more firmly where Jinx knew the girl needed it. Kammie captured Raven’s hands and looked up at her. She knew Raven needed to take her just as much as she needed to be pleasured. It wouldn’t do to simply make love to Raven if there wasn’t that primal sense to it—that was half of the problem. It was why Raven’s masturbation simply hadn’t been enough, and why her earlier role had been so satisfying despite Kamala’s lack of reciprocation.

“This would work better without your clothes, hon.”

For a couple seconds, blazing crimson eyes stared down at her. She felt the prickle of the demi-Demon’s aura as it pulsed and flared. Then Raven did something she burned into her memory for the rest of her life. The heated Demoness pulled her hands away from Jinx, set her shoulders back, and stretched her arms outward and back. Then the gorgeous, pale woman sat up off her heels and bowed her back until her every line was taut and her head hung back even with her toes. Raven let out a growling sigh, and Kammie felt that aura roll over her like an electric wave; it stood hairs all across her body on end. The shadows painting Raven’s contours leaked and lengthened, dripped over her sinuous form and seemed to writhe over her body. That was when she noticed the leotard was definitely not holding up to whatever Raven was doing; holes began to open, then widen in a sizzling fashion that reminded her of a film reel over an open flame.

In short order, the mystic Titan’s leotard had vaporized and the body before her was utterly bared and bare. The skin was smooth clear from her neck to her toes. Of course, Raven’s toes weren’t holding her interest. She wasn’t concerned with Raven’s neck, either; Kamala’s gaze was fixed about four inches below that.

‘I am both ecstatic I get to touch those and jealous they’re not mine... Then again, I don’t think those would fit on me.’

Raven leaned forward and gazed down at her intensely, her eyes glowing in the murk of the room. Kamala let her eyes roam the blanched expanse before her and couldn’t help but purr at the thought of that sweating, panting, and moaning above her in the next couple of minutes. Eager to see that outside her imagination, she put a hand on Raven’s thigh.
“Lift up for a moment.” It was clear that Raven was confused, but she nonetheless complied. Jinx moved one of her legs to the outside and pressed Raven’s knee back to the bed. She smiled at the girl who still hadn’t grasped the idea. That was okay; she would very, very soon. “Now scoot forward... a little more.”

Kamala then reached up and took firm hold the girl’s ass, continuing to inch her forward. She may have given a few squeezes along the way, too. When she pulled Raven back down to her former kneeling, the sorceress gave a gasp. Jinx grinned from below. The dawning look of comprehension—quickly followed by a heated lust—was breathtaking.

“Now we move.”

Raven slowly ground forward, and her mouth hung open. The purple-haired girl let out a shuddering groan as she slid against Jinx, and then gasped upon settling back. Kamala’s breathing went ragged when Raven jerked her hips forward again in response to the sensations, then squeaked and recoiled from the intensifying pleasure. The rhythm was set by Raven’s almost startled discovery and her inability to control her motions, to both get more and get away from this new experience. The demi-Demon’s cries quickly grew frantic and impassioned as things escalated quickly.

Kamala watched, riding steadily upward with Raven, and enjoying the sight before her. The other girl had settled with her hands on Kamala’s breast again, her own bobbing with every slide. Raven rocked, eyes closed and mouth open, with a heaving moan on her lips every exhale...

Then Raven was coming, a strangled scream ripping from her throat. The girl’s body twitched, her hips still jolting as the orgasm jarred her motor-functions into an erotic dance. Kamala’s toes curled at the vision unfolding before her and found her own release during Raven’s throes of passion.

Raven slumped over her, and Jinx leaned up to kiss the girl. Even as they kissed, her Demoness slowly began to drag their slickened, still-tingling cores against one another once more. This time, Kamala didn’t need a break and enthusiastically met the churning, lustful motions.

“I need...”

Kamala hugged the other girl to her, “What do you need, hon?”

“M-more. I need more, kitten.”

The pet names were new; before today, Raven had never referred to her by anything but Jinx. Of cat-jokes, Kamala had heard them all. However, there was nothing mocking in the way Raven said it. It was sincere, intimate, and endearing; she found it growing on her.

Kammie cupped Raven’s cheek and kissed her briefly before replying.

“It’s alright, Poe-bird. I have plenty more to give...”

When Jinx next awoke, it was almost midnight. Raven was slumped over her, lying right where she’d collapsed. They had both more or less fainted after that last round. She couldn’t put a number to it, though—had lost track somewhere between 9 and 13. The tired muscles in her belly, thighs, and groin told her that she wouldn’t be doing anything more impressive than limping for the next few hours. Right now, though, she wanted a shower... then she needed some food or she wouldn’t be worth anything come morning.

‘Oh God, 14 more days... I need to give someone my epitaph. I can see it now: ‘Here lies Jinx, mercenary maven; Fucked to death by the Titan, Raven.’”
She gently extricated herself from Raven, including the hands that had fastened to her breasts once again like barnacles on a ship hull. She even managed to roll the girl onto her side and tuck her in before checking out the closet. There was bound to be something in there that she could wear. After a few moments of searching, she found a crop spaghetti tank in dark blue.

‘Hmm, I’m gonna have to get her into this at some point.’

She discovered that Raven had several pairs of black sweatpants and a paneled pair of loose-legged pants that had a slight whiff of magical residue. She left the latter alone, but considered this rather specific style set. It made her think that the girl had a certain comfort zone. Most things she saw here were loose fitting pants. Jinx blinked and took a closer look. It seemed that anything at all with legs was loose. Conversely, anything that short-legged was rather snug, as evidenced by the biking shorts and short-shorts. There was an amazing lack of skirts, though she spotted one or two stuffed in the back as though with purposeful aim to forget their existence. There were exactly zero jeans.

Kamala supposed that after wearing those leotards for so long, the sorceress didn’t like anything constricting her legs. She nabbed some gym shorts with a drawstring, then rummaged through the drawers beneath the clothes for some panties. It took some hunting, and she wound up with what she expected were some of Raven’s underwear from a younger age, because Raven’s hips were a little wider than hers and the more current articles didn’t look like they would fit.

The hex-caster went back over the shirts and found more choices. There were bare-armed things like the tanks or halter-tops, but nothing between those and long sleeves. She found a white peasant blouse; a few standard blouses in various shades of black, grey, and blue; and some snug turtlenecks of earthy, cool tones between slate-grey and maroon. She also found a black, flowing shirt that had the same kind of magical residue as the paneled pants—this one appeared to be made of the same material as the pants. There was also a ton of hoodies—mostly in blue or black, and a few with motifs. Even so, she found not one tee shirt or short-sleeved anything. Apparently, it was either to the wrists or sleeveless.

Her thoughts turned to her lack of a bra, again. It wasn’t the only thing she lacked, either. It would be nice to have some of her things if she was going to ‘vacation’ at the Tower for two weeks.

‘If I’m staying here for any length of time, I’ll need to drop by my apartment for a few things...’

As Kammie showered, she thought over this situation. Raven needed her, of course, on a physical level. There was attraction there she was sure. However, all this was born of necessity and desperation. Just over two weeks of heavy intimacy was bound to leave its mark. She wondered how Raven would feel once her heat wore off. Technically, she was just a... fuck buddy to sate Raven’s ravenous heat hunger. Did Raven even know that—had she thought about that?

Kamala’s mind went back to what Raven had said during moments of passion. Jinx clenched at her hair as she lathered it into two cones of suds on her head. Se kam hal im—’be one with me.’ It was too much, even for having known each other through years of antagonism and their current understanding. Then again, it had been said during the heat of the moment—or the moment of the heat, as the case may be. Still, that was a damn sight more than a passion-swept ‘I love you.’

Maybe Raven’s mind had managed to romanticize everything, or maybe she just hadn’t been thinking at all... but she really needed to find some time to ask the girl about it. Where Demons were concerned, you had to be sure. They were driven creatures, and Raven was no different. If, somehow, Raven really meant what she said... then Kamala had some serious thinking to do, because that wouldn’t just be a girlfriend-girlfriend thing. What her demi-Demon had muttered during their amorous haze was meant for daelorism—the ‘forever other half.’
Kammie shook her head and stood under the spray, trying to cleanse both her body and her mind in one go. Raven just had to be the one to throw a wrench in the gears of her mind. It had always been so. To make matters worse, they were thrown together somehow more often than not. A few times, Fate had nudged her to do certain things that led to direct interaction—be it conflict or otherwise—with Raven. She never questioned it, but she was starting to after recognizing the pattern. How many times had her sense of probability more or less steered her right into Raven?

What was Chaos trying to tell her?

‘Please, please, please don’t be screwing with me. Not about this...’

Kamala dried and dressed, then padded barefoot out of Raven’s room. In short order, she found herself in the common room again. Nightwing was sitting by the main console, and she could clearly see her image and a list of files arranged across the screen. One of them looked like a HIVE mission report.

...Jinx was too hungry to care, and moved to the kitchen. Moments later, she was scrounging the rather massive fridge that was required to deal with the enormous appetites what poked their heads around the Tower.

-=Richard=-

When the door opened, he expected one of three people. Vic could have stopped by to tell him it was time to go to bed, since it was well beyond lights out. Raven could make an appearance, but he hadn’t expected it. His last guess was correct, however, and Jinx wandered in and promptly began to raid their fridge.

It had been his turn to cook tonight, and it had been a simple spaghetti affair—made en masse for the team... or a Wayne Industries end-of-fiscal-year buffet. The proportions were about the same. He’d fixed Jinx and Raven a plate, but didn’t expect to see either of them. After half an hour, Dick had covered both plates in plastic wrap and stuck them in the fridge. The sound of the microwave running agreed with him.

Nightwing turned around in his chair to regard her. She was dressed more revealingly than he had ever seen. However, his eyes were not looking upon her as he imagined Raven had earlier. No, some marks on her back—more visible after her shower as pale marks against her slightly flushed skin—drew his eyes. There were a few diagonal lines disappearing into her shirt, and a circular mark just to the left of her third thoracic vertebra. However, stark and clear against her ashen complexion were four, squared, block-style numbers tattooed in solid black on the upper left portion of her left shoulder blade.

3 1 2 0

He had no idea what that number meant or what significance it might hold, but Nightwing knew torture marks when he saw them. The circle wasn’t a bullet wound... that was a cigar burn. Those lines were some kind of cuts—maybe by knife, but he would heavily wager they were whip tears. She had encountered someone rather sadistic. The marks were stretched a little, but that wasn’t surprising; she had grown since their first encounters at the age of 16.

There was no mention of Jinx having ever been tortured—neither in the HIVE files nor in any reports during her usually brief periods of incarceration. Had it predated HIVE Academy? That
would have made her at most 14 years old...

“I don’t like it when people stare at it, Nightwing.”

Then a series of beeps in the kitchen cut into his musings. She grabbed her plate from the microwave and she moved to the table after grabbing a fork. She knew her way around their kitchen—but then, they had overtaken the tower long enough to figure out the general placement of things. Not much had changed in the layout in the past six years.

“I’m sorry,” he responded sincerely. For a half-moment, he hesitated, but then pushed onward, “I have a question.”

She spun some noodles onto her fork and shrugged, “Figured you might. ...Shoot.”

He opened his mouth to ask—but noticed the way she went picking out the meatballs he had made to go with the spaghetti. They made a small pile near the corner of her plate. In his next few seconds of silence, she had amassed and annexed all seven to the edge of her plate.

“...Why are you picking out the meatballs?”

“I don’t eat beef.”

Nightwing felt like kicking himself. HIVE had found her in East India; he should have considered she might be Hindu. He glanced to the side, trying to figure out how to move beyond the sudden faux pas.

“You can have ‘em, if you want.”

His gaze turned to her in surprise.

Jinx shrugged, “Just because it’s against my religion doesn’t mean I will oppose it for other people.”

“I... thought it was considered a heinous sin in Hinduism.”

“I suppose it is, but the fact of the matter is that I’m still here, and so are McDonald’s and Burger King. Either karma’s sending the world down the shitter, or Vishnu is a lot more easy-going than people give him credit for.”

Nightwing retrieved a fork himself and speared a meatball from her plate.

“I suppose you’re right. What’s your opinion on the matter?”

“I think... the deities gave us time in this universe and we shouldn’t squander it.” She took a bite, chewed thoughtfully, and swept her fork broadly. “When you enter the heavenly kingdom of Yahweh, or when Vishnu looks upon you and your karma is weighed for the next round, or when you arrive before the Demon you pledged your soul to... you should be able to say to them, ‘I did my best, and I have few regrets.’”

“That’s pretty sound, I think.” Nightwing nodded and speared another meatball. “You know, this is the most I’ve ever heard you speak...”

“We didn’t have a lot to speak about, before.”

Silence descended upon them for a little bit as Jinx gradually cleared her plate. However, with only two meatballs left, Dick decided it was time to bring up the other matter. He had learned quite a bit about her beliefs just talking to her for a few moments... She was forthcoming now, so he might as
well press his luck.

“...Actually-”

“That wasn’t the question you wanted to ask,” she preempted.

“No.”

“Shoot.”

“There aren’t many people who can come out of nowhere. Some people can doctor their histories to appear as though they have none... or never existed... It’s not so easy in this day and age.”

She nodded her understanding. Jinx probably knew where he was going with this. Nightwing decided not to draw it out and laid out his considerations.

“Nobody seems to seem to know where you came from, though. Not the League, not HIVE, nobody. Believe me, I checked. You just appeared out of a monsoon in Bihar one day at the age of 14.”

“Not hearin’ a question,” she said around a mouthful of noodles.

“Who exactly are you?”

She nodded in satisfaction as he finally asked the question she had obviously wanted to hear. The mercenary rested her fork on her plate and regarded him quietly for a moment. Her lips quirked in an almost rueful smirk.

“You know, that’s a question I’ve been asked a few times in my life. Answer seems to grow daily, only to disappear completely at random. It also varies according to just whom you ask.” She held up her free hand, motioning to their invisible options in turn. “You could ask the people of India, you could ask my Academy classmates and instructors, or you could ask me who I think I am.”

Dick frowned in slight consternation, “Didn’t I just ask you who you were?”

“No, you asked exactly who I am.” She didn’t seem to acknowledge his pointed stare when she split the hairs of semantics. “I’m rather self-actualized, but everyone has blind-spots.”

“Alright... who do you think you are?”

She looked to be considering his question seriously. However, Jinx then grinned in that way she usually did during missions. He wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not.

“I... am the wealthiest of beggars. I’m a woman—and a number. I am an Agent of Chaos. ...I’m the Jinx.”

She was weaving him riddles, and he had received enough of those from Eddie back in Gotham. Still, he wasn’t about to give up. Anything that helped him understand her would help. He just needed to know he could trust her with Raven... that this wouldn’t wind up hurting them all. Not for the first time, the holes in her information concerned him. How could he ever know what she was capable of, good or ill?

“And what would your classmates say?”

“To them, I’m a sister in a family of orphans.”
Dick had half-expected that one. Still, she seemed to dance around the issue as she danced around in battle. He was beginning to think it was more integral to her nature as a whole than just something she used in battle.

“Okay—I’ll bite. What would the people of India answer?”

Her grin grew to Cheshire proportions, and he knew the answer was going to be unpleasant, ridiculous, or unhelpful—possibly all three.

“I am the outcaste, the untouchable. I am the Manushya-Rakshasi without name who, with flaming hair and eyes, weighs down the souls of my victims with a deluge of karma. I am a fierce warrior and a powerful magician. They may hate me, but they also fear me.”

...That was a lot less ridiculous and far more unpleasant than he’d been hoping. It sounded like there was no love between her and India. If he had to consider those scars, he might even say that her mention of hate and fear was an understatement. He then turned his thoughts to the dehumanizing number on her back. ‘A woman and a number,’ she had said.

The idea of reducing a person to nothing but a serial number was revolting... but it wasn’t new to him. Suddenly, he wondered just what the Metahuman situation was like elsewhere in the world. Sure, they often became a major crime-issue in Gotham, but other places around the world had to deal with it in their own way whenever the League couldn’t. Many people weren’t as humanitarian as Batman or the League...

There could well be a silent, secret holocaust occurring in their midst, and the only people that knew it were those in charge of it. The idea made him a little ill, but he would do some digging. For every single Metahuman like Jinx, there could be hundreds... perhaps thousands still hidden—or dead. He might even have to pull some League strings; he resolved to speak with Bruce on the matter, first. Regardless of how the Rogues in Gotham gave Metas a bad name, Batman would be the first to lobby for life. His mentor always had. The Caped Crusader would want to be involved in this particular crusade. Dick just needed more information.

-=Kamala=-

She had given him quite a bit to think about. There was no reason to bog him down with more. In the silence, she made a good dent in her food. Normally, she wouldn’t stuff herself like this and the plate was a larger fare than she typically went for... However, she knew she’d need to stock up on energy for the days to come.

A little bit into their lull, the door opened. Raven, in a similar pair of shorts and tank but with both sets of underclothes, meandered into the common room. The girl had a slightly bedraggled look to her, even though Jinx could see her hair was still slightly damp from a recent shower. The eyes, however, were still quadruple; they didn’t glow, but rather glinted with any available light like polished rubies.

“Kamala?”

Her soft, scratchy voice was confused but calm. On some level, the demi-Demon must have sensed her departure. Kammie called out to her from the kitchen, though not loudly—she knew how keen the girl’s senses would be, so there was no point in raising her voice. Not to mention that raising her voice felt like it would take energy and she felt in short supply of that.
“I’m in here, hon. I just needed something to eat. Starving.”

“You had a busy day,” Raven said as she moved into the kitchen, swiftly preparing a kettle with tea.

“Yes. That I did.”

Once the tea was brewing, the girl wandered behind her and threaded her fingers through Kamala’s unbound hair. There was no tugging or gripping, just her fingers working from the broadest point near her scalp and combing outward. It was just shy of petting, and Kamala’s eyes fell shut and her head fell back. Dimly, she was aware that she was purring, but didn’t really care.

She hadn’t been touched so simply and gently in a while, and these caring caresses drew her into a state of contentment that she often could only find in music. Jinx felt lips touching her own—delicately, not demandingly—and she relaxed into the brushing contact. The kettle began to whistle, and she felt the lips reluctantly withdraw.

Jinx opened her eyes to see Raven pour tea into two cups. She brought one over and set it down next to Kamala’s plate. The kettle the girl left on the stove on a low, warming simmer—likely for later in the morning when she actually had to be up. Raven then padded out of the kitchen and toward the hallway doors. However, the demi-Demon paused as the door opened. The girl caught Kammie’s eyes and held them for a moment... then turned and sauntered back to her room.

‘Don’t keep me waiting,’ Raven’s glance said.

While she was sure Raven wasn’t expecting another round in bed, she probably wanted that spot beside her filled. Jinx was happy to oblige, but she had a few things to address, first. Her gaze turned to Nightwing, who was staring at her introspectively. He hadn’t missed the name Raven just dropped, she was sure—it was time to set the record straight.

“That name is private. It belongs to me,” she said with a hint of steel behind her composed tone, “It doesn’t appear in any file. It doesn’t get thrown around. That name is used only by those I grant with its knowledge and permission. I am telling you this, Nightwing, because if any—”

“I understand, Jinx,” he used the name naturally—didn’t stress it, but she knew he had stated it purposefully. His hands were up in a calming gesture and his posture relaxed. She knew the mannerisms, the tone of voice and body language, used in projecting calm from oneself and into others. It wasn’t that simple with Jinx. “You don’t need to explain it to me.”

“Yes, I do. It’s not a secret identity, or a codename, or just something to slap on a passport to go from place to place. My team is too conspicuous, honestly, to bother with such things. We never hid who we were... but we don’t share that side of ourselves with others lightly, either.

“You may know our names, but you know nothing of them. These are states of personification. Kamala... that’s me. That’s my life—not my job description or the world’s perception of me. It is core to my beliefs, my spirit. You will respect that.”

She could tell by the lift of his brows that he wasn’t expecting that. Sure, Nightwing understood the importance of a secret identity, but this was more than that. Kamala needed him to understand that her sense of self was important on a level that surpassed the simple need for identification.

Perhaps, one day, Raven could sit down with him and run him through the whole gamut of invoking the power of the ‘True Name.’ It might be the best way to impress upon him just how Jinx felt about her name. For now, she left it to her description—hoped it was enough.

“I will respect it. It may not seem like I understand—and I might not, not entirely... but Batman once
explained something to me: Batman isn’t just a person. Batman is an idea—the embodiment of an ideology represented in a simple symbol. That’s something more than any person, something that isn’t as easily ignored or destroyed.

“We’ve molded that, evolved that. Being Batman or being Robin—or Nightwing... it’s more than just becoming a vigilante, more than just some mask and a way to fight crime. That concept moves far beyond us.”

Kamala blinked at him once, then twice. It was good to hear that one of the few heroes she respected wasn’t just a motif to put on tee shirts like some ‘I heart Gotham’ gimmick. Everyone knew what Batman was about—but to hear someone who knew him tell her that he understood... that was worth something. It made her feel not so isolated from the world. After all, Batman—as a person—was just a human, despite what many might think of him. He wasn’t a Metahuman, wasn’t one of the ‘HIVE Kids.’ Hell, he probably wasn’t even a magic user in even the broadest of terms. Even so, he got those intrinsic concepts so essential to them.

Sedately, she picked up the tea Raven had left her and inhaled its aroma before taking a sip. She smiled in satisfaction. A thought occurred to her, then.

“One day... I’m going to have to talk to that man—really talk, I mean.”

“Y’know, I think he might like that. He’d probably find you... refreshing.”

Jinx’s smiled broadened a bit and she stood up, making to follow Raven’s egress. When she got there, she found Raven already in bed. The small cup she had been drinking from was resting on the dresser. Kamala finished off her tea and set it down next to its mate, and likewise went to join Raven.

She crawled up the rather large bed—a fortuitous thing for the ensuing nights, she was sure. Upon coming even with the pillows, Raven’s arms snaked out and pulled her back to the other girl until they were flush. The hex-caster tensed just slightly when Raven kissed her shoulder blade, and then her shoulder and neck in turn. Raven had actually kissed that tattoo; Kammie was almost disgusted for the girl, who probably wasn’t watching carefully and assuredly didn’t understand just what her mouth had just touched. She’d had lovers before who had been somewhat reluctant to run their hands over her back due to those scars... but to her, the worst thing marring her body were those four, hideous numbers.

Raven nuzzled into her neck, “Whatever it is, worry about it later. We should rest; I’m not sure how long this respite will last...”

‘Right, empath...’

Then Raven’s left arm slid under her tank and cupped a breast. Kamala decided to revise her opinion—Raven was a boobs-girl. Kamala sighed and settled her body and mind. Everything could wait for the sun, at least. This day, at long last, was over.

~§~END CHAPTER 3~§~

**Author’s Note:**

Hey, everybody! Don’t let the pairing-up fool you! Wipe the condensation from your monitors, smart-phones, tablets, and/or glasses if you wear them; there’s still lots more story before this drama
unfolds completely. Without further ado, I’ll give you guys the chapter breakdown. Enjoy!

So... it should be noted that “Prey Mate” was originally going to be a lot shorter than it turned out to be. This was going to be the climax (both figurative and literal) of the story. I was gonna do some brief tying up of loose ends and call it a day with the RaeJinx pairing. But then my brain got to thinking about those numbers...

It should be noted that this incarnation of Kamala Malti had her beginnings in another ficlet idea that I never wrote. It’s up on dA, in my scraps under the title “What Jinxes Do.” I modified things for “Prey Mate” and developed the idea a little further. So you’re getting some inklings and hints about the IMRO throughout the beginning of the story here. This girl’s been prison-hardened since before she hit puberty. There’s a reason she’s so happy-go-lucky in a lot of her skirmishes with the Titans and other such adventures. To her, this is a walk through a rose garden.

That’s when I decided to start down this route. That turned this story into a much, much longer endeavor as I took a turn down giving a true resolution to this issue.

Jumping back to the starting scene, we see another song that was some strange sort of inspiration of this area of the story. “Snow White Queen” by Evanescence sounded very obsessive and seemed to fit the feel of the overall level of Raven’s intensity throughout the lead-up to this moment. Honestly, it inspires ideas of a very... Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust moment, where Meier Link steals away Charlotte. The kind of thing where you have the pale, timeless, powerful entity stealing his chosen mate away, “swooping” as one of my reviewers from last chapter put it.

Of course, it can be construed as romantic... In Charlotte’s case, she knew Meier Link was coming for her. You’re supposed to get this foreboding, evil feeling from the opening scene. But as you learn more about it (and if you played the old Playstation videogame), you learn that Charlotte has met with the Vampire lord before and willingly went with him. They were genuinely in love. Which makes the whole introductory scene to VHD more like a jailbreak sequence, with Meier Link as an unstoppable force of liberation, the likes of which no amount of crucifixes, garlic, or holy water would prevent.

On the other hand, if your abductee isn’t in on ‘the plan,’ then you get something like this: a terrified woman running for her life and something that stalks up to the non-con line and gropes it. Is this questionable? Yes. Very. That’s the whole point of this. Yes, the story works out in their favor, but a big part of this was always getting Raven to realize her mistake and slow her down just enough.

Luck is in Jinx’s favor—as typical—and she’s not only receptive, but willing. A normal person might not be quite so understanding after what she’s been through at Raven’s hands and in Raven’s clutches. But Jinx’s life experiences up to this point have been so abnormal that her scale for unacceptable behavior is probably quite a bit different from the average person—even the average merc or villain.

Of course, there is the whole “Se kam hal im” – ‘Be one with me’ bit, which clearly takes this whole thing a step too far. Jinx is very aware of this, no matter her upbringing. Raven obviously has been too caught up in the emotions this is inspiring and romanticized everything in her mind. Just now, it’s hard for her to keep anything in perspective or even consider things from someone else’s point of view. That isn’t an excuse, and Kamala definitely had to address that. I kind of wanted to hit several tropes along the way and kind of... play them both straight and lampshade the issues with them at the same time.

The thing is, how could she have even begun to prepare? This is, perhaps, what I blame the Monks of Azarath for the most. They had a chance to be better than they were. They had a chance to raise a Guardian instead of a Pariah. They had a chance to turn their greatest fear into their greatest ally...
The could have weaponized Raven; Hell, they could have *humanized* her. Instead, Raven developed her good will toward people *despite* their abusive upbringing. I understand that she couldn’t be allowed her emotions to run rampant, but they didn’t help matters by making it no secret that she was despised and feared. I mean, if you’re trying *not* to make her into an unfeeling monster... what better way than to make her unfeeling and treat her like a monster? That’ll totally work...

So, in the end, we have a girl with only the barest hints of what it means to be human... or even *female*. Raven doesn’t have the same experiences as most females. Being a demi-Demon, she doesn’t have a period. Since there was no formative part of her life like that, there was never any curiosity or reason for her to investigate the way she felt toward some people. She could certainly read old romance stories and other things in her library of ancient books; she could understand the basic premise and biological actions that led to procreation. But on an emotional and philanthropic level, you might as well be speaking to a toddler.

That’s why, when I chose to write the ensuing lovemaking scenes, that I chose to put Raven in both the driver and the passenger seat. Yes, she was performing most of the actions, but she needed to be guided through it. Even afterward, there will be points that Jinx will help her navigate and understand as she finally realizes something that many others around her have—something she’s jealously coveted for quite some time: a relationship. Her interactions with Malchior are an easy showcase of this.

It also strikes me that I actually *didn’t* provide any translations for all the Daemos in Prey Mate. This scene apparently escaped translation. Not that you couldn’t probably put it together through context clues or be happy with imagining something, but that wasn’t my intention. I guess that’s what I get for making a claim that I’d done so. XD

For posterity, here’s a quick set of translations:

**Ban Gamaza** – “Very Beautiful/Pretty”

**Im stet ter-olvenekam heban rast** – “I will mate you all night” [lit. “I will you-mate all night”; direct objects often precede the verb with hyphenation.]

**ex al desarast** – “to the following-night”

**esi al spetra** – “and the next”

**Hebgamaza** – Most Beautiful/Prettiest (portmanteau of *hebanta gamaza*, lit. “all beautiful/pretty”)

So! Moving on from that...

The pet-names of Kitten and Poe-Bird were really just spur of the moment things, but I really, really like them. It seems really fitting with their characterizations so far. As was the little epitaph limerick that Jinx created. I couldn’t help myself. It makes me smirk every time I read it.

I actually sat down and thought about the various things I could infer from Raven choosing to wear what she does when she arrived on Earth. I also looked at various other forms of Raven’s uniform across the various DC incarnations. Then I put it all together and decided to put down something of a preference for her clothing. When I finished, I put that with what I knew of Raven’s personality and realized it worked out really well.

Jinx is the level-headed one here and, as I mentioned, she has a lot to think about. She is the one that will decide exactly what they are to one another. Raven is a little too far gone, but Fate is also handing Kamala nudges here or there... is possibly even responsible for just how sincere Raven is
about the whole mating. After all, what luck—what are the chances that Jinx will be handed a gift-wrapped mate... or that she will be handed gift-wrapped to her mate, as the case may be? She can either accept this—let it develop however it will, or she could play it safe and not let herself become emotionally invested.

Of course, Jinx would help Raven with her heat, but make it clear where they stood... In following with that line of reasoning, Raven would have to face that this is a situation of convenience, not of romance. But Jinx also knows that major events like this don’t often happen with her. She’s been following some very specific nudges from Mr. Chaos recently, and she’s learned all her life to follow them... even when they lead to places that make her uncomfortable. Where Chaos is concerned, there is always a reason. It might not always work out best for you, but Jinx is a surprisingly ‘big-picture’ kind of person.

Finally, we run into the final set of scenes. This is where the bulk of the story kicks in. There’s a lot of existentialism and mystery developed within the last few pages here. It’s where, instead of ending, “Prey Mate” took that fateful left turn at Albuquerque. Looking back, now... I don’t regret it. As a quick story, this would have been mediocre at best for just ending it right at the consummation of their relationship—basically stopping right at its onset. There was a lot more to add to this story, even when just focusing on their relationship, never minding the huge amounts of character development to be explored with the whole 3120 angle.

This is how I like to write Nightwing. I like Richard to show his Boy Wonder genius, his compassion, his understanding and leadership. Yes, he’s stubborn and yes, he’s learned a lot of bad, intrusive habits from Bruce... but he has always been and will always be a better leader. Batman is a creature of obsession, Robin is a creature of hope, Batgirl is a creature of determination. When Richard stepped into the role of Nightwing, he was stepping out of that mantle... becoming more than the Hope of Gotham. By not becoming Batman, but creating his own role, he inherently sidestepped that pitfall of obsession that is a requirement of being Batman. You have to be more than stubborn to take on that mantle...

Of course, there’s the whole latter days of his vigilantism, where he takes on the role of Batman with Damian as Robin, but... meh, it definitely wasn’t mentally healthy for him. Being Nightwing is a chance for him to be better than all of the Bat’s guilt, fear, and obsession. He doesn’t always nail it, but he’s only human. I think that’s what I like about him and I try to portray that.

Likewise, I think Raven’s lack of humanity and her striving for good will in spite of all that is what makes her my favorite.

Jinx—my Jinx, Kamala Malti—has her own beliefs on what makes a person. It’s tied to her religion as a Vaishnavite, a worshiper of Vishnu, as well as an Agent of Chaos. This story delves into that a little bit later in the story, so I’ll hold off on that discussion for later. Heh...

And so we close upon the chapter with some heavy introspection. You can almost feel that ‘ending’ die a slow, thoughtful death as I decided not to sum things up, but actually open up several avenues of plot to explore. Yes, the simple pairing-up and sexy-time ensued just like a lot of other fics. But that’s always gotten to me. Why stop there? Sex isn’t the be-all and end-all of a story. As far as I’m concerned, that’s barely more than a mile-marker in the ongoing story of a relationship.

That’s why, when I read fan-fiction that ends with a sex scene and is like... “annd CUT!”, I’m so superbly dismayed. Yes, I do often end my stories at the ‘and they got together,’ but that’s usually because I solved some other issue along the way. Most of my stories are left there purposefully so that my readers could continue the relationship happily within their own mind however they wished.

Sometimes, though, I want more. Most of my stories less end and more... prepare a future. Here, I
decided to show that. So, everyone... Welcome to the end of Chapter 3—and the beginning of the rest of story!

-Lynx

Story Mirrors:

Now Available on Archive of Our Own!

“Prey Mate” on FanFiction.net

“Prey Mate” on deviantArt.com
Chapter 4

“...love will find its way / Through paths
where wolves would fear to prey...”
-Lord Byron, The Giaour

Prey Mate

by

Lynx Klaw

Chapter 4

~§~

The next morning was far more agreeable with her, and she felt fully rested and ready to take on the world. Well, she was more ready to take Raven should the occasion arise—Kammie was sure it would, eventually. The hex-caster didn’t think for a second that just because they got a full night’s sleep this time that their sleeping patterns would survive intact throughout the demi-Demon’s heat.

The trick would be to sate Raven’s waves with appropriate timing and to such a degree that would allow them some time to recuperate. Kamala never thought she would be trying to schedule a sex marathon; that was just weird. It was a little before sunrise just yet and Jinx decided she might want a shower before starting the day. Research she had done years ago yielded that Raven was up in the pre-dawn twilight and liked to watch sunrises.

She had just finished shaving when she felt Raven’s aura. It was hard to miss—the girl was just so powerful and nobody with a lick of skill in sensing the mystical could miss the effervescent feeling. Kamala knew for a fact that the Demoness would push that aura in annoyance during their old skirmishes. People would get edgy around the sorceress and didn’t know why—didn’t know how to filter the natural, intimidating effect a Demonic aura had like she could. She was pretty sure that Raven had even used that to her advantage more than once.

Moments later, through the frosted, mosaic glass screen, she saw a pale blob topped with purple phase through the door in a sleepy toddle. Raven then moved to the shower and likewise phased through the screen. In short order, Kamala found her back under Raven’s cleansing care without any words exchanged. The girl was thorough and didn’t so much as hesitate as she washed her back—and that only brought back her feelings from last night.

She must have been broadcasting it again, because Raven’s hands moved almost immediately to take her mind off those matters in the most gratifying of ways.

“You need?”
Raven shook her head, “Actually, I want to do this before it starts again. I want to know you without that compulsion rushing me... Take my time, savor you.”

Her thoughts on a quick shower went out the window with that declaration. Raven made good on that intention, and Kamala was sure they’d missed sunrise. When not pushed by that heat burning through her, Raven was attentive on a level that made yesterday seem frenzied. The mystic Titan thoroughly explored, catalogued, and conquered every part of her. Jinx had cried out more than once even before they got to the good stuff!

‘Vishnu’s grace, she’s unreal...’

Raven still took control of the encounter, as she figured was typical with the Demoness. However, there was no forcefulness in this slow claiming of Jinx’s body. The gentleness after yesterday’s frenetic coupling was so stark it was almost astonishing. She could almost see those underlying instincts playing to Raven’s untroubled mind. It was in the confident motions the girl’s hands used to so surely scoot Kamala’s thighs apart, in that calmly focused but intensely aroused stare as she came on Raven’s fingers, and in the possessive way the sorceress held the witch as she recovered. When those instincts weren’t being forced into overdrive, it was so amazingly romantic that Jinx almost felt swept away. Beneath that cool exterior, Raven was very, very passionate.

‘...Fuck. I could fall for her.’

The possibility was there. She knew there was going to be some heavy, intimate emotions during this time. Raven wasn’t doing the just sex thing. Kamala thought it better if it had been that way; then, perhaps, she wouldn’t be so caught up in all this. There was no telling what would happen at the end of these 15 days of paradise. While she was likely to be on noticeably better terms with Raven than she had ever been before, that didn’t mean they were in any kind of relationship. Kamala wasn’t even sure how far-reaching the demi-Demon’s heat influenced her. Raven could well be upset with both of them in two weeks—both for the girl’s own lack of control and for Jinx’s complicity. There was far too much to consider...

“You think too much, kitten. Move to happier things, or I might just wear you out with similar distractions.”

“Alright, alright. I think I can find something to distract me.”

Then Kamala began a reciprocal washing of Raven. Apparently, following her failed attempts to masturbate during her heat, the demi-Demon hadn’t tried again outside of it. So, while the purple-haired girl was of clear mind, Jinx set about showing Raven just what experiences had been missed. Raven’s body was extremely responsive—something that hadn’t changed with or without the heat. Her chest thrummed almost achingly every time Raven called out her name, each cry was a brilliant light flaring inside her. Kammie knew she was in trouble when she realized that they weren’t having sex in the shower... they were making love in the shower.

‘Okay, Mr. Chaos... I’m trusting you an’ my big, blue Deity up there. I’m begging you not to turn this sideways.’

She hadn’t felt any of those fateful nudges one way or the other since she got here. Supposedly, then, Kamala was following the right path. If this really were the best path for her, then she would commit herself to it wholesale. It was just a little scary, though; her heart had never been on the line in something like this...

“You should step out, kitten. This is going to get hot.”
Kammie stepped out of the shower and proceeded to dry herself off while watching the distorted, naked form of Raven as adjusted the settings on the shower. Raven’s shower wasn’t typical—it had a digital pad and no knobs in sight. There was a large, red ‘off’ button on the left, a numerical keypad in the center, and a large, green ‘on’ button to the right. A small, capital F on the right side of the display panel above the pad had confirmed its scale. Jinx had typed in 108 and hit the ‘on’ button; it had taken a few seconds, but when the water issued, it was at a steady temperature. The hex-caster’s discovery of this was extremely novel, and she had never been so happy in a shower. Her apartment had a slow, cold-to-scalding-to-warm acclimation period for the first 45 seconds or so...

Her thoughts broke out of the topic of the shower itself when she heard the water begin to hiss with more pressure. Great, voluminous clouds of vapor began to billow up from the screen. Raven’s form became even more indistinct behind the glass.

“Uh... R-raven?” she asked hesitantly.

“Yes?”

The girl appeared to be just standing there, soaking in what had to be equivalent to a steam blaster. It took her a moment to realize that it was extremely unlikely that Raven might burn from something like that. Sometimes, demi-Demons were only as Human as a Human perceived them to be. In many ways, they weren’t like either side of their parenthood, having too many facets of the opposite side for either Human or Demon to fathom them fully.

“...I’m gonna raid your closet again. At some point today, I’d like to stop by my apartment to pick up a few things.”

“Okay.”

Awkwardness averted, Kamala finished drying herself and padded out to do just that. A couple minutes later, as she was rummaging around for another pair of panties that fit her and debating going commando, Raven stepped into the closet as well. Likewise naked, the sorceress was almost too tempting. Jinx was reaching for her before she even realized what she was doing. Raven noticed her approaching arm and took a quick step back.

“Don’t touch me,” the demi-Demon spilled out, and Kammie’s hand flinched back. Raven continued, lowering the hands she had put up in caution, “You’ll burn yourself. I’m kind of like a hot iron, right now.”

“How hot did you make that thing?”

“It goes up to 300, which was where I put it.”

“...I think that appropriately qualifies you as the hottest girl I’ve ever seen.”

Raven smirked and began to pull some articles off their hangers. The demi-Demon wound up in a form-fitting halter tee and sweat pants. Jinx had stolen some short shorts and another tank top, but found nothing else that could fit her. It seemed like commando was the way to go until she got to her apartment, at least.

-=Raven=-

Breakfast was the calm affair that all of yesterday hadn’t been. There was a curious glance or two, as
the others weren’t exactly clear on the why or how of things that had happened yesterday. Thankfully, nobody said anything. Raven assumed that Koriand’r at least suspected, if the speculative twinkle in her eye and bright smile were anything to go by. Gar had shifted his glance between herself and Jinx twice before shrugging to himself. When she settled her eyes on Vic, he raised a brow. She blushed at his expectant expression; he probably couldn’t wait to hear her explanation as to why Jinx had blasted out one of the Tower’s windows.

Tara meandered in last, looking a little more tired than typical. Raven watched her carefully, wanted to make sure the geomancer was okay. These days, the girl’s body was in a state of flux. When she had brought Tara back to life, there were unforeseen consequences due to her geomantic powers. At first, the blonde’s body had been locked into a form reminiscent of a golem; Tara was but an animated stone figure of a 15-year-old. Terra’s external powers of controlling earthen materials were gone.

Soon, though, Tara had learned to make that malleable form shift. At first, it was to a crystalline state—discovered in the heat of battle. Later, the girl had actually managed to shift to a fleshly body. That was when the geomantic abilities made their return. Raven had helped her with meditation, and now—after years of misfortune—Tara had a firm grasp of her powers.

After that, things began to change rather rapidly. It had seemed that Tara would be forever a teen... but now her body was aging at an accelerated rate. Vic had been understandably distressed. However, the longer the girl grew, the slower that process went—and it stopped whenever Terra entered any non-flesh form. The idea, Vic said, was that the process would halt once she returned to her ‘normal’ age, and then continue to progress as was typical. Well, it would progress as typical when Tara wasn’t taking a more mineral or metallic form.

It had been about two years since Tara’s resurrection, and the geomancer now looked about 20 years old—a five year increase. Raven imagined that her ‘settling’ metabolism was wiping out Tara as the girl’s body figured out its relative age. The demi-Demon almost felt bad for enjoying seeing the geomancer moving slowly; hyperactivity just wasn’t really her thing... and Tara was full of that.

Tara’s eyes met Raven’s, flicked to Jinx, then back to her. Then the girl waggled her brows at her. The mystic Titan’s blush became more pronounced and she looked away with a small huff. A small chuckle came from Tara as she sat down next to Gar.

Raven could feel her heat reasserting itself. It was just mild warmth, her body tingling almost pleasantly all over. That was how it had started last year, and how it felt yesterday morning. At the onset of her first heat, it had actually felt nice... before it became hotter and unbearable. Now, Raven allowed herself to enjoy that slow, buzzing feeling within her. As breakfast progressed, the feeling became more pronounced, but not yet uncomfortable. Even so, she wouldn’t have to suffer its latter insistence, now. Of course, that didn’t mean she just wanted to give in at the first, most superficial urging...

When breakfast ended, the others began wandering off as was typical. Jinx remained at the table as Raven finished her herbal tea, savoring it slower than the others and thus lasting beyond their meal. A pair of long, bronze legs floated in front of her vision and Raven trailed up their sinuous paths. Her gaze lapped upward, sweeping steadily over the thighs and lingering on an ass that froze Raven’s cup halfway to her mouth. The teacup slowly lowered to the table, as did the demi-Demon’s jaw. Eyes wide and gawking, Raven took in the supple torso and its montane, orange globes that demanded full attention. Just then, a few curly locks of red fluttered into her range of vision, blocking those glorious facets from her sight.

Raven blinked rapidly, and then covered her face with her hands, “Black Hells, that’s Kori.”
She could feel Jinx’s smirk as the girl remained beside her, sipping at Raven’s abandoned tea. There was no way Kamala had missed Raven’s blatant ogling. Her tone of voice gave her away, too.

“Yes,” Jinx agreed, “and Kori looks delicious.”

“Ugh, you’re not helping.”

Kammie’s amusement grew. Damnit.

“Nor will I. I don’t do cosplay.”

“Jinx!” Raven squeaked.

Unfortunately, the words were out there. The image of Jinx wearing nothing beneath that short, purple skirt and top filled her mind. Kori’s lack of clothing taboos and learning Kamala’s bare form last night and this morning worked against her. The mental images made her thighs clench and the heat begin to throb inside her.

-=Richard=-

Dick noted Raven was still sitting at the table. Well, she more akin to slumped over it. Her left arm was stretched out, as though reaching for the center of the table. Her other arm was curled and Raven had nestled her face into the crook of that elbow. Her nose peeped above her elbow and her eyes stared heatedly, almost balefully at the couch. Raven’s face was flushed uniformly and she looked almost feverish.

Jinx was by the couch, roughhousing with Gar and Tara for possession of Player 1’s controller. It didn’t matter how many times he pointed out to Gar, Tara, or Vic that it didn’t make any difference, that the racing game they played didn’t care which player controlled which car, they all started along the same line... They just gave him blank stares and then went back to bickering.

Currently, Jinx was holding the controller over her head while pushing Tara’s head down and away, unable to escape fully because Gar had a grip of her ankles. Then all three of them tumbled off the cushions and were out of sight from the kitchen where Dick was doing the dishes.

Jinx had managed to extricate herself, round the couch, and was about to claim victory. Just then, Gar shrank from view. He watched as Jinx flinched back, eyes wide. Then the Boy Wonder heard a gentle mewing issue from the couch. The mercenary grimaced and huffed.

“That... is disgustingly unfair,” she grumbled as she tossed the controller to ‘the face.’

Dick ignored them for a bit, instead turning his attention to Raven. Her burning gaze still held on the spectacle. He wandered over to her, but despite knowing she couldn’t miss his presence, she made no attempt to acknowledge him. This close, he could hear a soft rumbling, somewhere between a purr and a growl, emanating from her.

“How’re you holding up?”

For a moment, he wondered if she would answer him or not, so focused on Jinx she was.

“If Kamala doesn’t stop prancing around in those shorts, I’m going to bend her over that couch and fuck her senseless in front of everyone.”
Raven shocked him with her vulgar bluntness. He honestly had no idea what to say to that. It didn’t sound like anything Raven would ever think to say—and yet she had... Dick looked over at Jinx and saw her rest her elbows on the couch, hovering over Gar as he and Tara took first round. He knew that Jinx was wearing Raven’s clothing, but had never seen those shorts, before. From Jinx’s new position, he could sum up the description of that article of clothing in two words: camel toe.

In the next instant, Raven shot to her feet. He could see her escalated breathing and that wild look in her eyes. Jinx, apparently, had cued into the sudden movement behind her and spared them a glance. Raven growled audibly, the tendons in her neck standing out as Dick imagined she was attempting to restrain herself from doing exactly what she told him she would.

The mercenary quickly excused herself from the two gamers and trotted over to Raven.

“Why didn’t you say anything? Come on, hon—let’s take care of this before it gets any worse, yeah?”

So saying, Jinx grabbed Raven’s hand and tugged her into the hallway. Dick shook his head and sighed. It was going to be an interesting two weeks. That also reminded him, he would need to commandeer Jinx away from Raven at some point, today. He didn’t think he could keep her teammates in the dark another day... There was no way they wouldn’t assault the Tower if Raven tried to keep Jinx holed up in her bed for the duration of her difficulties.

=Raven=

“Just ask.”

They were both a little breathless, but the serious tone seemed to settle the afterglow a little more. The demi-Demon lay behind the hex-caster, watching the muscles slowly transition from lax to stiff tension. She could sense Kamala’s growing discomfort. Raven blinked and stared at the back of her hex-caster’s head. The sorceress’ confusion was palpable.

“You’ve been dying to ask since you saw it in the bathroom, yesterday. And you’ve been stroking it for the past ten minutes.”

Raven’s hand stilled and she cursed herself for not being aware of her own actions. She couldn’t really help herself, though. Jinx was just so touchable.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine—if you have questions, you can ask. I can’t... guarantee I’ll be able to answer them right now... or even soon, but I’ll try.”

Raven thought over her questions; she wanted to ask as few as possible, to cause the least stress to her lover. The idea that Blood still had some tangible hold over Jinx like this angered her. Her eyes, the four of them currently present, bled a crimson light that splashed onto Kamala’s pale, scarred back. The sorceress’ growl was low-key, but there nonetheless.

“First, I want to ask if you know where Sebastian Blood is. I know for a fact he’s not with any of my cult’s sects. After my ascendance to Scath, I made it very clear that Blood had gained my wrath, and was no longer welcome among the congregations of the Church of Blood. ...Despite that fact, I haven’t heard so much as a single breath on the wind about him—a fact that vexes me.”

Kamala relaxed, but only marginally. The girl rolled to face her with a quiet, calm regard, “Blood
didn’t do this, Raven. I had these years before he got involved in my life. Besides, you don’t have to worry about him.”

“Even if I don’t-”

“No one does, Raven.”

Raven stared at Jinx passively, taking in that statement. It was a confession, of sorts, but not one the sorceress really cared to do anything about. Instead, she considered the possible ramifications as well as the means of settling matters.

“Where is the body?”

Kamala’s expression didn’t as much as twitch when she blandly replied, “Which part?”

“...I see.”

“Despite his antagonism with the Titans and what dealings you’ve had with him, Deathstroke does have a code of honor. When the whole student body pooled their earnings to hire him for the job, he wanted to know why. So we told him. Blood’s actions were offensive to him on a personal level—I can’t exactly say what it was, really, that actually got to him about it.” Jinx shrugged, her voice still somewhat flat. “He gave us a 40% discount—and asked us if there was anything... special... we would like done. Most of us agreed that we wanted him ripped apart, slagged, and scattered. A few wanted to be there for it. Angel was. She was one of his—his favorites... and she needed to see it to know it was over.”

Raven nodded solemnly, “Were you there?”

“Not directly. I didn’t want to see the worm; I was just back at the hotel. I waited there for Kyd to bring Angel back; we supported her on the way home. She was fragile for a while, but she’s... doing better. We’re all doing better, even if we’re not quite healed yet.”

She could feel Kamala’s reluctance to discuss the matter further; they had exhausted the girl’s will to endure that topic, so Raven moved on to other considerations. Honestly, she was relieved that Blood was out of the picture. It also meant an end to the Blood family line, if she was reading it right.

“There was a curse... that Brother Blood will be murdered by his son, who will become the ensuing Brother Blood. If what you tell me is correct, then Wilson’s killing of Blood means the curse was broken... and it also means no more Bloods. That awful line may have finally been wiped from history.”

“One can hope,” Kamala sighed.

“I’m sorry—if this is too difficult, you don’t have to-”

“I know, Poe-bird. It’s okay. If I can’t answer or if it gets to be too much, I’ll tell you.”

“...Who put those on you?”

“I think I should first mention that you can’t do anything about that, either. I personally turned the man responsible into a crispy critter. I tased him and left him to burn seven years ago.”

Raven was somewhat put out over missing the chance for vengeance. While she was sure Dick wouldn’t approve, she possessed all sorts of horrific, unsavory thoughts she had been harboring for the offender in question. She was also cautiously hesitant about this topic. It had left its mark on
Kamala physically and mentally, and she didn’t want to distress the hex-caster anymore than was absolutely necessary.

“Can you tell me what happened, if it’s not too troubling?”

“That’s actually something I mostly came to terms with a while ago. It might not seem like I could be so settled with it... but Fate told me there was more in store for me, that I had to endure. So I did, and here I am. Listening to those instincts, following those threads of Fate got me out of that place alive and mostly intact.”

Kamala was quiet for a few moments, and Raven let her gather her thoughts. The witch was telling the truth; there was no great, lingering sense of trauma on this topic. However, it was emotionally wearisome.

Kamala drew in a breath and began to speak at length, “I was born in a small, rural village in Lucknow—that’s in the state of Uttar Pradesh. It was nothing like here, in Jump. The village was dirt poor and very... traditional. As you can imagine, someone looking like me wasn’t normal, and definitely not traditional.

“My mother never breathed a word about my father; not who he was or where he was, just nothing. Whatever happened to get me here, nobody spoke of it. It was taboo—and I think I was, too.” Jinx shook her head, a humorless smile on her face. “Most people I come across eventually start to wonder who I am... where I come from. I wonder that, sometimes, too.”

“Things were bad pretty much from birth, in as much as I could understand back then. Most of the village saw me as some kinda Demon, and I imagine you know what that’s like. My mother tried for a few years, putting up with the comments, the glares, and all the pressures... but she eventually caved to the village’s traditions. I was cast out and I had to fend for myself.

“So I became a thief—big surprise, right? Unfortunately, I didn’t get the Aladdin treatment and the Disney ending...”

-=Kamala=-

Jinx padded out into the common room again. This would probably become a theme, honestly. She moved directly for the fridge and pulled out some orange juice. It was about 10:45... It had taken a while to get through everything; it had when she explained it to Mike and Baran, and this time was no different. The IMRO, the Warden, the HIVE extraction—all of it just took time and energy to put out there.

Still, it was good to finally sit down with someone and talk about it. Raven was alternately seething and sorrowful at Kamala’s recounting. The sorceress had suggested tattoo removal for the obscene mark upon her back. That, however, wasn’t something she could do. The witch carried that mark around with her willingly, but begrudgingly—until she could overcome that part of herself that was still attached to that horrid cell on the outskirts of Bihar. Until then, that small part of Jinx would always be 3120.

“Are you alright?”

Her expression had been heavily set into a frown with the recent discussion, but she cleared it off her face. She wasn’t troubled, and smoothed her expression to show that. Kamala turned to face Nightwing.
“Yeah, voice is just a little hoarse.” The hue his face turned was amusing—and the way he tried to stifle that growing blush even more so. She laughed softly. “It’s not like that; Raven and I just had quite a long and personal talk... To be honest, I’m a little drained, emotionally. I’ll be fine, though.”

She took another, long, slow sip to soothe her throat, “I should also mention that Raven and I are going to drop by my apartment to pick up a few things. We’ll probably get lunch out if—well, if things don’t get in the way.”

Once she had finished her juice, he motioned toward the computer taking up the center of the wall. Apparently, she wouldn’t be returning directly to Raven. With an internal shrug, she followed him to the computer. He explained as they rounded the couch.

“Before you leave, you need to talk to your team so they can relax. Otherwise, there could be trouble. I want to avoid any conflicts, if I can.”

---Richard---

Dick ushered Jinx over to the chair in front of the main console. He noticed she glanced to her right, toward the window she had shattered on her way out last time she was here. The pane she’d buckled in her escape had already been rectified. The plastic over the window would only be there for another few hours as the Tower itself finished manufacturing the window. Vic would then fix it in place. Since everything was taken care of ‘in house,’ it allowed them to focus on other things rather than calling companies to make and replace parts of the Tower as the various super-powered young people living in it took their toll over the years.

“I’d really rather keep this quiet until... I know where it’s going, Nightwing.”

“You don’t have to tell them anything. Just let them know you’re still alive and well before they come storming over here,” he reasoned.

“They’ll know.”

“I can’t stonewall them forever.”

She sighed and he hit the dial button. He’d decided to call their agency, HIVE Freelance/X-Caliber Operations, because he didn’t have whatever direct number they had masked last time to call with their threats. The black screen showed ‘[NO SIGNAL]’ in white, blocky letters, and he figured that wasn’t entirely surprising. Someone promptly answered.

“HFX Operations. Appraisal, Bookin’, or Billin’?”

It was Gizmo—or, more accurately, Mikron O’Jeneus. He was a technological guru and mastermind to rival the tech-wizard they had in Cyborg. Of all of them, Mikron was the only one they continued any solid surveillance. Even though the three were no longer criminally aligned, Gizmo often broke various laws... and Nightwing just didn’t care enough to open up the fraud and cyber-crimes investigation for his porn-site hacking. So long as it wasn’t the NSA, CIA, FBI, SIS, MI-5, NORAD, NATO, or any other of the alphabet agencies across the world, Dick didn’t see the worth in it.

“Giz,” Jinx said.

In an instant, there was video feed and Gizmo. Dick noted that their own feed began once a videoconference was opened. He stood off to the side—still in view, but clearly not part of the
conversation. The Boy Wonder was only there to remind them that he was keeping his promises by bringing Jinx to them.

The short man said nothing, instead staring at her impassively. Nightwing glanced between the two of them and their deadpan expressions. Unfortunately, for all his years learning body language and various tells, he found them to be inscrutable. Suddenly, Gizmo turned around and bellowed.

“Mammoth!”

A few moments later, a large man wandered into the screen behind Gizmo. He looked more relaxed than the last time they’d spoken, dressed in a pair of sweats and a wife-beater, as though he’d been going for or coming from a workout. He paced up to Gizmo, stopping a half step short of squishing the smaller man under heel. Mammoth, known to fewer as Baran Flinders, stared into the screen just as blankly as Gizmo and Jinx, for all of four seconds.

“...Told ya she got laid.”

Nightwing’s glance flicked back to Jinx. Her expression was still winning hands in poker tournaments she wasn’t even attending. It surprised him that they could read each other that well. He’d heard that the HIVE Academy students were like one, big family... that the individual teams were even closer. How closely knit were they, really? Even the Titans didn’t have this level of cohesiveness. Dick was suddenly glad he hadn’t delayed this call; these two men would have rearranged the heavens themselves if Jinx but gave the word, to say nothing of rescuing her.

He watched as a massive finger poked Gizmo’s shoulder. Gizmo appeared miffed for a moment, but dug a Jackson out of his pocket and held it up at shoulder level. Mammoth took the bill and tucked it into his sweatpants’ pocket. Jinx’s expression still hadn’t so much as twitched.

Slowly, Gizmo and Mammoth’s countenances morphed into those almost malevolently gleeful smirks he had seen in his starting years of leading the Titans. Jinx had yet to break her game-face.

“How’re the Titans treatin’ ya?”

“Just fine.”

“What about Raven?”

“Ya taken up any ornithology classes, recently?”

“Raven’s killing me. Slowly. Check back in two weeks.”

The two men exchanged a glance.

“Honeymoon.”

Gizmo’s grin grew, “You can tell, too. She’s positively-”

“-glowing,” Mammoth filled in.

“Like a-”

“-neon sign.”

“Yeah, a pink—”

Jinx pressed the end-call button and stood. She didn’t say a word, and her expression still hadn’t
changed as she moved for the hallway. She crossed the threshold and, just as the door closed, she called back.

“Told you so.”

-=Kamala=-

Jinx had left with Raven around 11, and the demi-Demon treated her to a flight to her apartment. Flying with Raven was a different experience than flying under any mechanical means. Everything was open; it was even different from skydiving due to the absolute control Raven held. It was exhilarating to feel the wind in her face without having to worry about slamming into anything.

Her apartment wasn’t anything impressive, but Raven took interest in it and her minimalist setup. The posters she had on the walls were really just placeholder, uninspired pieces she had bought for cheap on a whim. There were only a few things of importance in her apartment. Where Kammie was concerned, it was better to have a few important things than a bunch of baubles that could weigh her down. The witch was almost overscrupulous in her reserved sentimentality.

While she was there, she took the time to slip into something more her style. While she no longer wore the old, gothic outfit she had used during her Academy days, her tastes hadn’t much changed. The purple-and-black stockings hadn’t changed, but they only came up to mid-thigh. She wore a black-and-pink plaid skirt that ended just above the knee and a silk, black button-up shirt that matched the hair-bands she wore.

When she came out of her bedroom, Raven stared at her—then slowly canted her head to the side, “Is that what they call the ‘naughty schoolgirl’ look?”

Jinx smirked just slightly, “More at gothic schoolgirl—only naughty for you, Poe-bird.”

“Really?” The Demoness grinned with promises of lasciviousness later, “I’ll have to explore that outfit, then.”

“Now, now—let’s get these things back to the Tower or we may never make it back.”

“Alright... I’ll wait, but not much longer.”

“Are you...?”

“I’ll be fine for a time, kitten. I shouldn’t have another wave for a while—barring you riling me up again. That skirt is awfully tempting.”

Raven herself lacked for nothing, Kamala reflected. The girl was wearing a pair of baggy pants tucked neatly into boots and a dark blue halter bodice. The figure Raven cut was vaguely piratical, and somehow not smothering for the warm weather. Even if it was, Jinx wasn’t entirely sure if Raven would even feel the heat as many would.

It was enough to make her want to purr like the kitten Raven kept calling her. After a few seconds, she slapped her palms to her temples and cringed.

“Ick! Ick! Ick!”

Raven was now regarding her like the psychotic mess she probably looked, right now.
“Dare I ask?”

“I just... had a very bad mental image. You and—”

A purple brow rose, “And?”

“Kitten.”

The grimace of disgust on Raven’s face was about how she felt for having thought of it.

“Oh—ew.”

“Yeah.”

“If you like, I can stop calling you—”

“No!” she rushed out, then blushed as she tried not to sound overly concerned, “I-I mean, it’s fine. I, uh... I like it. Normally, it’s insulting and I’ve had to deal with stupid cat-comments all my life, but the way you say it... It’s—it’s nice; I like it.”

She was repeating herself and rambling. Jinx hated it when she rambled. Fortunately, Raven didn’t press the matter, instead settling for pressing her lips to Kamala’s own.

When they managed to break from the short make out session that ensued, she nabbed her collapsible meditation table, some incense, and her murti of Vishnu; these she packed in a special box that wouldn’t get crushed and jeopardize the precious items inside. Kamala stuffed that box and her diary into a duffle bag, then began filling in clothes for the next two weeks. Following that, she tossed her toiletries in a small carry-bag, crammed it atop the duffle, and zipped up the bag. Packing was always quick for her.

Afterward, Raven spoke with Nightwing and mentioned that that they would be eating out for lunch. The Boy Wonder easily agreed and said he would tell Vic not to worry about their places. They wound up at a Greek restaurant called The Elysion Banquet that Raven promised would be wonderful. They sat inside at a table—the place wasn’t all that busy despite the lunch-time rush occurring about them. Most people didn’t have time for a sit-down like this.

The woman who came over to take their orders didn’t bat an eye when Raven ordered the family-sized lamb souvlaki platter. Jinx definitely did a double take when said platter arrived, though. It was enormous and there was absolutely no way she would ever finish that in less than two days even if she pushed herself. Undaunted, Raven gathered three skewers and put them on her plate. Jinx modestly began with one.

As the meal progressed, she noted that Raven was taking the lion’s share of the skewers and wasn’t showing signs of slowing down. She took a sip of her glykós frappé, observing Raven carefully. When she set her cup down, she felt the soft tip of the boot trailing up her stockings, tracing steadily up the contours of her muscles. At about the time it reached just above her knee—slipped under her skirt—her eyes widened.

“R-Raven...? We’re in public. I don’t want us to get tossed out...”

Raven calmly sipped at her chamomile as though nothing untoward was occurring beneath the table. The toe of the boot trailed just a little higher. Jinx swallowed and a blush was steadily rising in her face along with the footwear’s progression.

“What, I’m not allowed to stroke my—kitten?”
“Rav...!”

Her voice caught in her throat, replaced with a gasp as the boot cleared her stockings and the smooth fabric of the boot brushed against the bare skin of her inner thighs. Kamala made no sudden motions so as not to draw attention to herself, but that also meant she made no motion to impede Raven’s progress. She swallowed and looked around at the other patrons; none of them seemed to have taken notice of them. However, a cleared throat had her bouncing in her seat. Jinx’s head whipped to the waitress standing at their tableside with a somewhat amused expression and a raised brow.

“Refills?”

“Yes, please,” Raven answered for them.

Kamala was thankful for that, as she couldn’t really find words to speak at the moment. The toe traced the edge of her right stocking and she opened her mouth—then clamped it shut. Her eyes shot to Raven, trying to convey her message. She was sure the empath could practically hear her thoughts.

“You can’t be serious!”

The sorceress held her eyes and gave an inconspicuously minute nod and continued to work her magic. Raven could hear her! And the girl wasn’t stopping. Her eyes flicked to the waitress. Kamala could feel her ears burning.

“You’re not planning to take that any further, are you?”

“Oh, God, she knows! Stop before we get in trouble!”

Raven shook her head, “Just teasing a bit.”

The waitress gave a slower, faux-lamenting shake, “You are an evil woman.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Succubus!” Jinx squeaked.

The woman laughed outright at that. “I’ll be back with your drinks.” Their waitress sported a broad smile as she walked away.

Thankfully, the demi-Demon didn’t do anything else more scandalous than toy with the hem of her stockings. Kamala’s face remained rather red throughout the rest of the meal, but she calmed when it seemed as though they wouldn’t get thrown out. However, she remained utterly distracted—much to Raven’s amusement she was sure. When their waitress came back with their drinks, she managed to startle Jinx again, and her knees clamped over Raven’s calf to try to keep her amorous Demoness at bay.

The waitress looked just as amused as Raven when their meal was over. Jinx pulled out a card and slid it into the server book. Apparently, the woman had been waiting for just that occasion.

“So you’re footing the bill for your lady?”

The newfound shades her pale features managed were filled with equal parts embarrassment and exasperation.

“You’ve been holding that one in the whole meal, haven’t you?”
“Yep. Well, I hope you enjoyed your meal as much as you enjoyed the... atmosphere. I hope you’ll come back.”

“Maybe—if I can keep this one from jumping me in random fits of passion.”

“Hey!” Raven complained with an uncharacteristic pout.

Kamala raised a brow at Raven, daring the girl to prove her wrong.

“I’m in control. Now... Mostly.”

“You two are precious,” the woman said with a grin, “I’ll ring you up while you finish up your drinks. Did you want to add a tip?”

Kammie nodded, “30%’s fine. Thanks for putting up with her.”

Raven’s blush, long overdue in Jinx’s opinion, finally made its debut. Once more, they sent their waitress off with a laugh. Eventually, they had finished their drinks and left the restaurant to its peace. Kamala realized that she might just have to do something about Raven’s possessive/dominant streak during this heat. It might have been fine here, but she didn’t want to think what kind of scandal could start if Raven became much bolder... or hit a wave while they were out. Either they would have to restrict their outside time, or she’d have to do something about the girl’s Demonic instincts.

They made it back just after lunch, and had another hour before Raven’s heat struck again. Jinx was lounging on the couch watching a random documentary on fungus. She didn’t know why she was bothering to watch it, but Kori was paying it rapt attention. Raven’s head rested in her lap, lazily dozing. Despite the oh-so utterly captivating action on the screen, Jinx was about to join her—the mystic Titan’s heat had put them into a situation where they were taking several naps throughout the day. It just seemed wiser than counting on a full night’s rest.

A squeeze to her hand drew Jinx’s half-open eyes to Raven. The demi-Demon was looking up at her with intense, amethyst eyes. Kamala brushed her thumb over the back of Raven’s hand and gently drew the girl up from her lap.

“I’ll meet you there in just a minute,” she whispered.

Raven nodded and moved toward the hall. Jinx made her way to the kitchen. She sat down at the table after the door had closed behind Raven. There wasn’t much time to do this, so she would have to move quickly but surely. She could feel Nightwing’s gaze on her the whole way, but he chose to remain by Kori’s side. The hex-caster hadn’t a clue how he managed to stay conscious through that documentary...

‘Im mori al hort en duqai’tae, Kamala’s Ruby,’ she mentally chanted while channeling a minor translocation spell.

In a dull blossom of white light, a small, pearl-like orb made of ruby appeared in her palm. Into this handy, little artifact, she also channeled a small bit of ethereal energy. These ‘holding crystals’ were lovely items that made storage not quite so cumbersome. She had stored her duffle bag in this ruby briefly, today.

“Trevan ex im leti: Silver Chalice.”
The wording was something she could have set up to be more complex, but it really wouldn’t have helped anything. Already, she had numerous bindings and protections on the ruby to keep it out of the wrong hands. There was no need to code-phrase anything, especially when she didn’t have a lot in it to begin with.

Hell, the ruby itself had enormous holding potential and she wasn’t even scraping the surface with its meager contents. Honestly, a quartz holding crystal would have sufficed, but that would have been harder to enchant against unwanted users due to quartz’s accessibility as a lower-tier material.

Jinx gestured to the table after her command, and another blossom of white light heralded a simple silver chalice sitting upon the table. Kammie snatched it up and brought it over to the sink. There, she filled it nearly three-quarters full of cool water, then brought it back to the table.

After that, it was a simple purification spell. There was no need to summon Elemental Water; too much energy and too little time for such a simple thing. All she wanted was a standard, temporary binding. There was no need for anything special for that.

As she quietly chanted and channeled energy into the chalice to purify contents, a dark smoke slowly rose from the water. She continued to send more mystical energy and chant over the chalice until the smoke ceased emitting. The smoke wasn’t real—not exactly, though the things it was eschewing from the water were. Not only would this water beat a Brita any day, but it also had a harmonic resonance for magic, now. It was free of any negative energy sources that could harm anything in the least. In other words, it was ideal for casting or infusing with a spell...

Jinx waved her hand to dispel the wispy, blackened mass hanging in the air over the container, “To think people drink this shit straight from the tap...”

The hex-caster held her hand over the chalice and drew it away in an upward arc. The water followed, slipping through the air and holding shape. As it began to fall, she cupped her right hand beneath it and guided it back into itself, creating a swirling ring of water. With that done, she turned her attention to the chalice.

Kamala waved her hand dismissively, “Muriv shar im leti: Silver Chalice.”

Both ruby and chalice flared with that small light, and the chalice was once more stored within her holding crystal. Now, it was time to get down to that binding. She still had a few minutes before Raven might get suspicious. Nightwing already was—she could see him standing and making his way over to her.

-=Richard=-

Jinx was, for lack of a better word, drawing within the ring of water. The rivulets smeared into the circle of water as she directed her finger, but they smeared neatly into shapes and symbols he knew would only make sense to Raven or Jinx. Generally, he didn’t question the things that Raven did, but Jinx was still a bit of an enigma.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“I was wondering what you were doing.”

“This is just something to help me with Raven—give me a little edge. It’s nothing dangerous.”

Various rune-symbols and lines made themselves apparent as the ring of water slowly thinned.
Eventually, Jinx had a complex, hovering series of sigils within a binding circle. Dick had gleaned enough to understand the basics of what was necessary in a spell over the years with Raven. He still hadn’t a clue what he was looking at, though.

“Is that the Mark of Scath?”

“Indeed it is, Nightlight. Used to be Big Red’s, but the mantle has passed to our Poe-bird. Now she is Scath—and it’s easier to use it to refer to her this way rather than chancing a mistaken True Name or some ridiculous hierarchy just to point her out. All that she is, wrapped up in that little symbol. Easy, yeah?”

After a moment’s scrutiny, Jinx nods at the set of glyphs and lines.

“Can I borrow one or your shuriken-thingies for a sec?” Curious to find out where she’s going with this, Dick pulled a birdarang free from his belt and flicked it open. Jinx promptly took it and sliced a small cut her left index finger with it. She handed it back to him as the blood first began welling upon her fingertip. “Thanks.”

The pinkette then held her finger aloft, her other palm underneath it. Three drops of blood fell, but hovered halfway between her finger and palm, amassing into a small globule. It hovered in front of the water-sigil while she passed her right hand over the cut finger. A wispy, green mist twined about the finger and the injury was gone.

“What exactly are you doing?” Nightwing asked, and then quickly appended, “And is it safe?”

“Do not take me for some conjurer of cheap tricks,” she replied with a smirk. Dick rolled his eyes at the witch’s quote. Thankfully, her expression sobered and answered his question. “Seriously, I’m not some fumbling novice. I know what I’m doing, Nightlight. And this is just to link the spell to me.”

With a nod, Jinx sent the orb of blood into the center of the sigil, where the Mark of Scath laid. The blood stained the clear water, and slowly spread out until the whole symbol was suffused and turning a deep, reddish-pink. Jinx then held out her hands to either side of the whole circle. White trails of mystical energy flowed into the spell until it glowed brightly like one of the witch’s hexes.

Following this, Jinx brought her hands together and the whole thing began to shrink on itself until it was but a glowing pellet of reddish water. She continued to cram it into a smaller space—which should have been impossible, as it was now smaller than the mass it had been in the chalice, but he just accepted it as one of those magic things. Soon, it was nothing more than a glitter-like glint.

-=Kamala=-

“See? Nothing to it.”

She reached out and ‘grabbed’ the spark with her left hand, but merely relocated it to her right index finger once it was out of sight. A bit of misdirection couldn’t hurt. Besides, he didn’t need to know what she was doing with that spell—he might have some objection to it or something. Then again, he might not... but she wasn’t risking it.

Likewise snatching up the ruby, she clasped it in her hand and—as the stage magicians did—she opened one finger at a time. The ruby, of course, had translocated... She had actually moved it inside itself until she needed to summon it again, but that would probably just bake his brain if she tried to explain that something could be hidden within itself and thus ‘disappear’ from physical space as they knew it.
Almost on cue, Raven padded back into the common room. She was looking a little antsy, but that was to be expected. It had been five minutes, after all.

-=Raven=-

*It’s been five minutes. What’s keeping her?*

Even as she entered the room, she sensed the lingering energy of a recently cast spell. She frowned as she approached the table. Just as she opened her mouth to question Kamala, the girl stood and put a finger to her ajna chakra gem.

“Boop.”

Raven’s brows scrunched and her eyes crossed to stare at the finger.

“What-”

Jinx merely grinned and shook her head, “Just wanted to do that for a while.”

Before Raven had a chance to formulate a response to that, her hex-caster bolted from the room and down the hallway. Her head whipped to follow, and she blinked once... and then flung herself into pursuit. It was only once she had made it about four strides and to the door that she realized she couldn’t exactly help herself. She had already told Jinx that she chased because the girl ran... this was a bit too much like waving the matador’s cloak.

There was really only one destination where this could possibly end. Raven skidded to a stop in front of her door. It was open—and she never left her door open. She quietly stepped inside and slid the door shut behind her. There, sitting on the bed in easy pose and bearing her typical grin, was Kamala. The girl crooked a finger at her; Raven promptly prowled toward the bed. As she loomed over Jinx and attempted to press her back into the mattress, however, she found her hex-caster unbudging.

The witch wound her arms around the sorceress and slowly twisted them around, putting Raven’s back to the bed. Kammie now hung over her, and Raven found herself utterly baffled even as the girl kissed her. She responded on autopilot for several, long moments before her mind caught onto the strange circumstances.

“How did-”

It was when she attempted to lean up—to pull from Kamala’s grasp, that she found she couldn’t break it. Frowning, she reached for her soul-self—called it to grapple Jinx in the way she apparently couldn’t. She felt it shift inside her... but something was confining it to her corporeal form. It appeared that phasing would also be out of the question.

*What in the Black Hells is going on?*

The hex-caster’s grin hadn’t let up, but Jinx sat up and released her. She quickly sat up and scooted back a little bit. Jinx leaned forward, a peculiar gleam in her eye. Something was wrong here...

“Careful, Raven... if you run, I’ll chase.”

On an instinctual plane of understanding, the Demoness felt the shift of power... how events were slowly tilting on their axis. Her conscious mind hadn’t caught up to everything fully, but her body
was already in motion—her feet whisking under her. She torqued her body about and fled for the doorway. Behind her, she could hear Jinx tearing off the bed. Raven hurled herself down the hallway, realizing that she was faster in flight than she was on foot. Kamala had the advantage.

The door to the common room barely had time to slide away before she blew through its still-opening portal. Dick’s head whipped to her from his position by the kitchen table; apparently, he hadn’t even moved since their departure. Her inattention cost her, as Jinx brought her down with a flying tackle.

Her body crashed to the ground, but she was already in motion. Raven twisted and attempted to sit up, but Jinx had a grip of her forearms and slammed her back to the floor. She growled, jarred and annoyed. Kamala had her in full mount. She was a demi-Demon! Jinx shouldn’t be able to do this to her! She was supposed to be in control!

Thrashing, kicking her feet, and bucking her hips, she found that nothing helped. The mystic Titan growled again—so loud it was almost a roar. Her second tier of eyes opened and she reached deep for that power she knew resided within her. Even as her skin began to darken to a brick red and her hair lengthened, Kamala was chastising her.

“That’s not going to help, Raven, and you know it.”

This time, however, she managed to rise up almost a foot before Jinx pulled her arms above her head and forced her back to the carpet. The girl’s grip shackled her almost impossibly. It took almost minimal effort for Kamala to flatten her out.

“Uff. Okay, so you can make me work for it... but it’s not going to change anything.”

She writhed, arching her back and growling in frustration. No amount of jerking or contorting freed her arms or dislodged Jinx. Gritting her fangs, she strained—but it was for naught.

“Come on, hon. Settle down and listen to me, alright?”

Dick was nearby, and she could sense his concern... but she couldn’t call to him, couldn’t ask for his help. It wouldn’t be right. Jinx was Challenging her and she had to win—she just had to! There was no other option but to claim victory... somehow.

Raven’s struggles had tired her, and it showed as she panted lightly. She went limp, conserving her energy. Huffing, the Demoness turned her head away from Jinx. There was only one possible way that Kamala was managing this...

“You bound me.”

It was an angry accusation.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

It hurt to think Jinx would do this to her. She hadn’t done anything to deserve such treatment. Hadn’t she explained herself to Kamala in full? The way the girl held her down was almost insulting. Kamala wasn’t supposed to take these sorts of liberties with her—shouldn’t have even been able to do so...

Kamala bent down to her ear and whispered, “Vensai ex im.”
‘Surrender to her? She can’t be serious!’ Raven’s stunned expression was clear in all four of her wide, crimson oculars. “Dai im zal. Dai im stet.”

“Yes, you can. If you let yourself, you can and will,” Jinx’s voice was soft, encouraging—not gloating or triumphant. It was nothing like she thought Kamala might sound if she wanted someone to give into her. But Raven just couldn’t—giving up wasn’t in her nature! Even as she futilely struggled in the girl’s grip once more, Kamala continued in that same, soothing voice, “Just this once. I think you’ll like it. Just try it for me? I promise, if you don’t like it, I’ll unbind you and you can have me, instead. Okay?”

Raven shifted uncomfortably. To just be handed a ‘victory’ like that would feel even worse than submitting! Even with Kamala’s promise, however, she would still have yielded and that wasn’t something she was used to doing... at all. Such a thing just felt unnatural.

“Trust me?”

She was slow to respond. She wanted to tell Kamala that she did trust her... but that what Jinx was suggesting was a little bit scary. The words wouldn’t come—too much on her mind and her body too nervous to formulate the words. At last, she managed a nod.

‘I can do this... I can show her I trust her,’ Raven licked her blackened lips and forced the words past them, “Im... Im ven—vensai.”

Her eyes lodged themselves on the floor, unable to meet Kamala’s or Dick’s gaze. Kori was probably watching, too... Her body was shaking and she felt her insides shifting about uncomfortably. This was new territory and she didn’t like it. The world had dropped out from under her and there was a sense of weight upon her, like heaps of invisible chains lashing her down. She had surrendered; even Trigon hadn’t garnered such a thing from her—not in the official sense of a Challenge. Raven felt Jinx’s lips on her, but she had barely enough mind to kiss back before the girl was pulling away.

Jinx’s hands slid up to her palms, grasped her hands, and pulled her to her feet. She stood there awkwardly, unsure what to expect. Then Kamala’s arms were around her, hugging her close and she sought solace from it—even though they were the selfsame arms that brought this submission upon her. Her conflicting feelings over this were enough to keep her quiet.

-=Kamala=-

Her girl was shaking. She knew that Raven’s instincts would play Hell on the demi-Demon. She imagined this was probably true of every Demon’s first submission. She also knew that there was no way that Raven could simply give in; she had to take that from the Demoness... Otherwise, she doubted that particular side of Raven would be able to respect Kamala’s display of power—would have demanded that Raven put her in her place. Now, however, Jinx had earned the right to take Raven.

That kind of duality was probably what had Raven so twisted up, right now. Kamala would show her lover that she wouldn’t abuse that power she had taken, though. She pulled Raven close and nuzzled her head into the girl’s shoulder. Placing a kiss on the docile girl’s neck, she spoke just as softly as before.

“Trust me, Poe-bird, and I’ll make it worth your while.”
Raven was unresisting as she led her to the hallway. She hadn’t expected any resistance, though. Jinx had suspected the surrender would be complete, this way. Before they could make their escape, however, Nightwing called to them.

“What was that all about?”

There was suspicion in his voice, and she couldn’t really blame him. It would be best to answer him, but she didn’t want to waste time. The longer she left Raven feeling helpless, the worse she felt.

“If she’s okay with it, I’ll explain it to you later, Nightwing. Maybe after dinner.”

Yes—after dinner and after she had showed Raven that it was okay to give in once in a while. She ushered the girl back to her room without further incident or interruption. She slid the door closed and drew Raven to the bed.

“Let’s get you out of those clothes.”

“I-I shouldn’t have changed...”

Raven wasn’t talking about her clothes, Kamala knew.

“Why?”

“Because... this is—I’m...”

Raven struggled for the words. Jinx already guessed them, however. This form had resemblances to Trigon... and Raven obviously hated that. However, when Kamala looked upon Raven, she didn’t see the daughter of Trigon—she saw a Titan and an amazing, passionate woman. Now would be as good a time as any to show Raven that she wasn’t shallow enough to only want her in the form that looked Human. She gave herself to Raven with full knowledge that the girl was a demi-Demon. It wouldn’t do to start building misconceptions, now.

“Don’t hide yourself. I think you’re beautiful. Really—I like what I see.”

She wasn’t lying or trying to placate Raven at that. The girl’s skin was a deep, vibrant maroon, her lips and nails black as midnight. Well, her nails were more like claws, now, but that was actually cool in Jinx’s opinion. As long as those didn’t go raking down her back mid-coitus, things should be fine. Raven’s hair was also quite fetching long—maybe she could get the girl to keep it that way...

Overall, her demi-Demon’s fully actualized form was truly something to behold. It was different enough from Raven’s typical appearance that this felt like a new experience... but also close enough to normal that Kamala wouldn’t feel lost. She still knew what would make Raven twitch and what would make the girl purr. Jinx grinned and scooted closer to help Raven out of her clothes.

“Of course, I’d like to see a lot more of what you have going on, here...”

---Raven---

She had expected something a little different when Jinx started in on her, but Kamala kissed her all the same—as though nothing had changed. The desire, lust, and affection she felt from the hex-caster was just as strong as it had been before, if not a little stronger. Raven was pleased, but also slightly confused. Nobody had ever reacted to her Demonic side favorably; the monks of Azarath had always looked at her with identical... disapproving frowns whenever it was merely mentioned. She
knew that perceptions here on Earth were mostly the same, and only exacerbated by religion and their horror stories. It didn’t make sense that this form could be appealing to anyone. All things considered, it was difficult to contemplate that as Kamala was trailing a wet string of kisses into her cleavage even as the witch loosened the bodice, giving herself more... wiggle room. She reached up to help with the clothing—to remove it normally; she’d already destroyed a leotard and a shirt within the last 24 hours. She wouldn’t have much of a wardrobe left in two weeks if she continued at that rate.

Kamala’s hands came up to stop her, though. She soon found her arms raised and her hands put up in the obvious ‘surrender’ gesture. Then Jinx levered her back to the sheets. She wasn’t used to being idle like this... but she had yielded to Kamala in this; Raven just had no idea what that entailed, exactly.

“Um... What—what should I do?”

When she took Jinx, the girl hadn’t just... lied there complacently. Raven wasn’t sure how to play that one; everything her instincts told her was about how to take, to move forward, and to make love... Her hex-caster had managed, though, so she could try to emulate some of what she remembered. Jinx had been encouraging and accepting—open.

“You don’t have to do anything. I'll take care of you, now,” Kamala said as she nuzzled aside the neck of the corset. The girl paused, noting the set of Raven’s eyes and smiled gently, “If you need to do something, then you can tell me what you like. Can you do that for me, hon?”

Then Kamala took a nipple into her mouth and Raven gasped.

“Yes!”

The witch just chuckled at her and continued with her slow claiming of Raven’s body. Unbidden, her hands came to Kamala’s head and wove into those horns, holding her head tightly whenever the girl found a particular spot on her torso that had her arching to keep those lips just where they were continuing just what they were doing. Raven glanced down her body and moaned as she felt Jinx’s tongue swirl about her navel. The contrast between Kamala’s pale features and her now crimson mien was stark and somehow that made watching Jinx move all the more erotic.

Kamala loved her in ways that would have never occurred to Raven. After having been divested of her clothes, the sorceress found that the witch really did plan on taking care of her in every sense of the word. They moved almost fluidly through various positions and Kamala was always thorough. At times, it was rough—with Jinx almost throwing her down, pressing into her relentlessly, and restraining her so she couldn’t escape the pleasures practically inflicted on her. Other times, the girl would lay her down, and then slowly and sensuously wind her up, leaving her gasping and her hips shooting off the bed with such force that she dimly heard the golden chalices rocking atop her dresser. During those latter moments, the hex-caster also held down the demi-Demon when her bucking would have otherwise interrupted the lavish attention Jinx was dead-set on paying her.

There wasn’t really a point where Kamala wasn’t in control. Even so, Raven never felt as though she needed to take over. Some part of her—a quite sizeable part—was utterly content to let Jinx have her way. There came a time when Jinx had held her forearms fast and flat to the bed, and her body had frozen in full bow with her shoulders and heels digging into the mattress; the witch’s lips and tongue were doing all manner of wicked things between her thighs that her mind couldn’t comprehend. She had shuddered, unable to unlock herself from that position while the girl devoured her with almost savage intensity. Raven had squealed and cried out, begging wordlessly for something she didn’t fully understand. Kamala just wouldn’t stop... and Raven hadn’t wanted her to.
When it was over, Raven lay exhausted. For the first time since the heat began, she needed a break. She simply couldn’t take any more. Kamala lay beside her, a finger tracing random, swirling patterns upon her brick-hued skin—occasionally with a shiver-inducing circle around a nipple so dark it was almost black. There was a feeling of satiation and tranquility in her afterglow that made everything in this moment seem perfect and all her problems nonexistent. She felt utterly dominated... liberated... happy.

The hex-caster hadn’t once satisfied herself; Raven could tell the girl needed it, though. Kamala hadn’t even undressed fully, remaining in her bra and panties. Once she regained her senses and a second wind, the Demoness turned her head to regard her softly smiling lover. Despite the lust this had to have inspired in Jinx, the pink-haired mercenary remained in place with an aura of calm delight. When Kamala noticed her quadruple gaze, the girl leaned in to kiss her lingeringly.

“See? Anytime you want that, you just let me know, okay?”

Raven nodded. When this started, the mystic Titan hadn’t thought she would desire another instance of this occasion ever again. Now, however, she was rapidly concluding that it wouldn’t hurt to give into the girl. It appeared that submission didn’t always have to be a bad thing.

=-Kamala=-

“Alright, then. I want you to do one more thing for me...”

“Yes.”

Kamala loved that answer. Its tone told her that Raven readily agreed to whatever it was; the demi-Demon didn’t know what Jinx wanted, but was eager to fulfill. She wasn’t about to abuse that eagerness, either. She didn’t want to jade Raven to the powerful nature of what they had done. The hex-caster couldn’t help but be awed by it—an Arch Lord, Scath of the Eighth, had given herself to Kamala. If Raven hadn’t been willing, the demi-Demon would have found a way to subvert the binding... It wasn’t as though Jinx had been scrutinizingly specific or woven the spell terribly tightly.

“I’m going to unbind you... and when I do, I want you to flare your power. I mean all the way. I want everyone to know that my lover is Scath, and that she’s here—and out of all the people on the planet, that she chose me.”

The Demoness’ eyes blazed as she sat up, staring fixatedly into her magenta eyes. Jinx grinned at her. Rolling onto her back, she held Raven’s gaze for a few moments more.

“Then, after you’ve done that, you can take me like I know you’ve been wanting to.”

Raven swung a leg over Jinx, now on hands and knees, and peered down at her. Kamala reveled in the focus and desire she could feel in the girl’s direct gaze. Her demi-Demon was just waiting for the words.

Kamala reached up and brushed her thumb against Raven’s cheek, “Im ter-dremo, Scath.”

Raven’s following growl had a vicious and resurgent helix. The sound seemed to resonate in Kamala’s bones. Naked as the day she was born, the demi-Demon was a sight to behold as she stood with her feet to either side of Jinx. The growl continued to grow in volume and a faint, black outline flickered over the reddened skin and fluttered the purple hair in an invisible updraft. Kamala closed her eyes and watched with that third eye that all mages were trained to utilize.
Before her was a black bonfire worthy of a true Titan, its flames licking at the sky. The powerful flare of Raven’s aura stretched out to touch the primordial—from Gaia to Uranus and larger than any of their children. This was the Goddess of the Eighth, and everyone would know her.

Raven raised her head, that mouth hanging open to reveal a series of jagged fangs as her growl broke into a roar. Kamala didn’t need her eyes to see all of it, such a wellspring of power Raven was. Jinx basked in that power that might have terrified any other, because she knew it was for her.

Then her Demoness dropped to her knees, looming over her full of power and intent. Jinx finally opened her eyes and held her arms out to the girl, wholly welcoming Raven. The mystic Titan moved into her embrace, and they rested forehead to forehead. Raven’s ajna chakra gem was almost hot between Kamala’s brows.

“Se kam hal im, Kamala.”

This wasn’t a passion-clouded slip. It was a declaration, a promise. Jinx swallowed and let the gravity of the moment hang before her. She had been contemplating this ever since Raven had first moaned those words through the haze of heat. Was she ready to commit herself to someone like this? She could feel the whirl of Chaos about her, the power within her teetering on the edge—ready to fall one way or another at her words. Then she felt that tiny, reassuring nudge... and plummeted.

Kamala licked her lips nervously, “Imo se kam.”

‘We are one,’ her mind echoed, and all the strings of Fate plucked in harmonious chord with her.

~§~END CHAPTER 4~§~

Author’s Note:

And here we are! That final scene was originally closer to the end of Chapter 3 than the end of Chapter 4. But here you can see where my story took a very obvious left turn and decided, “Wait a sec, there’s more to do here!” Far be it from me to ignore my muse. I’m certainly glad I did this time around. Since the response has been so positive to my ‘end of chapter recap’ I figured I might as well do it the same way. Basically, I use Scrivener’s split-screen feature and read my story. Every time a noteworthy thought crosses my mind in my read-through, I put it in the author’s note. That’s why that last one was so large. No idea how long this one will be yet. ...Let’s find out!

So I start this story off with some introspection and carnal pleasures mixed together. This is somewhat bittersweet for Jinx, because she doesn’t know where she stands. Never a good spot to be in, of course, but she’s following her faith in Mr. Chaos. This, honestly, says the most to me about her strength of character. It’s one thing to throw your body into harm’s way. A trained, honorable, and loyal soldier will do this. But to entrust your heart to it? To put your feelings on the line and open yourself to the chance of emotional and/or psychological harm? That’s a little different. It goes beyond conviction. Kamala has always trusted Chaos, even when it’s led her through the IMRO and Brother Blood, she still remains unwavering. Sure, she worries... but in the end, her faith and her actions will not be in question.

Remember everyone, this is the DC universe! Just because it looks like a Human, walks like a Human, and talks like a Human, it could actually be a space-cow. Or a Bat-Cow. You know how good Bats are with disguises and secret identities. We’ve had hints before now that I’ve already addressed about how Raven has some clear, inhuman traits—not just in her appearance. Welp, here’s
another. I’ve often thought she could just... pluck food off a hot-plate or reach into a fire for something with no visible effects. She’s not fire-immune, but it takes a much higher degree to harm her. That’s why I think Deathstroke’s fireblast during “The End” did more damage with concussive force than it did to actually burn. That’s why she’s just fine afterward.

In my continuity, Raven resurrected Tara. She’s less Metahuman now and more... Metagolem? Not sure what to call it. She regained her flesh form, but that’s almost incidental? It’s a holdover. I actually addressed why Raven would do this, despite her feelings on Tara, in my unfinished ‘fic, “Behind Pride.” I’ll give you a little excerpt here:

“I don’t agree with what she did. I don’t even particularly like her. I may never like her,” she had admitted to him, “But I won’t be the one to judge her. I won’t condemn someone when they have a chance to make a choice. That’s all I’m giving her: a choice. What she does with it... that will be her trial.”

This embodies all Raven was raised with by Azar—how she should have been treated and wasn’t. This is Raven being better than the people who raised her. The best part about it was that she wasn’t thinking of it as a one-up on them when she did it. That was literally the whole of her concern—that and what benefits it might have for her team/family. Most notably, raising Gar’s spirits. It took her a few years, but she never stopped looking for ways to accomplish it.

Nobody is immune to Kori’s body. Nobody. Even if they’re not attracted to her, it’s a highly sought work of art. She won the Alien genetics lottery among most humanoid races.

Nobody can resist The Face. Nobody.

I love making Raven say vulgar things. But it has to be well-placed. My Raven feels it’s entirely too uncouth to use that form of language. But, being the bibliophile she is, she also knows the value of a few, well-placed intensifiers or a profanity.

Here, finally, we get a glimpse of Jinx’s past. This is the first time—in any story outside of those scrap-blurbs of “What Jinxes Do” and “How Jinxes Work”—that I actually admit to who the persona of Kamala Malti truly is. Was the father a Metahuman? Was he a being of metaphysical origin? A Rakshasi? I never admit what. Jinx wouldn’t know, anyway, so I just kind of disregard it.

Jinx could probably find out by doing a temporal scrying... but she doesn’t see the need. She won’t let someone who was never in her life define her.

I’ve gotten some flack before about the praise I give to the HIVE Five, seemingly making them out as better than the Titans. I’m not exactly sure how that comes out, but it’s not really true. I view them as two sides of a coin. Vigilante and Mercenary. Order and Chaos. Yes, the original trio for HF are very close knit—closer than the Titans. Jinx was a quiet, traumatized youth and she clung to her new teammates fiercely. Before she actually began talking, they had to learn a lot of her nonverbal cues. Even as she began to speak more at length and even confide in them, the HF team had something of a nonverbal language going on.

Some of the Titans have this, but not all of them together as a team. Furthermore, the former additions to the HF team—Seemore, Billy, and Kyd Wykkyd—don’t have that unspoken cohesion. As a team, the original group is more coordinated than the Titans. On the other hand, the Titans are more balanced in team build and mechanics. The Titans also have more flexibility in how they handle a situation, not just due to their numbers but for the wealth (and spread) of powers, abilities, and specializations among them. The Titans are also more likely to succeed when the team is divided.
Regardless, I’ve always given them this kind of... unspoken understanding of each other that borders on Cassandra Cain’s ability to read other people’s body language. Perhaps it’s exactly that, but limited to one another.

More fluff ensues, and I find a mischievous Raven to be both amusing and vexing. It’s refreshing to see her cut loose, but I imagine she can be a bit of a handful. Frankly, they’re lucky their server and the establishment was tolerant. There’s some places that would have flat out tossed them on their ass for such hijinks. And anyone who’s read “To Catch a Raven” knows what trouble you can find with a high Jinx. Anyway!

Then we jump into the next wave of Raven’s heat... Here we find Jinx’s proficiency with simple Sorcery. She’s more of a Craft sort of girl, a witch—but we’ll be getting into that a number of Chapters down the road. She has a bag of holding—actually, it’s more of a ruby of holding. Same idea. It’s a quick binding she created that would react to certain phrases. The three phrases she uses here are: ‘I summon the crystal of holding, Kamala’s Ruby,’ “Reveal to me this: Silver Chalice,” and “Hide from me this: Silver Chalice.”

Kamala does a quick binding ritual here, which I felt was explained about as far as necessary, but I felt it was a nice display of the various ways one could create a spell that requires binding circles.

Boop.

Welcome to Raven’s red form. ‘Bout time, right? This is my version of Raven’s red form, which I don’t explicitly link to Trigon, but to her personal Demonic side. Anger had initially held this form when they had been fully segregated and Trigon, as a being of Rage and Destruction, found it a perfect vessel. Now free of his influence, all of her emotional effigies are able to take on an ascended form.

...and it strikes me there’s more Daemos in this than I recall. Huh. Okay, so translation time!

Vensai ex im. – Surrender to me.

Dai im zal. – I can’t.

Dai im stet. – I won’t.

Im vensai. – I surrender.

Not that the first and last of that wasn’t obvious, but I wanna be thorough. Anyhow, these sorts of things come with instinctive responses across the Daemos. A surrender is almost complete—although that depends on the nature of the surrender. In this sense, it much like a Challenge for arbitration, which are sometimes to the death. This built-in response is similar to accepting punishment or death. Obviously, this makes all Daemos who are Challenged take these very seriously.

The only reason Raven doesn’t blast through the simple binding is because the release of energy might harm Jinx or others in the area. Her own energy would pop it like a bubble, but then her energy would continue traveling outward. If she wasn’t quick enough, she could damage the Tower—level a floor or simply shove the souls out of their physical anchoring.

In my Daemos society, flaring one’s aura is a way of announcing presence. When you’re coming into someone’s else’s territory—whether it’s to bring message, just traveling through, or to issue a Challenge—you flare your aura. This will bring the attention of the local Clan (or Clans, or House, or Arch Lord depending on the strength of the Daemos), and they will come to meet you. They will then, for their safety and yours, typically assign an escort. If you are expected, this is announcing
your arrival. If you are not, it’s like knocking on a door before entering. The aura flare is done without reservation, and will give an accurate measurement of the density of the Daemos’ ethereal essence (think power level in DBZ terms, if you must). This will also serve to show people what level of caution to display when interacting with that Daemos.

Did the flare just signify a High Greater or Lower Arch? Then if you’re a Median, you don’t Challenge that. If they do something worth Challenge, then you immediately bring that to the attention of your Clan Lord, or any of the residing House Lords (may be your very own Clan Lord). They will deal with the issue.

If it’s a High Arch or an Arch Lord? Well, you might as well have your Clan Lord summon your Arch Lord, ‘cause someone has a grievance...

This aura flare also has other functions—such as shown here, as a statement. Yes, it’s stating that Raven is here, and is an Arch Lord. The flare has more connotations that others are not aware of, however. If this had been among Clan, and been a proper betrothal mating, the flare would be met by an answering flare of their mate (Jinx’s aura is too small on its own to be sensed from any appreciable distance), and then supported in approval and rejoicing by the flare of the rest of the Clan. This large Clan-level flare would be expected, as such betrothal matings usually happen during the Mating Season in the Daezurev, and not responded to by other Clans as a request for aid. It’s a display, showing that their strength—via strength of bond—makes them more powerful and cohesive a Clan for it.

There’s no exact seasonal match for Mating Season in the Material Realm, but Spring may come closest for its wealth of animals going into mating. So Raven’s kind of outside the boundaries of anything that would make her display really mean anything. But it means something to Jinx, and she understands that. Furthermore, this would also be particularly pleasing for Raven on an instinctive level, but not something she would know when or why to do it. This little tidbit of coaching comes from her interactions with other Daemos. We’ll get into that more later—much later.

One more translation:

Im ter-dremo, Scath. – I release you, Scath.

And so we come full circle. Jinx got the go-ahead, the reassurance from Mr. Chaos that this was all as it was intended. That’s all she needs to throw herself in with Raven—body, mind, and soul. As I mentioned before, this was intended to be the very end of “Prey Mate.” It’s the whole reason the title was chosen.

Then I realized there were other applications if the plot continued. And that, dear readers, is why you’ll be seeing Chapter 5 and onward!

-Lynx

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**Story Mirrors:**

Now Available on Archive of Our Own!

“Prey Mate” on FanFiction.net

“Prey Mate” on deviantArt.com
Dick had been studiously ignoring his link to Raven for the better part of two hours. Normally, he merely got snippets of emotions, a word here or there... At the time, he hadn’t understood the—the ‘power play’ that had occurred in the common room earlier. It probably had something to do with Raven’s instincts and her heat somehow, but he really didn’t want to know about it if that was the case. The mystic Titan was a private creature by nature and he trusted that Jinx would explain it later, as promised, if it was truly important.

The fact that he trusted Jinx had more to do with Raven’s trust in the girl—something he felt from her through their link. Just now, however, he felt something he had never felt from Raven. The emotion was inhuman, and not something he could readily identify. It had connotations of commitment and promise, was filled with triumph and possessiveness... All of it rolled into an almost frightful declaration of power and love. He would have shied away from that, too, had it not been everywhere.

Dick was used to Raven’s aura after so many years. He had no skill in sensing such things, but proximity to her had attuned him to her unique signature. It was easy for him to tell when she was in the room, even if she was hovering silently. He could tell when she was feeling peaceful or energized by the way it pulsed from her. Of course, the link helped him hone down the meaning behind many of her moods, but that aura was almost tangible in what he could sense.

Just now, the Boy Wonder felt it... erupt. Raven’s aura rolled out like a shock-wave, coating everything and seeping into his every pore. There was no ignoring it. He wasn’t sure if anyone else outside the team used to her aura would be able to sense it... or how far-reaching it was, but it did make the sleuth rather curious.

The computer chimed—and Nightwing supposed that answered his question. Sighing, he sat down
and accepted the call. The familiar, forbidding visage before him gave him an idea of the possible scale of what just happened.

“What can I do for you, Bruce?”

“Dick, I wish this was more of a social call. Jason Blood just called me—Etrigan just gave him a literal ‘heart-burn.’ He mentioned something about an Arch Lord Demon coming.”

Despite his best efforts, Dick smirked, ‘She probably already has—several times. Ugh, Jinx is a bad influence on my mind...’

Bruce’s eyebrow rose at his expression and he tried to drown the smirk, clearing his throat as he did, “I’m fairly certain it’s under control and in good hands. The Arch Lord in question isn’t a threat.”

“...Raven.”

“It’s a private matter of hers, Bruce. Though, if things keep going the way they are, I’m anticipating a more permanent result from the situation.”

“Let me guess, you’ll let me know how things are in about two weeks.”

“How did—you know what, never mind. Something like that, yes.”

“Well... if things turn out for the best, tell me I said congratulations.” That said more than it didn’t. At least Batman knew enough just to leave it at that. Another blip on his screen had him glancing away from Bruce. “I’ll tell Jason he can relax—it seems like you have another call. Watchtower?”

“Mhm.”

“I’d wager it’s Zatanna.”

“Fool’s gamble, that,” Nightwing sighed. Zatanna and Raven had some bad blood between them—and that was putting it lightly. He flicked the communications for conference; maybe Bruce could keep things calm. “Titan Tower.”

“Nightwing—and Batman. ...We just got a major ethereal disturbance. Half the mystics across the planet could feel it. There could be—”

“-an Arch Lord Demon... arriving in Jump.”

On the right side of the main screen that had split for the conference call, he saw what he thought was Bruce’s mouth twitch into a smirk for all of half a second. It could have been a trick of the light. Zatanna frowned at them both.

“How did—never mind.”

“It’s nothing you need to worry about. It’s being handled.”

“Handled? Nightwing, you don’t handle an Arch Lord.”

“Believe me; I know that better than you do, Zatanna. I’ve had to handle the unhandleable for a few years, now.”

Now Zatanna glanced between Bruce and himself, “This has something to do with Raven, doesn’t it? Is this that Scath business all over again?”
“Not in the manner you’re speaking.”

“And you’re speaking in riddles, Nightwing. What’s going on over there?”

“What may or may not be happening isn’t any of our business. I’ll let you know if there’s any serious changes. Unless, of course, you would like to visit the Tower yourself...”

Her face scrunched up in equal parts frustration and unease, “I don’t think that would be wise. ...Batman, you have nothing to say about this?”

“My concerns have already been put to rest. We didn’t trust Raven that first time. We left a frightened, sixteen-year-old girl to stand up to Trigon alone and resurrect the whole planet. That about right?

“It happened again, two years later. We still didn’t trust her. That time, she killed Trigon and restored the world again—no thanks to any of us. She delivered. We didn’t. I think we have the option of trusting her, now, don’t you think? Or do you want to pull another League Vote? My stance didn’t change on that matter last time, and it won’t change this time, Zatanna.”

Having that particular issue thrown into the spotlight was a slap to the face, and Nightwing knew it. Dick had never mentioned the League’s plotting to Raven. He had discussed it at great length with Batman, but Raven had enough to deal with and she didn’t need to be thinking about the League putting a knife in her back while Trigon was looming on the horizon.

“How can you be so sure this isn’t going to blow up in our faces?”

“Because I trust Raven—she’s friend and family.”

Before the argument could circle, Tara burst into the common room. She nearly tripped over herself as she skidded to a halt. She panted from exertions, but looked to be recovering. Dick turned to face her, wondering what her rush was—and had she run the whole way up the stairwell instead of using the elevator?

“Nightwing! The whole planet just—uh...” She trailed off at the sight of Zatanna and the Bat staring at her, their faces larger than life on the floor-to-ceiling screen. “Hi, peoples.”

“The whole planet just what, Terra?”

“Well, it... hummed. Not, like, shook or anything bad, just—it just... um... hummed. It kinda seemed important, because I’ve never felt it do that before.”

“I’ll let you go, Nightwing. Seems like you might be getting a few more calls, today.”

“Thanks... I think. We’ll talk later.”

Then Batman disconnected, and Zatanna’s panel resized to take up the full screen. Before either of them could say anything, a muted scream emanated from the hallway. It caught Tara’s full attention and Nightwing glanced toward it briefly, but then gave his full attention to the Homo magi on the wall.

“Is there anything else you needed, Zatanna?”

“What was that?”

“Evidence that we need better soundproofing. ...Titans East are calling, now. I’m going to have to let
“you go, Zatanna. Today will probably wind up being very busy for me.”

Before she could issue more caution or rail against Raven, he cut the connection. He took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. He turned to regard Tara for a moment; she was still standing there in confusion. Dick gave her a rueful smile as he reached up and pressed the accept button.

“Karen, how are you?”

“Dick, Toni and Garth just-”

-=Kamala=-

It was just before six when Jinx slowly moved into the common room. The mercenary sat herself down at the dining table rather gingerly. Kamala sighed and folded her arms, then rested her chin atop them. Things had moved... phenomenally fast. However, she could practically feel the paths that had opened up to her; Chaos had delivered in a way that made her feel like everything in her life had finally come around to her. Sure, she had several false starts and more than a few snarls... but she had always stayed devout and trusted in that intrinsic sense of probability that drove her. Between her powers and her faith, she had carved out her own niche in life—and she was happy.

That realization brought tears to her eyes. There had been days—long gone days throughout her short past where she wasn’t even sure what that word had meant. There were even days when she had contemplated death to be easier than enduring those harsh times. Thankfully, the Urge had always pulled strongly at her, like a cuff to the head for considering it. Anything worthwhile took work and perseverance.

This was so much farther beyond happy, however. It was as though she had been lifted up, elevated, and now stood upon a whole, new tier of joy for life. She bit her lip, but couldn’t stop the somewhat dopey smile that tugged at the corners of her mouth.

“Jinx, why do you cry?”

Kammie sat up and immediately wiped at her eyes. She didn’t really care if anyone saw her crying now, but she hadn’t been aware she was... leaking so profusely.

“I, uh...” Her voice croaked a little. Earlier screams of ecstasy and her current crying did nothing for her vocals. “Ahem. It’s fine; I just...” She was going for a tone a little surer of herself, a little more confident... but instead she could only manage a calm, bashful hopefulness. “So, I’m mated now.”

Jinx wasn’t entirely sure what happened next, just that she was out of her chair and now her legs were swinging out behind her as she orbited Starfire. Her back also popped and she was finding it a little hard to breath. As Kamala tried to settle her equilibrium, an enthusiastic exclamation disoriented her again.

“Glorious!”

Much giggling and spinning followed, and Kamala was but a rag doll along for the ride. Rescue thankfully arrived just as some black spots were forming in her vision and her ribs began to feel decidedly stressed. A scratchy, somewhat suspicious voice called out over the jubilant attack upon her person.

“Kori, what are you doing to Jinx?”
“Oh!”

Then Kamala got her bearings, and as she sucked in precious oxygen, found herself dangling in the air. Starfire held her out at arm’s length, holding her up by her armpits and she hung there like a confused kitten. She silently stared back with wide pupils at the bright-eyed Tamaranean and appeared more than a little overcome.

Starfire descended and gently set her on on her slightly wobbly legs. Once the extraterrestrial princess seemed mostly sure that Kamala wouldn’t collapse, she was zipping over to Raven. Events half-repeated themselves—only this time without all the spinning. Kamala would have appreciated the same treatment.

“Kori... you’re hugging me.”

Even as Starfire lowered Raven to the ground due to a healthy respect for her own well-being, the alien was chattering away, “Of course, dear friend Raven, for today is a joyous day! Congratulations are in order! We must celebrate-”

“No.”

It was a flat and solid syllable, and broached no argument.

“But Raven, does not this wonderful occasion all but demand festivities of-”

“No.”

“Perhaps at least a feast for the traditional announcement-”

“No, Kori. Just... be happy for us... quietly.”

It seemed a foreign concept, even after all these years that they must have known each other, because Starfire looked rather confused. It was obvious to anyone who had ever met Starfire that the princess... and possibly all Tamaraneans... simply didn’t do things low-key. On the other hand, she was very well versed with how much Raven disliked a lot of bustling and busy-bodying. Her dislike of parties was legendary—reaching even the ears of the HIVE Academy.

Kamala blinked a few times to clear her head and felt a pair of arms slide around her waist. The familiar form of her mate against her felt more right than it ever had, before. The connotations of recent events infused even this simple act with so much more. Raven’s chin rested upon her shoulder.

“Are you okay?” Raven murmured.

“Y-yeah, just a little, um, frazzled by that.”

Kamala leaned her head into Raven’s and couldn’t help the soft purr that began.

“Most people are. Not many know how to prepare for Star’s... ebullience.”

“...I see,” Kammie murmured, but paused, “Ssso, uh... So how do you prepare for it?”

“You don’t.”

Jinx huffed.
“Raven, Jinx,” Nightwing greeted them, “Batman wants me to convey his congratulations.”

“And how did he know?” she asked with a raised brow.

“I’ve been very busy while you were... busy.”

She blushed at his inference. He wasn’t incorrect, but she didn’t really want others to comment upon it. Just because she wasn’t able to keep it quite as private as she typically would didn’t change that. Even so, she wasn’t particularly upset—not with her recent mating. Raven was feeling content, proud... victorious.

“Oh?”

“Raven... I’m not saying this to embarrass you, but... damn near everyone across the world felt your display in one way or another. They don’t know what it means, and I’ve been fielding their concerns for the past few hours. Titans East and Batman were among the first callers. Batman called on behalf of Etrigan.”

“What possible reason could Etrigan have for-... Merlin’s pet had better not be getting any ideas. I’m not looking for suitors. I’ve made my choice.”

Dick blinked, looked lost for a moment, and then shook his head, “No—he just felt the... power surge, or whatever it was. It worried a lot of people, including the League.”

The demi-Demon’s expression darkened at the mention of the Justice League.

“Nabu had a complaint to make?”

Behind her, Kamala shifted uneasily. More than once, she had heard the girl refer to herself as an Agent of Chaos. Jinx hadn’t meant it metaphorically. Her mate wasn’t an Agent of Mordru, but rather a balancer in her own right—even if on a small scale—pledged to the likes of the Demiurge and Vishnu.

“Do well to remind him that I will not suffer any interference with my mate. His rivalries with Mordru are not ours. I’ll not have him dragging either of us into them.”

Dick shook his head, “It wasn’t Doctor Fate, Raven.”

If possible, her expression denigrated even further, “Zatanna.”

“Wait, wait... the Homo magi woman that dresses like a stripper? Her?”

The Boy Wonder looked to be attempting to give Kamala affirmation of the former part of her sentence without the connotations of the latter. Not to mention that both of them perceived the girl’s sudden hostility; it matched, if not exceeded Raven’s sentiments. Now, why would that be? Jinx’s hands went to cover Raven’s over her midsection and gripped them. She could feel Kamala’s tension and wondered at it.

“Kamala?” Raven quietly questioned.

“We’re talking about the same bitch that concocted Operation: Unkindness, yeah?”

Dick’s mind went into a static of panic before it flat lined to her senses. Black Hells, just what was going on? His expression was grim as he cleared his throat almost authoritatively. That didn’t bode
“Raven, I need to borrow Jinx for a moment.”

“What’s going on, here?” she demanded.

Something clicked in Kamala’s head—there was a heavy sense of revelation. Raven was sorely tempted to read it. She morally understood the limitations she imposed upon herself, but that never got rid of the urge to do so.

“Oh, this is a conversation I want to have, right now,” Kamala almost growled, “Hon, I’ll be back in just a moment... then one of us will explain this. Okay?”

Apparently, this was going to upset her. By the looks of things, Kammie was waiting to rake Dick over the coals. Taking a cleansing breath, she moved her arms away from Jinx and stood back. She watched the two of them walk away—well, Kamala stalked off—with a hint of curiosity and just a speck of concern. What was Operation: Unkindness and why did it suddenly change Dick and Kamala’s mood the instant it was mentioned?

As the others came in the room for dinner, they took note of Jinx and Nightwing. The two stood in an unoccupied corner of the room and had a very, very tense discussion. There were terse gestures on both sides. Everyone skirted that corner of the common room, but all eyes were upon it.

Just then, the argument began to reach a crescendo. Kamala’s voice began to escalate in volume and volatility, but not enough for anyone to pick up on what was being said, just yet. Nightwing’s voice didn’t rise, but she felt his tension rise—could see it manifesting in the rigid set of his shoulders.

“...a gun to the back of her head!”

“I know that!”

Raven’s brow slowly rose.

-=Kamala=-

“Then why didn’t you tell her?” she hissed.

“She needed all the focus she could muster. That would have just been one more thing hanging over her head. Trigon was enough—the League didn’t need to be another concern of hers.”

“And what about after, Nightwing? Why not then?”

“Afterward, it didn’t matter anymore. She didn’t give in, Trigon died, and the purpose of the operation was nullified.”

“Except if they decide she’s grown too powerful and they wanna give it the old college try when she’s not towing the line exactly the way they want her to! Don’t you see the threat of this? They have a ready-made plan just waiting for her... just in case.

“I heard Batman has contingency plans for shit like that, but those are just plans. The Bat isn’t given to fits of over-reactive, paranoid annihilation. The League built a fucking cannon perpetually aimed in our faces! That’s not just a plan, Nightwing. Do I really have to explain this to you? The League means well, but they’re also dangerously over-prepared. We at least deserve a chance to react if they...
decide to take Raven out.

“Don’t tell me it can’t or won’t happen. You know as well as I do not to underestimate stupid people in large numbers. That plan only requires four people—six at the maximum. Does that worry you? That four people orbiting this dirt-ball could decide to kill her... and that she could be dead in the time it took them to go on their lunch break?" 

Nightwing flinched, “I get that, Jinx. I just didn’t want to worry her. She’s had enough things hanging over her head for a lifetime. That goddamn prophecy...”

“This isn’t a prophecy, though. It’s not a foregone conclusion written in ancient texts by a mystical order warning of some Arch Lord’s advent.” Kamala scowled and leaned against the wall, her arms crossed. Her hands clenched on her biceps as if to prevent herself from throttling someone. “It’s just fucking Zatanna Zatara. This is a threat she doesn’t even know is there, and it could work where nothing else has just because she isn’t aware of it.”

The Titans’ leader was silent for a moment as he stared out the window. She knew the Boy Wonder wasn’t really arguing for the League’s plan. She also knew that he was only looking out for Raven’s emotional well-being. Unfortunately, they couldn’t keep her ignorant and safe at the same time. Nightwing came to that conclusion moments later.

“This is going to upset her. It might even destroy any faith she had left in the League.”

“Then we’ll comfort her and support her. You’re not taking her freedom from her. You’re giving her knowledge and letting her deal with it in her own way.”

Nightwing nodded and sighed, “We’ll tell her together. Shit, of all the days—this was supposed to be a time of... well, not exactly celebration. This is going to ruin her mood, you know.”

Kamala couldn’t but shrug helplessly; she didn’t like this anymore than he did.

Then the Boy Wonder was beckoning Raven to them. The mystic Titan moved over to them calmly, somewhat warily. Nightwing met her eyes and Jinx could tell that Raven was feeling apprehensive from what she must have sensed from them.

“I’ve made a mistake... and I’m going to fix that now. I’ll understand if you’re upset with me afterward...”

Raven glanced between the two of them. Kamala moved to the demi-Demon and held the girl as Raven had done to her earlier. Her mate nodded, and Nightwing began an explanation of events that began with her arrival on Earth, her meeting with the Justice League shortly afterward, and the results of that meeting.

-=Richard=-

Raven hadn’t been angry with him. In fact, she had been understanding to an infuriating degree—with both the plot on her life and with the League. That did not mean, however, that Operation: Unkindness didn’t offend her. After his explanation some four days earlier, Raven had told him that she wouldn’t be speaking with the Justice League until she had sorted out her feelings on the matter. Nightwing had replied that Raven should take all the time she felt she needed.

In that time, Jinx continued to take care of Raven. This revelation did nothing to hinder Raven’s heat. The mercenary had even gotten around to explaining the whole thing that led to the power-flare and
their subsequent mating. At first, he had worried they were moving too fast. Raven had Jinx for two
days and now is proclaiming they were eternal life-mates? It didn’t make any sense.

Jinx’s assurance that this was an approved path on a nigh-divine level helped, even if he didn’t fully
understand Jinx’s explanation or her powers. He recalled her simplifying everything into an overly
short summation, and he wasn’t sure if that made it sound any better, honestly.

“We’ve both put up with a lot of shit; karmic law owed us,” she had said.

...Yes, they had put up with quite a bit, and all of it justly described as ‘shit.’ It was on that matter
that Dick was sitting in front of the computer. It was time to talk about some of that ‘shit’—and
perhaps take some steps to prevent anyone else from having to go through it.

“Bruce, I have a potential problem I wanted to talk to you about...”

“Problems with Raven?”

“Yes, but not the kind you’re probably thinking. My main concerns start with Jinx. I’ll start with the
most recent one, since it’s already been half-way resolved.” Dick took a breath and sighed, “There’s
no good way to put this. Jinx knew about Unkindness.”

That had Bruce leaning back into his chair, a frown on his face.

“It gets worse—when she found out that Raven didn’t know, she demanded Raven be told.
Eventually, between the two of us, we explained everything. She knows Zatanna proposed it, knows
Doctor Fate organized it... She knows who lobbied it and how the vote broke down. She knew more
than I did about it on the personal scale. That’s not even to mention she even understands the
mystical side of the plan.

“I asked her about it later, but she won’t say how she came across it. Only that she, personally, didn’t
find out. I wouldn’t put it past Jinx to have bankrolled the source for the information, though.”

“And we can practically vouch for anyone that works in the Watchtower, which means we’re not
looking for a leak... we’re looking for a security breach.”

“That was what I thought. You might want to suggest that the Watchtower do an audit of their files.
Unfortunately, I don’t even have a date where I could say this happened. Jinx seems to be an
unknown in a lot of ways.”

“I’m beginning to see that.” After a short pause, the billionaire had finished mulling things over.
“How is Raven taking all of this?”

“Better than I could have hoped. She’s refusing to speak with the League, but I can’t blame her for
that. She’s still deciding how the entire thing makes her feel.”

“She never was one to act rashly. I take it your other problem also involves Jinx to some extent...?”

“Actually, it entirely involves her. Worse, it could be bigger than anyone realizes. If I’m right—and I
hope to God I’m wrong—this could become a war.”

He could tell that he had garnered Batman’s full attention in the way he straightened. The grim
expression that came over Bruce’s face wasn’t that of the billionaire playboy; this was the Caped
Crusader—the very man he wanted on this.

“I had a private conversation with Jinx, and some of it isn’t my place to share. But the important bit
was before that. I have a piece of video I want you to watch...”

The files began sending over a heavily encrypted system that Barbara had set up for them for just such occasions. One file was an enhanced, zoomed still taken from the video. It was a bird’s eye view of the kitchen he knew Batman could see behind him from the vid-comm. In the video, it was night. Dick could hear the video as it played on Bruce’s end.

[“That wasn’t the question you wanted to ask.”]

[“No.”]

[“Shoot.”]

[“There aren’t many people who can come out of nowhere. Some people can doctor their histories to appear as though they have no history... or never existed... It’s not so easy in this day and age.”]

[“Not hearin’ a question.”]

The short video replayed the conversation, which he had cropped after Jinx’s explanation and before Raven’s appearance. He could see the Dark Knight taking in all the details. At one point, Bruce even leaned forward and stared hard at the screen. When the video stopped, he brought up the shared window between them. It was a real-time media manipulation program; two people in different locations could access it and compare notes instantly.

Dick circled the top of Jinx’s tank top in a marquee and zoomed in on the video.

“Those are whip marks... cigar burns... aren’t they?”

“Mhm,” Batman’s bass tone was anything but pleased.

“And this... is a tattoo. The implications are what worry me. What happened to 1 through 3,119? And what about 3,121 and on? Bruce, I think we’re looking at some kind of... Extra-Normal concentration camp located somewhere in India.”

Bruce isolated a portion of video and immediately began typing.

[“I am the Manushya-Rakshasi without name who, with flaming hair and eyes—... I am the Manushya-Rakshasi without name who, with flaming hair and eyes—... I am the Manushya-Rakshasi—”]

The Dark Knight stopped the video and his typing at roughly the same time, “Hm. A Rakshasi is the female counterpart to a Rakshasa, a demon or vampiric ghoul in Hindu lore. The Manushya part means it has taken a Human form. They’re said to haunt cemeteries and crematoriums. Some of the most ferocious Rakshasa were said to have flaming hair and eyes...”

“Yeah, I got the quick and dirty version from Wikipedia, myself. It’s not really alleviating any of my concerns.” Nightwing called up an old video into the shared window. It was surveillance footage from one of the Titans’ early encounters with Jinx—from when the HIVE Five had taken over the Tower. In the video, Jinx chased Gar down a hallway. Her hair curved up and back in those signature horns, her eyes were ablaze with malevolent glee, and her hands flared with hex-energy. “I can see what she meant by that. Of course, we know she’s not a Demon. She’s a standard, power-based Metahuman with slight physical deviations. According to Raven and her HIVE profile, she’s also a rather accomplished witch.

“Jinx has never been anything less than a handful when she’s firing on all cylinders. She’s quick
thinking, intelligent, insightful, and has the physical conditioning to frustrate us. Even if we discount her wealth of martial arts and took away some of her physicality, she would still be a formidable force on the basis of her powers of probability; her HIVE profile says she borders on precognitive, at times.”

“You’re wondering just who could have gotten a hold of her... and kept her for any length of time.”

It was an excellent question. Dick had no answers after puzzling it for five days. His research had yielded nothing. Jinx was a slippery creature... possibly one of the most dangerous people to come out of HIVE since Deathstroke’s brief dabbling with the organization. Who the Hell could have had the means to do something like that to her?

“Brother Blood came to mind, but despite his... pedophilic nature, torture wasn’t in his psychological evaluation. Narcissism, sociopathic tendencies, a manic aggressive nature—it’s all there, your standard super-villain mentality. But physical torture wasn’t ever shown to be one of this quirks; he was always obsessed with control, enslavement, and power. It took me some time, but I finally found something. It’s not much, though.”

“Anything’s a start.”

“I had to check her Transfer Documents from her concurrent remedial classes in Dark Way Prep. They had a physical evaluation, buried under the various testing and training she took while catching up to the rest of the ‘high school’ classes in HIVE Academy. That medical report is the only mention of the tattoo and atrophic scars. She was a little malnourished, too, but she recovered from that easily. They couldn’t get it out of her what happened. Report says she started to threaten them when they pushed for an answer; they dropped the matter after that. All we know is that it predated her time at HIVE. And before HIVE, she was picked up just outside Bihar...”

“...I’m going to get in contact with the League. If it’s as big as we think it is, we might need their assistance on this.”

“You won’t find Jinx and Raven too welcoming of them. Jinx was more upset over Unkindness than Raven was. I can almost guarantee she won’t work well with the League.” Dick rested his head in his palm, thinking for a moment before he offered a suggestion, “We could treat this anonymously. As I said, that conversation was private—and the last thing I want to do is betray her trust on the matter. Things have been a little tenuous over these past few days and I doubt getting the League involved—especially anyone who voted in favor of Unkindness—would do anything more than just make Jinx turn to stone on us.”

“Would she even be willing to face this part of her past? It sounds like she tried to make a clean break of it.”

“On that, I have no idea. I’m pretty sure she’d be reluctant to go anywhere near India, though. I don’t think we’d be very successful in getting her to lead us there... Whatever we do, it’ll be a juggling act. If Jinx gets involved, we’ll have to keep things separate between her and the League.”

“Then let’s see how far we can get before involving her any more than we have to.”

Nightwing nodded and their connection ended. He sat back in the chair, and stared at the console for several seconds. Finally, he wiped all the files he’d accessed from the screen. Hopefully, Batman would get back to him soon. Dick didn’t like to think about letting whatever it was that happened to Jinx go on any longer or happen to any more people than it probably already had.
Raven’s heat was over come June. Kamala had a brief period of worry, unsure of just how much such a thing influenced the demi-Demon. However, her concerns turned out to be completely unfounded. Raven remained as infatuated with her as ever. In the past six days, the only thing that changed was the frequency of sex and their self-imposed lockdown. After the incident at the *The Elysion Banquet*, they had decided not to tempt fate. For all Jinx’s luck, events tended to get away from her when there was an amorous Raven entreaty entrance at the doorstep of her libido.

Two days after the heat ended, Raven wanted to take her out on a proper date. They didn’t make love when they returned to Kamala’s apartment. They had just cuddled up and dozed on the couch, then migrated to the bedroom at some point during the night. To be honest, Kammie was perfectly okay with that. Nearing the end of Raven’s heat, she was getting a little run-down. The sex was amazing... a little *too* amazing for at least twice a day for 15 days in a row.

That wasn’t even counting the unpredictable nature of those heat waves. Sometimes—most times—they were normal; that was, they would sweep over her girlfriend and slowly build in intensity. During those times, Raven would squeeze her hand... give her that look. They would then quickly retire to her room, where the demi-Demon would find new and creative ways to put together all the ‘lessons’ that Kamala had taught her.

Other times, however, the waves would hit like tsunami out of nowhere. During those times, her only warning was a slightly heavier drawn breath... maybe the precursor to a growl. Then Raven would set upon her and damn the consequences. That had only happened three times. The first time, they were in Raven’s room and it had been fine. The second time they had still been in Raven’s room—but Jinx had been asleep, had woken up to Raven eating her out as though she was an oasis in the desert.

The third time, unfortunately, had been in the common room. They’d been watching some old, black-and-white classic when the mystic Titan had begun to growl. Even as Jinx was turning her head, Raven was prowling over her. Pressed down into the couch, Kamala discovered her jeans had been unbuttoned and unzipped by dark powers. That was just enough for the girl to slip a hand under the waistband of her panties, but more than enough for the demi-Demon to work with. Raven didn’t bother removing anything completely.

When Nightwing stumbled across them minutes later, Raven’s other hand had stuffed itself up her shirt—Kamala’s bra shoved up and out of the way—and was busy with the twin treasures to plunder there. Jinx had been trying to stay quiet, but it wasn’t that easy when Raven delighted in her screams. When she saw the Boy Wonder, she had stammered her way through an explanation.

“Mn—Night-... Can’t stop her. Need you to—oh God—keep everyone busy, yeah? Away from here,” she had pled to him, and then belatedly added, “Thanks. Fffuck!”

He had managed to keep everyone away from the common room for a whole three hours, somehow. She was infinitely grateful for that. If Raven was aware of his presence during that time, the girl hadn’t cared at all. The only thing the sorceress wanted was to fuck her senseless, and managed that quite readily.

...Now it was Tuesday and she had a flight to catch Monday, heading for Biratnagar. Mikron had poured over surveillance and all manner of intel. As far as he could tell, which wasn’t very far at all due to the utter lack of useful information, it appeared to be exactly what it was. He didn’t trust that, and neither did Kamala. Still, they were going if only to ascertain the truth of the matter; it would confirm if the IMRO was still going to be a thorn in her side. If things went completely sideways, Mike assured her that they had a redundant call-in to HIVE every six hours. If even one of them
didn’t check in as active, HIVE would send a Tier 3 Extraction Team; it was pricey insurance, but Jinx wasn’t taking chances.

It being the week before a mission, she was doing her typical pre-mission checks and warm-ups. Sex wasn’t exactly the kind of workout she needed before a mission, so she needed to make up for lost time. Jinx found herself alternately doing weight circuits, working over a heavy bag, and focusing herself with the muk yan jong. She had a pretty good sweat worked up, and her muscles were feeling sufficiently heated. Jinx was on the last set of her kata when a knock on her door put her workout on hold.

Kamala paused and reached for a towel to wipe her face of her exertions, then hung it around her neck. She hoped whoever was on the other side of that door didn’t mind the sweat, because she wasn’t finished and Jinx never left her exercises unfinished if she could help it. Her sense of probability didn’t hold any warning to them, so she merely opened the door without calling out or looking through the peephole.

“Hey, Kammie... we’ve been worried.”

Nin, Terry, and Darryl stood there with curious, concerned expressions. She blinked—it had been a rather busy two weeks. They usually met on Tuesdays at one of their apartments, and played the next day on the streets. It was one of their weekly things and she’d been completely caught up with Raven. She hadn’t even called and that made Jinx feel like a heel.

“Oh, Hell, I’m sorry. It’s been... an interesting two weeks. I should have called or left a text or something, but I was really, really distracted in ways I can’t even go into. Come on in, we can talk if you don’t mind me finishing up my workout, first?”

She stood aside and they readily entered. Obviously, they were just as eager for an explanation as she was to explain herself. Jinx decided she would have to figure out a better way to put things to them—because they really weren’t part of this side of her life. The usual explanations for these sorts of things wouldn’t work.

“Have a seat on the couch. I was just going through my last kata and cool down. I’ll only be about ten minutes. Then I’ll take a quick shower and we’ll talk, yeah?”

“That’s fine, that’s fine,” Nin waved her off, and the three of them settled themselves on her comfortable couch.

Kamala figured they would watch TV on her rather large screen. The screen was actually a HIVE monitor that she could use to call Baran and Mike when she needed them, or to place special orders from the HIVE Depot. It also doubled as a kick-ass entertainment system when Nintendo and the others came over. Instead of finding something to watch on the screen, she felt them watching her and felt somewhat self-conscious as she found a place to pick up her kata.

Jinx slung her towel over the pull-up bar nearby and moved back to the multi-armed training dummy. She started about three stance-changes back to work back into her flow and pick up her speed. With her scattering of martial arts, she had a rather customized muk yan jong and her katas were nothing like any Wing Chun she had ever encountered. However, that was probably what made her so effective in hand-to-hand; she was unpredictable on a phenomenal scale with her powers urging her one way or another.

The strikes against the dummy rained down as she picked up speed. Elbows and knees slipped between throat jabs, head kicks, and punishing body shots. Everything was precision-aimed; her goal was to ready herself to quickly incapacitate. Kamala didn’t go for the pain—for submission or
intimidating. Whenever Jinx found herself in melee combat, she wanted her opponent down, unable to pose a threat as quickly as possible, and preferably without having alerted anyone else. If they had alerted someone, she needed them down so she could focus on another opponent.

Parries and counters went hand in hand, and Kamala found her openings with vicious intensity. She had demolished standard, wooden dummies before. She needed something in steel or better to keep up with her Metahuman rigorousness. They didn’t dent quite as easily when she fully struck them. Eye gouging and fish-hooking had to be pantomimed, but her mind’s eye took over at that point and her eyes were closed for most of this, anyhow. She was violently, intimately familiar with this dummy and its wealth of realistic applications.

Her blows began to slow as she entered her cool-down. She kept her breathing escalated, but even and measured. The simplest of exercises in breathing control could increase her stamina three-fold, and she never forgot to maintain those little facets at peak. Once one started to slip on the small things, their game suffered pervasively.

Kammie descended down through tiers of violence, eventually moving to simple parries and blocks... Finally, she stood back and disengaged herself from the ‘combat.’ Her tank top was stuck to her like a second skin and, as she hadn’t been expecting company, she hadn’t bothered with her typical sports bra. Jinx imagined that Terry and Darryl might be getting something of a show out of this, but didn’t really care. She was sweaty and hot and a cool shower right now sounded divine.

“Holy shit, Kammie.”

Kamala ignored Terry’s comment and reached for her towel. Wiping her face, she took a deep breath and centered herself, “Alrighty, lemme get a quick shower and I’ll explain everything that’s happened. I’m actually happy—I’ve got some good news to share.”

So saying, she walked into her bathroom. Kamala wasn’t gone but maybe five minutes, and came back dressed in a sports bra, tee shirt, and a pair of sweatpants. Jinx was barefoot, still, but she liked feeling the earth beneath her feet. There was something to be said about being in contact with the ground—to feel it so solidly and surely.

“Okay,” Kammie called out as she flopped into a papasan chair beside and couch, “So... before we get into my monologue, how you guys been?”

“Kinda worried, honestly,” Darryl answered, “We dropped by for that whole ‘supernatural talk’ thing, but you weren’t in. Then you missed our Wednesday meet-up that week. Then Nin stopped by your apartment last Wednesday when you missed another, but you still weren’t in. You weren’t in this past weekend, either... We didn’t know what happened.”

“I’m really sorry, guys. I wasn’t even in the district for the whole two weeks. I pretty much spent the whole two weeks since we last saw each other in one place.”

“Where?” Nin asked.

“Titan Tower.”

Terry’s brows rose, “Seriously?”

“Yep. And on a seriously serious note—I really need you guys to keep this under wraps, yeah? Lot of this isn’t just personal, it’s gotta be private or there might be some sorta media frenzy.”

Nin looked rather disturbed at the thought, was probably imagining the paparazzi or something. The girl wouldn’t be far from the truth. Inevitably, Nin’s questions came forth.
“What happened? Was it something bad? Are you alright?”

“Oh, a *lot* happened,” she said with a grin, “But nothing bad. In fact, I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my life.”

She was met with overtly curious stares and Jinx’s grin became Cheshire. She leaned back comfortably in the bowl-like chair and sighed contentedly. How best to say this? Maybe she could use the shorter, direct approach. They had appreciated it with the whole discussion about her being a mercenary.

“I kinda got married.”

“What?”

Three voices chorused together for that one. Okay, so maybe being that blunt wasn’t the best way to go. She gestured for them to calm down a bit. They weren’t really the only ones shocked. The whole thing had taken her by surprise, too. Even so, she couldn’t say it had turned out badly at all.

“Oh, lemme explain... Uh... I didn’t, like, have a wedding... or really marry, exactly.” Now the stares were confused. Great, it looked like she would have to do another lesson before this went any further. Jinx took a breath, “Okay—so, remember when we talked about Demons?” Nods followed her statement. ‘Right, well, Demons have something we would term as mating. It’s not like animal mating, though. We’re talkin’ more about life-mates. There are two versions of life-mates in Demonic society. The first is a lot like a standard marriage; it’s a partnership, but due to the generally immortal nature of such beings, that can end up meaning a *lot* more to a Demon.

“The second version is even more important—it even has a special name: *daelorisem*. *Daelorisem* means ‘forever other half.’ That’s no idle term, either. Demons that do this actually bond their essence—basically, their souls—together. If one should die, everything that they are transfers to the other... memories, power, everything. You could say that they practically become one at that point.

“This is why the Oath spoken when one takes a *daelorisem* is *se kam hal im*—‘be one with me.’ As neither of us are sure just how such a fusion might affect our bodies, let alone our souls, we haven’t yet tied ourselves together in that way. However, we did make that Oath to one another.”

“...Who did you—er—mate with?”

Nin’s question was expected. The boys were better listeners and Nin typically did the majority of the talking whenever discussions like this came up. They hadn’t had many of these kind of talks—maybe three in the two years she’d known them—but she knew the guys would put in their questions if Nin didn’t cover them.

“You remember that Demon that listened to us two weeks ago?”

“*Her?* You said you didn’t know each other! You *just met*!”

“Well, I thought so at the time... I, uh—well, turns out that wasn’t the case.” Kamala shifted, wondering if there was any way to soften this. When it became apparent that there really, really wasn’t, she just barreled ahead. “That was Raven.”

“The *Titan* Raven? That Raven?”

“That’d be the one.”

“...She’s a Demon?”
Kammie shook her head, “No—she’s a half-Demon. Her asshole father was where she got her Demonic side.”

“I take it the two aren’t on speaking terms or something?”

Jinx laughed; she couldn’t help it. It was dark and unsettling, but the answer to that question tickled her. However inappropriate it was, she let it play out before she attempted a more serious explanation.

“No—he’s not on speaking terms with anyone. He’s dead. Like, uber-dead.”

Terry decided to be especially astute, “You mentioned Demons were immortal, so... Not a natural death, I take it?”

“Okay—I’m gonna be brutally honest, here.” Jinx frowned and gathered her thoughts for the quickest way to say this, “The way I understand it, Big Bad Dad had a cult that tricked Raven’s mother; by the time she discovered the truth, it was too late and he... took her. Raven was the result of that... and he wanted to use Raven’s body as a vessel—basically, he was going to rip her apart and use her flesh and blood to come to Earth, then conquer our universe.

“Raven stopped him... killed him, actually. She even took all that supreme power he was wielding, so Raven’s practically a goddess—or damn near—in her own right, now. So, basically, you have her to thank that you’re even alive, right now. The earth coulda been destroyed a few years ago, but Raven saved us all. She did that without any help from the Justice League; those dick-wads left her to take care of the whole debacle alone.

“Some heroes, huh?”

It wasn’t a completely accurate depiction of all the intricacies, but it did the job.

Darryl spoke up in a little shell-shocked, flat tone, “Why would they leave her to that? I mean, couldn’t that have gone... well, extremely badly?”

“Sure, but they don’t trust Raven. She’s Trigon’s daughter, so they didn’t know if she would just... take up where he left off. Remember what I said earlier about people perceiving Demons as evil incarnate? Even superheroes aren’t immune to preconceptions like that.”

“That’s just...”

“Fuckin’ stupid?” Jinx finished, her expression and tone far from her amused laugh that started them down this road, “Yeah. It is.”

Nin cleared her throat, “So... moving out of that dark territory... You and Raven, huh?”

“Yes. Uh, some things happened... and that was the reason Raven was following me around. We kinda wound up tied together for the whole two-weeks. I didn’t wanna be too far away from her in case anything came up.”

“You’re being deliberately vague,” Nin accused.

Kamala opened her mouth, but closed it. Should she really say more? She moved from her lazily, rag-doll position she had flopped into and tucked her legs into sukhasana. Kamala still appeared relaxed in the bowl-like chair—as if ready for meditation. After a few moments, she had considered everything she’d said so far. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound, right?
“Raven went into her Demonic heat. Her instincts were driving her to mate. And that ‘mate’ I do mean as in the lusty animal kind of mating. She became somewhat obsessed with me, and stole me away to the Tower. We wound up spending a good majority of those two weeks in her bed.”

Silence greeted her statement. Nin looked stunned, but both men had an unseeing stare that didn’t seem focused on her just then. They just stared vacantly over her shoulder with many a fantasy twinkling in their glazed eyes. Jinx grinned and leaned forward.

“I think I short-circuited the boys.”

“Sometimes, you still manage to surprise me with how... unfiltered you are.”

“My family is very open... and very close-knit. None of us are related by blood, but that doesn’t matter. We don’t need to hold secrets; we can be completely honest with one another, trust one another implicitly. It’s how we survived; we supported each other during the dark times.”

Nin looked a little surprised, again. Things were getting into serious territories more often with her friends, it seemed. Terry cut in then, having obviously shaken his mind from the gutter.

“How many are in your family?”

“I have 239 brothers and sisters.”

“What?” Darryl had finally jolted from his stupor. “How—Jesus...”

“My school—the one for Metahumans and Extra-Normals that I mentioned? Those two years we spent under Blood’s mind control... It nearly broke some of us. Nobody’s been the same. We had formed teams for missions and such, too; we had to trust our lives into others’ hands. That’s a hell of a bonding experience, never mind everything else the bastard put us through.” She swallowed and tried to smooth her frown away, but it was persistent. Her mouth felt dry. “A-after Blood was out of the picture, we didn’t trust anyone. Some of us still don’t. We pulled together to get through all the— all the trauma...”

“Oh, Kammie—if this is too hard, we told you that you could take time...”

“It’s fine, sort of. You guys have known me for just over two years and you’ve been really supportive even if you didn’t understand my, uh... quirks. I figure you deserve to know a few things.

“What you’ll find is that the HIVE Kids—that’s what they’re callin’ us these days, we’re about as insular as you hear about those old, nomadic Roma groups. Family comes first—always and forever. Trust one another and be trusted. You fuck with one of us, and you’re fuckin’ with all of us. Family is always stronger together, and we can protect our own this way. We won’t fight fair; we won’t hold back; we won’t give people chances to hurt our own...”

She realized that they had never seen her slipping into her more ‘Jinx’ mindsets, but it wasn’t as though she could help it. Today, she’d been completely in mission-mode for the whole day. That reminded her that Mikron and Baran would be stopping by for the next round of planning. If that were the case, then she should really start lunch—it would take quite a bit to fill Baran’s gut. She might even be fixing food for six, so she made a note to start that soon...

“Um... you don’t have to answer this,” Nin began, “but when you were working out, I—uh— noticed you had... bullet scars?”

Kamala grimaced and looked away, “I’m gonna have to start wearing more tee shirts...”
“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Those are actually older wounds. They don’t have to do with my time at the HIVE Academy. Those actually come from way back, when I was still in India. They’re not bullet wounds.” It seemed that this month was throwing her past in her face pretty heavily. It seemed as though Fate was preparing her again. It reminded her of how often Fate would herd her toward Raven. The only difference was that everything was happening in a shorter amount of time. With her impending mission, it was giving her bad vibes. It was something to consider, but first she would answer Nin’s question. “...I—the circles are cigar burns. The lines are whip tears.”

“You were... you were tortured?” Darryl’s voice rose, an angry scowl on his face. Then he proved more insightful than she wished he were just this moment. “That number on your back... they put that there, too, didn’t they?”

Her grimace deepened and she imagined she looked almost nauseous. She was beginning to feel that way, too, “Among other things, Darryl, yes. And yes, they put that... thing on me. The world isn’t a very friendly place to Metahumans. Ever wonder why there are so many ‘freak’ villains? There’s a reason for that. I got caught stealing by some rich schmuck and his security system, but I was imprisoned in that place because I was a Meta. Every year I was in that hellhole, the fuckin’ bastard would mark the passage of time with a new cigar burn. Well, all but that last year... that’s when I escaped. Killed the fucker in the process, too—left ‘im to burn alive.”

She was staring hard at invisible patterns on her earth-toned carpet, a frown on her features as she studied its fibers. They reminded her of that ground so long ago and her flight over it. The ground had been blurred, almost fuzzy—hidden under the sheets of water from that monsoon...

“I made a run for it, then. I mean, gettin’ outside was only the half of it an’ I remember running through this huge field or somethin’. I couldn’t exactly see because there was rain pounding down all around me and I was all but sloggin’ through it. As I was runnin’, these high beams practically blinded me outta nowhere. Mikron and Baran had been drivin’ toward me in this military-grade humvee, but I couldn’t see it or even hear its engine over the rain until it stopped just a few feet in front of me.”

Kamala shook her head, pulling herself out of the graphic memories she had of her grand escape from that living Hell. So much in that time that stuck in her head so solidly; they were such formative moments in her life—meeting the two boys to whom she would repeatedly entrust her life and wellbeing, and for whom she would reciprocate. There was entirely too much to tell, honestly. Still, she couldn’t leave them hanging and finished her little narrative.

“Heh, Baran barely fit in it, but he was in the driver’s seat. I didn’t think twice about it; when Mikron opened one of the back doors and said ‘Get in,’ I dived in. Some nice evasive maneuvers later, we took the ride stateside on a Spectre gunship; dunno if it was privately owned or what. Didn’t matter, anyhow. Nobody was messing with that on its way out. That was the last time I set foot in India—about seven years ago.”

“Oh, my God...”

The sting of going over this wasn’t really all that bad. Having had the past two-and-a-half weeks to think about it—and having talked to Raven about it—had helped her ease away from the pain... The burden felt shared, just as it had when she opened up to Mike and Baran.

“I’m sorry, this isn’t keeping things very light, is it? Point is, I got out of there and found a family. ‘Course, then Blood came in with his fuckin’ mind-slavin’ and everything went sideways for a while... but that, too, passed. Now we’re free to reclaim our lives and our futures. Karma seems to be
workin’ for me, ‘cause I got a mate now, too.”

Uncrossing her legs, she kicked out of the chair and to her feet. “Mike and Baran are coming over to discuss our business. You heard that I have a mission next month; that’s why I totally forgot about everything this week. I’m doing our usual pre-mission prep work. Between the last two weeks and the impending mission... well, sorry.

“Anyhow, I gotta start on lunch. Baran could eat a horse, so I gotta get busy. You wanna help, Nin? We could make something for everybody if you and the boys wanna stick around and meet my other boys.”

The three looked at each other then gave their mutual assent. With that, Jinx padded to the kitchen to start up what was likely to be a small feast. She would have to go shopping after this; she glanced to her already somewhat full list stuck to the fridge.

“Uh... Kammie?”

“Yeah?”

“Your table’s-”

“Oh! Just gimme a sec an’ I’ll clear that off.”

The dining table had a light grey cloth spread over it and parts were strewn—orderly strewn—across it. She set upon the parts and slowly began fitting them together. The boys came in to watch her, but she gave the table her focus for now. In a few minutes, she was fixing the scope to the picatinny rail.

“That’s...” Darryl began haltingly, “that’s a big gun.”

“She’s an AX388. For the longest time, I was handling AI’s Arctic Warfare Covert, but... er... hm. Actually, you don’t wanna know that story, but I needed a little more kick. Bein’ able to upgrade to magnum rounds really helped in a few spots where I just needed to punch some holes.

“I oughta make sure I can shoot the box before next week. Maybe take ‘er to the range Thursday an’ tease Donny into a Robin Hood competition. Heh. ‘Nother easy 50 bucks; more if I can scrounge a few players into the game.”

Jinx paused, looking up at her friends’ blank stares and raised brows. It was only then she realized that she was rambling shoptalk to a bunch of civilians who had probably never seen a handgun outside a display case, TV show, or videogame. Kamala’s mischievous grin faded and she cleared her throat.

“Uh, right—anyway. Lemme put this away, then we’ll start on lunch.”

She jogged over to the security cabinet and placed her hand over a small scanner on its front. After it had her print and DNA, a blue light blinked on a small dot to the right of the scanner. She leaned forward and let it scan her retina, which granted her access to the secondary measures. A slot beneath the scanner slid open to reveal an alphanumeric keypad. A 16-digit code later, the cabinet beeped
twice. Kamala spoke a quick Hindi phrase, which the voice recognition software Mikron wrote into it quickly verified.

“Open.”

The cabinet opened down the middle on two doors, displaying three panels of warfare. Sitting on weapons racks in the center holding area were several weapons; an Mk 12 assault rifle, an Auto Assault-12 shotgun, attachable M-203 grenade launcher, and a few flashbang and fragmentation grenades. The right door had several shelves; the top shelf contained at least three different types of hunting and combat knives, three multi-tool knives of different makes, and a single pair of multi-tool pliers. Below that was climbing equipment, a small case filled with security cracking gadgets and lock picks, and a crowbar. Beside those were her goggles with high-power zoom, night-vision, infrared, and ultraviolet modes. The left door held more miscellaneous items: electrical and duct tape, a first aid kit, harnesses and holsters, several duffle bags, and a military grade backpack.

Even though she intimately knew each and every item in here, her friends were probably doing more gawking. Right now, everything was a novelty. She supposed it looked cool to people who hadn’t seen a lot of action, but this wasn’t cool to her. These were work tools, and anyone who found themselves on the opposite end of them didn’t respawn or call ‘cut’ to the filming...

Below the central section’s weapon rack were several drawers. She’d need their contents in a couple hours. Those were her resources for her planning phases. After Jinx put away the rifle, she stood clear of the weapons locker.

“Close and standby.”

The cabinet hissed pneumatically as its panels swung shut and she turned to find her friends very much rubbernecking as she expected. She gave a half-smirk, hoping their infatuation would soon pass. Moving back into the kitchen, Kamala began washing her hands to start lunch.

~§~END CHAPTER 5~§~

Author’s Note:

Hey, everyone! This one’s coming in a bit later in the evening as usual, but I’ve some things on my plate that I wanted to get done with the weekend and some medical concerns I needed to address. Gonna be a busy few weeks for me, still. I have a few doctors to see and all the lovely paperwork and red tape that goes with it. Regardless, I’ve managed to keep up with everyone’s reviews and now it’s time to jump on this chapter! This one had a lot of plot building, so I’m not sure how long this one’s gonna be as I go through it.

As chapters go, this one isn’t chock full of action. It even ends on a mostly sedate tone. Frankly, I wasn’t really happy with the ending once I got down to it, because it was just sort of... cutting off in the middle of a scene. However, I had reached my word limit and there was a scene break there—so I just chopped it. Should probably pay more attention to that next time. Nevertheless, I assure you it will resume with Chapter 6 in fine form, where you’ll definitely be getting some action!

So, let’s start at the beginning: Here, we mention the link that Raven built with Richard a while back in the series when he had been dosed with a psychoactive hallucinogen from Deathstroke’s mask. They never dissolved the link, and Richard and Raven sometimes use it for some covert communication. It makes the whole team more effective when they can fall in sync easier. The
downside, of course, is the bleed-over effect that it sometimes has.

Raven’s emotions don’t always fall into easily recognizable categories for Dick, because she’s not Human and some emotions tend to ball up with other emotions into whole new ranges. It’s also sometimes gives way to some extremely personal emotions, and neither of them tend to intrude or just ignore the link when that happens as a matter of respect.

Of course, when Raven is broadcasting and flaring her aura like this, there’s really no ignoring it at all. A few of my readers had brought up this aura flaring and the impact it would have. Well, here’s your answer! Pretty much anyone with any kind of mystical, empathic, or other preternatural sense could feel something.

And yes, that leads us to Zatanna. This is her first appearance and we already can get a sense of how she feels about Demons in general from her very active stance on the matter. This, I feel, is one of her major flaws. Zatanna is driven to do something, sometimes even when the best plan is to do nothing at all. She doesn’t like to be sidelined and doesn’t like to wait things out. She can be impulsive, emotionally driven, and impatient. This leads to less than sound and/or tactical decisions.

Her capability with dealing most Demons taken into consideration, that could cause quite a bit of trouble. She could possibly already have something of a reputation amongst the Daemons for her views. Especially those who use the mortal realm for deals, but have no quarrel with humankind—indeed, some of them are very protective of the Material Realm in general. These Clans have standing deals with either individuals or groups in the Material Realm for resources they can’t easily attain elsewhere. To want to dominate or destroy Earth would be extremely counter-productive at best, and could even weaken the Clan’s standing within their House at worst.

I’m not sure Zatanna would be the best one to differentiate this.

But that’s why I have Bruce here, on behalf of Etrigan. He’s not going to allow Zatanna to step on anymore toes than she already has. Despite once being his love interest, he’s also been wronged by her before. In this universe, she hasn’t tampered with people’s memories as she did in the comics, but there’s other situations that have arisen that bruised and weakened their ties of trust. There was a page out of the comics I once read, where Batman called upon Zatanna for aid. She shows up and asks him why he asked her... He replies, “I needed someone I could trust... I had to settle for you.”

This is the first mention of a League Vote... and it won’t be the last. There have been other League Votes in the past—one of which could have led to the whole Justice Lords continuity. Remember the whole Doomsday and the Phantom Zone issue.

Someone in the reviews had asked me if others were aware of Raven’s new status. Oh, yes. Very yes. That’s the very reason for the League Vote...

So we briefly break away from that to see that Kamala is finally starting to internalize the results of their mating, and realizing that she actually has a mate. She’s married and has made a commitment to someone—and someone has made that same commitment to her. Beyond her teammates, she had never thought to have something like this, so it’s a little overwhelming. The fact that it’s happened within the space of a few days makes it almost unreal for her.

My parent’s cat always used to just... hang in my arms like limp baggage and stare at me with a kind of bewildered expression whenever I picked him up like this. This is how I imagine Kamala appearing when Kori picks her up. Heh.

It’s a running joke in all my fics that Raven does not enjoy any sort of festivities. Things were very staid when she grew up and probably life was more akin to the view that Elder Scrolls’ Dunmer have
on religious events—it’s more about introspection and reflection than celebrating. The running joke is just a list of things Raven does not participate in, and the list is comprehensive enough to pretty much shut down any kind of partying.

Back on the topic of that League Vote... Here we have the introduction of one of my plot bunnies, *Operation: Unkindness*. This was a preemptive plan to assassinate Raven before she could become a vessel for Trigon. In my stories, Raven was going to be a literal portal and vessel for him. Arriving as he does through her as a portal, he would still have no formal anchor to this Realm. That meant he could be sent back to the banishment Realm easier than if he had such an anchor. I use the term ‘easier’ here with extreme hyperbole. If he arrived here and then ripped Raven apart—then used her flesh and bones to form a physical body for himself, then he would be much harder to send away because he would have a part of himself now native to this Realm. He would effectively break his ties to the banishment realm, as the original banishing spell would now consider him a completely different entity. A new binding would need to be put in place, and that could take time and energy the world simply doesn’t have.

Luckily, Raven is not such easy prey.

The point being, the second time around, the League wanted to be prepared should it appear that Raven would fail. So they had their own failsafe made; they would have Raven bound and assassinated before she could be used by Trigon. That would still leave them with Trigon, but then he wouldn’t have a physical anchor—a spawn-point to coin a gaming term that would prevent him from being sent back ‘whence he came.’

Zatanna is used to binding Demons; she has quite a few caged, and quite a few kills under her belt as well. What this means is that she’s the perfect one to consult with on the topic of taking care of Demonic threats. I should note that DC Demons and my Daemos are completely different entities... just like my system’s Gods—Thor, Loki, Odin, Vishnu, Zeus, Hera, Hades, Tiamat, etc—are completely different from the DC Gods. I don’t really reconcile the two, honestly. I let them merge where they may for the purposes of this fanfic, but Daemos are not the fallen Angels, are not formerly led by the same DC Comics Lucifer that owns a bar in Perth.

But again, I don’t think Zatanna really cares to distinguish between the two because they are all technically extra-dimensional beings and can be treated as such. Likewise, the New Gods like Darkseid and Highfather only escape this kind of xenophobia on the merit of being New Gods... Then again, the New Gods aren’t exactly on the same tier as Lucifer, Michael, Elaine, and The Source. Still, my point stands. I don’t believe she has a very clear and concise view of who she hates and why.

Despite this, I do like to show my more reasonable characters as able to carry on an argument without being... completely irrational assholes. It seems like a skill they would have developed. They’re able to hold a discussion, heated and charged as it may be, and come to some agreement—whether or not they agree on all terms of the argument that ensued—that will work out as the best for both of them. In this case, Kamala and Richard both agree by the end that Raven should be informed of *Operation: Unkindness*.

Sometimes my friends and I hit ethical or just plain emotional arguments and things get heated. Usually we hash things out by sheer logical questioning and calm reasoning... despite us being very attached to the views that we have. We look at the nuances of the situation, we ask why or how we feel that way and why or how that offends the other person. We look at the precursors to what brought us to this, the origin of those feelings or beliefs. Sometimes these arguments actually shape our opinions and beliefs further, sometimes it strengthens them, sometimes it breaks them. This is okay—it’s part of growth as a person, and keeps up open-minded to all possibilities and walks of life.
I like that.

Kamala strives for clarity, as part of Hinduism is to cast off the illusions of the purely material and physical. Spiritual enlightenment, casting off ignorance, is very important to her. Sure, she’s a mercenary—and she needs her money to fund her lifestyle—but she’s not greedy. She’s grown since her days in HAEYP and she’s not as petty as she used to be, either. You can see her adulting all over the place, now.

That said, Jinx’s paranoia is something profoundly ingrained. It’s something that has kept her alive and also prevented her from settling down and getting complacent. Add to that a generous helping of distrust of authority figures and some nudges from Mr. Chaos, and it’s pretty clear how she could feel compelled to always forge her own path. If her path happens to go down the same path as someone else, then so be it... but it’s not something anyone can rely upon.

Richard’s the Boy Wonder and he didn’t get that way by being close-minded and stubborn. He does, however, have a tendency to do what he thinks is right without informing anyone. It’s a flaw he’s worked on in the past with his obsession over Red-X and Deathstroke. Nowadays, with my version of him, he does much better in tempering himself and reminding himself that he doesn’t have to do everything alone. This is why they’re able to come to a mutual understanding with Jinx.

And so we come to the point where Richard realizes there’s far more going on than meets the eye. Jinx knows too much, and he knows too little about her. Worse, the small bits he’s been able to piece together paint a very grim picture. If there’s a war on the horizon—or one already in the works, he needs to get everyone on the same page and ready to act. There’s only one person he could possibly trust with something of this magnitude that has the resources to put it all together: The Goddamn Batman.

I really enjoyed writing this scene because it let our old, Dynamic Duo hash everything out and set up the beginnings of a game plan. I love a Bat Clan working like a well-oiled machine. We’ll just have to wait and see what comes of all this later. Of course, I know how it all ends—but that’s for me to know and for you to read!

Now we see the return of Nin, Terry, and Darryl! I told you they’d be coming back. Once again, they allow me to play foil to Kamala, providing a backdrop of normality to give both the readers and Jinx a perspective on just how crazy her life is, sometimes. You gotta take a step back every now and then and appreciate everything you’ve been through.

I absolutely love Kammie’s explanation of getting married—or something like it. Right on the heels of that, we see how she views Raven’s actions as well as those of the League during that period where they were waiting and watching... Operation: Unkindness at the ready.

We also see how she interacts with Nin, Terry, and Darryl with regards that they are just your average civilians. Of course, over the course of the past two years, she has slowly been opening up to them. They’ve been getting closer and closer to her letting them in on some levels that she’s willing to admit more of the truth of her life than she’s shared before. Of course, this comes with that same level of unfiltered nature that she shares with the HIVE Academy alumni. After Brother Blood—and even during his tenure—many of them shared life or death experiences and lots of them became extremely close-knit.

You’ll actually hear more about that later, but it’s important to note that they are so close as to consider each other family. This is why Kamala uses the terms brothers and sisters—and she doesn’t use family terms like that lightly or blithely.

Once again, we get a glimpse of the life of Kammie before she came to HAEYP. This one in
particular details her escape to Dark Way Prep. We have some details admitted here about what happened and who did it. It’s not much of a reveal, but it’s a start down the road in this plot that will take us to the very end of “Prey Mate.”

The weapons locker is more than just weapons. Those lower trays have maps, blueprints, dossiers, and tons of other hardcopy information that would be important to have. It’s saved in large, three-ring binders in the event that an electronic source is unavailable. It has some pretty hefty security on it, but with all the military-grade weapons in them, it’s probably safer that way.

Jinx is a sniper... and probably all the more dangerous for it with her sense of probability. Get a nudge to fire before the target even turns the corner? Maybe even be exceptionally lucky/skilled to hit her target than one would think. Able to reliably fire with low visibility and hit a mark? Yeah, a sniper rifle in Jinx’s hands is something of a terror for the opposition.

I’m kind of disappointed for ending this chapter on such a lackluster ending. To be truthful, this is more middle-of-the-scene and would look much better if you could just keep reading straight into Chapter 6... which you will be able to do, soon... Even so, it’s not a terrible place to stop. It was just convenient that I had a progression break. The chapter had hit its 10,000 word mark, and exceeded it by 454 words. I felt it was time to pick a spot and stop.

Likewise, I’m going to pick this as my place to stop here, because I still need to upload this chapter and it’s getting rather late. I will see you guys in a couple of weeks!

-Lynx

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“Prey Mate” on FanFiction.net

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“...love will find its way / Through paths
where wolves would fear to prey...”
-Lord Byron, The Giaour

Prey Mate

by

Lynx Klaw

Chapter 6

~§~

The tuna casserole that she was crafting took up two large casserole pans. There was no other way to do it—Baran would probably be taking one all to himself. It also took up all the tuna she had and half the crackers she had for just such an occasion. As soon as everything was set and baking, she took up a pen and added to her sizeable grocery list. She had about half an hour until they were finished, so that time they had free to talk.

Somehow, the discussion had turned to her missions. She was a consummate professional, and wasn’t about to give names or dates to anything, but she had stories to tell. Normally, she wouldn’t have gone into any such details with her civilian friends, but this was a good chance to sound them out about certain aspects of her life. It would tell her if they could really accept the totality of her life or if they could only handle this little, semi-average part of it.

Kamala wiped tears of laughter from her eyes, “An’ he’s just... having a tug-o’-war with this Abrams, yeah? Its treads are just spinning all frantically, tryin’ to get away from ‘im, but it’s only got, like, the front two wheel’s worth of treads on the ground... and it’s kickin’ up all this sand ‘n’ asphalt... jus’—just plastering Mammoth in the face with it, but he’s not lettin’ go. He’s got a solid grip on this sucker and he’s holding it up by its ass-end, tryin’ to drag it down this side street.

“So, finally, after watching this for, like... two minutes straight, I hear some kinda reinforcements and I know I can’t let him have this pissing contest with a tank all day long. There was, like, this abandoned building across the way... And I’m all, ‘Baran, just let it go!’ So he just drops the thing and it tears out like a bat outta Hell. It winds up ramming right into this building and sinks into the wall. I’m shocked the thing hasn’t just taken out the entire wall, but instead the thing is sitting there.

“Well, after the dust clears, I can see it’s still embedded in this building. Y’see, it had this pile of rubble under its belly... and its treads are about two decimeters off the ground. They’re still spinning, but they’ve got no traction. Baran starts laughing—really loudly—an’ I’m worried he’s gonna get the reinforcements on our asses for it.
“He didn’t and we got out of there all easy-like. But he was absolutely coated in dust and there were entire chunks of asphalt stuck all over him. It was the funniest thing I’ve ever seen in a mission that didn’t involve any Metas. Man, it was right outta Looney Tunes.”

Her friends were laughing and weren’t questioning her about just what they were doing in situations where Baran had to wrestle with a US Army tank, for which she was infinitely grateful. As much as she wanted her friends to be part of her life, to not hide who she was, business was business and she was a professional. Thankfully, she was finding that she could say a lot without breaking that confidentiality, which made it easier to connect with them.

Kamala giggled, “He still insists he has the bigger guns.”

“So he’s the brawn of your team?”

“Yup. Mammoth’s the strongest, most easy-going, kind-hearted giant you’ll find. And protective; nobody better to have on your side when you need real, true support. He’ll crush your enemies beneath his boots and he’ll lend two huge shoulders to ya when you just need to cry.” Kamala decided to give them a quick run-down of her team while she was at it. At least this way, she could prepare them for the exceptional men they would soon be meeting. “Gizmo’s our go-to guy; an all-around masterful, miniature tech-wizard. He can turn your bicycle into a catapult, or turn a moped into a hover-jet with a few spare parts. For family, he would concoct plans to storm castles, construct monstrous siege machines, and sabotage entire countries’ infrastructures just to make sure you stayed safe.”

“So he’s like a real-life MacGyver?” Darryl asked.

Kammie frowned in confusion, “Who?”

“He’s an older TV series character. He could like, fix a broken down car with a stick of bubble gum and a few rubber bands, or build a bomb from cleaning closet supplies.”

“Pft. Chemical bombs are easy, especially if you have those industrial cleaning materials. Hell, gimme 90 seconds with a lighter and a janitor’s closet, and I could burn down a whole—...” They were looking at her in that off-put way again. Jinx had let herself get carried away. These weren’t the things you were supposed to bring up with your average person, she knew. Kamala cleared her throat, “Uh... right. Never mind.”

Nin regarded her contemplatively, “What about you?”

“Me?” She grinned, “I’m the Jinx: Agent of Chaos, a Tier-6 witch, and specialist of covert operations and counterintelligence. I lead our team; I find the angle; and I plan the insertion, execution, and extraction. I’m not just good with average hand-to-hand combat and firearms; I’m also our magic expert. I can summon the elements to work in my favor, or set a horde of imps on a rampage.”

Kamala held out a palm that promptly suffused with a pink light. Motes of dusty, pink energy floated up from her palm and swirled into an orb. Once it had grown to the size of a baseball, she let it hover innocuously.

“I am a whirlwind of entropy. If there’s a cage, I’ll rust the bars. If there’s a machine, I’ll make it malfunction. If there’s the tiniest crack in the ground, they’ll trip over it.” She then gripped the hex orb and crushed it; little lines of light briefly rayed out between her fingers. Her expression darkened slightly, her pupils widening. “And if there’s a big, fat fuck suckin’ on a cigar...? I’ll set the bastard on fire.”
“Kammie...”

Jinx rubbed her temples, “I’m sorry, guys. This mission coming up kinda has me all twisted up in the past. I hate going near India, and this one’s right on the border... It doesn’t feel right, but I’m going regardless. One way or another, I’ll see this through.”

“Why risk it?”

“Because I’m a professional, Terry. I’m a mercenary and it’s my job to take risks like this for the payout. Trust me; I’m not going in there blind and defenseless. I’m taking every precaution to make sure my team comes out of this okay.” The sound of heavy footsteps outside her apartment gave her pause before saying anything more, “Speaking of my team...”

--Nin--

Just then, the door opened. A short teen just under four feet and in a green tracksuit took two steps into the apartment while chortling. He floated up off the ground, which was probably due to the teardrop-shaped pack on his back, the bottom of which was a little larger than a basketball.

“Yeah, but she’s a Titan, not a cheerleader. ‘sides, Gloom-girl doesn’t wear skirts like Xeno-girl; rocks the whole gymnast leotard. Hey, you bet she’s Olympic medal flexible? Heh heh heh! ...Think she’s purple down sou-”

From the kitchen, Kammie’s arm shot out and the pinkette snapped her fingers at the short guy. It was unnaturally loud, like a breaking tree branch. Nin gave a start, having been standing right beside the girl. Suddenly, the strange backpack gave a small, static pop and promptly ceased to function. The bald, begoggled boy dropped to the ground with an undignified ‘oomph.’ He was quickly on his feet, however, glaring into the kitchen.

“Hey! ‘s delicate machinery, here!”

“I’ve already told you: no flying in my apartment. There-”

Another man—far larger than the first—then stepped through the doorway had to stoop to fit through it. His head lacked for but a foot before hitting the ceiling. He was built like a concrete wall. This man’s bright orange hair and beard were wild, but not unruly.

“-are fragile things in here, some of them magical. So no touchin’, no runnin’, no flyin’ in the apartment. Don’t talk to ‘em, even if they talk to you, first,” the giant finished for her, “And don’t fuck near ‘em. ...Never got that last one.”

“Glad one o’ ya remembers. Shit, Giz—you wanna bump into one of my artifacts and wind up teleported to Japan or somethin’?”

“Katteni shiro!”

“Bakayarou! You’re bein’ rude to my guests.”

“Yeah, but you’re the host, so it ain’t me that’s s’posed to be doin’ the introductions! Where’re your manners?”

Mammoth stepped past and all but hip-checked the little, mechanical maniac to the ground. He held his massive hand out to Terry, who took it and did a not-quite shake with him. The same process
“Nice ta meet ya,” he said in a growly baritone.

“This’s Baran, guys. The foul-mouthed, pouting toddler over there is Mikron.”

“Hey, fuck you, Pinky.”

“Not likely, Brain,” Kammie replied off-handedly.

The responses were rote and flowed right from one thing to another. Nin could already see the solidarity among them. Despite their ‘argument,’ the violinist was quite certain none of it held any venom. It had a strange, verbal roughhousing quality to it...

“Baran, Mike, this’s Terry, Darryl, and Nin.”

Her hand was almost laughably small in Baran’s and she couldn’t really shake it. Even so, he seemed to understand that already and didn’t linger in an awkward attempt. Then Darryl had to go and say something stupid.

“...huuuge guns, man,” he only half-whispered to Terry.

Then Baran leaned down and stared at the three of them. Nin shifted self-consciously as the enormous man scrutinized them. After a moment, his eyes cut to the side.

“Ya told ’em the tank story, didn’t ya?”

From behind the half-wall counter, Kammie just gave them a half-shrug, “Had to tell ‘em somethin’.”

Baran straightened with a roll of his eyes. Meanwhile, Mikron had slung his backpack against the side of the couch and commandeered the HIVE station. A pullout keyboard slid out from the back of what she thought was merely a wall-mounted television. The screen blossomed to life and his fingers began a tap-dancing quintet.

“Kam, how many redundant locations did you want?”

“Two, but three fallbacks, too.”

Nin stared at the shorter guy, wondering just what they were talking about. Various hotels and travel plans were appearing on the screen, though. She and the guys had never seen it do anything but give a massive selection of movies and play videogames. It was apparently a full computer... a really advanced one, at that.

“So you want six hotels?” he clarified.

“Yeah. Try to keep it loose, though... They throw a wide enough net, I still want ‘em to miss, yeah?”

“Four clicks sound good?”

“Yeah—yeah, that’s a bit of a stretch for anyone to cover.”

“Are you going to get a room at all of those hotels?” Nin asked. ‘That sounds expensive...’

Kammie nodded and waved her over. Darryl and Terry followed suit. The pink-haired girl pulled out six plastic cups from her cupboard and set them on the counter of the half-wall. Nin watched as Kammie opened her hand—revealing a small, spherical ruby gem. It gleamed with an almost
unnatural reflection of the light around it.

“We never wanna appear like we’re staying anywhere set. It’s an easy obfuscation. We’ll make three obvious reservations for them to see.” Kammie put three of the cups forward in a row. “Then we discreetly set up a room where we’ll keep our gear.” One of the cups went behind the row of three. Under this one, the ruby quickly slipped. “Before we go meeting anybody, we use Giz’s stealth tech to slip in the back of one of the shell-game hotels and make it look like we came outta that one.”

The pinkette quickly bumped the back cup to the front right cup, then slid the front right cup forward. Kammie tilted that cup back, revealing the ruby. Their host pulled them back into a line, then began shuffling them like any good street hustler. The movement was slow as Kammie spoke, so it wasn’t as if it was hard to follow...

“The fun trick is that we never return to the same hotel; we just shuffle the shell-game hotels and then stealth back to our main.”

Nin watched carefully as Kammie lazily shifted the cups around a few more moments—then stopped. The girl held her hands palm up and moved them over the cups in an inviting gesture. She was pretty sure it now resided in the front left cup, and Nin tentatively tapped the top of that one. The mercenary girl lifted the front three cups to reveal it was nowhere. She then lifted up the back cup, and there sat the ruby... Nin squinted in consternation. Kammie had only been shifting the front cups at a sedate pace—when had she even touched the back cup?

“If everything goes to shit, we have two emergency hotels to rendezvous at after calling for an extraction,” Kammie explained, putting the two unused cups in a row with the back cup.

The cups rustled about the counter, and Kammie periodically raised a cup to reveal the ruby orb under different cups. The ruby’s location seamlessly shifted from the back row of cups that never moved to the front row of cups that continued to shuffle dizzyingly. The whole time, the ruby only ever entered the center back cup and the three front cups. Nin understood that the other two back row cups stood for the emergency hotels; it made sense that Kammie would only used those if it was absolutely necessary.

“But if everything goes the way it’s supposed to, any trackers we got will be trying to cover the shells we’re not even at. Meanwhile, we’re always back at our real base of operations.”

Jinx obviously slid the ruby into the center back cup, began mixing around the front ‘shell-hotel’ cups to no purpose, and raised them to reveal that there was still nothing under them. Darryl was shaking his head.

“I guess it’s not paranoia if they’re really out to get you, huh?”

“*xactly!”

Kammie collected the cups, stacked them, then put them back in the cupboard. Nin watched the feld-eyed girl pick up the ruby and close her hand around it. When Kammie opened her hand, the ruby was gone. Nin blinked; it wasn’t like it went up a sleeve—Kammie was wearing a tee shirt, or in a pocket—Kammie’s sweatpants didn’t have pockets... She’d seen quite a few tricks from street magicians and had a friend who had showed her how that trick was supposed to go... but Kammie hadn’t actually done a trick. The ruby wasn’t palmed, loaded, or ditched... There wasn’t even any misdirection, really. It had just disappeared.

Giz paused in his typing. “What name you want on the shells?”
“Give ‘em the corporate HIVE face. Maybe they’ll think twice before attempting to screw with us if they know the Big H is backing us.”

“...Done. An’ the safe houses?”

“Use the seventh ID set.”

“Gotcha. Settin’ up Yuffie K., Barret W., and Cid H. now.”

Nin caught Kammie’s eyes and raised a brow. The pinkette didn’t look like she was kidding, and neither did the cue ball. Even Terry and Darryl looked skeptical. Her mercenary friend gave another utilitarian shrug.

“Swear to God, it’s worked every time. Dunno how, but... yeah.”

Darryl just shook his head again, “Unbelievable.”

The dinner table was a little crammed, but nobody was complaining. Instead of their usual banter and chatter, Nin, Terry, and Darryl found themselves front-seat as the mercenaries talked business. Gizmo was rambling on and had a small hologram computer-thing he’d linked up to the computer-TV thing in the living room.

“Stayin’ low key with the reservations, got a typical business suite. Queen bed can fit Baran.”

“Windows?” Kamala asked.

“Same wall as the bed, but from the looks of it, not over the bed.”

Nin noticed that this seemed important, “Why are you worried about windows?”

“Snipers,” all three intoned at once.

“Mike, you be okay on the couch?”

“Yeh, sure. And there’s a little nook by the dressers; should be enough for our travel-cases.”

Kamala frowned, “Hey, leave a corner free, would ya?”

Mikron rolled his eyes.

Nin was impressed with just how much they could do in about an hour or two. They had gone over the schematics of each of the hotels and scouted room layouts, planned escape routes from said rooms, and even measured distances to all exits—and not just the doors. Vent-shafts, windows, and even ‘sufficiently thin walls’ were all taken into consideration as possible means of egression.

It took her a while to notice an odd pattern with all the rooms, and they had been okay with their questions as they went about setting up the theatre of operations. It was a little strange to receive answers, though, because it was clear that ‘Kammie’ wasn’t answering; it was all ‘Jinx’ and Jinx was a tactical-minded, intense person with an easy grin and a mischievous, almost malevolent nature.

Her question was built from that pattern of Mikron taking the couch while Baran—big as he was—typically took the bed. They never mentioned anything about where Jinx would stay and she certainly wasn’t in another room. They only reserved one room per hotel.
“Uhm... where does Kammie sleep?”

There was a... pause, and all three mercs froze. She watched as those pink eyes lifted and sought out Mikron and Baran. There was some kind of silent conversation and the serious look on Kammie’s face made her wonder if she had once again blundered them into another ‘too serious’ moment. Mikron and Baran gave minute, but identical shrugs. Whatever this was, they left it up to Jinx.

“Okay, uh... I don’t typically sleep in a bed. I’m not really all that comfortable in them. I mean, sure, they’re soft and they feel good, but they’re not secure. Security has always been... very important to me. I just don’t feel safe in beds—too exposed.”

Terry had that worried frown on his face again, “Where d’you sleep, then? I mean, you can’t just stay awake all the time...”

Kammie shook her head, “No, I, uh... I sleep in corners. That’s why I told him to keep a corner open. If I can get a few blankets and a pillow, I can usually just curl up there. It’s safer. I can see all the exits—and entrances—and... and nobody can sneak up behind me.

“Recently, I’ve spent more time in a bed,” Jinx paused to glare at Gizmo as he snickered, “but there are still some times that I just can’t get comfortable in them.”

“’specially on missions. She’s always curled up in a corner like a cute li’l kit-”

“Mike,” Kamala warned, her eyes actually glowing a bright pink. The girl just stared hard over the table at Mikron. The short man had the common sense to hunker down hold up his hands.

“Alright, alright, no pussy jokes,” he said with a healthy dose of self-preservation, but a small smirk at his own wording kept trying to pull at his lips despite his attempts to stifle it. When the glare didn’t waver, he tucked into his tuna casserole.

The flare of energy faded—even though the pinkette’s frown didn’t, which made Nin feel a little better. The hot pink light had cast extraordinarily bizarre shadows across Kammie’s face. Even Nin knew about the girl’s sensitivity to cat-jokes. Sometimes they slid off the pink-haired girl’s back, other times they made her inordinately angry. During a few of those times, she thought Kammie might accost someone trying to heckle them... She realized now that such a thing might have been not only possible, but could have ended quite badly for those idiots. The way Kammie had gone at that training dummy had been really intense...

‘Probably a good thing Kammie’s so laid back most of the time...’

“So, um,” Nin began to break away from the other girl’s irritation, “all this is set-up for a meeting that might go bad. I take it this is a dangerous mission? Er—can you even talk about it?”

Kammie nodded, “Sure I can. Now, the details of the meeting and the actual sortie itself are confidential... but I can safely say that we’ve been hired by a business to repossess an item they lost—somehow. Likely, they don’t want anyone to know it was stolen in the first place, and aren’t reporting it to any authorities. That’s the corporate world for ya; anything to save face. We’re going to meet with their contact—probably a lawyer type—who will give us details... the ones I won’t be telling you guys.

“The mission itself was implied to have a low threat-assessment... but I never trust that. Regardless of what they say, after we’re briefed, we always conduct our own appraisal. If something’s fishy, we don’t take the job.” Kamala shrugged while she put a dent in her food. “Normally, this type of job wouldn’t have me planning our arrival like this. I’d have Giz run a background check, maybe double
check it. There’s usually nobody stupid enough to cross the HIVE like what I’m expecting. No, the reason I’m being paranoid is because it’s in Biratnagar... and that’s by Bihar.”

“Which is in India,” Darryl followed, “and that’s where those people are?”

“Pre-cisely. It doesn’t sit well with me that the location we’re supposed to meet the contact is all but humping Bihar’s border.”

-Kamala-

Dinner continued peacefully save a few more exchanges due to Mikron’s impressive social skills. Some questions were asked about the mission—or just mercenary life in general—but her friends seemed more interested in them than the action they had seen. It was good that they weren’t looking at her and her teammates like token mercenaries to ask all their questions. Nin particularly wanted to know where all Kamala had been and what languages she spoke.

“Obviously, you speak Japanese—I heard that when they came in.”

“Yeah, one of the few I actually know. I mean... I love learning languages, but I’m just not good at it. I get all tripped up over terminology most of the time; like, every time I think of a word, it comes from the language I relate to it the strongest... and it’s hard to remember the same word in another language unless they’re really, really close.”

“I can see that. So which ones are you strongest in?”

“Well, I grew up bilingual, speaking Hindi and English. That probably helped with the fuckin’ IMRO. Everyone there spoke English—I’m... not sure why.” Gizmo cleared his throat and Kamala moved on with a shake of her head. “Anyway, I actually picked up Japanese before I went to Japan for that mission. Giz taught me.”

“She wanted to know what everyone was sayin’ in my anime, but I didn’t wanna play interpreter the whole fuckin’ time. Useless tryin’ to tell her all the jokes an’ shit all second-hand. Finally just decided to sit her down and drill it into her head.”

Kammie nodded, “So, yeah. I got into that ‘cause of the cartoons. I’d never really watched much television growing up, so when I got to HIVE and Mike had all these shows and stuff, I got hooked. I really like anime and the old, silly, American cartoons—Looney Tunes and Hanna-Barbera stuff.

“Uh... other than that, I picked up German and French because they kept coming up in my missions and I didn’t want to make Giz play translator the whole time; he needed his focus elsewhere.”

“Did you teach her those, too?” Terry asked.

“Just German. I don’t do that romance language shit.”

“Yeah, HIVE taught me Spanish and French. Of course, there’s also the Demonic tongue, and Latin—both of which go part and parcel with most magic lessons, so I guess there’s that.”

“So... you’re telling me... that you speak,” Darryl began with a frown of concentration, and began ticking the list off on his fingers, “English, Hindi, Japanese, French, Spanish, German, Latin, and... Demonic?”

Kamala nodded, curious as to his point.
“Well, you’re better at learning languages than me. You know eight different languages. I can’t even remember half of my French lessons from high school and I took two years of it. On the other hand, you learned about a language a year since you came to America, that about right?”

“I, uh... guess that means I’m not all that bad with languages?”

“Don’t worry about her,” Mike placated with a slight wave of his hand, “sometimes she’s slow on the pick-up.”

“Hey!”

The others merely laughed, Baran’s deep laughs sort of drowning them all out. It was only after the laughter died off that she heard the faint buzzing noise and quiet chime. Jinx shot out of her seat, flying over the table in a forward tuck as she went, and dashed into her bedroom. She returned with her HIVE communicator and noted that Mammoth and Gizmo were already paying full attention to her call. These things were instinct and she answered the com on speaker.

“Jinx. Go.”

“Hello, kitten.”

Mike and Baran visibly relaxed. The latter went back to shoveling the rest of the tuna casserole down. Most of it was gone and she didn’t doubt that he’d likely clear anything left of their pan, too, if given the chance. It was always best to take however much you wanted before handing any ‘leftovers’ to the bottomless pit.

“Hey, Poe-bird. What’s up?”

“Me. I’m at about six stories, actually, flying the early patrol. I should be done fairly soon. ...Do you have any plans tomorrow morning?”

Kammie blinked but shook her head, “Uh... no, why?”

“Because you won’t be able to walk before noon.”

The boys broke out into small fits of laughter. Without looking away from the communicator, she used her thumb and middle finger to flick a mini-hex dart just over their heads. It popped over the table like a firework. As Darryl and Terry flinched, she realized she probably shouldn’t have reacted in the typical fashion she did with Gizmo and Mammoth.

“I’m on speaker phone, aren’t I?”

“Unfortunately,” giving the boys a fish-eye. Even Nin was smirking.

“Good,” Raven replied, “Then they’ll know that you have plans later this evening and that you won’t be available until the following afternoon... and I will be very displeased if anyone interrupts those plans. I assume Gizmo remembers what happens when I am... displeased.”

A glance to Gizmo’s already pale, Irish tones beginning to match her own made the hex-caster grin rather malevolently, “Judging by the look on his face, I’d say so.”

“I might be finished in about half an hour, actually. I could be over there shortly, if you would like?”

“Sure, I got the whole crew over here right now. Then I can properly introduce my mate to Nin, Terry, and Darryl.”
“That sounds like a great—just a moment, Jinx,” Raven’s tone had gone a little flatter than usual, which Kamala had learned early on didn’t mean good things. Raven’s face disappeared from the screen, but the video feed hadn’t been cut. Kamala guessed the darkness was the inside of Raven’s cloak.

Over the communicator, she heard the screech of tires. Suddenly, a cacophony of cracking reports that Jinx knew to be small arms fire. She frowned and her grip on the communicator grew tight.

A loud crunch and squeal of metal followed. There were indistinguishable sounds of confusion—a few soft groans. Several thumps later, a humming hiss blew static through her speaker; Kamala knew that to be Raven’s soul-self messing with the communicator. Probably due to Raven phasing outside the range of certain frequencies or something...

Then a fainter, male voice shouted, “Fuck, it’s a Titan!”

“Surrender would be in your very best interests...”

Several more staccato cracks sounded before they abruptly ceased.

Another male voice, somewhat more panicky, all but shrieked, “What’re ya doin’? What’re ya doin’! That’s a Titan!”

A thunderous growl, like that of an angered cougar, vibrated the device in her hand with its rippling, bass tones.

“I dislike gang-bangers... and cowardly drive-by shootings even more... But if there’s one thing you can do to really annoy me, it’s to shoot at me when my back is turned.”

“Shit man, don’t piss her off!”

“Agh! Lemme go, lemme-
guff.”

Another thump-and-groan combo came over the communicator. The growl continued, underlining Raven’s voice as she continued to speak. Jinx often wondered how that worked exactly; Raven didn’t have independent vocal sets or something, did she?

“Does anyone else want to annoy me? ...Good. I think you should all lay down with your hands on your head, now. Some of you might already be familiar with how things will go from here...

“Don’t even think about running. You’ll just wind up cuffed and tired. It will also have the bonus of annoying me. Understand?” There was a brief pause, wherein the growl slowly wound down, and then Raven’s face returned to the screen. There was an impassive but slightly annoyed set to Raven’s mouth; the rest of her face was hidden under her hood. Her voice gained volume as the sorceress spoke directly into the communicator, “Jinx, are you still there?”

“Yeah—you good over there?”

Raven sighed, “Fine, I just hate dealing with gangs. I have to call Nightwing and JCPD, now... I’ll need to make a statement, too. It’s looking to be an hour-and-a-half before I’m over there.”

“Take your time, hon. Shit happens. ...Did someone try to shoot you?”

“I saved these fools from being gunned down by a rival gang. One of them thought to thank me with a bullet to the back while I was focused on the cowards in the car.”
Kamala squinted at the visage of her lover, “What kind of idiot does that?”

“The exceptional kind.”

“I guess I better let you go so you can get ‘em outta your hair. See you soon.”

“Just as soon as I can, Daesem.”

Then the call ended, leaving Kamala blushing slightly at the term of endearment. Knowing she’d taken the Daelorism Oath with Raven and casually being called Raven’s ‘forever-half’ were on different levels. Stuffing those warm, fuzzy thoughts away and attempting to stifle her blush, the hexcaster looked over to the others, who were still sitting at the table. She gave them a shrug and moved back to her mostly finished dinner. This was pretty much an average day for her. The looks of surprise on her friend’s faces told her that it might be a while before they were used to the typical situations Extra-Normals often dealt with.

“Someone actually shot at Raven?” Nin asked with no small hint of incredulity in her tone, “The one that can create force fields and move stuff with her mind?”

“More or less, yeah. The world is full of stupid people.”

-=Raven=-

It was a warm, sunny Monday, but its spirit of levity never reached the demi-Demon. At 10 AM, the other Titans were up and preparing for the average day-filling activities. Someone had suggested a picnic, even. Raven wasn’t sure that a picnic would go over all that well; it was Monday, after all, and she’d heard nobody liked those. Well, she didn’t like this particular Monday, either. There was almost a full 13 hours’ gap between Jump and Biratnagar.

She hadn’t wanted Kamala to go. Jinx had been ignoring—well, not ignoring, but not heeding—the warning signs slathered across the whole of the mission as a bad idea. Raven could tell the others sensed her dampened mood, and they all knew why. Still, nobody brought it up; most likely because there was no need to call more attention to a circumstance she couldn’t change.

She sat silently, listening to the idle chatter as they drove to Jump Park for an impromptu cookout. It probably wouldn’t last long; just long enough to enjoy the atmosphere before cameras and reporters started showing up, wanting some kind of interview or something. Raven hated the celebrity attention they received, but there was nothing to do for it. The chatter continued in the foreground even as the mystic Titan slid her mind inside itself, muffling the world around her.

The sorceress thought back to her proper meeting with Kamala’s friends. Raven hadn’t ever been very good with socialization. Not to mention that she could feel Gizmo and Mammoth inspecting her to see if she would be good for Jinx, analyzing her and pecking at pieces of information like carrion birds stripping meat from bone. They hadn’t been intrusive or overbearing, though. Well, Mammoth hadn’t—she didn’t think Gizmo had a mode that functioned outside of the offensive range. Raven understood the carefulness, and did what she could to assure them that her feelings were genuine.

She also noted that Kamala’s friends had an openness of mind and an astuteness about them that wasn’t all that common in most of the jaded people around Jump. They didn’t view life as a hustle-and-bustle that was the same from day to day. Nin was especially interesting to Raven, from an empathic point of view, in the way she regarded every day as new and fresh. No two days were the same, no matter the similarity of events, and she never treated them as such. Terry loved and loved
largely; he had great passion and that showed in their performance when he had played those buckets so ardently. He had a ready smile and a buoyant spirit that reminded her of a mixture between Kori and Vic. Then there was Darryl, who was so easy going that she could almost miss his intense focus. She didn’t miss it when that focus turned upon her, however. She could tell he liked a good puzzle; his mind worked like a machine pounding out its own rhythm—much like the flourishes put into playing his djembe.

To a one, Kamala surrounded herself with intelligent, capable people. It was an admirable trait. She could tell her mate trusted them. From what she could sense of their minds, she would have to say that Kammie had chosen well. Perhaps, in time, those friends could become hers, as well. It would be nice to have someone to talk to who wasn’t always caught up with their vigilante roles that so often usurped their personal lives. Outings like this picnic were their attempt to reclaim that small bit of normalcy...

Nightwing was on his cycle, but he was also bluetoothed to the T-Car, and keeping with the conversation. Kori was up front with Vic, and Tara and Gar sat by each other making not-so-surreptitious eyes at one another. The demi-Demon let out a slow, somewhat exasperated breath... so as not to interrupt them. It wasn’t as though Raven couldn’t feel them practically having eye-sex.

Raven didn’t think she and Kamala were like that, but she could imagine being like that—would like to be like that right now. That fact and its impossibility only dampened her mood.

Just then, her communicator chirped. The others quieted when she pulled out the communicator and stared at it blankly. It was a personal message—which confused her, as all the Titans were currently within earshot. It could be one of Titans East or any of the standby Titans... but somehow, she didn’t think so. The contact information read ‘Jinx,’ but she hadn’t added Jinx as a contact... Of course, that didn’t mean that Kamala hadn’t stolen her communicator and done so without her knowledge.

‘Once a thief,’ Raven thought with a roll of her eyes as she flicked the communicator open.

Before she could properly inquire her caller, she heard a familiar style of strings plucking softly through her communicator in a steady rise and fall of notes. Raven fell silent, listening intently. Just what was that girl doing?

“Such a lonely day, And it’s mine; The most loneliest day of my life,” Kamala’s voice gently but clearly issued from her communicator, “Such a lonely day, Should be banned; It’s a day that I can’t stand...”

The chords became layered as she sang, but they quickly softened again. Raven could hear the longing in Kamala’s voice, could feel her heart singing with that same longing. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the window, listening to the sad, but lovely ballad Jinx was performing for her.

“Such a lonely day, Shouldn’t exist; It’s a day that I’ll never miss... Such a lonely day, And it’s mine; The most loneliest day of my life...” Kamala’s voice ramped up with the volume of her strings, “And if you go—I wanna go with you! And if you die—I wanna die with you! ...Take your hand and walk away...”

Jinx fell silent as her sitar entered a somewhat energetic solo that seemed at once counterpoint and harmonious with the gentle theme underlining the whole song. Then Jinx’s voice swelled with the chorus, and those lines resounded within her. Yes, it definitely felt like the most loneliest day of Raven’s life.

Finally, Kamala’s voice softened as the plucks of her sitar softened, “Such a lonely day, And it’s mine... It’s a day that I’m glad I survived... ...Just settled in here and I already miss you, hon.”
“I miss you, too, Daesem,” she sighed, opening her eyes to look at the small screen, where Jinx was staring at her with a somber smile, “You be careful over there.”

“Trust me, Poe-bird... I’m going into this with all the security I could muster. Even if something happens, there’ll be a badass extraction team sweeping in with extreme prejudice. I’m no pushover, either. If they actually manage to get me, they’ll get a taste of true chaos from this Jinx. I’m a thousand times more dangerous than when I last escaped the IMRO.”

“I know... but I still worry.”

There was a pause, and then a sigh, “I do, too.”

“I don’t mean to butt in, but can you ask Jinx just what the IMRO stands for?” Nightwing’s voice emanated from the T-Car’s dashboard.

This time, the pause was far longer. Raven could see Kamala’s expression flatten and harden. The hex-caster’s eyes cut to the side as she considered something—whether it was Dick’s question or whether Jinx would answer said question, Raven didn’t know.

“Honestly, Nightwing? I don’t know. I never cared. Whatever they call themselves doesn’t change what they are. After I got out, I never wanted to have anything to do with that place, again. ...Tell ya what,” Kammie offered, “If I find out while I’m over here, I’ll let you know.”

“Let’s just hope you don’t have to find out the hard way. Don’t take any chances.”

“Hey, now... remember who you’re talkin’ to, here!” Jinx said with a jovial tone and an assuaging grin.

Raven stared blandly at her, “That’s why I thought I should bring it up.”

“Tch. Next thing you know, you’ll be telling me to be less unpredictable.”

“I rather like your unpredictable nature.” Kamala let out a yawn, and Raven smiled softly. Jinx looked absolutely adorable when she was tired. “You should get some rest. It’s 11 or something over there, right?”

Yeah... Friggin’ self-imposed jet lag. Pulled an all-nighter and stayed up on the flight over so I wouldn’t be runnin’ the graveyard shift when I got here. How ’bout I’ll call you after I meet our contact and get back to our room?”

“Sure. Sleep well, kitten.”

“Night, Poe-bird.”

The screen went blank, and Raven closed her communicator. Her slight smile remained, and the day didn’t sound so bad, anymore. She wouldn’t be playing any of their roughhouse games, but reading in the shade of a tree on a bright, warm day suddenly sounded more appealing.

-=Kamala=-

Biratnagar’s railway station—a connection to Jogbani railway station in Bihar—sat still and silent at 1000 hours. Things feeling off were par for course, just now. The land was pretty much flat everywhere she looked and nearby the rural bustling of Biratnagar seemed almost familiar to
Kamala. However, it wasn’t anything like where she grew up; it was too metropolitan... and that was saying a lot considering that it wasn’t exactly a big, busy city like New York or San Francisco.

‘Still... an empty railway station? It’s not like it’s abandoned...’

In her tactical gear, it was a little warm for India’s mid-June climate. Still, better too warm than underprepared. She shifted her auto-shotgun, but kept her eyes traveling across the scenery. Nothing yet looked out of the ordinary, but she would be the first to discount that. Those grassy plains didn’t look like they could hold any threat, but how many times had she seamlessly blended into something like that? Even without Gizmo’s advanced technology, a good ghillie suit would get you far.

‘Speaking of which...’ Jinx frowned and stared out across the tracks, “Gizmo. IFR scans.”

“Negative.”

“Radar.”

“Negative.”

“EMFs.”

“Nothin’ outta the usual.”

That was good; the current military’s stealth tech was shit compared to Gizmo’s personal displacement fields. Still, her contact had five minutes to make himself known. Then she was marking this one as a no-show. Kamala’s pupils narrowed and she cut from the field to look toward the road that got them here via taxi. Still nothing...

“Drones?”

“Deployed at 200 meter radius, and scanning 400 meter radius.”

“Chemical scans.”

“Nothin’ but mild pesticides.”

“That’s the agricultural terrain,” the witch discarded, “Any souls out there?”

“Not a one.”

The hex-caster shifted her auto-shotgun again and stared at the railway. Maybe they were having second thoughts. Somehow, Kamala doubted it. Something was off here. She was ready to call this bullshit.


Jinx shifted herself to the ready. She didn’t appear threatening... unless you counted the menacing shotgun she held. She kept it pointed down, for now. No use meeting contacts at gunpoint—it seemed like a bad policy.

“Mammoth?” The giant’s massive arms uncrossed. “If anything so much as twitches out of place, I want you to turn that gas-guzzler into a pancake.”

“An’ me without a spatula,” he growled, clenching a fist at his side.

That was when everything seemed to go to the Twilight Zone. The SUV stopped and its rear left
passenger door opened. A bronze-skinned girl hopped out; she was definitely no older than 10. As the girl jogged toward them, Kamala trained her scowl into an expressionless mask.

“Shit...”

“Courier?” Gizmo asked.

“No,” Kamala ground out through clenched teeth, a slight growl rumbling the back of her throat, “Not just a courier. Human shield; insurance we won’t blow ‘em away at first sight.” The girl was almost to them, and she felt her shoulders bunching and forced herself to unwind. “...Fuck. Baran, no big pounds. Gizmo, no big rounds.”

The girl held something in her hand... and she went directly for Jinx. The young girl padded to a stop and held out the black phone to her. Jinx shouldered her shotgun, then took the phone—and noted it was already running a call. She rose it to her ear, glaring at the SUV even as she put a hand on the girl’s head and gently ruffled her hair.

“Jinx. Go.”

“Would you mind telling my daughter to come back to the vehicle, please?” The male voice was British English, but clearly had Hindi roots.

“You should go now, little one,” Kamala said in Hindi to the smiling girl with features so like her own—if she had a natural skin tone, “Your father’s waiting in the car.”

“Before we conduct business, I must ensure you are who you claim to be. I do believe you have a password for me.”

She heard a train in the distance rumbling its way down the rail line. It would be impossible to hear him if this conversation continued over phone much longer. Kamala decided to cut to the chase.

“After that, we speak in person... only you, yeah?”

“Of course.”

“Jiski lathi uski bhains.”

He who wields the lathi gets to keep the buffalo. She hated that phrase. It had good intentions, she was sure—whatever its connotations... However, in this situation, it was probably just to jerk her chain. More and more, she was sure of the IMRO’s hand behind this. That proverb sounded like one that the fucking Warden would have used, even if he only used it in English. The meaning was the same, and Jinx understood that intimately. ‘Might makes right,’ indeed.

“Your Hindi is impeccable, my mercenary.”

She chose not to respond to that. Instead, she lowered the smartphone from her ear and ended the call. That done, Jinx tossed it to the ground. Besides, the train was getting louder and it would be next to impossible to hear him in the next few moments. If he wanted to talk, it would be face to face.

Just then, her sense of probability tilted, then plunged on a sharp decline. In the same moment, the steady clacking fell out of synch to her ears. Jinx tensed as she heard something interrupting—overlapping the train’s noise... It was barely audible, but higher pitched. Instead of a rhythmic chack-a-clack, it had a frantic whip-a-whup to it. After four more seconds, Kamala’s eyes widened.

She twisted the wrist unit’s outer dial 90 degrees and slammed her palm on its face. The emergency
signal to the extraction team went out. She noted Mikron doing the same almost simultaneously, “Giz.”

“Stealth chopper high an’ droppin’!” he interrupted in a shout, “Musta been sittin’ pretty ‘bove my drones!”

They had their plans for aerial attacks, and all of them split in three tactically sound directions. Gizmo went up at an angle, probably to engage their threat. Suddenly, a deluge of pellets rained down upon them. The tiny orbs similar to paint-balls cracked and a cloying, grey smoke erupted from them. The pellets painted the landscape and soon Jinx was lost within it. Baran had already leapt clear on the merit of his powerful muscles. That left her sprinting pell-mell through the cloud. She hadn’t brought a mini rebreather or gas mask because... Well, in hindsight, that was dumb of her.

She could feel whatever agent inside of those pellets begin to sap at her muscles. She had held her breath, but she could feel the cloying smoke invading her nostrils and filming upon her skin. Her balance began to go sideways and she stumbled. Even as her vision—which was practically nil as it was filled with smoke—began to fade, her dulled ears managed to pick up the sound of two choppers.

‘Ah, hell... a flanker. First must’ve been initial strike... a distraction team, maybe?’

Her legs weren’t quite listening to her, anymore. Jinx crashed to the ground and her inertia carried her tumbling onto her back. As she attempted to roll herself to her feet, Kamala found her body jerking weakly to her commands. Above her, the second helicopter began to blow away the smoke. Four men on cables rappelled from the whirly-bird. They each seized a limb and then they were being winch-wound up into the waiting craft.

‘Oh. Abduction team. Fuck.’

Her vision began to stretch and skew, but before it could make her truly nauseous, everything faded into a null darkness.

---Richard---

It was 21:17 when the main computer gave a five-count chime. In another two seconds, it repeated the quick, quintuplet of chimes. It wasn’t their typical call-in. Nightwing calmly stood and pressed the Alert button, then chose the Restriction 5 Override. That would call anyone without a Restriction 6 code, which was an undercover restriction. Restriction 7 was reserved for contacting Titans East, Reserve Titans, and Justice League. Finally, Restriction 8 would alert any deep-cover agents they had—none just then. Put simply, he had just paged everyone in Titan Tower.

The red emergency lights flashed throughout the hallways along with a warning, but not overly obnoxious klaxon. Dick flicked on the record and trace functions and answered the call even as the first of his team, Raven, whisked into the room. The enormous screen filled with the face of Gizmo standing in front of his own console. Behind him and to the left was Mammoth. ...Behind Mammoth was a team of black-and-gold tactical soldiers he knew belonged to HIVE. The soldiers were heavily armed and currently setting up a command post.

Raven stepped up beside him and frowned. He could see her quickly scanning the video’s environment. Before the short genius could even speak, she made demands.

“Where is Jinx.”
“I got a standin’ order from Jinx. In the event that she was unable to reach ya, I’m s’posed to make contact. They did a smash-and-grab for Jinx. Gotta be the fuckin’ IMRO. I have somethin’ I gotta play for ya. Video-transmission startin’...”

Gizmo was relegated to the lower right corner as Jinx’s grin appeared on the screen. She sat back from the camera, settling herself into easy-pose. She drew in a breath and sighed, her grin dampening just a bit.

“Hey, Poe-bird. I hope you liked the song last night. I was kinda out of it after 30 hours and it seemed like a good idea at the time. It’s almost sunrise now; today’s the day I see what Fate has in store for me. Fate said I had to be here... it was giving me all sorts of scary warnings, too... but I had to go. I know—I didn’t tell you that, but you would have wanted to stop me. I couldn’t let that happen, hon. When Mr. Chaos calls upon me, I have to answer.

“If you’re watching this, then... well, yeah. Admiral Ackbar was right—it was a trap. Sooo, uh, before this goes any further, I wanna tell you that I love you... and that won’t change. If I.. Whether I’m alive and well or dead before you hear this, that’ll never change. As long as there’s breath in my body, I’ll fight to get back to you.

“Ahem... Now, here’s the business end of things. I know you’re not gonna just sit there and wait for me... or to see how things turn out. I planned on that much. Here’s the low-down. You already know a lot of what I know... but I have a little more for you.” She reached beside her for a notepad. “Seven years ago, a witch in HIVE’s Mysticism Sect was divining when she got a vision. She spent the next two days sorting through maps and satellite footage. Then she went to our Matriarch and told her that she needed to send two of her soon-to-be students on a mission.

“Gizmo and Mammoth had just graduated from Dark Way Prep, and weren’t students of HAEYP just yet. Still, the witch said it had to be them. The Matriarch was no stranger to the weird workings of the occult, so she did. They had to drive out into a field in Bihar on a specific day at a specific time. It was a retrieval mission of the utmost importance, and there would be danger...

“Nevertheless, my boys have balls of brass. They got their coordinates and they went. These,” Jinx proclaimed, holding up a page she had ripped from the notepad, “are those coordinates. That’s where Mike and Baran found me... and saved me. This is the closest you’ll ever get to the IMRO compound, Raven. I couldn’t have run more than a few hundred meters before they picked me up.

Jinx pulled her arm back and a hot pink, electrical arc zipped down her limb. The small spark flitted through the paper and popped at one corner. That corner promptly caught fire; the flame consumed the paper at an unnatural speed. She let go of the notepad sheet just in time for it to turn into cinders mid-air. She leaned forward, a slight smirk tripping across her lips.

“If Gizmo and Mammoth got out, they’re playing this for you from a HIVE bunker in Bihar. They’ll have details on what exactly happened to get us into this situation. You’ll also probably notice several dozen HIVE Operatives. You need any support or fallback, that’s them. I actually included you in the Extraction Coverage I paid. They did rather wonder why I paid for four team members when there’s only three of us. Now that’s plannin’ ahead!”

Kamala drew in a deep breath, her expression now somber, but intense, “I’m pretty sure the IMRO’ll want to lock me up again, not outright kill me. They’re sadistic like that. If that’s the case, then you can count on my help. I know, I know—’But Jinx, you’ve been captured!’ Well, I know a lot more now than I did when those assholes caught me.

“One of those things is you. I know you, Raven. When the time comes, I’ll call upon you... and then these fuckers will know you, too. Show them the wrath of Chaos. Be my avenging Arch Lord, Baelat
Scath. Make sure they can never do this to anyone else, again... Nevermore.”

The video cut, and the image of Gizmo in the bunker resumed its full-screen status. Nightwing felt the prickle of her energy just moments before his cape began to stir. He could feel a soft breeze rippling to his right and, when he looked, wasn’t surprised to see Raven shaking.

Her eyes were burning like hot coals and her pallor was swiftly darkening, flushing to a deep, brick red. Her teeth ground, and he could see that they were jagged and fang-like. In the next instant, she abruptly burst into black flames that poured out of her like a geyser, ripping upward and phasing through the ceiling. Within that blazing power of her externalized soul-self, she rose up and through the ceiling as well. They heard a shrieking roar even as the whole of the tower found itself cast in shade.

Then he saw what he could only describe as an enormous, black phoenix blaze out across the Pacific. It was a monstrous thing and he had no doubt that many people would be reporting that particular sighting very, very soon. In fact, he noted a waiting call from the Watchtower. He’d get to them in a moment.

Nightwing knew there was nothing he could do to stop Raven; he didn’t even bother trying to contact her. Instead, he stared at the screen, where Gizmo had watched the display with a similarly grim expression. He pressed a key to send the coordinates Jinx gave them into all of their communicators.

“We’ll be expecting her,” Gizmo said.

“Expect us, too. We’ll be about two hours out. Raven... significantly less.”

Nightwing cut the call and moved for the hangar. This was no doubt about to be one of those troublesome missions... He was aware that Raven didn’t exactly travel through physical space when she did things like that. It was more similar to her phasing ability, and thus had more in common with teleporting than anything else. Dick just wondered what might be left by the time he got there...

He quickly bluetoothed his communicator to his ear bud, “Watchtower, this is Titan Tower. There’s an emergency rescue mission in progress. Please stand-by for further details.”

“Nightwing, what the Hell is going on?” the Homo magi demanded.

“Zatanna, do you remember what you said about handling an Arch Lord?”

“...I do.”

“Don’t get in her way, Zatanna. You probably know better than I do that you don’t come between a Demon and their mate. That’s a lesson someone’s about to find out the hard way.”

“She has a-”

“I’m going to have to call you back,” he said, and immediately cut the call. That was probably enough to guarantee Zatanna didn’t do something stupid... probably. He next dialed into Oracle’s network. “Batman... I think the Freeman Run just started without us.”

“I guess that answers the question of whether or not she’s willing to face her past. Who’s in play so far?”

“HIVE Freelance, Raven, and a few squads of HIVE Support Operatives. Zatanna just called, but I’m not sure if I can keep the whole League out of this.”
“I’ll assemble our shortlist,” the Dark Knight affirmed.

“One more thing...”

~§~END CHAPTER 6~§~

Author’s Note:

Hey, everybody! This is coming to you late on a Tuesday morning because I still feel like crap and I had entirely too much to do this weekend. Not a lot of time to reply to reviews and sit down and write this whole thing and format the chapter. Mother’s Day came first, and I couldn’t begrudge taking Mom to a nice dinner with the rest of the family. Still, took a good chunk of my Saturday (actually Sunday) evening. Still, I’m here and I’m writing this now. As of yet, I haven’t replied to any of the reviews—but I’ve read them! I promise I’ll be getting around to those throughout the week—probably my other day off.

Welp, with that done and without further ado, here’s the breakdown!

Tuna casserole. My mom makes amazing tuna casserole. I can’t do it half so well at all. As this is something of a mother’s day update, this deserves credit where credit is due. I chose this dish as the preferred one Kamala would make because it’s versatile: topped crackers, bread crumbs, or croutons; with or without noodles—I prefer wheat—elbow, rotini, penne, ziti; not to mention the ways you can mess with the portioning of various ingredients. Honestly, I love the stuff. ...I need to get her to just... send me two pans of it or something...

Honestly, I don’t know what Kamala did in that third-world country. Were there US soldiers in that Abrams Tank? Maybe, maybe not. Maybe they were acting as opposition to oust a sleeper cell, hired on as a Black Ops accompaniment that would knowingly interfere with the primary mission to shake things up. Maybe they were hired by a supervillain so they could clear out their secret lab and leave the terrorist insurgents to the tender embrace of the US Army heavy artillery. I dunno, but the idea of Baran holding a tank while its treads spit up ground in his face was too hilarious a mental image.

Point of fact, if you spend a chunk of your early years tossed out of an insular, religious community and into a heavy-isolation concentration camp, you don’t get a lot of exposure to Western television sitcoms. There’s a lot of Jinx that’s worldly now—she indulges, she likes her cartoons and expanding her wardrobe and gathering little trinkets and posters... But all this is disposable. It’s nice to have these things, but they would mean nothing to lose. She still functions off previous ways of life, and prefers to have only a few main possessions—that way it’s harder to take away the important stuff. My other stories have mentioned this, but she typically carries a journal/diary, a meditation table with incense, her Vishnu murti, a toiletry bag, and a few changes of clothes. She could pack everything in a duffel bag and be out of a given location in five minutes.

That said, the latter part of her formative years was spent in a kind of paramilitary boarding school. The things she knew and learned in her high school years are a mite different. It’s not that she didn’t have mathematics, literature, and other staples... but her Chemistry class would have been extremely hands-on and geared toward a purpose. Most high school teachers won’t tell you how to make thermite, explosives, and acids for sabotage, distraction, and ‘creative entry and exit.’ Sometimes, what with her growing up with other people surrounded by this stuff, she tends to forget that other people didn’t have those same types of classes and experiences.

Gizmo should know better than to talk ‘shop’ about girls when one of said girls is your team leader’s
mate... And yes, Jinx has some artifacts in there that may talk to you or wind up reacting strangely with the Material Realm’s dimensions of space and time. The reference to being teleported to China is a reference I make every once in a while regarding this one time when Raven got fed up with Richard’s overbearing nature and just sent him to China. She uses various veiled references to China as a warning whenever Richard is treading on her last nerve.

I like these introductions and how it humanizes them all. It’s also good that Baran and Mikron have some normal interaction with people who aren’t part of their merc business or the Cape-society. At one point, I’d had an inkling to ship Baran/Nin. Beyond the obvious amounts of size-incompatibility which I would normally ignore, I don’t really know how their physical relations would go. Everything would have to be tailored to one or the other. Mostly it’s a mass logistics thing, otherwise I’d be all for it, because I know Baran can/will be an absolute sweetheart of gold for anyone he dedicated himself to. I just... think the stress of the severe imbalance of their respective sizes and lifestyles would clash too much to work out.

You can cheat at shell-games, or you can just play the game straight and use alternate physics to alter the probability of a win scenario. Using Kammie’s ruby as the item to be chosen, however, is just straight cheating no matter what. She can summon or dispel that shit at any time.

For those of you not familiar, that was a Final Fantasy 7 reference. Cid, the foul-mouthed pilot cannot possibly be anyone but Mikron. Kamala’s probably a little annoyed at having to play the Asian stereotype since she’s, y’know, Indian.

What follows is something that’s common to just about every incarnation of Kamala Malti. Whether it’s due to Brother Blood or the IMRO, Jinx has developed a level of paranoia that has made her extremely aware of her environment. This helps with her ability to affect probability on a wider scale, but it also impedes where she feels it is safe to rest. She only feels safe at ground level, when there’s two solid walls and a firm floor at her back and under her when she sleeps. This way nobody can take the ground from under her or sneak up behind her. She also requires that any corner she choses has clear visibility to all entries and exits (barring those ‘creative’ entries and exits).

Kamala’s need for safety to rest has led to extended periods of wakefulness, necessitating her to take sleep wherever she can get it. To this end, she learned the ability to forcefully fall asleep in minutes and remain so until disturbed or her (extremely accurate) internal clock wakes her. Her sense of probability from Mr. Chaos has also helps to keep minor distractions from waking her, as she subconsciously senses them and assesses them as harmless or a reassurance allows her to ignore what might normally wake her. This is exceptionally helpful if she’s in a busy, urban setting. Kammie also wakes immediately; she has no slow-wakeful period... From the moment she wakes, she’s primed for activity. This is true at all times unless she’s drugged or put to sleep in an unnatural way. What this means for her internal clock is that if she’s missing time, then obviously something’s wrong and will trip her paranoia. Otherwise, her sense of probability will ‘nudge’ her into alarm and draw attention to these things.

This is why, when Raven steals way Kamala that first time, that she freaks out so completely. She didn’t remember going to sleep, woke up slowly, and couldn’t account for missing time. Add that to waking up in the presence of a once-rival in an unfamiliar location (later to be recognized as a once-hostile territory)... She panicked and made for the quickest—and not necessarily safest—escape possible.

Likewise, this integral part of her is why she reacts poorly to Mikron’s statements. Add the derisive kitten remark in there, and it’ll just trigger her hostility. Mostly, her thing with cat-related jokes are whether they’re done in jest or mockery. Jinx can take a joke, but she hates being mocked.
I only wish I was as fluent as Kamala. Still, I imagine that having a deep discussion with her on some far-reaching topics is more than likely going to involve speaking in several different languages. It also allows her to watch cartoons from a broader base of programming—because that’s what’s really important, here—amirite?

I am a firm believer that anyone that fires at a fully empowered Raven with standard ordinance has to be extraordinarily stupid. There’s very little you can do to change my mind on that one, heh. It’s only her patience and good will that will save you from a fate worse than death. I mean... really, after seeing what she can do over the years, who thinks that’s a good idea? Some criminals know better—at least one did.

... time-skip. Here we are at the big moment. The mission is officially underway and Jinx has said her (likely enthusiastic) goodbyes to Raven. At the time of conceptualizing this scene, I was listening to a lot of System of a Down because I had an action-y scene coming up and I liked the energy they provide. At one point, “Lonely Days” came on and it just fit so well with a ‘missing you’ theme that even as I had a vaguely planned bit of writing for this, that the song instantly won a place in the fic. It launched from there and all the dialogue was written with the song on repeat. Come to think of it, even the action/abduction scene was written to a loop of “Peephole,” “Spiders,” “Chop Suey,” “Forest,” “Aerials,” “Hypnotize,” and “Lonely Days.”

Remember when I said Jinx has a paranoid side? Yeah, they’re not going into this blind at all. For all the precautions and scans she has Gizmo setup, it’s really only due to long observation and planning that they were caught by something like this. That and the IMRO caught Jinx off-guard by using a civilian girl. Granted, the girl may have well been a daughter of one of the funders/founders of the IMRO, but that didn’t mean that Jinx would carve a swath of bullets through her just to hit the man. That said, for anyone curious: No, the man in the SUV was not the Warden of the IMRO...

This is, however, very likely something constructed just to mess with Jinx’s head. The Warden was always an exceptional type of monster, as you may have gathered by reading the hints I’ve given of the IMRO to you thus far. We’re about to go hip-deep into that fuckery.

And so the bad news gets handed to Raven. I think everyone knew this was coming. I mean, if I drop a Chekhov’s Gun like the IMRO and its many mentions like this, then provide you with glimpses of an ascended-form Raven... you know I’m gonna toss out the Badass Raven Scene. Well, in this story, it’s more like several scenes. So enjoy that. You’re in for one hell of a ride!

Y’know how the Bat Clan is seriously prepared for everything? Well, you saw the beginning framework on this in a previous discussion. All the actual planning I made backstage for suspense-building purposes. On that matter, I won’t be spoiling it, but let’s just say that things are going to start moving very quickly starting next chapter. There’s a ton of players coming to the board and everyone’s sliding in their character sheets and vetting their skills and stats.

In the words of Tiny Tina from Borderlands 2’s Assault on Dragon Keep DLC... “ROLL FOR INITIATIVE!”

-Lynx

Story Mirrors:

Now Available on Archive of Our Own!
“Prey Mate” on FanFiction.net

“Prey Mate” on deviantArt.com
Jinx groggily rolled her head until it lolled back and stared dazedly at the halo of light from a chandelier that hung above her. It was made of gold, its prisms some form of glass or crystal. Light dimly reflected and refracted off each and every dangling, twinkling octahedron. The chandelier’s glow was subdued and jaundiced, not the magnificent snowflake conflagration that she expected... that she remembered.

Her brain felt like it was full of cotton—so did her mouth. Even as her thoughts slowly began to galvanize, she took stock of her surroundings as she’d been trained to do years ago. The lights had been turned out all around her; the chandelier was the only light. Her bare feet were cold against a floors of polished, stained oak. The one halo of light from that chandelier held only a soldier standing at her left and her chair—to which she was bound by cables of some sort. Her wrists were cuffed; carbon-steel, by the weight of it and the mystically blurry resonance they gave off.

Kamala realized then that she was also not garbed in her tactical gear. Her clothing had been swapped out for little more than she expected. There was a white tank top and a pair of white shorts. She could tell she wasn’t wearing a bra or underwear beneath them. It wasn’t anything sexual—well, it probably wasn’t supposed to be; the lack of undergarments just afforded less places to hide things.

Her head orbited her neck and hung heavily against her chest. Whatever drugs were in her system were slowly granting her more lucidity, but barely any strength or coordination. With no small effort, she raised her head to stare at the other hanging light fixture. Its little spot of light held nothing, yet. This was the ballroom... the torture room—whatever. She didn’t awaken in this room by any stretch of coincidence. This was her welcome home.

“Ooooounn,” Kammie noised as her tongue flopped uselessly in her mouth. ‘Vocals—check.”
Coherency—nu-uh. Goddamn tranqs.’

The good news was that her muscles were starting to twitch more often in response to her commands. Kamala had no good fixture on the passage of time, as she usually might. Whatever time it was now, she couldn’t know. However, now that her mental processes were up and running again, her mind was falling into line with understanding the flow of time once again.

That’s why she knew that, 6 minutes and 37 seconds later, a door at the far end of the hall opened. By then, her body was cleaning house quite nicely. The chemicals would still affect her in pervasive ways, but only minutely; most of her facilities were once again her own. Her cotton-candy orbs tracked the sound of rotors and the motion of a bulky object.

‘Motorized wheelchair. Two guards at that door, now. Probably two at the door behind me. One beside me... three around him. So eight guards and... who—might—you—be?’

The chair slowly slid into place beneath the other circle of light, and she got her first look at the body residing in the chair. It was hooked up to an oxygen tank, a breathing tube fed into something resembling nostrils. It was an emaciated thing, but there were sags about the body that gave her the impression he had once been quite hefty. There was a waxy sheen to his skin, almost like plastic, but fleshier. The man was bald... didn’t even have eyebrows. His beady, focused eyes—sunken into his dark, splotchy sockets—burned darkly into hers. There was an old hatred there.

Jinx’s head dropped, and a series of hyperventilating gasps made it past her lips as her shoulders shook.

“Do not cry, 3120. The time for that will be soon enough, I promise you.”

“Hunh... hunh—h-hng,” she nearly choked, but couldn’t stop. The fastenings over her chest made it hard to suck in a full lung of air. Kamala continued, “Huh, huh, huh.”

Her body fidgeted and trembled and she practically bounced in her seat.

“Huh—hk—heh, heh heh heh... Heh hah ha—!”

Whatever they’d given her must have been a cocktail. Tranquilizers didn’t have this sort of effect on her. Syllables and sounds were compelling her to noise—something, anything... and she gave in. Unfortunately, she doubted that this was what they had wanted to hear.

“Ha ha haa! Hah ha ha ha—”

She was laughing too hard to see the backhand when it came swinging at her face. She felt it, though, and that cut off her fit of guffaws. The chair was sturdy; it didn’t even rock with the inertia as her head whipped to the side in a way the rest of her restrained body couldn’t follow. Her grin stretched across her face like a Cheshire rictus, and Kamala slowly lifted her head. Glowing, coral energy had filled her eyes. When she turned her luminous, corrosive stare upon her visage in the mirroring helmet of the guard standing beside her, the reflective faceplate shattered with a violent, hammering crack!

The guard staggered back and fell on his ass. She wasn’t 11 years old, anymore. They should have known better. Some people just didn’t learn, especially not...

“Warr-dennn. Warr-dennn... Crunchy, crispy, crackling—” the mercenary singsong sang to them before suddenly sobering, “Warden. Haven’t you heard? The name’s Jinx.”

“It no longer matters what you... call yourself...” He paused to take a lengthy inhaled. Her grin, if
possible, widened at his difficulties. “You will... always be 3120, here. And now that we have you again... you will never... be leaving my... hospitality.”

“Oh, Warden... if you had wanted to die, you coulda just put a bullet in your head. Heh...” Jinx paused to lick at the throbbing warmth on her lower lip and tasting the warm tang there. The glow of her eyes faded, and her felid eyes had narrowed to the tiniest of malevolent slivers. She stabbed him with her unflinching gaze, “Now your last moments will be far—far—more enjoyable. For me.”

His face contorted oddly, seemed to purse in several areas unnaturally. His eyes, however, did not change. They stared directly into hers with an almost maddened hatred. That was fine. The feeling was mutual.

“3120, I don’t think you... appreciate your circumstances, here” he finished with a large suck from his respiratory tubes through those reconstructed nostrils, “I have waited quite... some time for this moment.”

She shook with a peal of giggles, hopping in her seat and clattering its legs. Through this motion, she hop-shuffled the chair to the edge of her circle of light. Her face, despite the bloody trail down her chin, still grinned as she tried to lean forward. Failing that, she pushed her head as far forward as she could. The guard—now sans helmet—kept pace with her. She noted he looked Caucasian, like her once and current captor. The guard’s hand firmly gripped the back of her chair, just to keep her from coming any closer to his employer.

“As have I, Warden, I assure you. However, there’s just one little thing...” she trailed leadingly. Then she whispered loudly and ominously, “I have a secret!

“But! Before I go spilling the beans... inquiring minds want to know: Just what does IMRO stand for? You tell me your secret, and I’ll tell you mine. I’m pretty sure mine’s even better than yours, so you’re kind of getting lucky, here.”

Her continued grin only seemed to infuriate him. The Warden wheezed something close to a growl and it only led to coughing fit. He could only glower deeper as she chuckled at his expense.

“The IMRO is a facility... for dealing with the menace... that you represent, 3120,” he spat the number like an epithet. “You and your kind belong here... sealed away where you cannot... corrupt this world. One day, all your kind... will languor—and then die—in these cells.

“This facility, 3120..., is but the start of what will... soon be a world-wide effort. We are the Indian Metahuman... Response Organization. This is a living landfill... and you are the filth...”

“Metahuman Response, huh? Well, I wonder how you’re gonna ‘respond’ to my secret... I bet you’ll just die!” She chuckled viciously until she expended the rest of the meager air she could suck in from the tight cables constricting her. “See... everyone here—at least, everyone I left alive when I escaped—that I was some sort of Demon.”

“You are a Demon, 3120,” he practically frothed at the mouth, spittle leaking onto smooth flesh where lips should have been, “and we have constructed a... very special cage where you may rot... until you die!”

“Actually, I’m just a Metahuman—plain and simple... but I’ll let you in on the joke: my mate? She is a Demon. Not some underling, you must understand.” She reared up in her seat, imperiously grinning so hard it hurt... but she couldn’t seem to stop just at that moment, “She is an Arch-demon, the Overlord of the Eighth Hell, daughter of Trigon the Terrible. She is Scath, a harbinger of blight and savior of the world...
“And here’s the real kick in the balls, you stupid fuck: I invoke her name. I invoke the name of Scath.”

Suddenly, the ballroom’s lights flickered and dimmed. The whole of the complex underwent a heaving shudder and dust fell from the chandeliers. The crystals on the chandelier tinkled as it swayed. A great roar rent the air with calamitous volume. It came from everywhere and nowhere, resounding down the hallways distantly and without origin. Steadily, the pernicious cacophony rose until it was humming in their skulls. She could hear the jangled chiming of all eight chandeliers as they whipped about. Finally, the chandeliers’ crystals began to crack... then shattered completely. As their shards rained down about them, the dark revealed Jinx’s eyes incandescent with magenta malevolence.

“That would be her. You took me from her,” she rasped with heated, happy hate, “She’s going to want me back... and she will find me—even if she has to sunder mountains, or dry up oceans, or blot out the sun to do it!”

-=Raven=-

Her arrival was anything but secret. Ships of all make and manner had spotted her for an instant before she was already on their horizon. She whipped by aircraft of varying types, visible to their eyes, but not their radar. The massive, enraged bird of prey appeared on satellite footage, moving at rates that buggered some of their most advanced, experimental jets. Everyone could see her flight west, but very few knew why. Raven was sure countries were panicking, wondering if this was some kind of attack. If anything had happened to her mate, they could only be so lucky as to hope for such a thing...

The demi-Demon entered India without any fear of reprisal. It wasn’t as though they had anything that could oppose her current power. As she stormed over Bihar, her flight slowed. Entering Bihar’s airspace, Raven finally retrieved her communicator to gain a better understanding of her position. Soon, she would have them—soon she would find Jinx.

Still ensconced in the black, avian shroud of her soul-self, Raven glanced down at her communicator. It was blinking. She continued her westward flight, correcting her path to a fine-tuned west now that she had reached the country of her choosing. The checked the blinking note on the screen. Apparently, a private channel was hailing her communicator.

“Raven.”

“Hard right, Demon-girl. Yer a few hundred kilometers south o’ where we picked ‘er up.”

Raven banked and began a slow, swooping descent, “Remember that mission seven years ago?”

“Want us out there again? Same spot?”

“The very same. Set a rendezvous. Have your squads set perimeter. Anything leaving that facility alive will be there, one way or another.”

“You got it,” Gizmo then turned around, bellowing at others that must have been present, “Gear up and mount up! We got places to be!” He then turned back to the view-screen. “Get Jinx. Kill any fuckers in your way. HF out.”

Her screen blanked and she watched the coordinates on her communicator grow closer and closer. In
moments, she circled a large field. There was nothing out here to her eyes, but she would be the first to discount that. Appearances could always be deceiving.

The gigantic, Demonic bird of her aura abruptly shifted into a sliver, streaking downward like a comet trailing black lightning. In moments, she had descended. Raven’s power frothed around her before settling... if only just enough that she could concentrate without having to rein in her more destructive impulses. The sorceress looked around for anything out of the ordinary, but this place had probably gone unnoticed for decades. The red-skinned Scath scrutinized the landscape... perhaps she should be searching for another sign. If there were prisoners, then there would be auras to feel, minds to touch...

Before the mystic Titan could begin any passive scanning, a powerful energy thrummed within her chest. There was a stirring from within her aura somehow resonating inside of itself. Her mind felt the same; a thread... a train of thought not her own had pulled into Nevermore and was beckoning her like a siren call. She listened to it, drew in the sensation and gave herself over to it.

‘I invoke the name of Scath.’

Raven could feel it reverberate, and it echoed repeatedly as someone continually invoked the title now metaphysically bound to her very being through Rite of Succession. She could feel it coming from underneath her... It was then that the demi-Demon’s gaze drew to the ground and she stared hard. Suddenly wreathed in black flames, she hunched over—stooping as though inspecting the ground. Then she shook as a sound rumbled deep within her chest. Letting go of her restraint, she flung her head back and roared to the heavens.

The ground around her caught in a breeze, stirring grass, dirt, and dust. Her aura flared higher, the flames now nearly three times her height. With a pulse, a wave of dark energy rippled down the flames and slammed into the ground, punching a sizeable divot around her. Her roar continued, grew in intensity as her determination escalated. Another ripple rolled down the flames and ripped through the earth. The ground began to peel back around her, clumps of grass and dirt flying away. A crater formed, swiftly growing outward. Finally, a third ripple of energy suffused into the land, sinking Raven even deeper still.

All at once, a tumultuous upheaval mounted upon the land. Her power seeped down... downward until it felt something unnatural—foreign and manmade. The earthen covers then rose and broke, humongous islands of dirt, rock, and grass hanging in the air. Beneath them, great, black, chthonic vines—trunk-like, tentacular masses—writhed and whipped where they had carved the landscape.

Most of the islands moved away, relegating themselves away from a large, square block leading to the surface. Once a cleverly disguised tram shaft, it now found its neck peaking out from the earth like Jörmungandr from the ocean waves. Her quadruple eyes settled upon the structure, and several islands settled down from her crater, creating a grassy ramp to the shaft.

The seething, slithering tentacles pulled back and drew closer to Raven’s still form. They melded, merged, and separated from her flaming aura without any true distinction. The demi-Demon stalked forward, across the grassy incline... and then sank through the camouflaged, concrete doors without any acknowledgment that they were even there.

-Clark-

Superman stared hard at their live surveillance footage. Raven’s roar made him feel uncomfortable. It wasn’t a normal sound, and went far beyond the physical trappings of menace. He could feel the
sound in his soul. It was hard to reconcile what he was seeing with the typically calm, but sincere young woman. He had only met her a few times since her arrival in this dimension. The Man of Steel had heard much about her, though. Indeed, she had been the topic of many a conversation.

Of course, these days, she wasn’t talking to them. Clark supposed he couldn’t blame her. The events that estranged them had never sat well with him. He realized, in hindsight, that he had stood on the wrong side of that vote so long ago. Batman had listened to the proposal... then simply stood and left the meeting. Superman should have listened when that young girl had come to them, instead of listening to irrational fears. It was a moment of surrender that he wouldn’t repeat.

As he watched Raven phase through some heavy doors and descend into the bowels of an unknown complex, he frowned, “What is that? An underground bunker?”

“My guess? That’s what I’ve been mentioning in the past few weeks: the IMRO. Raven’s found it.”

“Are we sure we should be letting her run around like that? If she decides to start ripping apart people like she’s been tearing into that landscape-”

“Zatanna,” Clark cut her off, “We are not having this discussion again.”

“That’s why I’m telling you I need Hawkwoman, Green Arrow, Flash, and Steel.”

“That’s an eclectic choice of team. I’m assuming you have a reason why you want them in particular?” He asked. Clark knew Bruce—there had to be a reason him to single out those members of the League.

“Of course,” Batman candidly replied, “They didn’t vote for Unkindness.”

“Steel wasn’t even part of those discussions!” Zatanna protested.

“All the more reason he should be going,” came the answer. The ‘instead of you’ implication hung heavily in the air between them.

“I see. I’d like at least two of the core members to be there. If this is as big as you say, we could definitely use the pull. I imagine you’re already on your way there. Can we at least send J’onn?”

He could see Bruce considered it—heavily considered it. “J’onn would be an excellent candidate, but I don’t know just how Jinx might react to his presence. Jinx’s reaction will directly influence Raven’s.”

“He endorsed the plan as feasible, but if you’ll recall, he voted against it.”

Batman mulled it around a little more, “Alright, we’ll go for that angle. I wouldn’t suggest putting him anywhere near Raven or Jinx, though. In fact, the idea is to have us there as figureheads.”

“So we look pretty and supportive. Okay. Are you sure you want to draw the media into this?”

“It’s part of Nightwing’s endgame. We’ve been discussing this for a few weeks. If the world knows we won’t tolerate this kind of activity, they’ll be less likely to attempt this sort of thing. ...We still don’t know if this is the only facility, either. There could be more—possibly hundreds worldwide.”

Wonderwoman, Green Lantern, and Zatanna had an expression to match his own. Many things had gone without their notice until they had grown too large to step down on it without causing a backlash. Waller’s Project Cadmus was one such thing. Even so, Waller knew enough not to make this sort of play. While that woman was a hardliner for accountability, the last thing she wanted was
a war.

This was a war... and it was looking pretty one-sided, so far.

“If you want to do something more, then look for more of these facilities. The world needs to know that the League is opposed to this—not because of who these prisoners are or why they’re there, but because it’s wrong. This one, though... this one belongs to Raven. If we try to stop her now, it could turn ugly.”

“...You know she might kill everyone inside there, right?”

“I don’t like it anymore than you do, Zatanna. Unfortunately, we were too late to be the first response. I was hoping to put them down our way... before anything like this happened. Everything Nightwing and I know about Jinx had indicated her pointed avoidance of India as a whole. I don’t know why she took this mission... Jinx had to have known it was a trap. She went anyway.”

Batman looked even grimmer than usual, “Whatever happens... we neither condone nor condemn it. We’re there as humanitarian aid only. If necessary, we’ll be peacekeepers. It’s the only way I can think of this not turning into a public relations nightmare at best.”

“I can see your point,” Superman said, then sighed, “Alright. I’ll send your team. Where do you want them?”

“We’ll be working in conjunction with Titans West and HIVE Freelance. I understand they’ve got a command post already set up in Bihar. We’re just waiting on word from Nightwing.”

“They’re mercenaries. Do we really want to involve them?”

Batman’s expression finally lightened. He smirked into the view screen, “I’d like to see you try to keep them out. That’s Jinx’s family, and Raven essentially just married into it.”

“This is such a cluster.”

“We’ll have your team ready and waiting,” Superman affirmed and cut the comm-line.

-=Raven=-

As she sank into the depths of the complex toward the largest host of auras she could sense, she soon found herself in a hallway. Shrouded in shadows, she moved down one floor—another hallway. This one was the same as the last. Down she went again, and again. Raven could scarcely believe what she was seeing. There were endless rows of cells on either side of the wall, all of them staggered so that any prisoner looking out the little view-port on their doors wouldn’t be capable of seeing anything but the wall across from them. It was complete isolation.

The silence was eerie, uncomfortable. Empathically, the place sang out nauseating hymns like a dirge—all wails and whimpers coalescing into a terrified anguish. This came with an accompaniment of jaded callousness and loathing-laced hate.

Raven poured out from the end of the hallway—her perusal revealed five levels of these cells, each containing 20 halls. Every hall held what looked like a hundred cells per side. It wasn’t difficult to fit that number in these rather short halls; the cells were incredibly cramped. Even so, it was a rather sprawling facility beneath the ground.
The demi-Demon felt bile rise in her throat, but fought it back. Somewhere in here, Jinx was being held... but she couldn’t very well leave these people prisoner. ...Very well, if she had to turn this awful cesspool of agony inside out to get her mate back, she was more than willing to oblige.

A camera swept in her direction, and she idly stared at it. Canting her head slightly, she stared into it even as a klaxon began to buzz repeatedly. The camera then shattered under her unflinching gaze, crushed into shards of plastic, glass, metal, and silicon.

The restless tentacles of her power brushed over the walls and doors to her side. She began to walk forward even as she heard the telltale stomp of boots echoing down the long hallway. With each cell she passed, the serpentine vines lingered upon the doors, peeled them off their hinges with metallic shrieks. Behind her, the doors clattered to the ground while her tendrils sought out new things to grip and rend.

Ahead, Raven could hear the barking shouts of orders. They were in English—American English at that. It was a surprise, but would ultimately make no difference what language they spoke. Death cast its gaze upon all.

Her lips moved not once, but words boiled out from the ether—heard by every soul in that hallway, “There must be words between us, we monsters. Send forth your legions, so that they might break upon my wrath. Show me the bright flame of your life, so that I might snuff it out. Speak now your last, futile words. Curses and pleas alike, I will hear them not.”

The first cracking sputters of gunfire sounded, tearing into her shadowy aura. The whispering hiss of her power barely flinched. Her Demonic side reveled in the Challenge at hand, and she roared her acceptance. The minatory bellow drowned out the ensuing howls of horror.

Despite her urgency, Raven forced herself to sweep the entirety of the facility with methodical attention. She liberated hall after hall of prisoners, though she had yet to see a single one emerge from their cell. The demi-Demon didn’t quite blame them, and it was probably safer in there while she was purging the facility. Several soldiers had attempted hiding in janitors’ closets or lavatories; it didn’t help them. She wasn’t torturing them, but she certainly wasn’t sparing anyone. Considering the slow deaths that must have be occurring behind the many cell doors she had ripped off, she was being quite merciful.

Most of the soldiers found themselves swallowed by the dark of her soul-self, and ceased to exist. She felt the unfettering of their souls as their corporeal forms were sent to oblivion, and mercifully let them sweep into whatever—hopefully hellish—afterlife awaited them. Others still found themselves strangled, crushed, or otherwise maimed by the whipping, ensnaring mass of her creeping power. Their bodies were likewise dragged into her aura, wherein they disappeared. There was naught left but a few, stray, bloody smears on the floors or walls.

The resistance was bolstering, now, as soldiers reinforced the lower levels. It hadn’t helped. The sorceress pushed forward with inevitable, relentless force and overtook the floors one by one, pushing back the guards who were clearly not equipped for this level of opposition. Very few in this world could be.

It was on the second floor of cells that she found one of the last bulwarks of their panicked resistance. Some fifty of them had holed up in the prisoner’s shower room. It had a narrow and squarely spiraling stairwell for a bottleneck; at the bottom was a steel door—the singular entrance and exit from the room. Their last stand was tactically sound... for any meager, mortal invasion.
Raven was feeling a little malicious by that point. Each and every floor held the same suffering and despair, a hopelessness so great it was maddening. It reached out for her mind, tried to infest her psyche with the corrosive psychosis this place cultivated and exuded.

Thus, Raven decided to cleanse this festering wound upon the earth. The guards had jolted when the door to the showers slammed shut with an ominous clank. Reaching out with her mystical power, she melded the door to the concrete around it and welded all its moving parts into a solid mass. With a flare of her power, the lights were shattered, sparking once before plunging the men into full darkness.

Phasing through the floor, Raven watched as they flicked on their gun-mounted flashlights. They had made a run for the armory when she had first arrived, but by the time she had emerged, it was far too late for those inferior countermeasures. The disgusted demi-Demon’s aura felt for the various pipes leading in and out of the showers, then crushed the drains and ruptured the water pipes.

The mystic Titan watched their beams of light swing about frantically as water began raining down from the ceiling—and the drains filled. Soon they were ankle-deep in water and there were no signs of it slowing. When the dire situation finally dawned upon them, they ran to the door, pounding and shrieking for someone, anyone to hear them. Raven heard them just fine... and abandoned them shortly thereafter, to hunt down the remaining stragglers.

It took a few moments for her power to seep out across all the cell doors on this level and tear them away. It was startlingly loud, the sound of so many bolts and hinges simultaneously snapping. Then she quietly journeyed up the stairwell to face the dregs of her onslaught residing on the first prison floor.

With her advent into this area, Raven sensed several men fleeing into higher levels—out of the penal sector completely—ostensibly hoping for some reinforcement where all others had failed. Possibly, they hoped to leave the facility... That wouldn’t be happening. She was paying enough attention to the movement of living bodies throughout this facility; if any of them even came close to the surface, she would not allow those tram shaft doors to open.

A singular tread of boots on cement caught her attention. Somewhere down the hall was a lone guard. Her malicious curiosity piqued, she quietly padded down the halls. She could hear the jangling of keys before she turned the corner.

“Shit... shit... Hold on, just hold on...”

Raven half-peeked around a corner and watched this one anomaly. At the first cell in this hall stood guard in tactical gear sans helmet, and he was frantically tapping on a keypad. It buzzed at him and he threaded his gloved hands through his black hair. Like many of the other guards, this man sounded American rather than either British or Indian... He closed his eyes and took a deep, calming breath.

Swiping a keycard again, the man punched in numbers on the small console beside the door while muttering to himself, “7 – 7 – 9 – 9 – 4 – 1 – 2 – 6 – 3 – 2 – 5 – 8 – 0 – 2 – 8...”

This time, the keypad bleeped twice and he jammed a key circular key into a hole above keycard slider. There was a loud clacking sound as the door unlocked. The guard all but threw the door open. Was he hoping to hide in an unoccupied cell? No—no, the cell wasn’t unoccupied.

“Rohan!”

Raven felt she had waited long enough and wasn’t about to give him the chance to grab a hostage.
The red-skinned, wrathful woman slipped around the corner and reached out with an angry tentacle of her power. She hauled the man out of the cell and slammed him against the opposite wall. More dark roots slipped from the wall and held the man aloft. She slowly approached him, her face a snarling mask of fury.

Before she could decide the fate of this final straggler, someone tackled her from behind and she went face-first into the concrete with an audible crack. A hand fisted in her currently mid-back-length hair and forcefully slammed her cheek into the ground again. It felt bruising, disorienting... but that was fleeting. That bruise would heal within minutes if she could stop her assailant from continually bashing her face to the floor.

With a roar, her aura pulsed and wrapped her attacker in a tubular fold of soul-self. She floated the man she had just captured against the wall by the guard.

“No!” the guard was screaming as though Raven was crushing him alive. She wasn’t—yet. “No, don’t!”

The man who had attacked her was a prisoner, dressed in a white tank stretched tautly over his well-muscled figure and a pair of white shorts. At about six-foot even, he had the bulk of an athlete, built like a heavyweight boxer. Raven estimated him to be in his mid- to late-twenties. He was Indian, the structure of his face and tan of his skin implied that much. However, his hair was a mass of spiky, blood red shocks. Down the side of his face, running from his temples down to point of his chin, were darker, almost crimson scales. There was a series of them running down the sides of his neck and over his shoulders, as well. Clearly, this man was a Metahuman; judging by the way he had rammed her head into the floor... and the small fracture that made in the concrete, he had some modicum of enhanced strength.

“Don’t do it! Don’t do—”

She gave the guard’s ribs a little squeeze to keep him quiet. Raven needed to reason with the man. Unfortunately, the Metahuman promptly chose that time to go berserk. He struggled against her binds, which she made sure merely restrained him rather than harmed him, as had been her first intention when he had tackled her.

“Michael!” he bellowed.

Raven frowned, but regarded the Metahuman.


The scaled man struggled against her power again, and she loosened her power—not enough to free him in case he hadn’t calmed, but more as a show of good faith on her part.

“Calm yourself.”

Of course, he didn’t. It was just her luck. The last thing she wanted to do was to put him back in the cell because she couldn’t get him to listen to her... Rather than still, he began to thrash, eventually wrenching his right arm free of the ‘blanket’ of power she had around him. His hand reached out—to the guard. Idly, despite her confusion, she noted the back of his hand was also lightly scaled, with larger scales upon his knuckles.

“Michael!”

The demi-Demon squinted, all four eyes flicking between the two of them. Against her better judgment, she loosened her hold upon the guard. She felt him taking deep gulps of breath, but also
struggling with his bound arms to reach back. Raven lessened her hold farther—freeing the guard’s arm—and watched as they vainly tried to grasp for each other.

The sorceress didn’t know exactly what was going on, but she knew what she felt. These two were more worried about one another than they were themselves. There was a bond that they shared, as strong as hers to Jinx. Slowly, she slid them down the wall and dissipated their power.

The men embraced, and she tilted her head to regard them for a few moments. Unfortunately, she didn’t have time to get a full account of just what one of the guards was doing with this prisoner. She could only trust in her instincts and the emotions she sensed from them.

“Michael, is it? If you wish to live, I would suggest removing your gear and dressing yourself in some whites. Then stay in the cell with... Rohan. I will come back to retrieve you...”

Michael regarded her ghastly figure for a few moments. His breathing was still unsteady, but he spoke between pants, “The others—have to get the doors. Floors below-”

“-are already freed...” Raven glanced down the hall, sending her soul-self over each of the steel slabs. Banging pops and metallic squeals followed as doors peeled away and clanged against the concrete flooring. “As is this one. Don’t wander, this won’t take long.”

As the demi-Demon turned toward the mouth of the alley and made it all of three steps before Michael spoke up again.

“Wait!” She glanced over her shoulder at him, her eyes once more burning with portents of vengeance. Michael swallowed uneasily. “If you’re... if you’re goin’ up... You gotta check the sweatboxes. Might be more there.”

“Where.”

“East side, just past the—the ballroom.”

Raven’s eyes narrowed in confusion, “Ballroom?”

“Where they take ‘em every year. It’s... really—it’s a ballroom. You’ll know it when you see it.”

Suddenly, Raven’s thoughts went back to what Jinx had once told her. There was a large room, opulent and pristine. It was all a lie, Kamala had told her, that room was a vicious torture room. This ‘ballroom’ must be where the yearly tortures happened that gave her mate those scars...

Raven nodded once and almost left them again before shortly turning back. This was a guard... he might know the most important piece of information. Noting her full attention back on them, she noted Rohan stiffen. She ignored him, for now.

“Do you know where Jinx is?” She wasn’t sure if that would be enough information, and even though she hated it, there was one clear way to identify her mate, “She has the... number-”

“The Jinx,” Rohan breathed in shock. Apparently, Kamala was still very well known here. Seven years and her name was still a forbidden epithet.

“Yes. I must find her.”

“I heard we had a big catch today—probably her... probably the Jinx. Jesus Christ, never thought I’d heard that name again. No cell assignment was on the manifest, though... Warden wanted the
ballroom set up first thing. She might be there.”

“If the Warden is there, he will have pulled the remaining security around himself...” Raven mused as she toward the ceiling, “Don’t leave this floor. I’ll check the sweatboxes, in case there’s anyone there.”

With that, Raven swept into the air and through the ceiling, leaving the two men behind. It was time for this house of horrors to fall forever. She would show the Warden the true meaning of horror. As she found herself in a more residential section of the complex, she announced her terrible arrival with a Demonic war cry.

-=Kamala=-

“Ooo, she sounds angry...!”

Heads whipped to her—some 23 guards had joined the initial eight. She had listened to their frantic communications. Apparently, Raven had made her way out from the prison cells. Her mate was tearing the barracks apart—along with any guard unlucky enough to find themselves in Raven’s way. She had always known that Raven could pull out the stops if necessary. Kamala idly wondered how the girl’s team would take these fatalities. Nightwing was especially a hardliner against killing opponents, just like the Bat.

“Hey. Hey. Warden, hey... Hey—Hey, Warden,” Kammie heckled, “what’s the response to this one? I mean, seriously. You can’t kill her with guns. She can’t be taken out that easily.”

“Can’t we shut her up? Just put a bullet in her head already!” one of the new-arrivals called out from behind her.

It sounded like someone cuffed him, “You idiot, she’s our only leverage down here!”

“Jiski lathi uski bhains. He who wields the lathi gets to keep the buffalo.” Ugh, that fucking cocktail was still running its course. She couldn’t stop talking. It was beginning to get on her nerves. “That was one of yours, wasn’t it, Warden? Always did like to be all poetic with your Marquis de Sade bullshit.” She paused, then tittered again in that way she absolutely hated because it made her sound vapid. “Hehehe... Buffalo shit...”

The Warden hadn’t spoken to her since he began issuing orders out his withered, gravelly voice. However, whenever he wasn’t gasping out directives, he was glaring at her. She could tell that, now, because he had demanded they turn on the auxiliary lights. The dark that he was trying to use to set up a creepy mood for her was set aside in light of the new threat. So much for those dramatic circles of illumination from half-lit chandeliers. It was a nice touch, but a tad impractical in her opinion. As some of the guards milled about, she could hear the crunch of those crystals under boots. That would show him for wasting so much money on dungeon aesthetics and theatrics.

No matter how she tried, her lips kept twitching toward a smirk or a grin. It was probably sodium pentothal. Dark Way Prep had mentioned after they did her blood work that her Metahuman system would react strangely to psychoactive agents. Surely, they would affect her as intended... but probably with unintended side effects.

“Jiski lathi uski bhains. Might makes right. My mate is mighty—does that make her righty? ...Right. Make her right. Hey, Warden—I got one. I got one for ya: Jal mein rehkar magar se bair thik nahi. ‘You should not have enmity with the crocodile if you are living in the water.’
“The Metahumans you respond to... Shoulda chosen a different response, y’know? She’s not the kind of enemy you want. Guess you’re learnin’ that, huh?”

One of the guards stomped over to her, “That’s it, I’m gonna-

“Touch me and I will have you weeping blood as your heart explodes,” she acerbically spat, her face a snarling scowl and her eyes leaking flame-like wisps of hex.

Arcs of her energy danced over the cables and cuffs she wore, silently working at the metal even as she heard the chair creak and age through entropic decay. The polished, wooden planks beneath her feet grounded some of her energy, and they too groaned as they began to warp and press against other floorboards. It wasn’t visible, the damage she was creating—not just yet. However, the guard could hear the unnatural sounds of the wood creaking and popping as well as see the her body teeming with energy. The man all but recoiled, throwing his advance upon her into a sharp reverse that nearly had him tripping. He wasn’t about to chance coming into contact with her now, that was for sure.

“You think I was powerful before? You think I was the Jinx with those little ‘accidents’ that happened seven years ago? I got fuckin’ news for ya. I’ve gouged trenches in the ground with my power. I’ve brought entire buildings crumbling to the ground! What do you think I could do to you?

“An’ here’s the scary part: I’m nothing. I’m not the most dangerous Extra-Normal out there—not by a long shot. However... you have one of the premier threats to all mankind entreating entrance at your chamber door. She is worshipped as a god! What are you but a trifling insect in her gaze? ...Heh heh—only this and nothing more.”

Jinx looked ready to continue, but a radio crackling to life cut her off.

“-swept through the Boxes! Couldn’t redirect! Rippin’ doors off like they’re paper! We can’t hold position! We gotta fall back-

“No go! No go! Hallway’s collapsed! Need to double back-” A booming growl drowned out the rest of their frantic chatter. However, she could still hear their screams and gunfire as an unseen carnage descended upon them. “Get us outta here! Get-”

The room went eerily silent as the cacophony coming from the radio abruptly cut out. The riotous staccato of gunfire echoing down the hallway and into the ballroom ceased. Those shots were a lot closer than last time. The first guard on the radio had mentioned ‘the Boxes.’ Was Raven by the sweatboxes? That meant it was almost time...

Kamala, the glow in her eyes fading, stared fixatedly into the Warden’s eyes, “All your sins have come to pass. Your karma has been weighed... and you will not find the next life so pleasing. That is, of course, assuming she doesn’t consume your souls.”

It was then that she felt the aura of her lover. It washed over her like a warm deluge and set her hairs on end, just as it had when they had taken the Oath. She saw it in her mind’s eye and she closed those pink orbs to focus on it. Her manic grin pulled back even farther as she began to bounce in her weakened seat, unbidden chuckles bubbling up her throat.

She began muttering a chant, unsure where it came from or why, “Im sarai al yan en Scath, al Tiran en al Huq-then. Im ter-sarai, Baelat Scath. Im se quat, Daelorisem.”

She felt their attention turning to her; to date they had never heard her speak anything but English or Hindi. This tongue she rambled in—now on her third repetition—had to be discomforting for them.
Kamala found it next to impossible to stop, either. If she had to say something, though, it was probably better to continue invoking the name of Scath. Eventually, it would have its desired effect.

Her body slowly began wreathing itself in sparking, popping hex energy, trailing a fuchsia-tinged steam as her power began to suffuse everything touching her. Kamala leaned forward, the cables now providing her with more breathing room as her power corroded the wooden chair’s back into so much mulch. Her mass gathered under her, Jinx slowly pushed herself to her feet. Against the back of her calves, she felt the wood rot and the cables around her shins fall to her ankles like bracelets.

Now standing, the cables around her torso fell to ring her feet. Her freedom would only sow further seeds of panic and dissention among them. She heard the shifting of several weapons and the clicks of even more safeties. They wanted her as a hostage, but an unbound prisoner wasn’t much of a hostage. They were unsure whether to point their guns at her, or at the door to the hallway, where she knew her mate approached. Their indecision fed the chaos of the moment, and she reveled in it! Had she been capable of doing this the entire time? Of a certainty—with more or less subtlety. Even now, the drugs in her bloodstream were making her feel a little more like a conduit, a grounding rod than a directional funnel for the entropic energies.

Eyes still closed, she heard the rotors of the Warden’s wheelchair moving away from her. Her power flared into her hands, and they blazed with coral-colored fire. Clenching and unclenching her fists at her sides, she felt the thrumming energy building within her. She had been wanting to do this since she first saw the Warden, to show him her power.

Myriad arcs of energy in white and pink flashed and zapped along the floorboards, cracking planks and disjointing the floor in a small circle around her. However, directly in front of her, that power raced a serpentine path toward the Warden. With an electrical pop and a dying whir, his motorized chair ceased movement. She could hear him frantically pressing at the joystick.

“Lieutenant!”

“-ter-sarai, Baelat Scath. Im se quat, Daelorisem-”

The ground beneath her softened, gained a kind of intangibility. She could feel the full fury of Raven’s power rampaging within the room. Her mate was already here, and nobody knew it but her. Slowly, she felt the surface beneath her begin to give, and she began to plunge into the dark well. As when she had first willingly gone with Raven, she sank into that emergent, black pool.

The guards had moved farther away from her in dismay, looking aghast as she disappeared into her own shadow’s overgrowth. She was doing things—impossible things that she had never done before. Her chanting stopped as she descended into the stygian quagmire. For several seconds, she merely let the dark power swallow and ensconce her.

As the pitch aura began to envelop her shoulders, her eyes opened.

“You’re all going to die down here.”

-=Raven=-

Something wasn’t right with Kamala; she could sense that before she reached the room. Jinx’s aura was strong and her body whole, but her mind felt... disjointed. It was even more poignant when she had her mate wrapped up in her soul-self. There was an almost constant buzz about Kamala’s mind. This busying hum of aimlessness wasn’t typical of Jinx’s characteristic focus or energetic flurry.
Even so, she now had Jinx. Her mate was safe. She would hopefully be able to sort out any problems later. It had taken her longer than she desired to clean out the barracks and the sweatboxes. She had driven the last of the stragglers toward Jinx’s position; it was unavoidable due to the directionality of her attack. Those who had straggled too far behind had been cut down.

Additionally, she had discovered the medical ward. Raven remembered Kamala’s comments of the only fair hand in the entirety of the facility. He wasn’t a friend or confidant; you couldn’t expect him to be compassionate, either. However, the Doctor was the counterpoint to the Warden. The Doctor was a consummate professional and dedicated to making sure those under his care healed to the best of his ability. Anyone who mishandled his patients had been known to disappear. At least, Jinx had commented once or twice that guards found mishandling her while she was still recovering from one or another torture never did so again—she never saw them again. Perhaps the Doctor had them reassigned... or maybe they had just been outright executed.

The Doctor held almost as much sway as the Warden. Jinx had told her how the guards had acted around him—wary, respectful. How he got that power was anyone’s guess. Whatever the case, she found absolutely no one in the medical ward. If the Doctor had been here, he left before Raven arrived. Considering her quick response, that had to have been very recently—possibly within the hour of Kamala’s arrival...

Other than his complicity in the events surrounding Kamala’s incarceration, the demi-Demon had no qualms with the Doctor. However, that wouldn’t stop her from killing him if she ever found him. The guard, Michael, would likely be the only one to receive any form of reprieve. She wasn’t even sure about that much, honestly; the mystic Titan would need to know more. That was for later, as well. Now... now it was time to make her mate’s declarations manifest.

“We gotta move... We gotta get outta here, man.”

“To where, boy?” the Warden asked in derision of the panicked guard.

“I dunno! Some place more secure! Maybe they got the tram workin’—we could make for the shaft. We could meet up with—”

“No.”

“Whaddaya mean ‘no?’ We gotta do somethin’!”

“Everyone outside this room...” He began with a voice steady, deep, and weighty. However, it was still a gravelly croak and he took a long, troubled breath; the defunct respirator provided no aid. The mostly destroyed man rent the hopes of all around him as he finished, “...is already dead.”

The Warden, malcontent as ever, was strangely unfazed by the sheer pandemonium around him. She wondered if he had already made his peace with the world. Well, it no longer mattered whether he had given into hopelessness or not; her wrath would not be denied.

Raven’s essence had long since suffused the room, and she could readily say that she held dominion over its entirety. The demi-Demon sealed her power over one of the doors, letting her soul-self propagate in a tumorous mass of vines. They slowly wound through the cracks, heedless of the groaning wood as the feelers crept underneath and along the floor, above and up the wall. Thicker roots wove through the mass, the cracking of wood like gunshots as her power oozed between the somehow still-closed doors.

Suddenly, the large, oak slabs sucked back into the blackness behind the door, violently ripping off their hinges and disappearing into an oily black mass that boiled beneath the amorphous arms of her
Several men opened fire at the mass. She was aware of the impacts upon her soul-self, but not in a physical sense. Such paltry measures could not damage her. The guards must have come to the same conclusion, and they stopped firing. They did, however, move farther away from that side of the room. The man who had voiced his weakness before finally broke and bolted for the opposite door.

Another guard, presumably his superior, shouted after him, “Sanders, where do you think you’re going? Get back here! Sanders!”

“Gotta get out. Gotta get outta here!”

“Sanders! Don’t you touch those doors!”

The advice went unheeded, and he yanked at the polished, brass handle. The door whipped open and Sanders stood aghast. His sub-machine gun clattered to the ground as the liquid pitch pulsed and churned beyond the door. Tentacles of her power erupted from the blackened morass, seizing him by his thrashing limbs. His shrieks continued clear until her soul-self absorbed his body.

“This ain’t the Jinx! No way she could be doing this. Just what the fuck is that stuff? ...Y’think she was tellin’ the truth? Think it’s some kinda… Demon?”

Raven supposed that was her cue. The vines continued to issue out from the doorways, winding across the walls and out onto the smooth floor. One by one, she crushed the lights under coils of her power as they reached throughout the entirety of the room. It took time, but she relished in their cowering in the face of inevitable death. All of them were in varying stages of horror... all but the Warden. He merely watched events unfold with that surly, odious expression upon his face.

Her dark curiosity piqued, she decided to speak with this man before killing him, ‘Words between monsters, indeed.’

As she crushed the final auxiliary light in the room and plunged them into darkness, she poured her aura full force into the room. The Demoness watched them react to the feel of her power. Raven knew well the kind of response most mortals had to her aura; it was instinctive, the jittery unease and tension that wound through them all.

Then, with skittering rattles, she bled her power into those chandelier crystals that had fallen. The fragments wobbled along the floor, rocking and jittering like glass larvae. In concert and to a one, they pushed into the air, their clear bodies hanging indolently, if impossibly. Much had been happening recently that these men found impossible. Each and every shard she infused began to glint with a light that slowly pulled back the obscuring shroud. They threw the room into red relief, blooming bloody, crimson hues throughout the ballroom like some photographer’s darkroom.

The men were whirling in circles, and she half-amused herself that they were actually entertaining the thought of shooting the crystals, as well. The crossfire would cut down on her efforts considerably, honestly. Her second thought was to send the shards whirling around the room in a maelstrom, tearing into their bodies like a Demonic blender. That, however, seemed far too messy and vulgar a display of power.

With a growl that echoed through the cavernous ballroom without origin, she pushed at that dark puddle she had left in the center of the room. The men had bunched closer to it because they somehow thought they would be safe if they only stayed away from the walls. Burgeoning under the force of her arrival, the portal she had opened for Kamala into her soul-self rose up from the ground unnoticed at first—but only at first.
Someone cursed when they first spotted the shapeless bulge stretching out from the center of the room. However, the Warden merely stared at it. She could sense him empathically, and he was neither surprised nor frightened. For everything that had happened, he might as well have been sipping tea in a study and reading a book. Even as the men spun and fired into her mass, he didn’t flinch at his proximity to the gunfire. His eyes merely bored into the abyssal inversion before him.

Sedately, her soul-self took form. The hellish, razor beak morphed into existence, jutting out as more avian features slowly manifested across the bulge. Finally, those quadruple eyes pierced through her inky aura. They contained only a hint of light, but they leeched the red from the various crystals and gained a brighter, minatory luminescence. The now-soft, white light around them threw her dark manifestations into clear relief.

Then her soul-self’s wings spread and the guards shifted back—but not too far back, mindful of the walls now fully encased in her Hellish mural. The corvid features slowly shrunk and conformed to her physical form. The eyes slid down like melting ice cream even as the beak bent downward and bled away to her drawn-up hood. The wings lost their rigidity and settled down with the flowing naturalness of her cape.

The demi-Demon slowly stepped forward, away from that locus of energy—toward the man who had held Kamala’s hate for so long even after she had believed him dead. Raven reached up and drew back her hood, her scarlet, black, and purple features finally revealed to them.

“Death I am, the great destroyer of worlds, and I have come here to destroy all people.”

A little theatrics never hurt anyone—but it was about to.

“Fuck this!” one guard said, and opened fire upon her.

Raven’s gaze did not stray from the Warden. A splash of atramentous energy rose between her and the man, swallowing the bullets and simultaneously reaching for him. Her tendril struck like a serpent, wrapped around his neck, and throttled him. A dull pop sounded in the newly silenced room; she dropped his corpse to the ground.

She canted her head as she regarded the chair-bound man before her, “I say such things, but I wonder if you qualify as a person... I am curious, what sustains you so? Do you fancy yourself a man of conviction? Is it faith that holds you? Have you fallen into that dark pit of resignation? Or has your soul already died, and all that remains is this slow-rotting corpse before me?”

His glare never wavered and, had his wheezing inhales not signified his continued life, she might have thought he died with that truculent expression frozen upon his face.

“You thought your victory assured, hadn’t you? You captured Jinx: she who would be your mark of failure. Having thought yourself redeemed, did you not sit here minutes ago—triumphant and mocking? Perhaps I reference the wrong scriptures...

“What say you to this: ‘Pride goeth before destruction and an haughty spirit before a fall.’”

“Termagant. You are but a... vile wench wallowing in your iniquity! ...A canker, all of your kind... you will burn this world down around your heads!” His last words barely left his lips before a coughing fit wracked his body. Yet, when he recovered, that baleful stare remained. “What you have done here is nothing... short of slitting your own throat! My men... think you are a Demon. Truth or not... unless you are stopped, you will end our world.”
His words rang through her as the voices of the Monks of Azarath once had. She saw this man for what he truly was, now. Before her resided the husk of a fearful, hate-consumed soul isolating itself from its greatest nightmare.

“But I already have. I have ended the world—and over again. Twice now have I dragged it back into the light. I have fought and bled and died for this world... But you, you daren’t sacrifice so much. You would content yourself with sacrificing others, hoping that some greater power will accept your offerings and take mercy upon you.

“I’ll have you know this is a great error. Your folly has not handed you your salvation. You have condemned yourself—and, too, those among you,” Raven’s arm waved across the men, and with that gesture ensnared them in her power and wrested away their guns. Hung aloft, they struggled, cried out. Her power swept over their heads and returned the silence to the room—their thrashing bodies soundlessly wasting away as she deprived them of breath. “It was not some great, apocryphal curse, but your paranoia, your bigotry, and your hate that brought this upon you. For this, you will not see the beyond. Though I have destroyed these bodies, I have let their souls go free... Whether they now reside in some Elysium or burn in the blackest Hell, I no longer care. You, however, I will ensure simply cease to exist...”

“Hellion! Harlot!” the Warden hollered in volumes she hadn’t though his frail body capable of evoking, “You wretched, death-mongering, profane creature, I—”

He lost that last, great epithet as his hacking consumed him. The pathetic, yet insidious body before her did not seem long for this world. Possibly, the Warden was on his way out right now—he didn’t seem to be recovering.

“I’d like to think I’m doing the legions of Hell a favor, here,” Raven muttered, “They won’t have to put up with your bullshit.”

Then her hands, lit with black flames that seemed to darken the space around her, plunged into his body. Physically, he remained whole. From him, she ripped the writhing, glowing form of his soul. It appeared roughly humanoid—this trapping a residual effect carried by an aura long imprisoned within that sick, dying body. His mouth had opened in silent scream—having neither the breath nor energy for it. She was sure that ripping his soul directly from his still-living body was an agony he would never again experience.

Raven ensured it was his very last, horrible sensation when she gripped that flailing, ethereal essence and crushed what she had within her clutch. Pulling with power unrelenting, she tore it—him, all that he was—into pieces, and spilt voluminous energies into the air that her soul-self ravenously snatched and consumed. As with Trigon before him, the demi-Demon left nothing of the Warden to pass on... So utterly destroyed, he would not haunt, nor convalesce, nor even merge into the surrounding, atmospheric energies. Within her, that which was once the Warden found oblivion.

The chandelier shards fell to the ground, now bereft of her power. Once more, the room plunged itself into absolute absence of light; during this time, her darker-than-black aura pulled the suspended, suffocated bodies into itself. The complete lack of any bodies was bound to raise questions—or, more likely, demands for an explanation—from numerous fronts. Still, better that they ask where than how.

Raven stood for several moments in the silent dark, taking in her actions today. She had come here alone because she knew that many would disagree with her actions. The demi-Demon had arrived here well ahead of any aid, and took command decisions out of their hands. She had settled the
matter, but there was still the fallout of this place. Her actions, the prisoners, and the underground edifice itself... they would all require management soon enough. Raven sighed.

A swath of dark energy swept over the Warden’s expired shell, bringing it and the wheelchair in which it resided to nothingness. All around her sat bullet holes, shell casings, and weapons... In her wake lay bloodstains, wreckage, and a lingering scent of fear. There was also the matter of the drowned bodies in the shower room that she would have to deal with before leaving this place. That was next on her agenda. Then it was back to the guard, Michael.

This blight upon the world and all its myriad dreadfulness was finally coming to an end. Unfortunately, it would live on in the minds of its victims for some time to come. It was a disheartened part of her that realized that this shouldn’t be forgotten—that everything here, including her own actions that cut a swath through this organization, ought to be held aloft for everyone to see. Maybe people would learn from it. Then again, maybe they wouldn’t. All Raven could do was hope.

Hope kept Kamala sane and relatively whole through the years. It kept Kamala strong while Raven came to rescue her mate. Perhaps it would be enough to prevent this sort of thing from happening again. Hope was a strong sensation, but also a fragile one...

~§~END CHAPTER 7~§~

Author’s Note:

... So. ... That—is why you don’t abduct an Arch Lord’s mate. Here’s the much-anticipated Chapter 7. Hope it lived up to your expectations! That was 10,578 words of Scath-tastic action. Now, you may think, “The Warden’s dead, we’re finished.” You would be highly incorrect. There is plenty more story to tell. Just killing the main villain doesn’t buy everyone an automatic ride into the sunset. After I decided not to cut this short, the story developed along a long refrain of ‘yeah, but then what?’ You have another 12 chapters and an Epilogue to go, yet! Now, let’s get on with the breakdown!

This one had been in my head for a long while before I actually wrote it. And then I made a little script skeleton of it. Then I wrote a draft of it and it sat on my hard drive for like, two years. Jinx’s conversation, her confrontation with her own, personal Devil was something I was highly anticipating. When it came down to it, I cannibalized the draft to fit the direction and developments that “Prey Mate” had made in that time—as well as my writing prowess. The scene itself turned into something of a Mason Verger vs. Hannibal Lecter scene. Not so much high-octane action as a psychological battle of menace and hate from sides; neither side here is a heroic paragon of justice. These are just two mortals who hate each other with every fiber of their being, both physically unable to go at one another... However, they have their own extensions: Jinx with her hexes and the Warden with his guards.

In case anyone’s wondering, carbon-steel still has its roots in iron. Iron is a mystically resonant metal, and it has properties that make it ideal for both binding and dispelling, but not so much for casting, warding, or channeling. It’s blurry to her senses because it’s not pure iron.

Those who have read “To Catch a Raven” know that Jinx responds differently to behavior-altering substances.

These guards remember her as a 10-12 year old. Accidents happened around her. Those who have read my “What Jinxes Do” and “How Jinxes Work” on deviantArt know the things I’m talking
about. She has finely honed those skills. Her mere glare put a full, length-wise crack in the bullet-proof faceplate. Even bound as she is, it’s entirely possible she could kill everyone in the room with one, concentrated nova of hex. The problem with that would be that she would likely also cause the entire room to cave in on itself. However, that doesn’t mean that Jinx can’t mess with them...

In case it wasn’t clear, ‘crunchy, crispy, crackling’ is a reference to when he caught fire and she used a stun baton on everyone in the room (including him) and left him to burn alive while she made her escape.

I don’t really have a lot to say about the conversation here, honestly. Everything that needs to be said is right there. These two have a special kind of hate—the kind that festers on their skin in odd moments of quiet. It’s like a heat that chokes like the air inside a sweatbox or stings like long-torched nerve-endings.

I actually have a bit of information I provided back when I originally wrote this scene that I posted as a reply to a commenter on dA:

The idea was to make him completely intractable. He's the most stubborn, hardballing, hate-filled guy. I was torn between making him an atheist (I had ideas and possible dialogue ideas for him to talk about, “God is within Man” or “We created God”)... but in the end, I decided for a hardline Christian attitude that would be more in line with older soldiers. He has the kind of mentality you might have seen in 'Nam vets. He doesn't really view himself as on any sort of holy crusade, but he's trying to redeem the world.

He views Metahumans as a modern-day plague, a warning and a punishment by God. So while he can't condone murder, he can still separate the 'lepers' from the rest of civilization. That's why he has them locked up.

Of course, he's a sadistic bastard, too. He's definitely not right in the head. Furthermore, he let the power go to his head. There's no Messiah Complex, but the man is like a lawful evil paladin... if that makes sense. Tyrannical, rule-based, faithful, and on a mission.

I based him off a few characters, one being the Warden Norton from Shawshank Redemption movie, the Elder God from the Legacy of Kain videogame series, and Gunnery Sergeant Hartman from Full Metal Jacket movie. All three of these characters could talk and when they did, you listened. They were powerful presences.

The goal was to keep him a powerful figure even as he wheezed and coughed in his wheelchair. While he held no true strength, anymore, he had command of the guards to enforce his will. It's not charisma that leads his men, but that raw conviction and will that drives him. He's grounded and driven by faith. The men respond to this, as he is always sure of his actions.

Nobody, not even the Lady of the Eighth Hell appearing before him and telling him she's going to destroy his soul, is going to make him budge an inch.

Invoking the True Name or the Title of a Daemos—infusing your Will with a measure of ethereal power—is like paging said Daemos or Deity. Depending on the barriers (like the Atrament, the mystically oily barrier between Realms) in your way, it may take slightly more power to broadcast, or even a special spell to project it into another Realm... but it can reach them. Raven’s not even in a different Realm. This is as good as shooting a flare gun during clear weather on calm waters. Better,
even, because she can pin-point it like echo-location. Next best thing to GPS.

When you get the HIVE Five invested, you don’t get shuffling feet and meandering. They are immediately mobilizing and working on a plan. Add to that Jinx’s knack for preparation here, and you’ve got a solid strike force. You can bet that, if they needed, there’s an artillery strike in the wings. HIVE does not abandon one of its premier operatives when they pay the right price for their insurance.

Fortunately, they don’t need an artillery strike. Raven has her own methods of excavation. If anyone’s ever played the FEAR games, this is all very reminiscent of FEAR 2, and those black tendrils, vines, and roots that reach out at various points (at one point, even killing Cedric “Top” Griffin). Unlike Alma’s, these aren’t quite focused on liquefaction and disintegration, but still very much in line with Raven’s telekinetic utilization. Sometimes, I think people underestimate just what you can do with a power like that—a power that doesn’t recognize physical limitations, something without muscles to fatigue or joints to lock or strain. It moves at the speed of thought, draws strength from will, and is limited only by imagination.

Much like invocations are powered by will and ethereal energy, the same is the source of Raven’s helixed voice and the strange manner of echo and reverberation (or even different words being emanating from nowhere in tandem with, underlining or backing the vocally spoken words). When infused with an aura (a suffusion of one’s ethereal essence), it creates an effect we are all familiar with. This can even be used as a form of telepathy, and is also the means through which Raven and Richard’s link was forged. And because it’s ethereal in nature, it is not bound by the physical boundaries of sound. What this means is that it can be heard through barriers and vacuums. Superman and Zatanna didn’t hear the roar through the surveillance footage; it’s exactly as Superman said—they felt it in their souls.

Everyone is watching this. Word will disseminate about the IMRO and its nature, and the various members of the League will be keeping out an eye for anything that sounds like something from the ‘Preventative Measures’ plan. I’m spoiling things a bit... but ‘Preventative Measures’ will be mentioned later. Keep it in mind and it will be explained in the ensuing chapters.

Back on topic, everyone is finally watching Raven and Jinx. The League is about to see Raven’s true nature. Yes, she’s viciously protective, but she has always striven to be a force of benevolence. If that means protecting the innocent in this way, so be it. Some may disagree with her methods or her results, but nobody will doubt her capacity for compassion. Being human has nothing to do with having sympathy, protectiveness, and kindness.

I think the Boondock Saints said it best, “Do not kill, do not rape, to not steal: These are principles, which every man of every faith can embrace. These are not polite suggestions! These are codes of behavior, and those of you that ignore them will pay the dearest cost. There are varying degrees of evil. We urge you lesser forms of filth not to push the bounds and cross over into true corruption, into our domain. But if you do you, one day you will look behind you and you will see we three, and on that day, you will reap it! And we will send you to whatever god you wish.”

The emotions coming from this place would merely enforce Raven’s conviction. The sorrow, anger, hate, fear, and pain within these walls would be like an assault. As I mentioned, it physically nauseated Raven to feel it all. Raven doesn’t go on a killing spree; this is just... a necessary cleansing.

That’s not to say that Raven isn’t wrathful, here. I do play a bit of horrific retribution here, drowning the men in the dark, sealed shower room. It’s almost like water torture and an Trial by Ordeal (by element of water) all in one. Of course, Raven isn’t really doing this to determine anything, it’s just a method of showing these men a bit of the fear and pain they’ve instilled while meting out justice.
Then we come to Michael and Rohan. Even in a microcosm of madness and hate, there can still be found small seeds of hope. These two embody the very defiant nature of humanity striving to overcome unforgiving nature and all manners of adversity. While we don’t really see much of them (comparatively) in this story, they are a quiet counterpart to Raven’s upbringing.

If you ever wondered just how resilient Raven is in this form? Yes, Kamala kicked Raven in the face full force in a panic. Rohan, however, has enhanced strength. His strength is close to Mammoth’s strength during the Teen Titans cartoon, and he just *face-planted* Raven into a solid, cement floor—and cracked the cement. That merely managed to rattle her and briefly bruise her cheek. ...She’s not Superman, but that’s by no means a small durability buff.

Back to Jinx, and we see that she’s still loaded and half-off her rocker. Heckling your captor probably isn’t the best idea, but she can’t really help herself. Technically, it’s their fault, anyway. Things have seriously taken an about-face, and their little fortress of pain has gone under siege. At times like this, I like to think of Jinx as a Trojan Horse.

Her staying in any penal facility has always been more of a gesture of her good will and compliance. With the various things she’s done to the IMRO facility and guards, it’s a good thing she never felt direly threatened by the guards at JC Correction’s M-Block. After everything she’s been through, I think she probably found JCC to be actually... accommodating and human. They didn’t abuse her, they had rules, no sweatboxes, no whippings, no sadistic Wardens. They got three square meals a day, and even her cell was larger than the one in IMRO. They also let her walk and exercise outside her cell. And it wasn’t mandatory that any prisoner outside their cell be escorted by at least two guards and have a black bag over their head to prevent them from seeing any more of the facility than her overseers wanted. Comparatively, JCC was downright *communal*.

The Warden once loved to taunt her with little maxims and philosophical phrases. Her scattered brain is getting a kick out of throwing them back at him.

There’s a reason you don’t want to come in physical contact with Jinx’s hexes. The Human body has so many different malfunctions it can go through. Not to mention the decrepifying things, like quick-rotting the chair. She was absolutely not joking about the weeping blood while their heart explodes...

Quick Translation:

*Im sarai al yan en Scath, al Tiran en al Huq-then.* – “I invoke the name of Scath, the Overlord of the Eighth.”

*Im ter-sarai, Baelat Scath.* – “I summon you, Lady Scath.”

*Im se quat, Daelorisem.* – “I am here, Mate (lit. *forever other-half*).”

And then, of course, I throw in the obligatory Resident Evil reference by quoting the Red Queen.

Remember what I said about the Warden being intractable? He’s that way with everyone, even his own guards. I love the idea of them watching as her power seeps and grows into the room on tendrils and vines and then coalesces into a mass of something out of an Aliens movie’s Xenomorph hive. Despite the new hellscape, the Warden is unwilling to flinch before one of the most powerful beings in the Realm.

Even as his guards begin dying, he just sits there all contentious and cantankerous in his grudging silence. But once she starts quoting Christian scripture to him, that’s when it becomes too much. I wanted to make him something like an incredibly evil, daytime televangelist.
Just as with Trigon, this man is a complete evil that Raven cannot abide. It doesn’t matter if he could be locked away until he died (which would probably be soon). It doesn’t matter that he’s too weak to be a threat. It doesn’t even matter that she could prevent a haunting by sending his soul off to somewhere it would be taken care of by some deity forever.

She couldn’t abide this soul’s existence anymore than Trigon. To her, they were upon equal levels. The difference comes down to ethereal presence, and he doesn’t have hardly any. His continued existence is a threat, and she wasn’t about to let that threat hang over her or Kamala. In their line of work, how often had great threats they thought were long-gone returned? How often had simple criminals gained super-powers or major villains come back from the dead?

It was lucky she and others, like Superman, also didn’t seem to stay dead all that often, either. This time, however, it wasn’t going to happen. This was one threat Raven was ensuring wasn’t coming back.

Justifications aside, there’s dead—and in some afterlife, never to affect the Material Realm again... and then there’s total annihilation. This is a destruction beyond what Joker is capable of, it’s more than when Huntress kills, more than when Wonder Woman slays her foes. There was a point when Lucifer—in the Elaine Belloc arc of events—appeared in Hell and destroyed billions of souls. Permadeath on that level is something sketchy I usually try to avoid, as it’s kind of scary in a death-beyond-death way. I use it in ways that are always put forth in no nonsense, eternal terms. I feel it should always have that sense of gravity.

Raven has the same sort of feelings she had after killing and devouring Trigon’s essence. It’s the second time in her life she has totally wiped out an entity from all forms of present or future existence on this or any Realm. ...For beings like this, it something she can accept.

...Hm, that last scene always tends to bring me out waxing poetic or philosophic or whatever. Anyhow! Here we are, at the start of things to come—again! As Kain said at the end of the last Legacy of Kain game, Defiance:

“No, at last, the masks had fallen away. The strings of the puppets had become visible, and the hands of the prime mover exposed. Most ironic of all was the last gift that Raziel had given me: More powerful than the sword that now held his soul, more acute even than the vision his sacrifice had accorded me. The first, bitter taste of that terrible illusion - Hope.”

-Lynx

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**Story Mirrors:**

Now Available on Archive of Our Own!

“Prey Mate” on FanFiction.net

“Prey Mate” on deviantArt.com
Jinx drifted in the darkness, peaceful and content. She wasn’t exactly sure of the passage of time, and unaccustomed to such a feeling. Even so, Kamala could feel Raven’s presence surrounding her, enfolding her in a protective blanket of the demi-Demon’s power. She could even feel her mate’s caring and concern for her. All around her was Raven, and it was an exquisite feeling.

Dr. Light had spoken of the cold dark that had laid waste to his sanity. He never seemed to get over talking about it. And yet here she was, ensconced within that same darkness and it felt like a warm numbness. Unlike him, she would like to have this feeling never end.

Then her addled brain had to go and ruin it.

“Hehehe,” she tittered once more despite herself, still seemingly not in control of all her faculties, “I’m inside you.”

The shroud peeled back and she found her arm slung over Raven, with the Titan’s other arm around her waist. The purple-haired girl gave her a look while waiting for her to regain her footing. Once Raven was sure she wouldn’t fall, her mate moved to more of an embrace than a supporting hold.

“Really, Jinx—innuendo-based, sophomoric humor at this point in time...?”

While Raven’s words were censuring, her tone was light. Her mate was simply glad to see her, no matter the context, and the feeling was mutual. She tried to sober, but that was next to impossible and a wide grin wrought her features.

“Sorry. I can’t stop talking. They must have given me somethin’. I never respond well to the exotic stuff. I think most of it’s outta my system by now, but it’ll probably take... probably take about half
an hour to clear out completely. I never liked the feeling. That’s why I never did any drinking or... or... or tried any of the recreational drugs; I know what some over-the-counter stuff does to me an’ I’m not eager to see me on anything stronger. Lucky I don’t have a mirror, I guess. Tha’s seven years’ bad luck, y’know? ... ...I’m buzzed.”

“Just shut up, Kammie,” Raven muttered, then kissed her while holding her tighter than before, as if afraid she would disappear into some other shadowy mass. Her lip stung a little, but she didn’t care if only the kiss continued.

When Raven pulled away despite her attempts to keep the demi-Demon right where she was, Kamala reluctantly moved her focus from Raven’s lips and took in her surroundings. It looked like a cellblock... but that meant they could be anywhere in the IMRO. Kamala then noticed the doors laying on the ground and the torn hinges along the cell jambs.

“Huh...” she noised in comment, “Um, where are we, exactly?”

“First floor of cells.”

“...I never knew there was more. We never saw-”

Raven drew her along, passing corridor after corridor, “I know—you mentioned the black bags they always used in transit.”

“Makes sense, though. Guess that... put me on the third floor, huh?”

She felt Raven’s arm tighten around her.

“...Perhaps. Don’t think on it. It’s over, now.”

Kammie sighed, but kept moving. When they finally came to a stop, she saw nothing different between this corridor and the others they had passed. Before she could ask, Raven called out.

“Michael. We’re ready to leave.”

When the black-haired man moved out of the cell nearest the mouth of the corridor, Kamala squinted. She took in his gait, his posture, and they way he looked at things around him. No other prisoner she had seen during shower time ever showed any interest in the walls or their surroundings. Immediately, she ignored his white clothing; it was a facade. Her eyes conflagrated into with fuchsia light and she made to launch herself at him. Raven caught her around her waist before she could go airborne and tackle the man.

“Lemme go! He’s a fuckin’ guard! I’ll fucking kill ‘im! He’s a guard!”

Then a broad-shouldered man stepped out; he wasn’t huge like Mammoth, but they had a build of similar bulk. The hard, red scales over his body and the way he stood surefooted made her catalogue him as a physical fighter. The psi-powered and tech-wizards tended to take on a less obstructive stance unless they used their powers to physically augment themselves. Likewise, magic users had their own poise generally focused on circumvention rather than opposition. Kamala herself was a mixture of physical augmentation and mysticism... it showed her generally evasive and counter-attack style.

The Metahuman before her was, as Gizmo called Mammoth, a “tank” class. What completely threw her was this man moving in front of the guard. His stance was protective and she knew she couldn’t carve her way through this guy just to get to the guard. What the Hell was he doing?
“Perhaps you ought to stick close to Rohan, Michael. Jinx’s reaction might be somewhat... tamer than others.”

“Raven!”

“Kamala, he’s not with them.”

“He sure as Hell isn’t with us,” she snarled.

Michael put a hand upon Rohan’s shoulder, “I’m with Rohan. That’s enough for me.”

Her eyes flicked between the hand and the guard’s expression, then from Rohan to Michael. Slowly, things began clicking into place. Rohan didn’t seem to look uncomfortable. She knew the average response to a guard’s touch. The angry glow to her eyes faded and she stood there, still encircled by Raven’s arms, now thoroughly confused.

“I’m sure he has his own reasons... but I left him alive for Rohan’s sake.”

“We should really get out of here—take as many as we can with us. We don’t have time to sit here talking. There could be reinforcements coming any minute,” Michael urged.

“No—no we have all the time we need. You are the only living ‘flat-scan’ in the area. I made sure of that.”

Michael looked shocked—not stricken, just incredulous, “You... killed them all?” Then he paused, staring at the ground for a moment. He frowned, and then looked up. She knew what scheming looked like and this man was doing it. “Then we can start with the lower floors. Do a cell-check and gather them up as we go. I—I hate to say it, but we could take them to the ballroom. It’s the only place that might be big enough to hold any large number of people... and the only connective room between the cells and access to the barracks. Once we have everyone gathered there, we’ll be able to get an accurate headcount and make our way to the trams; they’ll ferry everyone to the surface.”

“...It will have to do,” Raven reasoned.

-=Michael=-

The Jinx’s mood was sour; that was quite certain as she padded down the stair well ahead of everyone. She was unable to keep that fact from them, as well as unable to keep her mouth shut because of the drugs undoubtedly administered to her. Michael had been on the Jinx’s detail exactly once. He would never forget it. The reason for the new assignment had been the death of one of the guards. The Warden needed to fill the gap and didn’t want a repeat performance. Lots of duty-shuffling followed.

The first time he saw her she had been freshly punished and patched up. Even so, there was a biting defiance in her posture. He had never seen its like—not here, not even in the new prisoners. Whenever escorted to the showers, she walked surely despite the bag over her head. Whenever he was to search her cell, he found her standing austerely with a focused gaze that no 12-year-old should have possessed. In those times, her gaze reminded him not of a cat, but a snake—a cold stare through slit pupils.

Nevertheless, they did their jobs and did them professionally. She didn’t even bat an eye during the mandatory cavity searches. That was what always unnerved him; she was an unflinching symbol of opposition. The Warden had hated it. Of course, they never lingered and never otherwise abused her.
Such unprofessional behavior is what got that one guard dead and his two buddies reassigned away from any prisoners. Nobody wanted the wrath of the Warden or the Jinx upon them, so they just did their jobs quietly and quickly.

What truly bothered him was how little anyone cared about those three pedophiles. The other guards didn’t even talk about what the assholes had done. Hell, some of the guards continued talking to the two remaining abusers. Most guards, however, kept their distance—but only because they didn’t want to come under the scrutiny of the Warden.

“And good fucking riddance to all of them, now.’

Afterward, Michael found himself on Rohan’s detail. Nobody had ever messed with Rohan. His skin was too resilient to tattoo, and thus he had no number. Hell, they couldn’t really stop the guy in any appreciable way when he was conscious. The Warden couldn’t whip him or burn him, and so just left him to rot in his cell most of the time instead of bringing him yearly beatings. One idiot had learned the hard way that you didn’t use bullets on Rohan; the ricochet had hit the guard in the thigh and gimped the dumbass to desk duties for months.

They kept him pacified with gas pellets that would eventually put him down. Most people didn’t want to deal with Rohan. Their reluctance wasn’t his. After two years of Rohan’s detail, things had...changed. They had exchanged words. At first, he wasn’t sure if he believed Rohan—that he was just some guy they had picked up. The more they talked, however, the more he believed.

That was when he truly started paying attention to his guard detail. He’d always thought that these children had been too dangerous for society. That they just lashed out and had to be stopped—that this was the only place capable of withstanding their power. While he never agreed with the Warden’s sadistic practices, he knew better than to question them. It did, however, always make him uneasy.

All his early assumptions about the IMRO had been false. Many of the Metahumans here were just...abducted. Worse, it was only because they were Metahumans. He doubted any of them had ever committed any serious crime.

It was only then that he fully understood just what role the IMRO played. This wasn’t a prison; it was a camp. By the time he appreciated that he was among a secret police of supremacists, there was no way out. Nobody—not even guards—left this place alive. That is, nobody but the Jinx.

They emerged upon that lowest level, the fifth floor of cells, and Michael broke off, “I’ll grab the manifest. Better we have numbers to compare.”

“Excuse me?” the Jinx spat, once more looking ready to jump him.

“Look, I’d rather get a tally and wind up with more heads than listed than chance missing someone. It’ll give us a base number to expect on each floor. I dunno about the other guards, but first floor was always extremely careful about headcount. The numbers should be accurate.”

“...Oh.”

“Kamala, he wasn’t suggesting-”

“I know, I know. Just... let’s just do this,” the pink-haired girl muttered.

Michael frowned at the two young women, ‘Wasn’t suggesting what?’

He was halfway down the hall to the guard’s office when the answer came to him rather suddenly.
The guard nearly facepalmed himself. She must have thought he wanted to match cells to tattoos. It was how prisoner check was generally taken and, having been one of said prisoners, it was undoubtedly on her mind. Michael used his keycard and the memorized code to open the office doors and quickly snagged the clipboard off the hook to the right of the door.

When he got back, he made a point to apologize, “I’m sorry—I didn’t think about how it would sound.”

The Jinx stared at him strangely, her expression tense. Obviously, she didn’t know how to respond to that. This place—and his recent employ within it—must have made it hard for her to comprehend such sentiments. Nevertheless, it was there and it was all he could do.

She opened her mouth, but closed it almost immediately. Instead of saying whatever was on her mind, she instead asked a more pertinent question, “How many are supposed to be down here?”

“Uh,” he flipped through the list of cells, seeking the final page, “417.”

-=Raven=-

“I suppose we’ll need to check them one by one... not to mention the time it’ll take to coax them out and up to the ballroom.” Raven frowned, “If there’s 417 on this floor alone, we might be stretching its capacity. ...I don’t like the idea of having to make several trips.”

Jinx noised beside her in assent, “Might not be anything we can do about that. We’ll just have to see how it goes. I guess I’ll take the right side.”

Raven glanced to the other side of the hall, noting the numbers engraved above the cells, “I suppose I’ll take the odd, then. Perhaps every few cells we can move them up to the ballroom, otherwise it’ll just get crowded down here.”

“I will do this,” spoke Rohan for the first time since she had killed the Warden. Apparently, he wasn’t much of a talker. On the other hand, he might just be reluctant to talk to them until he knew them better. Azar knew Raven understood that concept.

“You’ll need to set up some lights... maybe sweep the floor of some glass. I’m afraid I made a slight mess of the place.”

Rohan nodded and headed up the stair well to prepare the ballroom for temporary occupancy. At least Raven left that room free of bloodstains... some hallways and the barracks weren’t quite so lucky. As it stood, the place would be dark and littered with bits of chandelier and light bulbs—and, too, some shell casings.

Michael nodded and took a breath, “Alright. Let’s get started. ...Fifty-oh-one... empty, actually.”

“Check.”

“Fifty-oh-two... occupied.”

Jinx moved forward, stepping over the doors Raven had ripped from their hinges. The demi-Demon could sense the aura from within. She knew Jinx would find the cell with prisoner. She could also sense Jinx’s almost heart-wrenching, twisting emotions as the past slowly began to seep into her soul through the gaze of another prisoner. This was going to reach Kamala in ways the Warden could never have hoped to, and that made Raven long to sequester her mate away. She also knew she
couldn’t do that; this was something Jinx needed to do. This was going to be a painful, necessary catharsis.

It took nearly an hour and a half to manage the fifth floor’s occupants to the ballroom. Many were unsure if it was over... or even if they were any safer with them than the guards. The mistrust was high, but Jinx was able to convince those. After all, it was unfathomable that the IMRO would allow Metahuman to walk around freely. Raven wasn’t capable of handling those who couldn’t speak English. Typically, Jinx took over when Hindi was necessary. Rohan was also bilingual, but had his hands full moving groups of ten between the fifth floor and the ballroom. She could tell this was taxing for everyone involved, but this was the turning point. The worst was over.

Once they had cleared the floor and the mystic Titan had done a thorough scan of the level for any lingering auras, Raven nodded to herself. Her attention drew to Rohan, who stood with a frown. She could sense his concern.

“What is it?”

“The ballroom is lacking space. We will have to evacuate this group before we can fit more.”

“...This was only 417,” Michael said with a frown, “I know for a fact we’ll have more than that on the other floors. The first had seven plus; have to break that up into two trips, itself.”

“Ya mean we’re lookin’ at several hours of cell-checks and shuffling... Fuck, Raven, we’re gonna need to set up a camp or something... ‘least ‘til we can find a place for ‘em.”

The demi-Demon nodded and pulled out her communicator, “Gizmo.” Utter silence met her call out. Squinting, she hailed his frequency again. “Gizmo, this is Raven.” She broadened the channel’s band, “This is Raven to any Titan or HIVE communicator...”

“You’ll have to leave to get a signal of any kind. I dunno what kind of measures they’ve got in place, but the walls jam everything. Hell, our radios never even worked between floors. We have ground-line communications all over the place.”

Raven grunted, “Alright—Rohan, Jinx, try to keep everyone in the ballroom from getting antsy. I’m going to see if I can get some kind of refugee camp set up outside.”

“I’m gonna see if I can move some food supplies into the ballroom. If we can get this moving at any sort of speed, we’ll snack ‘em and send them out. Would be like an enormous lunch-line.”

Raven liked that idea and nodded her assent, “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Cloaking herself in her soul-self, Raven rose up and phased through the ceiling. She wasn’t gone for more than five seconds before her head poked through the ceiling. When she spoke, she started all three of them.

“Michael, I’ll need an upper limit for preparation.”

The ex-guard was thoughtfully silent for a few seconds, “None of them are filled to capacity, but with four other floors—with my last worked floor at over 700... I’m going to say we should estimate around 3,000—probably less, but it’s a safe number... Definitely no more than 3,500; despite this place’s size, it’s nowhere near full. I think this was supposed to be part of a... a long-term plan.”

Raven hid her grimace at the idea of 3,000 people enduring this living Hell, but nodded and
disappeared through the ceiling once more. Michael was right; it would be better to well overshoot the actual number of people and have more supplies and relief aid than necessary than to find themselves lacking. The demi-Demon hoped the other floors’ occupants didn’t wander too much before they got to them. While she felt horrible for thinking it, the fact that these soon-to-be refugees stayed in their cells made them easier to track, ensuring they didn’t miss anyone. The level of helplessness involved, however, that would keep them in their cells even after she had ripped the doors right out of the walls... it turned her stomach.

Only seconds after she had floated out of the earthen crater she had made from tearing away so much of the grassy plane, her communicator chimed. Raven had been expecting it and flipped its view screen up. On it was Gizmo, which was also expected.

“You went off the grid. What the fuck happened?”

“The building isn’t conductive to communications, possibly jammed. Anyway, I need to bring Nightwing into this before going any further.”

“Already here, Raven,” her Fearless Leader answered, suddenly replacing her view screen with his serious expression. She could tell he was taking in her visage—which was still in her elevated, Demonic form. “What do you need?”

“More than you might expect. I’ve secured the complex. However, there is the not-so-small matter of the 20,000 prison cells.”

“What the-“

“Ho-ly Je-sus!”

Ignoring the outbursts from Gar and Vic, Raven continued, “Not every cell is filled, but we will need some kind of camp or... temporary housing-”

“How many?”

“Michael tells me we’ll probably be overcompensating at 3,000—most of them children and teens.”

“Who the fuck is ‘Michael?’”

Raven hovered in the air, staring down at the torn ground beneath her. Everything above ground, save her little excavation, looked so peaceful and benign. Still, the plains around them would come in handy for setting up an area where the prisoners could find any treatment and safety the likes they probably hadn’t known in quite some time.

“Michael is a guard who is aiding us, at this time. He had a conflict of interests with the IMRO due to his relationship with one of the prisoners. From what I can tell, he was freeing Rohan when I came upon him. Possibly, he intended to use the chaos to escape with Rohan.”

“What about the other guards in this place?” Nightwing asked. She continued to stare at the screen as passively as she could. They both knew he wouldn’t like her answer, but he had to ask the question anyway. She understood and appreciated that, but Raven wondered how she was supposed to answer it without causing some sort of rift. “...Raven?”

“Beyond Michael, there are no longer any non-prisoners present in the complex.”
His sigh was less angry and more... frustrated. After a moment, Dick answered, “How many body-bags are we talking here?”

“You won’t have to bother with those.”

Then, finally, the outburst came, “Raven! Couldn’t you have just-“

“They abducted my mate!” Her interruption was terse and angry. The red cast to her communicator let her know that her temper had brought a blaze to her eyes. “They ambushed her and took her away from me! I’ll not be questioned on this matter—not by you and not by the League. That filth sought to toss her back into the horrors she barely escaped seven years prior. Other prisoners were not so lucky, and have been enduring that torture this whole time. The guards attacked with lethal force, and I responded in kind. And don’t think to give me the ‘power and skill beyond the mundane’ speech you typically use to argue nonlethal measures against lethal opponents. They were monsters and their deaths were well-earned long before my arrival; this is not up for debate.”

The prolonged quiet on both sides after her declaration hung thick in the air like particularly heavily scented incense. Raven let a slow breath out of her nose and tried to calm her nerves. The demi-Demon knew this had been coming; there was no reason to let it get her worked up so much. Else, she would just wind up saying something she didn’t mean.

“We’re feeding them from whatever we can scrounge up for now; there’s quite a bit of food stores, so we’re not worried on that front. But we need to get them out of the ballroom; it’s the largest room and it’s cramped with the fifth floor alone. We’ll need to evacuate them before we can bring any others up. Michael was hoping to use it as something like a half-way cafeteria and just have them pass through... but right now, it’s clogged with those kids.”

“The ballroom? Are you outta your fuckin’ mind?”

Apparently, Gizmo and Mammoth were aware of what ‘ballroom’ meant to Jinx. She shook her head, “I know, Gizmo. As I said, there was no other room large enough to hold them even temporarily. It’s also why I want to get that camp set up ASAP. How long will it take to get some humanitarian aid here?”

“Not long at all,” said a new, calm voice. She knew that deep, slightly flat tone, “We have brought a rather large group of people willing to help. Steel, Hawkwoman, Flash, and Green Arrow are heading the organization. All we need is a location to set up.”

“...J’onn.”

Nightwing shifted aside to reveal the Martian. It seemed there were more people there than she had known. Raven wasn’t sure she would have spoken so freely about killing the guards. The last thing she needed was some moral high-grounders thinking she was finally ‘giving into the evil inside her’ or some such asinine concept.

“Did... you just say there was a ballroom down there?” Green Arrow asked.

“Yes. The Warden was a sadist and took a page from The Count of Monte Cristo; he had every prisoner brought from their six-by-eight cells to a garish ballroom, where he would administer a yearly, commemorative torture.”

Manhunter was nearly shoved aside as Shayera shouldered her way into the foreground, “Are you sure they’re all dead?”

“Hawkwoman,” J’onn chastised.
“Oh, I’m very sure.”

“We’re going to make this public, Raven. If we want this to have an impact on the world—to show them that this is happening and that we can’t let it,” Nightwing informed from somewhere off-screen, “To that end, we also brought several journalists whom we know will be sympathetic to this situation.”

She stared hard at her communicator. Something about the situation didn’t make sense. Raven felt a slight chill work down her back and, though she hated to think it, this was suspicious. Thoughts shifted through her mind about Zatanna and her seeming Demon-slaying personal crusade. The mystic Titan shook the thought free from its icy grasping for her attention. Dick wouldn’t; he would never condone it... but what was the League doing there even when he knew she didn’t want to deal with them?

“...This is too well prepared for a couple hours’ notice, Nightwing. Would you care to let me in on the big plan and just who all you have over there?”

“They brought the goddamn Batman!” Gizmo exclaimed, and managed to sound a little creeped out—Batman had that effect on people.

“...I see.”

She did, in fact. Many things suddenly made a lot more sense. Kamala had told her that she had a talk with Dick. Of course, he hadn’t been able to leave it alone. He and Batman had probably extrapolated some kind of situation like this might arise—and that it could have large ramifications. It wasn’t as though they were wrong, either. If there was anything the Bat clan had in spades, it was preparedness.

“And just how are you suggesting we reveal this atrocity and our censure of it?” Raven queried; there was no reason for her to be the one to do all the ‘dirty work.’ This way, this whole debacle wouldn’t revolve around her decisions alone.

It was J’onn who answered her, “Perhaps we could begin with a display of power...”

Raven considered that. The idea had merit. Just how could she do what he was suggesting? Obviously, it would have to be something they could snap pictures or capture on film. Her actions would have to show the world what was happening, hidden right under their noses... indeed, far beneath their feet.

Then the demi-Demon blinked all four of her eyes as a thought occurred to her, ‘The answer is beneath us...’

“I think I have an idea. I’m hovering over the bulk of the complex. Get the camp set up about a mile out. Get your reporters ready, too. Is half an hour enough for you to get out here with everyone from that bunker?”

“Should be more than enough. I just called into HIVE; you said most of ‘em were kids, yeah?” Gizmo asked, but didn’t bother to wait for the answer, “We got our affiliates in on this. Dark Way Prep knows how to deal with Meta-kids in need. Did wonders for Jinx when—” He abruptly cut himself off, clearly considering his company. “...They’re gonna be on-site in 45. They’ll know what to do, no matter what kinda powers or mutations the kids bring to the table.”

Raven felt a sizable weight lift from her. Initially, when she considered a relief group, she hadn’t really known how to deal with the fact that most of these children would have powers... possibly
ones over which they had little or no control. HIVE’s connections weren’t something she had
considered, despite Kamala making excellent use of them over the years.

“Good—that had been a concern of mine. By then we hope to be moving them out, so that’s fine.”

“Uh, Raven,” Vic began, “You mind tellin’ us just what you’re gonna do?”

Finally, Raven granted them with that amused smirk, “And ruin my chance to see the look on your
faces? I think not.” She glanced to the corner of her communicator. “Just turn all your cameras and
eyes on this location at 3:45—local time. And remember, give me that one-mile buffer. We’ll see you
in half an hour... or, well, everyone else will see us in half an hour.”

With that, Raven closed her communicator and sank back into the depths of the earth. Some dark
part of her was going to enjoy this thoroughly. It was rare that she had an opportunity to do
something grossly overpowered without censure. If J’onn wanted a display of power, that’s exactly
what she would give him!

---Michael---

When he returned with a sack of MREs, he caught the pointed stare of the Jinx. It seemed like there
was no pleasing her. Things would probably run smoother if he would just think before he spoke
around her. Most of the things he did that annoyed her were honest mistakes—which was probably
why she hadn’t outright attacked him by now, he supposed.

“Look, it was just a suggestion,” Michael sighed out in exasperation.

“Sloppy joes,” she hissed, “You’re in India, Michael. You wanna open up a Ponderosa Steakhouse,
too?”

“I get it, already! I wasn’t thinking, alright? I was just trying to come up with things that were easy to
make that could feed a lot of people!”

Passing off his sack of MREs to Rohan, who had set up a few foldable tables they’d found in the
barracks, he shook his head. Finally, the Jinx huffed and focused on setting up the MREs and the
FRHs to warm them. They would start heating them like an assembly line once they found enough to
feed everyone. The problem had come about when he found one of the meals was a sloppy joe,
prompting the Jinx to go off on him when he suggested it. The pink-haired girl had gone through all
their rations to make sure none of his last deliveries had any of those among them.

“Heh...”

“What?”

She shook her head, “Nothing, just—this one’s Pasta with Alfredo Sauce. First time I had this was
when I was in Burma. I’d just gotten myself into this kind of... guerilla raid deal with a bunch of
pirates who’d entrenched themselves in this cul-de-sac along the Mekong. We got called in as a
favor; they wanted these guys down hard and fast, but the governments didn’t wanna lose their men
in the process.” The Jinx snorted at that, shaking her head slightly. “Y’see, these assholes had some
good firepower and a tendency to raid anything they could conceive of overtaking. They’d already
gotten about three boats from the very militaries trying to stop them—killed everyone aboard—and it
was getting ridiculous. So they sent my team in...

“We kinda skirmished back and forth. Wound up raiding them of the very supplies they stole and
using it against them. Then they would wise up and run us out of a given area before we could secure the weapons, and they’d take ‘em back. It turned into this kind of... attrition warfare, with everyone claimin’ the same stockpile. Ever play Hungry, Hungry Hippos? I never have, but it was kinda like that... only with bullets and somebody dies every round.”

Michael shook his head. Where the Hell did she come up with this stuff?

“That’s when the governments got fed up and our benefactors gave us the green-light to cut loose. I got to thinkin’ and was like, ‘You know what? Fuck it.’ So I decided to get my special order delivered all post haste. It was an AX388 with a few boxes of some... really nice rounds. I loaded my heavy-hitters and told Giz to get out those whirly warheads he likes. Mammoth managed to keep a crate of 50-cals and an M60 from our raid, so we set him up across the cul-de-sac an’ had ourselves a turkey shoot.” She was working mostly on autopilot as she recounted the story, he noticed, more focused on the past than what she was doing. Even so, the Jinx wasn’t missing a beat while setting up the MREs. “We went to town on that shit. We punched holes in anything that floated or stood upright for a coupla hours before dawn. The military wasn’t happy about us turnin’ their boats into Swiss cheese, but they wanted the fuckers gone yesterday.”

Then the girl blinked a few times and shook her head out of the reverie, “Anyway, yeah. Night before the turkey shoot, I had one o’ them Alfredo Pasta MREs. Just stuck in my head as memorable.”

He thanked himself for small favors that whatever they’d given her seemed to have worn off. She was a mouthy thing to begin with and he didn’t want to deal with her when she wasn’t able to keep quiet. It didn’t stop her from talking altogether, obviously. As it was, the more he listened, the more he was impressed. The Jinx was a professional; he’d readily admit that. There was a controlled, trained way she went about things that made him wonder if she had enlisted in some form of military previously. She sounded a little too cocky to follow orders, though. Then again, it sounded like she led her little fireteam. Obviously, she was part of some paramilitary group, as it stood.

“Mercenary work, huh?” he asked, considering her story and reaffirming never to get on her bad side in any serious way.

“Top o’ my class. I’m doin’ pretty well for myself.”

“And how,” came a voice from above them.

As Raven descended through the ceiling and toward the ground, both he and the Jinx gave a startled hop. In her jerky reaction, the pink-haired mercenary tossed one of the MREs into the air. The purple-haired girl caught it as she floated down and placed it on the table with the others. It was only then that he took in the difference in the visage of the woman that had nearly killed him almost two hours ago.

Raven was now pale as the Jinx was, and with a single pair of eyes in a bright amethyst that seemed to catch the light easily. Her hair was the same purple as it was before. The change was a little disconcerting, but more Human than it had been before. Raven turned to stare at him before he could finish cataloguing the differences between her two appearances.

“What.”

“You, uh... look different.”

“Public personas being what they are, I’m a Titan and people are used to seeing me this way. Soon, this place is going international—it’s going to be on every news station and printed in every paper
around the world. I’m not all that disposed to give people any more reason to demonize me than they already do. I may not have cared when I was down here, but I dislike the Satanic parallels people start drawing. I’m not of the Christian faith, so those comparisons just irritate me further.”

“I wouldn’t think that a group as famous as the Titans would be seen as Demonic.”

The Jinx snorted at him, but he ignored her sass.

“But I am,” Raven responded flatly as she levitated several MREs with her powers and laid them out on the tables, drastically reducing their work load.

“Just because you can turn red?” Michael asked with a frown. That didn’t seem right...

“I meant I am Demonic, Michael, and the Justice League doesn’t quite take a liking to me because of it. The last thing I need is the general public getting up in arms about the existence of Demon-kind in general, then starting up a whole line of theological debates and crusades. We have enough of that as it is.”

Before he could interject for clarification, the Titan continued, “I get enough condemnation from the League and entirely too much veneration from my cult. I’d really prefer they both just left me alone.”

“You have a cult?” he couldn’t keep the incredulity from his tone.

“It was my father’s cult. He was about as typical a Demon as any current-day Christian could stereotype one. I inherited it from him,” she blew out a sigh, “and it’s not like I could just disband them. I’m not entirely certain they would... and Azar knows the last thing we need is the Cult of Blood running around doing things on its own. At least this way, I can direct them away from most trouble.”

“Man, bein’ a deity sucks,” the Jinx muttered.

“Very. ...How many of these do we have?”

“Tons,” he droned straight-faced, “Probably literally; there’s a whole storeroom of ‘em. I dunno, Rohan’ll be back with a few more bags soon. I just made a run of my own. We’re taking turns ‘cause we don’t want to leave them alone in case... I dunno, anything.”

“...I’m supposed to give a ‘display of power’ to show the world about the IMRO. That will be in about 25 minutes. When the time comes, there might be a few shakes. Keep an eye on the tables so nothing falls over.”

“Does the League have any idea what they just asked of you?” the pinkette asked with a quirked brow.

Raven’s grin was far from comforting, “Oh, I’m sure it hit them just a few seconds after Manhunter suggested it.”

“You’re gonna enjoy this, aren’t you?”

“All my life, people have only ever asked me to be careful with my power. This is the first time I’ve actually been asked to show people what I can really do. Considering it was at the request of the League... I feel I really must impress.”
“...Heh heh heh...”

“Gizmo, you’ve been chuckling like that for the last five minutes,” Hawkwoman said impatiently, “What is so funny?”

Gizmo’s grin only broadened, which made none of them feel any better, “Ya don’t get it, do ya? Did it cross yer high-an’-mighty minds that ya just asked Raven of all people to cut loose? This’s gonna be good shit—an’ me without my popcorn!”

Dick hadn’t said anything at the time, but he was thinking nearly the same thing. The moment the words had left J’onn’s lips, the other Titans had all shared glances. The room was mostly quiet afterward. The Titans could only wait, the League went about organizing the relief site, and the HIVE operatives were just idling in a deceptively relaxed state... save for Gizmo’s sporadic fits of chuckling.

“...Oh,” J’onn sounded, seemingly only then realizing the implications.

Gizmo’s openly cackled at the uneasy faces on the League just then. Nightwing sighed; this was going to be a long day. At least the threat was over... Well, there could be new threats, he would admit, but Raven had put an end to the major problem of the IMRO. Now, like Batman had mentioned before, he could only wonder if there were more sites like this around the world. With 20,000 cells in this facility alone, who knew how many Extra-Normals might be captive worldwide?

‘We’ll deal with that problem if and when it arises. I’ll be happy to mark today down as a victory, though.’

=Hawkwoman=

Her return expedited the process of moving foodstuffs to the ballroom. Michael had commented on the strangeness of seeing a conga line of MREs floating down the hallways toward the ballroom. They now had a few crates—also dragged through the air by her soul-self—and she began storing them for the next round. This would likely repeat several times throughout the day as they emptied floor after floor.

While they had a solution in order, Raven was beginning to feel uneasy. She heard a few sniffs, maybe a cough, and sometimes idle shifting... It wasn’t silent, but it was simply too quiet. It bothered her on a level she couldn’t quite specify. This group hadn’t done more than sit as directed and Raven wondered just how crushed their spirits were. Hopefully, the shock of being outside would shake them from this disheartening muteness.

“Has... anyone said a word since I left?”

Kamala’s expression was solemn, and the downward quirk to her lips didn’t suit her, “Not one.”

Raven sighed. She almost couldn’t fathom this level of helplessness. Even when Trigon had made his first bid for Earth when she was 16 and she had driven him off with her teammates’ help, there wasn’t this kind of all-encompassing graveyard of murdered hopes. She hadn’t simply sat there and waited for Trigon to take over her body. The demi-Demon had run, hidden like a frightened child. Even freed of their oppressors, these children merely huddled on the floor like so many marionettes with their strings severed. It sent a chilled shudder up her spine.
Her communicator chirped and she glanced to it. She had three minutes before her display was to take place. Raven increased the speed of the last of her floating MREs to join them in the room.

“It’s almost time. Make sure the tables don’t rock over—I’ll try to be gentle. I’m going to show the world the IMRO,” the mystic Titan informed. With that, she moved over to Kamala and held her in tight embrace; she could feel that Jinx wanted it, but didn’t want anyone to brace her, lest she falter in her fast-gripped restraint. Raven kissed her gently, but with reserve. Jinx would stay strong, but not if offered a reprieve. Her mate had taken this burden upon herself. When this was over, however, Kamala would undoubtedly need to lick the old wounds this had reopened. “I’ll let you know when it’s safe to move about. ...Can I contact you mentally?”

She felt Jinx’s pause, her careful stillness of body and mind. It was an instinctive response, she understood. Kamala had told Raven just how she typically reacted to telepathic touch. It was swift and often violent.

“S—... Sure. You’ll be careful or easy or—however it is that works, yeah?”

“Of course, Kamala. I wouldn’t even suggest it otherwise.”

“Then go do your thing. Show them...” Kammie trailed off, unsure of just what it was she wanted Raven to show. Finally, she grimly shook her head, “Show everyone.”

Raven nodded her assent. Everyone was in accord, and their will would be done. Once more, she disappeared through the ceiling.

As the demi-Demon slowly began her ascent through the levels of the complex, she phased her body completely into her soul-self. The IMRO lay deep beneath the earthen body of Bihar. She would seek to cut the cancer from its heart.

Over the years, Raven’s prowess had grown... matured. It wasn’t anything so pedestrian as raw power. Any Demon could toss about their weighty power and enact great feats through sheer girth of presence. However, the savvy Demoness knew well how to use finesse. For all the power that earned her the right to the station of Scath, it would be for naught if she hadn’t learned to utilize it properly and without waste. Over the years, she came to understand how to use it—control it, harness it, unleash it.

These days, she rarely needed to invoke any words of power. However, that wasn’t to say there was no use in doing so. Because of the fine nature involved in this endeavor, as well as the lives present within the structure, she wanted to ensure that everything went smoothly. That meant she had to handle this with the utmost care.

She drifted ever upward, amassing her ethereal powers and mustering the forces within herself. When she finally emerged from the ground, she looked to the west... and saw with senses that had nothing to do with her eyes the bright signatures of powerful lives and minds. Raven settled herself some 50 or so meters above the disturbed, grassy plain.

Her communicator beeped its familiar tune, and she answered sedately, “...Have I the eyes of the world?”


Stowing her communicator, she focused upon her power completely—upon the trail of energies she’d left while moving up through the IMRO complex. Her aura flared to life about her—from the
distance of the cameras, she imagined she looked like a small, black flame on the horizon. Raven then invoked the great power resting within her unassuming figure.

“Azarath. Metrion. Zinthos.”

Her aura erupted from her body, bursting out from her limbs and suffusing from every pore. The enormous, dark bird of prey once again revealed itself to the world. Stretching those intangible wings out in a rare display, its tail feathers likewise fanned out—but also extended down into the ground in a mass of deep-rooting trunks.

The earth shook. It quaked and growled in protest beneath her, but she would not heed it. With a snarl of her own, she began to pull. The enormous, avian aura drifted higher into the air, its quadruple eyes blazing with seemingly endless power. At first, large islets of land merely floated up—she directed these aside; she had planned for their later use. Then a greater mass, truly worthy of the term ‘island,’ arose from its nestled confines. Higher and higher, the chunk of land levitated while ensconced completely in oily aura.

Once it hung in the air, very clearly free of the ground and any connectivity it might have once held, Raven went to work. It was very sharply geometric in shape, at first. Dirt, clay, and rock all clung together in a cubic amalgam. However, Raven quickly pared that away to reveal soil-caked concrete. It now dwelled in the sky, lingering and looming over the land and casting its awful shadow. Here, finally, was the dirty secret exposed—a flying fortress of suffering and hate.

As voluminous clouds of dust rose from the massive, falling clumps dirt and debris, the IMRO’s long halls and blocky rooms slowly became evident. By now, the long neck of the tram shaft held itself aloft, elapid in appearance but altogether superfluous. It would make no sense to have those refugees trek up said shaft merely to descend back to the ground. Of course, she could just set the whole thing upon the ground... but she couldn’t trust its structural integrity. Before, it had relied upon the very earth she had just removed to bear its mass. Hanging as it was, without gravity to pull at its unsupported and unwieldy build, it was safe.

Moreover, she would not lower it... she would not decrease the spectacle being made here. To these couple of problems, Raven had already contemplated a worthy solution. With a decisive, mental gesture, the dark energies surrounding the structure severed the head of the beast. Through pure will and intent, she took the awkward length of that tram shaft and strung it outward. The cement yielded and bent to her will, breaking apart and once more fusing itself into the shape of a large, thin band around the whole of the floating IMRO. This Raven lowered to the undisturbed ground around the hole she had created.

The steel railing was the secondary material she decided to use. While it probably wasn’t mystically resonant in any proper sense, it was still capable of channeling magic as a medium. She stripped the metal into thin, wiry lengths; with it, she bent them into runes, ley guides, and binding circles necessary for a simple suspension spell. Once finished, she melded the metal into the strip of concrete just as she had earlier fused the metal shower room door to the cement of the walls.

It wasn’t hard to make the random exceptions she knew would be necessary. It took a little bit of fancy wording to get it to work only on an ‘exterior’ or ‘circumference’ sense. There was also no reason to have everyone floating about in zero gravity once they left the compound, either. An exclusion of living beings was enough for that, she could sense.

The demi-Demon pushed mystical energies into the binding circles around and within the suspension spell. Once begun, it began drawing in the magic itself and she willingly imparted all it necessitated. Honestly, the spell didn’t require much; magic wasn’t like the physical laws of nature that held scientifically sound and mathematically proven ratios. The weight of the IMRO was but a minor
issue—what mattered mass and weight to a power that had probably spawned the very gods themselves?

Now, with the spell holding the monstrous edifice in place, Raven brought those grassy islets back inside the binding circle. She positioned them carefully at the shortened neck of what was once the tram shaft. Hovering in a fowl form most intimidating, her mere gaze directed them about until she had built an earthen ramp leading to ground level. She molded the chunks of earth wherever prudent—straightening or bending, widening or thinning to make it easy to traverse.

Raven idly wondered how those refugees would feel, to walk freely upon the lush, green grass for the first time in years. What would it feel like to have soft earth instead of hard concrete against their worn and wearied soles? When the heavens were bared to them instead of concealed and the earth was beneath them instead of burying them, Raven hoped it would be a balm to their souls, as well.

After reviewing her work and approving of it, the demi-Demon sought out the mind of her mate and brushed her waves of satisfaction over the girl. She could feel Kamala’s momentary confusion until the mind of her hex-caster echoed a questing thought.

‘Raven?’

‘I’m done here. You should start up those meals, now. We can move them all, now. They can finally leave that place.’

Kammie’s response was a little slow as she cast her thoughts about into some semblance of order, ‘...Okay. Nothing fell over, but we had a few shakes. What did you do?’

‘Hopefully, I’ve helped them rise above their past.’

‘You’re being vague.’ There was a small mist of frustration rising from Jinx, but her mate pushed it aside. ‘This isn’t exactly what I was imagining when I thought about telepathy...’

‘This is how it’s supposed to be, Kamala. It’s not a manipulation or an intrusion of the mind. It’s shared thoughts and feelings.’ To illustrate that point, Raven breezed the feelings of her adoration and desire through their link. ‘I love you, Daesem—I’ll return to you shortly.’

‘Oh my God, kill me now.’

Raven blinked, ‘What?’

‘Whatever you just did—I just moaned and now Michael and Rohan are staring at me all weird. ...I’m telling them it’s all your fault.’

Raven grinned and flew off to meet with the rest of her team and the Justice League. She saw the gaggle of people who were gaping up at her corvid form. Reining in her aura, she began to descend even as the waves of power fueling that winged effigy of her soul-self shrank and then disappeared. Left in her purely physical form once more, Raven touched upon the ground in front of the superheroes. Some of their eyes resided upon her, some of them on the IMRO building. However, their expressions were mostly identical. Even the inscrutable Batman stood with a slightly slacker version of his grim stare.

The demi-Demon retrieved her communicator from her gemmed belt and held it up.

—Click—

“You see? That was worth the wait.”
Author’s Note:

Hey, everyone! It’s June 1st—my birthday. Normally, that means I get some gifts or something from friends and family, but I’m an author. Guess what that means? That’s right, you get a present, instead: an early update!

Yeah, remember when we talked about hijinx and High Jinx? Here you go! This stuff is going to be in her bloodstream for a bit, so expect a lot more talking out of our dear Agent of Chaos.

Who saw this one coming? Michael is a regular, human-looking guy with guard-like behavior (because he’s a guard). He doesn’t exactly fit in the appearance. There’s absolutely no way that Jinx is going to let him try to masquerade and play the innocent party. With her experiences in the IMRO, it’s understandable why another prisoner protecting a guard would short-circuit her brain for a bit. Furthermore, she’s not sure what to do with an apology. Despite knowing better of the world, in her mind, things have always been very black and white regarding the IMRO. The IMRO was evil, full stop. Finding one of the guards that wasn’t a complete shitbag or jadedly callous was like asking to find a shadow in the dark.

It was strange writing some of the heroes, as I’ve never really dealt with them a lot outside of just watching some JLU episodes and such, but I try my best to work them into some semblance of a believable personality. Shayera, being used to war, I think would be the least opposed to Raven’s killing of the group. Even in times of war, Hawkwoman would find this sort of practice utterly barbaric. To her, this seems me to be the kind of thing that she would have taken her mace to without much thought.

I’m pretty sure the first junior dance they did at HIVE had Jinx panicking and hiding. The word ‘ballroom’ for her was a term guards used with mocking maliciousness as they dragged their prisoners to their yearly commemorative torture at the Warden’s hands. With no other comparison to go with her limited education at the time, it’s no surprise her teammates would be appalled at the idea of using it for anything. Sadly, they don’t have much choice in the matter.

At least Rohan swept up the sharp chandelier crystals. Thankfully, unlike other hallways where she may have maimed and left a few sprays of blood here or there, the ballroom is devoid of bloodstains, so there’s small favors for that.

If her team is going to spring these kind of surprises on Raven, she’ll return it in kind. This sort of thing is kind of one of her pet peeves with Dick. He tends to be all Batman in his planning and plotting, and often doesn’t let others in on it. You can bet that didn’t fly with Babs. I think she’s even read Bruce the riot act a few times over that very thing, too. You’d think poor Richard would learn...

Ah, sloppy joes—the staple of an all American summer. Along with hotdogs, hamburgers, and baked beans, you gotta have sloppy joes. Many of the IMRO staff were American; that might speak to something of the conceptualization of the idea’s origins... And so, it should come as no surprise that sloppy joes probably don’t work out all that well in India. I mean, there’s probably a lot of people who would just have a cow.

Remember that story that Jinx said Nin, Terry, and Darryl wouldn’t want to hear about regarding her sniper rifle? This is it. With all her filters lowered due to the last of the barbiturates remaining in her system, she will have even less compunction telling someone all about that sordid little mission.
where they just opened an entire can of whoop-ass on some Burmese pirates. As you can see here, she has little reservations about taking out hostiles with extreme prejudice. People don’t often write Jinx as a person who would kill in such a calculated fashion... Me? I think she’d do whatever was necessary to ensure the safety of her boys. After so much back and forth, with lethal stakes on the line the whole time, it was time to end that little game.

Hungry, hungry hippos—where instead of pellets, you use use bullets. Rules are inverted. The losers are the ones who eat too many bullets.

Poor Michael doesn’t understand. However, Jinx very well might. The Cult of Blood was a thing she would have learned about eventually, and it’s entirely possible that Brother Blood was using the HIVE as an end-game to both fund and use the operatives he trained there as cannon fodder while the Cult attempted to summon Trigon.

Since Trigon’s death, the Cult has undergone some changes. They’re still... well, *them*, and there’s probably no limit to what they would do for Raven. One might think they’d turn on her, but I look at it this way: she *ate* their god. They got what they wanted, the world was given to Trigon, and Raven straight up and obliterated him. Do you really think you could do *anything* to her now? Especially since all your prayers and willed power now go *directly* to her, as the owner of the Scath title?

They are a strangely loyal bunch, so when Raven orders them not to cause trouble... they mostly settle, but don’t think for a moment they’re not zealots of the highest fanatical order. That might change with successive generations; I already had ideas and plans on that, but... For now, they’re scarily loyal and afraid to cross her. After all, one does not anger their god when she can come knocking on your door.

Poor J’onn doesn’t really understand what he’s asked her to unleash. It’s not so much a matter of him being a Martian, either. I remember in the JLU cartoon, after he took off at some point... and when he came back (I think to battle Darkseid’s army?), he actually appeared Human for a bit and had found himself a wife/girlfriend thing.

In this case, it wasn’t so much that he missed something about Humanity as it was that he’s used to dealing with the League. Most people in the League understand what the core members want from them. He hadn’t considered just how Raven would interpret his suggestion.

He’s a telepath and an extraterrestrial of a great knowledge exceeding most Human intelligence. I’m sure he probably had some idea in mind when he did that, but his idea of a ‘display of power’ is different from a Demon. Demons--even demi-Demons like Raven--understand a display of power on a different level. Humans tend to view a show of strength as just that. It’s an intimidation factor. However, there are far more connotations in such a thing for Demons. What you do, how you do it, why you do it, who your audience is, your intentions, and--to a degree--even when you do it can play a large part in just what message you want to send... and what message is perceived.

Remember my author’s notes a few chapters back on flaring one’s aura? This. Exactly this. Raven made a display that, even without flaring her aura, would be understood by *everyone*.

J’onn is used to dealing with Earth-style people who live on Earth. Of course, there are exceptions: Diana is from Themyscira, there are some other aliens, too. I don’t count Superman among this because he was raised Human. The point is, he suggested a ‘Human’ action to a Demon and expected a human action. What he’s going to get... isn’t going to be that. It’s going to be a display of power worthy of a Demon of Raven’s caliber—an Arch Lord.

Once again, we see a kind of binding circle and more magic as it pertains to my system, the ways you can add exceptions and limitations. This version of doing things is Sorcery, and it can be very
similar to programming at times. Also, a little on how Raven does her whole mental communication thing and the extra things she can sense as an empath. I like delving into how others perceive extraordinary/extrasensory powers like this.

And yeah, you can bet that picture is going to be used for some serious blackmail later. If Raven was the computer type, I could see her putting that as her desktop. Heh. Anyhow, hope you guys enjoyed the birthday update! I know I enjoyed writing it!

See you next chapter! ...Hm, now I’ll probably have twice as many reviews to answer come the 11th-12th... Poor me. XD

-Lynx

Story Mirrors:

Now Available on Archive of Our Own!

“Prey Mate” on FanFiction.net

“Prey Mate” on deviantArt.com
Raven’s mirth slowly faded as she put away her communicator. On the surface, she appeared quietly satisfied and perhaps even mildly pleased with herself. However, he could see the underlying lines of tension in her body. She looked as though she wanted to be anywhere but standing in front of them. Considering her recent falling out with the League, Batman couldn’t say he blamed her.

“How is everyone inside?”

“That’s a subjective answer, I’m afraid. They won’t talk. Jinx mentioned that the IMRO had a strict silence policy, usually enforced by half a day in the sweatboxes. However... they are alive and mostly healthy. I hope everyone is ready—because the first group will be coming out soon.”

“We’re all set,” Gizmo nodded out toward the tents a short distance from her concrete circle, “That why ya wanted that buffer zone?”

“Yes. I didn’t want anyone too close to the hole.”

Batman’s gaze trailed to the floating edifice, “How long will you be keeping that up there?”

“As long as it takes. It’s not using frequent flier miles,” Raven’s joke fell short of mirth; her expression was too drawn and her mind was clearly elsewhere.

“This first group has 417 in it. Michael suggested there were other floors with a greater number, so it’s going to take several trips to get them all out as we move floor by floor. It takes time to coax some of them out; they won’t leave their cell on their own... They aren’t trusting—and I’m not sure if some of them even believe they’re free. The sooner we get them out, the better... but I don’t think we can rush it.”
The Dark Knight took in what she wasn’t saying, “You don’t think we’d be able to bring in more people to help.”

“I honestly don’t know where we would put them if we moved faster. Unless we just want to make an enormous line, but it’s not as though that would work all that well, either. The corridors are narrow; we had to move them by groups of ten up to the ballroom,” Raven sighed, “It could take the better part of the day to get everyone out.”

Raven glanced back toward the floating city. When she didn’t turn around after several seconds, he prompted her, “What is it?”

The young woman finally turned back to them and shook her head. She sounded relieved, “They’re eating. I was half-worried they wouldn’t.”

“When do you expect to move them?” he asked.

“Just after they’re finished eating. If there’s anything else that needs prepared, I would do it, now. Expect to see some of them in about 20 minutes.”

He could tell she was distracted. More than anything, she wanted to be back inside and helping. Poignant moments like this had made it all too clear that Raven was full of good will.

Of course, he knew she wasn’t utterly void of certain instincts and that darker side everyone held within them... However, Raven was a model of self-control. Her recent actions were a sign of both. He doubted the demi-Demon, who Zatanna feared would one day turn out to be just like her father, had ever been out of control. She had made a decision and carried it out. It didn’t really sit well with him—that she had killed everyone inside she deemed guilty, but he had fully expected it. She had explained herself and she would; she wouldn’t budge on that matter. He knew it would be no use attempting to lecture her on the matter, neither now nor later.

His rare encounters with the supernatural over the years were enough for him to understand that Demons simply perceived the world differently. Their actions and reactions were driven by an entirely different set of standards, appreciable but never fully understood to most Humans. Raven was no different; it never did well to treat her as a mere Human.

Perhaps that was one of the major problems between her and the League. Upon first meeting her, they tried to treat her as they would any Human born and raised on Earth... and Raven didn’t fall under any of those categories. Once they learned of her Demonic heritage, they simply disregarded her. Batman hadn’t been present for that initial meeting... else he might have cautioned them. By the time he’d heard about the encounter, it had been too late to do anything. The next time he heard about Raven, Dick had started a team with her. At the time, he thought it was best to let things happen and observe it for himself. It had been the right move, and Raven had saved the world several times over—and defied expectations of the League, he was sure, when she fought and defeated Trigon himself not once, but twice.

Now, here they were again... having to rely upon Raven’s unique methods to sort through problems they otherwise would have met with complete ignorance or an ill-prepared response. Dick had been right: this had become a war, and there had been casualties. Hopefully, they could prevent it from further escalation. For now, though, it was in the hands of Raven and Jinx. He had to admit, they were an unlikely but effective pair.

All this considered, Bruce still hated sitting on the sidelines, but there was little else to do. Their part would come soon enough, when it came time to make statements. Oddly enough, he—typically known for staying out of the limelight—would be the primary spokesperson. Along with J’onn, they
would focus upon the humanitarian aid for the ill-treated youths and try to downplay any inflammatory reactions.

“We’ll be ready. ...How is Jinx?”

“She’s fine, now. They hadn’t time to do anything to her before I arrived. More accurately, the Warden wasted all his potential time for abuse while gloating at my mate.”

“I assume you want to get back to her.”

“Yes.”

He hadn’t expected anything less. Batman was surprised they’d managed to keep even half her attention this long. Those two still appeared to be in their ‘honeymoon phase.’ Today was probably going to make Raven and Jinx very popular; it seemed unlikely they would get any peace in the near future. To that end, Bruce wondered just how involved Jinx intended to become with the fallout of the IMRO. That young woman excelled at utterly obliterating preconceived notions about her, so it was impossible to tell.

Dick had mentioned Jinx had an interest in speaking with him sometime. Bruce decided he might just take her up on that offer. If nothing else, he could learn more about her. He always made a point to gather any useful information he could.

Quickly ensconced in her own energy, Raven’s soul-self shrank out of existence—probably to reappear out of nowhere in ways that even the Dark Knight sometimes envied.

With the Flash’s help, it had taken almost no time to set up the relief aid right on the edge of the cement circle Raven had laid down. He was very clear with everyone when he said no one was to mar the cement or set up anything on it; he had no idea what might interfere with the spell and the last thing he wanted was to send the entire facility crashing to the ground.

Five minutes later, they had finished moving the site closer to the planned exit. The media was definitely glad to have a closer look at things. With zoom lenses aplenty, cameras snapped and recorded, and several eager reporters were pitching their opening statements as they all waited with baited breath. It wasn’t often one saw what equated to a floating castle—especially one that had been an underground lair. They had been promised any minute that something enormous and momentous was about to happen.

When a hushed murmur went across the media, Batman paused from his survey of the area and turned his eyes to the IMRO. At the neck of the tram shaft stood a pale figure in white; it was hard to see more at this distance without his cowl’s zoom lens, but it wasn’t necessary. He knew what he was seeing: the shock of pink at the top told him perfectly. Jinx had finally made the scene.

The young woman looked out across the expanse of land—both the hole and the broad platform leading down to them—for several moments. He heard a cacophony of clicking cameras, but there was hushed silence as they all waited for her to do something. In the ensuing events, Bruce would later reflect that Jinx didn’t really do much of anything to strike awe into the crowd. Raven had taken that upon herself and done a stunning job.

Instead, Jinx merely looked over her shoulder and nodded, then moved aside as a mass of people emerged from the tram shaft out onto the grass. They slowly began a hesitant descent along the grassy, earthen ramp-way to the relief site. Jinx stayed near the top, ushering out more and more. The
mass, children to a one, flowed out as a river of varying colors... but all clad in the same white as Jinx.

Somewhere in this procession, Raven floated out of the shaft and ahead of the troupe, like a flying shepherd to lead them the rest of the way down. Some of them had clear inhuman traits, which only brought the point home that these were Metahumans or otherwise Extra-Normals. Batman’s jaw tightened; the sight of it sickened him, because despite the myriad differences each child held, he knew what he would find in common among them all. Beneath their prison garb—because that’s exactly what the minimum-coverage, white uniforms were—would be numbers permanently stained into their backs. Each tattoo was a reference number to an inventory list of tortures and abuses upon a young, fragile psyche.

Bruce had thought about killing, before. He had dreamed of it and been tempted by it every time he faced one of the more sadistic rogues of Gotham. Sometimes, it was difficult for him to grasp that concept he held so dear. There were times, when it came to the Joker or Scarecrow or Zsasz... when they actively tried to wrench away his oath from his steel-fingered clutch. Somehow, over the years, he had found it within himself to pull back.

Seeing these children as they meandered silently and numbly down the hill after Raven was as strong a blow as having lost Jason. He felt it like a burning knife twisting in his gut, boiling his insides with rage and hate. It was times like this that he couldn’t even muster up the will to censure Raven for her actions. Bruce couldn’t have done what she did... but sometimes he wished he could. In fact, if he were honest with himself, Bruce would even admit that he was relieved that he didn’t have to fight himself over it—that she took that weight off his shoulders. He was glad they were gone. Other parts of him stung guiltily over feeling that way, but those parts likewise lacked the will and volume to overpower that bitter, grim satisfaction.

Instead of dwelling on that matter, he instead focused on the necessities to help these children. If he could focus enough on that, he wouldn’t have to think about the darker events of today. It was a different kind of sacrifice for his conscience to make... and by far an easier one.

-=Kamala=-

Jinx kept her eyes on the flow of freed prisoners as they passed her, her mind slowly wrapping around the concept of the current events. This exodus was something she could have only dreamed about in the vaguest of ways years ago—or even just a few months ago. Yet here it was. Her past finally had resolved itself, and not just partially in the way that she accepted so that she could cope with the memories in those rocky years after Mike and Baran had found her. This was the end of the IMRO. Kamala blinked away her disbelief, focusing instead on the cement canopy of the tram rail that slowly exposed more and more Extra-Normals...

Some of them weren’t quite children anymore. Some of them were around her age, resided in the middle of their teens, or had just exited those years. Some were older than her by several years—Rohan at least was over 25, possibly one of their first incarcerated. There was so much time missed, Kamala realized. In the seven years that she had used to build her life... people like that green-skinned kid with the leafy, brown hair passing her by were losing their lives, one day at a time. Kamala tried not to think about it, tried not to feel guilty for escaping. She couldn’t have saved them back then... and probably would have had a Hell of a time mounting an assault on this place.

‘I know you wouldn’t have left them behind, Kamala. You didn’t have a choice. If you hadn’t gotten out, or been recaptured, none of this would have ever come out,’ Raven reasoned in her mind.
‘And I guess it’s a good thing I didn’t do anything too early. I can only imagine what would have happened if they had been put under Blood’s control... They would’ve... ...’

Kamala trailed off, visions of that level of tragedy assaulting her mind almost against her will.

‘Jinx, don’t think about it. It didn’t happen and you came through it just fine.’

The pink-haired mercenary nodded and refocused on the children. That green kid looked about 14, and kind of willowy. The sun finally beat down upon him and he paused to turn his head up to it. She had seen that reaction too many times to count in the past few minutes. Then his head dropped to stare at the ground—real ground, earthen and grassy beneath his feet. Then he knelt and bent over, and slithered into the earth. The grass hadn’t even been disturbed.

Breaking away from her post, she wandered over to where he had been. It wouldn’t be good if he’d just... dissolved or something! In the next moment, however, he sprung up out of the ground, less a pale asparagus and more a lush, coniferous green. The brown mop on his head now appeared more like a peeling sycamore than scraggly mass of matted plates. The boy then dove into the earth again as if it was a refreshing pool and practically swam through the earth alongside everyone else.

Kamala glanced over the edge of the earthen ramp, ‘Do me a favor and watch for the Dryad, make sure he doesn’t fall out the underside of this bridge?’

‘The Dryads were female.’

‘Whatever,’ Kamala thought with a roll of her eyes.

Kamala wandered back to the grassy spot just after the tramway’s cleanly amputated section. The minutes passed and things progressed satisfactorily. They were about halfway done with this little parade, then they could move onto the fourth floor.

So far, the procession was going well and she could see some of them finally reaching the various tents set up to shade them from the sun. She’d already seen one or two fliers who had taken to the air. Raven had guided those ones to the tents before they could just fly off in some random direction. Many of them were pale from lack of sunlight, and the sudden intensity of the afternoon sun could well have burned them badly.

Some of them didn’t have that problem, Jinx reflected as she spotted a girl who couldn’t have been more than seven—a recent addition, likely—making her way up the tram shaft. Jinx’s first thought was ‘Drow.’ Her brain was on a fantasy kick, apparently. Even so, it matched: the girl had pitch skin and short, pale, cinder-like curls.

As the girl broke out into the sunlight, she also broke out into flames. Little motes of candle-like fire lit upon her skin. The longer she stood in the sun, the more flames burst out over her body. Her clothes practically vaporized into a sooty film that flaked away in the sudden, heat-induced updraft. Jinx recoiled as she felt the atmosphere reaching scorching levels and noticed the procession halt. Likewise, the tide of escapees trickled to a halt and a space opened around the girl as she conflagrated.

“Shit!” Kamala hissed, holding a hand up in front of her face to keep her eyes from drying out in the sudden heated waves, “Raven—elemental! Need some help up here!”

The grass was browning around the little firestarter and the earth starting to dry. The girl stepped back into the shade of the tramway, looking both angry and like she wanted to cry. Possibly, she already was, if the motes of steam around her crimson eyes were any indication. As curls of heated
air rolled upward around the girl, Jinx approached her.

“Hey there, Charcoal,” she said with easy reassurance, trying to get the girl to calm down, “Relax; we’ll get you out of here. Looks like you’re a little solar-powered, huh? Don’t worry, we have some people who can deal with that.”

Just then, Raven floated over. It was a moment’s work to provide a temporary solution. In one smooth motion, Raven slipped out of her cloak and settled it over the girl, then pulled the hood up over. Making sure the brooch fastened a bit tighter due to the young girl’s slight frame, her mate looked to her. The cloak, Kamala knew, was enchanted with a protection against fire. She had never asked why or how it got that way, but it was... that made it perfect for the situation. Hopefully, it blocked enough sunlight to keep the girl extinguished.

“Maybe we should introduce her to Hot Spot; he probably has some tips for fire manipulators,” Raven suggested.

“Oh, I’ve heard of him—saw him in action a time to two, I think. That might be a good idea.”

The small pyro moved hesitantly into the sun, but—thankfully—didn’t burst into flames. The eyes were barely visible, and her black skin fairly disappeared into the shadows cast by the cloak. Jinx patted her on the head and tilted her head toward the camp they’d set up.

“Looks like you’re good to get outta this place.”

Clutching the cloak tightly about her frame, the young girl moved down the grass path. The cloak was rather long on her and a third of it dragged along the grass behind her. The congestion the slight pause had created eased up and the flow of escaping refugees resumed. Jinx let out a small sigh; this was going to be a long and trying day, but it was definitely worth it.

It was nearing 1930, local time, and they were back inside the IMRO. Already, they had evacuated the fourth floor and Dark Way was tending to them. Now, as they worked their way through the cram-filled third floor, Kamala was feeling just a little irked. She wasn’t going to stop until every one of these cells was clear. There was no way in Hell that she was going to let these poor souls linger inside this place even one night more.

“All I’m saying, Kamala, is that you should take a break. You don’t have to stop; if you want it cleared tonight, we’ll do it tonight.” Raven sighed and looked at her, clearly seeing the lines of fatigue Kammie knew showed starkly upon both her posture and her expression. “You still need to eat something. If you’re going to power through this, you’ll need the energy.”

“Thirty-sixty-five... occupied,” Michael called out.

It didn’t take her mate long to direct the young man out and toward the end of the hallway, after which she turned to face Jinx.

The hex-caster relented, “I’ll eat with the next group before they go up.”

“Thirty-sixty-six... occupied.”

Kamala moved forward to motion for the man inside the cell. He looked at her, assessed her for several long seconds. Finally, he shuffled out beyond her and toward Rohan, who waited with five others; the large Meta would escort them up to the ballroom in those groups of ten, by now an established process, which was working well for them. Even so, according to the manifest Michael
held, this floor would be time-consuming. There were people occupying nearly every cell in the third floor so far, unlike the bottom two floors. Michael had suggested that the second floor would probably be sparse, but the first floor would be similar to this one.

Even though it tore at her heart to see those deadened or haunted eyes in every cell, she forced herself to keep going. It was probably better for everyone involved just to get it all done in one fell swoop. Kamala knew that if she took a break, she might not be able to muster up the courage to see it all through—and she needed to finish her business with the IMRO. If she didn’t, it would forever taunt her...

They worked mostly quietly, and often silently. Jinx needed few words to get the ex-prisoners moving. Having spent a few years in silence here, she had learned how to convey a lot with fleeting glances. In her first few months of freedom, she was nigh silent around most people, including Baran and Mike. Her verbal answers were sparing, and she would leave as much as she could to non-verbal cues. The three HIVE Academy enrollees had learned to read one another. It took time for Kamala not to fear breaking the silence... and once that stigma was gone, she spoke in volume and volumes. Still, even after she began talking, those non-verbal cues merely grew as they shared life or death experiences.

She knew how to be earnest, how to project it with her entire body. It wasn’t a trick; one had to do it truthfully. She couldn’t really explain it, though. It just worked. That was probably why it was easier for her to coax out the prisoners than Raven. Her mate was a very reserved creature most of the time.

“Thirty-one-nineteen... empty,” Michael droned on, “Thirty-one-twenty... ...reserved?”

The light still flickered, just as it always had for the last year or so she spent in it. Her eyes drifted upward along the doorframe; the number 3120 engraved on a plaque above the cell. It was just as tiny as she remembered it. There was the solid, rectangular bed; and there the dingy, porcelain sink; and there the squat, steel toilet. The slight hum of that flickering, jaundiced light numbed her brain...

She had used that droning sound to tune things out; she had learned meditation here as a necessity—a way to keep from going crazy. It also helped when she needed to get her mind off cigar burns and whip tears.

She remembered days spent on her stomach, gauze swathing her back and making her feel like a turtle, while she listened to that hum. Kamala remembered the detached feeling of tears on her cheeks, a muted sensation because her mind was so far away—contemplating things she had no words to describe. Now she had words for those things... that place she went in her head that told her she would be okay. She still used it in divination; it was a mental realm of commune—or something like it—with the Urge. This room was where she learned to trust that sense, where she became an Agent of Chaos.

It was also the room that haunted some of her worst nightmares of years past.

“Jinx... Kamala—stop.”

The arms around her snapped Jinx back to reality, and she found herself blinking rapidly. Her eyes felt dry and stung as she did so, as though she hadn’t closed them for quite some time. Raven was holding her back. Kamala hadn’t even been aware she had been walking into the cell.

“You don’t have to do this. There’s nothing in there for you to find,” Raven insisted.

Jinx swallowed almost convulsively and pressed backward and into Raven’s embrace. Her mate understandingly took them a few steps away from that awful enclosure. Kammie drew in a startlingly deep breath, only then realizing how stifling and oppressive the air felt around the cell. Had she
really spent four years here—surrounded by that?

“She gonna be okay?”

Michael’s voice right next to her instead of down the hall nearly made her jump out of her skin. When she turned her belligerent, stony stare upon him, he cringed and took a half step back. It was an old, stubborn expression; one she had adopted in this place after she had killed that child-molesting fucker. Its unflinching nature had unnerved more than a few guards—Michael included, apparently. However, he seemed to recover quickly and the look of concern returned.

She turned her eyes away from him, but they wound up anchored on the cell again and she was finding it almost impossible to drag them away. Finally, she shook her head to clear it of the past and forced herself to move out of Raven’s arms and beyond her—... beyond the cell.

“I’m fine. Let’s just move on...”

She could feel their worried gaze buffeting her back, but she didn’t want to look back—not when that cell and its thick atmosphere still resided with all its ominous presence. It had a stare of its own, unshakable as hers. It even had arms, and she didn’t want it latching onto her again with the suffocating grasp of its cold, heavy fingers. Thankfully, mercifully, Raven had been there to pull her out of its reach.

-=Raven=-

Raven watched as Kamala paced farther from the cell that had once imprisoned her. This was hard—too hard—but she knew better than to suggest they stop, now. She had already gotten Jinx to concede to a meal break. It was likely going to be the one and only break her mate took tonight. She would have to be there to support Kammie without taking over. Raven understood the things one needed to do on one’s own.

She brushed against Jinx’s mind, sending waves of her encouragement and love like a warm breeze into the girl’s mind to thaw the icy apprehension that cell had glaciated across her soul. This place would not take Kamala from her—not after she had slain the monsters and Kamala was as free to walk out as simply any of these children could. Kamala had left this place once and it would be a cold day in the Eighth Hell before she let it take her mate back.

Raven moved after Jinx, passing her by and stopping by the next cell. Jinx wasn’t looking at her—simply staring down the hallway, to its end just past the 200th cell. Kamala paid little attention to anything else, but she could sense the overwhelming sensations begin to ebb from Jinx as the woman’s focus returned. Raven sighed and glanced to Michael. With a tilt of her head, she motioned toward the cell on her side of the hall.

Michael nodded and slowly resumed their liberations, “Thirty-one-twenty-one... occupied.”

The demi-Demon let a taciturn girl with inky drapes of hair and skin as grey as her own float off toward the tents after a cursory once-over. The girl’s skin looked rough like granite, but she floated like a phantom. The serious expression didn’t fit on the 11-year-old, but she knew better than to do more than she already had—which wasn’t much. Escorting the milky-eyed girl down was as far as the girl was willing to allow. The girl wasn’t blind and read cues off her body language more than actually listened to anything Raven said. The empath could feel the quiet rebelliousness in the girl’s
mind; this one still had some spirit left in her.

A mass of black moved into the corner of her vision without sound. The mystic Titan turned to face the Bat. She could sense his concern—that ever-present wish for well-being that she had long since associated with the man’s mind—and saw that his gaze was directed out toward the steady stream of refugees.

“How is she holding up?”

“She’ll manage, one way or another,” Raven answered with a careful non-answer; neither of them missed the uncertainty in that reply.

“This group... they were from her floor.”

As astute as ever, he picked out the very problem that had plagued Kamala only an hour ago. At least he had the tact not to mention the tattoo. Raven wouldn’t say she wasn’t worried, but she also wouldn’t tell him she had been worried for Kamala’s sanity for a few brief moments. Her mate had stared into that particular abyss, confronted the beast that stared back, and pulled away. It might have taken some support from Raven, but Kamala hadn’t collapsed in on herself.

“Yes.”

“She may need counseling after this is over.”

Raven shook her head, “She made it through Blood’s schemes and mental abuse... What she needs is family. Jinx told me about the HIVE Alumni. I can’t even express just how closely knit they are. Leave her to me and to them... she’ll heal on her own if she has that support.”

“Funny you should mention the HIVE Alumni,” the strange inflection of his voice made her scrutinize his emotional calm and placid expression, “Oracle just informed me that SFO just got a charter for 237 passengers on a private jet listed under one of HIVE’s shell companies. It’s departing for Gaya Airport in three hours.”

Raven graced him with a small smile, “I should have known they wouldn’t let her face this alone. We’re looking at a very large class/family reunion.”

It felt good to know that her mate’s family would be here. While Mikron, Baran, and she would see Jinx through, it never hurt to have help sitting in the wings. That reassurance did much to lift the weight off her shoulders. Kamala would convalesce quicker and more completely when surrounded by all those she cared for—and those that cared for her.

“We’re looking at a rather large conglomeration of Extra-Normals in a single location. The ‘HIVE Kids’ have a reputation for... boisterousness.”

Raven sighed. “Look at them. More than that: listen.” She motioned out across the masses under the shade of the tents. The only murmurs of sound came from the Dark Way staff and relief aid workers. The silence for so many individuals—now counting past a thousand—was unnerving. “This silence was beaten into them. This place could use some noise.”

Batman paused, and then offered a shadow of a smile, “Maybe you’re right. Let’s just try to keep it to a dull roar.”

Raven returned his smile with a smirk.
It had taken a while, but they were all out. It was now a quarter to 11, the emptying of the facility having taken quite a bit longer than she had expected. Jinx hadn’t changed out of her white clothing the entire time. She knew that the news crews were keying into Kamala’s presence, by then. Every time the white-clad, pink-haired woman appeared, more refugees came out of that place.

It caused quite a stir with the media when Jinx started down the grassy ramp, her body silhouetted against the darkened skies. Raven had set up lights along the earthen bridge once evening had set in; Jinx was a ghostly figure in her descent, trailing after the last of the ex-prisoners by a good 20 meters.

The various news groups were chomping at the bit to get statements. As it was, they had quite a few video clips of Jinx—taking whatever they could, likely with maximum zoom on their highest definition cameras through their most powerful lenses. That was one stipulation they had all agreed upon from the get-go: the media was not to be anywhere close to the refugees until they instilled some level of stability. Thankfully, Batman and the others were taking point and fielding questions for now. Raven had sent a telepathic message to J’onn that Jinx wouldn’t be giving any statements unless she felt so inclined—and not before tomorrow.

Tonight, Kamala was too raw and hurting. Mikron and Baran had taken her aside to get her into something else other than those minimal white clothes. The visible trappings of that place would be the first to go. They would have to destroy the outward sign of the IMRO, symbolically sever it from these souls. Later, once they had removed the most superficial of sins, it would be possible to focus on the far more insidious wounds—both those upon their bodies and those hidden deeper within their minds.

When she returned, Raven would take Kamala and hide the hex-caster from everyone. Kamala could break apart then—could let go of that tight control on her anguish and despair and hope and relief... Her mate wanted to let go, but wouldn’t do it where anyone might see. After the catharsis found its completion, Jinx would pull herself together and would likely be stronger than ever.

Her mate was nothing if not resilient.

They didn’t return to the hotel, but rather remained in one of the thousands of tent-dormitories that had been set up across the field. As night hung heavy across the plain, far heavier emotions pervaded the camp. It was stifling, but Raven endured it. Jinx wouldn’t leave this place until she was satisfied that things were going well, and Raven wasn’t about to leave her alone to that burden.

It was almost 1 AM, but Kamala wasn’t asleep. Raven could feel the emotions whirling around the girl’s mind and she held her tightly. Kammie’s body was tense and stiff like a sack of stones. There was nothing Raven could do, she knew, as her mate slowly prepared to let her defenses down—allow herself to hurt. It wasn’t going to be a gentle dismantling; they would collapse like the Walls of Jericho. At length, Jinx spoke.

“I hate them.”

“Yes.”

“They’re dead... gone, yet I still hate them. I try to look beyond them and their petty thoughts and actions... but all I see when I do that is that awful, fucking building full of cells and sweatboxes and fucking ballrooms.”

Kamala began to shiver, her breathing beginning to stutter. Her voice then held a wavering quality, though it was no less adamant to continue talking. Despite the hate that Raven could indeed sense,
the greater portion of Kammie’s being consisted of a soul-deep ache. It only grew over time, like the
throbbing burn of lungs deprived of oxygen. Jinx was drowning in despair.

“I can’t help but think of all the faces I’ve seen, today. This isn’t who they are! It’s not supposed to
be this way! ...I just want to scream at them, to get them to see. I want to tell them, ‘Look! Look at
what they took from us! Look at what they’ve turned us into!’” The trembling became more
pronounced, Jinx’s body finally slackening. Raven pulled her tighter, as though trying to merge them
into one being and share the amassed pain. “It won’t change anything. I can’t get them to react. They
don’t talk, they barely move without someone directing them. ...It took them ten minutes to start
eating even after we passed out the food; I could just tell they were waiting for some guards to pour
into the room and--...

“They’re dead, but we’re still hurting! I hate them for what they’ve done! They broke so many of
us... I hate them so much!”

Raven kissed Kamala’s temple as her mate cried. There were no wails or, really, any vocalizations.
After her tirade, Kamala just went quiet. Aside from an occasional sniff or a hitching breath, her
mate’s sorrow was silent. It was something she would have to remember; that Jinx would grieve
mutely. Raven was familiar with that method, it being her own.

It would take time—and time alone—to heal these recently reopened wounds. She wanted to do
more, but it just wasn’t possible. Some efforts would not be accepted or appreciated. Raven hated
them, too, for making Jinx hurt again. She didn’t care how necessary this pain was; it still made her
want to kill them all over again. There was, however, one thing that might help...

“Kamala... they’re not as broken as you think. Yes, they’re hurt... and yes, it will take a long time to
ger them through their inner turmoil, but I could feel it. Right now, they’re just... in shock. They’re
going through the motions until their minds can catch up with everything that’s happened today. It
probably won’t be long until we begin to see the first, true reactions.

“Some of them have already started... but they do it quietly, cautiously,” Raven whispered as though
it were a secret. Her thoughts traveled to the phantasmal girl from earlier. “Many of
them are strong—like you. They’ll pull through... It’ll just take time.”

-=Lois=-

Lois drove out to the refugee camp in her beige rental; using the left side of the road was unfamiliar,
but she would manage. In the passenger seat, Jimmy slept obliviously. It was unavoidable. It was
better to get out there bright and early; the sun wasn’t even up yet, but news could happen at any
point and she wanted to see this unfold personally. This was possibly the biggest thing to happen in
the whole Extra-Normal Relations category since the formation of the Justice League. The Press list
was extremely exclusive, and screened personally by the founding members of the Justice League, if
her guess was right.

There were only a handful of other journalists on-site at the moment—most local, but more like her
would be in within the hour. Lois gently shook Jimmy awake and they made their way quietly out to
the staff-side of the camp. The Press wasn’t allowed into the refugee area, which was no surprise.
Nobody wanted to upset the likely fragile calm of the recently freed prisoners from what sounded
like a group of militant supremacists. Of course, there was also the fear of just what might happen if
someone upset one of those children: what their powers were; what they could do; and all the other
ugly considerations that, unfortunately, were actually pertinent concerns. She wouldn’t be the one to
voice those; nobody here wanted to be painted as the ‘bad guy.’
As she milled about looking for something significant, she took a bite of her breakfast bar. She wasn’t really expecting much this early. There were innumerable tents, but most of them were beyond the restrictive tape that prevented non-personnel. Somewhere on this side of the tape, however, were the Titans and a few Justice League members. As she gazed out across the camp that had been separated into orderly rows, she morbidly felt like she was walking through lines of giant headstones. The soft, grassy ground was a counterpoint to the stark, sterile, white tents. As she came into a common area—little more than a clearing between the sectors of tents, she found breakfast already heating on hot-plate-laden tables for the masses of relief aid staff required for this effort. It was open to the Press, too, but she would do with her breakfast bar for now.

It was a little hard to see, but the sky was starting to lighten. It was only as she glanced out behind the breakfast buffet tables that she noticed a lone, caped figure floating cross-legged near a tent. It was Raven of the Titans, the very one that had provided quite a stir as she lifted that looming, ex-subterranean structure out of the ground yesterday. Lois didn’t know much more about the woman other than she was a Titan... the mystery woman of the group with an eclectic set of powers that, to this day, remained poorly defined in the eyes of the public.

She was about to draw Jimmy’s attention to the woman when another surprise came. Appearing freshly showered, a young woman sauntered over to Raven. She had pink hair sticking up in two distinct spires at a vaguely upward-and-back direction; it was still damp, but contained by two black bands. Yesterday, this girl could only be seen in the distance, but everyone—herself included—had speculated upon her identity. Today, the pale Metahuman garbed herself in a deep blue skirt, dark grey tank top..., and apparently some hefty platform boots.

The girl was turned away from her, and she could see a set of four, black numbers only slightly obscured by her tank and bra strap. Jimmy had shared some of his photos with her on the tablet. The zoom photos he took of some of the refugees contained the same tattoos. This girl seemed to be one of the refugees, but why wasn’t she in the other part of the camp? She was also apparently some sort of leader among the group—obviously more expressive than the somber, haunted countenances she had seen in Jimmy’s shots.

The pinkette stilled next to Raven and reached out. She tilted Raven’s head back and bent down to kiss her. Lois blinked in surprise, and then glanced at a mostly-asleep Jimmy, who was more interested in the breakfast spread. This private moment didn’t need to be interrupted, so she didn’t draw attention to it. When Lois looked back to the two girls, they were still kissing against a lightening horizon. Finally, the Meta pulled away and settled herself on the ground. Almost as an afterthought, the young woman reached up and put a hand on one of Raven’s knees. In response, Raven slowly floated down to land beside the girl.

Dawn brightened the plain, once more revealing the bright, green grasses in all their vibrance. The two girls sat and basked in the sunrise for several minutes before the girls stood. The pink-haired young woman spoke briefly with Raven, and then moved into the tent beside them. Moments later, she returned with an oddly shaped case. Raven followed her, and Lois pulled Jimmy from the breakfast tables to follow, despite his half-awake complaints.

They were swift approaching the refugee area, where she would be barred access. However, the girls merely moved settled down not far beyond the tape. The girl removed a sitar from the case and began to pluck out a sedate tune with a gentle crest of notes. After a few bars, the Metahuman began to sing. Once the lyrics repeated, she realized it was more a chant than anything. On the third repetition, she began trying to pick out the phrases. Of course, she didn’t speak Hindi, so she didn’t have a clue what was being said.

“Om bhūr bhuvah svah; tāt savitūr vāreṇiyām; bhārgo devāsya dhīmahi; dhīyo yō naḥ"
As the girl continued the mantra, she slowly gained volume in voice and on sitar. The instrument’s notes also became more intricate. “Oṃ bhūraḥ svah; tāṁ savitūr váreṇiyaṁ; bhárgo devasya dhīmahi; dhíyo yó naḥ pracodāyāt...”

This continued for several repeats, but not much else changed in the song. The atmosphere, however, was slowly transforming. From the various tents, several of the children from the day before—some still wearing those whites—emerged and approached the chanting bard. Some of them were young... too young for Lois to bear the thought of them being in some terrible prison underground. Others were older, but not much older... The more repetitions the pink-haired girl made, the more listeners gathered. Jimmy was snapping photographs; she hadn’t realized, but she had instinctively depressed the record button on her digital recorder.

The silence of yesterday carried over today, and though the children were creating quite a crowd, Lois was unnerved at just how little sound they made. Children weren’t meant to be this quiet. They were meant to be running around, getting under foot, and completely missing the concept of an inside voice. These kids didn’t seem to have voices, and the thought made Lois cringe. This young woman, however, hadn’t lost her voice...

Ludicrously, her mind went to The Lorax, and the Lorax’s first, solemn lines: ‘I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees. I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues.’ From there, her mind made unpleasant correlations. Shaking her head from the Seussian reverie, she refocused upon the scene unfolding. In the moments of her woolgathering, some of the staff had come out to this early morning Siren’s call. The mass of children continued to grow, and she could see them trickling from their tents even in the distance. Some of the workers, Indian of descent, were also singing along with the girl, now. The camp was coming alive to the mantra.

“Oṃ bhūraḥ svah; tāṁ savitūr váreṇiyaṁ; bhárgo devasya dhīmahi; dhíyo yó naḥ pracodāyāt...”

“She has a certain charisma, doesn’t she?” commented a deep voice beside her.

Jimmy dropped his camera with a gasp. Lois likewise jolted when she saw just who stood beside her. It was none other than the Dark Knight. How the Hell had he snuck up on her? He dressed in all black; they were surrounded by white tents! Shaking off her dismay—somewhat used to superheroes being there one moment and gone at super-speed the next—she regathered herself enough to respond.

“Batman... Yes, I suppose she does. Who is she?”

“That seems to be the question on everyone’s minds, lately. I imagine she’ll let people know in her own time, in her own way. She can be very forthcoming—when she feels like it. I’ve been meaning to speak with her, myself, before I return to Gotham.”

Lois looked back at the girl. She wondered if garnering the Bat’s attention was a good thing or a bad thing—or both. Jimmy finally bent down to pick up his camera. Mindful of her own device’s continued recording, she turned to get more of a statement from superhero sleuth, but found that he had already disappeared.

‘Figures.’

-=Bruce=-
The black and green figure hovering over the camp heralded Bruce’s retreat to the command center tent. His grim expression—somewhat more perturbed than normal—was perfectly readable. The HIVE Extraction Operatives still milling about the tent moved out of his way when he had stalked to the communications array. He fixed them with a stare.

“Out.”

None of them needed to be told twice, and left him to his privacy. Batman flipped the localized sound-dampener on the arcade-box sized device, then keyed into the Watchtower. Thankfully, for the nerves of all the Watchtower staff, Batman found himself glaring at Superman immediately.

“What can I do for you?”

“I don’t appreciate being worked around.”

“Is this a lecture or do you want me to contribute by asking what you’re talking about?”

Bruce’s glare intensified, “I’m not blind. First Lois, now John. Are you actively trying to antagonize them, Clark? There was a very specific purpose to my chosen team and my suggested Press recommendations.”

“Lois can be trusted to be impartial.”

“But can you trust her not to go for the juicy details when they’re being waved in her face?” By the look on the Boy Scout’s face, it was clear that he wasn’t seeing the problem. He sighed and decided to give Clark the benefit of a doubt. “Jinx is just this side of unstable, Clark. I’m not sure how much it will take to make her snap. She’s strong, but everyone has their limits. The IMRO has pushed her very close to that limit...

“Can you tell me that Lois would ignore prize material just to spare Jinx’s feelings? That girl hides it well, but it’s clear to see she’s hurting—and still healing. All it will take is one careless comment, one wrong question. She’s too much of an unknown for us to reliably predict how she might react.”

“...I trust her, Bruce. She may be ambitious, but she’s not heartless. You’ve seen her go after Luthor and others—and I’ll admit, she knows how to play hardball and sometimes gets herself into trouble... but you haven’t seen her on other stories. She can be very compassionate; Jinx isn’t the enemy—she won’t treat the girl like that.”

“I hope so. Because God only knows what Raven might do if something happens to her mate. We’ve already seen the level of dedication she has... as well as what she can do with a concentrated effort.” His expression didn’t lighten, because this was only half of the issue. “And just what were you thinking bringing Green Lantern here?”

“You may not be aware of it, but tensions are running high around the world. He’s there to make sure nobody does anything foolish while your team tends to the children. Some might consider this an opportunity to get rid of more than a few problems since they’re all clustered in a rather contained, isolated area.”

“I’m aware of that, but you do know that John is listed on the Primary Containment team for Raven’s powers under Operation: Unkindness, don’t you? ...Because Jinx does. I told you before: She knows who organized the operation; She knows how everyone voted; She knows everyone’s roles. His presence here will not escape her notice.”

“John is not there in that capacity. Besides, Unkindness is defunct—years defunct.”
“Not in Jinx’s eyes. Dick said she described it as a gun to the back of Raven’s head.”

That brought about a grimace from Superman. Batman needed him to understand the... the level of suspicion—bordering on paranoia—with which the HIVE Kids operated. Jinx in particular was a rather intense case.

“She’s afraid that if you feel Raven should ever overstep her bounds in any capacity, that many of the League will start thinking back on that operation and begin looking at it as a viable solution.”

“That was... an extreme plan based off of a worst case scenario. It was never meant to be taken lightly,” Superman rebutted, “We planned it meticulously, Bruce, and yes—we even voted on its use. However, we also voted on whether or not it should be used.”

“Desperation is a powerful tool, Clark. What would it take for you to authorize that operation? Just how bad would things have to go before you drew that line? What constitutes ‘too far?’”

Superman was silent, but his expression now as stubborn and grim as Batman’s.

“If you don’t know, then that means it could happen with an uncertain level of perceived threat. That uncertainty is what Jinx fears.”

“That’s a rather extreme level of paranoia.”

“So was Operation: Unkindness.”

Clark gave a huff of exasperation.

“Okay, let’s look at this from another angle: How are we assuaging those fears? We’re surrounding her and Raven with League members during an emotional and politically charged environment. Some of those members were even part of the plot to assassinate her newlywed wife. To me, that sounds like we’re maneuvering into position. Or maybe we’re trying to see if they’ll crack under pressure.”

“John is just there to protect those children. He would have been called to keep the order under his standing directives from Oa, anyway. Honestly, Raven has nothing to do with his presence there. Unkindness isn’t even on his mind; he’s focused on the outside threats, not the drama unfolding from within.”

“Extra-Normal relations aren’t good. Someone might consider this a good time to take care of a large number of their problems with an impersonal ‘hello’ from a tactical strike. There’s even a large number of super-villains who might see this as an opportunity to sweep in and steal some of the more ‘promising’ Metahumans over there for recruitment or brainwashing.”

“I had considered it, yes. Unfortunately, Jinx and Raven’s mentality on the League make this a very fragile balancing act.”

Superman was silent for a few moments, obviously mulling over everything. Batman had weeks to consider this problem, and he still had few answers. It both impressed and vexed him at the wealth of assets and problems Jinx brought to everyone.

“...Is Jinx really that bad off?”

“I wish I could say for certain. The only thing I’m currently certain of is that I can’t rely upon anything I’ve heard about her... not even from her own mouth. Dick mentioned that she’s referred to herself as an Agent of Chaos. Sometimes the things she does won’t make any sense—even to her;
she’s driven by an unseen, unfathomable power beyond our comprehension.”

“An ‘Agent of Chaos?’” Clark frowned, “Does she have any ties to Mordru?”

“No. To hear her tell it, she works for a higher authority—but on a smaller scale.”

“So, as you say, we can’t be certain of anything.”

Bruce shrugged, “She trusts in that power. It gives her strength to endure what might break a lesser person. That faith could see her through...”

“But we can’t count on it.”

“As she would say: you have to make your own luck.”

~§~END CHAPTER 9~§~

Author’s Note:

Hey, everyone! So we’re back on the regular schedule, and I’ve got a pile of reviews I’ve yet to touch! I’ll be getting around to those, but it might take a little time. Some of them might also be shorter than typical simply because I need to conserve some time to get everything done I need to do today. On the other hand, the fact that I have that many reviews pleases me greatly! So without further ado, let us begin...

There’s simply no good way to move large numbers of people like this. The problem isn’t in mobilizing, but in making sure not to spook the children. If you’re trying to build trust, it’s not something you can just blaze through. If it takes this much to get them to eat, then it’s hard to imagine what kind of work it would take if they just... bustled them out the door and into some other establishment. I’m not sure if they could really appreciate the difference between guards and people looking after them.

Batman gets it. It probably took him a while, and several sit-downs with Jason Blood and others, but Batman understands—at least in basic—magic and Demonic/Daemos culture. He can’t use magic and rarely has use for that knowledge, but that’s part of what being a polymath genius like him does. It’s the little minutiae that become important in times like this.

Raven is full of good will, but even among the people of Azarath, she simply has a different perception of the world. Jinx is more in-line with Raven’s thought process simply because she’s had prior experience with Daemos. She’s well-versed and it puts both Batman and Jinx in a good position to truly fathom what might be running around Raven’s head most of the time. When you try to impose arbitrary limits—like ‘human,’ ‘born on earth,’ and ‘raised on earth’—then you’re just shooting yourself in the foot. Superman, for all his alien facets, is a little too humanly indoctrinated to fully grasp Raven’s point of view. I would imagine that J’onn J’onzz (or better, M’gann M’orzz) would more understand where Raven is coming from than anyone.

She plays by the rules of this planet most days, but sometimes they just don’t make much sense to her and she can’t abide them. Raven will always do what she has to do, no matter how much it may irk authorities, governments, or even her teammates. It’s this level of forthrightness, of headstrong conviction that puts her at odds with people a lot of the time.
That said, there are some things that are universally understandable, and Raven still being extremely caught up in Jinx is one of them.

...So, these are my first major scenes with Batman’s POV. I’ve never written him before, but I’ve read a the whole of *No Man’s Land* and watched Batman’s animated series, Justice League, and JLU throughout some of my formative years. I like to think I have a solid take on him.

It’s never been that Batman doesn’t know how to kill or that Batman *can’t* kill. He won’t... but he *wants* to. Sometimes, when he’s going into Arkham to resolve some problem, he’s stated to Jim Gordon that he’s worried it will be ‘just like coming home.’ He knows he’s not stable and if he slips over the unhealthy ledge of the messiah complex he’s built, then he’ll never dig his way out of it. At which point, you’d probably be looking at something like Marvel’s Punisher.

We can already see that this is taking its toll on Kammie, but she can’t stop. She can’t stop or she won’t have the inertia to keep moving forward. She has a lot of dark contemplations and a helping of survivor’s guilt trying to wriggle its way in. Still, she’s got a solid, reliable mate there to help her through it. Still, Raven will have to respect the distance and self-reliance that’s kept Jinx going all these years. Soon, it will be time for her to comfort Kamala, but now is not that time.

And here we begin to see some of the Metahumans that will be recurring for this story. The nature elemental, the fire elemental, and the phantom girl... we’ll be seeing more of them. There’s one more, but you’ll not see that one for just a bit. These four are going to amuse and impress you in future chapters.

Kamala is also dead-set on getting these children out tonight. She absolutely cannot bear the thought of leaving them in his hell-pit one more day, even if the tormentors are all gone. It’s the least she feels that she can do for escaping all those years ago and not being able to get them out sooner. Now she will do anything and everything in her power to make sure they don’t spend one more second longer in this place that absolutely necessary to get them fed and freed.

But there are other things lying in the depths of this facility than physical horrors. Kamala probably wasn’t even thinking about it—to focused on the process of liberating more of the prisoners. But there was another kind of confrontation to be had. It’s the ghost of herself and all the mistreatment she suffered in this place, that dark cell that still rests in her soul as a part of her. That darkness will not let her go easily. It knows her, and it beckons to her. Now, face to face with its real, physical counterpart, she finds herself lured to it.

I’m... not really sure if Kamala was really trying to prove anything, here. Not that she could enter and exit, not that she could face it without flinching, not... anything like that. Perhaps, as Raven suggested, her mind conjured something that she needed to go in there to discover; some sense of self or scrap of hope that kept her going. Most terrible would be that she was merely reacting on instinct to what she’d always done, standing before this doorway: she’d entered her cell. But she won’t—can’t—find anything worthwhile in that cell, because it’s empty. She had already exited, and willfully never returned. She didn’t flinch in her sprint for freedom those years ago, she had seized the chance and run with it for all she was worth. The hope she had found, and the worthy cause of Chaos she had embraced, may have been discovered while she was within that cell... but its source wasn’t the cell. It was within her, and was never some external thing. She had bolstered herself, saved herself. Chaos merely provided her with the tools and let her find a path. Most insidiously, that cell is a *trap*. It is nothing but a dead-end path. Whatever Kamala thinks might be in there or worth finding, it’s as falsely baited as a bear trap.

Count on Batman to get this, too. Sometimes, like now, he can truly understand why a cell isn’t the answer. One might hope that he’ll take his experiences and findings from this and take a good, long
look at Arkham Asylum (maybe even Black Gate Penitentiary). Sometimes, Arkham is responsible for making the people he takes there into worse monsters than they were when they went in. The Great White Shark’s story is a good example of this.

You want to see some shit? Read Batman’s “Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth” and “Arkham Asylum: Living Hell.” You wanna know where I draw my inspiration for my Arkham stuff? Read those, then play “Batman: Arkham Asylum” and “Batman: Arkham City”... Supplement those with the treasure trove of info from the “No Man’s Land” series, and you’ve got a pretty clear view of the madness.

So the IMRO isn’t exactly Arkham. It’s not built on the screams of madness, but on the silence of hate. The Golden Rule, enforced by a whip and sweatboxes and batons. Fear and hopelessness was the establishment here, and the Warden was the best man to accomplish that. It could be said that he had no hope and no fear, and so was perfectly equipped to ferret it out wherever he found it. Kinda dark, but this place wasn’t built on fondness for one’s fellow man...

And when we step away from this awful cesspool, we’ll find that there’s someone there to help us out. As you saw, we have the whole of the HIVE Alumni coming to visit! I’m sure you’ll enjoy that. Now, I didn’t have the time or compunction to write every single character into things, but I did include a whole bunch of them in a few scenes. So you’ll be seeing them, soon!

But for now, what Kamala has is Raven. At long last, it is time for her to release most of the metaphorical demons that hold her... and embrace the Demon that’s actually here to hold her and support her in her times of weakness. Here, away from the prying eyes of others, she has the chance to finally give voice to her own feelings. I didn’t do a verbatim reference, but I did reference a line from the Bourne series. In the “Bourne Ultimatum,” Jason Bourne is confronting the newest assassin. He says “Look at us. Look at what they make you give.” These words were initially spoken by ‘The Professor’ in Bourne Identity, but Jason isn’t ready—doesn’t know or remember enough to understand the full gravity of those words.

It struck me as very pertinent, because these children don’t really understand the full gravity of what was being enforced upon them. However, now is their chance to embrace their own fates and take hold of their own lives. It may not be easy, and that is Kamala’s fear. That however hard she worked to get them out of there, that the damage may have already been done. Thankfully, there is Raven’s power of empathy to once again give Kamala that small spark of hope. We can only hope it is not, as Kain said in “Legacy of Kain: Defiance,” a ‘bitter illusion.’

Next, I bring you to the first of a few scenes featuring everyone’s favorite DC reporter from the Daily Planet: Lois Lane! Love her, hate her, she’s the lady with the questions and the recorder. Lois is a go-get-’em type of girl, but I’ve always felt she was sold short as having no tact or even being foolhardy. I never really liked that damsels-in-distress thing, however I could (and do) lampshade it. But unlike some of the Superman/Batman Adventures cartoons, where she takes a rather active role in the heroics, there’s no real enemy for her to go skulking about to find and listen to them monologue. The evil plot has been thwarted already. No, I have Lois here to do her job. She’s a reporter and actually has that vaunted journalistic integrity that divides from every other embellishing rag and rabid paparazzi asshole out there.

The bit about the Lorax was an inspired analogy that wouldn’t leave me alone, and it felt really apt.

Now... I don’t actually speak or write Hindi, so for all I know I just heinously cursed a blue-streak, but I did my best to get the authentic Gayatri mantra. If you are familiar with Hindi, and I have incorrect syntax or anything, please let me know. I would like this to be as proper as possible!

And so, Batman makes his return. Told you I’d have a few scenes with him... and we’re not done
with him, yet! Not by a long-shot!

Who here loves a good Batman vs. Superman argument?! Show of hands! ...I gotta say, I love making these two bicker. If I were a Bruce/Clark shipper, this would be my bread and butter. I’m not, so it’s neither here or there, but I am a fan of them being close friends—in as much as Bruce understands how to relate to another person. Let’s face it, the man is a finely-bred, butler pressed-and-folded bundle of traumas.

This argument works as a very clear line on how these two heroes function. Both Clark and Bruce have a great level of compassion and good will. However, Clark can be a little too hasty to believe the best in others, whereas Bruce can be a little to cynical and mistrustful.

Clark didn’t like that League Vote for *Operation: Unkindness*, but he did it because he thought it might be necessary. Once it was shown to be, as he put it, defunct... he chose to put it out of mind and probably even made a silent vow to himself not to be caught in a position like that again. He tries not to think about how close he could have come to murdering a young girl—who also happened to be their only hope. He tries not to think about the requirements he placed upon that Operation, or how they almost misjudged the situation.

Meanwhile, Bruce wants to know exactly how the situation is judged. He wants to know the requirements, the limitations, the flaws in the plan, and the results of the Operation in the event of its success or its failure. Because, as he said, if you don’t know, then it could still happen with an ‘uncertain level of perceived threat.’ And just now, he knows that Zatanna perceives plenty of threat from Raven and other Daemos.

What would it take for Raven and Zatanna to have a spat, get Zatanna all riled, and have her convince everyone that Raven had turned? Of course, Raven would defend herself... and that would merely be proof that she was turning evil. Or maybe Zatanna wouldn’t even be involved in those events. Maybe the first time Raven has to ascend to her full Arch Lord status to deal with a threat, the League overreacts to the mere sight of her and suddenly... Operation: Unkindness is looking awfully appropriate. There are plenty of reasons why having that plan is too much like having a gun pointed at someone, just as Jinx described.

Superman isn’t that cynical. But Batman knows what it’s like to have a gun pointed at you, to feel that terror and wonder who might be taken from this before its time. So, to be recursive on things and reference Amanda Waller, the Watchtower is actually a giant laser cannon perpetually pointed down.

In the end, they can agree on this: they both want this resolved gently and with minimal disruption to all parties involved. Whether or not they’re going about it the right way, nobody can know. They can only do their best, with the best of intentions. It’s all any of us can do and I think these two do it the best when working together. With Jinx, luck may not be on their side, but maybe it will help smooth over most of the wrinkles.

So! That’s that, and now I’m gonna take a break before I attempt to reply any reviews. I’ll be doing some of that probably on Wednesday and Thursday. I’ve gotta say, reading those reviews have been giving me plenty to talk about and I want to give you guys well-deserved responses, not just a rushed ‘thanks for reading.’ Anyhow... start the clock for another two weeks—I’ll see you all there!

-Lynx

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“...love will find its way / Through paths
where wolves would fear to prey...”
-Lord Byron, *The Giaour*

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**Prey Mate**

by

Lynx Klaw

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**Chapter 10**

-=Kamala=-

Jinx settled into the routine of checking on everything while assisting wherever necessary. Technically, she wasn’t needed to help out at all—she was one woman, after all. However, she saw how many eyes tracked her. She had helped more than half of these young Metas out of that Hell, and it seemed that they were placing some modicum of trust in her. They needed to know that it was safe with these strangers—ones that weren’t guards, but weren’t Metas or prisoners like them.

She had received word that the rest of the HIVE Kids were inbound; would probably be here just after lunch. Kamala couldn’t even begin to contemplate what must be going through Customs’ minds. That many *unique* individuals weren’t something Bihar had ever had to handle, and possibly would never handle again.

So, while she waited on her family, she did small things. Sometimes Jinx ferried this or that item to this or that doctor checking out some kid or another. Other times, she took information down on impromptu forms they were creating for various treatments required. She did any of a hundred tasks over the next few hours, and it was just like her. Mercenaries had to have a wide variety of skills and the ability to adapt. This was a different application of that job, but not one beyond her.

When lunchtime finally rolled around, she found herself eating quickly. She wasn’t sure if her brothers and sisters would be early, but she wanted to be free when they arrived. It might take a bit of explaining to get them to appreciate the situation fully, but she wanted to be the one giving that short briefing.

The media was crammed up to the yellow tape, everyone trying to get as much footage of the children, her, or the League as they could. After initial statements were made, very little was given to the press as everyone focused on the children. Honestly, it wasn’t terribly exciting. The work bordered on monotonous, but it needed to be done.
She eventually tuned out the media; their camera flashes and clicks no longer drew her attention—for some reason expecting one of them to be a muzzle flash at some point. Their voices turned dull and echoed distantly as they reported in various languages that melted into a verbal sludge over there, because the only important talk was happening on this side of the tape.

Having scarfed down her food, the hex-caster had meandered absently for a bit, checking that the children were eating. It still worried her that they might just stop if something spooked them. Eventually, she wound up back by her tent, where Raven was finishing up her own meal. Her mate resided on a rather large, displaced boulder—likely from Raven’s uprooting of the IMRO. Jinx joined her there, staring out over the masses of tents and considering the future held beneath them. Somehow, and she suspected Raven might have floated it into her hands just to distract her, Kamala wound up holding her sitar.

The moment she began plucking a few cords, she noticed an aggregation of kids—some still holding their meals—flocking around the rock. Okay, she could do this. It seemed more purposeful than it did back in Jump. There had never been any music at the IMRO. How many years had it been since they had heard so much as a hummed bar? The thought compacted around her heart and she felt her eyes mist just a little, but ignored it as she decided on a slow, plodding set of chords.

After a couple repetitions, she overlaid elongated bars of lyrics in a soft but carrying voice, “Darkness walks in front of you... Can’t get through... Why are you escaping... nothing?” Almost immediately, she transitioned into the chorus, her voice raising but never growing harsher. This song never really left that softness, which is why she had taken notice of it a while back. “Will you ever... see the world as I do? We’re here today... Don’t let that slip away from you.”

The next part felt pertinent in several ways she didn’t feel like analyzing in any detail; it might depress her. She could never sing while depressed; it was almost easy while angry, but depression simply stifled Jinx. Her voice always came out dull and without passion. She drew a breath and continued into the second part of the short song.

“We’re not here to crush you... Like they do... Who you were is still there... somewhere,” she sang it like an assurance to everyone, trying to pour her hope into them through the song. Raven had said they hadn’t been broken, that it would just take time. Maybe this could help in some small way. She urged them on with her voice, “Will you ever... see the world as I do? We’re here today... Don’t let that slip away from you.”

Gentle of voice, she cautioned them through the lyrics as well as from personal experience, “Alone... Don’t listen to... the voices in your head... Alone... Don’t listen to... the voices in your head...”

Kamala opened her eyes, just then becoming aware that they had closed and having no idea when she’d done so. The crowd had grown—no longer just the children. Many of the relief aid and Dark Way assistance who had taken their lunch breaks were also listening. Her eyes swept over them quietly for a moment, then moved beyond them and to her left, where she could see most of the news crew had gone silent, as well.

Jinx wasn’t sure if she was comfortable with this kind of publicity. Even in Jump, she didn’t have the kind of notoriety that this was likely to bring. Still, she wasn’t doing this for the media and they could go screw themselves as far as she was concerned. She was singing for the kids—and she pushed herself into some new material.

This one was something she had been kicking around solo; had intended to bring it up to Nin, Terry, and Darryl last week once she felt she had it down. Of course, the mission and this current debacle had put a damper on those plans. There was no reason not to debut it now.
Because the song required quite a few complicated and mixed chords—more suited to being played with multiple instruments—she slowed it down so that she could put in all the intricacies she wanted, “When this began—I had nothing to say; And I get lost in the nothingness inside of me. I was confused—And I let it all out to find; That I’m not the only person with these things in mind. Inside of me—But all that they can see the words revealed; Is the only real thing that I’ve got left to feel. Nothing to lose—Just stuck, hollow and alone; And the fault is my own, and the fault is my own.”

The chorus felt more useful and this time, she didn’t keep herself soft. Kamala belted out the lyrics clear across the camp as loudly as she wished, “I wanna heal, I wanna feel—what I thought was never real! I wanna let go the pain I’ve felt so long—Erase all the pain ‘til it’s gone. I wanna heal, I wanna feel—like I’m close to something real! I wanna find something I’ve wanted all along: Somewhere I belong!”

The song almost felt like it was ripping out of her, and Kammie surprised herself with both the vehemence and the emotion behind the song. The words came to her with new gravity and she almost wanted to stop in the middle, unable to bear actually saying the words. It was too personal, too private for so many people to hear—for them to pick it apart and use it to psychoanalyze her. However, like many things in the past 72 hours, she needed to do this; the words needed to be spoken, even if it was in the form of a song.

After she had finished, she felt Raven brushing at her mind. Soothing waves hit her and slowly drained the tension from her shoulders. Even so, she could feel the eyes of the Press and the relief aid workers and Dark Way staff and everyone on her. They weren’t a part of this, and suddenly the position became acutely uncomfortable. Kamala jumped down from the rock—on the side that put it between herself and the reporters—and meandered back to the tent she and Raven had shared last night. After stashing her sitar, she sequestered herself deep within the forest of tents.

A worried, vague questioning feeling came to her, and she bundled a small packet of thoughts toward Raven, ‘I’m fine... I just don’t want to answer any questions, right now. I don’t want to hear the comments or anything.’

‘Perhaps you should; you’re receiving some pretty high praise back this way.’

Kamala shrugged, wondering if that particular gesture had a mental equivalent—and how one might convey it, ‘Sure the vulture’s aren’t picking it over? Trying to turn it into a statement or something?’

‘On that, I can’t be sure... but Germany’s reporter is passing you off as the next American Idol.’

That made Jinx smirk a little. She continued to wander somewhat aimlessly and soon found herself entering the main tent where the command center of this whole operation sprouted up. Kamala slowed as she heard them discussing her. She supposed it was better than them discussing Raven, but she didn’t quite care to be the topic of a League discussion when she wasn’t there to defend herself if necessary. Batman was looking right at her—he hadn’t missed her entry as everyone else had.

“-some voice on her. You see how they look to her? They follow her lead like sheep to a shepherd.” Green Lantern sighed, “They don’t respond to anyone else like that. Hell, they look at me like I’m the wolf walkin’ among ‘em.”

Kamala decided it was time to speak for herself, “For good reason.” John Stewart’s shoulders convulsively bunched, but quickly relaxed as he turned around. His posture was stiff, formal..., organized. She could have picked him out of a crowd easily, “It’s rather obvious. You’re ex-military?”

The others moved from their little semi-circle, broadened to include her. It was quaint, but she still
wasn’t comfortable. They may treat her like an equal, but she knew they considered her an outsider—a wild card. It was the truth, so she didn’t let it bother her.

“Ex-marine,” John answered.

“Yeah... you’re a soldier at heart. I’ve seen you around the camp in the past couple hours. You move like a guard; body screams it.” He looked uncomfortable and shifted. For a second, it looked like the Lantern was about to put his hands behind his back, but forced them to remain at his sides in a rigid approximation of nonchalance. She motioned to the way he stood, “The set of your shoulders, the way you turn your head... And that careful way you keep your feet at shoulder width—at ease—to seem nonthreatening...? It doesn’t work.” Kamala shook her head at the futility of his gestures; it was like waving a knife around while insisting you weren’t going to hurt anyone. “You don’t walk, you patrol. You don’t check on them, you make the rounds. You’re a guard.

“...We don’t respond very well to guards.”

“You have any suggestions?” he asked.

Kamala leaned against a support post making up the large tent’s door, “Not really. I’m not the best person to ask about authority figures, obviously. And, honestly, I don’t think we should. Those kids are gonna have to face it someday, so they might as well get used to the idea that not all guards are prison guards, and even then... not all prison guards are like the IMRO. I mean, I spent some time in Jump Correctional. Those guys—they’re alright. They do their duties, and sometimes they’ll even talk to ya. Tha’s why, whenever I used to break out, I’d never lash out at the guards on my way out.

“I mean,logistically, I was gonna see ‘em again as long as the Titans were around and Blood kept sending us out on stupid heists. It didn’t pay to piss off your landlords, yeah?” The pink-haired mercenary canted her head as she regarded him. “Honestly? Just keep doing what you’re doing. Mean well, sow the seeds of good will, and treat ‘em like people. It’s more than they ever got from any guards they’ve ever known. Ya never know—some of them might come around; it’s the best we can hope for. You won’t be doing them any favors pretending to be something else...”

-=Richard=-

“Jinx,” Nightwing stepped into the conversation and redirected it, “you ever find out just what the IMRO is?”

She grinned at him in that way she had when he first asked who she was. He wondered just what she was going to shock him with next. Batman was probably the only other person to pick up on what her expression meant.

“Oh, yeah. I asked the Warden himself. ‘s funny; I thought I’d killed ‘im all those years ago when I got out. Turns out he’s been alive all this time, posing as a Mason Verger doppleganger.” Jinx huffed out an amused breath, “Stupid fucker had a chance to order one of his guards to off me, but he just had to gloat in my face, y’know? Monologuing—guess it’s not just a super-villain thing, yeah?” That was when the hex-caster’s grin widened. “I managed to get him to answer your question outright. So it turns out the IMRO is the Indian Metahuman Response Organization. Sounds... official, doesn’t it?”

“Whoa-whoa-whoa,” Flash interrupted, “You telling me the Indian government might have knowingly funded this... thing?”
“You telling me that the American government might have knowingly funded Waller’s Project Cadmus—or her new baby, Checkmate?”

He saw the various relaxed stances shift. John straightened, his arms crossing. Ollie’s arms uncrossed and fell to his sides. Shayera sat up off the table. He could see Jinx taking notice of this, and she quirked a brow at the Flash who—for a few amazing seconds—stood stock-still.

J’onn was the first to recover and respond, “You know quite a bit more than expected. I think we are all interested in how you came across such information.”

“Well—...” Jinx paused, a distracted and distant expression crossing her face for a few moments before she frowned, “Raven is advising I not answer that.”

“And why would that be?” Green Lantern asked.

Jinx’s grin made Dick internally groan—this was going to stir controversy, he just knew it, “Apparently, my response would have been anatomically impossible for everyone but My Favorite Martian, here.”

Nightwing rubbed the bridge of his nose over his mask. He noted Batman’s eyes narrowing just slightly. It wasn’t the Bat-glare, but that look he got when someone rarely confounded him—however briefly.

The Dark Knight spoke up, “Which, while it is an admirable diversion, still doesn’t answer the question.”

“Nope,” Jinx answered simply, “I guess it doesn’t.”

With a soft smile that was only half-apologetic, the whimsical witch turned to leave. Only two steps out, she paused to look over her shoulder. “Oh, maybe we could get together later—we could have a chat. I might even tell you a few secrets... for a price.”

Bruce nodded at her thoughtfully, “We’ll talk later.”

Jinx sauntered off, leaving them alone. For a moment, they were all caught up in their thoughts. That didn’t last for long, when Shayera turned a frown to Bruce.

“Why didn’t you press her for answers?”

“Because she knows how to keep a secret, and that’s something many of us value. If she were willing to part with that kind of information so casually, she probably wouldn’t be alive today. She probably knows plenty about each of us—if you’ll recall, she was fully aware of Operation: Unkindness.” Batman continued without heeding the uneasiness his last sentence had caused. Not everyone had known about that Operation, but everyone here did—and it still made them uncomfortable, especially since Raven had recently found out about it. “Now she’s shown us that it’s far from the only secret she knows. I believe Jinx is offering an olive branch of sorts. We don’t go digging into her secrets; she doesn’t go digging into ours.”

“Uh, wouldn’t that make what she said a threat?” Flash asked.

“Not a threat, a promise.”

The Bat family was very keen on the difference.
Kamala was headed her way, which was a good thing. Gizmo had contacted her, assuming that Jinx would be nearby. That wasn’t the case and Gizmo didn’t feel like repeating himself a third time. Apparently, he’d already contacted the Justice League—and just missed the presence of Jinx’s wonderful personality. He simply told her to tell Jinx when she got there. Raven shook her head. Well, if nothing else, she had good news for her mate.

“Hey, Demon-girl, Jinx with ya?”

“No, not at the moment, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, fuck it—when ya see ‘er, tell Jinx we got 14 all-terrain buses inbound. League already knows,” and with that Gizmo ended the call.

Raven stared at her communicator in confusion. The message was minimal, but thankfully, she understood what it meant. While she was perfectly aware the HIVE Alumni would soon arrive, one part of the brief communication truly baffled her.

“...They make all-terrain buses?”

The demi-Demon wandered out toward the mass of reporters and levitated herself above them to look out across the field. In the distance, she could see some dust kicking up. They would be here any minute. The reporters, noting her lack of interest in them or making a statement, turned almost as one to the approaching vehicles.

She lowered herself and turned to see Jinx approaching curiously. Raven swept Jinx into her arms, resting her chin on the girl’s left shoulder. She smiled softly and whispered to Kamala.

“Your family’s here, kitten. Those all-terrain buses will be here in just a few more minutes.”

“I can’t wait to properly introduce you, Poe-bird—you’re gonna to love ‘em.”

“I’ll bet. Baran can be surprisingly charming when he’s not throwing expensive vehicles at my head.”

“Yeah, there is that,” Kammie allowed, and then went quiet for a few seconds, “Wait, they make all-terrain buses?”

Raven chuckled just a bit.

When the HIVE Kids came, they fairly swarmed the place like their vespid colony’s namesake. Several of them flew in, including Angel and Kyd Wykkyd. Those two landed directly in front of Raven and Jinx. Her mate disengaged from her and launched herself at both, dragging them into a group hug and pulling back. The entire exchange was silent, mostly. Kyd didn’t really speak and Angel was a shy, quiet type. Both offered sincere smiles, and that was greeting enough.

Kyd, however, looked over Jinx’s shoulder and separated himself from where previously he’d been glomped between the two women. He moved to her and took her hand, holding it and squeezing it with an earnest, solemn pair of eyes, but a small smile. Jinx had told her he didn’t talk, but he conversed more honestly and easily than most people she had met in her life—possibly rivaling only
Azar herself.

She shook her head, “You don’t have to thank me; I would have gone after her no matter the stakes.”

He canted his head, his smile broadening only slightly. Surprisingly, she felt a slight brush against her mind. She didn’t pull back, but returned his honesty with her own. He didn’t delve, but seemed to breathe in the ambient waves her mind gave off. It was similar to her empathic abilities, if she had to classify it.

“Yes. She’s my mate.”

Kyd treated her to a grin and pulled back to return to Angel. There, he moved behind the winged woman and put his hands on her shoulders. Angel shifted from Jinx and rested against Kyd’s lean frame. Their body language was a clear statement, and she gifted him a smile of her own. Jinx then gravitated back to her, and she likewise took hold of her own mate.

At that moment, a small army of luggage bearing Billies flocked by. As they passed, the Billies Numerous yammered onward with their accompaniments—shamelessly flirting with several of HIVE’s femme fatales. None of them seemed to take any major offense and, from what she had seen of him in the past, it was probably just one of his endearingly annoying quirks... either that or one of his annoyingly endearing quirks. It could be both, she supposed.

One of them detached, then proceeded to jovially and loudly proclaim his presence.

“Yo, J—where’s our welcome party? Ya got any music here? I heard ya been playin’ up a storm on yer Indian banjo, there-”

Raven felt Kamala twitch in her arms, “It’s a sitar—not a banjo. A sitar... is an instrument of classical Indian music. How many times do I have to tell you, the banjo is not a classical—”

“You listen here, missy. Maybe ya can’t play it in a fancy-schmancy orchestra, but it gets a get-together goin’.”

“A sitar can be lively!”

“Funny, I don’t hear nothin’ lively happenin’ anywheres about.”

“You-...” Kammie seethed, then squinted, “...just you wait, hillbilly. I’ll show you a party.”

Jinx stormed away, leaving Raven glaring at Billy for interrupting the embrace of her mate, “Billy... how many of you can you make?”

“Rae-Babe, it’s endless.”

The Demoness reached out, snared a fistful of his suit by its divide sign, and hauled him almost nose to nose. Her eyes bled red and she snarled in his face. His paling expression was most delightful.

“As are the horrors I will introduce to you if you ever call me Rae-Babe or antagonize Jinx like that again. She’s dealing with enough without your badgering. Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

“Crystal, ma’am.”

“Good,” she grunted, then shoved him away.

“...I ain’t mean nothin’ by it,” he said with a rare frown.
“I know, but Jinx is still raw from everything that’s happened recently. You need to be more understanding.”

“Them bastards hurt her? If they hurt her, I’ll kill ‘em dead.”

Suddenly Billy had straightened and lost that childish glee. The stern, strong-jawed Numerous gained years in the way his expression tightened. If there was one thing she knew, it was not to underestimate the HIVE Alumni; they were always much more than they appeared.

“I’ve already seen to that, Billy. They didn’t hurt her this time—but they hurt all those kids. You’ll need to be soft with them, too.”

“That ain’t right,” he drawled in ire, “Ya don’t treat ladies an’ young’uns like that. It just ain’t done.” After a moment, Billy grinned. “Don’t you worry none, Rae-B—ven... I’mma teach them kids all ‘bout hows to live up the life.”

He then strolled away into another gaggle of himselfs.

-=Kamala=-

As more of the HIVE Kids trickled in, Kammie returned from her tent with her sitar and hopped up onto the boulder upon which she had last played. It seemed as good a ‘stage’ as any. This time, she had a gathering of the children within moments of sitting. Apparently, they liked her playing and were eagerly waiting for more.

“Oh!” she called out, “Since apparently someone can’t tell the difference between classical and folk country, we’re gonna have a little object lesson. This—is a song some of you might be familiar with, so feel free to pitch in. I thought it was an apt song, an’ I think all o’ ya could use some uplifting. So here’s something a little more lively!”

Jinx started with a series of simple notes wavering up and down the middle of the scale before dipping to repeat a bit. With her cadence set, she added droning vocals, looking at the children among them and speaking the lyrics to them.

“Do you think about—Everything you’ve been through? You never thought you’d be so depressed... Are you wondering—Is it life or death? Do you think that there’s no one like you?”

Kamala jerked her head, motioning to the various HIVE Alumni, “We are. We are. We are...” Then she burst into the chorus, striking louder and more powerful chords as she went, “We are the ones; We get knocked down! We get back up—and stand above the crowd!”

After a repetition, she returned to the softer notes that she started with, and went back to singing to them with conversational casualness, “The life I think about—Is so much better than this. I never thought I’d be stuck in this mess... I’m sick of wondering—‘Is it life or death?’ I need to figure out who’s behind me.”

By this point, some of the HIVE Kids had joined in, and the chants of ‘We are’ ramped up into the chorus. Jinx sang with the students as a bunch of Billies began improvising some percussion for her as they hit a less vocal-filled part of the song. Some of the Alumni were dancing, too. As Jinx looked out across the children who had been so lifeless and lackluster yesterday, she saw the dying light in their dull eyes slowly rekindling. She could finally believe what Raven told her.

Her family would show them; there could still be life after tragedy. Hope, fragile as it was, could be
regrown. It was hard to get back to life... but not impossible, not a mirage. When one had help, it appeared vastly more real. Her brothers and sisters—they would be there for these children when they needed that support.

“We stand above the crowd... We stand above the crowd... We stand above the crowd...”

Yes, these kids had been knocked down—and knocked down hard. It was time for them to get back up, though. This wouldn’t be an easy task and Jinx knew it would be an uphill battle... but she would fight it with them.

-=Lois=-

The girl had an eclectic choice of songs. After about 20 minutes and a few songs—some of them requests from the newly arrived group of Metahumans—the young woman was apparently done for the time being. The girl was fairly acrobatic; made an aerial cartwheel off the boulder and landed gracefully on the ground—all the while keeping hold of the sitar. The pink-haired Meta left the immediate sights of the press and Lois took a moment to make sure the various reporters were looking elsewhere when she slipped a few rows of tents over and made after the girl.

That girl was going to be the centerpiece for more than a few articles, but if Lois could get an actual statement out of her, it would be gold. So far, her would-be interviewee had managed to maintain a certain distance from the Press. She knew some of them were confounded with the various things that kept getting between them and the girl. It didn’t even seem like the girl was doing anything to avoid them... obstacles just seemed to converge between them.

Lois headed closer to where she had first seen the girl—by those breakfast tables from earlier, and noticed a blue-cloaked body ahead of her. And ahead of the Titan—the twin shocks of pink that the reporter had been hunting. Raven sedately trailed after the girl. Lois eventually followed them back to the same, unassuming, modest-sized tent they had occupied this morning. The girl swept inside the tent, and Raven followed suit.

Lois checked behind herself, to make sure nobody else had followed her. Her journalistic instinct was to march up to the tent and wait just outside of it for when the girl would come back out after having put away the sitar. Caution and intuition, however, made her hang back just a moment. After nearly a minute passed, Lois found herself impatient and slowly pacing closer to the tent.

Suddenly, the tent shook and a girlish squeal followed by some giggles sounded. Lois froze, and another minute passed. Uncomfortably, she shifted and reconsidered getting any closer. The two girls could have been sharing the tent, and that conjured all sorts of paparazzi-worthy stories in her head. Another minute ticked by, and Lois realized that those two might not be making a return to the public for a while...

Once more making sure nobody had tailed her, she moved away from the tent. If those two girls were in a relationship, it didn’t need to be plastered all over the front page of the *Daily Planet*. Despite wanting to know more about the situation—who the girl was, where she came from, and what had happened in that big, floating building... she could content herself with the smaller details for now. She would get her chance later, perhaps once the girls had reappeared.

She found Jimmy silently snapping away at the medical aid. He paused when she sidled up to him.

“Where did you go?”
“I had to go check a possible lead, but it didn’t happen. You get any shots of the girl while she was playing?”

“I got about five shots per song. Have you gotten any calls from your techies? I sent them my photos of her, but haven’t heard back.”

“No, last I heard, they were resorting to sorting through local news archives,” Lois shared a grimace with Jimmy. Searching for something that way took forever and they both knew it. Lois blew out a sigh.

“Everyone’s been keeping tight-lipped about this whole thing. I wonder when they’ll blow it open. There’s no way something like this won’t explode. It’s just a matter of time.” She made sure she had his full attention before she continued, “And Jimmy? Once the details start flowing, we’re going to have a front seat to the flood. This is gonna be generating headlines for years. Don’t get caught up in the sensationalism of the moment, or you’re bound to do something you’ll regret.”

“I just take the pictures, Lois.”

“It doesn’t matter, Jimmy—just keep your head on straight.”

By four that afternoon, several of her fellow reporters were milling about, some asking about the pink-haired girl. The question had been around for almost an hour, and Lois had said nothing. Finally, she saw Raven meander back into the scene and begin helping as though she had never departed. It had been two hours since she last seen the couple enter their tent. Two kids barely out of their teens... she was surprised to see either of them before nightfall—or tomorrow morning.

Raven’s hood was drawn up, so there was no telling what might be going on in her mind. A stir of murmurs drew her attention to the pinkette ex-prisoner that had since showered and changed her clothes. The girl appeared nothing out of sorts, but Lois knew a glow when she saw it, and that girl was radiant. Now she was definitely glad she hadn’t gotten any closer to that tent...

With a quick glance to Raven, Lois saw the Titan’s eyes lock onto the other girl for several long moments. The Titan’s attention was dragged away by one of the physicians and she broke her stare as though nothing had happened. The journalist watched as Raven made her rounds, but steadily progressed closer to her girlfriend’s location.

‘And everyone thinks Raven is an ice queen...’

Raven twitched and abruptly stopped in her tracks, slowly turning her gaze toward Lois’ general direction. Lois had the distinct impression that Raven was looking for her, if not directly at her... The girl’s hood still hid her features, but there was a cautious pause, as though one of the journalists had drawn her attention. Raven lingered a few moments before visibly forcing herself to continue onward.

‘...Thought I read somewhere she has some kind of mind-powers... Shit, did she hear my thoughts? Was it because I was thinking of her? ...Damnit, stop thinking about Raven!’

The self-directive wasn’t working, so she threw herself into her work. Moving with the tide, she put a hand on Jimmy’s shoulder to keep him close. Almost as one, a large delegation gravitated toward the pink-haired mystery girl. There was no way the girl could miss this gaggle and Lois thought it a little tactless, but she wasn’t going to be left behind, either.

Raven and the girl wound up working side-by-side; something she was sure happened by design.
Whether it was Raven’s or mutual planning, she had no idea, but they found themselves ferrying supplies about the camp. Some of the children had been whipped, their backs padded with gauze. Several of them still needed some looking after, and Raven and Jinx were supplying them with various cleaning solution and bandages.

As Lois and the others were slowly moving closer to the pair, her attention was drawn to a girl wrapped in what looked to be Raven’s cloak. The girl’s skin was dark like the void of space, and her hair a mass of winding, ashen curls. The dark-skinned Meta’s body looked to be smoking ever so slightly in the shade of the tent.

The relief aid medic, a tall, Indian woman, said something to the girl in Hindi, but received no reply—just a blank stare from wide, solid red eyes. The medic quickly marked something down on the form held in the clipboard. The medic spoke again, this time in English.

“What is your name?” the voice was soft, encouraging, as one often spoke to children.

“Fifty-one-oh-four.”

The medic grimaced, “No, little one, that is not a name... That—is not something we use as a name. What do others call you?”

“Fifty-one-oh-four.”

“No, that is a number, not a—...” Lois saw the faint trails steam clouds rolling up from the girl’s eyes. The medic trailed off, a mournful expression crossing her features. “Oh, do not cry—I will... I will use that number, for now.”

Lois felt sick. These children had lost all identity in that place. That number on the girl’s back... it wasn’t who that little girl had been. Was it all she remembered, now? Lois couldn’t help but wonder how long had it been since anyone had referred to them as anything else. Her attention now completely off the pink-haired girl her group was still meandering toward at a shuffling pace, Lois began to take in the rest of the scene beneath the large awning that made up the makeshift medical ward.

All around her, medics now held clipboards as they spoke with the children. All of them seemed to be doing the same thing: trying to get a name. Apparently, Lois’ group had stumbled upon them while they were trying to start some form of medical records for the children. To her horror, she listened to the continual answers from child after child as she passed each successive table.

“Twenty-two-ninety-one.”

Lois passed by another table, with another patient and another doctor.

“Forty-seventy-three.”

Lois saw a blank-staring boy, no older than 15, and heard his voice drone.

“Eighteen-oh-six.”

Lois bumped into the reporter ahead of her, unaware that they had stopped. Her eyes dragged forward and saw that they had come startlingly close to the pink-haired girl and Raven. The two were returning with some boxes—some of them floating in black power and trailing behind the Titan. The hair-horned girl moved back under the awning with her box, and stopped so abruptly Lois wondered if she had hit an invisible wall.
Body rigid, the young woman stood shell-shocked with a slack expression. The box of fell from her loose fingers; dispensers of medical tape and rolls of bandages tumbled out of the box. Her back was to the group of newscasters and journalists, but there was no mistaking the girl’s distress.

“No,” the girl whimpered.

Raven was at her side in an instant, taking one of the girl’s limp arms. The Titan gave the journalists a glance, but summarily dismissed them from her attention. Instead, the purple-haired mystic began murmuring to the pink-haired ex-prisoner.

“Uhm... e-excuse me...? Miss?”

Lois leaned out a bit from the crowd—some journalist about five people to her right was trying to get the girl’s attention. Neither Raven nor the seemingly dumbstruck girl paid him any mind. Couldn’t he see the girl wasn’t in any frame of mind to reply to him? Apparently, he couldn’t, because he continued trying to get her attention.

“Miss? Excuse me...”

Raven didn’t spare anyone a glance, but continued whispering to the girl. Lois could feel the tension rising. Something was about to happen and it wasn’t going to be pretty. If she had reacted badly to these kids’ loss of identity... just what must this be doing to the girl?

“Olsen,” she muttered warningly, gripping his arm tightly until he stopped looking through his camera lens, “stay calm.”

Jimmy stared at her confusedly, but the tense tableau broke when the badgering journalist spoke again, “Um... Miss? ...Thirty-one-twenty?”

Lois drew a sharp breath. Did that man really just say that? He seemed to realize what had just popped out of his mouth himself, eyes wide as though even he couldn’t believe what had just left his lips. Lois watched the train wreck play out across the girl’s muscles; they crashed into one another, starting with a mild twitch at her nape, and then spasmodically bunching up around her hunching shoulders before working down seized arms into white-knuckled, trembling fists.

The pink-haired young woman whirled about, her eyes blazing with pink energy brighter than the hue of her hair. Lois could hear something akin to a growl from her position only a few yards away. The girl’s teeth were clenched tightly, but that didn’t last more than a second.

“I have a name!” she bellowed.

The various news crews backed up slowly and warily. Sometimes, Lois hated being right. All that was left now was to do her job and hope it all worked out for the best.

-=Kamala=-

She stared at the mass of people in front of her, fighting the overwhelming urge to beat them all into the ground for uttering that awful series of numbers. Her fingers felt cramped from how tightly she balled them. When she spoke again, it was with a hurricane of intensity. Her tone held an austere command as she made her declaration with the same conviction as she nearly a decade ago.

“I am Jinx.”
The name rippled across the medical ward in echo, the kids uttering the name in a hushed voice. All these children knew her, even if they had never seen her. She was the Jinx: the only one ever to kill a guard, the only one ever to escape, the one who left the Warden for dead on her way out. Her name was profane in the IMRO, an epithet of legendary status whispered in awe and fear and hate.

Kamala whipped about to face them, her voice raising once more, now almost a shriek, “And not one among us is a number! If you can’t remember your name, pick another! If you don’t remember any other names, then you make one up! Anything—but don’t you dare—...” She drew in a hitched breath, ignoring the angry tears making her vision all quivery. She swallowed through tightness in her throat trying to choke her and forced the words out loudly and clearly, “Don’t you dare use those numbers! I will not suffer the perpetuation of this Hell—not in its theory and not in its practice.”

Everything above her neck felt like it was on fire, everything below felt numbingly cold. Her chest was kicking almost painfully with each, rapid heartbeat. Her fists shook with the effort it took to hold onto the roiling hate trying to explode out of her. She couldn’t quite keep a hold of it, though.

“The Warden is dead, and I’ll see this building broken and buried if I have to dismantle it cell by cell! I will see it ground into dust... burned to ashes... and wiped from the face of this planet!” Kamala took a few breaths, shallow as they came, trying to force back all the darkness. Jinx knew she couldn’t just keep yelling at them, venting her anger. It felt like an impossible feat, but she somehow managed to lay most of it aside. “They’re all dead—and they can’t stop you, now. They can’t keep you silent, can’t lock you away, can’t hurt you anymore... Your lives have now begun—so do what you will with ‘em. You do what you want, but you do not let this place take you down when it falls!”

She stonily glared out across the rows of beds, her breaths coming quick and dizzying her. The scene compressed around her in a strangle hold. Kamala couldn’t bear hearing those numbers again... couldn’t bear to see those numbers crush these children. A braver person might have been able to hold eye contact with at least one of them for more than a few seconds. A smarter person might have had something better to say instead of just shouting at traumatized kids. A stronger person might have been able to stay and help in some capacity. ...It was all Jinx could do to make her legs move and leave the scene.

In Kamala’s wake, silence reigned for nearly half a minute. The pitch-skinned Metahuman clutched at the cape Raven had granted her, eyes trailing after Jinx’s distant but still-retreating form. Then she turned her large, red eyes to the medic and opened her mouth.

“Charcoal.”

-=Raven=-

She stood stunned, at once swamped by Jinx’s weighty words and unsure of how to soothe Kamala’s latest injury. The only thing she was sure about right now was that she should follow her mate. Everything else could wait.

Motion out of the corner of her eye drew her attention to the press. Her sharp, amethyst eyes zeroed in on the bastard that had hurt her mate. Her nigh-murderous glare was enough to back them up several more steps. Raven couldn’t hold back her aura, and it seeped out like an invisible fog. She noted the immediate, instinctive response from the press as her sheer presence seemed to grow exponentially. It didn’t matter if she was just a gothic-looking girl of five-foot-five... she might as well have been five stories tall.
“Why can’t you just think before—...” Raven forced herself to calm down using the iron control she had cultivated over the years. With a slow exhale, she shook her head out of the pointless rant. “I don’t have time to waste my breath on you.”

With that, the demi-Demon pulled in her aura and directed the various boxes still held within her soul-self to a nearby table. Then she levitated the spilled contents of Kamala’s box and floated it back into the dropped container. Once everything was in order, she stalked away, leaving the reporters in a lurch. She was vaguely aware that she brushed by Batman on the way out of the medical tent; he was headed in the direction she had just vacated.

Kamala wasn’t anywhere within the general area. She must have broken into a run as soon as she was out of sight. Raven tried to reach out for Kammie’s mind, but it was far too mired in turmoil for her to make any sense of it. Still, she could sense Jinx’s aura and knew she would find her if she just kept going. Her mate hadn’t even deviated much—had gone around tents when they blocked her way, but otherwise had continued in a straight line.

When the Demoness found her mate, she discovered the pink-haired hex-caster in another woman’s arms. The woman was tall with a bright, reddish-orange hair. She was slender, but honed—very similar to Jinx’s build. She wore an outfit composed of blue leather and steel. The woman’s head was bowed over Jinx’s, holding her mate tightly while Jinx buried her face against the taller woman’s sternum.

“I can’t... I just can’t...”

Baran and Mikron stood to side of Jinx and the woman. She saw a few more headed in their direction, as well as one or two behind her. Raven recognized her quickly, especially with her proximity to Baran. This was Selinda, Baran’s older sister; she was a powerful transmuter and someone she had consulted with briefly before resurrecting Tara.

“...Shimmer,” Raven muttered as she came closer.

Selinda looked up and held an arm up to motion her closer. As Raven neared, Shimmer managed to pry Jinx’s arms away a little bit. The moment Raven was within arm’s reach, Kamala fairly launched from Selinda and seized her. She held her mate tightly, feeling the trembling girl. The mystic Titan was aware of a slowly growing patch on her cape soaking with Kamala’s tears.

“I can’t watch ‘em break... Not after-... I j-jus’ can’t do it...!”

She shushed Jinx, holding her and brushing as much compassion and reassurance as she could against Kamala’s distressed psyche. She became aware of the growing mass pressing in around them. Her first notion was to warn them away with a snarl, but that was before she actually swept her eyes over them.

Angel and Kyd Wykkyd had closed the circle of people surrounding Jinx. Around them, she found a Billy and See-More standing closer. Over their shoulders, she saw XL Terrestrial and Wrestling Star. Beyond them were more students, but Raven saw Sergeant HIVE a short distance away, standing sentry; he faced the direction they had come, supposedly prepared to block any reporters that might follow. The longer she looked around, the more students she noticed filtered in around them.

It was almost uncanny how they all just knew where to find Jinx. Soon, nearly fifty of the HIVE Alumni surrounded them, and the narrow corridor between the tents teemed with Kamala’s family. None of them said a word, but she could feel their presence; to a one, their minds were solid and determined. This must have been what Jinx had once spoken about—that silent support in the days after Blood. This was how they saw each other through the traumas they endured.
Her hex-caster had stopped trembling. The tears, too, were slowing. Raven was aware of the warmth of the sun and the heat generated from so many people in a single place. It didn’t bother her, but it had to be almost sweltering for others...

Then they were moving. There was a shuffling and a press of motion and suddenly they were on some sort of group trek. As one, they moved in this mass to a destination they all seemed to know, as nobody gave directions. All walked in concert with no jostling or confusion. It was hard to fathom the level of... understood coordination they had. Raven couldn’t help but be impressed with their cohesion.

She gleaned from their minds that they were taking Jinx some place safe—some place they could hide her away, where Kamala could hurt without being vulnerable.

~§~END CHAPTER 10~§~

Author’s Note:

Hey, everybody! We’re back and I’m actually caught up on answering reviews! Wonder of wonders... You guys left me a whole heck of a lot to talk about, I must admit. I love keeping in touch with my readers, and I tend to give as good as I get when replying. I think I wrote a chapter or two’s worth of replies just answering you guys from Chapters 7 through 9! Anyhow, now it’s time to buckle down and get this new Chapter’s author’s notes done. Everyone ready?

Actually, before I start... remember back in Chapter 6’s author’s notes, when I said my mom makes awesome tuna casserole? She brought over two pans of it. I’m in Heaven. Okay! Now we’re ready!

To start, this chapter is a little shorter than all the rest, but it has some extremely poignant and pertinent events occurring within it. It starts out a little humdrum, with Jinx just going through the motions and busywork, but you and I both know that can’t last. We have the HIVE Alumni coming to visit!

So we start off things by having Jinx start playing a few songs. Music is important here, because it’s a means she uses to break the silence that had so long oppressed these children. She’s a former prisoner, like them, making noise and not getting punished. She’s pushing that message with the lyrics as much as the very action of singing. Its effect is profound and entrancing, and Jinx hopes that this will help them find their own voices, eventually.

“Somewhere I Belong” was part of the planned songs—there were several—and this one, like many of them, have specific meaning in the story and to Jinx. They work as thematic reference as well as foreshadowing. Obviously, I’m not going to explain the foreshadowing effects, but there’s plenty of ways for you to piece things together along the way. If you’ve been following Jinx’s thoughts along the way, there’s a very clear lean to where this is all headed.

And so we introduce John. Would you believe that his presence was a mistake? That mistake started last chapter when I started writing the scene (and had even come up with several things hinging on John’s presence) and realized... I didn’t say Green Lantern... I said Green Arrow! ...But then I was like, “Fuck it, this can work for me!” Sometimes, the best thing to do when you make a mistake in your writing and it’s working, is just to not fix it. Yep, you heard me. Don’t fix your problems. Let them be part of an interesting plot point.

Once I realized that Stewart was here to stay, I realized that he was also part of Operation:
Unkindness... and that Batman, who had screened his heroes and press very carefully, would not take to this lightly. That little mistake gave me a very awesome way to end Chapter 9, with having the ever-awesome argument between two premier heroes of the DC Universe.

Similarly, if you realize that, at some point, you wrote something and now you’re faced with something of a rewrite or a retcon... don’t fix it. There have been a few times in my lore-building for my stories that I’ve had to backtrack and check something. Usually, I’ve forgotten something previously set in my lore that contradicts the scene I’m trying to use to progress the story.

When I make mistakes like that, sometimes I keep them and use them to make “exceptions to the rule.” If it’s big enough, you get your heroes or villains to stand aghast at the impossibility of something that just happened. Then, later, you get to explain just how that happened and make it a big goddamn deal. It also builds limits, exceptions, and workarounds into your lore.

For example: X binding spell physically bars passage. Y paladin smashes right through it. But how? Oops, I forgot that earlier I said that no living being can pass through it. ...But what if the stalwart, trustworthy Paladin we’ve been depending upon was a Vampire? Not technically considered “living.” Well, now... that’s a twist!

How did he become a Vampire? Why is he still supported by his deity? How is it that he’s immune to the typical Vampire weaknesses—is it a boon granted by his patron deity, or something else? See how much more interesting this random, nameless Paladin just got?

Of course, that doesn’t always work, and sometimes you do just have to go back and fix things, but... well, sometimes it’s good to leave your readers wondering. You don’t even have to explain everything, as long as it’s not an ass-pull and you know why, you can let the readers speculate for however long you want until your reveal. And you really should reveal it or otherwise make a clear path to the answer (even if you don’t outright state it) to maintain your continuity.

See, continuity doesn’t have to be something you start with, you can build it as you go!

...Uh... where was I? Oh! Right, Green Lantern. This little mistake also allowed me to voice some backstory on Jinx’s prior incarcerations and her views on the guards that worked there. For all her previous trauma between the IMRO and Brother Blood, she knew that the guards at JCC weren’t going to be half as bad as the IMRO. There’s no reason to give these children the wrong idea. Besides, if he’d acted any differently, it’s very likely that he would just be sending them mixed signals. A lot of these kids are, like Jinx, hyper-vigilant. They would notice if someone was off and it would only make them withdraw further.

Then we have this interesting little reveal... as much as you could call it one. IMRO... perhaps it is official, but is it India’s doing? Probably hard for them not to be aware, but did they truly bankroll it? If so, why was it filled with American guards? The plot thickens...

And so Jinx hints that her hand is fuller than they know, but still doesn’t tip it, just yet. Cadmus was not meant to be widely known—just like Operation: Unkindness... and yet, once again, here’s Jinx—waist deep in all of it. Of course, there are secrets rolling around in her head about a lot of things. But if she goes spouting those, she’s as good as dead. Furthermore, if she goes spouting those, some people might react and make other people dead, too. The kind of information she’s found obviously has some pretty far-reaching parameters. How did she get them? Where did she find them?

You’ll have to wait and see.

Batman understands. The Bat family makes huge distinctions between a threat and a promise. Because they often are premier threats in their own way, dangerous in body and mind, a promise not
to go digging is a courtesy, not a privilege. Furthermore, a threat is something that loses validity if you don’t carry through. The Bat family doesn’t want to harm anyone, so typically, their threats are only used when they have drawn their line and are pretty sure someone’s going to cross it. That way, the victim/opponent knows they have only themselves to blame for their Bat-beatdown.

Yes, they really do make all-terrain buses. They are awesome. That is all.

I like throwing Angel and Kyd into things. They’re the quiet kids and, incidentally, probably two of the people who were mostly affected by Brother Blood. As Jinx had mentioned earlier in this story, Angel was Blood’s favorite, and received the most frequent and deepest level of abuse. Likewise, this translated over to Kyd and his feelings for her. Angel needed to see that Blood was dead and gone to actually believe it was over.

In this story’s time line, Rose Wilson (who does not appear, unfortunately) is of approximate age to these children. Slade Wilson is often portrayed as a monster, but he’s a noble monster. In terms of tropes, he is Noble Demon. He’s a mercenary with a conscience, for the most part. This... isn’t quite the case with the comics or the cartoon specifically, but I have interpretations of him in my story that align things well with my vision of him. This is a man that would do almost (note: almost) anything for family. In this continuity, instead of being a founding member of the Secret Society of Super Villains, I’ve put him as a founding member of HIVE.

So... a group of kids he had high hopes for honing into the next generation of mercenaries and (possibly, likely) super villains... and Brother Blood comes through and not only disrupts his plans, but does something even more despicable? A creepy, skeevy bastard that molest and traumatizes them? It could have just as easily been Rose, if he had sent her there for some training. It was... personally offensive to him on a number of levels and he could not abide that.

That, my dear readers, is why he asked the HIVE Alumni if they wanted anything special done as he was taking care of the problem at discount price. You do not trifle in the affairs of dragons...

As a side note, I’ve also removed Adeline Wilson from the HIVE’s hierarchy... that’s a clusterfuck that I’ll have to contend with at a later point. I can (and likely will) come up with other places to introduce her into the world. Also, fuck the Wildebeest Society and that particular fuckery. We can find something better to do with the Wilson family than just... use them to embitter Slade, right? Right?!

So, moving right along with a gaggle of Billies. This is nothing new. Billy being Billy is something everyone in HIVE’s gotten use to. Honestly, this wouldn’t quite be such a big deal save that Jinx is a little fragile right now and he’s stepping on her last nerve, especially with that “lively” comment. These children—and she herself—had once been beaten into silence. Lively is a long, long way off. And that hurts. Jinx knows there’s no use arguing with Billy, though.

Don’t call Raven ‘Rae-babe.’

So, let’s stop in with Lois. Where might these two be going? Oh—nooner. Gotcha, let’s just... leave them be. But what’s this? No more information on our favorite pinkette? Surprise, surprise. Well, you can bet they’re going to be doing more digging...

Lois once again proves to be very insightful on this kind of thing. It comes from experience and intuition. This isn’t even foreshadowing at this point. Lois is just giving us all a heads up. How many times has she been suspicious and Lex Luthor (or whoever) not pulled some elaborate scheme? Exactly: none of them.

It doesn’t work that way, Lois. You can’t say “stop thinking about pink elephants.” But those two
are just totes adorbs.

Moving on to more serious matters: let’s take a look into what’s happening with the children, shall we? So... who’s read “Lord of the Flies” either by choice or as part of your school’s required reading? My condolences. Not a fun story, is it? Remember the end? The littlun, Percival Wemys Madison and his address... how it faded away? Yeah, here we see a more insidious version of that. Instead of forgetting identity completely, their identity has been supplanted by someone else’s dehumanization of them.

Many of you had been thinking something was going to have to break. Some of you thought it would be Green Lantern, others thought it would be Lois, others though it might be something else. Well... here’s your answer. Yes, Batman did vet all these reporters. However, as I had previously mentioned, nobody is perfect. All this guy wanted was a tiny exclusive bit of content. Well, he got it, alright...

“I – Have – A – Name!”

In my head, this is the biggest goddamn proclamation of the entire story. I can hear her voice clearly in my head, punctuating each word at the full height of her voice. The words that pour forth after that come from deep within Jinx’s being. If it sounds a tad loquacious, that’s because it is. It’s everything she’s always wanted to shout into the face of the Warden and the guards. It’s what keeps her moving. When she has panic attacks, she would use parts of this as a type of... affirmation and mantra all in one. And so she thinks:

I am not a number. I will not suffer the perpetuation of that Hell, neither in its theory nor in its practice. I am the Jinx.

She builds her new life upon this theory. And here, despite the children probably not understanding everything she’s said, will still hear some of it. The important parts. This, right here, is the turning point. Kamala isn’t there to hear it or see it, but her words do reach them.

And with that, I formally introduce one of our newest characters: Charcoal.

If you thought I’d just leave it at that, however, you’ve got another thing coming! Raven is exceptional about keeping her cool. But honestly, this man is probably lucky that Raven is more concerned about her mate than reading him the riot act.

Time for another cameo appearance. Who here is familiar with Shimmer? Heck, not many are aware that HIVE Alumni; it’s never stated, so I made her the older sister. She graduated a few years ahead of Jinx, possibly mentoring her when Kammie was in her early years at HAEYP. She’s become a successful mercenary in that time, had graduated before Blood got his clutches on the Academy. She was possibly a junior when Jinx started out as a freshman.

Remember when I said the shared trauma formed something of a cohesive bond between all the HIVE Alumni? This is what I mean. This isn’t something I say to depreciate the close working relationship and family unit that the Titans have built. But this is a little different. This was something forged hot and fast, then solidified and strengthened over the course of two-and-a-half, horrible years. It doesn’t make it any better or worse, it just applies on a different scale of measurement.

They draw from each other, just like the Titans, but there’s a level of empathy that wasn’t there to start with the Titans, because there was no similar experience they all shared in that way. The Titans worked, trained, sweat, and bled for their unity, and it’s been well earned and well tested—even by the HIVE Five, themselves.
So here we have the end of the chapter, which isn’t exactly ending on an uplifting note... but not on a terrible note, either. I’m pretty sure that most people I replied to got a lot of the same comment from me: while the action may have hit its climax and started to fall, the story is only about half over... and the majority of this story will see a shift into dramatic themes necessary to tie the loose ends of this mess left by the IMRO.

That said, it’s been a pleasure going over this chapter and I’ll see you all in two weeks’ time! Until then!

-Lynx

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Chapter 11

“...love will find its way / Through paths where wolves would fear to prey...”
-Lord Byron, *The Giaour*

Prey Mate

by

Lynx Klaw

Chapter 11

~§~

-=Raven=-

The safe place turned out to be in the heart of the yellow-and-black themed tents set up by the northern outskirts of the already massive campsite. Here, they passed by many milling HAEYP graduates who immediately saw the large gaggle. However, besides a passing glance, none of them made a move to join their group. Rather, they seemed to go about their business while making a secondary barrier around them by proxy of their presence.

After a few moments, the group paused, then slowly expanded somewhat as they began to settle down. Raven sat down with the rest of them, coaxing Jinx along with her. As they sat on the grass, Kamala stared out at nothing in particular... Raven felt her mate’s mind in a vast swamp of helpless anger and depression. Even as she was thinking about what she could possibly say to bring the hex-caster out of her mental muck, Kammie spoke.

“Fuck India and the IMRO.”

Though Raven could sense the rage behind it, Jinx’s tone held little of that vitriol. It was a flat statement, perhaps sounding a little disappointed, as though commenting on poor weather. She hugged Kamala tighter and kissed her temple. Raven still didn’t know what to say...

“Fuck Markovia,” Selinda huffed.

Baran chimed in, “Fuck Australia.”

Angel threw in her opinion on the matter shortly after, “Fuck Blood.”

That was supported by several other ’Fuck Blood’ echoes.

“Fuck the Brotherhood.”
Raven blinked and watched this... strange butterfly effect as a wave of profanity began swirling about them. The demi-Demon shook her head and sighed. Even so, it was doing something despite all sense. Each of them had pains—some very deep, some only superficial grievances—and one after another, those were voiced. It was as though the burdens, spoken aloud and so cursed, eased the overall pain of the group.

“Fuck you.”

Raven’s head snapped to the speaker, a frowning glare already digging into her previously stoic expression.

“Fuck me, Fuck us; Fuck Tom, Fuck Mary, Fuck Gus; Fuck Darius.”

The Titan squinted, her mouth slowly opening even though she wasn’t exactly sure she knew what to say to this... The speaker was mostly blocked by the others sitting between them, so Raven could only see the back of a head of straight, green hair about as long as Raven typically kept her own. She gleaned the person was female by the voice. Lastly, her empathic senses told her the woman was, at the very least, slightly unbalanced...

The woman blithely continued, “Fuck the West Coast, And fuck everybody on the East; Eat shit and die—or fuck off, at least! Fuck pre-schoolers, fuck rulers; Kings and Queens and gold jewelers; Fuck wine coolers. Fuck chickens, fuck ducks; everybody in your crew sucks—punk mother-fucks.

“Fuck critics, fuck your review; Even if you like me—fuck you...”

The lines of profanity continued and her wide eyes slowly turned to Kamala, hoping to get some explanation for this... what she was hearing. She found Jinx biting her lip, her eyes wide with pupils broader than typical. Raven saw her mate’s neck straining for a second or two longer before the girl lost all composure.

“Ff-fahahahahahahaha!”

The vulgar woman continued heedlessly, “…Fuck the real deal, And fuck all the fakes, Fuck all fifty-two states—ooo! And fuck you!

“If I only could I’d set the world on fire... Say fuck the world!”

It was at this point that a few others actually joined the woman, and a chorus of “fuck the world” and “fuck ‘em all” meshing with the voice of this leader of vile verbalization. Suddenly, it dawned on her that everything had rhymed... She had been too dumbstruck to compute it for the first few lines. Raven’s frown grew more pronounced, but this time in confusion.

“Is this a... song?” she almost demanded of Jinx, “Is this a real song? What is the point of—”

Kamala half-snickered and nodded, then entered a sudden duet with the green-haired girl, “Don’t bother tryin’ to analyze these rhymes; In this song I say ‘fuck’ 93 times!” Raven glowered and huffed. Finally, Jinx took pity on her. “It’s a rap song, Raven... by ICP. I used to listen to them during my darker, more rebellious moods while at HAEYP.”

“ICP?”

“The Insane Clown Posse.”

Raven said nothing; merely pinched the bridge of her nose.
Kammie’s mood sobered and she knew Raven took notice. With a quick kiss, she pulled away from her demi-Demon and muttered, “I have to deal with this really quick.”

Jinx meandered around a small group of her siblings before finding the woman who had brought up that song. There was only one person on earth she knew would do something like that—someone that knew how to get Kamala with something like that. Sure, it did knock her out of her funk long enough to get some perspective on her grief... and she wasn’t angry over that. However, she was angry—and worried and frustrated and hopeful. She could sense Raven’s presence in her head stir just a bit, a feeling of concern seeping in from the wings of her own psyche. Kamala didn’t have time to answer it, as she was suddenly upon the green-headed woman.

The hex-caster sat down behind the silly thing and grabbed her by the shoulders. Kamala pulled her back and glared at the upside down face. Those bright, cherry eyes stared at her even as the fine, pine hair haloed out in Jinx’s lap. She frowned down at the sheet-white countenance, mustering up as much censure as she could at the woman who—at least physically—appeared to be her age. The truth was different... and complicated.

“Jessie... What are you doing here?”

“I saw you on TV! I hopped Mr. Riker’s stealth-hovercraft and—”

“You told me it was experimental!” Jinx said in a harsh whisper, trying not to draw too much attention with her argument. She had to keep calm—or sound and appear calm—while dealing with her charge. Shouting at Jessie never got anyone anywhere. There was a method to dealing with the girl, and one of these days, she might just sit down and write a manual.

“It was... a year ago,” Jessie explained, but Kamala’s glower didn’t lessen. The girl’s lips pursed in a petulant expression, “And you told me you weren’t doing serious relationships. You said Fate said.”

There was accusation in Jessie’s tone and she pointedly slid her gaze over Jinx’s shoulder. It made Kammie glance behind her to confirm her sudden suspicion. Raven stood there, looking both stunned and outraged. Kamala would have to do damage control with that soon, but right now, she had to deal with Jessie... and possibly get the girl home.

“Fate did say, Jessie. However, recently, Fate also said that Raven was the right choice. I didn’t call you because you still had classes—still have classes at Dark Way Prep!”

“Nope.”

Kamala wanted to wring her neck. Instead, she shoved the girl’s head out of her lap. Jessie sat up and turned to face her, then settled herself in easy pose. Jinx was certain her charge was trying to affect an innocent appearance. Unfortunately, with Jessie’s appearance, that simply couldn’t be done.

“What do you mean, ‘nope?’”

“Mr. Riker an’ a whole bunch others got called away—here, yeah? Classes got put on a temporary hold,” Jessie explicated the situation, “So we got like, a week or two off, right? An’ Mr. Riker just... left it in the hangar.”

“And did he have it securely locked down?” Jinx eyed her suspiciously.
“...Mmmaybe, but—but you told me that if they really wanted to keep it out of our hands, they wouldn’t leave it where the students could get to it.”

“Dark Way’s hangar is not on campus, Jessie. We both know that, so don’t try to pull that with me.”

Kamala could read the nervousness in Jessie’s eyes and, as usual whenever the green-haired girl got worked up, her pale lips twitched and pulled back into a wide grin. It was compulsive and unmistakable. Kamala huffed a sigh and looked around.

“Did you bring Prank with you?” she asked, half hoping that wasn’t the case.

“Teh-heh-heh...”

The nervous chuckle only made her groan and drop her head into her palm.

-=Raven=-

The woman sent a chill of discomfort down Raven’s spine with her mere appearance. It wasn’t any one thing about the woman, but the combination—the unmistakable conglomeration that shouted an identity. Raven wanted to yank Kamala away from the woman, but she could sense the bond between the two in Kammie’s mind. They bantered like family, but Jinx was being somewhat mothering... That in itself was enough to still her initial reaction and evaluate just what she had in front of her.

The clothes had to have been custom made. The combat boots, cargo pants, and fingerless gloves were all a deep, royal purple with fuchsia stitching. Those alone were simply a style—and hard to replace, probably. The rich, forest green vest with the paisley-pattern embroidery also looked good with the purple and showed understanding and coordination in color theory. Even the red carnation lapel-flower didn’t push the image too far.

The green hair wasn’t really that much of a shock; Extra-Normals were known for their variety. Raven didn’t doubt this was its natural color. It was fine, straight, and a shady, forest green, but glinted in the sunlight with hues between emerald and bright fern. The eyebrows held similar colors, if a shade or two darker. Even so, she might have passed it all of that off if not for the girl’s pallor.

It had to have been the face that cinched the deal. Jessie’s skin wasn’t an ashen, desaturated sort of grey like her own or even paleness the likes of Jinx. No, Jessie’s skin brought to mind images of flawless porcelain or new-fallen snow. That pure, colorless complexion surrounding eyes like fresh-spilt blood brought everything into a horrifying sense.

Still, none of it truly struck Raven, ‘But then she smiled...’

One of those blazing eyes gave a small tic, “She’s staring at me...”

Kamala’s eyes went wide, and she slowly turned her head to Raven. Her mate’s mind practically fired thoughts into her head like speeding bullets and with the same severity, ‘Fuck! Raven, don’t stare at her! And whatever you do, for the love of everything, do not say his name!’

Raven managed not to flinch at the suddenness and volume behind Jinx’s pleading, but sent a quick, mental affirmation, “I was just noticing your unique style of clothing. I don’t think I’ve ever seen purple combat boots.”

“Yep, the whole ensemble is custom work! I made it myself—I think...”
‘Let it slide; I’ll explain later.’

The stab of thought made Raven squint a little, ‘Kamala, I can hear you just fine through the link I created yesterday. You don’t have to ‘shout’ your thoughts at me. Just say the words in your head like you did before.’

‘Oh... sorry,’ came the much more subdued message. Then Jinx took control of the situation and addressed Jessie, “As soon as I can, I’m going to get Mr. Riker to take you and Prank home.”

“But...”

“I don’t want to hear it, Jessie. You know better than to hijack Dark Way property—and you know even better not to take it across international borders! I’ve told you before not to leave Coast City. And don’t ask why again; you know why. Goddamnit, Jessie, the League is here!”

Mention of the League only gave the jokerette half a moment’s pause, “I still want to help! That’s what family does. Family comes first—always and forever. You said that!”

Jinx froze, and Raven could see the confliction playing ping-pong in her head. She could see Kammie trying to find a way to phrase things so as not to set off her charge. The Titan broke the uncomfortable silence with calm reason that she hoped didn’t incite Jessie’s ire.

“But if your presence here creates complications or strains the good will of the League, then what help is it truly providing?” Raven gently countered, “There have been times back in Jump when a church or other religious group was involved in one of our missions. Those that we saved—those that I saved... weren’t welcoming of my presence. Yes, it’s bigoted and yes, it’s narrow-minded... but it wasn’t worth the effort to stay there and let them throw their scriptures in my face. Before you ask, it does gall me... but the alternative is to make a working relationship with many of the people of Jump almost impossible.”

Jessie deflated and rested her chin in her palm, propped by an elbow on her knee. Those garnet eyes flicked between herself and Jinx. Finally, the girl blew out a dissatisfied sigh.

“I need a girlfriend like yours,” Jessie muttered.

Raven suddenly had a front-row seat to a drama the likes of which she wasn’t sure she wanted any part.

-=Kamala=-

Kammie frowned at the thought, “What you need is to graduate high school.”

“I can do both.”

“That’s not the point.... ...You’ve already got something in the works, don’t you?”

Jessie blinked with wide, crimson eyes, “What?”

“I taught you that look, Jessie. It doesn’t work on me.”

“Did I do it right, at least?”

“Misdirection won’t help you, either, J,” Kamala said warningly, “You might as well spill.”
Her dependent threw her hands in the air, “It wouldn’t help; you don’t even know her!”

“I’ve seen most of the students in Dark Way and HAEYP, Jessie; I’m like their unofficial mascot. HIVE Academy Valedictorian, remember?”

“She’s not a student; she doesn’t go to Dark Way,” Jessie rebutted with a flare of rebelliousness.

“...Then where the Hell did you meet her? You aren’t supposed to go off campus—fuck, Jessie! It’s not safe!”

“We haven’t even met...! I just—I’m still trying to figure out how to approach her.”

Jinx knew this could go all sorts of bad. She knew, eventually, that Jessie would want to spread her wings. She had hoped to keep the girl reined in until she graduated HAEYP. At least then she would have an idea of what she was working with and the resources—not to mention the professional opinions of her instructors—to help her build a life for Jessie. Right now wasn’t a good time for the girl to get all entangled in this sort of drama. In many ways, Jessie was far too young for all this.

“You’re not stalking her, are you?”

“I didn’t leave campus! She’s not even in Coast City!”

“Is it someone in Jump?”

“No,” Jessie huffed.

“LA? San Francisco? Jessie, just tell me, already.”

“No and no! She’s not even on that coast!”

Thunderstruck, Kamala shrewdly regarded her charge. Jessie had better not be thinking of the East Coast. Jinx had enough issues uprooting the girl in the first place, and keep it quiet was even harder. Still, she had managed and she was never letting the girl go back over there—period.

“...Is she in Portland?” Jessie’s silence was beginning to unnerve her. “...New York? ...Steel?” Jessie shift uncomfortably. “Jessie. Fucking Hell, Gotham? Gotham is—no, Jessie. That is not happening.”

“Just because she lives in—”

“Do you have any idea how bad of an idea—no, of course you know; I’ve told you!” She leaned forward, seizing the green-haired girl’s shoulders and shaking her a bit. “You can’t do this, Jessie. I don’t care about the girl; I don’t want you anywhere near that city!”

Jessie pulled back from her, jaw tight and lips pursed stubbornly. The corners of her mouth were twitching as though she wanted to smile, but Kammie knew that was involuntary; emotional stress always garnered a grin or a laugh from Jessie. They stared at each other intensely for several seconds. Neither of them was giving, but Jinx wasn’t about to back down from this. No matter what—or who—Jessie had found in Gotham, Kamala just couldn’t let her go there. The very thought horrified Kammie.

“I’m not going to give up on this chance just because he is there.”

They never spoke his name; they’d long ago agreed upon that much. However, if even he wasn’t enough to stop Jessie, Kamala realized she was going to have to make some sort of compromise or deal with her charge. Whenever the girl got something in her head, it was nigh impossible to get her
to let it go. Jinx closed her eyes in acute frustration.

‘Goddamnit, Jessie...’

“Then... then call her or something. Talk—agree to meet elsewhere—I don’t care; just promise me you won’t go to Gotham.”

Jessie looked to be almost frustrated to tears, “I can’t just call her! She doesn’t talk all that much... or at all.”

Where the Hell had Jessie gotten wind of a mute Gothamite? It made no sense. How had this even crossed Jessie’s path? Jinx had been very clear with the Dark Way instructors that they were to filter Jessie’s various media while on campus. It was to isolate her from anything to do with that city. Everyone understood her reasoning and worked hard to keep it that way, lest something exactly like this happen. So how in the Hell had this even happened?

“Jessie...”

Unfortunately, Jinx was at a loss for words, at this point. Nothing she could tell Jessie was what the girl wanted to hear and that wouldn’t help anything. Repeating herself at this point would do nothing. She felt Raven brushing a soothing feeling against her nerves, but it couldn’t assuage her feelings of helplessness.

Short of locking Jessie up, something she utterly refused to contemplate, Kamala couldn’t really prevent her charge from going to Gotham. If Jessie were determined enough, she would find a way. Jinx was fairly certain that would be a death warrant. She knew the jokerette got obsessive at times, but she had always hoped to prevent this particular obsession.

“Jinx, I just want-...” Jessie shook her head and slowly clambered to her feet, “Look—listen, I’ll try. I know it’s a bad idea to go there; I don’t want to. I just can’t get her out of my head. I have to know if there could be something there. If there’s another way, I promise I’ll try...”

‘But failing that, you’ll still go,’ Jinx morosely finished the train of thought. Raven’s arms wrapped around her and she relaxed into her mate. As Jessie wandered away with about as much spring her step as a rusted slinky, Kamala sighed and called out. “Prank.”

-=Raven=-

A large shadow fell over them and Raven felt hot breath gust against her neck for a moment. As the large form circled them, the demi-Demon slowly turned her head to see the large, furred creature. It was about the size of a grizzly bear, with a similar brown pelt but covered in darker, near-black circles. A scraggily mane stuck up in random directions from its scalp and traveled a tapering path most of the way down its spine. This, Raven surmised, must be Prank.

Prank’s beady, brown eyes regarded two of them, idly flicking one of its rounded, perked ears. It groaned at Jinx in a soft, but very deep tone. Kammie smiled somewhat sadly at Prank, receiving a lightly flicked tail in return.

“Follow her for me? She’s upset and you know how she can get sometimes. And... I dunno, but it’s possible someone might see her out here. The League or one of the other Titans...”

Prank grunted lowly. The enormous hyena’s eyes stared hard at them while its head rose imperiously. The legs slid a little bit wider for a stancher stance. Even Raven understood that clear,
aggressive signal.

“No—I don’t want any fighting. Okay? And don’t let her pick a fight, either. In her current mindset, she just might. We can’t afford that right now. Pin her if you have to.”

“Hehehe,” Prank shifted nervously and giggled.

“I know she won’t like it, but it’s for the best. And she would never go through you to get to them, so... it’s kind of the safe option.”

‘Can you understand him?’

‘Her, actually. It’s more interpretation than actual understanding. I watch her posture and the cues she gives. Prank knows how to get points across with me, but Jessie can read her better. As for Prank, she’s extremely intelligent—she can understand us just fine. At least, she does when I speak English. Anything else she gets through body language.’

“And remember, if everything goes to Hell, you can trust the Bat.”

“Oooo,” Prank half-whooped and ambled away, carefully winding her massive form through the various, relaxed HIVE Alumni and ignoring their surprise when her deceptively stealthy movement startled some of them.

“If you need me, just holler,” she called after the hyena.

-=Kamala=-

Jinx sighed as she meandered through the HIVE tents. She had reluctantly left Raven’s embrace to speak with Batman and she wouldn’t find him among these wasp-themed tents. Even so, she was stalling. There wasn’t enough time for her to take in everything and the last thing she wanted right now was more responsibility. She had come to Biratnagar hoping for a simple in-and-out job. Fate had said otherwise, and now she was in India and feeling overwhelmed.

Kamala loved this country. It was beautiful to her. India’s geography and nature spoke to her, its culture and religion resonated in her soul. She loved it, but it was very clear that India hated her—maybe for what she was, or maybe for what she represented. Then again, maybe it wasn’t either of those things. The more painful idea was that the teachings of wisdom and acceptance fighting ignorance and rejection had been set aside, and she was merely reviled for what they perceived her to be.

‘...I am the Manushya-Rakshasi... I am the Jinx. And now you know my name, Bh?rat. Hate me, fear me, but you can no longer deny me.’

Everything with the IMRO, the children, and Jessie had piled up on her, leaving Jinx frustrated and wanting to do something. Kammie’s energy was for naught, as everything that would happen here was to be over weeks, months, and probably years to come. The hex-caster needed some immediacy, needing to do something that yielded immediate results—even if it was a pointless endeavor—just to get something done.

Kamala emerged from the yellow tents into the brighter, white tents. She made a point to circumvent the medical section for now. She just wasn’t ready to go back there, yet. Her sense of probability fairly swiped her upside the head a half-moment before she collided into someone rounding the corner of a tent. The mercenary reeled back and caught herself in a backspring. As she righted
herself, Jinx looked up to find none other than the main man himself.

“Oh! Uh, hey, Bats. Was hopin’ to run into ya... more figuratively than literally.”

“I’ve been wanting to speak with you, myself. However, I don’t have the time for that right now. Green Lantern mentioned a large animal in the area and he’s concerned it might be dangerous.”

Jinx winced, “Yeah, no. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“You already know. What’s going on?”

“Eh—that’s one of those things I need to talk with you about. You can tell the Bearer of the Ring he doesn’t need to do anything... Actually, I’d suggest just leaving her alone. She’s doing a rather important job for me.” She could almost feel the raised eyebrow behind the mask. “Long story, lots of genetic experimentation—I’ll explain later.”

“You seem on edge.”

Kamala’s laugh was a tuneless instrument; a desperate, weary fit that took energy she didn’t have. Threading her right hand into one of her hair horns in frustration, she shook her head to free herself of the thoughts devouring her. It didn’t really work. She started walking toward a clearing she saw in the tents—a patch of grassy space between the white of the relief aid’s tents and the yellow of the Hive Alumni’s tents. The Dark Knight moved with her, clearly intending to continue the conversation. That was fine with her.

Kammie’s shoulders were anchors that dropped, dragging her forward motion to a stop. She stood listlessly in the long, narrow strip of field between the two tents. Staring at the ground, Jinx admitted, “I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. This situation is draining the life out of me. I’m starting to wonder if I was just... too late.”

“No,” Batman spoke the word with such conviction that it dragged her gaze from the blades of grass to his stalwart frame, “What you’re doing here is necessary. They still need you—you strengthen them by your mere presence.”

When Jinx said nothing, he continued, “It’s hard... and painful to be that symbol of hope. You have to give everything you have... and then give more. You have to endure beyond your endurance. You have to because the alternative is unacceptable.”

“They were using the numbers! I can’t reach them! Where’s the hope in that?” she demanded.

“You reached them, Jinx. They heard you. When I was there, some of them were doing just what you said—making up names.”

Kamala stood dumbstruck, almost afraid to believe him and too emotionally exhausted to ride that particular roller coaster again. The truth was in his stance, his proclamation delivered with such certainty that denied any doubt. She chose to believe him, and it swamped her with such relief that the sudden, elating removal of those stones on her chest—one for every prisoner—left her feeling dizzy and weak. Jinx fell more than sat on the ground, sucking in a stunned breath.

“I’m so fucking sick of crying,” she growled while dashing a sleeve across her eyes.

“It’s a release. We all need it sometime in our lives.”

Jinx sucked in a long, steady breath, held it for several moments, and sighed out, “I’d rather be doing something else.”
“Such as?”

A few of her siblings were milling about, but she didn’t pay them any mind. She wasn’t doing well, but far better than she had earlier. It felt like she had done something. Kamala once more sensed the reins of power resting in her hands. All of the senselessness and aimlessness began converging into a point—a path blossomed open in her mind. Once again, Jinx seized her mantle as an Agent of Chaos.

She tilted her head up, regarding the Bat with a solid stare. Kamala felt her pupils contracting. In the next moment, she launched herself from the ground in a whirl, one of her platform boots swiping at the detective’s head. He hunched, effortlessly letting her foot fly only an inch over his cowl’s pointy ears.

Her instincts pulled at her. Ever obedient, she was in motion the very instant her feet touched the ground. Her body lurched a half step to the right, his gauntlet’s sharp fins whistling by her ear. Juking back and to the left, Jinx stepped in on the right and spun to deliver another heel kick to his head. His palm caught her boot by the sole and promptly halted her motion dead in its tracks. Then he pushed up and away; she followed the motion and sailed into a back tuck...

-=Bruce=-

She rose, feet together and standing erect as perfectly poised as an Olympian gymnast. In that moment, Jinx reminded him of Dick. A wide grin stretched across her face; something that he hadn’t seen since Nightwing had sent him that video footage of her chasing Changeling down a hallway. Her fingers flexed and splayed out, then clenched into fists. It was like watching her remember what the will to fight was.

In the next moment, she was dashing at him fast and low. Halfway to him, she boosted herself into the air and sent herself somersaulting forward. Her landing brought Jinx into a series of roundoffs and back handsprings all charging toward him. Batman noticed that she continually spotted him, barely paying attention to spotting her landing—as though she simply knew where she was going to be and just how she was going to get there. He didn’t bother moving out of the way, merely prepared himself for her arrival.

The gyroscopic Jinx opened her attack with a load of momentum behind a sudden and forceful tornado kick stolen from Tae Kwon Do and delivered with all the professionalism he would expect from a mercenary of her caliber. He stepped back out of the boot’s range and sent a strong, forward kick toward her midsection... except she wasn’t there. His eyes tracked her even as his heavy boot was falling to the floor. Jinx had transitioned into a dodging cartwheel the moment her grounding foot touched the grass.

He blocked an elbow coming from behind him and turned with a backfist she was already in the process of ducking. Her reaction seemed ahead of his attack by mere moments, as though she knew what he was about to do and had moved to accommodate his attack as a part of her own. The way she moved around him such that left him in a lurch was unlikely—or, more accurately, improbable. His thoughts then turned back to his second conversation with Dick about Jinx.

“...her HIVE profile says she borders on precognitive, at times...”

He caught a right high kick by the ankle and stepped in only to feel her leg go limp and Jinx’s upper body arch away from him. The sleuth leaned back to avoid the other leg flying upward, but didn’t compensate for those platform boots she wore; it just barely nicked his chin and flicked his nose, but
otherwise completely missed.

Fighting Extra-Normals was never a task to be taken lightly, and the Dark Knight now understood why Nightwing considered this girl so vexing. She had yet to throw a hex, but he didn’t think she would. This was all about action—something she probably felt starved of since she saw the last of the prisoners out of the IMRO complex.

Since then, she had kept active only by doing odd, random jobs to help around the medical staff. Jinx wanted to do more—needed to do more, but there just wasn’t anything else she could do. That feeling of uselessness could only have grown when the mercenary had heard the children using those numbers...

Jinx knew how to fight and she wanted to fight those kids’ problems. Unfortunately, those weren’t the kind of problems that she could beat down with fists and feet. But if they were things she could beat up, then she wanted to show that she could. She wanted him to see that she was still capable... or maybe she was only trying to prove it to herself.

The Krav Maga strikes came next—including an incoming dirty shot to the groin that he checked by a boot halting her thigh’s forward motion. He kicked forward, sending that leg flying out behind her... and her arms flying up to box his ears. After stopping her forearms on his own, he reached forward and put her in a Muay Thai clinch.

His superior strength brought her head down and she had to know the knee was coming. As his supporting knee buckled, Batman still didn’t know exactly what she had done. He had heard her squeak, and then all the resistance against his hands had disappeared. In the following instant, his knee touched his palms and he felt her punch the back of his supporting leg’s knee. Somehow, she had dropped and slipped between his legs...

His cape pulled taught and hauled him backward from his knees onto his back. The little pixie had actually yanked his cape. The Dark Knight caught her incoming fist with a steel grip. From her kneeling position above him, she stared down with widened pupils. She seemed to sense the same, sudden shift in flow as he did.

“Uh-oh.”

He smirked, “Indeed.”

With that, the Caped Crusader sat up abruptly, hauling her arm forward and sending the girl flying over his shoulder. She tumbled forward and abruptly whirled about—by then he was already on his feet. After a moment to brush herself off, the witch returned his grim smirk with a mirroring version of her own.

Her eyes were bright—not just in hue, but in radiance. They weren’t in full glow, but he could see her irises were almost incandescent. The mercenary threw herself forward with a volley of mixed Muay Thai and Eskrima. She certainly didn’t have his wealth of martial arts under her belt, but she knew how to use what she had. When added to Jinx’s incredible luck, he found himself feeling a few solid impacts against his body armor. Of course, her flexibility and evasiveness only took her so far before she had to strike—and he decided not to attack her, but rather counter.

In this way, he landed a strong solid hit to her gut that blew the wind right out of her. To her credit, Jinx didn’t crumple—but grabbed his wrist and performed an aerial cartwheel that torqued his arm up. Her incoming uppercut aimed at the joint of his shoulder to dislocate. However, she couldn’t meet him for mass and muscle, and he bent at the elbow, pulled his arm—and her with it—toward himself.
Her errant uppercut sailed off to his right as he stepped in sideways. Gripping her just above the elbow with his left hand and hooking his right around that same arm, he dropped to his knees and threw her again in a drop shoulder throw. She landed—but only on her feet, her upper body was still off the ground and she stared at him upside down. His head was close to her and she grinned again.

Her right leg swung up in a vertical split, the boot targeting the back of his head. Batman had to let go of her with one arm to block, but kept hold of her arm by pulling it down behind her, leaving her elbow pointed skyward. With a sudden lurch to his feet, The Dark Knight hauled her back up, leveraging her by the arm and forcing her spine to bow. With her back to him, Batman threw a knee at her right kidney. Jinx played him like a jungle gym. She rolled along his thigh on her back, kicked her feet into the air, and firmly planted her free palm onto his shoulder.

He let go of her other arm and she spun that hand away—a weight settling on his other shoulder had him looking upward. Batman found the mercenary doing a handstand on him. She blushed—or maybe that was blood rushing to her head. He raised a hidden brow at her.

“Really, Jinx?”

“...I may not have thought this one through.”

He took a sudden step back and watched her legs sway to compensate for his motion.

“Your skirt’s flown up.”

“I’m wearing shorts under it.”

“Foresight?”

“Luck.”

He reached up to grip her at her wrists, only to have her twist away. It didn’t matter. She had to dismount and the moment she was in freefall, it was over. She whipped her body into a side flip... and in that moment, he clotheslined her midsection and dumped her on her back.

“Gweh—uff!”

Jinx coughed out a chuckle that, as she recovered her breath, turned into a full-bellied laugh. This time, her instrument was in tune. She rolled to her feet and stood up, brushing her shirt and skirt free of loose grass blades.

-=Kamala=-

“Wow. You are as advertised!” she grinned, “Now, let’s talk some business...”

She glanced around and found they had attracted a bit of an audience from some of her brothers and sisters. However, what drew Jinx’s attention was one dark-skinned young man in a white jumpsuit. His green helmet housed a rather large eyeball themed lens; the iris was currently white, but rimmed by a red ring and a large black pupil that kept blinking red.

“Oh, no,” Kamala muttered, and then shouted, “Seemore!”

As she marched over to him, she noticed his suddenly wary glances. She wasn’t about to let him run away with something like this. Of all the voyeurs to attract the attention of, it just had to be him...
“Uh... He—hey, Jinx! How, uh... how ya doin’?”

“Seemore, you had better delete that video right now!”

“Ssssure, yeah. You got it. All gone.”

He grinned nervously. She scowled. His grin widened, as did his eye and he glanced to the side. When Jinx began to growl, he held up his hands.

“Well, okay, I can’t! It was a live pod-cast... I was just walking around and ’castin’ when I saw you an’ the Bat! I figured it would get me some extra viewers; I didn’t know you were gonna throw down! The pod-cast uploads to YouTube once it’s over.”

“Take it down! Now!”

Seemore promptly dug out his smartphone and began flicking through menus, occasionally glancing up at their irate valedictorian. Finally navigating to his uploads page, he paused. Then, after a moment, he blinked and whistled.

“Well, 85,000 views? Man, it’s only been like, three minutes! That’s more viewers than I had when-”

Kamala looked fit to explode.

Suddenly, Batman’s voice authoritatively cut in, “Seemore, was it?”

“Uh, yeah—I mean y-yes-sir.”

“We have a press restriction. Assuming you haven’t already done irreparable damage, I think it might be in your very best interests if you reconsidered any further recordings. Have I made myself completely clear?”

“As glass.”

“He has HD ADHD; I wouldn’t expect him to remember this conversation took place five minutes from now. Which reminds me: Seemore—delete... the video... now.”

“Oh, right, yeah...” A series of hurried taps ensued, after which Seemore nodded. “Aaand gone.”

“Good,” Kamala said, and then swiped the smartphone out of his hand, “I’ll be keeping this to make sure nothing else winds up plastered all over the internet. Goddamnit, Seemore, you have to be more careful or-...”

The hex-caster stopped, as she noticed his eye was already focusing elsewhere. Kammie sighed and decided it would be a waste of energy to hit him. If she left him to his own devices, he would wander off and go do something else in a few seconds. Shaking her head, Jinx looked over her shoulder at Batman. What she saw had her turning to face him completely.

“You’re bleeding... when did that happen?” she stared at him stupidly for a moment, when she finally blinked, a thought entered her mind, ‘How did that happen?’

Batman reached up to gingerly trace the cut with two fingers, “You don’t remember?”

“What I remember is you beating me—gently. I hope it doesn’t ruin your pretty-boy complexion. It looks like you had a shaving accident with a batarang... Can you shave with a batarang? I bet you could,” she rambled, “Wait, have you?”
“Jinx.”

“...Right. We need to talk, but I need to get everything settled in my head... ordered so I don’t just start rambling. Those secrets are dangerous and their price just went up, unfortunately—nothing to do with you, just... unforeseen developments. Was why I was looking for you in the first place. Now that I’m thinking clearer, I can see I might have done some damage if I’d just spilled everything so haphazardly. ...Can we meet up a bit later, after I’ve had time to... sort my head out?”

“You’ve obviously put some thought into this.”

“More than I’d like, but it’ll take just a bit more before I feel it’s safe to reveal some secrets. After all, ‘Three can keep a secret...’”

“...if two of them are dead.”

“That’s the one,” she turned to leave, and then paused to face him again, “And Bats? ...Thanks for the Bat-pep-talk.”

Jinx found herself needing some mindless motion and, unwilling to face the children in the makeshift medical ward just yet, she decided to help indirectly. To that end, she found herself wandering up and down that floating, earthen bridge to the IMRO complex and ferrying files to the medical workers in the ward. It was the long walk—both the exercise and the relative solitude it provided that let her mind wander at random or focus as needed.

People could say what they wanted about the IMRO—she certainly had plenty she could say on the matter—but the Doctor that worked there was in no small way the best part of it. The man was talented; she would never doubt that. He excelled at patching people up and getting them fit. As long as you listened to him, it was almost amazing the recovery you could make.

He knew the Human body and how to work with it. He even knew Metahuman bodies with foreign designs wrapped up in them. The time when she thought the Warden had flayed her flesh to the bone with that whip, the Doctor provided her with a full recovery. Granted, there were scars... but they didn’t pull or ache.

The Doctor was a consummate professional. He wasn’t your friend or confidant. The man merely did his job—and did it well. She’d heard talk from guards about other guards going missing when they interfered with some of his recovering patients. He had some level of pull in the IMRO, the limits of which she was unlikely ever to discover. The Doc was the only possible rival to the Warden in terms of power within the facility.

Thankfully, he was also a meticulous record-keeper. Every guard and prisoner had a file he saw to personally, it was detailed and up-to-date. Everyone had at least one appointment with him upon their ‘induction’—willing or otherwise—into the IMRO. This meant it was possible to find past treatment logs; all they had to do, regretfully, was match the tattoos to the file numbers.

This wasn’t difficult work, just tedious and monotonous. There was the same monotony sans tedium in transporting said boxes of files. ...It was exactly was Jinx needed.

‘I wonder if the Doctor could have been a Metahuman. He was almost too good at what he did. My scars should be more than just... spots of dead nerves, right? And what was such a medical guru doing in the IMRO, anyway? ...He could’ve been. Wouldn’t that have been a riot? The Warden woulda shit a brick.’ Jinx smirked at the very thought. ‘Hate to admit it, but I respect the Doctor. ...I
wonder if Raven killed ‘im.

‘Would have been nice to have him here workin’ on some of those kids. Warden was whipping them
to the day he died. Wounds are fresh, but every one of them treated. Wouldn’t expect less o’ the
Doc.’

Her thoughts turned to other injuries recently incurred. She’d cut the Bat. If she gave credence to the
air of superstition around him, she wouldn’t have thought that possible. Unfortunately, she was a bit
too pragmatic for that.

‘‘His pretty-boy complexion,’ I said,’ Kamala thought with a shake of her head, ‘Man, I can’t keep
my mouth shut sometimes. ...Where the Hell did I hear that, anyhow?’

It had been within the past few years. It was too familiar a phrase. By the time she had a lead of that
thought’s origin, she was at the base of the ramp. It was then that the mission in Gotham returned to
her. Thankfully, it was entirely aboveboard, so it wasn’t likely to attract any of the famous vigilante
attention particular to the city. Baran, Mikron, and herself had holed up in one of many hotels, as was
typical.

Jinx was keeping an eye on local events via the news. It was always important to note which crazies
were on the loose in Gotham. During that time, she had seen Gotham’s playboy billionaire himself,
Bruce Wayne. Apparently, during some press conference, somebody had pointed out a cut on his
chin. Wayne had just touched the cut and made some excuse about shaving. One of the wisecrack
journalists asked if he used a sword.

Kammie snorted. Gotham was a breed of its own. Their cynical nature was probably the only thing
that kept them afloat. Somehow, their callous method of satire kept the city from devouring itself...
but only just. It also helped to have the symbol of hope that was Batman. Kamala couldn’t imagine
doing the kind of thing she was doing now every night. She would have gone insane...

‘So sure that Batman’s sane, am I?’

Jinx rolled her eyes. She had a few standing favors to pay out, and it was thankfully all rolled up into
a tidy bundle for her. Red-X would probably call her on it if she didn’t take the chance to talk to
Batman as she promised him she would. Just because the conversation happened almost three years
ago didn’t mean he was likely to forget. X could be extremely obsessive, so that wasn’t going to
happen.

‘So I gotta worry about X, Jessie, and those League Secrets... That’s just perfect. The question is,
just what should I tell the Bat? ...Sometimes I wish I had burned some of those Cadmus and League
files instead of letting my curiosity get the better of me.’

The thought of wanting to embrace ignorance stung Kamala. Had she not found out about
Unkindness, it would still be a danger to Raven. For that alone, she would shoulder this burden. Still,
it weighed upon her.

‘And how do I bring it all up to Batman? ...Easiest thing to do would probably be to hand over the
files to him. That’s not going to happen, though. I’m just paranoid enough not to let a resource like
that get grouped into his files. What if something happens to him? Then we’re all out of luck.’

Kamala grumbled her way through her problem as she slid yet another box into one of the plastic
storage shelves someone had the foresight to bring. ‘Then there’s Target: Rich Boy to consider.’

A few years ago, Kamala had been paging through the files Red-X had liberated from Cadmus. Any
link between Waller’s baby and Jessie would be vital. Still, she didn’t expect it to be easy.
Everything had a codename, and couldn’t be readily identified. Thus, she had to go through each individual file and verify it had nothing to do with Jessie before setting it aside. Still, the things she read in those files alternately shocked and turned her stomach.

‘Then I hit Rich Boy.’

It was a veritable shopping list of tools, gadgets, and chemicals. It was a thick folder listing their purpose, components, pros and cons, and proposed methods of nullification. Every gadget had its own page or set of pages; at a glance, her first compulsion was to toss the whole thing to Gizmo to feed him some ideas. It wasn’t until the fourth item that she realized what she had in her hands.

At first glance, it was just a utility belt. It was the largest page-set in the entire folder. The more she read about its functions and the plethora of things it held, the more unsettled she became. That was when she began rapidly flipping through pages.

‘An inventory of known toys, constantly updated until their liberation. Now the file’s some three years out of date, but it’s still dangerous to have in the wrong hands. It would figure that Cadmus would want to monitor the Bat’s workshop... I mean, it’s no Unkindness, but definitely bad for the Dark Knight.’

A trickle of concern not her own touched her mind, and Jinx blinked out of her contemplations.

‘I’m alright,’ Kamala thought outwardly, ‘I just have a lot of considerations.’

Raven sent back, ‘Have you spoken to Batman, yet?’

‘That’s what prompted my considerations. Lot rattling around in here, Poe-bird.’

‘Well, take a break and come eat with us.’

Jinx didn’t argue, and shortly found herself at the HIVE command center tent. The tent teemed with mercenary and vigilante alike. Gizmo and Mammoth were there, already stuffing their faces. Two tables had been cleared for food, where the Titans, the League, and the HIVE Five now sat. She completed the scene and grabbed a plate. She paused when she saw the platter of food.

“Mutton-burgers,” Baran answered before she could even ask, “Not bad.”

Kamala just nodded and loaded her plate with some fries and two burgers. She sat down beside Raven, who squeezed her hand for a few moments before going back to her plate. Raven had four burgers and a load of fries; Jinx couldn’t be sure if the large load was taken on purpose to disconcert others or if Raven was just that hungry. Normally, her mate didn’t hardly eat anything. She’d noticed, however, that Raven also took large meals about once a month. Other than that amusing bit of scenery, Kammie glanced around the table and shook her head at the present company.

“Something off?” Nightwing asked, clearly having been watching her.

“We’re eating mutton-burgers in India with Batman. What isn’t weird about that?”

After the meal, there was some idle conversation, but Jinx’s attention mostly glossed over it. Her mind was still entrenched in other affairs. Raven’s presence had a calming effect on her nerves, so it wasn’t very hard to collate everything she wanted into neat little topics. It looked like, after that short period of silence, she just needed the feeling of safety being with Raven engendered to make everything flow harmonically in her mind.

“-raiding the medical facility.”
Jinx blinked out of her thoughts and cued into the conversation. Everyone around the table shared nigh identical smiles. Batman touched the covered cut on his chin.

“It was one bandage, Flash. It wasn’t much of a raid,” Batman said, clearly playing along to their joke—which was kind of weird.

“That’s what they all say, at first,” Hawkwoman said with a dramatic flourish, “It’s just a bandage. It’s just a wallet. It’s just a car. It’s just one bank. Next thing we know, you’ll be shaving your head and trying to take over Metropolis.”

There was a round of laughter, which Jinx found herself joining. She wasn’t sure if the others knew how he got it, but she wasn’t saying anything. The Caped Crusader took their jeering admirably.

“Looks like he’s already had a close shave,” Flash followed with a grin.

There was more laughter, but Jinx’s grin was slowly melting down. Her blank stare settled upon Batman as her mind flashed back to that press conference. A thought fluttered through the mercenary’s head like a moth dragged by an unseen force toward a roaring fire.

*Bruce Wayne touched the covered cut on his chin.*

‘*...his pretty-boy complexion...’*

Fate felt like it was nudging her, but she couldn’t understand what it was telling her. Still, the unsettled feeling continued to grow. What was it? Was she not supposed to talk to Batman? As she tried to discern her proper path—which had apparently just taken a left turn—a small frown wrought itself across her brow.

‘*Is it about Target: Rich Boy? Should I not be mentioning it? Why wouldn’t I do that? ...That doesn’t seem right.*’

The chaotic energy inside her seemed to agree with her, but somehow resonated along her thoughts with peculiar strength.

‘*What about Rich Boy?*

*Bruce Wayne touched the covered cut on his chin.*

Jinx’s mind twitched; her lips pursed in response. Batman was looking at her, now. She couldn’t help but stare back. She felt like everything was tipping on its axis and if she could just figure out what it was...

‘*Rich Boy? Like the sound of that, don’t you, Mr. Chaos? Is the Dark Knight rich like dark chocolate? Or maybe he’s rich like Bruce Wayne,*’ Jinx’s expression went slack when her mystical sense seemed to snap back to equilibrium, ‘*Like Bruce Wayne and his pretty-boy complexion... and Gotham and—oh my God...*’

What little color Kamala had drained from her face. Her pupils had gone wide and she was vaguely aware of Raven nudging her mind almost forcefully. Finally, the hex-caster managed to drag her eyes away from Batman to regard Raven with a look of shock.

‘*Kamala. Tell me what’s wrong.*’

‘*No. No, no, no. Don’t think about it. Don’t think about—Don’t think. Don’t think. Don’t think!*’
Raven’s hand grasped Jinx’s and squeezed reassuringly, ‘It’s okay, Kamala. Whatever it is.’

‘Batman is Bruce Wayne,’ an obviously unbidden thought shouted into Raven’s mind, and she could feel Jinx frantically trying to steal the thought back—to make it stop existing.

Raven blinked, but clamped down on her reactions. Her expression was stoic as it had been in days long passed, as she squeezed Kammie’s hand comfortingly. Sending out soothing waves throughout Jinx’s mind, the demi-Demon almost invasively calmed the girl until she looked almost drugged. The tension left the hex-caster’s body, leaving her with dilated pupils.

‘I know. It’s alright. It’ll be alright,’ Raven sent, ‘I think you should talk with him, now. Do you need me there?’

Once again, she felt startled—amazed by how resilient Kamala was. The question jolted Jinx’s mind into focus. Suddenly, the rising panic gave way to an inner strength. As it swelled within her mate’s mind, she felt her empathic, calming influence swept up and pushed out by a surging wave of determination.

‘No. No, I should do this alone... minimize the damage. There are some things only he should know... some things only you should know... some things nobody should. Sorry, I’m rambling in my head again. Gonna learn to shut my big mouth one of these...’

The whimsical witch’s voice faded away near the end, as if pulling away. Raven let her to her privacy. Hopefully, talking with Batman would ease Kammie’s nerves. As her mate stood up and left the tent, the mystic Titan turned her eyes to Batman. He met her gaze, and she tilted her head toward the tent—where Jinx was just making her egression.

Batman stood and moved for the door and she sent a parting thought into his mind, ‘Give her time; she’ll work through it.’

The only sign he heard her was a minuscule hesitation mid-stride that she doubted most would have noticed.

~§~END CHAPTER 11~§~

Author’s Note:

Come one, come all and witness magic! I introduce to you: an occult sorcerer... of the ancient craft... of Nec-ro-mancy! A caster of mind-bending illusions! From the nether void of shadow walkers, a soul from Shangri-La!

Ladies and Gentlemen! Witness the keeper of arcane, wicked voodoo magic! A beguiler of spells, hexes, and curses! With the help of potions, talismans, and ancient relics from the forbidden realms of the Dark Carnival... Ladies and Gentlemen:

A Rae-Jinx Fanfic!

We start this chapter with the conjuring of another OC. Though short of scene, if not of stature, I
bring to you a veritable jamboree of jabbering: a Jokerette juggling a jagged genius with jarring gentility! Fueled by music, this unstable amalgam of sweet and sour disposition is food for future thought; plot; and a hot spot fraught with frottage (eventually).

Quite uncanny and slightly unhinged, we see one of Jinx’s biggest secrets: her charge. Now, I have a dossier of her—slightly dated, but still complete—upon dA for anyone that cares about character sheets or that kind of thing. She originally started as a role-playing character after I had gone to see Dark Knight.

Despite the movie that spawned her as an idea, she’s not part of the Nolan-verse nor is she really built for a grim-dark setting. I used various elements when creating her and fleshing out her character. She’s not entered into things lightly, either. I heavily debated whether or not to write her into this story, or to hold off until a later date. You see, Jessie Terr isn’t some fanciful whim that was plopped into the set of scenes. You never drop anything related to the Joker lightly in a DC universe.

Jessie has a fully fleshed out part to play in events. ...Just not in this story. I had been extremely circumspect, in that I wanted to keep a lot of things as a surprise in the sequel of “To Catch a Raven.” As it came to shift toward a sequel of “Prey Mate” instead, the story of “No Laughing Matter” underwent a sudden shift with this scene (and subsequent scenes). Gone was the shock-and-awe of our Jokerette appearing on the scene.

What, then, do I wow my readers with? With that spoiled, what’s holding me back? What questions do I answer? What should I keep under wraps? I took some time to answer those questions. In the end, I found what I felt it was safe to reveal here. After all, it would be an interesting introduction, if nothing else! This is a bit of a detour... brief, yet important—both to “Prey Mate” and to “No Laughing Matter.”

In the end, I may have told a bit more than intended. At least, those familiar with DC will probably see some of the things in NLM coming a mile away. Still, it’s not just what you say or write, but also how you write it. That’s always been my maxim, and I don’t doubt that it will be just as much of a ride once I get around to it!

We also get a little glimpse into life at Dark Way Prep, and by extension HIVE Academy. This all comes out as part of a mothering side of Jinx that I hadn’t really put forward until now. Certainly, she’s capable of it. This maternal side is certainly useful, as Jessie responds to it. Jessie has quite a few quirks, and several of them are highlighted here along with a side of Jinx that we’re going to be seeing more of in the future.

I put some thought into it, and eventually decided that Dark Way Prep is in Coast City. It’s got its fair share of problems, but it’s got a Lantern protecting it. One would hope there was more stability in that after the city’s destruction, but only time will tell. Dark Way Prep saw an opportunity and took it. Despite ushering in a large influx of metas, Dark Way is fairly low-key due to most of their students being minors. They want safety and anonymity, both of which a city filled nowhere near capacity after its reconstruction would do well to support.

We’ll be revisiting Jinx’s concerns later on in another chapter, but suffice to say that they are very valid concerns. One that she needs assistance to settle them. To that end, we introduce Jessie’s partner: Prank. The extent of Prank’s augmentations go by largely unmentioned, but I’d put her as about as intelligent as Krypto... maybe slightly more so. She can’t really speak, but she vocalizes and pantomimes extremely well.

I think Prank is a weak-point in my story thus far, what with shifting NLM over to being a sequel to “Prey Mate.” I need to figure out more about what she’s doing and how she helps (or hinders) things. Still, I’ll have it worked out eventually. Remember in last chapter’s author’s notes, what I said about
sometimes not fixing your problems?

Believe me, I have room for a lot of this, right now. Heh.

Back into the mainstream events! Jinx and Batman have a talk. This one is much-needed, as Jinx—even with some mild levity—now has a whole bunch on her mind. With the IMRO, identity issues, the Justice League, and Jessie... our lovely hex-caster is certainly stretched a little thin. It’s like all of her problems suddenly conglomerated into a single, geographical location. And, honestly, they kinda did.

Batman provides her with both reassurance and an outlet. It’s come up a lot in my responses to reviews, but the Batman I am most familiar with isn’t grim-dark, isn’t slapstick, and isn’t the Goddamn Batman. No, I take most influence not just from the Animated Series and JLU... but from No Man’s Land. More accurately, “Road to No Man’s Land.” Batman #561, “Mr. Wayne Goes to Washington: 2.” We see there that, as Bruce Wayne, he lobbies for Gotham not to be labeled a no man’s land, with all government funding and humanitarian aid cut. This fails, of course, but for all his badassery in martial arts and crime fighting and everything else... this is what I see Batman as: the force of protection. Something to prevent a loss like he experienced, so nobody had to go through what he did. Sometimes he does it in a cape, sometimes he does it in a business suit. He is never more a hero when he is concerned with helping people. If that’s by fighting, investigating, scheming, or lobbying... that is what he’s there to do.

He’s willing to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders. Or, in this case, Jinx. Honestly, I think this fight had a foregone conclusion to it about two-thirds of the way through it. I mean, she yanked his cape. When has that ever gone well for anyone? I’m pretty sure that’s a cursed maneuver with him. Sure, you might get the upper hand on him initially... but in the end? Uh-uh.

When I thought about the HIVE and who might do pod-casts to Youtube, there was really only one answer. Seemore rarely plays a serious part in any of my ideas, if he makes an appearance. He’s far too easily distracted to be a major threat. Still, he has his uses, if you can keep him focused.

For the record: Yes, you can shave with a batarang.

Next up, we have some interesting introspection into the Doc. Not The Doctor, no Tardis here... Doc is a character I’ve been questioned about a lot. Who is he, what is he, where did he come from, did Raven kill him? There are answers to these questions, but now is not the time or place for them.

Suffice to say that more on the Doc will come about later. Though only referenced a handful of times thus far, his actions do have some rather far-reaching effects on both the past and the future. There’s going to be a much larger section dedicated to him in another chapter, so just file those thoughts away for later... It’ll be worth it, I promise!

And now... we get a little peak into some of those secrets rolling around Jinx’s head. Target: Rich Boy. What, you thought the Justice League was the only that would over-prepare? Thought I’d skip over Project Cadmus and Waller? Hah! Oh, no no no—this is my bread and butter.

I promise you, everything ties in on this story. It’s not a conspiracy theory. In fact, it’s a little hard to see the conspiracy because we’re right in the middle of it. You have to step back, otherwise you can’t see the forest for the trees.

...But more on that next chapter... Muwahahahahaha!

Ever want a better view of Jinx getting a rather complex nudge from Mr. Chaos? Here you go, front and center! This is how Chaos can work. She has no reason to put any of these things together. She’s
known about Target: Rich Boy for years now. She’s only just now met Batman in person. That cut she gave him was a random, lucky shot. What are the chances that—a few years ago—Bruce Wayne would show up to a press conference with a similar cut? What are the chances Jinx would be in Gotham at that time to see that local broadcast? It’s the perfect storm of events to filter Jinx down to a singular thought.

And that brings us to the start of a very important conversation to be had, one that Jinx has both been anticipating and dreading for quite some time. ...But that conversation is for next chapter! It’s no spoiler to say that Chapter 12 is going to be one, big, long discussion. You wanna see some threads of plot pull together like strings of Fate? Like seeing puzzle pieces fall into place? Do you get all giddy about a four-line clear in Tetris? Then stay tuned and we’ll see you in two weeks—same Bat Time, same Bat Channel!

-Lynx

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**Story Mirrors:**

Now Available on Archive of Our Own!

“Prey Mate” on FanFiction.net

“Prey Mate” on deviantArt.com
“...love will find its way / Through paths where wolves would fear to prey...”
-Lord Byron, *The Giaour*

**Prey Mate**

*by*

Lynx Klaw

**Chapter 12**

-=Bruce=-

Batman followed Jinx as she meandered in silence. It wasn’t an aimless wandering. They steadily moved away from anyone’s earshot, until they stood in an empty section—not in use because its future occupants currently resided in the medical section. It looked as good a place as any for their discussion and he slowed to a stop. Jinx kept walking a few paces beyond him, seemingly lost in thought, but also ground to a halt. The girl was staring at the ground as if it held all her answers.

“Ahh—Hell, I lost track of it again. How does something that big just disappear?”

“Green Lantern,” he spoke into his cowl-mounted communication, staring up at lime green dot glowing against the darkening sky, “Are you still wasting your time? I told you to ignore the animal. It’s not a threat.”

“You sure about that? I wasn’t very close when I saw it, but it was pretty vicious-lookin’.”

“A knowledgeable source suggested leaving it alone.”

“Man, she’s just tied into *everything*, isn’t she?”

“I’m about to find out,” Batman answered and cut the connection. When he turned to the mercenary, he found her gaze had turned skyward. He let her stargaze for a few moments before beckoning her attention. “Jinx.”

She started very slightly, her pupils contracting even as they settled upon him. The witch opened her mouth, but immediately closed it and frowned. Suddenly, she looked very pensive and squinted.

“I have some explanations for you; something that will clear up a lot of your questions—but in exchange, I’m going to need your help.”
“That would depend upon what it is.”

“I know, I know—can’t work blind, and I get that. However, I can’t really ask for your help until you understand what we’re dealing with... and I’m not telling you anything unless we have some privacy.” The Dark Knight frowned, and she went on. “I don’t want anyone in the League hearing this... This is for your ears only, Bats—not even for your Oracle. I don’t know ‘em, so I don’t trust ‘em. Later, after you’d heard everything, you can decide whether or not to let others in on it...”

“I see. It’s that sensitive, is it?”

“Oh, you have no idea.”

“You look like you’ve had some new revelations, recently.”

“Oh, you have no idea!” she reiterated, threading her fingers into her hair horns.

Bruce nodded and put two fingers up to his earpiece, “This is Batman to League Comms, I’ll be going off the grid for a short time. If anything happens that needs my attention, send me a Restriction 7 alert. ...Oracle—yes. ... Depending on what she tells me. ... Batman out. ...We’re clear, Jinx.”

The girl hesitated, but only for a couple seconds.

“I’ve been thinkin’ about what you said—about bein’ a symbol of hope... That’s all fine and good for superheroes, Batman. But I’m not a superhero; I’m a mercenary and an Agent of Chaos. I don’t adhere to the same moral codes as you or even the League. Someone recently reminded me of our code: Family comes first, always and forever. That’s why I am here...”

“You’re no superhero, I’ll grant... but in this moment, in this place, and for those children... you’re a hero, Jinx. You and Raven took that responsibility upon yourselves, willingly or otherwise.”

Jinx grimaced, “How’s that Shakespeare one go? ‘Be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them.’ I never liked that one. It smells of martyrdom.”

“I take it you aren’t familiar with the source,” Bruce played out this detour, sure it would wrap around. Raven had agreed, and that was enough confirmation for him.

“A friend of mine likes Shakespeare and he told me about the story... Frankly, it disgusted me with all the deception. The ending seemed entirely too unbelievable. I never read it or saw the actual play performed, though.” Jinx glanced off to the side, considering her words. “And now I find myself all tangled up in someone else’s web of deception. I don’t like it. I’m keeper to far too many secrets, now. I prefer to be honest and true to myself, and the world keeps heaping its dirty laundry on me. Chaos has a funny sense of humor, I guess.”

He waited half a moment, remembering Raven’s caution. Jinx fell silent, staring at her shoes for a moment. Finally, her stance shifted and she turned to him, her mouth open to say something. However, in that moment, a shadow of a cringe flashed across her face. The mercenary looked away from him, suddenly once more unsure—or unwilling—to speak further. Frankly, the speculation was slowly twisting itself inside him.

“Jinx...”

“I don’t wanna do this,” she spilled out, her right arm grabbing her left and hugging it in acute discomfort, “If I say it, that’ll make it real and—and I don’t wanna do that.”
“They say a burden shared is a burden halved.”

Jinx made a sound halfway between a laugh and a shaky sigh.

“But it’s not my burden! And Mr. Chaos is givin’ me all sorts of mixed signals right now, so I’m not even sure what I can—... Tell ya what, I’ll do it in turns. I’ll just—just put it out there and then we’ll be done with it.”

‘Her sense of probability is making this difficult. This has to be why Raven warned me not to press her—Jinx will need to check her words and actions against that mystical sense. Small wonder she’s taken so much time to get around to this. She’s trusting ‘Mr. Chaos’ to get through this...’

Having sufficiently psyched up herself, Bruce watched her retrieve a notepad from... somewhere. Honestly, he had seen stage magicians pull trick flowers or produce coins with less aplomb. Batman could honestly say he had no idea where she’d been keeping that, but his first guess would have been magic. From the details he had read about her from Dick’s dossiers and HIVE’s profile, she was an accomplished occultist. The latter profile ranked her as an exceptional elementalist, an adept conjurer, and passable demonologist. Her HIVE profile gave various tiers to each skill, but Bruce hadn’t the experience to interpret what that meant. However, her overall occult scores settled her as a Tier-6 witch—not, he understood, to be confused with a sorceress or a shaper—and theoretically put her on the same level as the Enchantress.

She had just finished writing something on the notepad and tore the page out of the pad, upon it was written a singular name. The paper simply read ‘Kamala Malti’ in black ink from a simple ballpoint pen. Even so, there was gravity to it; because he could guess this was part of the mystery surrounding Jinx.

“I was born in a tiny village around Lucknow, in Uttar Pradesh. ...Uh—geographically speaking, that’s to the west.”

“I’m aware.”

“Right, ‘course you’ve looked at a map... Sorry, used to dealing with people that’ve never seen a globe... A-anyway,” she hastened, waving away the sidetrack, “so—so this’s me. I don’t really feel like going over my life story right now; did it once, didn’t like it. Maybe another time.”

The dismissal was misleading as she flipped the notepad shut. He didn’t think for a moment that she was so reluctant to tell him that. There were other secrets she possessed that held far larger importance, even relative to what he might be able to do with her true origin. No, she didn’t drag him out here just to share her name.

“My team’s not like most vigilante, villain, and mercenary sets... we don’t use obfuscation—masks or otherwise. We’re just who we are. I’m Jinx—but I’m also... Kamala.” She looked reluctant to say the name aloud, but forced herself to impart it. “However, that doesn’t mean I’m not familiar with the... vital nature of those obfuscations.”

Jinx—or Ms. Malti, as Alfred would likely call her—flipped the page she had torn and put it on the notepad’s face. She put the pen to the paper but it utensil froze, and the mercenary stared unseeingly just over his left shoulder; he rather thought she was feeling out those probabilities very carefully just then. After a long set of seconds, she appeared to come to some sort of decision. Kamala quickly scribbled two letters and held them up for him to see. Very clearly upon the page resided: ‘B M.’ By now, her stance had shifted from mere discomfort to a clear anxiousness. He had the feeling he knew where she was going with this.
“...Which is why-...”

Jinx then slowly and carefully tore the paper in half down its center. She took the piece held in her left hand and rotated it clockwise until it was upside down. In that moment, she confirmed his suspicions—as he now found himself staring at ‘B W.’

“...-this never needs to leave the page.”

Gathering both pieces in her right hand, she held them away from her. A spark of hex energy traveled down her arm and zapped along the paper—terminating in the farthest corner with an electric crack. The paper halves abruptly caught fire. The page strips were fast burning and gone in the time it took to blink, leaving ashes to fall to the grass. Her other hand had also disposed of the notepad, though he doubted in the same manner. The pad had just vanished as simply as it had appeared.

“There are a few who know, of course. Some I’ve told, others have found out. I’m curious as to how you put it together.”

“Would you believe it was completely by accident? Chaos Theory?”

Batman raised a brow she couldn’t see, “Coming from you? I would, actually.”

“That cut I gave you—sorry about that, by the way—reminded me about something I saw, which reminded me about something I read... and that’s a large part of why I need to talk to you. The first half of the puzzle came from a press conference I saw while on a mission in Gotham a while ago. See, there was talk about a shaving accident...”

She was being vague even now... and for his benefit. Even though they were out of sight and earshot of so many, she wasn’t giving names or dates. Her level of caution was admirable—it was no wonder nobody knew her origins, if she treated them with the same level of discretion.

“Ah... I remember that one. The night before, I’d brought in Penguin.”

Jinx’s eyes went up as she recalled the events, “Penguin... Oh, he has that umbrella sword-thing, doesn’t he? Wait, so that reporter was right...? Holy shit, you really did shave with a sword!”

“Very nearly.”

“Huh,” she noised, and then refocused, “The other half came into my possession while I was looking for something else completely. Don’t worry, we’ll be discussing that next.

“As you might guess, I have various, interesting pieces of literature from a few sources—some from the League, some from Waller’s personal stock of pre-redacted affairs. It was the latter that I found the works in progress for something called ‘Preventative Measures.’ Are you familiar?”

Bruce frowned, “No, I’m not.”

“Well, I can’t say for sure, but looking over everything..., Preventative Measures is like a hydra, each head addressing a different issue of the same matter. The set of files came with an insignia of four serpent heads in a curved, double-V shape—with two on either side of a shield; that’s why I say hydra... and like a hydra, it’s really just a single entity. You see, it’s only when you look at the whole that it gets scary. There appear to be three parts to Preventative Measures...

“The first head is named Project Cilix, and seems to be sort of aboveboard—they’re a supplemental military organization made to safeguard the world against random rogue Extra-Normals that pop up.
Sure, it can be viewed as alarmist, but... it’s the military, so whatever. It’s kind of their job to muck up human rights territory, yeah?

“The second is a BlackOps branch that liaises with the Department of Extra-Normal Operations. They’re purpose built to deal with known individuals who possess an above-average threat to humanity. ...Of course, on paper, it looks like they’re talking about the Lex Luthors, Jokers, and Madam Rouges of the world, but what they really mean is—”

“The Justice League.”

“Got it in one. That one is called Project Cadmus—yes, that Cadmus. It was within those files that I found Target: Rich Boy, and it had nested lists of all sorts of fun-looking gadgets. Guess who that one’s about? So when I thought about the press conference and the way you touched your cut... and then I got to thinking about Rich Boy and... I only figured it out ‘cause of a weird series of chaotic happenstance, really. I wasn’t trying to figure it out, it just sort of happened. ...A lot of things around me tend to ‘just sort of happen,’” she finished with a grumble. Batman nodded his understanding. Jinx paused to order her thoughts, and then nodded to herself. She launched into the third part of her explanation. “Right—so... The third head is called Project Phoenix. It’s their geek-squad, where the DEO makes all of their fun-looking gadgets.

“Really, when you start looking at it, you realize that the world is secretly preparing to put down anything Extraterrestrial, Meta, Mystical, Extra-Normal, or just plain different somehow. Preventative Measures is, as you may have guessed, a massive, multi-pronged, pre-emptive strike force.”

“There’s just one problem,” Batman postulated.

Jinx chuckled in a fit of nerves, “Just the one? You sure about that?”

“You said the insignia had four heads. Depending on the version of Greek mythos you’re reading—or using as a base concept, Agenor had four children; three sons and one daughter. The sons were Cadmus, Cilix, and Phoenix. Europa was the daughter... she was abducted by Zeus. He took her to the island of Crete, where she became its first queen. Agenor sent his sons in search of her, telling them not to return without her. They never found her, and later settled their own cities.”

“So we’re looking at a branch named after a girl abducted and never seen again... I never read anything about containment in those files, but I seriously doubt I got all the files. However, if I had to take a wild guess...”

Jinx shifted, and her upper body turned just enough that she could look over her shoulder at the gargantuan, formerly subterranean prison. His expression went grim. It was possible, but Waller wouldn’t have green-lit that operation. If it ever came to anyone’s attention, the fallout would be—well, exactly like this situation. Waller was in the business of safeguarding her side in that ever-brewing cold war arms race between humanity and Extra-Normals... but she never wanted to see it blow up.

“If the IMRO is Project Europa... or a part of Europa, then Bones and Waller don’t know about it.”

“I dunno if that makes it better or worse.”

“Worse... it definitely makes it worse. It means we don’t know who is pulling the strings.”

“...‘Specially if Checkmate gets itself up and runnin’. ‘Cause White’s the eyes and ears; Black’s the hands and feet, yeah? And Europa would still be running around doing shit while the White Set
thinks they’re seein’ the whole board. It’s a blind spot big enough to drive a Mack Truck through. If White Set provides the Black Set with intel, then quite literally the right hand doesn’t know what the left hand is doing.

“And that, my dear bat-billionaire, is how you set the stage for a coup—or a really good doomsday device. Because, just as we all learned in our AP Theory of Mayhem class, a good doomsday threat needs what?” She didn’t pause for him to edge into her monologue and he let her run her course. Jinx seemed to be on a roll and he wondered just what else she might ramble to him. The things she was explaining just continued to get worse, despite her seemingly jovial jaunt along the topic. “That’s right—effective misdirection!”

The mercenary spun about, gesticulating with great flourish, “So, while Waller’s tellin’ Bones that everything has gone according to plan... and they’ve put down all the threats to their security like the Justice League, the Titans, the Doom Patrol, the Bat-Clan... Guess who comes knockin’? It’s Europa—and it comes out of the shadows using the backdoors they left and usurps everything using Checkmate’s very own countermeasures against them. And it works because Checkmate’s founded on those concepts; Preventative Measures is its spine.

“So the question is who, then, saves the world from the new regime? The answer is: nobody. The heroes are out of the picture, there’s nobody to stand up to them. It’s kind of like the whole thing with the Justice Lords, only in reverse.” Jinx seemed to reel herself in at that point. Then, as if just realizing what she’d been saying, Jinx blinked several times and turned to stare at him with abashment. “I’m sorry, I-I kinda got carried away. I don’t know what I’m talking about—just ignore me.”

“No,” Batman shook his head, “The problem is you might not be carried away at all. I’d rather be aware of a problem and be ready to solve it rather than be caught off guard and wish I had a solution.”

“That’s what I told Nightwing about Unkindness! I mean... if you had planned it, you wouldn’t leave the fucking gem all imbued and sitting around like, ‘In Case of Rampaging Raven, Break Glass.’...Well, I mean, the kryptonite notwithstanding because—y’know—there was precedent there. The League was gettin’ their shit together before they even voted on it! I’m just saying—”

“I know. I was there.”

Jinx hung in mid-gesture, suddenly taking in just whom she was ranting to and about what. Her arms slowly fell to her sides. Finally, she cleared her throat, “Er—right... You’d know more about that than I would, actually... Yeah, moving on...”

But they didn’t. Jinx just stood there, again self-consciously and seemed to be fetching around for a topic. The Dark Knight decided to bring up a matter that had been bothering him—and everyone—for quite some time.

“Supposing it’s one of the secrets you can part with, how did you come into possession of these files?”

He saw the light go on in Kamala’s head halfway through the question.

“Oh! Right... that’s where I keep my word. See, I owe somebody a favor—a very specific favor.”

“I’m listening.”

“If you ever need something investigated or discovered with the utmost tact and secrecy... something
you don’t want to be linked to—”

Batman broke in, “You mean like something from the DEO... or the Watchtower?”

“Er... heh,” Jinx glanced up and away for a moment, rubbing the back of her neck, “um—yeah... li-
like that. Look—listen... you ever need someone you can trust with that, someone that will just get
and get out with whatever it is without asking what it is or why you need it... then you tell Sebastian
Crawford.”

“And he would be?”

“Someone that got into Waller’s playroom and the Watchtower mainframe... and Titan Tower. He
was good before Titan Tower—he’s even better, now.”

“Does a certain internationally infamous thief know that you’re dropping their name?”

Jinx nodded surely, “Yeah, actually. He told me to... Said that if I ever met you—and you in
person—that I should tell you. That offer you just received? There’s only one other person in the
world that has a deal with him like that... and you’re lookin’ at her. It’s not for HIVE, it’s not for the
League... It’s not for your allies or your friends or anyone else. It’s just for you. Nobody can ask on
your behalf; that deal has to be at your request.

“You can reach him in a number of ways. X-Caliber Operations is the other half of HFX Operations.
You could have Nightwing call me and I’d let X know you wanted to meet. Or you could call him
directly; Option 2 when you dial HFX.” Kamala paused, raising a hand to caution him. “He doesn’t
work freely, but he’s fair. Sometimes he doesn’t work for money; he’ll barter in trades, deals, and
favors. It’s all in what’s offered and what he needs—or will need.”

That was a hefty offer. It made him wonder just who Sebastian was that the man would lay so much
trust in him. Bruce also had to wonder about Jinx. She trusted him implicitly for reasons he couldn’t
yet define. Then again, she might just be reacting to some metaphysical urge dictated by her sense of
chaos and probability... Kamala herself might not know why she should trust him. It would explain
her earlier wavering.

“So Red-X got into Cadmus and the Watchtower.”

“To be fair, he wasn’t even Red-X, then. He took the suit later.”

‘So that’s what she meant by good before Titan Tower,’ Batman realized and found himself
distinctly impressed and more than a little vexed, “That’s quite a feat. ...Is he a Metahuman?”

“He’s not a Metahuman, no. However, he is...” Jinx paused for effect, her grin widening, “Obsessive
Compulsive. Know anything ‘bout that?”

She was loosening up around him, which was good. It had started with her slightly longer rants. The
more she talked, the surer of herself she became. Likely, everything was beginning to synchronize
and she’d found a viable path provided by ‘Mr. Chaos.’ Enough so that she had begun to joke with
him, at least.

“You’ve certainly given me quite a bit to think about. However, I’m still missing one large piece of
the puzzle.”

“Go for it, I think I know where this is headed...”

‘I’d wager you do,’ Bruce thought before launching into another tangle of intrigue surrounding Jinx,
“I know where you came across much of the sensitive information you hold. I know some of what you found in Cadmus and the Watchtower. I know who got it for you, if not how he got it. The only question left is why. Why did you need those files?”

-=Kamala=-

Kammie nodded readily. This was the last, but most confusing chapter to be had in this discussion. Hopefully, the World’s Greatest Detective would be able to solve the mystery for her. She stared up at the moon as it rose into the darkening evening tapestry; saw it valiantly trying to pierce through a layer of clouds. Its dull glow was the only hint she had of it, a pale face hidden behind a vaporous veil.

‘Speaking of pale faces…’

“Remember when I said I’d need your help?”

“This is that part?”

“Oh, yeah. For everything I’ve found out... all I’ve got on this part of the whole conspiracy is bread crumbs...”

“You mentioned... genetic experimentation.”

“You really are on the ball. Yeah,” Jinx grimaced as she thought about where to start, “Okay, so... How close an eye do you keep on Cadmus? I mean, I can’t imagine you of all people let it do its thing without checking up on it every once in a while.”

“I keep myself apprised of major developments—or I thought I did until recently. Waller likewise keeps herself similarly aware of my comings and goings. We tend to let each other do our own thing.”

Jinx’s brows drew together contemplatively, “bout four years ago, Cadmus underwent a silent period.”

“Ace.”

“What—oh, right, she was the... Huh.”

Had that been when it started? Had Ace merely been the spearhead? Kamala knew that Doomsday and the Royal Flush Gang were all part of Cadmus’ countermeasures against the league. Somehow, it hadn’t even crossed her mind that this whole thing might have been more of the same...

“Jinx?”

Her mind snapped back to the present, and she shook her head, “Just thinking. It might have been linked. What were they doing after Ace? What all kind of experiments and such were they doing around that time?”

“Of the genetic kind? None. Milo was fired from Cadmus after his work was deemed a failure.”

“No, not Milo; I’m not worried about—hold on.” Jinx’s mind raced as the nudges grew more insistent. She wasn’t supposed to mention Nuvo-Gen, apparently. But why? Her lips firmed to a line. It didn’t matter; if Chaos didn’t want her rambling about that *Galatea* thing she read about in...
Waller’s reports, then she wouldn’t speak of it. “Sorry, I’ll have to get to my point from another direction.”

“Guidance from ‘Mr. Chaos?’” asked the Dark Knight.

Jinx nodded, “Lemme work through this...”

Could she name names? It didn’t seem like there was any problem with her talking specifically, so long as she said nothing of Nuvo-Gen. Maybe she should just start with a prompt and see where it got her.

“Dabney Donovan.”

“...He’s one of the co-founders of Cadmus. He didn’t remain for very long before-”

Jinx shook her head and Batman fell silent. The hex-caster waited, thinking down the line of her intended topic. Everything felt okay, so far. It would have to do...

-=Bruce=-

“Dabney Donovan.”

That was a name he hadn’t heard in quite some time. Batman frowned as he quickly went over what he could recall. He supposed there was no reason to hold back since she had brought up his name.

“...He’s one of the co-founders of Cadmus. He didn’t remain for very long before-”

Bruce’s explanation faded as she shook her head, dismissing his comments. Jinx only looked to be paying half her attention to him. It seemed she was still seeking guidance. It perturbed him that she was purposefully keeping things—likely important things—from him. From what he understood, those things might even hurt him or others. He supposed that was the point, though. There had to be balance—between chaos and order; good and evil; life and death. The mercenary followed a bigger picture than he could comprehend—possibly a larger picture than she herself could comprehend.

“Yeah. He’s gone—but he didn’t just vanish off the face of the earth.”

“Do you know where he went?”

“Not really. Like I said, I got bread crumbs,” the pink-haired witch reiterated, and then launched into her explanation, “About three years ago, I was in Gotham. Don’t ask—mission was nothin’ related to your gallery o’ rogues. Whole thing was clean, so I’ll be keeping client confidentiality on that. The point is, while I was there, I came across someone in an alley...”

For a second she was quiet, lost in the past. With a sigh, she continued, “She was stumbling about, in shock—nearly catatonic. Bloody, too... It—wasn’t her blood.”

“I did find Donovan’s body in Gotham about that time. He had been stabbed to death,” he mentioned and she nodded; he tossed out another tidbit for her, “Unfortunately, due to his expertise in cloning, there’s no way of telling if it was him, one of his clones, or if he’s long been dead and there’s just been a line of his clones running about.”

Jinx grimaced, “Well, fuck. Here I was hoping the asshole was just plain dead.”

Batman’s expression drew grimmer.
“She... My ward—I took her in—she was a mess. She doesn’t remember a lot from that time; I think she repressed it. Wouldn’t surprise me in the least. She’s one of his victims; I don’t have the first clue about what all he did to her. She’s got traumas Dark Way’s still trying to work her through...”

“And whatever he did to her, it was genetic.”

“You could say that for some of it. I’m sure he did more than that, though. Regardless, she was made from altered genetic material. Thing is, I don’t think it was Project Cadmus’ work. I mean, you know they got genetics programs out the ass—... So after that debacle with Ace, things went quiet, yeah?”

And just like that, Jinx cut herself off and began a completely different track. Batman’s eyes narrowed, almost glaring at her, but he knew it wouldn’t do to squeeze her for information. The last thing he wanted was for her to turn to stone on him. She was talking and he’d take what he could get.

“You think there was more to it than that.”

“I know there is. Ace was just the icing on the cake. The reason they went all lock-down after that probably had to do with Dabney. The files I asked X to find for me... They detailed a security breach. You wanna know where Doc Donovan was a few years ago?”

“Where?”

“*Right there*. In Cadmus. Fuckin’ *nobody* knew. ...It all happened right under Waller’s nose. Apparently, there was some kinda power expenditure that red-flagged his secret lab. I read that report—Waller was pissed to the infinite. They locked down Cadmus while they went over it with a fine toothed comb, but Dabney was already gone. They found his research notes, though.” Jinx sobered, then. Her exhale was slow and hissed through her nose as she glanced into nowhere. “I know Waller knows about my ward. Bitch hasn’t done anything—and that honestly worries me. Makes me think she’s just waiting to sweep in like she did with Ace.”

He didn’t at all miss that Jinx was refusing to name her ward. Bruce wondered if she would get around to it or if he would have to go digging. Regardless, he’d wait until she got through everything before starting. The detective had enough deductive skills to realize that having half this story was probably more dangerous than having none of it. It certainly explained Jinx’s very careful winding around the topic of genetics.

The girl rubbed the back of her neck, her eyes fetching about for something to hold their interest—something that wasn’t him. Her reluctance had returned, but it didn’t look to have the purpose behind it that her earlier deliberations held. At length, she began once more.

“This is where I need to ask you for help... but this won’t be easy. She’s a person—her own person—and I can’t have people looking at her as just a clone... or worse, a mere copy of her genetic donor. I have spent time, money, and *months* of sleepless nights over this. I need you to promise me that you can look beyond those things—accept her as a person, not some soulless puppet of a madman.”

For all the trust she seemingly placed in him, this worried him. What would cause her to doubt him now, of all times? It was especially troubling that Jinx thought he might react unfavorably simply because of her ward’s genetics.

“I can promise that.”

Jinx scrutinized him for a long moment—and it was an unusual feeling. Many times Bruce had taken the worth of a man into consideration; calculated their usefulness, their threat to others. It wasn’t
often that he found himself under similar circumstances. Kamala’s eyes weighed him, measured his worth and the veracity of his claim with all the Chaos swirling in those magenta irises.

“I hope you mean that, because I think Jessie was created specifically to kill the Bat-Clan.”

He didn’t even blink at that, “Obviously, something went wrong.”

“I’m pretty sure she wound up killing Doc Donovan—or his clone—before he got all his conditioning done. I think half the problem was his ‘source material.’ Nobody can control that; until Dabney, I couldn’t think of anyone stupid enough to want to try.”

“And that’s why you’re worried about me—Jessie’s donor is someone I won’t like. You want me to separate the two in my mind. Take them on their own merits... or flaws. It’s someone you don’t think I can forgive.”

Jinx flinched. She knew he was working on it in his head and didn’t like it. Even so, the hex-caster looked to have already accepted the fact that he might work everything out before she finally got around to actually saying it. Even if he did, he promised himself to let her get around to it herself. If he cut her off, she might not give him some small but vital piece of information.

“I took her out of that city... out of Gotham. I set her up at Dark Way Prep. I spoke with their counselors and instructors... I thought I’d made a nice filter on anything she could get her hands on to keep Jessie away from everything about that city... about him,” she spat the pronoun; a substitute for a name long since outlawed.

“I’m telling you this because I think she might wind up in Gotham. If she shows up, she could get killed... just—just for her appearance. She would incite a lot of destruction by her mere presence. Jessie isn’t all that stable; her counselor and I still need time to work through everything Dabney did to her. Some of that conditioning...”

The mercenary shook her head, threading her fingers into her hair horns again.

“You want me to look after her if she comes to Gotham.”

“Jessie’s not a one-girl job; I can’t do this all by myself. Dark Way helps, but Gotham’s your city. If she shows up there, at the very least let me know—I’ll fly out to her, meet her face to face if necessary. I know I can’t stop her if she decides to go... Fighting her isn’t the answer, but she has some violent tendencies when the right triggers are pressed. If something happens... if you find her in a bad situation, you need to talk her down; that’s possible in most situations. Shouting does nothing but rile her, makes her more prone to wild or irrational actions.”

Jinx bit her lip nervously, “I’m making her out to be more dangerous than she usually is... It’s not that she can’t be dangerous, obviously, but she just... she’s not malicious. Jessie is a sweet girl, if a little quirky. She’s compassionate and means well. Unfortunately, she also gets carried away easily... and she’s intelligent enough that her getting carried away can take her a good ways before someone can talk some sense into her.”

“How carried away are we talking?”

“Jessie was at Dark Way Prep. She saw me on TV and wanted to help. Many Dark Way teachers put classes on hold to help out here... so I guess it was enough of a security lapse for Jessie to sneak off campus and into the restricted areas. She broke into the hangars, disengaged the security measures on one of her teachers’ stealth aircraft, and jacked it. She’s here, right now. I wish I could say that is atypical of her... but Jessie’s second major flaw is her impulsive nature.”
“So she’s resourceful.”

“Almost to the extreme. Jessie’s biggest problem is her anger. She hates her genetic donor; if at all possible don’t even say his name. If he’s involved—... God, I don’t even wanna think about that...”

“I think it’s time to just come out and say it, Jinx,” he coaxed.

The girl opened her mouth, but thought better of it. She shifted with acute anxiousness and took a deep breath. She looked almost nauseous. Bruce felt a similar, discomfort slowly growing in the pit of his stomach. A few seconds later, she finally broke the tense silence.

“Jessie is a Metahuman... Her donor isn’t. He’s completely human, but the problem with cloning him is that he had already been genetically altered. Dabney altered those genes even further. I can’t even begin to guess at the differences—or similarities between Jessie and her donor.”

His first thoughts went to Killer Croc, a known genetic anomaly but still technically human. Croc wasn’t a Metahuman, despite his genetic mutations. Poison Ivy was out, as Jinx specified Jessie’s donor as male. His next thoughts went to Clayface or even Mr. Freeze... Somehow, though, his mind felt drawn to a far, far darker place.

“No matter what happens... no matter what she does... if you have to restrain her somehow, then you cannot put her in Arkham. It could destroy her in ways you can’t begin to fathom... We might never get her back, even if we got her out. And if she tries to go to Arkham, you stop her.”

Coldness seeped into his chest and he felt the muscles in his shoulders begin to sag. He knew where this was going. Bruce was praying he was wrong, but the word forced its way up his throat before he could stop it. He voiced the one name that tormented him on otherwise peaceful nights.

“Joker.”

Kamala’s head fell, and her body language shouted defeat, “She’s not—... Please don’t look at her like—...”

Donovan had made a clone of the Joker. It was the only thing worse than the Joker—two Jokers. The Dark Knight immediately checked that thought, though. He’d made a promise to her and he wouldn’t start down that slippery slope. Jinx made him promise to look at her ward as a person unique to herself. Jessie wasn’t the Joker; he would repeat that in his head as long as it took that to sink in. After the trust Jinx had placed in him this far, the last thing he wanted to do was let her down due to his own personal demons...

“I’ll keep the two of them apart. You’re worried about what he might do to her if he knew she existed, aren’t you?”

“That’s part of it. He could say things to her... twist her with his words. The man is a poison. The other part is what she might do to him. Jessie hates him. I can’t guarantee she won’t attempt to kill him at some point.

“I think the idea was first proposed as part of the Rich Boy end-game. This is the part where I’m just guessing, though. There’s nothing directly stated in those files X got for me. All I know is that the idea had been put out there by someone, but nobody dared touch it.

“It was scrapped as too dangerous. Obviously, even they saw how uncontrollable the Joker was. Dabney apparently thought he could succeed, though. Instead of a loyal minion he could unleash as a bat-assassin, he got Jessie. I don’t know how that psycho got a hold of those Rich Boy proposals; X told me Cadmus was no cakewalk. I just have confirmations of Joker’s DNA in Dabney’s lab. No
idea where he got it, either. Waller might have those answers.”

-=Kamala=-

Jinx paused to gather her thoughts. This was taxing on her nerves and she just wanted to be done with it. To that end, Kammie returned to her main point. Maybe she should just lay everything out there.

“Jessie is similarly... irrepressible. Instead of a bat-assassin, he got a girl who hated the Joker with every fiber of her being. Recently, she’s become somewhat obsessed with someone in Gotham. Before you ask, I don’t know who... just some girl in Gotham. Fuck if I know how she even got a hold of that information. Dark Way was supposed to have a restriction on anything related to Joker or Gotham anywhere Jessie can access information.

“If she goes to meet the girl, she’ll be in Gotham. If she’s in Gotham, she might start thinking about her past... her origins. If she starts doing that—”

“She might go after the Joker,” Batman finished for her.

“I don’t want her hurt. I just want Jessie to live her own life... away from that death-worshipping psychopath!”

-=Bruce=-

She swallowed somewhat thickly, breaking the severe eye contact that came with her proclamation. It was clear to him that Jinx cared for Jessie—there was some kind of semi-maternal motivation behind the mercenary’s actions. Bruce imagined it was rather difficult to speak with him about Jessie’s problems while simultaneously trying to show him a better side of the girl.

“It terrifies me to think what might happen to her if she went to Gotham,” she admitted, “That fucker—you know he conditioned her? Sometimes she says things that I know aren’t her speaking... and she always looks so confused after she says it, like she isn’t sure those words actually came out of her mouth...”

Her expression darkened and her next words were full of a hate he rarely heard outside of the more obsessive of his rogues’ gallery, “He put things in her mind that would make her do things.”

The hex-caster’s eyes were gleaming by that point and she crossed her arms, fisting bits of fabric from the elbow of her sleeves. Tiny, dusty motes of pink energy floated up from her hands and Batman could see her control slipping. He saw her thoughts consuming her and brought her back to the present with his voice.

“And it reminds you of Brother Blood, but it’s almost worse because it still affects Jessie even though he—or the clone responsible for her—has been dead for three years.” Jinx’s shoulder hitched along with her breath. Both her past and the chaos snuffed from her eyes. “...I’m sorry; I shouldn’t speak of it so casually.”

“No, I... it... you’re right. Obviously, you know... you know why it bothers me so much. I’m actually worried she might run into you here—or anywhere. I’m worried if she goes to Gotham, it’ll trigger something and the girl I’ve been looking after will disappear—that she’ll get overwritten by some shell of a dead clone’s marionette. I’m worried she’ll outright attack you on sight for no other
reason than that was what she was programmed to do... like she’s just some toy he can wind up and set loose.”

“You think something in Gotham or the sight of me might be a trigger.”

The young woman nodded, hugging herself tighter, “I don’t know how far he got before she... had her breakdown. The files X stole told me enough to put a few solid facts together, though. The proposed and subsequently scrapped part of Rich Boy was for Jessie to kill the Joker, take his place—a more refined, more focused, better planned..., more controlled Joker. She was to be the DEO-appointed operative in the area. After securing that position, her first priority would be to take you out. Then she would take your place. Hm... after that, her focus would probably shift to climate control—maintaining order in Gotham as the DEO saw fit... up to and including the sanctioning of others in your rogues’ gallery or sabotaging the infrastructures of the various, local mobs.”

“So you’re worried that her hearing about or seeing any person, location, or paraphernalia of those on the DEO’s hit-list might trigger some conditioning.”

“Yeah. That’s supposin’ Dabney didn’t add in his own little list. Imagine if he set up triggers for Waller or Bones, maybe even Superman. He was originally Supes’ deal, yeah? Point is, even if none of her conditioning was ever completed... half-way complete is still a lot of damage where this sort of power play is concerned. ...It sounds cruel to say, but I’m not really concerned about other people; what really makes me worry is the mental scars it’ll leave on her if—when she comes to and finds out what she’s done. Worse, if others find out what she’s done and don’t know she didn’t have any control over it. They’ll just blame her. And the DEO would let them; she’s expendable—everyone is expendable to them. Fucking Suicide Squads. Cadmus would just wash their hands of it and get out clean as ever.”

“But she’s not part of DEO’s plans—you said they scrapped the project. Donovan would technically be responsible for everything that happened.”

Jinx’s eyes sliced into his mask even as her lips spilled acid, “Like I believe Big Bitch Waller is just going to walk away. She didn’t endorse the plan, but Jessie is a piece on the board—no matter how she got there. Ol’ Mandy won’t leave someone else to claim Jessie, much less allow Jessie to make decisions on her own. Too big a threat—too big an opportunity. I don’t have any doubts that she’s just biding her time... She probably has two forms in her desk all filled out, waiting for a signature: one a conscription, the other a sanction. I’ve seen her files and you know how she works.”

“Unfortunately, I do.”

“I’ve thought of going in there, warning Waller away from Jessie...”

“But that would tip your hand, and Waller doesn’t flinch.”

“Yeah.” Releasing a frustrated sigh through her nose, Jinx shifted her weight and glared down a row of tents, “I’m stuck with the ball in her court. I don’t like it.”

“So when you said you needed my help with Jessie, you weren’t just talking about if she comes to Gotham.”

“Sorry if that was misleading. You are kind of a big part of what everyone planned her to be. There’s no way you can’t be involved. You can bet that you’ll be the center of the storm if anything happens to Jessie. I’ll need your help to keep her out of that. Gotham is the tip of the iceberg, the most obvious of problems. The more serious threat is deeper than that and well-hidden.”
Batman couldn’t agree more, “Believe me, it’s in everyone’s best interests to keep her out of things. Gotham has enough trouble without introducing Cadmus into the mix.”

“Don’t I know it. If they succeed, I’m pretty sure shit would hit the fan. Think about it: she’d be a government agent—official. She wouldn’t be considered a vigilante and thus have more autonomy than you do currently... despite your astonishingly good relations with Gotham PD. Basically, they would be runnin’ Gotham with an iron fist. Or trying to—I don’t think it’s possible, honestly. No offense, but your city is kind of cracked. Anytime someone tries to take control, there’s nothing but anarchy. Still, it’s self-sustaining. I bet when the world goes to shit, Gotham will be the last, relatively sane place left.”

Batman held his hands up, “I’m not about to enter that wager.”

“But what a way to lose those billions, huh? Better than nickel an’ diming yourself with batarangs. How many of those are just... lying around Gotham, now? Not like they’re biodegradable.”

Her smile was still dimmed by recent discussion, but at least she was smiling again. Now he understood the gravity of what she’d been carrying around all this time. He was sure she hadn’t even shared the bulk of what she had seen in those files or worked out in her own time. More than ever, he was surprised she was so well adjusted for the burdens she took on. Then again, faith could take someone far beyond normal limits, and Jinx had an incredible faith in Chaos. Perhaps she was just... well prepared.

The mercenary suddenly gave a rigid jolt in her stance. Her gaze immediately cued him to something behind him. Turning around, he took several hasty steps back. Bruce had been a mere foot from the muzzle of a large beast. How it had wandered up behind him so silently with its bulk, Batman couldn’t guess. In the night, its eyes reflected in bright citrine.

“Nuh,” it huffed at him.

Jinx panicked for a moment, frantically looking about, “Prank! Why are—where’s Jessie?”

The Dark Knight regained his composure quickly enough and glanced around himself. He was almost morbidly curious about Jessie, in a strangely foreboding way. Half of him wanted to see her to confirm his fears, the other half wanted to see her just so he could lay them aside. However, Jinx’s charge didn’t seem to be anywhere in the immediate vicinity. The huge hyena paced over to a tent and gently pawed at it.

“...Are you sure she’s asleep?”

Prank chuffed.

Jinx held up a hand, “Okay, okay—I just wanted to make sure she stayed in the tent. ...Prank, if you hadn’t already guessed, this is Batman. Batman, Prank.”

The ear Prank flicked at Jinx could have meant just about anything, in as far as Bruce could tell. Still, the hyena gave him a quick once-over before pacing over to Jinx and brushing against her. Jinx leaned into the brush and smiled as Prank rounded to her other side.

“She’s been looking after Jessie for me.”

“Speaking of sleep, it’s getting late—you should probably turn in if you want to be up sometime in the morning.”

“I don’t, really, but I find it extremely hard to sleep in... so, yeah. You two can—something—I’ve
got a Demoness waiting on me.”

The enormous animal nudged Jinx off with its head, and the hex-caster went with the motion. Her steps were spiritless and Bruce could tell that she had reached her limit for just about any further discussion. In fact, he would have said they passed it earlier today. The woman kept surprising him with the depths to which she could dig within herself and pull out more willpower.

Batman decided, however, to give Jinx some respite; there was no need for further discussions until things settled. It would probably be better if Jinx distanced herself from all the drama. That meant he would have to convince Jinx—or get Raven to convince Jinx—to stay away from wherever the press happened to be at the time. He knew the mercenary wouldn’t give up what she was doing in any given area just to skirt the press... She was far too stubborn for that.

So far, there hadn’t been many problems with caring after the refugee children. It was easy, in fact—too easy for his conscience. They complied with everything in quiet obedience. Against all sense of asking for trouble, he just wished some of them would do something more than just what they were told.

-=Kamala=-

“Hey,” Kammie called softly as she crawled into the tent.

Raven immediately held her arms out, “Come here.”

Jinx didn’t need to be told twice. She practically collapsed into her mate’s arms. This was where Kamala belonged. The kiss that came next started tiredly, but drudged up an almost desperate passion. She needed an anchor, needed to be sure that everything would be okay. There was absolutely no way to guarantee that... Kamala’s heart grasped for what it could get.

Raven took her passion and somehow calmed the storm of her urgency until their lips met less as a clash and more of a joining. Her mate smoothed out the rigid lines of her muscles with gentle, reassuring strokes along her back. Kammie pressed as close as she could to Raven, trying to meld them into one. She felt the darkness, heard it whispering over them until the demi-Demon’s aura had cocooned them completely.

Jinx could feel the will of Raven as it suffused every inch of her body and held her soul in tight embrace. She weakly rocked her hips against Raven, but the motion had no real inertia behind it. She felt fingers thread into her hair and purred at the myriad intimate emotions surging through her.

“You need to rest now, Kamala. There is plenty of time for this tomorrow.”

Kamala didn’t want to rest, she felt like there was still so much left to do and everything was unfinished. Almost against her will, she felt her body reaching for a fourth wind that just wasn’t there. Suddenly, Raven was in Jinx’s mind and nuzzling her way into its fuzzy recesses. Jinx didn’t feel threatened by the depths to which she felt Raven dive; the warmth of the aura and Raven’s body lulled her into a sense of security she honestly hadn’t ever felt.

‘Rest, Kamala. Rest.’

Raven reiterated herself once, and then again, and one more time. Jinx felt her thoughts settle, and the tension within her body finally give out like an overburdened bridge. Kamala fell into the awaiting blackness with a numb, complacent complaisance.
Author’s Note:

Hey, all! It’s time for that big talk I mentioned. Everyone ready? Good, this is one talk that just blows the story wide open. Here we go:

For all that Prank is somewhat of a weakness in terms of her activity throughout No Laughing Matter, she is still very fleshed out and researched as a character. More specifically, I did quite a bit of research into spotted hyenas, with a large focus on vocalizations and behavior. Because Prank is a one-of-a-kind, she doesn’t have the benefit of numbers that other, normal spotted hyenas might. To this end, I had to make her more viable as a solo hunter.

She’s intelligent enough that she doesn’t really need to hunt as long as Jessie is providing for her, and that she’d more likely raid a deli for fresh meat than track down some grungy street animal or person. She’s also ferocious enough that one of her is more than enough. The major function of hunting hyenas is their stamina; they run their prey down to exhaustion. The pack corrals their prey, cordonng them off from the rest of the herd. As a one-girl act, Prank would be more more prone to stalking and ambushing... which is why I’ve made her so quiet. Stealth and power combined with a very keen level of intelligence makes her as dangerous as Killer Croc.

As fleshed out as I’ve made her, what she lacks in latter plot lines is a solid goal or set of goals. In Prey Mate, however, her job here is deceptively simple. She’s a minder for Jessie. As difficult as I imagine that can be, Prank has been looking out for Jessie for quite some time and has a handle on the girl’s mercurial moods. She’s the best one for tracking down and making sure Jessie doesn’t make too many waves.

Jinx can rely upon her in this capacity, which is good because the last thing Kamala needs at this point is more things to worry about. She’s aware that she has a lot of dangerous information, and knows that it’s too easy to give away something major and do irreparable harm with a few misspoken words. That’s why Jinx doesn’t want to share anything even with those Batman would call his allies. Oracle is a known information broker trusted by Batman of all people, but that doesn’t mean that he’s shared everything with them. The fact that Jinx is this circumspect shows the healthy respect that she has for the information she carries.

Batman can appreciate this, and it’s part of what has him trusting her despite knowing that she’s withholding information. In essence, he’s not so much trusting in her so much as her intent and a primordial force that’s driving her. While keeping in mind that the Urge that she serves isn’t strictly benevolent or malevolent. It simply is. I think Hogfather’s Death said it best:

“Then take the universe and grind it down to the finest powder, and sieve it through the finest sieve. And then show me an atom of justice, a molecule of mercy!”

He can appreciate this concept of forces in the universe and how small he is, how small Jinx is. In the grand scheme of things, she may not truly be important. However, through the infinitesimal trickle-down and the incalculable interaction of billions of butterfly effects, Jinx has purpose. He would be remiss not to consider just how much she could move and do by her mere existence. After all: here they stand.

Jinx’s presence has already caused a massive upheaval, leading them to this moment in time where she has revealed the IMRO and started a group of children down a path. These children will
undoubtedly have an effect on the world. What that will be is, as yet, undetermined.

Now, I mentioned that she’s arguably on the tier of the Enchantress. Of course, we’re speaking of full potential here. In general, I would say that Jinx is more of a conduit of Chaos. She’s not truly that powerful on her own. However, when the Urge touches her or mandates that she needs to take action, her power isn’t truly calculable on the scale that we would normally perceive from her. Most people (Jinx included) are largely unaware of what she can do—even with this measurement in place, it is a guess at best.

This is why there’s cause for concern among many factions and agencies concerning her. The level of influence Jinx is currently having on the world is unprecedented. She was just an average Metahuman mercenary. Sure, Enchantress-level abilities are impressive, but nobody really thinks she’ll ever actualize or cultivate that level of power.

Of course, very few people know that she also has a lot of classified material that puts her on the map as an international security risk. The Justice League is the first to find out, and that makes it slightly more difficult to work with her. Even so, Batman is able to see just how carefully she’s treating these subjects. That says a lot in and of itself. If she were truly just some anarchist punk, she would have released that information like a Snowden scandal and let the cards fall where they may.

That brings us to Preventative Measures. This is my little creation. It’s pretty clearly outlined in the story, so I don’t really think we need to rehash everything there. However, Preventative Measures is something I use to kind of flat-foot everyone. It’s a risk for everyone: Cadmus, Checkmate, Justice League, HIVE, and the Secret Society of Super Villains. It could potentially take them all out an institute a totalitarian rule. We’re talking dystopian world government. Kinda like the Justice Lords, but entirely human-run...

This is what I had in mind when I first brought Waller into the picture. I’ve had a few discussions with some of my reviewers on Waller’s nature. I think it would probably just do best to copy and paste here:

“Waller is a hard-baller, but I really liked her in the Batman Beyond episodes with the Return of the Joker when she realized just how integral it was to have someone as humanitarian as Batman fighting for tolerance. Yes, he was just human and had his own failings, but so does she... And she’s enough of a big-picture gal to understand that between people like Superman, Batman, and herself, there will always be arguments... but none of them want innocent blood shed.

“I kinda disagreed with the version of her in Suicide Squad, but mostly only for her shooting the room of those agents that weren’t “cleared” for that security level. I liked her much better in JLU.

“In DC Universe, with very few exceptions, all the characters—even the villains—have a depth to them that you can understand, that makes them relatable. You don’t have to agree when them or even sympathize. If you can understand, follow them down that dark path and relate to how they’d gotten there... then you’re invested.

“I couldn’t get behind Waller in Suicide Squad because she was... almost inhuman in her stubbornness. Like, without Rick Flag weighing in on matters, I could see her just... locking Deadshot away without ever letting him see his daughter again, despite having saved the day. She was entirely too... bitter and cold.”
Remember when she blew a gasket over the missile that General Eiling authorized? Even at her coldest, she wouldn’t sanction innocents if there was any alternative whatsoever. Yes, she had it on hand... but Batman also has his kryptonite on hand. And both Waller and Batman are on the same page here: this was too far.

However, Waller is the creator of the Suicide Squad. She will use whatever players are available on the field. It’s not a matter of “will she, won’t she,” but a matter of how and when. This is exactly what Jinx fears. She’s played that game from the wrong end, already. Brother Blood was stopped, but she’s not naive enough to think that working for the government would be any better.

Sliding more fully into the topic of Preventative Measures, I’ll give everyone a bit of information that isn’t admitted in the story. Once again, I’ll be pasting from a previous reply, this time one from deviantArt:

“Kammie and Batman were more or less dead-on. The IMRO is part of the Preventative Measures series of militant responses to the rising number of Metahumans and the threat they posed to the world. It was a four-pronged maneuver aimed to gain control over any Extranormal—be they Metahuman, Extraterrestrial, Extradimensional, or otherwise.

“The IMRO isn’t Project Europa; it’s only part of Project Europa. Furthermore, it was the prototype facility. Pending the success of Europa, various shadowy government officials would have tacitly poured more money into building even more of these underground containment camps throughout the world. (Knowing some more DC lore, I actually view this as a precursor to the concept of “Salvation”—the prison planet.)

“Of course, then Jinx escaped and threw the whole plan into disarray. Once she escaped, and then exposed the IMRO seven years later, all the funding for this program and even the acknowledgment of Project Europa’s existence will probably disappear, along with any evidence. It will be scrapped and tossed aside as a failed product. This may lead to the Salvation planet... or it may prevent Salvation from occurring entirely; take your pick.

“I tend to think it will end the Project altogether and prevent Salvation. Amanda Waller wasn’t in on this. She has no idea about it. But you can bet she’s been watching the news; she saw Raven pull this monstrosity out of the ground and she saw Jinx emerge from it. The wheels are turning in her head and she’s NOT HAPPY. Someone kept her and Mr. Bones out of the loop.

“Worse, they probably used some of her intel and resources to do it. She’s already frothing over the whole Dabney Donovan issue what with the whole Jessie wild-card being out there. But Jessie is not a major concern to Waller, despite Jinx’s worries. Jessie is just a failed experiment and as long as the little jokerette stays out of everyone’s hair (unlikely), then Cadmus won’t have any reason to get involved. Even then, it would have to be something that dicked with Cadmus’ plans—which is to deal with Extranormals.

“The IMRO and Europa step on Cadmus’ toes, trampling all over its jurisdiction, and Waller wants to know who and how this happened. She’s going to go over Project Cadmus with a fine-toothed comb—again—and root out everything she can find. That’s just the way she is. If you’re familiar with the whole Justice League/Justice League Unlimited/Batman Beyond/Return of the Joker stuff... then you know that Amanda...
Waller eventually comes around to understanding that the world needs a Batman.

“She’s never been a control freak to the point of self-destruction. She may be heavy-handed, but she’s also sensible. Europa is far too extremist for her tastes and she realizes this could be the beginning of something just like you described—a war. Cadmus is all about a kind of Cold War-style standoff and preparedness. If you can match the other person in terms of firepower, they won’t attack you for fear of repercussion.”

And so we move onto the next portion of this sizable author’s note: Red-X! In my story, Sebastian Crawford is an OC. I’m familiar with the concept that Red-X is often used as a Jason Todd insert for a DC/Titans world without a Jason in it. If you follow BTAS/JL/JLU/BB/ROTJ theory, you don’t get a Jason. We seem to just... skip from Dick to Tim.

We never see Robins 2, 4, or 5 in the DCAU, never mind Batgirls 2 or 3. So... it’s popular to have the never-admitted identity as Jason. Well, I never went that route. I usually adhere to canon and play in the blank spaces, save for the point I pick as my divergence (in this case, Teen Titans, Season 4’s Finale: “The End”). From there, I have a lot of play room and a lot of canonical things I could put my own spin on.

Red-X is another OC, but don’t think I just... up and forgot anyone in the Bat-Clan. Sebastian is plenty interesting in his own right, and it made sense for him to be the go-to for something of this magnitude. If there’s anyone that often gets where they’re not supposed to be, it’d be him! So... there’s another mystery down.

Why would Sebastian want to offer Batman a favor? Well, that’s its own mystery. But suffice to say there were worse people he could have offered that. In keeping with Red-X’s mentality, Sebastian is a thief, but he’s also not a completely amoral entity. He will help those in need, even if it means sacrificing his goals. But if there’s a way to spin things for personal gain, he will definitely run with that.

And so we get around to Jessie’s background, here. Obviously, this isn’t everything, but it’s the most pertinent parts that Batman and you, dear readers, require to fully appreciate the gravity of the situation. Sure, you knew Jessie was a jokerette... but here’s some of that why and how.

Kamala’s main fear is that people won’t see Jessie for the Joker aspects of her. Unfortunately, she’s right on a lot of that. Gotham in general, especially Gotham PD. Never mind what others in the Rogue’s Gallery and other heroes might think. Her presence would be an enormous powder keg and, with an already unstable situation, would cause a lot of problems for everyone. Then again, that’s pretty much what Gotham’s all about. No matter how twisted or grim things get, it endures. Jinx’s line about Gotham being “self-sustaining” and able to survive the worst comes from both No Man’s Land series, which I’ve referenced before, but also from The Dark Knight Returns.

In that series, after a Soviet nuke covers the US in a EM pulse that causes chaos throughout the whole of the country, Batman rallies the Mutants/Sons of Batman and basically takes control of Gotham. He gets the people of Gotham to do what they do best: survive. They put out the fires, gather resources, and overall weather the storm that ravages the rest of the country.

You can’t really put that city in a state where it will collapse on itself. Even in No Man’s Land, it still organizes itself. Granted, a lot of it is via the villains forming gangs and carving out territories. So the GCPD becomes a gang. The Bat Clan becomes a gang. Gotham evolves into its new state and finds a new ‘status quo.’ Eventually, they pull themselves up from the muck... not far above it, Gotham will never truly stop being dark and gritty. But woe unto anyone who tries to change that...

So here’s our dilemma. Certainly, Jessie will cause some upheaval. It may or may not even be her
fault. And that’s the problem with just... being Jessie: she can’t safely exist without all that drama. Will that stop her? ... Yeah, that’s kind of a stupid question. So... how does one mitigate the fact that their identity would cause a lot of problems?

The answer is obvious, and it’s no laughing matter.

-Lynx

Story Mirrors:

Now Available on Archive of Our Own!

“Prey Mate” on FanFiction.net

“Prey Mate” on deviantArt.com
“...love will find its way / Through paths
where wolves would fear to prey...”

-Lord Byron, The Giaour

Prey Mate

by

Lynx Klaw

Chapter 13

~=Lois~

Though she had arrived early, the intrepid journalist had seen neither horn nor cape of the strange pair she’d been seeking since early morning. Questioning others garnered similar results, but it was on everyone’s mind. Yesterday’s epically catastrophic faux pas had nearly brought on a League-enforced media blackout. Batman had spent a full 10 minutes reading the riot act to the assembled reporters for creating a major disruption in an already fragile situation. It was not a good time to be a member of the press.

Today the press was nigh invisible. Nobody clumped together, nobody asked any questions, and even the televised reporters were speaking quieter than normal. There still hadn’t been any sight of the self-proclaimed ‘Jinx’ or Raven. Lois had slipped away twice during the morning to check the tent, but hadn’t approached it.

On this third check, now nearing noon, she found Raven in her standard garb standing outside the tent. The mysterious Titan’s hood was down, but her hair obscured her face as she stared down at something in her hand. The girl looked to be holding some device—maybe a smartphone or the like. Raven gave a small huff.

“Kamala, we’re going to be late.”

“We’re not going to be late, Raven.”

“I told them we would be there for lunch.”

“We’ll be there for lunch.”

“We have 10 minutes.”
“We have plenty of time. Eesh, are you a Demoness of pride or punctuality?”

“I’m the demi-Demoness of don’t-make-me-come-in-there.”

Lois approached quietly, but not sneakily. Raven snapped the device closed and looked up at her as she stepped closer. Lois froze for a moment as she saw Raven’s eyes gleaming brightly with ruby reflections of the noonday sun. It looked like there were five gems set in the upper half of her face. Only four of them—the horizontal ones—seemed to pinch and tilt toward the center, diamond-shaped stone. She mentally shook herself and slowly approached the four-eyed Titan.

“I was wondering if I could speak with you for a moment—about her,” Lois said with a nod toward the tent.

“Now isn’t-”

“Where’s my bra?” Jinx called out.

Raven’s pale face slowly saturated its hue toward the color of her eyes, but her expression didn’t so much as twitch, “I don’t know.”

There was a rustle inside the tent and it shook a little, “Oh, never mind... how’d it get under the air-mattress? Anyway, you better have an idea where my stockings are, I know you phased them off. I was still in my boots when—”

The mystic heroine whipped a hand toward the tent behind her. Jinx’s sentence abruptly halted with what sounded like breaking waves, then a loud flapping. These were followed by Jinx’s muffled squeak and a bodily thump; the tent shook a bit in the commotion. Raven then pinched the bridge of her nose, the four gems all but slivers and her face now bordering on burgundy.

“What do you want, Ms. Lane?” Raven asked with an edge of mortified annoyance.

“I was hoping you’d bring up the possibility of a one-on-one interview; no pressure, just the three of us. Anything you two don’t want mentioned,” she paused with a meaningful stare into the gems, “can stay off-the-record. You sound pressed for time, so just let her think about it. She looked a little shaken yesterday—so I’m not expecting a quick answer. If she decides she’s up for it, though, let me know.”

Just then, the tent flap flew open and Jinx stepped out, barefoot and with her black skirt only half-zipped. She had on a solid, short-sleeve blouse with a yellow honeycomb pattern outlined in black; it had a similarly black-outlined yellow crest patch on the left breast, within which a flourished ‘H’ was embroidered over four checkered black and white quadrants. The shirt was thick enough to be completely opaque, undoubtedly something that would block sight of the number on her shoulder, which was probably the point. Around the pinkette’s neck, wrapped like a scarf, was a single, grey-and-black striped stocking. The other stocking resided in her left hand.

“What the fuck is wrong with-”

At that particular moment, their eyes met, and the journalist saw the dark slits in the girl’s eyes broaden until they completely overtook the magenta. Everything about the girl seemed to solidify into a statuesque stillness. Lois didn’t make any sudden movements, half-afraid of startling the girl into flight. The young woman’s eyes darted around, probably looking for some of her colleagues.

“Well run it past her—and really, no pressure. I think everyone’s had enough stress in the past couple days.”
Lois gave what she hoped was taken as a disarming smile to the still-frozen girl. Then the journalist turned and walked away. She didn’t really like the look of panic in Jinx’s eyes. She knew the press had a rather rabid reputation, but that expression bordered on anxiety attack. As she turned the corner, she heard a soft, resonant voice that sounded like it was right next to her—and behind her and in front of her and inside her head.

‘I promise nothing, but I will ask.’

Lois jolted and looked around, but she was alone. The tone was adamant, however, and she knew who had to be addressing her.

“All I’m asking,” she muttered.

-=Kamala=-

“You poor thing. Didn’t you tell me ‘nothing can resist The Face?’”

Changeling huffed, “Yeah, but I didn’t know they weren’t going to let go.”

“You turned into a giant, green liger in front of them. Most of them are between the age of 6 and 16. What’d ya think would happen?” Jinx rebutted, then shrugged and offered her own perspective on the matter, “I doubt most of ‘em have touched something like soft fur in years—if ever... You’re probably lucky you got away with all of it.”

“At least you didn’t pull out the Persian kitty,” Nightwing reasoned.

“Are you kidding? I at least knew better than to change into anything they could fit their arms all the way around!”

“Yeah, try explaining that photo op to the reporters,” Cyborg joked.

“Speakin’ of reporters,” Jinx began as she munched her way through another mutton burger, “what was up with Supes’ chickadee back there?”

The Boy Wonder looked up from his meal to frown, “Who?”

“Lane. Big-name Metropolis reporter, ovaries of steel, falls out of buildings from time to time into the arms of her Super-hunk. That one.”

“...Lois Lane is here?”

Kammie watched his frown deepen with a bit of confusion, “Yeah, you didn’t know?”

“I haven’t been around the camp all that much. Flash and I’ve mostly been going through all the paperwork we can find in the IMRO complex, trying to find any kind of paper trail or link that might help us find more of these places if they exist or perhaps whoever is funding and making all this possible.”

“Oh. Find anything of note?”

“Actually, I have. Drop by my tent after lunch; I have some things you might be interested in seeing. Anyway, I didn’t know Lois Lane was here—Batman and I handpicked our international news coverage. She wasn’t on the list. That means someone slipped her in at the last minute.”
Jinx huffed, “Probably Big S tryin’ to keep a finger on the pulse o’ things. I mean, otherwise he’s just sitting up in the Watchtower watching satellite feeds and news reels.”

“So what’d she want?”

“I dunno, that’s what I was askin’ Raven; she’s the one Lane was talkin’ to.”

“She was suggesting an exclusive interview—only her, you, and I—where we had veto rights on information shared. I told her I would bring it up, which I’ve just done. ...It’s up to you what you want to do.”

“I don’t actually know Lois Lane... can she be trusted to keep her word on that?”

“If it means anything to you, when we were speaking she was telling the truth about leaving whatever we wanted off the record. She also said to take your time thinking about it; she didn’t want you to feel pressured.”

“...I think I’ll do just that, then.”

-=Richard=-

“Hey.”

The voice came from two feet behind him. Nightwing went bolt upright while half-spinning around. He relaxed a moment later, but he could still feel his heart beating in his chest.

“Jesus, Jinx, you make less noise than a ca-uh...”

The hex-caster gave him a disarming smile, showing she wasn’t annoyed at his unintentional reference. That was a relief; Raven had told him that Jinx really didn’t like cat-jokes made at her expense. Before he could fully fit his boot past his lips, Dick decided to forge ahead.

“I take it you’re here about what I found in the IMRO?”

“Any information about the IMRO is important to me,” Kamala replied with level tone, “What did you find?”

“Flash found a medical ward and started boxing up files. They were very in-depth and very complete. Despite their origin, anything that can help us treat these children is a boon to us. The doctors are looking through the files for validity, but so far—”

“You don’t have to worry about that. The Doc treated us fairly and with the utmost care. What’s in those files is probably accurate... in fact, if there’s a recommended treatment, I’d follow it. I’d trust the Doc over just about any other doctor I’ve seen or met since.”

That... wasn’t at all what he was expecting, to be honest. Jinx had expressed nothing but a deep loathing for anything IMRO. Why was this doctor any different? Nightwing took her words under advisement, but he would still let the medical staff act as second opinion on those files before taking anything in them as gospel. However, not all the files would be getting a second opinion.

“Just a moment,” Dick said and ducked into his tent. Moments later, he returned with a small medical folder in hand. He summarily held it out to her. “I figured you deserved this—you decide what to do with it.”
She looked at the hand-penned numbers on the label sticker: 3120. Jinx looked up at the Boy Wonder, a slight tension working into her shoulders. She held the file lightly, but the way her fingers flexed upon it made him think she wanted to dash off with it and squirrel it away with all the rest of the obscure information she had managed to dig up.

“Who else has seen this?”

Dick shook his head, “It was in a box Flash ferried out. Besides the doctor that created the file, nobody’s even cracked it open. I was looking over the things Flash found and saw the files marked in the three thousands. ...I picked this one out and held onto it; I didn’t look inside. As far as I’m concerned, whatever’s in there is your business.”

Her fingers pressed into the manila folder again.

“Thanks, Nightwing. This means a lot to me—really.”

“No problem,” he played it off, then excused himself, “I’ve got to get back to checking on Flash’s deliveries; there’s no telling what all he’s pulling out of that place.”

-Lois-

Lois shook her head in disbelief at the various plates piled with hearty meals. The children were starting to consume an almost alarming amount of food. A doctor she’d questioned about it told her that Metahumans generally had improved physical prowess, but that their metabolism had to make up for that. That meant they burned through a good amount of energy and required quite a bit of fuel. That the ex-prisoners were eating more meant that their bodies were already buffing themselves. Some of the overly thin ones she had seen, the physician explained, would likely look well nourished within a couple weeks. The Meta gene was extremely resilient that way.

Lois had glimpsed Raven after the lunch break; the Titan was once more among the children, delivering supplies. The young woman was also once more with a single pair of eyes—human ones. She couldn’t get the four, bright, red eyes out of her mind, however. She remembered the giant, bird-like creature seemingly made of black fire that Raven had evoked to drag the prison building into the air. It, too, had four eyes. That had been a ghastly sight, but clearly somehow part of Raven’s powers.

Having just recently seen those same four eyes on the girl herself gave Lois quite a bit to think about. Her mind wandered back to the bit of conversation she’d heard as she approached them earlier. Jinx—if that was really a name—had questioned whether Raven was a Demon of pride or punctuality. The mocking tone made her wonder which part of that was the jibe. However, Raven’s answer of being a demi-Demoness didn’t seem to hold any insult in the term.

Could it be true, then? Could Raven actually be a flesh-and-blood Demon? ‘Demi’ meant half or part... Was Raven some sort of hybrid? The questions whirled in her head along with many a musing on mythology, from Ancient Greek demigods to the Judeo-Christian Nephilim. If it was true, how much of myth and folklore was true? It was a well-known fact that Wonder Woman credited such Ancient Greek deities for her blessings of power...

Lois leaned against the familiar, large rock sitting in the grassy field. She pulled herself out of her thoughts and glanced upward, to Jimmy, who now resided where Jinx had been with her sitar a few times. Olsen was snapping shots from the vantage point across the many tents. It had taken some scrambling for him to get up there, which only made her think about how easily the pink-haired
young woman had swept up the boulder.

“How’s it coming, Olsen?”

“Pretty good. Nice view from up here,” he said, barely taking his eyes away from the camera’s viewer. “Hey, I think I see that Jinx girl over there. She’s on other side of the medical tents. Guess she wanted some space. Impressed with how she keeps managing to avoid everyone... I mean, it’s like she knows.”

Lois’ scrambling was barely more dignified than Jimmy’s, but she managed. At least she wasn’t wearing a skirt. In environments where exposed skin just meant a feast for the native insects, she did as she always had and wore some utilitarian expedition cargo-khakis.

“Where?”

Jimmy pointed out an area in the same section, but not really near where she’d found Raven and Jinx earlier. Jinx was sitting in easy pose, back resting against a smaller boulder—this one about waist height—and paging through something. It looked like a magazine or the like from this far away.

Jimmy was snapping a few shots of her through his zoom lens, “Think I could get closer?”

“Maybe, but don’t interrupt her, okay?”

“Yeah, no—you don’t wanna piss off someone who picks a fight with Batman.”

Lois jerked, her head whipping toward Jimmy with a demanding frown, “Excuse me? Olsen, when did this happen—and why didn’t you tell me?”

“Yesterday. It’s gone viral. A friend of mine texted me about it. The Jinx vs. The Batman. It hit YouTube, but the original pod-caster took down the live-stream. You can see it everywhere, now.”

Lois nearly went face-first into the ground as she skidded down the rock. Her boots thumped into the grass and she trotted at a fair clip all the way back to her tent. There, she found what she was looking for—her tablet. With a few deft taps and swipes of her finger, she found exactly what Jimmy mentioned. Jinx all but danced around Batman, though neither of them seemed to be trying to injure the other greatly.

In the end, the girl wound up doing a handstand on Batman’s shoulders—it looked almost choreographed, far too unlikely to be real. However, the look on Jinx’s face as she realized where she was and how precarious her position was said it all; that hadn’t been intentional... somehow. Lois winced at the clothesline Jinx took to the gut, nearly cringed watching her fold around Batman’s forearm and thump to the ground. Still, the girl’s laugh implied she wasn’t dissatisfied with the outcome.

Then Jinx was staring directly at her—at the camera. A perturbed frown wrought across the pinkette’s features as she stalked steadily forward.

“Seemore!”

The video ended two seconds later, with a screen full of angry Jinx. This had just happened yesterday—just before lunch, by the looks of the timestamp. Lois shut down and tucked away her tablet.

“Huh.”
The journalist in her told her to go talk to Jinx, but she had promised Raven to let Jinx decide whether to do the interview. Still, there was nothing wrong with satiating her own curiosity. That was, of course, if Jinx would talk to her. There was only one way to find out.

-=Kamala=-

Kammie shook her head as she paged through her medical file. Here was the lost chronology. She was surprised at just how much was in here. Jinx didn’t remember a lot of this stuff in an orderly fashion. A few months of memories in that place were less like a timeline and more like a splatter painting.

She knew she’d lost a bit of time in the IMRO; during that portion of her life, most of it became a sinkhole of swirling time. Things happened, but they happened yesterday and on that day and tomorrow and the day after... Even as horrific as it was, some part of her had gotten used to it. Jinx shook her head again, pulling herself out of the muddled memories and focusing on the reports.

The hex-caster thumbed through the reports, paying more attention to the headers than the actual contents of the reports, ‘Post-sweatbox evaluation... check-up... check-up... delousing and haircut... box-eval.’

“Bit that guard after delousing,” she muttered.

‘Check-up... check-up... delousing and haircut... there’s the second burn treatment after Warden’s ‘annual meeting’... penalty treatment-

“Oh, yeah... got 12 lashes for ghostin’ that fucker. Doc wouldn’t let ‘em put me in the boxes afterward. ‘Bout the time you fuckers stopped feelin’ invincible, wasn’t it?”

‘Post-op check-up and disinfection... ‘nother post-op... suture removal. Check-up... check-up... delousing and haircut. Check-up... check-up... delousing and haircut. Check-up... box-eval... check-up... developmental evaluation... delousing and haircut. Burn treatment—that’s year three, then. Developmental evaluation... dev-eval... delousing and haircut. Dev-eval...’

This was her secret burden—now not so secret. This was her sordid history, with all the little duckies in a row. Jinx could now see the order of events in her life for those brutal set of years. Her brow twitched as she noticed a sudden pattern. The ‘check-ups’—to a one—had been abruptly replaced with ‘developmental evaluations.’ It took her several moments to figure out what had changed. Even then, the answer came relatively easily.

“Heh, sent me to the Doc; wanted to figure out how I was causin’ all the accidents?” She scanned through the dev-evals with a bit more scrutiny. “Couldn’t get your heads around it, though. Wasn’t in my blood; ‘within nominal Metahuman standards.’ Wasn’t in my brain; ‘no outstanding activity detected within EEG. MRI/fMRI scans inconclusive.’” Jinx blinked and stared up at the bright blue sky above them. “Holy shit, I remember that, now! Fuckin’ weirdest day of my life in there...”

The Warden, thoroughly fed up with all the tragic happenstances, must have ordered all those bizarre, obscure tests done to figure out how she was sabotaging everyone and everything in the building. All she had to do was walk by something and it would malfunction. And so they sent her to the Doc. They had drawn blood. They had strapped things to her arms, to her chest, to her head. They had stuck her enormous machines...

“...and then I broke the MRI.”
She remembered how it had gone. They couldn’t get her to lie still on the slab, so they’d lashed her down tightly with something like gurney straps. Then the banging sounds started. She had been stressed... and frightened. All she wanted was for it to stop. Then it did. It was the one time the Doc had a discernible expression on his face. He looked... mildly disappointed, Jinx imagined. The memory was fuzzy and the man himself was nigh the definition of inscrutable.

HAEYP had wanted to do an MRI of her. She’d taken one look at the machine and bolted from the room. It’d taken them nearly six hours to find her, and another two to coax her out of the cubbyhole where she’d tucked herself away. Still, they eventually managed to calm her down... explain it. It took almost a year and a half before she let them put her in an open MRI. Not being trapped in a tube had helped calm her down some; seeing someone else do it before she went in helped, too. In the end, it was all for naught. There was nothing extraordinary to find in her grey matter.

There wasn’t much more left in the medical file—and she remembered those events with far more clarity. Kamala had become more aware when she took hold of her power. It drew her out of the stupor of daily tortures and indignities... gave her something to live for. It was also when she began her transformation. Thanks to the guards, she was no longer just 3120; she had become the Jinx. She knew what was in the next few pages, and it was mostly negligible. With that, she closed the folder.

“Sneakin’ around this place? Not wise.”

The Daily Planet’s poster girl came closer, “I wasn’t sneaking. I just didn’t want to interrupt you if you were busy with something important.”

Kamala made sure the file was face-down, so that the numbers on the sticker weren’t visible, “So you were treading carefully.”

“Yes.”

“So you wouldn’t be heard and disturb anyone.”

“Yes,” she agreed, then frowned at the hex-caster and reiterated, “I wasn’t sneaking.”

-=Lois=-

“Okay... so why were you not-sneaking over here?”

Lois sat across from her, keeping a respectable distance of about four feet. The last thing she wanted as for Jinx to feel crowded. As she stared into the girl’s eyes, she noted that the vertical pupils were slightly wide... but narrowing even as she mocked Lois. The girl had probably noticed her the moment she approached; it seemed the girl was hypervigilant.

Even so, this was a far cry from the panicked look on Jinx’s face this morning. The woman she was talking to now was self-assured, in control, and unthreatened. Those bright, pink eyes were evaluating and Lois made a point of being very open. Something told her that the straightforward approach would be better than working roundabout toward her goals.

“I just wanted to talk a bit; I had a few questions and I thought you might be able to help.”

“Thought you were going to give me time to think about this.”

The journalist shook her head, “Not for the paper. Just my own curiosity...”
“I’m not the spokesperson for this shindig. League’s handling all that junk. Far as I know, they’ve got answers for all the inquiries that need answerin’.”

Jinx was running her around. She had to check her first impulse to go on the offensive. It reminded her of some of her interviews with Luthor. Those were all adroit posturing and careful wording...

“The Justice League doesn’t have the answers to my questions. I thought about asking Raven, but she’s busy just now. You didn’t look as busy and you seem to be something of an unofficial leader to—”

“Look, I’m just a merc,” Jinx interrupted flatly.

“How does a mercenary get caught up playing the humanitarian role?”

“You sure this isn’t an interview?”

“Recorder’s not even on,” Lois assured, pulling said device out of her pocket and showing the pinkette its unpowered state.

Jinx grunted, but finally decided to answer the question. “Got called in for a quick repo. Knew it was a fuckin’ trap, but I had to go anyway.” Lois wanted to ask why she had to go, but she’d just got the girl talking and didn’t want her to clam up again. “Got to the rendezvous, stuck in an ambush. IMRO came in heavy, scattered my team and snatched me.”

“So you’re not local—you sound American.”

“I’m native, but not home-grown,” Jinx gave by way of explanation.

Lois took in Jinx’s features—ignoring the pale skin and pink hair—and drew parallels to the facial structure of several of the local relief aid. Jinx was Indian, but she certainly didn’t sound like it. It made her wonder if she shouldn’t tell the techies to search the American records for anything on Jinx, not the local news archives.

“Why would the... what did you call them? Why would they want you?”

“IMRO. And that’s easy to answer: I’m the one that got away.”

This gave the woman pause, and she knew that now was the time to start treading carefully. There was something in Jinx’s voice—a carefulness that she always noted with Lex Luthor right before he would close down on any interview. A false step in the conversation at this point might just terminate it... and potentially wreck her chance for any further talks.

“Can I ask about that or should we stay away from the topic?”

“Might as well; everyone and their third cousins seem to be hearing about it, lately.”

“You don’t have to—”

“It’s fine,” Jinx interrupted again, this time just a bit tersely. The girl took a breath and jumped in, “I spent four years here. I escaped, left ‘im for dead... Warden wasn’t happy with that. When I made the merc circuit, he started baiting me with false job offers in and around India. Wasn’t stupid enough to take ‘em. They were ham-handled ones—obvious ploys. Think he was desperate... might’ve been on his way out and wanted me buried in a cell before he got buried in a pine box.”

“...Why take the bait this time, after all the others?”
“Fate said. And when Fate says, I obey.”

“Fate said? I don’t understand.”

“Call it preternatural intuition... or divine intervention—whatever floats your boat. I don’t think it matters.”

Lois wasn’t sure she understood exactly what Jinx was referring to, but she wasn’t about to question it, “So that sense led you to come here, and they abducted you.”

“Yeah. Don’t think they counted on me being a whole lot more dangerous than before. Didn’t count on me having allies, either. Raven had a particular problem with them... and now they’re not a problem anymore.”

“Still, if you’re just a merc, as you say, why stick around? It wasn’t even a real job—you’re not getting paid for your time here, are you? You’re staying for those kids.”

“I’m not some token hero to tout around, Lane.”

It was the first time Jinx had acknowledged her name, but it wasn’t a pleasant statement. There was also something in the way she said ‘hero’—as though it was some invective or disgusting insect. This young woman had some sort of issues with the concept of heroism, and Lois made a note to stray away from that particular line of discussion.

She had let the silence drag on a moment too long, and the mercenary broke it.

“I didn’t mean to snap at you, but I’m not doing this for the payday or the recognition. I don’t need a costume or a fuckin’ cape. My team doesn’t spout moral discourse or do press conferences. This was business—my personal business—and I had to see it through.”

“That’s not what a hero is, Jinx,” she thought, but she didn’t think it wise to bring up.

“It’s okay. If you’d rather wait and talk about all this later with your girlfriend-”

The girl interrupted her once more, “She’s not my girlfriend, she’s my-”

The sentence terminated there. Jinx’s mouth hung open and Lois watched her fetch around for another word—a substitute for whatever she was unwilling to say. From the casual intimacy that she had seen Jinx and Raven sharing, she wouldn’t have thought the girl to be in the closet. What was it that had her censoring herself?

“-wife,” Jinx finished lamely, and rested her chin in a palm. The frown deepened across her face, and the slight grimace made it clear that she was not happy with that word.

“You, uh... don’t look too happy with that...?” Lois hazarded the question.

The pinkette was slow to answer, but her words were carefully placed when the reply came, “The current view of marriage depreciates what we are to one another.”

“Wow, that’s... impressive, actually. From your tone, I gather that you didn’t do the typical wedding and reception...”

“Everyone knows Raven’s position on those sorts of things. It’s legendary. She hates parties—or large gatherings, or celebrations... ...birthdays, holidays, ceremonies, dances, festivals, tributes, dedications...”
Lois quirked a brow at the growing list, “What about religious assemblies?”

“Vishnu’s grace, don’t even bring that up,” Jinx groaned, and Lois wondered what the story behind that was.

“So what did you two do? That is, if you decided to do anything at all...”

Even from where she was sitting, she saw Jinx’s pupils begin to widen as the girl sat up and glanced away from her. She also noticed the faint blush that the girl seemed to be fighting. At least part of it was obvious; Raven and Jinx had consummated whatever partnership they’d entered several times over by now. Lois watched as she tried to formulate a response and made a vague gesture with her hands.

“Well... it... we swore oaths.”

“So you took vows?”

“Not the kind you’re thinking. More than that... we’re not talking about the rote things you say to someone that are just... elaborately worded promises.”

“More than a promise?” Lois wasn’t exactly sure how it could be more.

“The words we spoke have real power. They can have a tangible effect on us—body, mind, and soul.”

“Um...”

“You live in a city with your alien boyfriend who fights mad science and its strange creations both machine and creature. Are you really going to question the validity of planes existing beyond our mortal senses? Hell, Darkseid came from one of those planes.”

Lois said nothing to the boyfriend remark. She couldn’t think of a reply that wouldn’t just make things worse or more awkward somehow. Instead, she merely focused on the latter half of that rebuttal.

“Okay, I have to give you that; I’ve seen some crazy things...”

“The words Raven and I spoke to one another easily have more power than the spell holding up the IMRO over there,” Jinx said, jerking a thumb at the floating edifice. “It’s devotion on a deeper level.”

“That sounds... intense.”

“It can be.”

Lois decided they’d exhausted that particular topic. The more succinct Jinx became, the less likely it seemed she’d continue speaking. The journalist decided to move on from that topic, spring boarding off something she’d picked up in that last explanation.

“So that’s what’s holding up that complex? A spell?”

Jinx held out her hands, one over the other with palms facing one another. Within them, sparked a greenish flicker, which quickly conflagrated into a small, quarter-sized orb of fire. Lois recoiled slightly at the sudden appearance of the fire, but quickly leaned back in. Jinx had set the flame circling vertically in a counter-clockwise motion.
“Yep.”

The flame began trailing green fire behind itself, and soon had a ring of fire perpetuated. Then the ring itself began to rotate, also drawing a surface of flames in its wake until it had rotated a full 180 degrees. Now Jinx was holding a much larger orb of green fire about the size of a basketball.

“Pure, concentrated, channeled, mystical, magical mojo.” The fiery orb suddenly winked out, and in its place was a small ruby that dropped into her left palm. Jinx’s right hand lowered, and the left hopped the gem out of her palm... and there it hung in the air. “See, levitation is simple. What Raven did was essentially just a parlor trick... but on a grander scale, obviously.”

And then the spherical ruby simply vanished.

“Because the building is bigger and heavier?” Lois ventured.

“Sssort of,” Jinx almost hesitantly agreed, “Weight isn’t really a... thing. Mass—*metaphysical* mass—now that’s important. Physics mostly bows and bends over backward for the kind of forces we’re imposing on things. We’re talkin’ extraplanar energies, yeah? Gravity, acceleration, space, time, energy...? That’s all *this* plane of existence. Those have no claim over magic; that’s the first thing ya gotta forget when you’re trying to accomplish something.

“Look, it’s like—you’re trying to suspend something in a relative or absolute location, yeah? You don’t want it to move in the purely physical sense of the word. So, you have to exert some outside force to anchor it there—or, in the case of moving something from Point A to Point B, exert a force to keep a relatively chosen chunk o’ mass within the mobile locus of your control.”

Lois slowly nodded, “Well, I’ll admit I’m more than a little out of my depth.”

“I get that; magic is a whole ’nother mindset. Most people kind of... indoctrinate themselves against the idea of magic, whether or not they believe in it. Do you take it for granted that you’re standing on the ground? When you fall, you’re going to fall ‘down’—to the ground. Do you take it for granted that because you poured water into a glass until it reached the glass rim that it can’t hold more? The glass is ‘full,’ you say. Do you take it for granted that a doorway leads to the same place twice? I was just ‘there,’ you might think, I know what’s there behind that door.

“Mortal perception dicks with the concepts inherent to magic, making it an almost impossible feat for even the most believing person—a person who has seen magic performed or even mixed mystical ingredients or used magical artifacts. They can’t use magic themselves, because they’ve limited their perception.

“Sometimes that’s a good thing, though.”

She hadn’t expected to get a lecture in Mysticism 101 when she sat down, but damn if it wasn’t interesting. Lois could see Jinx relaxing, could tell the girl was in her element, and thought it for the best to let the conversation run amok. The more comfortable Jinx was with her now, the better it would be for the interview later.

“Why is that a good thing? Isn’t that... embracing ignorance?”

“It’s a duality. You ever hear of the stereotypical ‘mad sorcerer?’ What happens when you focus so much on magic that you stop paying attention to this plane’s reality? If you start questioning whether you are standing on the ground, or if your glass is full, or if you *really* just left the living room? Existential questions like that will mess with your head. You gotta segregate that shit.” The mercenary held her hands up in a gesture of space on her left. “Physical...” She shifted her hands to
“Metaphysical. “If you don’t get it down straight, you’re likely to mess yourself up. It’s always sound practice to treat things as ‘real’ unless there’s good reason not to.”

“...Sound advice,” Lois agreed, “So you seem to be pretty sane, you must be doing it right.”

Jinx laughed. It was a melodic, carefree, and slightly mischievous bounce in her voice—stronger than a giggle, but lighter than a cackle. It truly transformed the young woman, and Lois knew then that everything that everyone had seen of her so far was just the tip of the iceberg.

“I know a lot of people that would seriously doubt you on that, recently more than ever.”

Lois decided to steer clear of the question of her stability. She’d heard it kicked around by some of the other news crews, who clearly worried about Jinx’s state of mind after that blowout. They weren’t being cruel, but this was the kind of thing to inspire traumas... or exacerbate preexisting ones.

“You don’t strike me as the ‘mad sorcerer’ type.”

Jinx shook her head, failing to fight back her grin, “That’s ‘cause I don’t fit in either category. I’d be a ‘crazy old witch’ type.”

“Are we splitting the metaphorical hairs of stereotype, now?”

“Actually, no,” Jinx said, sounding rather surprised at the turn of the conversation, “When you start breaking it down, there are three ways of going about magic. There’s Sorcery, the Craft, and Shaping. And, eck, we don’t have the kind of time to really get into all that.”

“You nearly baked my brain with the last explanation, at that. What about a cliffnotes version?”

“Right, okay...” Jinx was silent for several moments as she deliberated what must have been a really complicated explanation in an attempt to boil it down to something Lois’ layman mind could wrap around. The mercenary repeated herself, “Right... So, manipulating ethereal energies can be done several ways. The Craft, or Crafting, goes with the natural order of magic; it draws upon the energies and promotes its innate behavior to influence or affect something or to evoke some kind of result without imposing upon the natural currents. This means the magic is all natural, and so it’s a little bit wild. You don’t work with exact measurements with the Craft; anything you cast is gonna have inertia, so you better have a good grip. Generally speaking, the Craft is used in witchcraft, shamanism, druidism, and other natural magics.

“I’m a witch.”

“And the other two?”

“Mm, Sorcery should probably go next—Shaping is... never mind. One thing at a time.”

Lois nodded silently, though she boggled at the thought that this was the simple version.

“Yeah, see... On the other end of the spectrum of mages from the Craft, you have Sorcery. Sorcery is more technical. Oh, it still works naturally—in a manner of speaking. You can’t just make magic do something it’s not geared to do. Ya do that and you’re lookin’ at a one-way ticket to the Spectral Realm, assuming you don’t just obliterate your soul in your fuckup.

“Anyway, if the Craft is like... Force-lightning, then Sorcery is kinda like programming. You take
that electricity and you feed it down a number of pathways until you reach a desired conclusion: Windows XP.”

“I don’t...” Lois frowned and trailed off.

“You bend the flow of magic to accomplish things you want it to do, that you know it probably wouldn’t do unless constrained under those specific circumstances, but it’s not going against the flow of magic, per se. This kind of ‘spell-programming’ requires much more attention to detail, because otherwise your carefully built power-lines and circuitry and tubing will short out or spring a leak or whatever the analogy is now. As I said before, that’s bad—things can go boom.

“Sorcery is typically used in wizardry, enchanting, sorcery-”

“Wait, wait—sorcery is used in sorcery?”

“Er... that’s a big heading. It’s a means as well as a profession, in that sense. Sorcery includes people like diviners, conjurors, thaumaturges, all the different disciplines within the field of sorcery.”

“Oh. So this last one... Shaping?”

Jinx squinted, “Okay, this one’s hard to explain. I explained the Craft and Sorcery because they all fall under an even bigger heading of mages. Everyone in both groups is considered a mage.”

“But not... shapers?”

“Exactly. Shapers work from the other side of that. Mages take the world around them and influence it with the introduction of magic. View that as a micro-to-macro style of thinking. Shapers take the grand scale of the purest nature of magic—the nature of the Ethereal Realm itself—and spin that into all the intricate workings of things. Basically, you’re greasing the cogs and wheels as the power trickles down into the tiniest of details.

“Generally speaking—and this isn’t always the case—but generally, mortals can’t fathom that shit. Shaping is used by ethereal beings; the Daemos, the Angiras, extraplanar entities, deities, and other such creatures that inhabit the metaphysical realms.”

“I take it, then, that Shaping is the most powerful type of magic?”

“Well—um... no. It’s all the same thing. You’re still casting magic and any type of magic has its pros and cons. Sometimes you should use Sorcery, other times you should use the Craft. Shaping isn’t generally an option for mortals like me—not the deep stuff, anyway—but one can make limited use of it if they’re careful. They’re schools of thought, much like Tae Kwon Do, Muay Thai, and Wing Chun. It’s all martial arts; this is all magic.

“I’ll even make it simpler for you: it’s all different faces of the same pyramid. The more you learn in a particular school of thought, the more powerful you become, and the closer to the top you get. But they all reach the same point. Once you’ve learned so much, you’ll discover the best way to go about something is synonymous throughout the Craft, Sorcery, or Shaping. It might have a different name, but the process will be the same.”

Lois was silent for several seconds and she could tell that Jinx was waiting for her response on that before saying anything more. The journalist blinked and shook her head; her brain felt entirely too full right now.

“I can’t believe that actually makes sense.”
“I know. Weird, isn’t it? But that’s the whole thing about magic. It’s not adding anything new to your world; it’s just layered in there... waiting for you to discover it. Here’s the fun part.

“You know how science is progressing, yeah? We’re learning to harness all sorts of technology and powers that would obviously be beyond the comprehension of our predecessors. When science progresses far enough, we’ll more or less discover the magical spectrum. Imagine powering a city with magic—no more electricity or fossil fuel or nuclear power. Those are simply forms of energy wrought by the longstanding magic of the universe. And since magic is infinite and pervasive, it’d be no problem to keep shit perpetual.

“That’s what we mages call ‘transcendence.’

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,’” Lois quoted.

“Oh, that’s nice. Who said that?”


“Oh, he wrote that book Gizmo’s always goin’ on about... ...Space Odyssey, I think.”

“Yes. Its full title is ‘2001: A Space Odyssey.’”

“Ah, Hell... I might have to actually read that, now. I told Gizmo I would never read it; I’m not into science-y stuff and-...”

Jinx’s sigh was the epitome of a martyred teenager.

“So science is like a new style of developing magic, huh?” Lois asked to keep her talking.

“Yeah, but to be honest it’s so orderly and full of intricacies that it’ll probably just get slated under Sorcery. Your average Demon wouldn’t bother with it, probably. Too much hassle when you already know what works. Then again, I’m sure there’s a shut-in of a Demon somewhere holed up with a quantum physics book.”

And just like that, Jinx paused—seemed to draw back and her smile faded. Lois could actually see her laying down brick after brick between them, retreating behind a wall. Something had just pinged on Jinx’s cautionary radar. The journalist hastened to prevent the imminent shutdown.

“You’re saying there are... geeky Demons?”

Jinx’s lips twitched as she fought a grin. It was a valiant effort, but whatever tickled the girl about that was obviously far too strong for the likes of the mercenary’s self-control. The sound that came next grated out Jinx’s nose, as her lips were tightly pursed in a happy grimace. The best way Lois could describe it was ‘snerrrrrk.’

Lois couldn’t keep a straight face and wound up laughing, which only made Jinx lose the battle. After several moments of gaiety from journalist and mercenary alike, the pinkette finally managed to compose herself long enough to give an answer. Jinx’s smile was amused, but not mocking. If Lois had to call it, she would say the expression held a fondness.

“I know one, but their pride would never let them admit it.”

Lois’s mind twitched back to that small bit of conversation earlier today...
“I told them we would be there for lunch.”

“We’ll be there for lunch.”

“We have 10 minutes.”

“We have plenty of time. Eesh, are you a Demoness of pride or punctuality?”

“I’m the demi-Demoness of don’t-make-me-come-in-there.”

She decided not to ask about Raven in particular—at least, not just yet. That seemed like a bad idea, considering how reticent Jinx was being about the topic of Demons, so much so, in fact, that the young woman chose gender-neutral pronouns so as not to link Raven to the mentioned Demon. It wasn’t hard to guess that they didn’t want anyone making that kind of connection. Lois could already see the religious zealots lining up for picketing—or worse, if things got truly fanatical. There had to be a way of assuring Jinx, but coming right out and saying it might just get a knee-jerk reaction.

Lois had handled difficult interviews and had a way of dealing with reluctant talkers, both delicate sensibilities and hardball players. This, Lois was thinking, would definitely fit under the former, but she couldn’t coddle Jinx. The girl had quite an independent streak in her, after all.

“You consort much with Demons?”

Jinx turned an interesting shade of pink, not quite matching her eyes or her hair, and Lois kept a careful poker face. Inside, she was laughing. That hadn’t been what she meant, but she wasn’t about to clarify and end her amusement prematurely.

“A little more than average, actually. Most mages are wary of Demons and don’t really want to get involved with them unless they’ve really brushed up on their demonology. The problem with that particular discipline is that it’s basically built around a worst-case scenario. It’s all about prevention—how not to be manipulated, how to keep them caged up, how to tilt a deal in your favor.

“Honestly, who does business like that? The classes I took kind of irked me ‘cause it was so confrontational. In my experience, if you treat a Demon with the respect you would treat any other mage then you generally won’t have problems. I mean, let’s say you do manage to get one up on that Demon... she’s not gonna be happy about that and likely her Clan won’t be too happy with you, either.

“I took a different perspective than my tutors. Rather than taking caution around any and every Demon, I chose to get in good with a Clan or two. I help them, they help me, and it’s beneficial for all. That way, I’m even less likely to be backstabbed because the rest of the community wants to keep me as a resource. I give ‘em first dibs on specialty items from the Material Realm as well as give them opportunities they wouldn’t otherwise get.”

“Oh? What kind of opportunities?”

“Well, there was this Demoness right out of her Blooding. She was ready to take on the world and I’d just gotten sponsored into the merc circuit. She pulled some Clan strings and we had a little sit down. She was looking for some quick power leveling; I was in need of a Demon willing to help me with a blood rite to jack up my energy reserves. I mean, the kind of stuff I wanted to do required way more Ether than even my body carried at the time; stuff that would save my ass now that I was an official mercenary and would be taking on some serious jobs. Not to mention I’d be brimming with
hex whenever I needed it.

“So... I needed a Demon’s shaping prowess to help me tuck a few extra hex-bolts in my belt. Otherwise, I was gonna have to go through this whole, big rigmarole with bound channeling, overhaul my chakras, and reinforce my body for the whole duration so I didn’t pop like a bottle rocket.

“Well, I had my binding circle all set and she had her aura and a dagger ready for the blood rite. So, me an’ Jenai Kor made our cuts and start channeling... but when we get to the energy-buffing part of it, neither of us had considered what the concentrated chaos in my aura would do to what should have been a simple casting.

“Long story short, my aura grabbed hers—she was feeding some of her essence into me—and sucked her in. I wound up possessed for two weeks. I mean... we coulda separated with some help, but neither of us was all that comfortable with telling my tutors or her Clan that we fucked up something so simple, yeah?

“So we worked on it together in my spare time and I guided her around the academy while she posed as me in my body. She had control of my physical form, but wasn’t really used to only having four limbs or doing mortal things like eating three meals a day. I lost six pounds before I realized she was only eating lunch to keep up appearances.

“On the plus side, that adventure introduced her—and thus the Clan—to waffles for breakfast. You have me to blame and/or thank for Eggo becoming the Dying Night Clan’s specialty export.”

“Demons like waffles?”

Jinx nodded, “More than life itself.”

-=Kamala=-

Kamala sat back against her boulder and glanced at the folder lying beside her. She took a deep breath and steeled herself, because she really didn’t want to do it. Unfortunately, she had to ask the question and it was going to bring back all the tension she had just put to rest. At least Lois was being genuine, as far as she could tell. She had good intentions, but those paved the road to Hell.

“So... how much of this are you going to share?”

“What?”

“I need to know how much you’re going to tell everyone about what you’ve heard so far. It’ll go a long way toward me figuring out what else and how much I’ll tell you.”

Lois frowned at her, “I told you this was all off the record, Jinx.”

“I’m not talking about news. I want to know how much of this goes back to Superman and the League.”

“I’m not Superman’s spy,” the journalist told her, and Kammie could see the offended irritation. The woman didn’t even realize why she was here, which did ease her nerves somewhat.

“You weren’t supposed to be here.”
“The League included my name on the press admissions.”

“Sure, ‘cept it wasn’t the League’s list. Batman and Nightwing worked up the exclusivity of that list. You weren’t on it. If you weren’t on it, there would be nobody on it that could walk freely among the area that would get the League the kind of intel they needed to make sure the situation remained stable. So you were put in as a last-minute addition.”

Lois glared at a tent to her left, “Son of a-”

“Don’t get angry. They needed to know; they didn’t pressure you into anything and they didn’t tell you to gather any specific intelligence, did they?”

“No!”

“They just wanted someone here to keep an eye on things where they would be too obtrusive. Capes and spandex are kinda conspicuous, after all. But you’re part of the press. It’s your job to snoop around. I can respect that intel is important and the League can’t make blind decisions on a situation as volatile as this one.

“You’re here to help, don’t doubt that. However, the League and myself don’t exactly see eye to eye... and while I’m not saying they want to exploit the knowledge you possess, they would if they felt it necessary. It’s a power struggle I’m sure you’re familiar with. You’ve dealt with Lex Luthor, after all.”

“You’re not like Lex Luthor at all, Jinx.”

Kamala canted her head to the side, “Aren’t I?”

“...If you are, you’re very good at hiding it.”

“Can you keep a secret?” Jinx asked in a deeper tone, leaning forward a few inches.

Lois likewise did the same, “Yes.”

“So can I.”

The woman huffed and sat back, settling Jinx with a look.

“I have very sensitive information on a lot of topics. This information gives me power, and it’s dangerous on multiple levels. I know things about the League, about the government—several governments and even some international agencies. I know things about specific people... powerful people who don’t like that I could have their head on a chopping block. The dirty laundry in my basket isn’t the kind of thing anyone wants to share—not even me.

“They know I have it and they’re not comfortable with that because they don’t know what I might do with it. No amount of reassurances from me are going to fix that, short of a telepathic mind-wipe. The fact that I know these things scares people... worries the League.

“The sad part of that is I can’t promise not to use that information if it becomes necessary. If push comes to shove, I’ll have to. But that’s just it... the League doesn’t like that they’re not the only ones who can throw around their weight anymore. I got some girth to swing, myself. Suddenly, they’re in need of leverage, something on me that they can use to make themselves bigger in this asinine dick-measuring contest.

“...That’s why you’re here, technically. It sounds a lot dirtier than it is.” Jinx sighed and glanced to
her medical file again. “I won’t say it’s a bad thing or that they’re doing it for the wrong reasons. The League doesn’t intend bad things... but I won’t let them pave their plans on the backs of me and mine. It’s not a reconciliation situation; we can’t agree on these points. I’m just not sure the League will agree to disagree.”

Lois was silent for a moment, seeming to regard her in a new light. This had to be something of a small revelation. Now she just had to wait and see if the reporter would reconsider her initial opinion.

The journalist was still digesting everything when Raven came around the side of the tent.

“Kamal-” Her mate paused upon noticing her company. Still, it wasn’t enough to keep her quiet. “Jinx, you need to come see this.”

Something in her tone—energized and insistent—drew her up. Raven had been working with the children in the medical ward. Whatever the reason, it probably had to do with them. Jinx grabbed the folder and made a note to take it to their tent soon. She’d probably stash it in her sitar case, as it was a somewhat unlikely place to keep it. There simply wasn’t a lot of private space to conceal things here.

She would have stored it in her bound gem, but she didn’t have the time to work the enchantment that would add the folder to its roster of re-summonable objects. It wouldn’t be so difficult if she hadn’t put so much security on the gem, but she didn’t want any average magical schmuck opening her bound gem. She would have to lower its wards using her rune-locked ‘password,’ enchant the folder, link it to them gem as per usual, store it, then raise the wards and relock it with that same ‘password.’ It was something that took a rather complicated binding circle.

So, for now, the folder would be easily accessible to anyone with deft fingers. Maybe she should put up a minor protective ward on it. Then again, that might just draw the attention of one of those average magical schmucks she worried about in the first place. The hex-caster sighed. This entire mission had become one of reveal, and put Jinx in an awkward spotlight.

~§~END CHAPTER 13~§~

Author’s Note:

Hey, everybody! I caught up on all the reviews! I’m still accumulating PMs, though, but they’ll have to wait. Heh. Today’s been a day of lots of typing and it’s not over yet! So I gotta focus and get busy. There’s a lot of fun in this chapter, so let’s get right down to it!

After last chapter’s debacle, we’re starting a new day. Everyone’s refreshed and while the stress isn’t forgotten, at least everyone’s ready to put yesterday behind them and start this whole thing over. I mean, really... what else could you do? There was a lot that had to be done, had to be said, but nobody really liked it.

Onward, to today! Gush as much as you like. RaeJinx is totes adorbs. I mean it, the banter at the beginning here is just... pure, unadulterated adorability. In fact, I’m pretty sure I’m hitting some kind of adorational threshold for banter.

Still, Lois has a job to do, and she’s going to do it right. This, right here, is what Supes was talking about. There’s a difference between doing your job, and understanding your job. Yes, the public has a right to know. No, the public doesn’t have the right to wreck peoples’ lives just because they feel like it. Lois is just there to get a story about the IMRO and Jinx, and nothing says she has to be
invasive to do it.

Normally, the press wouldn’t really phase her. However, Jinx has a lot on her plate right now and the last thing she wants is the remains of yesterday being thrown in her face. Jinx is about one insensitive comment away from a panic attack that would have some unfortunate results for the cause of her stress.

Also, did I mention there’s some adorable things happening in this chapter? Because Gar’s got his Face mojo going on. With the IMRO refugee average demographic being between 5 and 15 years old, he was lucky to get away without giving rides or dragging about 500 pounds of Metahuman anchors on each paw.

In light of Jon Kent being a thing, I totally and whole-heartedy stand by Lois’ ‘ovaries of steel.’ I wonder if Lois ever complained that Clark was faster than a speeding bullet?

Once again, the thing that differs Jinx’s moods on cat references are whether they’re mocking or not. She doesn’t mind if you refer to her nature. Hell, she’s proud of it. But if you’re making fun of her, it just kind of irks her. Even then, if everyone’s just poking fun at each other, if she makes a joke about Raven being a nerdy four-eyes, she wouldn’t be bothered by kitty references in return. It’s all fun and games until someone loses an eye...

Ah, and here’s yet another instance of The Doc having something of a longer reach. He’s still affecting things even without direct presence. He’ll be doing that for a while, honestly. Fortunately, Dick is the kind of guy that actually gets the importance of this kind of thing. Sure, he was raised by the Bat and the whole Clan seems to subscribe to a concept of ‘surveillance is a sign of affection’ as well as being over-prepared... but he also knows there’s not likely to be anything in there that could help him. It would only create a gap of mistrust between them.

Also, Lois isn’t some new-age Philistine. This is why she’s doubly a good choice for a reporter. Not only is she learned enough to pull upon various religion and folklore, but smart enough to piece together a pretty cohesive picture with the clues she’s given. On the other hand, she’s got enough restraint not to panic at the initial picture (this one’s looking at you, Justice League). Rather than alarmist, she’s cautiously inquisitive. I think, at the very least, she would be willing to hear out Raven and consider the validity of what she was claiming.

Instead, the Justice League basically just stood idle and watched. You know, they say that all evil needs to triumph is for good men to do nothing...

Even now, as Lois sees Jinx duke it out with Batman, she’s not really worried. Because she thought before acting. Sure, Raven might be a Demon, sure Jinx just fought Batman, but none of them are worse for wear and none of it screams villainous. So the only real option for her to get an informed opinion is to just... go talk to them. Woulda been nice if the League had considered that, huh?

Yeah, it makes me a little bitter. Meh...

So! Wanna know what’s in Doc’s notes? Well, here ya go! Also, we get another peek into what it was like in the IMRO... and how Jinx’s experience differed and took on a sudden shift. This forms a fuller picture of her days slowly leading up to her escape, even as they tried to figure her out, she was growing more powerful... Then she chose her day—the very day she wouldn’t take anymore. Be it death or escape, she wasn’t going to have him put out another cigar on her. This time, luck was on her side.

Also, it’s notoriously difficult to sneak up on Jinx. In addition to her hyper-vigilance, she also has those nifty nudges... So Lois can not-sneak all she likes, it won’t make a difference.
Unfortunately for Lois, Jinx also knows how to play the game. She’s been in enough courtrooms to not give anything away that she doesn’t want to. Of course, Lois kind of expected that. This girl is obviously a little bundle of secrets and cutting the answers out of Jinx with her razor sharp wit won’t work here.

Honestly, being used to posturing and maneuvering from the likes of Lex Luthor kind of give her a sixth-sense for getting the answers she wants. Luckily, Jinx doesn’t want to jerk her around or gloat like Lex would. Unfortunately, Jinx’s world-view is a little... different from most of the people she associates with.

After all, most of the heroes she’s met in the League play nice. Most of the villains she knows are either cunning bastards or bloodthirsty warlords. A Can o’ Jinx is what it says on the tin: Mercenary. However, Jinx also has a somewhat skewed idea of what it means to be a hero. There’s this standing conversation I wrote once from Jinx’s perspective... I never found a good place to put it in my stories. I’m gonna post an excerpt on it for the purposes of this little ramble:

“Heroes aren’t just upstanding people. Heroes are symbols to the masses. They comfort the scared and weak with promises of protection. They rally the courageous and willing against injustice. They condemn crimes and vow to stop the criminals that commit them. The biggest problem with heroes is that they stand for the greater good. Heroes will toil for the many and forget the few. They function with public knowledge, whether or not they take the stage or work behind the scenes, heroes will make their presence felt in a very tangible and undeniable way. This enforces their power and the symbol they represent.

“Capes are arguably worse. Capes are people with power, often masquerading under the guise of a hero. They garner support for their ostensibly noble actions, but are selfish. They have power, so they use it. That is the whole of their creed. They seem okay until you hinder them in some way, then you get to see their true nature. Not all Capes wear capes. The corrupt politicians, the power-hungry cop, the greedy business tycoon... they can all make your life a living Hell if you get in their way. Throwing Metahuman abilities or magic or alien power or technology only makes the real issue more poignant.

“Villains are a dime a dozen. Unlike Capes, you don’t have to be in their way get caught in the shit-storm. Villains have an agenda; nothing and no one is going to stand in their way. Furthermore, they don’t care—or at least, don’t value—other people’s wants and needs on the same level as their grand plan. Sometimes you can reason with them, but sometimes they’re too committed, too obsessed, or too crazy to stop. No matter what happens, they’re almost guaranteed to hurt someone.”

In it, Jinx proclaims all three to be extremes that she doesn’t really want to bother with them or get caught up in their schemes. Jinx has a moral line, but she can be pushed to her extremity the same as anyone else. She just attempts not to cross over into any of those extremes as much as possible.

Moving on from that, we come to Jinx’s discourse on just what Raven is to her. It’s not really something that has an exact analogue. Demons have some fairly clear divisions on how they relate to one another in terms of relationships; whether they’re lovers, mates, soul-mates, etc. For the Daemos wording, I present you this short list:

**Daelorism** – Essence-Bound Mate (compound word, lit. “forever other half”)
Daesem – Forever half (compound word, lit. “forever half”) [diminutive for Daelorisem]

Lorisem – Other half (compound word, lit. “other half”) [can be diminutive for Daelorisem, but not exclusive; very emotionally invested]

Ormekam – Lover (portmanteau of ormestet kam, lit. “loved one”) [spec. non-mated, but more emotionally invested than Lorikam]

Lorikam – Mate (compound word, lit. “other one”) [spec. a sexual partner; it does not imply permanent status, emotional attachment, or Daelorisem]

And of course, because I had to go and bring up Daemos, there’s obviously more discourse to be had upon my world-building. How does magic work, what are the schools of thought, and what’s the required mindset? And yes, there are most definitely geeky Daemos—beyond Raven, even, because technically, she’s not a Daemos. Not anymore than Trigon was, and he’s slotted under that ‘extradimensional/extraplanar entity’ area.

And so, we also get a little story about Jinx and her Daemos relations! It had been stated previously that she had a level of Demonology prowess, but here’s a peek into just how some of that went. Possession isn’t always a terrible thing; at least, not in my story. It’s all in how things are done—and that’s true of many things.

Waffles are a thing, too. Evil beware.

You shouldn’t work around Batman and bring the press in, Superman. Likewise, you shouldn’t work around your girlfriend and send her in as an unwitting spy. Guess who’s not getting laid anytime soon?

So... in this whole discussion of whether or not she’s going to share things, it should be noted that I title all my scenes and color-code them in Scrivener. Eventually, I’ll also post a picture up of all the titles and my Scrivener setup on deviantArt just so people can see the way I built the story. This last scene was titled ‘Lecture Like Lex Luthor.’

Once again, this goes back to how Jinx views Heroes, Capes, and Villains. Will the heroes paint her as a villain when they come to a disagreement? Who can say? The most important thing for Jinx is that she doesn’t want to use it, and would only use it in protection of herself or others... but some heroes wouldn’t care about that. They would merely see someone with power threatening them. A lot of the League don’t really respond well to threats, but what recourse does that leave Jinx if she has to protect her interests and investments?

That lovely little problem aside, we’ll end this on a positive note!

The next few chapters will grace you with the presence of some of the IMRO refugees. Remember Charcoal? Well, there’s three more kids for you to meet, and two of them have already had an informal debut! Is everyone ready to say hello? Because one of them can’t wait to introduce themselves...

See you there!

-Lynx

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Chapter 14

“...love will find its way / Through paths
where wolves would fear to prey...”
-Lord Byron, The Giaour

Prey Mate

by

Lynx Klaw

Chapter 14

~=Raven=~

Raven was aware of Lane following them, but didn’t really care. If she were a reporter, she would go wherever she heard there was something possibly of noteworthy news. However, her major focus was on Kamala. She ushered her mate around the temporary sleeping tents and into the larger canopies of the medical tents. Her arm was around Kammie’s waist, drawing her on with a slight urgency that she couldn’t help. Jinx’s slight worry trickled over their link, but Raven pressed some reassurance down the mental pipeline, along with a minor helping of excitement.

Kamala shared a quick glance with Raven, and the demi-Demon shared a small smile with her. Jinx was looking about, trying to figure out what was happening. There was, indeed, more than a little stir among the medical staff. As she drew nearer to the small gaggle, she halted.

“So some of the children have begun to grip the reins of their lives. This one has just had the last of his bandages removed; he healed at an accelerated rate. Near as we can tell, he’s completely healthy, now... and the first thing he did...”

Raven trailed off. She pressed Kamala onward, and they passed several of the ex-prisoners who were now sitting up on their beds. She could feel Kamala’s sense of incongruity; it had taken her the same way. Just hours before, these children had been lying upon their beds swathed in gauze due to various tortures inflicted upon them recently. This section of the medical tent was for the more severe traumas.

The fingers of Kamala’s left hand interlocked with her right. The boy—Raven estimated his age around nine—was of a sky blue complexion, and still wore the whites from IMRO. His hair was a silky black, pulled away from his face with a simple tie someone had provided him. Currently, he was pouring what looked to be red smoke from his hands... into the body of another ex-prisoner.
Kamala sucked in a breath. When she spoke, her voice held a quietness—as though afraid to disturb him despite their distance from the boy, “Is that—is he...?”

“Yes, he’s healing them; their bodies, at least. He’s been at it since they allowed him off his table.”

The child had been without a tattoo, and from what Raven had queried of the medical staff, that was likely due to his body fairly rejecting the ink. They had attempted to treat his wounds, but he had responded to none of it. His body had even evicted the smallest of sutures. They had even removed the IV once they noted that particular feature. In the end, they had only been left with the option of putting gauze over his wounds as they regenerated. While it was a slow progression, the boy still convalesced visibly faster than any of those around him would. It had only been a matter of time... and now he was perfectly healthy—essentially flawless.

“...He’s like a mini-Vishnu...”

Kamala’s hope was radiant, glowing in her aura so brightly that Raven turned her head to regard her mate. The pinkette’s eyes brimmed with happy tears, a soft smile stretched widely across her face. This was what Raven had been wanting all along. Even as this small blue boy was healing the whipped girl before them, he was also healing Jinx’s long-wounded heart. Jinx drew their hands up and kissed her thumb’s knuckle.

“He’s been at it for about half an hour, but he’s already healed nine of them. They’re watching him very carefully, because they don’t know what kind of limitations he might have.”

Kamala gave a choked, coughing sort of chuckle as she wiped away her tears, “Probably gonna be hungry, if that takes any energy. We don’t have many healers, but one o’ the HAEPY docs had a personal fridge in the office. Whenever we had skirmish sessions, we could always count on him bein’ in his office, stuffing his face so he’d have the energy to patch up our dumb asses. Healin’ us always kicked his metabolism into high gear.”

“I should tell them they might want to have some food nearby, then.”

Jinx nodded, “You go do that... I’ll be right back.”

So excusing herself, her mate almost reluctantly extricated their interwoven digits. Raven thusly made her way toward the doctor closest to the boy, whom she assumed must be his physician for the time being.

“Excuse me—do you speak English?”

“Ah, yes. How can I help you?” the older, somewhat matronly woman responded.

“My mate knew of another healer, and she suggested healing like this may well take its toll... His power may be fueled by his body—may accelerate his metabolism. It might be prudent to have some food on hand or nearby, perhaps something high in protein?”

“...Yes, yes, I can see that likelihood. He healed, but seemed most recuperative after meals. The more he healed, the more he ate, the more he healed—yes. Thank you for that suggestion. I am sure we have some high-protein bars somewhere around here. They should work very well until the cooks have prepared the next meal.”

Raven watched as the stout woman moved away with her own musings. She moved away from the boy to give him fewer distractions. The young girl’s exposed wounds were slowly sealing and Raven knew how she hated it when someone interrupted or bothered her in the middle of a healing. The boy’s face had a serene tranquility as he worked his miracle. Maybe Jinx wasn’t so off the mark
with her comment about him being a miniature Vishnu.

Speaking of her hex-caster, Kamala had just then returned with her sitar case. It appeared that they were in for a performance again. Hopefully, the press didn’t attempt to mob this way upon hearing her. It was doubtful, though. Batman had put a deep shame and a stark fear for their employment and future reputation at large if they didn’t tread carefully.

Placing herself at the edge of the tent, probably to keep herself out of the way, Jinx removed her sitar from its case. For almost a minute, Kamala sat in silence as though contemplating or meditating upon something. Raven wasn’t sure, because her mate’s mind had gone strangely blank. It wasn’t the same way that Richard blocked her when he desired mental privacy; it was just a concentrated vacancy.

In this time, she noticed Lois padding closer. Raven felt her reluctance to disturb anything, and the demi-Demon respected that sentiment. If nothing else, Ms. Lane was proving to defy Raven’s initial expectations. The mystic Titan had seen some of Lane’s interview questions and commentary; it was biting as a shark—the kind that always filtered its way out of the final product of her articles. Raven had thought that was the doing of some poor, overworked editor. Granted, most of what she’d witnessed had to do with known villain-types such as Lex Luthor. Before today, Raven wouldn’t have thought Ms. Lane even knew the meaning of the word restraint.

Finally, Jinx began to pluck gently at her sitar. The notes were unhurried and stretched on with lazy repetition. Soon enough, her mate’s voice welled up—not to sing over the instrument, but to blend with it.

“ॐ namo bhagavate mahā sudarśanāya vasu-devāya dhanvantaraye; amṛta kalaśa-hastāya; sarvabhaya-vināśāya; sarvaroga-nivāraṇāya; trailokyapataye; trailokya-nidhayeye; śrī mahā-vīṣṇu-svarūpā; śrī dhanvantarī svarūpā; śrī śrī śrī; auśadha cakra-nārāyaṇāya svāhā...”

Kamala’s voice carried despite its soft tone. The mantra, of course, repeated itself with a steadiness of voice that was entrancing. Raven, unfortunately, could only read Sanskrit and the Hindi mantra—even at its slow, droning pace—was too quick for her to appreciably place the syllables into Sanskrit words in her head.

Raven passed by Kamala and stroked her hair as she passed, ‘I’m going to go help set up the healed children in some of the shelters.’

She felt the vague affirmation and hopeful happiness floated into her mind and smiled. The darkness was finally lifting from Kamala’s soul. Raven could feel the power of Chaos, the mantle of self-assuredness, and that stark determination swirling about her in the same way it had first attracted her to Jinx during her heat. This was the person her mate was meant to be.

Several hours later, she retired with Jinx on her heels. There was vivacity, a spring in her step that had been missing since this whole debacle began. When she had entered the tent, she slipped off her cloak and turned to face Kamala. In that instant, her mate’s hands were on her shoulders, pressing her down into the mattress. As neither had any problems operating in dim lighting, they didn’t bother turning on any light source. So it was that Raven stared up into the deep, dark pits of Kamala’s pupils, each rimmed in a fiery, ecliptic ring of fuchsia brimming with hex energy and portents of passion.

Jinx loomed over her, her lithe body pressing in on her with a gravity that Raven knew she didn’t have. It was the weighty sensation of her emotions, and the empath felt every grain of it as Kamala focused upon her. Her pale and pink mercenary had every intention of taking her. It had been a while
since the demi-Demon had surrendered to her mate. Honestly, it wasn’t something that happened often, nor was it something she was always comfortable allowing. Today had been a great victory, though... and it felt right for Kamala to have what she wanted.

Raven definitely wasn’t complaining. Kamala’s sonorous purr crept up her spine and dredged up tingling ripples that sank deeply into her belly. Jinx nipped at her neck, and her back arched. It was a calculated maneuver, and she felt adroit fingers pulling the zipper down within the hidden seam on the back of her leotard.

Her mate pulled down the leotard toward her waist, but without taking the time to extricate her arms, leaving Raven somewhat shackled but bare-breasted. Jinx’s kisses migrated to her lips, hunting and chasing her tongue whilst a muffled, felid growl hummed in the hex-caster’s throat.

Hands swept over her bared flesh, and after several, long moments of indulgence, Jinx’s mouth followed. Raven wanted to reciprocate, but also didn’t want to tear her leotard. While she could phase through it, that would entail interrupting Kamala. That wasn’t happening, Raven reflected, as her mate’s teeth raked over her right nipple.

The demi-Demon’s head tilted back, gasping and then sighing a word, “Daesem...”

“Im-os daesem,” Jinx muttered back, now nibbling at the underside of her breast, “Im-il.”

“Ter-il,” she moaned.

Normally, Raven would never let someone lay such a claim upon her, much less grant it. However, she knew without a doubt that Kamala belonged to her as much as she belonged to Kamala. It wasn’t a claim of ownership so much as a verification of the bond between them. That much, the demi-Demoness would readily assert.

Jinx’s hands immersed themselves in mammorial fascination, squeezing and kneading her in ways that were evoking all sorts of sounds she would be embarrassed even to contemplate outside of bed. Meanwhile, her hex-caster’s mouth was abandoning that terrain for firmer, southern plains. The sorceress’ stomach shuddered and her arms shook with her restraint. As Kamala passed her navel with a trail of kisses, Raven interrupted her.

“Kitten, if you don’t get me out of this leotard, I’m going to tear it apart.”

“Is that warning or inspiration?”

“I—nn—it’s... It’s the only thing I have to wear! Been... using a cleansing—sss—spell on it every morning. Didn’t exactly... pack anything in my rush over he-ee!”

Jinx had tugged down the leotard just far enough down her hips to latch onto her mons with her lips. Her hips bucked suddenly, her jaw falling in a silent gasp. Amethyst eyes went wide, staring at the pointed ceiling of their tent. Was Jinx going to give her a hickey there? Raven’s head fell back and she bit her lip; she wouldn’t be able to hold herself back much longer.

“Squeak like that again, and you might make me tear it off you myself, Poe-bird.”

Hands grabbed her ensnared forearms, holding them to her sides to give Jinx free reign over her torso.

“I’d be naked... hiding under a cloak. You want to chance someone else seeing me the way you see me?”
Kamala mercifully pulled away and Raven panted. With heated, quadruple eyes, the desirous demi-Demon raised her head to regard Jinx. The pixie rested her chin upon Raven’s stomach and grinned.

“I suppose you’re right—I’d just have to keep you in bed all day.”

Her head fell back again, “Bright Azar, Jinx...!”

Just as she feared the loss of her only major article of clothing, Kamala was tugging at the sleeves... and then pulling the black material down her legs. Her boots came with it, and Raven felt her knees pushed apart. Jinx was certainly a handful tonight, but Raven still wasn’t complaining for the most part...

Kamala had yet to undress, but Raven knew that was unlikely to happen until the woman finished having all her fun. She hadn’t been lying about that cleansing spell; it would probably be necessary tomorrow morning. Jinx had her soaking and there was no way her leotard came off dry.

Further thoughts were put on hold as nimble fingers began teasing her clit. First, two digits seesawed along her mound, sweeping through the parallel valleys on either side of her hood. Slowly under this pleasurable provocation, Kammie drew out her quarry. Then Kamala’s thumb almost savagely swirled directly over her button. Raven’s knees pulled up higher, toes starting to curl. Her breaths gusted out of her, measured at first but quickly shrinking into staccato pants. Her mate’s other hand shoved her arms above her head and Raven knew that she shouldn’t bother moving them until directed otherwise. Kamala liked to have unobstructed access to her, absolutely delighted in having all of Raven available.

And, oh, did her mate play her like a finely tuned instrument. She convulsively choked back several loud moans into grunts when she felt those dexterous digits plunge into her, then drag back along her g-spot. It was more than she could quietly handle... but she pursed her lips and clenched her jaw, hoping to bury the bulk of it. It wasn’t enough.

Her mind broke apart and her body followed suit; she clamped down on her control just as quickly as it had slipped, but not before a rather voluble syllable escaped.

“Eemph!”

Her whole body was quaking, but her flushed face was deep into a grimace as she tried to stifle the rest of her orgasm. Kamala hadn’t stopped—probably wouldn’t, just usher her toward the next great peak without any real dip in passion. That was fine at home, but at home she could moan and thrash and scream.

Not here, though... not here, not here...

Then Kamala’s voice was right above her. She managed to pry her bright, ruby eyes open to stare at the intense, almost ominous expression on Jinx’s face, “What’d I tell you about squeaking like that? You’ll make me lose control...”

Raven sucked in a sharp, staggering breath as Kamala began a particularly industrious massage of her g-spot. Kamala’s head disappeared from her view—she couldn’t see the girl with the way her back was arcing. However, there was no mistaking Kamala’s tongue as it firmly dragged over her clitoris. Raven locked her jaw again, her lips unable to purse due to their post-orgasmic quivering. Somewhere in the back of her mind, the sorceress realized Jinx was repeatedly lathing the word ‘Scath’ in Daemos runes across her swollen bundle of nerves. Her mate was invoking, too—Raven could feel the resonance in her soul and the magical hum on her clit. The demi-Demon whipped her head from side to side, her short, purple hair flailed about, but Kamala couldn’t see her, either. It was
too much; she could already feel those wails of passion building up like waves of tsunamis.

‘Can’t... I’m-’

‘Come for me, Daesem,’ Kamala’s thoughts shot through her brain and down her spine like a lightning bolt.

Her hands flew down, clamped double over her mouth. Then everything was swept away in a single, abrupt instant; every nerve chorused a scandalous hymn. She could feel her voice following suit... Were her hands still covering her mouth? She couldn’t think straight enough to tell. Azar, she hoped so. The waves rocking her hips fetched upon the massive wakes made by Jinx’s tongue, sending her up another crest. Jinx still hadn’t stopped. She must be making such a mess out of their air-mattress cover...

An indeterminate amount of time passed, and she found herself clutching at Kamala’s sleeves while her mate held her. When had that happened? Everything was still twitching, so it couldn’t have been all that long ago. Her hands were supposed to be over her mouth! Did she manage to muffle herself enough? ...Was she still screaming? No, no she couldn’t be. Her mouth was closed.

“That’s it. Relax, hon. Easy...”

“Nnz... di-?” Raven croaked unintelligibly. ‘Azar enlightened, my throat feels raw.’

She felt the plastic lip of a water bottle kiss her own and she sipped its cool essence. Raven stared at the bottle, trying to divine when it had materialized or how. Her mind wasn’t quite with her yet, apparently. Finally, her juddering muscles—both inside and out—settled and the afterglow draped over her like a warm blanket.

“Wow, Poe-bird. Don’t think you came that hard even during your heat. Head still in the clouds?”

“Muh,” Raven attempted, but her lips and tongue still wouldn’t comply. ‘How do you even do this to me?’

“With a heart full of love and a really tired tongue, hon.”

That’s when Raven realized that she must have been broadcasting her thoughts. Hopefully, it was just to Jinx. She didn’t even want to think about Richard or J’onn just then. She pulled her mind together—as much as she could just then, to make sure her thoughts were contained and limited to her mate’s link. The mystic Titan’s mouth still wasn’t cooperating, so for now it would be telepathy.

She briefly struggled to reach for Jinx. It was a token gesture, even though she wished otherwise, because Raven was pretty sure her bones had turned into jelly for the time being. Still, the sorceress was somewhat plaintive about the circumstance.

‘That was all me. What about you? I need to-’

Kamala caught her reaching hand and kissed her wrist. The negation came over the link before the words did, “Actually, I just wanted you. I don’t need anything—ask me again in the morning. For now, just rest up.”

The empath wondered if Kamala was merely humoring her, but could feel the irrefutable truth in her mate’s mind. With that easing her nerves, Raven’s mind promptly shut down. Her body was more than half-way out and the trip into unconsciousness short.
Kamala awoke with a soft purr in her throat. She felt good... mentally content and physically quickened. It was 5 AM, and her conscious form became aware as it typically did—swiftly and fully cognizant. The hex-caster blinked several times, and looked down.

Kamala smiled at the sight of her bunched up shirt. Raven’s hand was under it, cupping her right breast. The demi-Demon in question was curled up against her head resting on her shoulder and trapping Kammie’s left leg between her own. She ran a hand up the bare back with her pinned arm, and was unsurprised with the answering squeeze to her breast. Raven was such a boobs-girl.

Her feelings from last night still lingered. Despite Raven’s sleep fondling, she was in far too serene a state to actually feel aroused at the moment. Oh, it felt really nice—and she didn’t mind if Raven kept her hand right where it was, but she wasn’t quite feeling lusty. That would likely change; Kamala was fully aware that stress affected her in some strange ways, but her libido wouldn’t be down much longer, she would just bet. Hell, she’d be lucky to make it through the day without craving to Titan-nap Raven back to their tent for several hours.

Unfortunately, she felt obligated to be there to provide positive energy for Li’l V. That boy had a drive—Kamala would dare say he felt a calling. His diligence and focus were completely abnormal for a kid his age, IMRO refugee or not. V had a mission; Jinx knew what that looked and felt like.

“Poe-bird,” she called gently, and received another grope, “Do I often pogo stick through your thoughts wearing nothing but a smile?”

She watched Raven’s brow twitch briefly into a frown. Her quadruple eyes slowly slid open, sparkling gently in the filtered, early-morning predawn. Her mate muttered sleepily, “Acrobatics, yes... pogo stick, not so much.” With one last—and this time intentional—caress of her breast, Raven’s hand retreated from her shirt. She sat up with a slowness Kamala knew without a doubt was borne of last night’s amorous activity. “...I’ll need to cast a few cleansing spells, this morning.”

“Go take your shower and cleanse your leotard. I’ll take care of the tent.”

With a nod, Raven toddled out of the tent with nary a care. Jinx wondered if Raven thought much about going out in her... ascended form, but decided not to mention it. Fate said it was better that way. That was enough for her, and the last thing she wanted to do was make Raven uncomfortable. She didn’t think anyone would care if Raven had brick red skin before dawn and pale grey before noon.

The air inside the tent tingled—raised hairs on her arm like static—after casting the same spell twice in the same area. Still, it worked to keep their bedding from having to be replaced and the most likely awkward and inevitably ensuing question or deduction of why. She joined Raven in the semi-communal shower set-up that had been placed next to several water heaters and pumps. It was the only way they’d be able to wash so many bodies while they remained in the field. There were a few on-site doctors there with them, but she ignored them.

Kamala was out before Raven, who was finishing up and just turning to her leotard for that cleansing spell. When Raven came back, Jinx had bedecked herself in nostalgia. Her mind had been doing that for a while, now. Yesterday, it had been a HIVE Academy senior’s uniform. Today, it was her old mission costume—not the very same, of course, because that wouldn’t have fit her... but it was definitely a retro-look and Jinx filled it out very nicely now that her late-blooming curves had developed.
...And over it, Jinx was just adding her ‘finishing touch’—Raven’s cloak.

Suspicion cut through the tent, “What are you doing?”

“Nnnothin’,” the hex-caster articulated with faux nonchalance as she took an exaggerated step toward the right wall of their tent.

The sorceress instinctively counter-stepped toward the left wall. Raven’s brow raised; Kamala’s smirked. She took another careful step, and once more Raven moved to keep herself on the same line. Years of fighting each other had built up this kind of rival’s rapport. Her back was now to the still-open flap; Raven hadn’t closed it upon finding Jinx in her cloak.

Jinx grinned... then turned and bolted out the opening. She peeled down the grassy canal between the lines of tents with a gleeful, giggling squeal. Raven, she knew, was hot on her heels; she could hear the girl on foot—which was somewhat odd, but also fair. It wasn’t a proper chase if one of them was flying.

Kammie broke a hard right at one of the wider intersections, skidding in the grass as she reoriented herself. A glance behind her told her that her mate would be on her in seconds if she didn’t make some ground. Finally gaining some traction, the hex-caster looked forward just in time to smack face-first into an icon of a bat. Bouncing backward, she blinked and shook her head.

‘We gotta stop meeting like this.’

“Uh, hey. How’s it—” Kamala began, only to be tackled from the side by Raven, “-guff!”

A very vermillion Scath straddled her in full mount, a fanged grin spread across her face. It never really ceased to make Kammie’s heart quicken. Sure, it was slightly inhuman, but how could Raven think she was grotesque in this form?

“You ran, kitten.” The demi-Demon leaned down, her short purple hair framing her four, Hell-lit eyes. “I believe you have something that belongs to me...”

She heard the brooch unsnap and the cloak loosened about her shoulders. Raven’s head dipped closer to her face. The hex-caster heard the growl, low and seductive, and she knew—just knew—where her mate’s mind had gone. Unfortunately, that train of thought was just departing and they weren’t on it.

A woman cleared her throat, and Jinx looked up to find none other than Lois Lane standing beside the Bat. She felt the sudden, stiff tension above her as Raven followed suit to behold their interlopers. The annoyance was tangible in the air—quite literally, as it seemed that Raven was pushing her aura on purpose as a sign of her displeasure. Jinx almost mentally chided the sorceress on principle... almost.

Kamala broke the silence, “How come you always seem to be where we are exactly when we kinda wish you weren’t?”

“Actually, I was with Batman—you ran into us.”

Raven slid off her as gracefully as she could. Her mate wanted to be anywhere but here, but Kamala had already figured someone would see Raven like this. Fate didn’t often direct her towards things like this without a reason. Kammie didn’t mention Raven reverting, and lo, the Titan’s red form was ‘discovered.’

The mercenary sat up, allowing Raven to pull her cloak from under her and settle it over her
shoulders. To say the demi-Demon hid within the confines of the cape and hood would be a
misnomer, but her mate didn’t like to be on display or ogled—not without her permission, at least.

Her eyes cut to the side, “So I did. Huh. Well, be seein’-”

“But since you’re here...”

Kamala paused, realizing they weren’t going to get out of this quite that easily. Still, it was good to
know that Lois was still interested in talking to her. She hadn’t been sure that would be the case after
yesterday’s conversation. The reporter wasn’t giving her the ‘Lex Luthor treatment,’ at least.

“How have you thought about what you’re gonna tell your Super-boyfriend?”

“He’s not my-” Lois cut herself off, shaking her head, “Look, I was just talking to Batman about this
subject, as well. I’m not too happy they tried to slip me in as an unwitting mole. I’ll probably just tell
him what you told me...” The phrase hung in the air for a beat; Lane had timing—that was for sure.
She could have been a comedian. “Magic is complicatedly reasonable and Demons really like
waffles. If he wants to know more, he can read my article in the Daily Planet or watch CNN.”

‘Ooo, ouch. Looks like I might have stirred a little bit of trouble in paradise.’ However, Kamala did
consider it for a few seconds, “I’ll tell ya what. How about we meet you over breakfast when they
open the buffets at six. You can finish your Bat-chat and it’ll give us a little bit to—ah—freshen up. I
wanna be over in medical by seven, though.”

Lois was quick to jump on the opportunity. Kamala hadn’t expected anything less. Maybe Lane
would surprise her again and not grill her over the events over the past few days...

---Raven---

It had been three days since the sudden and sharp decline in the number of refugees needing attention
in the medical ward. Jinx moved from tent to tent along with the blue boy her mate had taken to
calling ‘Li’l V.’ She sang healing mantras while he worked a curative wave across the refugees.
While he could do nothing for wounds that had already healed on their own—no matter how badly
—he was fully capable of clearing infection and repairing wounds be they bruises, broken bones,
burns, or tears. His healing left no scars, but partially healed wounds he accelerated sometimes had
faint markings. It wasn’t a divine removal of all injury, but it would more than do.

The medical staff had actually taken down several tents to free up some space with the evacuation of
so many patients in such a short time. Li’l V was relentless in his focus, something that worried some
of the physicians and relief workers. However, other than an increased hunger, he exhibited no
negative effects or strain.

Kid could eat, though, that was for sure. It turned out they were correct in their assessment: food was
his healing fuel. Someone had given him a belt pack to store some protein bars. At one point, in lieu
of a sudden and severe lack of protein bars, some poor sap had introduced him to candy bars. Now
they had to watch him to make sure he didn’t eat all the junk food and ignore the healthier, but less
tasty protein bars. Honestly, he was nine; how did they not foresee this?

Raven shook her head.

It wasn’t half-bad, though. Someone had the bright idea to go about prioritizing the injuries of those
in the medical ward from worst to least threatening, and now Li’l V had an itinerary rather than simply wandering from bedside to bedside. There was a clear order and time allotment made to keep him from doing too much and tiring himself out. That seemed to help streamline the entire process and alleviate several concerns for the overall health of the ex-prisoners.

Currently, he was on one of the last medical tents with healable injuries. Many of them had conditions such as malnutrition that would still require medical oversight, but that was no longer complicated with the occupational congestion of wounded bodies. Today was the day that most of them would be strong enough to walk around, even if they weren’t completely clear of IMRO-induced maladies.

So, too, had the press caught its stride. Once again, they were growing bolder, but also far more circumspect in how they went about their journalistic duties. Batman had glanced their way a time or two, but they were pulling their act together and there had been no further incidents since Jinx’s blowout a few days prior.

In particular, Ms. Lane had spoken shortly with them a few times for some clarification on one or another statement they’d given during their causal breakfast interview. It was clear she was working up her draft of the article. Raven half expected to be seeing it within the next 48 hours before it went to the Planet’s editor.

To be honest, the Titan had been expecting some rather invasive questions. Lois had been quite tactful, however. This Raven knew for a fact; she had felt the prominent waves of curiosity buffeting her, all regarding her red-skinned appearance the morning of the interview. She hadn’t asked, though. Whether that was because Ms. Lane had made up her own mind regarding that or because she was respecting Raven’s privacy about it, the demi-Demon was still grateful.

Somewhere around here, Michael and Rohan were still working around the place while pointedly avoiding most of the press. Michael, as the only non-refugee survivor, had an especially good reason for staying out of the limelight. She didn’t even want to contemplate the frenzy that would occur if they learned there was a source of information about the prison that didn’t come from a prisoner’s perspective.

They worked well together; Rohan and Michael would pick a place and set out to improve it. So, when they started this structure, she wasn’t surprised to find it sprawling and almost finished in a mere three days. With Baran and other ‘Tanks’ helping, Raven shouldn’t have been surprised. Michael excelled at organization and planning, and Rohan seemed to intuitively synchronize with him. The two were made for one another and it pained her to think she’d almost killed Rohan’s other half. If someone had killed Kamala... Well, she understood now why Rohan had gone berserk when she had grabbed Michael.

She wasn’t sure what it was they were doing, but it looked like a more permanent structure, if the sizeable plates of interlocking metal were anything to go by. Using some of HIVE’s unique honeycomb building tech, the past few days saw a new structure forming quicker than any steel-and-cement construction.

She wandered over there and was surprised to find Jinx nearby the structure... and thus Michael and Rohan. Despite her aversion—which was nothing personal, but also something Kammie struggled with for the sake of open-mindedness—there her mate stood, staring off in the distance. A few reporters had taken interest in the new structure rising up before them. It had only been three days, but it was clear that the plan was to move the refugees into this building.

“Rain’s coming,” Kamala said without looking back at her.
Raven’s eyes turned to the horizon, where she could see the dark grey clouds amassing... darker and heavier than she had ever seen, even along the western coast of the US. The day was dim, already, as the morning light was not making it through the grey gloom shroud. Even so, the camp was anything but downtrodden. Indeed, the weather seemed to be invigorating many of them.

“Will this be complete before it hits?”

It was nearing the anniversary of Kamala’s escape from the IMRO, which had taken place near the onset of Bihar’s monsoon rains—in the middle of June. It was right on time, and Raven could feel the stirring of memories within her hex-caster.

“Should be. Been moving ‘em in there since they started. Won’t be much longer, though. Probably by lunch today—and probably rain sooner, but you’d be surprised how quickly those things go up.”

“I don’t doubt it; HIVE always had safe houses fixed up mere hours after we would bust one... and that’s to say nothing of your fortresses.”

Jinx snorted, “Fortresses were always more Blood’s commissioning. Typical HIVE operatives always work in smaller groups; there’s no need for enormous buildings. ...I’ll grant the Academy is one of the larger structures. When you have that many Meta kids with random, often destructive powers, you can’t even begin to rely upon insurance. HIVE got around that by making reconstruction practically free.

“There’s 153 different types of hexagons; they’re all independent, but also interlinking. The techies program a sort of... latticework, and all the tiles making up that room, hall, or whatever section of building it is share that formatting. Any replacements that need to be made just... get loaded with the schematic and slid into place. Bam, done.

“Anytime we need wiring, we just install a line of EGH’s—er, the Electrical Grid Hexagons. They manufacture cheap and they’re sturdy... gotta be. When you got people like Baran and Rohan mixing things up or really dense speedsters, you need walls that can withstand the impact of some nimrod taking a header into it at mach 4.”

“It looks like it works on force distribution.”

“Partly, but it’s also made break-away when a force threshold is exceeded to prevent one hexagon tile pulling out whole chunks when you could have just replaced one. Most dorm rooms were made from low-breakaway points. Alternatively, you can also set them into a ‘cluster mode,’ so you’ll have to take out a whole wall to do any damage. You can set their individual breakaway points and cluster-size. Training rooms have the highest breakaway and typically are built with the largest cluster-size—a 37-Grid, a single hexagon with the surrounding three blocks in any direction. When every hexagon in a wall is set to 37-Grid cluster mode, you gotta take out the whole wall and part of every adjacent surface for three tiles before the room’ll crack open. I mean, it’ll dent and bend an’ shit, but the tiles won’t let go. Some kinda molecular super-electromagnet something or other holds ‘em together.”

Her expression must have been telling, because Jinx grinned, “This is just average living stuff you pick up through years in HIVE. When you broke somethin’ at the Academy, part of the punishment usually included doing the repairs—loading up the tiles on the pallets an’ rolling ‘em down the halls to where you made your mess, replacing the damaged tiles, and taking the damaged tiles to the recycler. I dunno how it works, but I know the way it works. Giz could tell you a whole lot more.”

“I think I’ll leave the technical aspects of such things to Cyborg and Nightwing.” Raven begged off, “Li’l V’s on the last of those in medical. It’s been downgraded in size quite a bit, but nobody wants
to go below a quarter of its size just in case of emergency. Mostly, they’re just packing away supplies that don’t need to be out.”

Kamala nodded her assent, her mind not completely here or there.

“Did you want to go see them?”

Her mate had conflicting feelings on the matter. Jinx wouldn’t be one to be a mother hen, but she also didn’t want to seem aloof to their plight. They had talked about this earlier: that Jinx and her team couldn’t stay here indefinitely—it would soon be time to return to the States. This was true of the Titans, as well. Kammie wanted to make sure the children could stand on their own, but had support if they needed it. That meant ensuring HIVE was firmly in control of the situation and Dark Way Prep was ready to accept a massive influx of youths.

“Yeah. Yeah, I probably should...”

-=Ananta=-

The only patients currently in the medical ward were the ones receiving immunization shots or otherwise upgrading their health status. They administered vitamins aplenty, as it was clear there was some malnourishment in some of them. Even so, there were many children... and vitamins weren’t close by in their storage of medical supplies. Before the blue child had set about his healing spree, some of the more severe equipment was necessary—sutures, disinfectant, bandages. Even now, they had moved in only a crate or two of the vitamins into the center of the area. It was necessary, from time to time, to make trips for those supplies.

Dr. Ananta Iyer had only left the patient unattended for half a minute—40 seconds, at the very most. However, she continued to hurry back because she knew the nature of one of her... assistants. After the first two times, she had learned better than to leave for any period longer than a full minute.

All the children were starting to come alive. Some were making choices, either developing or revealing preferences. Others were taking initiative and performing actions of their own volition. Each progressed at their own varying speeds.

One very small group consisted of a harder, more resilient sort. They remained stubborn and somehow unbowed by their experiences. It was both blessing and curse. These ones were more aware of their surroundings, suspicious and alternately active or reluctant.

Her first assistant, who had chosen the name ‘Charcoal’ for herself, spoke nothing but some sparse and broken English. Ananta had a suspicion that the seven-year-old might have actually been taken extremely early in her life. Charcoal was an obvious Metahuman due to the girl’s dark complexion and very flammable nature. However, with Raven’s cloak, that seemed to be mostly mitigated. The girl was unsurprisingly quiet, but also well behaved enough that Dr. Iyer was glad to have her assistant.

Ananta’s second assistant, although she was only 11 years old, was one of the more taxing individuals in the camp. This assistant had dubbed herself ‘Wraith.’ She was one of the first and few that had given a name when asked.

In her initial survey, Dr. Iyer had discovered the girl was somewhat bilingual, but predominantly spoke Hindi. That is, predominant when she decided to speak aloud. However, the girl’s primary form of language was not verbal. Wraith had some form of telepathic projection, and would send
‘snapshots’ or short ‘clips’ of imagery; this constituted her primary form of conversing. A lot of it was conceptual, but Ananta liked to think she was doing well to interpret things. They didn’t have many miscues and Wraith was quick to associate words with things she showed the young Metahuman.

One of those Dark Way Prep people had informed her that the girl could likely learn just about any language at an incredible rate so long as there was a readily identifiable concept or image to put by it. That seemed to be true, and made Wraith a good helper—when the girl was focused. The girl toted around some extra supplies and handed her what she needed, rarely needing a reminder of what was what after hearing said item’s name twice.

From what Dr. Iyer could glean from the girl, Wraith wanted to help the others. One thing was clear from the images that Wraith sent her: this girl was extremely independent. She wanted to do things on her own, choose her own goals and methods of completing those goals. In addition to all this, the girl was extremely curious. These admirable traits were, perhaps, the crux of the problem.

This perfectly illustrated itself by the small set of tweezers in Wraith’s hands. She knew what would happen already and she was still too far away to snatch them away from the girl. Currently, Wraith looked normal—that is, normal for Wraith. The girl had inky black hair almost obscuring her face; it fell to the middle of her back and was more or less straight. The girl’s shale grey skin was coarse to the touch—like cement. They had finally gotten them out of the prison garb, though the doctor wasn’t sure the hospital clothes were much better. The white clothes Wraith had worn earlier made her appear magically stamped into her environment in monochrome shades of inky black and paper white. The blue-grey clothes at least added some hue to her otherwise drab features.

However, she would have to describe Wraith’s personality as anything but drab. Eyes matching the storm clouds gathering above them turned to her just as she was within speaking range. Before Dr. Iyer could speak a word of censure, though, the girl was in action. Like ink staining fabric, several sections of the young Metahuman’s body broke out in metallic splotches. Over the course of perhaps half a second, her body suffused itself in the gleaming gunmetal of the tweezers. Ananta sighed and calmly walked—there was no use in rushing, now.

Those storm-grey eyes had become a shade brighter—a little more metallic. Even so, they held that same knowing, guilty-but-unapologetic expression. Wraith knew she wasn’t supposed to go grabbing at things. She had just wanted to ‘try’ the tweezers before Dr. Iyer would snatch them away—which she did once she was within arm’s length.

“Wraith, I told you not to grab other people’s belongings without their permission,” Ananta reiterated. It was the ninth time she’d told the girl that, but it would probably take a whole lot more before it sunk in.

Wraith projected to her; she knew it was the girl because images bloomed in Ananta’s mind as if she had suddenly developed an overactive imagination—but she wasn’t thinking in that direction. The images all had a foreign feel to them, which was the only way that Dr. Iyer could explain it. They simply didn’t feel like her thoughts. Normally her thoughts came with some words and associations—these ones were oddly ‘standalone,’ which was the source behind her perception of them as foreign.

She first saw the pair of tweezers on an otherwise clean table. The next image welled up with the medical tent completely void of any people, patient or otherwise. Wraith’s expression was clearly expressed she thought that was reason enough. Over the course of the past few days, doctor had gotten used to the girl’s communication.

“So you thought that, since they were left all alone, it was alright to do whatever you wanted with
Wraith nodded seriously. Most of these kids would need a crash course in manners nobody ever taught them. She would have to bring this up with some of the Dark Way Prep group if it wasn’t already on the agenda. Many of the young children would need to learn how to function properly in society.

“I’ll grant you that; they weren’t in use right now, but how do you think the person that owns those will feel if they come back and find them missing?”

It was clear Wraith hadn’t even considered that. The black, metallic filaments that now made up the girl’s brows glinted as they pressed closer together. It was an object lesson and one she could see that Wraith was taking this to heart.

“Why don’t we just put this back where you found it so they won’t be upset, okay?”

The girl readily nodded, and Ananta passed her back the tweezers. Wraith floated over to the nearby table and replaced the small tool, then came back looking somewhat pleased. Hopefully, she hadn’t just given the girl the idea that it was fine to take something so long as the person didn’t know it was missing. She wasn’t the best at behavioral sciences. The metallic Metahuman’s proud expression only lasted a second more before an expression of curiosity supplanted it. Dr. Iyer had become accustomed to that look, as it usually meant more trouble.

Wraith’s right hand reached out, index finger extended. With a tap upon Dr. Iyer’s laminated ID badge, the girl went partially transparent with a whitish core—bespeaking of her now plastic consistency. It also made it quite a bit more difficult to read the young Metahuman’s facial expressions.

“Wraith…”

A small mental ‘clip’ of Wraith plucking the badge off Dr. Iyer splashed into her mind’s eye, quickly overlaid by a universal ‘no’ symbol.

“I know you didn’t take it, this time. That is not the most important aspect of this. You should seek permission before interacting with others’ belongings…”

From the careful stillness and blank expression—or what she thought was a blank expression, as Wraith’s face currently looked as though it came out of a laminator—Ananta knew her explanation was lost on the girl. The doctor sighed.

Her eyes moved to Charcoal, who was merely watching the two of them. The fiery seven-year-old didn’t speak Hindi, so most of this conversation hadn’t benefited her any. If she took the time to explain, it was likely Charcoal would just quietly nod—possibly whether nor not she understood.

It was going to be a long day regardless, but it felt a little longer with her little assistants. Still, Dr. Iyer didn’t exactly mind. After all, if she had wanted an easy job, she would have settled herself in a clinic in Bihar.

-=Kamala=-

Kammie’s attention was drawn to the phantasmal girl both she and Raven had noticed once or twice during their time in and around the medical tents. That girl had been the first to start helping after Li’l V had swept through the medical ward. Raven had mentioned she was quiet but curious; however,
Kamala saw another side—a stubborn one that kept the girl quiet. It seemed the girl had a strange form of self-transmuting power.

The doctor was chastising her... If the girl was anything like Jinx, that wouldn’t really do any good. In her early days, Jinx had been a whirlwind of concentrated mayhem. She did what she wanted and no force could make her do something she didn’t want. That had caused more than a few missteps. The Headmistress had finally sat down with her one day and asked her what she really wanted out of life. The older woman had used her answer to focus her chaotic rampage. With direction, Kamala was seemingly unstoppable.

The hex-caster had no doubt that had been the reason behind putting the likewise trouble-making Mammoth and Gizmo into her squad. Mikron was just as much of a wildcard as she had been, and similarly irrepressible. Mammoth fit part and parcel with them; with a desire to push against—and straight through—any obstacle, Baran was in dire need of a direction before he became little more than a rampaging bull. Jinx had shared her direction with them both. In concentrated effort, they rose to top position in the HIVE Academy.

Some had been wary of them simply because of how driven they were. Nobody understood the utter thirst for freedom within them, the need to take their life by the reins that set them to a ground-eating gallop to success. And here they were, one of the premier mercenary teams of the new wave, trying to live up to the fame and/or infamy of their predecessors.

She could see it: that single-minded force of will, that indefatigable ambition in the ghostly girl. Silently, Jinx tagged her as one of the prime movers and doers in the next generation. In what direction the young Metahuman would move or do things, Kamala had no idea...

Jinx certainly hoped Dark Way Prep was ready for that one; she was sure to be a handful.

Making her way to the trio standing by the boy that reminded her of a gender-bent Poison Ivy, she noted that the floating girl noticed them first—but swiftly followed by the other three. The doctor remained oblivious, but she obviously didn’t have the same type of hypervigilance that the IMRO had engendered.

“Deh-Jinks,” the plastic-y phantom uttered in what Kammie supposed passed as a form of greeting. Her voice was quiet and a bit scratchy, probably from disuse. It reminded her of a younger version of Raven.

The words obviously startled the doctor, who finally seemed to notice that the girl’s attention was no longer upon her. The woman turned to face her and Raven, and incidentally missed the 11-year-old blotching back to her monochromatically pale skin and inky hair. The doctor had been speaking to the girl in Hindi, so she went out on a limb and did the same.

“I am Jinx,” Kamala affirmed.

“I am Wraith.”

Dr. Ananta Iyer—so her ID read—turned around. After a short double take at Wraith’s change in appearance, the woman ushered the dark-skinned elemental forward. This time, the doctor spoke in English.

“Would you like to introduce yourself?”

The witch likewise switched; apparently these two were not bilingual, “Hey there, Charcoal.”

“Oh—you’ve met already, I suppose.”
“I-” Jinx paused, blinking confusedly at the younger girl, “You, uh, liked the name, huh?”

“Yes,” was the fire elemental’s succinct reply. Even so, she could see the girl was proud of that name.

Kammie glanced toward the doctor, “It was, like, a nickname thing I made on the spot. Hopefully, I don’t cause her embarrassment over it later...”

“I’m just glad to have something to call her other than those horrid numbers. Sadly, not all of them have begun embracing names of any sort. She seems happy with—Wraith.”

Jinx’s eyes snapped to the older girl, who had floated forward a few inches and was reaching out toward her sitar case strapped to her back. Wraith’s arm retreated quickly, staring with an innocent but mostly unapologetic expression. Dr. Iyer was swift to chastise the girl in Hindi once more.

“Remember what I said, Wraith. You should ask before touching or taking things that belong to other people.”

She felt the mental touch well before anything came across, pressing at the edges of her mind and trying to discern a way through her shields. Jinx inhaled deeply and fought back her instinctive reaction to begin lashing out at anything and everything near her. The children were nearby. As it was, her right hand clenched into a fist by her side. Raven clasped a hand over her fist and stroked the knuckles.

‘Relax, Daesem. I sensed her as we approached. She speaks with her mind more than with her mouth,’ her mate reassured.

Jinx very tentatively lowered her mental shields to accept whatever Wraith was trying to impart. Wraith’s expression of momentary confusion gave way as she found her way into Kamala’s consciousness and subsequently blossomed images of her touching the sitar case. The girl was reaching out even as the imagery was fading from the mercenary’s mind.

“Wraith,” Dr. Iyer called her. This time, as Wraith pulled back, her annoyance was clear in the frown pulling and pinching at her brows. “Yes, you asked, but did she say you could?”

Now Wraith flapped her arms against her sides in exasperation. Kamala smirked.

“So many new rules, yes? Do not touch, do not take, ask first and wait, then do it anyway. Is it very confusing?”

Jinx felt the mental nudge and accepted the images she expected. Several of them were of Dr. Iyer’s disapproving expression. She outright laughed at that.

“Yes, you will find there are many, many rules. Listen to her and the other instructors here, they will teach you everything you need to know. Becoming free also means more responsibility. Will you take this responsibility as surely as you took a name?”

Wraith’s chin lifted. With a firmness reminiscent of Jinx’s declaration several days ago, the girl spoke her first English phrase, “I – am – Aparajita.”

Dr. Iyer started again; this was apparently the first any of them had heard this. Kamala turned her gaze back to Wraith and stared into those dark orbs. Aparajita—meaning ‘unconquered’—seemed very fitting. Jinx’s eyes met the doctor’s and held that gaze for several seconds. It was a silent warning, even though she understood that the doctor had no idea what that warning regarded.
Jinx tapped her chest and likewise stated in English, “Aparajita, my name is Kamala Malti.” She felt Raven squeeze her hand in concern; the demi-Demon knew she didn’t like spreading her true name around. “But please, call me Jinx.”

“Jinks,” Wraith acknowledged with a nod.

She could see Charcoal also nodding. That one was so quiet it was almost easy to forget she was there. Her eyes traveled to the doctor again.

“I trust you’ll keep that in confidence. I’ll not have that name thrown about carelessly,” the sternness in her voice was half command, half threat. Luckily, Dr. Iyer perceived both.

“You have my word, Jinx.”

With that issue resolved, she removed her sitar case and returned to Hindi, “Yes, Wraith, you may touch it—carefully.”

A moment later, the pale girl had changed into a figure composed of black nylon. However, the novelty soon wore off and Wraith abandoned the form in search of a new experience. That curiosity was sure to vex some of the Dark Way Prep instructors, she was sure.

Wraith sent a questing image into Jinx’s mind again—one of Jinx sitting, sitar in her hands, with her eyes closed and mouth open.

“Will I play more music? Perhaps I will—just until the rain arrives.”

~§~END CHAPTER 14~§~

Author’s Note:

It’s that time again! And there was some good stuff to share with everyone in this chapter! This chapter and last chapter didn’t really tug at the heartstrings as much as previous chapters, and serve as a lighter break to build up prerequisites for ensuing chapters. Yes, we’re heading into the home-stretch of Prey Mate, but there’s still a solid chunk of six chapters. So, before we go summing up the third quarter of Prey Mate, I wanted to slide back to last chapter for a sec!

One of my reviewers mentioned the whole detail of “sorcery used in Sorcery” thing during Jinx’s little Ethereal Theory 101. And when I thought about it, I realized that I hadn’t really addressed the reasoning behind that all that well. There actually was specific purpose behind my using the terminology, but sometimes it’s hard to see the missing parts when you’re so familiar with your own material.

To that end, a quick explanation:

When I say that Sorcery entails wizardry, sorcery, enchanting, etc., it’s due to naming conventions. For example: Psychology. Psychology is used in behavioral psychology, developmental psychology, social psychology, forensic psychology, etc. But they are all considered “psychologists,” aren’t they? Psychologists use psychology, but presenting this tautology doesn’t quite cover it.

There is a different level of quantification for all of them. Some of them require information on other sources—children, societal infrastructure, criminal methodology, etc. But at its base, there’s still psychology. If we divine the root meanings of the words, we’ll see the difference.
Wizardry has its root in “wys”, meaning wise. It could be said that Wizardry is the study of magic, much in the way Philosophy is the study/love of wisdom. Strangely, Wizardry does not inherently require the usage of ethereal energy, it’s the study of it.

Sorcery has its roots in “sors”, meaning fate. This is the practical application of ethereal energy. This is where one actually uses magic. This can be as simple as creating a fireball or as complicated as turning oneself into a Lich (which requires multiple intertwined spells into one, large master-spell).

Enchanting has its roots in “incanto”, which has multiple meanings, but the important one here is the meaning to consecrate. This is a specific type of application of magic, specifically imbuing energy into an object or entity--usually of a certain type of energy or causing a certain effect with that energy.

The overall heading of Sorcery fits because it could encompass all of that. Even Wizardry is “working with magic,” even if you’re not actually making it do anything. There are tons more headings under Sorcery, obviously, but there’s no need to go into them for the purposes of this explanation.

...Okay! Now, on with the notes for this chapter!

I said we’d meet a new face, and this is true, but I also revisit two more! Why bring you one adorable OC when I can bring you three?! You’re welcome. Heh.

So, first... let’s all take a look at this little uplifting bundle of feel-good. Li’il V, as was kinda alluded to, is short for ‘Little Vishnu.’ I built him upon the basis that he is pure. He has a kind of genetic memory on how he is supposed to be. He cannot be marked, scarred, or altered easily or appreciably. Thusly, he cannot be tattooed or even get stitches. The trade-off is that he comes with his own healing prowess that will return him to the the state he should be. He is a pacifist by nature.

He is also nine years old. Sure, go ahead, introduce him to candy bars. You can trust him to be responsible, right? ...Yyyeah...

I really wish I could have found a solid single source for all my Hindi/Sanskrit needs, but alas. Still, I think this was actually my most authentic transcription copy-paste in this story. The repetition of ‘Sri’ was kinda perfect, I felt. From what I could discovery, Sri is the sound of Vishnu’s Sudarshana Chakra as it destroys all ignorance and lies, providing a path to true enlightenment. It also destroys the world, in other texts, but that’s probably because the material is seen as ignorance of the one truth... Nevertheless, this mantra was to promote healing via Ayurveda and removal of disease, which was why I chose it.

Not much to really much to say in the ensuing scene, but here we see something of a Demonic reasoning as it plays into a relationship. My Daemos do not have a concept of slavery or ownership. To say “you are mine” is to lay claim to them, ignorign their existence as a person and objectifying them into something that can be taken like a possession.

However, the other side of that—and more romantic, is to say that “mine” in the sense that “this person is part of me.” This is the very essence of a Daelorism bond, where souls are bound and fused together. This means they are a single soul spread across two bodies. In that sense, the other body is just as much theirs as their own body. The inverse is also true.

That is why the words spoken here—

Im-il – mine
are acceptable. In another story, I had a Daemos lay claim to Raven in that way. When said Daemos claimed, “You are mine”... well, that didn’t really end well for him. Of course, nobody would really make this little cross-reference unless they trawled through my deviantArt account’s scraps. For those interested, that one’s title is “Behind Pride.”

And, y’know, the squeaking bit here is actually a reference to another unfinished story that nobody would really get because I don’t think I even uploaded it to dA. I’ll probably rectify that soon enough. Needless to say, Jinx delights in drawing those noises out of Raven.

Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines reference inbound!

Once again, if you run, they will chase. Jinx knows exactly how to manipulate Raven’s Demonic instincts. Of course, if you just stop running, then really, it’s on you when you get flying tackled by a demi-Demon.

Deny it all you like, Lois, we all know you wouldn’t deport that alien if he wanted to cross your borders.

Y’know, when I started writing this and put this in the time-frame that I did... I really hadn’t even considered this scene. This was one of those serendipitous moments where a story just falls together. The monsoon season in Bihar matching when Jinx escaped and then matching again here with when I had her depart for her mission was... a stroke of luck.

Kamala is magical that way.

Also, the hexagons thing? Purely my BS, but I liked the idea of a very lego-style quick-build for their places. The 153 number was chosen specifically because of the original number of blocks in Minecraft. Obviously, that’s changed, but I wasn’t going to change it.

...And now, it’s time for me to introduce our newest friend! Everyone, say hello to Wraith!

Now, I have a few things to say about her, but there’s also a time and a place for some of them. Most of this comes from deviantArt, as I did a lot of explanation on them there. I’m going to go more into Wraith, Charcoal, Li’l V, and another as-yet unnamed addition (whom you’ve also already met) that will be filling out my Refugee-OCs besides Rohan and Michael. You’ll get that bit in a later chapter.

For now, I’ll impart this copy-and-paste:

“The self-named Aparajita is a character who has also been (sort of) patiently waiting for her debut. Wraith and the others—Li’l V, Charcoal, and the unnamed plant-elemental—will be making up the lead team of the “new wave” of HIVE students. Like Jinx, Mammoth, and Baran before them, these four will be the premier team of their generation of students. I won’t spoil more, but let’s just say that codenames and identities are inbound on these four. Wraith already revealed herself as Aparajita, but we’ll soon have names for each of them.

“Technically, Wraith isn’t a transmuter. Shimmer is, but Wraith has more in with characters like Marvel Comics’ Absorbing Man. By tactile contact, she is capable of taking on the properties of most forms of matter and some forms of energy. Wraith is also capable of channeling matter and energy if she had tactile contact with it or has taken on its properties.
“It doesn’t seem like we’ve seen her “channeling” ability yet... but you’ve got to remember that she typically floats. She’s channeling the properties of air around her body. That’s why, even in her concrete state (and thus as heavy as a concrete statue of an 11-year-old girl), she can float like a... Wraith.”

~§~

Some history on Wraith that won’t be admitted in the story:

“Wraith was taken into the IMRO at a young age, as many were. She was in a human, flesh form at the time. They were capable of tattooing her at this point in time. However, after they put her in a cell, she refused to let them hurt her again. To that point, she took on the properties of the strong, solid cement of her walls. She never felt she could relax from this state, however, and over time became accustomed to her concrete state of body. Eventually, she began to identify with it and her concrete form is now her “resting form,” and becoming flesh again is a matter of will—as is any other property she wishes to embody.

“Because they could not abuse her in any appreciable way, she was mostly left alone and locked in her cell. After all, the force it would take to injure her would go above their means. If they did manage to injure her, it was likely that they would face the wrath of the Doctor or the Warden. You didn’t want either of those two’s attention on you, even if you were a guard.

“In following with this, the guards of the IMRO were never able to stamp out her rebellious streak. They couldn’t do anything to her save just... keep her sealed away. However, as she was also a child, she was still scared of the men and didn’t really know what to do about her current state of captivity.

“On a note of speculation: I’m not sure she has Human, physical needs when in other states. Meaning, as the concrete state is her “resting form,” she may not need (or even be capable) of consuming food and water... or, for that matter, need to breathe. I’m not sure I want to go that route fully or even partially, but it is something I’ve tossed around.

“As a matter of personality, she’s very much like Jinx and it will take some time for her to understand that her actions have larger repercussions than just the immediate results. However, also like Jinx, when she’s given the responsibility of a team, she will probably come into her own.”

~§~

“I’m not sure if Aparajita will appear in future fics or what I would do with her. She was
just sort of here for this story. I don’t doubt I could do plenty with her, but is something I will have to give another look in the future.”

...And that’s what I have on Wraith. I absolutely adore her. Her personality is just so... honest and, as her name implies, unconquered. She also takes on a big-sister role to Charcoal, which just makes me want to squee more. This girl’s going places!

And that takes us to the end of Chapter 14! Always a pleasure to bring you more of this. With the introduction of Wraith, Charcoal, and Li’l V, we’re approaching a major milestone of the story. Next chapter is gonna bring back the badass in one epic moment. I won’t spoil anything, but I’ll say this:

The End of the IMRO is nigh!

-Lynx

Story Mirrors:

Now Available on Archive of Our Own!

“Prey Mate” on FanFiction.net

“Prey Mate” on deviantArt.com
Chapter 15

“...love will find its way / Through paths
where wolves would fear to prey...”
-Lord Byron, The Giaour

Prey Mate

by

Lynx Klaw

Chapter 15

~§~

Jinx made good on her intentions, and had soon garnered a small crowd almost as soon as she had unzipped her sitar case. She sat down somewhere near the fringes of the medical ward, still under the tents but not really in anyone’s way. Her mind flicked over the past few days as well as her impending departure. Kamala was sick and tired of the IMRO’s effects on her and lingering here merely exacerbated the situation. On the other hand, she loved her country—even if it didn’t feel the same about her—and she felt very strongly for her recent and now fellow escapees of that prison.

‘Have I done enough? Can I do more? Should I?’

She would admit to having mixed feelings on that, as well. These children needed support and guidance, but she didn’t want to become their crutch. She couldn’t stay and become their heroic figure. The very idea left a bitter taste in her mouth. The heroes were already here, but there wasn’t much for them to do, not really—not now, anyway.

‘But where does that leave them?’

The mercenary sighed, mustering up her resolve. She couldn’t sing depressed, so she had to shove these feelings away if she wanted to do anything but pluck at her sitar. Jinx didn’t mind doing that, of course, but most of the songs in her head came with lyrics. She toyed with a few notes as she fetched around her brain for a tune.

A twitch of Fate was all it took for her to cycle back to one of the songs that flitted through her head, ‘Ya want it? You got it, Mr. Chaos.’

The chords came out strongly but sedately even as her voice rang out. The words spilling out with a weight and forthrightness that seemed just a tiny bit gauche to her, but tact had never been Jinx’s strong suit. And so the lyrics went on...
“Someone told me, ‘Love would all save us;’ But how can that be? Look what love gave us: A world full of killing and blood spilling; That world never came!” Her chords ramped up, faster and louder as the chorus burst out of her again.

As the chorus finished, she entered the more instrumental portion of the song. Her mind drifted to everything she had—and hadn’t—done for these young refugees. She bit her lip and swallowed down that particular emotion. However, it would not be stifled, and sat in her stomach in a solid, heavy lump.

Jinx swept her eyes over some of the children. Once again, she found it difficult to meet their eyes. Was she giving them what they needed... or was she abandoning them in their hour of greatest need? Her fingers eased the chords into softer notes almost subconsciously.

“Now that the world isn’t ending; it’s love that I’m sending to you,” she sang, fighting her throat’s desire to close. Her eyes couldn’t withstand the pull, and she shut them so she wouldn’t have to see the imagined accusation reflected in anyone’s gaze. She felt a tear work its way down her cheek, but couldn’t pull her hands away from the sitar to do anything about it, “It isn’t the love of a hero; And that’s why I fear it won’t do...”

Ignoring it for now, she could feel the wind picking up and the first churning rumble of thunder from the dark clouds hanging heavily above her. It wouldn’t be long, now. Kamala could practically feel the shift in the air.

“And they say that a hero could save us; I’m not gonna stand here and wait!”

She felt a hand upon her cheek, the thumb wiping away the tear and its wet track down her face. Kamala leaned into the hand, turning her head slightly as the fingers flowed down her jaw. As she felt the fingers finally depart at her chin, she opened her eyes to see Raven standing at her side, concernedly staring at her. She felt the touch of her mate’s mind.

‘I didn’t know you were this concerned about leaving.’

‘Neither did I, I guess...’

She finished the song just in time to hear the hushed susurruses of the monsoon’s rainfall. Absolution had finally arrived, and—it seemed to Kamala—not a moment too soon. She ignored some of the press that were watching and went about stowing her sitar in its case. A few of them were murmuring about nature of the interaction between herself and Raven.

‘That didn’t take long.’

They parted in her wake, clearly not interested in obstructing her. Jinx moved past them and out into the rain. Clear of the tents, she stared out at the small expanse of grassland before the pit that had held the IMRO. There, right in front of her, that abomination itself hung with its nauseatingly odious presence.

Jinx glanced to her side to see she was not the first out there. It was the sylvan child. He stood with his arms out to receive the water as well any other plant here. The boy’s head had fallen back, and his eyes had closed; his entire countenance spoke of a blissful serenity, as though he were closer to enlightenment than she had ever been. Kamala figured he had the right idea.

Tilting her head back, she closed her eyes and let the rain cleanse her body and nourish her soul. The wind chilled her a bit, but she couldn’t be bothered—not now. The very air hummed with probability all around her, billions and trillions of possibilities all waiting to happen. Every molecule was
charged with chances and likelihoods, and the Agent of Chaos could practically see their slow alignment as events began to fall into place on a planetary scale. A small smile lit her face; she knew what that meant...

“Lightning.”

The bolt struck the IMRO with an audible crack. Her clothes were already soaked—she couldn’t have cared less. The mercenary had brought this set along to wear around the apartment for comfort, but she hadn’t been back there since she left for the IMRO’s false mission. Her top was a short-sleeved, midriff top in light lavender and the shorts black, knee-length denim. Jinx reached up to her hair, pulled off her hair bands, and shoved them into her pockets. She shook her head, sending droplets flying as her hair horns splayed loosely. Her sneakers began to feel squishy and it reminded her of her first, barefooted flight across these plains.

Kamala rolled her neck and took a breath of the mud and rain. Yeah, the kid had the right idea. There was just one more thing to do, though. It was something she had come here to do, knowingly or not. Everything had come to a point, all those lines of Fate culminating into this: the hex-caster’s impending, presaged action. How long ago had Chaos had this outcome in the works? seven years? 21 years? longer?

In the end, it didn’t matter: she was here and it was happening.

Her pupils slowly broadened; her focus aimed at the edifice before her like the point of a lance. Kammie pulled out her communicator and hit the team-talk.

“Gizmo.”

“Yeah?”

“Get Lantern to set up a shield between me and everyone else—reporters included.”

There was a short silence before Mikron replied, “It’s time?”

“Yeah. I’m reaching for big power.”

As she closed the communicator, her eyes flashed a potent and portentous fuchsia.

The wind whipped at her bare arms, causing goosebumps to wash over her. Her hair, even damp as it was, refused to bow with the weight of the rain. She inhaled slowly, and exhaled in measured time. After three repetitions, Kamala opened the floodgates of her power. She felt Chaos taking hold of her, but didn’t fight it.

The hex-caster positioned herself rigidly straight, her feet together and her forearms perpendicular out in front of her. Palms pressed together, she began concentrating on the raw, chaotic entropy inside of her. Kamala channeled it, fed the welling energy until her fingers felt hot and itchy.

The pinkette heard Gizmo’s pack whirring a short ways behind her and knew he had returned with Green Lantern. She listened with half attention as he began coralling the reporters and moving them back. A low, oscillating hum caught her attention; likely, that was some sort of force field. Good, she should be free to cut loose. Jinx was betting on a Ring of Oa having the power to block her hexes.

As if hearing her thoughts, Giz piped up, “I hope ya got some juice in that sucker; no tellin’ how strong the kickback’s gonna be.”

“Kickback?”
“Don’t ask me how that mystical mojo shit works, man. I only saw Jinx let loose once before. Girl’s like a cannon. Ya don’t get in her way; there’s a fuckin’ force of nature behind her.”

Dusty particles of bright, coral entropy began to drift from her body—slowly at first, but then quicker and with increased volume. Soon motes of the energy trailed around and away from her like embers from a bonfire. Kammie pulled her palms apart, trailing a series of pink, popping electrical arcs between them.

Her right leg and left arm rose even as she felt the resonating chorus of hex beginning to crescendo and press against the walls of her being. With a harsh stomp, she took a broader stance to anchor herself. The stomp was concussive, and kicked up a kinetic wave that sent the rain whipping away from her for several seconds and traveling parallel to the ground for several meters. The force created a circular locus of flattened grass around her almost twice her body length. Behind her, she heard a scraping sound and Green Lantern utter a curse. Thankfully, she sensed no danger from Mr. Chaos and continued mustering power.

“Get a hold o’ your shit, she’s almost ready! You ain’t ready when she goes off and it’s our asses!”

“Won’t happen again,” Lantern’s voice rebutted with stern resolve, “I didn’t think she’d be that powerful.”

“Weren’t ya listenin’? I told you, there’s a force of nature behind her. Dincha ever wonder why she’s called ‘Jinx?’ It ain’t an idle name. It’s Murphy’s law, pure disorder, utter chaos! ...It ain’t meant to be contained.”

As if in response to Gizmo, the mystical entropy swelled in anticipation just beneath her skin. It wanted to impose its will upon the world—it wanted out. She harshly reined it back, instead allowing the pressure to build for just the right moment... Lightning flashed, once more striking the risen structure before them. The brimming energy lighting her eyes faded, but left her irises practically conflagrating as her pupils narrowed with her concentration.

Waves of visible hex-energy now pulsed from her in wispy, steaming waves. A rosy, electrical spark traveled down her right arm, making the limb twitchily shudder. She had finally reached her zenith; the power was beginning to overflow. Another two zips of hex rambunctiously bounded down her arm, jerking it in miniature seizure. Yet another zap hammered down her arm with almost jarring force and she clenched her fist to keep it from escaping.

It was time. Standing tall, one leg bracing her forward stance, she regarded the IMRO. The Warden had always had a quip on the tip of his tongue from the day she met him to the day she left him to burn alive in his office. It was only fitting that the IMRO end on such a quip.

“Jaisi karni waisi bharni...”

Her arm launched outward like a punch, but punctuated with a sharp snap of her fingers. A flare of fuchsia light and the thunderous report of cannon fire filled the plain. The luminescence lingered, slow to dissipate, but it eventually abated over the course of half a minute. It was then that her efforts revealed themselves.

The IMRO building sat intact, but riddled with trillions of spider-web cracks about its enormous body. A magenta glow seeped and pulsed between those cracks, like molten energy waiting to erupt through the tiny crevices at the slightest provocation. Here and there, small spurts of chaotic power roiled up in arches like a solar prominence.

Jinx’s hand smoked and hissed with amaranth vapors of ethereal energy. She took a cleansing breath.
She had finally kept her promise. Today, the IMRO would fall into nothingness.

Already, the storm was taking its toll. Ruby lightning bolts smashed into the complex. Unlike before, instead of radiating harmlessly around the floating edifice, they punched gaping holes and carved broad trenches throughout its concrete frame. As the monsoon raged on, its rumbling strikes explosively tore into the awful prison. The structure smoked from several of those newly rent fissures and, in some places, a carmine glow heralded the first fires igniting deep within, shielded from the rain by its fragile walls.

The bone-rattling drum roll of thunder echoed almost constantly as the assault continued. The clouds grew increasingly darker. The torrent of rains increased, as did the wind lashing across the grassy field. They had only to wait, now. The monsoon would wreak catastrophic havoc upon the IMRO until she made good on her word. Soon it would be broken, dismantled with every crushing blow from the storm. At long last, this place would be burned to ashes. What did not burn would be ground to dust. What could not be buried would be blown away on the tempestuous winds or swept away in torrents of water.

Still, Kamala stood defiantly, the smoldering, rosy energy of her hexes slowly ebbing. Her arm finally lowered to her side. She attempted to relax the muscles in her face, but the grim expression upon them felt chiseled in stone. Jinx drew another slow breath and exhaled calmly before turning to face Green Lantern and the other spectators. She noted the uneasy expressions on their faces; it wasn’t hard to guess why.

Her irises were normally a rich cerise with a constant vortex of zipping hot-pink hex—together forming the familiar bubble-gum pink most people thought her eyes were at first glance. However, after a stunt like that, Kammie knew that her body was now overly saturated with chaotic energies. Despite the startling amount of raw power that went into that mega-hex, rather than emptied, she felt supercharged. Indeed, she could feel her aura practically thrumming. That was how she could tell that her irises had to be solid, burning rings of hex.

As she approached, Green Lantern looked like he wasn’t sure if he should have taken down his shield. Jinx couldn’t argue that she wasn’t dangerous. As a soldier, he was practically hardwired to assess the threat level of anything that could potentially become hostile. Her past was checkered enough to firmly place her in the ‘potential’ category, too.

Slicking her hands through soaked horns, she squeezed what felt like a few cups of water out of them. For good measure, she shook her head. A few droplets wound up on Green Lantern, but she didn’t particularly care. Kammie retrieved her bands from her pockets and threaded the sodden cones of hair into them.

Jinx forced a smirk to her face, “Thanks for the windshield, Lime Lamp.”

“You okay?” he asked, his tone as uncertain and wary as his expression, “You look----”

“Wired? Yeah. Could probably charge a hundred iPods right now... probably pop ‘em like firecrackers, too, but eh. What would you expect? After all, I’m the Jinx!”

A hint of mirth trickled through her mind and her smirk felt less forced. Kamala moved beyond him—and once again, the reporters parted for her like the Red Sea. This time, however, they were a mite quicker about it.

‘Oh, well. At least they won’t be so eager to get at me for a statement of any sort, now.’
John’s eyes followed her retreating figure. He couldn’t help but notice the way she confidently strode through the masses like a stalking leopard strolling amongst a field of hares. The Lantern would have called it a sashay, but there was no exaggeration of swaying hips or affectation of allure. For such a slip of a girl, she was impressively powerful. What Gizmo had termed as ‘kickback’ had stressed his shield more than he would like to admit. John wondered just how powerful she would be as she grew. Jinx was still a kid, probably just legal to drink back in the States—there was plenty of time for that enormous power within her to mature. He also wondered if that was cause for concern.

Power like that required careful regulation by its wielder. Many struggled with it, Superman and himself included. They took great pains to ensure that they had firm grasp of their power. Gizmo also said the power within Jinx wasn’t meant to be contained. How much of a danger did that make her, if she ever lost control? Right now, she could be a ticking time-bomb...

“Way to show off, Roy Mustang,” Gizmo called out in a faux-mutter.

Jinx’s gait didn’t falter in the slightest. Instead, she merely raised a hand and snapped her fingers again. A patch of rain-soaked ground near John’s foot exploded; tore free a chunk of grass that planted itself in the short, bald kid’s face. Gizmo wiped the sodden mess off his face, then continued to swipe away the mud, but mostly succeeded only in smearing it across his juvenile facade.

Then again, she could also know exactly what she was doing.

“...see if I pirate you the last book of Avatar...”

Gizmo’s pack whirred to life and soon he was moving off somewhere else on a path perpendicular to Jinx. That left John alone with his thoughts. Jinx was a mixed bag of mirth and mayhem. She knew too much about too many things. Before he had come down to do his duty, he had asked around the Tower of people’s thoughts about Jinx. A small portion of them didn’t see her in a favorable light; with everything she knew and a strange power nobody truly understood, these people didn’t trust Jinx as far as they could budge the earth. A slightly larger contingent of the Tower was cautiously optimistic that she could be an ally, if still wary of her due to the comments made by the Bat, Superman, and Zatanna. However, the majority agreed: they couldn’t make heads or tails of her, let alone come to a solid conclusion on whether or not she was friend or foe now or in the future...

Altogether, everyone he had talked to had been useless.

John cut off further introspection; he had a job to do—protecting the whole of this camp from any crazies on the outside. He would leave the inside to the others. With that in mind, Green Lantern flew higher into the rain until the whipping wind drowned out the sounds of billions of raindrops on the ground.

However, just to be safe, he made sure to keep his shield-aura on full. He had no idea how dangerous that red lightning was. If it was charged with even a portion of the power Jinx had just unleashed, he shuddered to think what it might do to his unprotected body.

Kamala had rounded the mostly empty medical tent as a whole and approached the building that was expanding by the minute. Just a few hours ago, this portion hadn’t even had a wall or ceiling; it was just the flooring. Once the rain had started, though, everyone began rushing to ensure the interior
would remain dry.

Jinx took a deep breath. Now out of sight of the press and most questing eyes, she could bleed off some energy. She didn’t need people staring at her strangely while she tried to concentrate on grounding mystical, entropic energies. Kammie could feel the energy humming around her body, pulsing down her chakras like the heavy, rumbling thumps of a diesel engine.

Tilting her head back, she let the rain hit her in the face. It was, as before, cleansing. Arms dangling at her side, her eyes flared brightly and small eddies of her power began soaking her skin as much as the deluge already had. The hex-caster felt the torrent of power within her surge and let it whip about her figure. Once more, she found herself covered in a flaming aura of chaos energy.

As Jinx let out a long, controlled exhale, she remembered the only other time she had done this. After she had grounded the excess energy, Gizmo said it ‘freaked him right the fuck out.’ By his account, she had stood limply while rasping like a glowing, radioactive zombie for ten minutes. Her focused breathing was interrupted by a snort at the memory. Kamala quickly found her center again, then continued to push the bulk of her energy down through the gates of her being.

Carefully she guided the power along her chakras through a series of focused meditations. She bit her lip as it reached her Muladhara; it always felt... strange, with the energy humming there—just not in a physical way that would have had... different effects. She desperately tried not to think about that. Instead, she put her mind to the task of directing the energy outward and down. Slowly, she forged the ethereal conduits, allowing the energy to seep toward her thighs, then her knees, and her feet.

Once there was a full pathway to Mother Earth, it was like a continuous stream of lightning flowing from the crown of her skull to the soles of her feet. Even though Kammie could feel the energy bleeding out of her, there was so much of it that it barely made a difference. One might as well have poked a hole the size of a nail head in a water tower. That’s why it took those ten, ‘creepy’ minutes that ‘traumatized’ Gizmo a few years ago.

The meditation had put her into a light trance, but she wasn’t oblivious. It felt good to have all this energy inside her, and that only eased her mind into a tranquil state. Jinx’s body naturally absorbed just about any mystical energy source and converted it into hex energy in addition to slowly producing the stuff of Chaos on its own. When she had this much energy, the problem became convincing her body to let go.

She hadn’t been kidding about those iPods. Better she not be near any delicate electronics before she got rid of most of this. Her thoughts became more hazy as her trance deepened. Kamala stutteringly drew some air into her lungs, only a softly moan it out. Her noise startled her, and she suddenly realized that she was actually feeling too good.

Eyes fluttering open, Jinx turned her head down to her legs. Under her feet was a pool of black, from which issued sinuous lengths of solid pitch that gently writhed over her skin as they coiled up her legs. Kammie blinked at them stupidly for several seconds. Just as her mind connected the dots, she felt the heavy pulse of Demonic aura. Another pair of thick tendrils rose up and snaked around her shoulders, then down to her elbows and wrists.

A sudden heave found Jinx’s arms hoisted taut above her head and her feet departing the ground—knees wrenched up and out. The mercenary hung in the air, overwhelmed and bewildered. She wasn’t granted any time to appreciate the situation.

Without further notice, the pitch appendages launched her backward. Her back only somewhat lightly collided with the HIVE structure’s wall, enough to jar a small grunt from her. In the same
instant of her flinging, Raven throttled forth from the puddle of murk on the ground as smoothly and violently as a shark hunting a seal. Kamala had barely processed how she wound up pressed against the side of the building before her daelorism’s body was flush against hers, noses touching, and four, glittering, garnet eyes boring into her two. The demi-Demon’s gentle growl mirrored the distant thunder.

“My powerful mate,” Raven muttered with a soft, but clarion helix to her voice.

There were no more words. Her Arch Lord, Baelat Scath—frothing and roiling with the dark energies just beneath the surface of her cape—fastened their lips with terrible intensity. Kamala’s chest, overcome by the tremors of her purring, heaved against Raven’s impressive endowments. It was a fact Jinx couldn’t escape; didn’t want to escape.

Time fell dead, and in the moment before its resurrection, hours and seconds were indistinguishable. Kamala dwelled in that delirium. She couldn’t positively identify the reason for this gratifying assault, as such complicated thoughts were rather difficult to form at this juncture, but she wasn’t complaining. She definitely wasn’t complaining as Raven’s thigh insinuated itself between her own and against an entirely different juncture.

Kammie gasped and Raven greedily drank it.

-=Gar=-

The rain pounded like a million tiny hammers, dragged down his fur like curtains, and dripped off him in waterfalls. A Bengal tiger may not have been the best choice for this outing, Gar reflected. Twice now, the strangely familiar scent of hyena had wedged itself in his nose near the newly raised building. He could only discern this through familiarity from his travels with his parents when he was younger—and that only during flehmening. A tiger’s olfactory system just wasn’t designed for this level of input. Tracking was out of the question, especially in this kind of rain. The knowledge that there was an omnivorous hunter in the area—one known for its prowess in picking out the weak prey and running it down—filled him with a mounting apprehension.

It probably wouldn’t become an immediate concern; hyenas were nocturnal creatures. Even so, he didn’t want to leave it. There were still enough hours of daylight remaining to perform a quick survey of the grounds in a more sensitive form—perhaps a grizzly. For now, however, the black striped, green tiger had another job. The Fearless Leader wanted to talk with Jinx after that literal blowout. Apparently, large-scale demolition marked some precise and specific point in the Bat-plan.

Changeling wasn’t sure she wanted to be found. She had wandered out of sight most likely by design. Still, Jinx wouldn’t hide—she was still too worried about the kids to put herself out of reach in the event of some emergency. That meant she was probably still loitering somewhere between the HIVE housing and the medical tent. It had been her typical haunt since she came out of that hellhole currently under bombardment by the elements.

The tiger trailed the perimeter of the honeycomb structure; he figured he would spot her somewhere around it. As Gar sauntered along the grassy alley between the building and the medical ward, he spotted a path of darkness through the rain. Shaking his head to clear it of the soaking heaviness, he squinted at the shape, which resolved itself into a languidly swaying, serpentine masses emanating from a short form with purple hair.

Directly next to the purple hair, wreathed in the mass of mystical limbs, he saw another body—this one topped with pink hair. It wasn’t hard to guess that he’d found her, but the more his steps cut the
distance between them, the more he felt like an interloper. Gar honestly attempted not to stare at the
two of them—whenever he discovered them like this. Currently, the best he could barely manage
was to resist boarding the train of thought that undressed them with his eyes, but soaked clothes and
a leotard don’t exactly leave much to the imagination.

As he drew close enough to speak over the pounding rain, he hastened to do so before his
imagination—or the girls—went too far, “Uh... Rae? The FL wants to talk to Jinx.”

When Raven’s lips retreated, Jinx’s pursued. There was purring—and a growl that had nothing to do
with anger. His teammate turned her head to face him, but otherwise remained where she was. There
was a feminine, sexually frustrated moan from the mercenary.

The sound resonated within Gar. He shifted from paw to paw. The longer this whole chapter of
events took to conclude itself, the bluer he would become. Tara didn’t have trouble with sex
outdoors; as a Metahuman geomancer, she loved the earth. However, Tara felt far less than inclined
to do anything with so many people milling about, many of them children—especially with only a
thin layer of polyester between them and the public.

Jinx looked to be in a euphoric haze, panting from her girlfriend’s onslaught. Raven herself looked
out of breath, but still had some portion of herself under control—whatever part wasn’t restraining
Jinx, most likely. They were not making this easy on his very instinctually driven, very teenaged
mind...

“She’s taking a break.”

The hex-caster looked to be regaining a semblance of awareness regarding the world surrounding
Raven’s lips. The drenched shifter could clearly see that her eyes were bright with hex energy, and
his instincts—and entire zoological menagerie—conspired to set all the fur on his body on end. He
wondered if that was just Raven’s aura or a combination of the two. He knew first hand that Jinx had
powers that set his animal side into flight response, but until unleashed, that power didn’t have the
aura of danger to it that Raven sometimes had.

Right this moment, even filled to the brim with all that destructive power, he didn’t feel threatened by
Jinx. He was equal parts amused and exasperated. When her attention finally slid to him, he could
tell it was with great difficulty. The girl blinked owlishly; her almost vacant stare turned from him
back to Raven, then back to him.

“I, uh... I’m—taking a break...?”

It was a statement, but her tone suggested she wasn’t certain of her conclusion. Nevertheless, Raven
accepted it as acquiescence. Her stygian power crept up the yellow hexagons of the wall behind Jinx.
In the next moment, Raven pushed the two of them into its shadowy depths and Gar found himself
alone in the downpour.

The tiger hung his head and grunted his mild vexation, “Great.”

-=Raven=-

The darkness peeled back like a living entity, one under her complete control—and that was exactly
how she liked it. The space was dim—a dingy, grey light from the cloud-shrouded sun shining
through the window. It was more than enough for her to locate the bed and dump them both onto it.
Then she was atop Kamala, pinning her to the mattress and resuming their lip-lock.
The HIVE Five had clandestinely rented this room for the duration of the mission; they would retreat to this safe house after faking a return to one of their shell hotels. She knew this to be the case; it was standard operating procedure for most HIVE mercenaries and one of the many things Victor had gleaned during his time as a spy within their Academy.

The hotel was one of the things Gizmo had shared with her during her flight across the Atlantic. Save a small supply run, the mercenaries had abandoned it for their new base of operations in the field that recently housed the IMRO. It perfectly suited her current needs—and desires.

Just then, her mate squeaked, so Raven pulled back just a bit to regard her curiously.

“What happened to our clothes?”

The demi-Demon gestured vaguely toward a chair. A disc of ebony mist swirled and dropped their garments in a pile on its seat with a dull whump. Four, slapping clops immediately followed, heralding the arrival of their shoes.

“They’re out of the way,” she answered simply, then stole a quick kiss. Before they tangled themselves too far into one another, she moved her lips to Jinx’s ear, “I want to try something new, kitten.”

“Okay, Poe-bird.”

“Just relax,” Raven murmured in her ear, “Let me take care of everything.”

Her aura flared, tenebrous limbs ensconcing the bed and sequestering it away from the dreary light fighting its way through the window. As before, they slithered over her mate, coiling about Kamala’s shins and thighs, her shoulders and biceps. Raven knelt on the bed, and let them draw the girl to straddle her knees.

Raven wanted to feel Kamala—inside and out, with every part of herself. She drew her daelorisem to her, ran her hands up the slim hips and the firm flanks of the gorgeous, chaotic creature in her grasp. As she leaned in to hurl Jinx into a series of bottomless kisses, her hands inexorably drew to the girl’s chest, where Raven found her twin obsessions.

Kamala’s purr was back and running on all cylinders. She loved that sound—loved the myriad intimate noise that her mate could make, and determined to gift her ears something delightful. Kammie’s hands rested on her shoulders, squeezed practically in time with Raven’s light pinches to the girl’s nipples. A lone tendril of her power licked its way down Jinx’s sternum, over the taut belly and then lower—molding itself to the ridges and valleys of her kitten’s intimacy.

Jinx jerked, but she could feel her hex-caster attempting relax both mentally and physically. Raven reassuringly ran her hands over Jinx’s ribs and then, on a whim, swept behind and down for a grope of that tight, dancer’s ass before returning to those breasts that filled her hands so perfectly. A few moments later, Kammie wrapped her arms around Raven’s neck, letting herself fall against Raven and trusting the limbs cradling her.

When the tentacle of Raven’s soul-self slowly and unremittingly pressed into her mate, Kamala drew a lengthy, jaw-dropping gasp. The demi-Demon capitalized on this, her tongue insinuating itself farther past her captive’s relenting lips. Kamala’s lungs could hold no more—and Raven had likewise marched her power as far into Jinx as she dared. Now her daelorisem released a hissing groan that was slowly ratcheting up until the girl emitted a squeaking whine.

Her mate did not deny her, though the emotions jutting from Kamala’s mind were in slight disarray
—a stunned haze consisting of acute astonishment and a studious helping of lust. The essence of self that Raven had urged inside Jinx pulsed and hummed with potency—a natural, physical effect of the raw ethereal power held within her soul-self when made tangible. It was likely the latter effect that made Kamala’s walls arduously clench Raven’s dark tendril as tightly as the arms embraced her neck. Furthermore, she could feel the pulsing of Jinx’s soul—tightly wound and suffused with Chaos, pressing and constricting against her soul like a spectral massage. With but a half-thought, that portion of Titan’s soul-self within the mercenary smoothly undulated forward, thrusting in ways that didn’t advance, but also never retreated.

Before long, her mate began rocking her hips with the movements; tiny, muffled mews of her pleasure issued between their lips with each gliding roll forward. It was a slow, but dedicated climb upward. Kamala peaked early, her thighs trembling within their ethereal binds, yet both forged ahead undeterred. Kammie’s rippling hips and Raven’s writhing darkness continued unbroken; they sought a greater summit.

The journey played out and grew long without sojourn, each new peak merely a milestone in this grand odyssey. Before long, Jinx’s breaths came in great gulps and sharp pants between kisses; Raven horded the girl’s lips like a dragon with a treasure. It was one of the many fortunes the demi-Demon had discovered within her mate. Kamala’s nipples under her teasing fingers hardened like priceless jewels. The supple lines of her muscles smoothly glided under her palms like the finest silks. It was an exercise in futility to capture on any canvas the sight of Kamala in the clutches of overwhelming passion, even with the rarest and most vivid of paints.

This moment, opulent as it was, could not go on forever. Finally—gloriously, the symphony of her mate swelled into crescendo. Wordless, slurring mews gave way to staccato shrieks as Kamala’s head fell back and Raven’s lips and teeth set upon the hex-caster’s neck. The finest of feasts lay before her; all the flavors of Kamala’s flesh, every wafted aroma of sex and sweat, and the whole range of palate-whetting emotions—each more delectable than the last!

Her lover’s chalice overflowed. Kamala’s bound legs thrashed, sweeping like butterfly wings. With the girl’s spine in an exquisite arch, a strangled scream flooded the room. Then the moment lingered, the drama now in its dénouement. Jinx’s breasts trembled with each desperate pull of air. The motion enticed Raven—and she indulged herself. The brilliant, coral bands around Kammie’s broad pupils had faded, the chaotic energy having spent itself alongside the Agent.

The Titan’s soul-self unwound from the mercenary’s body, gently lowering the girl to the bed sheets. At length, Kamala drudged up her scattered senses and groaned. Her head struggled to raise, but apparently found that too much effort, and flopped back against the pillows—settling on staring at the ceiling.

“Jus’ what kinda eromanga have you been readin’?”

“Ero...manga?”

“Yeah, I mean... that was straight outta La Blue Girl or somethin’.”

“La Blue Girl?” Raven parroted.

“Yeah, like the Shikima that was attacking Miko’s professor and she was getting brainwashed so Miko had to use her sexy ninja powers and—you don’t have a clue what I’m talking about, huh?”

“...No, but I’m starting to think you don’t, either.”

“I know plenty about it! ...Aaand yeah, I guess that’s not exactly something to be proud of.” Her
mate sighed, “I’m probably going to regret even bringing this up later...”

Raven frowned, but crawled up next to Kamala and laid down beside her, her amethyst gaze patiently drilling a hole into her mate’s head. She felt the embarrassment and exasperation slowly working its way into the room, but also a bit of amusement. What did anything they just did have to do with ninjas?

“Okay, so there’s this fetish...”

That was when Raven knew she would probably regret this later, too.

-=Richard=-

The temporary Dark Way shelter was proving to be most helpful by far. The monsoon was turning the field into a shallow marshland, unsuitable for the most tents—barring the specialized medical tents which were much more like temporary pavilions tents. There was no way to continue housing the refugees in the tents without winding up ankle-deep in water inside the tent. Thankfully, the residential section of the honeycomb structure had been finished—an astonishing capacity of 5,000 finished in under a week. The medical wing and cafeteria sections were under concurrent construction. It was hard to believe that Dark Way deemed it a temporary shelter.

Likely, this would become something of a HIVE outpost. He didn’t doubt their reach. Nightwing couldn’t say he liked it. Sure, the HIVE Five were fine mercenaries... but they were still tied to HIVE. The organization wasn’t anything as cute as a bee-themed country club; the Academy was merely a spearhead into the future of paramilitary power. He couldn’t just sweep aside the meaning behind their acronym: the Hierarchy for International Vengeance and Extermination.

Dick had worked out that Deathstroke, one of the premier mercenary assassins and a constant thorn in his side, had first targeted the Titans on contract to HIVE. He couldn’t be sure, but he suspected that at least part of the contract was a ruse. It was more than likely that Deathstroke held some degree of power within the HIVE—possibly even possessing a chair on the HIVE Council—and hired himself. The man worked wheels within wheels.

Even so, he knew that HAEYP had its own standards and policies. It could be trouble if the Academy ever rose up against the Hierarchy, but there was simply too much going on right now to contemplate any of that. HIVE was helping through Dark Way—whatever their reasons—and they simply weren’t in a position to decline.

Furthermore, they didn’t have much time left here. Titans East and a few honorary Titans were covering for them back in Jump, but they couldn’t stay away much longer or the usual rogues would start to get uppity. Jinx had mentioned withdrawing from India soon, and he needed to coordinate with her and tie up any loose ends before leaving it in the dubious hands of Dark Way Prep.

To that end, he had sent Gar to find Jinx. It had been almost two hours since the green teen had left and Dick was starting to get annoyed—and a tiny bit worried. Almost as if responding to his thoughts, the flap of the tent pulled back. Dick’s attention immediately swung to it.

“Changeling,” he greeted when the tiger padded into the command post soaked to the bone, dripping rivers, and tracking puddles. He was somewhat displeased with Changeling tracking in water like this, but not surprised. The Titans were learning entirely new lexicons and definitions for ‘rain’ and ‘wet’ in India. Nightwing took all this in stride, but the major sticking point was that the young man came in alone, “Where have you been? ...And where’s Jinx?”
“I’ve been chasing around this scent all over creation. There’s a hyena around here somewhere, I’m pretty sure. The rain’s made it impossible to track, though. Last thing I want is an opportunistic hunter like that around so many kids come nightfall and it starts getting hungry.”

Nightwing didn’t miss the glances Mammoth and Gizmo made between one another. Neither said anything about it, but he had his suspicions that they knew the hyena Changeling had been chasing. Batman, however, was the first to reply on the matter.

“The hyena isn’t a concern, Changeling. I’ve already looked into it.”

“...So basically, I just wasted an hour and a half in the rain for nothin’?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Dick made a mental note to talk to Batman about it later and decided to move on, “And what about Jinx?”

“...Erm... She’s, uh... taking a break?” Gar half-answered, half-asked.

“Things are progressing swiftly. This is not the best time to step away,” Manhunter commented.

“Don’t really think she had a choice.”

“Raven,” Tara deduced, “figures. She takes off for a quickie, leaving us stuck doing the legwork.”

Nightwing shrugged, “I’m just glad we got everything out of there that we could—anything that could be used to track down who’s responsible for the IMRO—before Jinx tore into it.”

“It’s kind of surprising,” Ollie commented, stroking his beard, “Little thing like that, housing all that power...”

“Jinx ain’t ever been big on lettin’ loose. Ya get to listenin’ to her—hear her talk about Chaos. Girl’s got a callin’. Ya don’t make light o’ that.”

“Are you implying she planned this, Gizmo?” Arrow asked.

“Jinx? Nah, man. She’s got her plans, but she don’t scheme that sorta shit. She leaves that to Chaos.”

“I’ve heard she refers to herself as an Agent of Chaos.”

“Got it in one, Manny. That whole spectacle outside? Too flashy for Jinx, but she’ll do what she has ta.”

Hawkwoman shifted uncomfortably, “But if it’s all chaos, then how can we trust that it’ll work out for the best?”

Gizmo snorted, “It ain’t about what’s best, Wings. Think on a bigger scale, yeah?”

Shayera frowned at the little genius, “But how can we trust her if-”

“Among my people, it is said that when one is charged with a duty by X’hal, there is no doubt—no confusion or refusal,” Kori interrupted, surprisingly supporting Gizmo, “Those favored by the gods do not waver in their resolve, for their actions were devised by those very same gods. Why should we not trust in our deities?”

“Chaos is beyond good and evil. ‘s not the same concept,” Mammoth added, but it sounded like
something Jinx would say. Likely, he was quoting her on this matter. “Whether’s good or bad, life or death—it doesn’t matter. Jinx’ll follow Chaos, an’ it’ll look after her.”

Hawkwoman remained cynical on the matter, however, “I don’t think—”

“Then you shouldn’t talk,” a voice interrupted from just outside the tent.

Jinx walked in wearing a purple and black rain jacket, its hood up. Underneath, she wore what was probably a fresh change of clothes, looked like her tactical gear—black military cargo pants and combat boots. From the bulk under the jacket, he surmised she had on a light military vest, too.

Gar, still dripping, huffed and paced to the middle of the room. Then, without warning, he shifted his weight. Dick knew what was going to happen too late. The shifter shook mightily, sending water whipping all over the inside of the tent.

“Gah!”

“Hey!”

“-fuck are you-”

“-little grass stain!”

Jinx had merely half-turned, letting the raincoat take the most of it. Batman had his cape to block most of the ‘attack.’ Others were not so lucky.

Gar shifted back to his human form and shrugged, completely unrepentant, “Hey, why should I be the only one to suffer?”

Baleful stares abounded. That was when Changeling did what he did best in these situations: he heaped the attention on someone else. The young man turned to Jinx, who was just then slipping off her raincoat. Nightwing had been right—she wore a short-sleeve shirt and a light military vest, both in black.

“So... how was she?”

“Gar!” Tara called sharply and marched up to slap him on the back of the head.

Kamala, however, merely flashed Cheshire at them. By now, Nightwing had become accustomed to that expression on her face. It was the epitome of mischievousness.

“Like a writing desk.”

Gar’s expression was confused, and that did it. Despite himself, Dick broke into a fit of snickers. Flash outright laughed. Perhaps most surprising, though, was Batman’s discreet cough into his hand and almost invisible smirk behind his gauntlet. The Titan leader caught it, though.

He spared a glance toward the hex-caster’s teammates, but they merely stared at her. When he saw Jinx finally take notice, she likewise took part in that stare. It was like that time shortly after Raven had taken Jinx and he had her call her teammates. Their inscrutable expressions simply locked onto one another for several, silent moments.

“Ah, shuddup,” the pinkette grumbled.

Only then did Gizmo and Mammoth erupt into chortles and guffaws.
After everyone’s laughter had abated Gar—still clearly bamboozled—finally surrendered and asked, “How is Raven like a writing desk?”

Raven chose this moment to emerge from a puddle of darkness that briefly seeped from the floor of the command tent. Drawing her hood back, she regarded Changeling with a raised brow. She sighed at him in mock-exasperation.

“I think you might do something better with the time than waste it in asking riddles that have no answers.”

A new wave of laughter washed over the room, and Gar still didn’t get it.

~§~END CHAPTER 15~§~

Author’s Note:

Okay, so this Author’s Note is late for... obvious reasons. There’s no need to go into them here. That said, this story is now available on AO3, as well. Yes, that’s me, Malkavian Logic. Of course, if you’re reading this, then you’re already here. Unfortunately, this isn’t visible on FFnet. I’ve done all I can to ease my readers into this transition. Thankfully, though, this will be the last chapter removed from FFnet. All other chapters will remain intact.

Said obvious reasons are not worth my time, so let’s move on to the chapter review!

Jinx loves her country. She loves its geography, its culture, its language. She even loves its history and religion. She loves it regardless of everything its has put upon her and the fact that it’s sometimes unsanitary, sexist, and casteist. Those are real-world issues. In this setting, I also apply a strong, anti-Meta sentiment. All this together forms a pretty bleak outlook for someone like Kamala. It grates on her nerves, at times, because she knows there’s never going to be an acceptance for her in a country with systemic problems like that.

That creates something of a duality within her regarding staying here and helping the children versus leaving and getting on with her life. It was partly this feeling that led me to the song choice, here. “Hero” is something of a pointed song. It’s not really something I need to explain here, the lyrics are rather unambiguous. There’s a powerlessness to it, even as its words pointedly take charge of a situation.

That brings us to the moment we’ve all been waiting for. This is one of the few times that Jinx really lets loose. In my stories, I have a very specific and defined way that Jinx’s powers work. In general, her hexes work on a diffusive property. Her truest Metahuman alteration isn’t a physical one—it’s not her eyes or her hair; it’s her very soul. A soul naturally contains condensed ethereal energy. This is the purest energy there is, and it’s kind of... volatile. Jinx’s soul has a definitive shift into Hex. Any ethereal energy that she takes in is converted into Hex energy. Her soul is unlike any other in this regard. (This makes her soul similar to a Daemos hathori, which you’ll read further down.) Thus, Her aura is also hex... and it’s that aura that that reacts with the outside world.

Hex energy naturally breaks down the physical into its core components. You could say Hex is an ethereal solvent. On a more subtle range, it finds means with which to cause things to break down. This can enact itself on a broad, mechanical sense—weakening or breaking certain integral features (shorted wires, loose bolts, snapped cabling, locked gears), or on a baser, molecular or even atomic level (rusted metal, rotted wood, chemical instability, that one-in-a-million spark to combustion). Jinx
can harness this energy and focus it. She doesn’t quite so much control it as unleash it. Kamala has dedicated years to understanding and sensing the world around her. She needs to understand these things to know how her hex blasts will break them down—and prevent her aura from affecting ambient behaviors in everything around her.

Jinx is always cautious, has long-since honed her aura to prevent her power from affecting things. She doesn’t just limit it to how it emits from her—usually in waves—but also the totality of what she will allow it to affect.

With concentrated effort, she can make a hex harmless to a living entity (such as a human) but affect anything mechanical upon their person (phones, wires, computers, mechanical apparatuses like exosuits, etc.). This is useful when she wants nonlethal damage. However, it still takes a little care—after all, there’s defibrillators and pacemakers to consider. Even hearing aids. If one of those blows up... well, she’s just murdered someone.

She could also filter it to magical elements (find weaknesses in a rune-set, wear down or break a warding, interrupt a channeled spell)... but that could also wind up damaging someone’s soul. At any given moment, she is limiting her power. ...But here? This is where she lets it out. In this particular instance, the only limit she’s put out is a cone of effect. In general, she’s more of a shotgun. Here, as Gizmo said, “Girl’s like a cannon.”

That line is actually my favorite throughout this scene.

Of course, there is kickback to consider. This is exactly why Green Lantern became necessary. After all, Chaos is not something that can be harnessed. Jinx merely directs it, which is why that’s my favorite line. She’s the smoking barrel of the gun, burning inside with the passing of the bullet, and the origin of the muzzle flash. She’s the smoking barrel of the gun, burning inside with the passing of the bullet, and the origin of the muzzle flash.

Also? This is the point in the story where I realized Green Lantern was never mentioned, that it was actually Green Arrow. And since he’s kind of integral to the scene... well, I decided to just leave him in there and write him in (and a little argument between Supes and Bats). It worked out for the best.

And really, Raven can’t really resist her mate when she goes and does something that riles her Pride. Incidentally, Raven is unlike many other creatures with regards to interactions with others.

For many a Human, their soul is intangible; it feels, but no in the same way a Human body interprets it. It could be said that the soul is mostly dormant in a person... Or at least feels something on a comparatively muted scale as the mortal frame it inhabits.

You could say that mortals are phased entities, with the bulk of themselves lodged in the Material, but the main battery of their life being metaphysical, its ethereal side tethered to the material body by what is known as the Mortal Coil: a spiraling, tendril of energy that works as a conduit between body and soul.

(Incidentally, this is how mages have access of their energy. Though typically one should avoid trying to cast from their own essence. It can be life-threatening if done improperly. As in drained dry or blown up...)

Demons, on the other hand, merely have a core—called the Hathori—that holds the bulk of their essence. This is sort of like their soul, but also their heart. It’s a hardened shell teeming with uniquely infused energy of the Daemos Realm (the anti-demonist would say “tainted”).

They don’t have physical bodies like most creatures in the Material Realm. Their bodies are basically
extensions of that outer shell, a latticework of fibers from that shell that builds an exoskeletons around their core. It’s an extension of their very being (and this is why Demonic form is malleable). It’s not so much a structure like ours as a projection of their own energy. With concentrated will, it can shift shape, size, and even tangibility (metaphysically speaking).

When on the Mortal Realm, their bodies aren’t physical like the material form of a Human body, nor fully ethereal like a Human soul. They are metaphysical—an ethereal presence that has properties of both Ethereal and Material. This is why you can touch a Daemos, but they can also phase through walls a junk like ghosts. It’s also why they’re so strong; their strength isn’t linked to any Material sense of musculature.

So... Demons aren’t hermit crabs. What I mean is, a hermit crab nestles into a shell; that shell is external and they can’t feel it. The body, even though it’s an extension/exoskeleton of the hathori, is just as tactiley sensitive as Human skin... and the same is true of their core. When a Demon feels something, they don’t have a chunk of them like Humans that might not really feel it. Whether you’re wrist deep in their chest cavity, or stroking their hair, they feel that. That said, being wrist deep in a Daemos’ chest cavity doesn’t exactly mean you’re hurting them... though you could be. Remember, their physiology is rather malleable. This is why they’re so durable, because even lopping off an arm (or their head) doesn’t ensure death unless you’ve damaged the core beyond repair.

For as much as she pours into the mega-hex, it requires her to suffuse her body with the energy from her soul. There’s a substantially larger amount of energy inside of her soul than her physical body could safely maintain. Remember what I said about it being unsafe to channel directly from your soul? Jinx is technically a walking Hex bomb. After the mega-hex, her body is charged with as much Hex energy as she could safely hold... meaning that right now she’s at her most capable. If Batman sparred with her now, there’s would be a high probability that she would be even more trouble than she was previously...

She can ground this energy safely, but she has to basically feed it down her chakras and strip the essence of all its Hex, her chakras acting like a sieve, keeping the Hex she needs/uses while letting go of the excess ethereal energy she doesn’t.

Now... Raven? She’s a bit of a complicated matter. (Because what about her isn’t?)

Raven’s soul, being the sort of demi-Demon she is, has a duality in this nature, as well. She not only has tactile sensation with her material form, but also with her soul self, it being both her soul and her hathori. Incidentally, it is also looser than most Daemos, because she uses it offensively and casts it out quite often. So without any real anchor keeping it inside her and also fully sensate, it’s not really surprising that she would seek out an intimate bonding that would include both aspects of herself.

It’s not a Demonic Raven story unless you have tentacles.

Gizmo taught Kamala Japanese. She found eromanga on her own.

This discussion about Kamala’s service to Chaos was a long-time coming... buuut it’s not here yet! There’s a lot to be said on that, but I’ll save all that for next chapter. Needless to say, this is going to be a question that makes people wonder quite a bit. If they were worried about Raven, then Jinx is just as verifiable as concern. After all, with the likes of the various Chaos-serving entities, very few (if any) are actually good. It would be very easy for the Justice League to label her as a threat, as many have in the past.

Gar can be a complete troll at times. Heh. Even so, Raven will almost always have the last word. Or, well, perhaps Lewis Carroll...
Anyhow, there’s more action to come next chapter! We’re not done yet, though we’re definitely coming up on the final chapters. The IMRO is well on its way to oblivion, and everything from here on out is fallout and wrapping up loose ends.

Our time in India is drawing to a close, so familiar territory will abound soon! So... this chapter was late, but I’ll be posting on time with the next chapter, which means you’ll only have to wait a week for next chapter! See you there!

-Lynx

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**Story Mirrors:**

Now Available on Archive of Our Own!

“Prey Mate” on FanFiction.net

“Prey Mate” on deviantArt.com
Once the mirth abated, Jinx saw that Nightwing’s expression turn to business. Her grin toned itself down, but didn’t leave. Instead, her typical semi-malevolent smirk graced her lips. The expression didn’t reach her eyes, and her pupils narrowed sharply. She could just feel how this was going to take some weird turns. Kammie nearly glossed over the forewarning; everything that had happened in the past two months had been weird.

“Jinx, you mentioned your team was going to leave soon. Do you have a set departure time?”

“Not exactly, Nightlight. Can’t speak for my old classmates, but I’d planned to have HF out by tomorrow afternoon... possibly the day after. I can’t give you a solid answer until I get a nudge.” When she saw more than a few blank stares aimed in her direction, Kamala clarified, “From Mr. Chaos. If Fate says says I should leave earlier, I’m gone. If Fate says I should wait, I stay.”

“How do you know you’re doing the right thing?” Hawkwoman asked pointedly.

Jinx could already hear in the woman’s tone that this would be some sort of sticking point for her. Still, it wasn’t as though she hadn’t had doubters in the past—or even moments of doubt, herself. However, when it counted, she would always fall on the side of Chaos. Jinx’s eyes swept over her and raised a brow.

“How do you know your wings aren’t going to smack someone wherever you walk?”

That miffed the woman, she could tell, but the Thanagarian still replied, “I wouldn’t; they’re part of me.”

A shimmer of hex energy flashed across Kamala’s eyes and her pupils widened slightly. The entropy
swimming within her irises brightened considerably. The hex-caster held up a palm, and it ethereally conflagrated into a chaotic pyre.

“Exactly. Chaos is a part of me. Every pore, every cell, every atom of my being is filled to the brim with this hex energy. It’s soaked into my aura and completely saturates my soul. I’ve said it before: I am an Agent of Chaos. I am not at odds with Order; it’s the other side of the coin, brothers in arms. Chaos is change; it births life from Order’s stagnancy. Order preserves that life from Chaos’ destructive means. When something grows stagnant and long, Chaos intervenes and destroys it... Things break down, die, or through other means are introduced to a state of change.”

Jinx clenched her fist, and the power in her palm burst through her fingers in rays before extinguishing, “You ask me how I can know. I’ll answer that like Descartes. I think, therefore I am. I know because Chaos enacts itself through me. It’s undeniable—it exists, so I will not doubt the paths it provides me.

“Chaos is a necessary, pure, and elemental force of the universe; why would I not trust it? Chaos put me on this world. It helped me escape that place,” Kamala jerked her thumb toward the wall of the tent, where the remnants of the IMRO were falling to ruin. She then nodded toward Mike and Baran, “and introduced me to my future teammates. It saved me from Blood’s perversions. It brought us to the attention of the Titans. It brought me my mate. It also just saved thousands of people.

“Chaos and Order are a balance. I’m not here to throw everything into anarchy, just to keep that fragile balance. Have I not left destruction in my wake? I’ve caved in streets, brought down buildings, wrecked cars... I’ve battered people—killed others. The things I do, I do at the unaltering discretion of Chaos. It’s led me here, to this point... and I know. Do you know what led you here? Do you have anything you can trust so completely?”

“If I did, I’m not sure it would be Chaos,” Shayera admitted.

“I think it’d be weird if you did. Chaos isn’t exactly something everyone can handle, conceptually or in reality. Even now, there’s some asshat running around with the mantle of Chaos. That’s not even worth talking about, ‘cause it’s more about serving the Lords of Chaos than Chaos itself... The Lords, if I understand them correctly, are a bunch of idiotically maligned, eternal anarchists. Like any fanatical group, they just took what they wanted to hear and ran with it. Me? I’m a bit more... practical in my applications of Chaos.”

Lantern drew her attention next, “Did... you just call Mordru an ‘asshat?’”

“Dude, you ever read up on the guy? Total asshat.”

“Okay, so he’s an asshat,” Flash said with a slight snicker, “So, if you balance things, then you’re implying there’s a price to be paid for every bit of Order or Chaos. It’s very... karmic. What I want to know is... if you’ve brought about so much Order in freeing these children, where’s the Chaos?”

Kamala’s expression sobered, “Every guard that was inside the facility is now dead. The Warden is, too. The building itself has been torn out and torn up. I have a hope that such destruction will tilt the scales back to a more or less neutral position.” Her pause was met with silence and she swept her eyes across the assembly of heroes. “Unfortunately, I doubt that will be the case. I don’t doubt, even now, that there is an upheaval on the horizon. It’s going to rock the foundations of Order; something set and stable in our lives is going to turn itself inside-out.”

Now they were wary, as well they should be. This was the reason she hated showing people the larger part of her that was an Agent of Chaos. They didn’t understand that she didn’t mean any ill-will... it was just that bad things were necessary. Most people didn’t like the concept that you
couldn’t have good without evil, that their tenets were intrinsically intertwined.

“I may or may not know what’s coming your way. I know a lot of things. I probably won’t piece it together until it’s practically on your doorstep. Furthermore, I can’t help you. This is part of Chaos, it’s the reason I’m his Agent... The best I can do is let you know that everything has repercussions.”

“So you’re telling us so we can be prepared?” Flash inquired.

Kamala’s weary expression shook that away, “I doubt me telling you this will prepare you for anything. I guess... It’s not an apology, but I’m trying to show that I empathize.”

Hawkwoman grew indignant, “Exactly how is that supposed to help?”

“It’s not,” the mercenary sighed, entirely putout with this topic. “Look—listen. Let’s say you have two kingdoms... Due to some odd circumstances, you know that an evil sorcerer is going to wipe out one of those kingdoms. Furthermore, you know that a single, young boy will escape the sorcerer’s wrath, fleeing to the second kingdom... As he grows up and assumes knighthood, he will do many great things for the second kingdom. Furthermore, when the sorcerer comes to destroy the second kingdom, the knight will be able to stop him. In time, he’ll even stop a warlord from laying waste to the second kingdom.

“Now that our hypothetical is in place, I have to ask you. You know about these events. Do you try to warn someone? Do you try to stop events? If you do, you might just tamper with the young boy’s escape. Then nobody will stop the sorcerer from destroying both kingdoms. There’s no telling what would happen even if the sorcerer was stopped; the warlord would come upon the weakened second kingdom and tear it a new asshole.

“Was it good or evil of you to not help or not tell anyone in the first kingdom that they were all about to die? ...I say neither. Screw the ‘greater good’ bullshit and just look at the bigger picture. This shit’s going down and your involvement can only make it worse. You might as well focus on other parts of the equation—areas where your actions won’t end up fucking with the grand scheme of things.”

Shayera glowered, “Are you asking us these questions just to mess with our heads?”

“No,” Batman answered for her, “she’s not messing with anyone. She’s telling us the story of Superman, aren’t you, Jinx? You’re talking about Braniac and Darkseid.”

The hex-caster smirked, “Found me out, Dark Knight Detective. So... save Krypton—or save Earth? If you’ve been following along, you’ll realize that the Chaos of Krypton’s destruction granted Earth a hero who could instill some Order just when it needed it most. These things are cyclical; Chaos, then Order, then Chaos again, and so on for eternity.”

“...Well, this is depressing,” Terra half-muttered.

“Yeah, well,” Kamala shrugged helplessly, and then brightened suddenly, “How about a demonstration in taking direction from Mr. Chaos? We can all sit in this stupid tent talking about weighty, dismal shit... or we can head outside and see somethin’ impressive!”

The turnaround garnered several confused looks, but she paid them no heed. Instead she slipped into her raincoat and pulled up its hood. Jinx turned to the door, but paused just before someone call after her. She had expected it—had been waiting for it, after a fashion.

“What’s happening?” J’onn asked.
“Dunno! Never do!” Kamala offhandedly replied, already nigh-skipping outside.

-=Lois=-

Lois hadn’t a clue how they had constructed the enormous structure so quickly, but she had watched. Everyone had watched as the building engulfed and absorbed the entire refugee site. Soon, the people of Dark Way took down the tents, assigned rooms, relocated their medical center to the infirmary, and moved food stores into the cafeteria. There was more than enough room to fit everyone now—be they freed refugee, relief aid, or reporter.

It was just in time, she reflected, as the monsoon was pounding everything. What few tents remained the facility was likely to swallow by nightfall. Most everyone had hunkered down in the cafeteria, but Lois lingered by the doorway leading outside. Her tablet rested in hand at her side; her eyes needed a rest from all the reading they’d done recently. Leaning against the wall, she could see the whole of the cafeteria and a good chunk of the now empty landscape previously taken by tents. She had a clear line of sight to the building—the IMRO.

Whatever Jinx had done to it had the thing falling to shambles before her eyes. That level of power... it was almost incomprehensible that it came out of that slip of a young woman. Then again, once Lois thought back to their conversation, it was easy for Lois to understand that size nothing to do with power. If levitating the IMRO were a parlor trick not bound by physical laws, then Jinx’s blast wasn’t either. It followed, then, that Jinx had an enormous ‘metaphysical mass.’

It surprised her how simple that little talk of theirs had made understanding the preternatural forces in the world. Things that she had a hard time putting into words regarding otherworldly power suddenly fell into place. Lois was sure she didn’t understand even a fraction of what was actually going on with those things, but she could at least appreciate them.

Last time they had talked, Lois hadn’t been sure what to think. The end of their conversation had left her unsure where Jinx stood. Was she really a villain like Luthor, as she implied the League worried, or was Jinx the heroine despite the girl’s vehement denials? In the wake of their talk, the interview, and her observations, Lois was beginning to suspect that Jinx was exactly what she claimed: a mercenary. The idea fit only because Jinx just couldn’t fit into any ready-made box that Lois could conceive.

Lois had spent the last few hours on her tablet, paging through the documents the Daily Planet techies had sent her from Stateside. Jinx’s comment about being ‘native, but not home-grown’ had given her some inkling of where to start on the mystery mercenary. As it turned out, there was a paper trail for Jinx in Jump City. For a few years, she was a frequent part of Titans West’s rogues’ gallery. She had done some time in prison, but never for long.

Later, the DA had dropped several charges citing issues of mind-control and other abuses of Extra-Normal powers by a known super-villain, Brother Blood. Apparently, some of the things Jinx had done were not of her own volition. These extenuating circumstances allowed her to make an easy and early probation.

There was nothing after that. Any scrap of information she scavenged came via multiple sources and required her to scrutinize every word of each article. Some lawyers had undoubtedly gotten a hold of the reports; she had seen this type of detail obfuscation before—had been subjected to it more than a few times. Usually, it was when she was doing an article about questionable things done by the government or Luthor.
Lois frowned at the thought, ‘Maybe she is similar to Luthor in some respects... but to what degree?’

It had taken Lois the better part of lunch to rummage through most of the articles and pluck out those scarce details. Jinx’s backers had been... enthusiastic in their media suppression. That didn’t take Lois by surprise. Even so, she had put in the legwork and unearthed a few answers.

Jinx’s group name was the HIVE Five. Lois had spent an inordinate amount of time trying to figure out why they used the number ‘five’ when there were only three members to their outfit. That was, of course, barring a few altercations with the Titans where they had inducted four more for a grand total of seven members. Either way, the numbers never matched.

Putting aside the issue of headcounts, HIVE had to be the organization that backed them. There was obviously more to it, but the techies had told her very pointedly that she should not look into it. Even more vexing, after sending her what they had already found, the research team ceased all further inquiries into HIVE. Someone had spooked them—that much was clear. It only fostered her growing suspicions.

Despite their warnings, she had done a cursory browsing. A few search engines returned only one, small website for a private school: The HIVE Academy for Extraordinary Young People. Its crest was a flourished ‘H’ over black-and-white checkered quadrants. It reminded her of the ensemble she had seen Jinx wear once. Frankly, it had looked like a school uniform—the black skirt and yellow shirt. The shirt had a crest just like the school website. That was to say nothing of the honeycomb pattern on the shirt.

‘Like a bee hive. Cute.’

The Academy website had neither pictures of students nor a page denoting any faculty. There were a few links for contact, a button for login, and an out-of-the-way page of affiliates. One of those affiliates was, unsurprisingly, Dark Way Prep—the very group that was now housing the refugees in buildings assembled from a series of honey-comb-like plates.

The fact that Jinx still casually wore the uniform spoke of her continued connection to them. Every member of the HIVE Five had been Metahuman or otherwise Extra-Normal. It was too much of a coincidence, really. Lois had a fairly solid idea of what HIVE Academy meant by ‘extraordinary young people.’ The reporter didn’t doubt that most of these refugees would soon find their way into Dark Way Prep and HIVE Academy...

Lois rubbed her temples. She’d done too much reading... too much thinking. She wasn’t in the least ready to begin considering the ethical parameters involved in this. The only thing she was sure of at this point was that whatever happened with these kids would probably be better than what they would have endured in the IMRO.

‘After all, look at how Jinx turned out,’ her unbidden thought came.

Lois groaned. That girl had put her mind through the proverbial wringer over the past week. Now, the mercenary was doing it again without even being there. As Lois came to that thought, she realized she hadn’t seen Jinx, Raven, or the League in several hours. The journalist was sure they were floating around here somewhere—figuratively or literally. The musing made Lois smirk; she was far too used to people floating. Her attention shifted back to the cafeteria, where her eyes immediately caught on a girl hovering about. That pale, little girl didn’t even make her bat an eye.

The girl seemed intent on letting everyone know to call her ‘Wraith’ from that point forward. More than that, Wraith took great pride in her name. It wasn’t pride in a surname or for any deeper meaning or history behind the moniker. No, Wraith was simply proud to have a chosen name.
Once Wraith was finished sharing her new identity, it seemed that her attention had lodged itself elsewhere. Several times, the girl had looked her way—but the journalist had an inkling that she wasn’t the focus. Just as Lois herself could look out and see the IMRO, so could Wraith...

‘That girl’s going to do something,’ Lois realized.

The sound of multiple slapping footfalls slogging through the soaking grasslands broke through the constant static of rain and drew her attention outside once more. There she saw a rather large troupe exit the tent serving as a command center for the League and Dark Way’s more militant affiliates. Those paramilitary soldiers also had patches on their arms—yellow-outlined black hexagons with a blocky, golden ‘H’ inside. Now that Lois was looking, she realized HIVE had their hands all over this. Putting aside her thoughts on the conspiracy, her eyes trailed after the hodge-podge group.

Out of the tent came most of the League, the Titans, and the HIVE Five. Jinx led them forward like some kind of impromptu parade. Now out of cover, the rain steadily drenched all of them. The pinkette stopped them in the middle of that rain and stood there. It looked as though Green Lantern was questioning her, to which Jinx gave an empty-handed shrug.

Just then, the sound of bare feet on hard surface came from behind her. Glancing back, she found Wraith floating toward her, toting the dark-skinned girl in one of Raven’s cloaks. Slightly behind her, two boys—one blue preadolescent, the other green in his early teens—watched the two girls’ egress. The two shared a silent glance, and then the younger one pointed after them. The verdant one acquiesced and they followed the two girls.

Looking around the rest of the cafeteria, she was somewhat startled to find that every eye of every child was watching the procession with eerie focus. More than a few of her fellow journalists were already grabbing their gear and giving chase. Lois realized she really ought to be following their example instead of muddling through her own musings. She was here on assignment, after all.

She watched as the four made their way out into the rain and toward the suspended prison. Motion to her right brought her attention to Jinx and the group following her. They had moved to follow. Like a trail of ants, people were once again massing around the IMRO. Cameras were rolling as a precaution, and others—like her—were murmuring into recorders.

Lois spoke evenly, but loud enough to make herself out over the rain. It was second nature for her and she was barely paying attention to the words spilling out of her mouth. By this point, Jimmy was at her side in a rain poncho with a long, broad hood ideal for keeping his camera’s lens dry while taking pictures.

The gaggle slowed to a stop as Wraith stood before the cement circle surrounding the crater. Then, with a decisive swipe of her hand, threw back the other girl’s hood. Even dimmed by clouds, the daylight still stained through the clouds. The effect was immediate; plumes of steam rose from the droplets pelting the dark girl’s form. A scant few seconds later, said young girl’s hair caught fire.

-=Kamala=-

Charcoal appeared mildly distressed and attempted to pull the garment over her head again, but Wraith kept firm hold of the hood. With her free hand, Wraith threaded her fingers into Charcoal’s hair and the flames covering them. Kamala discerned Wraith’s goal only an instant before it became reality.

The ghostly girl’s body blazed to life with fire, her form a massive bonfire casting about warm,
orange glows across the landscape. Floating upward, Wraith now trailed her own path of vapor. Wraith cupped her hands some distance apart and began spinning a circle of embers that unsteadily whipped about in the air, spurtting outside of its circular shape in harsh elliptical heaves before swinging back into the swirling inferno. The flaming wheel’s lashing flares grew in size and severity, throwing out great gouts of heat and light across sky and leaving long, whip-like clouds of steam in their wake.

Wraith’s hands closed and cupped farther, forming a natural cone. Then, draconic in its effusion, a rush of fiery death disgorged from her hands and blew a hole in the IMRO large enough to drive a rock truck through it with room to spare.

The girl shoved her hands insistently and pressed widening bulges of fire into the facility. A few moments later, a tumultuous but muted explosion echoed from within, and a column of flames, smoke, and debris erupted out the top of the IMRO.

Kamala blinked and turned away, regarding the League present. Moving back toward the League, she grabbed Batman by the wrist and tugged him aside a few paces. He let her lead him, probably because he had no reason not to do so. She then walked back to the main contingent and put her hands on Green Lantern’s chest, and pressed him backward a good four steps. They looked at her nonplussed, but she shrugged and resumed her forward position in the group.

About four seconds later, a flaming piece of molten cement slammed into the ground near the left side of her group. The others jumped away warily, but the chunk of edifice had buried itself in the cold mud. The only ones that had been in danger had conveniently relocated themselves courtesy of a little nudge from Mr. Chaos. The heated mass of cement crackled and popped loudly, though its violent bursting was neatly contained within the earth.

“Kid needs to consider her fallout.”

She could feel Raven’s stare at the back of her head, “How many times have you literally blown out a street just like that, Jinx?”

Kammie turned to face her with a grin, “And how many times did I hit Mammoth or Gizmo with a chunk o’ asphalt?”

Raven opened her mouth to speak, but slowly closed it with a thoughtful expression. After a few moments, her mate rebutted, “How much of that was your calculation and how much your penchant for improbability?”

Jinx had to admit, “Okay, you got me there. When I’m listening to Mr. Chaos planning a mission, I typically don’t let myself sweat the small stuff.”

Green Arrow frowned, “Is it you or ‘Mr. Chaos’ doing the planning?”

“Yeah,” Kammie nodded, paused, and then appended, “usually.”

The saffron light winked out, and Jinx’s attention swung to the IMRO and the girls before it. Wraith had abandoned the fire for her resting state and now casually floated toward Charcoal, backlit by the mass of fires birthed inside the building that the heavy rains could not quell. Charcoal had since pulled her hood over her face, ensconcing herself in its dark confines better than Raven ever had in her earlier days.

Kamala watched as Wraith silently gesticulated and knew that the girl was likely backing this up with mental imagery. Whatever Wraith conveyed, it must have convinced Charcoal to try her own
hand. Charcoal, with her small steps, steadily approached the IMRO. Kammie still recalled just how quickly Charcoal was to light up and wondered if this might not actually be so good of an idea...

“Uh... guys... When Charcoal—I don’t think she can really control herself all that well.”

“I can shroud Charcoal from the sun long enough to get her fire under control, if needed,” Raven supplied.

“I’ll keep an eye out for more debris,” Green Lantern added, “The press is getting a little eager.”

Charcoal had finally made it to the cement ring that held Raven’s levitation spell’s binding circle. She paused atop the solid surface and was still. As Jinx watched, a tiny, black arm slipped out of the cloak, held aloft out from Charcoal’s side.

“If she destroys that part of your spell,” Batman began, but Raven waved him off.

“I’ve perpetuated it beyond the physical. There’s a metaphysical anchor there, by now, and destroying the merely physical aspect of the spell won’t immediately cease the effects. If you did destroy it, everything would remain suspended for up to two months. ...I was unsure how long we might need the building and its contents, so I poured enough energy into it for the upper end of my estimates.”

Everyone fell silent, unsure just what would happen. Kamala felt for nudges, but her entropic senses were nothing but faint murmurs; ripples in the fabric of Fate. She supposed that was good—or good enough—for now, at least.

Charcoal’s arm broke into flames, as it had before. They licked at her arm and grew upward like a funeral pyre, growing with each passing second. Moments later, a jet of fire sprouted from her arm, reminding Jinx of the unnatural rigidity and directional burst of a flamethrower.

The column of fire itself perpetuated, growing in thickness around Charcoal’s arm as well as at its own extremity. As the light fed the girl, so did the beam of conflagration. It wasn’t until almost a minute had passed, and the flames had elongated to nearly 20 meters that she discerned a shape.

The fiery mass had actually gained a definite bend about halfway along its length, and terminated into three prongs of pyres. The prongs bent and undulated—and that was when Jinx realized that it was a massive, flaming arm complete with two, blazing talon-like fingers and a thumb. Charcoal moved the arm like it was an extension of herself; Jinx couldn’t say that wasn’t the exact case, just then.

By this time, Wraith seemed to understand that whatever fire she had borrowed off the top of Charcoal’s head was but a drop in the ocean of her power. She floated away from the other girl as the heat caused a strong drift of warm wind that carried with it voluminous clouds of steam. Charcoal shifted and the cloak flapped wildly... and then completely flew off and behind her. Li’l V stooped to pick up the cloak as it rolled along the ground toward him.

Bare to the daylight, Charcoal’s clothes almost immediately disintegrated as her body burst into a hulking mass of smoke and fire. Charcoal herself had become the center of a miniature tornado of hellfire and brimstone, the firestorm leaping up to share the shape of a growing body.

Over the next few minutes, the incandescent figure formed around Charcoal, though her dark form was still visible within its heart—or abdomen, as the case seemed to be. The figure was just a torso topped with a squat, dome-like head and bulging, serpentine arms. It continued to grow in size, until its body and arms were, by Jinx’s rough estimate, about 150 meters. Like some kind of dark genie or
god of destruction, its arms raised outward and ‘flexed’—which Jinx noted was an act of puppetry that mirrored Charcoal’s movements.

Just then, the torso elongated and drew up in a scorching cyclone. Likewise, one of its arms lunged forward with distorted length and buried its talons into the hole that Wraith had created. Charcoal’s other arm came over top, slamming down like Hephaestus’ hammer. As one, both arms angrily swiped to the side, wrecking a large portion of the IMRO’s side and most of its upper levels. Jinx briefly feared as she watched the scattered, superheated debris—larger than any of Wraith’s had been and smoldering with more explosive potential—summarily caught in a green, curved wall that funneled it back into the hole beneath the IMRO.

What ensued was a tantrum locked inside Charcoal that had never before seen light of day, literally as well as in any figurative sense that Kamala could conjure. The girl’s fiery golem slammed its hands into the top of the prison, gripping heaping handfuls of the structure and ‘crushing’ them, spraying more debris for Green Lantern to contain. More likely, the meager building materials so engulfed in Charcoal’s superheated grasp simply exploded.

Bracing itself on a collapsed shelf, the infernal effigy leaned its head into the center mass of the IMRO. The dome of its head rose and its previously indiscernible maw spread wide; Charcoal’s creature hollered a wall of flames that easily dwarfed Wraith’s earlier simulacrum of dragon’s breath.

The behemoth reared back, as if taking a breath, and roared another gout of fire while repeatedly hammering both its massive limbs deep into the floating building. Thanks to Jinx’s hexes weakening every facet of the building, Charcoal’s tempestuous conniption easily ate through every part of the building.

At the rim of the crater, Kammie could see Charcoal flailing in a rage, completely lost to her cathartic anger and grief while her fire golem thrashed the IMRO to cinders in tandem. There was much screaming, she was sure, but it was definitely lost over the blaring bluster of combustion.

The calamitous outburst lasted almost 20 minutes, and in that time, Charcoal obliterated that damnable prison until it was naught but disparate and discrete pieces of hanging desolation. What remained in the wake of Charcoal’s reprisal was an asteroid field of wreckage. The blazing Demon seemed to slump and heave with great breaths Jinx knew had nothing to do with itself and everything to do with its miniature mistress. When the gargantuan creature shuddered in a way that Jinx realized could only be a sob, she turned to Raven.

Her mate was already in motion, a large, bowl-shaped stretch of her soul-self spreading out over the monstrosity. It slowly began to reduce itself, its literal inflammation shrinking out of direct sunlight. The plate of darkness slowly shrank and lowered with it, until it was little more than a large parasol over them. Within a few minutes, the bare form of Charcoal was clear of fires.

Raven gestured to Wraith, who floated over to Li’l V to retrieve the cloak her mate had given to Charcoal. Once Raven had her securely ensconced in the fire-warded fabric, Wraith scooped up the blue-swathed Drow in her arms and cradled the little firestarter’s head against her shoulder. Kamala was sure any normal person would have been a worse burn-victim than the Warden had, but Wraith’s stony skin was clearly capable of handling Charcoal’s base-level heat.

“She burned her clothes off again. We’ll probably have to look into something synthetic that doesn’t conduct heat... or maybe teach her how to ward her clothes,” Jinx somberly commented as she wandered over to Raven.

The demi-Demon nodded her assent, but remained focused on a new task. The enormous, cement ring that had held the IMRO deracinated itself. Raven’s soul-self subsequently crushed and dissolved
a good portion of it, then dumped it into the center of the crater—where it hovered indolently.

Kamala felt Raven reach out with mystical threads of power and disengage the levitation spell, dropping what few bits and pieces of the IMRO remained. A sheet of dark power fell over the crater and, with a harsh grinding sound, reduced the artificial materials into so much powder. Raven then directed the dirt and grassy chunks of land atop it all; it couldn’t possibly have filled the crater, however, and left a sizeable caldera-esque depression in the ground. The casual manner she did such things should have tipped off even the most obtuse persons had to realize that she was a cut above the rest. Why some people thought they could oppose her mate on terms of sheer power still left Kammie boggling.

That was when she noted that the green bean who now stood at the vacant, earthen edge of the crater. Kamala wasn’t too sure that was safe. He continued to stare at the massive blemish in the earth, but she couldn’t divine what it was he saw that could hold his attention.

“Uh, Raven, I think the Dryad-guy might be-”

“I believe the Greeks called the male tree spirits ‘Drus.’ It basically means ‘oak tree.’”

“Yeah, well, I think ‘Drus’ is gonna-”

Kamala’s thought terminated in a gasp. The kid just dove off the edge! She panicked for a moment before reminding herself that he would likely just plunge into the soil. At least, she hoped so—it was a little late to do anything else!

Moments later, she felt the ground... bump beneath her. At nearly the same moment, while Jinx was still bracing herself, she received a heads-up from her sense of probability. It wasn’t so much a vital warning as a note to pay attention. Wary of the unsettled ground, she cautiously approached the crater. In the center, she could see earth and crushed debris churning and sifting itself.

The ground thumped again, and this time, she saw the edge of the crater in front of her bulge up just a bit. There were a few exclamations a ways behind her, informing Kamala that whatever as moving wasn’t localized to just the crater. Her pupils widened; moving that much earth wasn’t a small matter. Then she saw it: a tall, thin rod sprouted up from the depths of the hole, thickening as it went at an unprecedented rate. It was a tree, winding its way upward even as its girth increased to truly gargantuan proportions. The wood groaned and creaked and cracked as it aged hundreds, perhaps thousands of years in seconds.

A minute passed, and its sheer height began to impress upon her that it showed no signs of stopping. Already thick as a giant sequoia and nearing a good hundred meters or so, it stretched far-reaching limbs from its trunk without even pausing in its ascent. Then the earth gave a little shudder, and roots rose up around the tree—bigger around than Baran—and stabbed into the earthen walls of the crater. It reminded her of the aerial roots of the Great Banyan, but these were so much larger than that! These, too, continued to increase in breadth and soon looked more like wooden bridges than roots, wide enough to fit a lane of traffic. All around the crater, various bulges riddled the plain; in some places, the tops of the enormous roots broke through—though they didn’t fully protrude out of the ground.

The next five minutes showed the massive arboreal goliath slowing in its growth, but by then it didn’t quite matter. Some quick eyeballing had Kamala estimating it at over 50 meters wide at its base and nearly 120 meters tall. Its limbs were long, undulating masses that slowly tapered and sprouted a plethora of branches, each slowly winding out their own branchlets.

The great, brown megaflora culminated its display by sprouting long, almost vine-like drapes of
shoots covered in rich, green leaves that sagged heavily but healthily in a thick, lush canopy. It was a willow tree of such enormity that she had difficulty fathoming it. Kamala considered it might be some form of mutant, spliced tree the likes of which Poison Ivy sometimes favored.

The crater now appeared to be more of a giant flowerpot than some unsightly pit. To be honest, it was an amazing sight—a beauty of nature that a city-girl like Jinx rarely saw, even in her mercenary travels. With the IMRO buried beneath this real-life Yggdrasil, the view blotting out the sky was no longer an eyesore, but a marvel.

“Think I gave these kids a poor scale for appropriate responses?” Kamala asked her mate as the Drus emerged from the grass a few meters from Li’l V and Wraith.

Raven made a show of considering her question, “Well, he didn’t make a forest of them.”

Kamala smirked, “There is that.”

After the spectacle, the four children and Jinx moved back to the cafeteria. Raven was right beside her, currently in discussion with Nightwing over Drus. The Fearless Leader was concerned for the child’s safety; that display had to have gone worldwide, and his thoughts had turned in the same direction, but down a different route than Kammie’s had.

The boy was powerful, of that there was no doubt. Some people—many people, actually—would try to exploit that. Foremost among them would probably be Poison Ivy. Either as an ally or a pawn, Nightwing said it was almost inevitable.

“It’s happened to most of us, Nightwing,” Kamala commented, “That’s what having power does, even to those who want to be left alone. There’s also going to be people like you and Bats out there, though. As long as there’s someone ready to stand up to people like that, kids like them have a chance to be spared all the fuckery we got put through.”

“People like you are out there, too, you know.”

“Nightwing, I told you, I’m not a—”

“-not a hero; you’re just a merc. I know. Still, you have integrity... Not every mercenary has that.”

“You realize I’m not exactly... your trustworthy ally, right? Sometimes Mr. Chaos will have me doing things that will actively oppose some of your goals. It’s not personal, but...”

“I figured as much... but I trust you to do that with the right perspective.”

Jinx grumbled, “Yeah, well... Even I don’t know why I do things, sometimes.”

“Maybe it’s for the best,” Batman interjected, garnering her undivided attention, “You have a calling—one I won’t pretend to understand, but one I’ll accept. Your ignorance of causality is probably for your own peace of mind. From what I’ve seen, we can’t have you second-guessing yourself.”

“Still, it doesn’t mean that when we do oppose you, we’ll hold back,” Nightwing impressed upon her.

“Don’t,” Jinx affirmed, “Whatever you do, give it your all. I’ll never know if I’m supposed to stop you, or just stall you, or merely make you approach something from a different angle. If you just stop, then you might not be where you’re supposed to be exactly when you’re supposed to be there.
The point is that bad things might happen because of me, but it’s probably better than some alternative... somehow.”

Batman regarded her quietly for a moment, “Because there’s always something worse, isn’t there?”

“Always. It’s also entirely likely that you’ll never know what, either... My powers don’t work on what could be, should be, or might be. I’m not a pre-cog; I don’t know the future. I enact myself in an immediate sense.”

“Even if you trust in her,” Raven cautioned, “be aware that whatever possibility she’s promoting might not have our or even her best interests in mind. If you ever go along with her, keep in mind that you do so at your own risk.”

“Are you saying that her own powers would put her in danger on purpose?” Shayera questioned.

“Brother Blood,” Kamala ground out.

“I understand. ...Actually, no, I don’t.”

The mercenary smiled sympathetically at Hawkwoman and shrugged, “I don’t attempt to understand it. I just put my faith in it. It’s all I can do.”

“Back in Depression-ville,” Tara mentioned.

“Sorry, but welcome to my blessing and curse.”

“That about sums up your powers, I think,” Raven stated with finality, and then gestured toward one corner of the cafeteria, “Now, can anyone tell me what’s going on over there?”

Martian Manhunter hummed thoughtfully. It looked like he would provide them with a distraction from the dead horse they’d been beating for the past few hours. Frankly, she welcomed it. At least, she did until he actually spoke.

“It would seem that Wraith is choosing names for her companions.”

“What?” she exclaimed in equal parts disbelief and outrage, “She can’t do that! They have to choose —that’s not... She can’t—... It’s their choice!”

After everything that had happened, she couldn’t let this happen! Jinx was sure that Wraith wasn’t aware of what her actions were doing; it wasn’t an act of maliciousness on her part, as the numbers had been with the IMRO. The children needed a chance to make up their own minds, not have someone hand them all their answers or even have those answers forced upon them.

Raven placed a hand over hers, “Did you choose either of the names you use today?”

“I—no, but... but I accepted them!”

“Then let’s give them a chance to accept or deny theirs. Have you considered that they might be lost on how to even begin making their own choices?”

Kamala was silent as she contemplated that possibility. It was a bitter pill to swallow, to be sure. Even so, she couldn’t doubt Raven’s theory. She had asked these children to do something utterly foreign to them. Worse, it was no small thing she asked of them. Jinx calmed somewhat, but her frown remained.

“Still, I ought to go over there and mediate. You’ve met Wraith, you know how she can be.”
“I won’t argue that.”

-=Ananta=-

The cafeteria was a little louder today. That was both strange and heartening. All about the room, there were tiny quiet rustlings of talk drifting about like autumn leaves in one of those American suburbs. This had all obviously come to pass thanks to Jinx and a handful of young refugees. Today had certainly overflowed with incredible events, and Ananta was sure she hadn’t even begun to see the last of them.

It was dark now, with dusk mostly hidden behind stormclouds and the constant, driving cascade of the monsoon season. It was dry in the cafeteria, however, where most everyone had initially taken refuge. Some had decided to inspect the facility’s furnishings and perhaps move some belongings there. The reporters could now sleep here instead of returning to whatever hotel they’d booked, meaning they were closer to newsworthy events. The doctors such as Dr. Iyer herself were closer to their patients, with a fully equipped medical room. Finally, the children were not exposed to the elements; some of the refugees were very susceptible to sun, heat, humidity, or just tiny threats in the air—be it pollen, insects, or the pesticides used to deal with those insects.

Ananta’s thoughts drew her eyes to seek out one such susceptible refugee. However, unlike most of the pale children, this one had nothing to fear of sunburn. No, this dark, little waif was the sunburn. The seven-year-old’s earlier display showed just how heated the situation could get even with diffuse UV rays eking their presence through the cloudbage.

She spotted little Charcoal from across the fluorescent-lit, table-filled cafeteria. It was easy to find her because Wraith all but chained herself to the girl since the destruction of the prison. The pale pre-teen had been friendly with Charcoal before then, but had taken on a fierce and focused guardianship of the younger child. It was easier for Dr. Iyer to locate Wraith because she was front and center of a bit of commotion. Frankly, Ananta wasn’t surprised in the least to find that Wraith had found some way to draw attention.

With a small sigh of resignation, she decided to head over there. Whatever else, she could at least keep the girl from rushing into something headlong; foresight was something Wraith was learning, albeit slowly. At times, when the girl worked herself up or became overexcited, Dr. Iyer knew the girl would revert to what she knew best. Without Ananta there to mitigate things, Wraith could be a little bossy.

When she neared, everyone but Wraith was looking at her. The floating youth, too caught up doing whatever it was she was doing to notice Dr. Iyer, continued to gesture wildly. Wraith’s swinging arms more than once almost backhanded Charcoal from the shorter child’s position beside Wraith. Around the two were the young, blue boy most were calling Li’l V and the older, green boy whom nobody had really named. The latter hadn’t spoken a word, but clearly understood most Hindi and a little English. Many of younger children were the same; during the rare moments when they chose to speak, it always became clear that they weren’t very articulate.

Li’l V, however, was a bit of a mystery. He could speak some Hindi—more than Charcoal’s very sparse English—but clearly didn’t have a large vocabulary. The larger question was just how much he understood. He didn’t seem to have any problem perceiving people’s intentions no matter what language they spoke. Whether he actually understood or divined meaning in other ways, no one could tell.

Charcoal had taken up with Wraith ever since the older girl had carried her away from the remains of
that floating prison. Ever since then, Ananta saw that Wraith also kept careful tabs on the girl. The two had bonded closely and Wraith was very protective of the dark-skinned firestarter. Now, Charcoal moved away from Wraith’s side, almost instantly gaining Wraith’s attention. It was when the pyrokinetic girl approached her that Wraith finally took notice of Dr. Iyer.

An image flashed into her mind: blackness. In this darkness, a vertical beam of light cut into it, then widened, spreading horizontal offshoots from above and below. Finally, the whiteness became a tall rectangle of light. Ananta realized it was a door opening in the darkness, leading into light. Had Dr. Iyer not experienced this several times before, she would have been perplexed. However, this strange image was what passed as a greeting—Wraith’s way of saying ‘Hello.’

“Hello, Wraith, Charcoal. What are you two doing?”

It was better to get an idea of what Wraith thought she was doing before attempting to help or, if need be, stop her. Sometimes—often times—the girl had good intentions, but the wrong plan of execution. However, before Wraith could respond either mentally or verbally, Charcoal gave a little tug at her lab coat.

“Charcoal,” said Charcoal, her other hand’s forefinger tapping her becloaked chest, “Charcoal – is – Rajani.”

Wraith nodded proudly and succinctly, repeating Charcoal’s words in clear agreement, “Is – Rajani.”

Charcoal then pointed to Wraith, “Wraith – is – Apa-... rita.”

“Aparajita,” Wraith corrected.

“Aparajita,” the newly dubbed ‘Rajani’ parroted.

“I see,” Dr. Iyer said patiently, “Should I call you Charcoal... or Rajani?”

Charcoal hesitated at this. For a moment, Dr. Iyer wondered if she hadn’t been clear enough; it was sometimes difficult to bridge the lexical gap. If she confused Charcoal too much, she usually received a vague nod, which didn’t help anything, really. The thoughtful frown on the girl’s face, however, told her that Charcoal understood her. When Charcoal shook her head, Ananta took it to mean the girl either didn’t know, or didn’t want her to call her one of those right now. For now, the doctor decided to continue calling her Charcoal until the child came to a more concrete decision on the matter.

After a moment of awkward silence, Charcoal turned away and pointed at the plant-like boy, “Is...?”

To this, Wraith spun in a slow circle, biting her lip in concentration and regarding the early teenager along with Charcoal. Wraith’s expression suddenly brightened in a show of enthusiasm, and then she pointed with aplomb to the green teen. This was how Wraith made her declaration.

“Is – Pankaja!”

The teen seemed neither impressed nor disagreeable, but the blue nine-year-old beside him frowned. Despite Wraith’s obvious pleasure with naming others, Ananta saw that girl did notice the boy’s expression. Li’l V followed up with a short hum of disapproval. However, before any sort of discussion—such as it was—could be had, all eyes went behind Dr. Iyer.

Wraith pointed, and as Ananta began turning, the transmutative girl announced, “Deh-Jinks.”

Indeed, there was Jinx just then trotting up to them. She seemed a little stressed, but clearly
attempting to hide it. Jinx gave them all what looked to Ananta to be a slightly fragile smile.

“Hey there, boys and girls. What are you doing?”

The doctor watched, then, as Charcoal silently padded her way to stand in front of Jinx. Blood red eyes met fluorescent pink, and the two regarded one another like strange contradictions of one another—tall and short, pale and dark. Charcoal’s arm emerged from the cloak and tapped her her chest.

“Charcoal – is – Rajani.”

“Rajani? You like Rajani?”

This garnered a nod, which Dr. Iyer was about to warn Jinx could mean either an agreement or confusion. However, the mercenary must have seen something in the girl’s eyes that told her which it had to be. There was a pause as Jinx regarded her with a quiet seriousness Ananta couldn’t quantify.

“You like Charcoal, too?”

Again, Jinx received a nod from the young girl. This time, Jinx gave a warmer, less fragile smile. Then she broke it for a more openly inquisitive expression.

“Can Rajani be Charcoal?”

Charcoal scrunched her brows once more as she contemplated that, but quickly shook her head.

“I see,” Jinx nodded reasonably, “Only Charcoal can be Charcoal. But Charcoal can be Rajani, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then remember: only people you like get to call you Charcoal.”

The doctor wished she knew how Jinx made sense of all of that, because it would probably make dealing with Charcoal a lot easier. However, something told her that only those who shared a similar experience could or would understand what had just transpired. Only those who were prisoners and stripped of their identities could fully appreciate what that had meant.

Charcoal wandered back to Wraith, who regarded the smaller girl quietly. Wraith placed a hand on the hooded head and smiled down with a peaceful expression that Dr. Iyer hadn’t ever seen on the girl.

“Charcoal,” Wraith affirmed.

She was relieved that Wraith seemed to understand the importance of the letting Charcoal decide how she wanted to be called. Just then, it struck her why Jinx had joined them. It was to prevent just that sort of disaster. Foisting an identity on them against their will would have been nothing more than a new tattoo. That definitely wasn’t something Jinx would allow. Furthermore, it was something the mercenary somehow knew how to navigate. It was clear that her own efforts weren’t quite reaching them.

Charcoal didn’t move from under Wraith’s hand, but merely pointed in a vaguely Wraith-ward directly and spoke agian, “Wraith – is – Aparajita.”

“Hm,” Jinx noised, then tapped her head, “Let’s think, okay? Only people Wraith likes get to call her
Aparajita, right?”

“Yes,” came the affirmation from the darkling firestarter. Then, in a moment of realization, the girl slowly amended, “Aparajita... is... Wraith.”

“Aparajita,” Wraith concurred, her head tilting up slightly with her characteristic, unbowed pride. This name she spoke softly but firmly—with the same inflection as she had accepted Charcoal. It was obvious that this was to be a private name that only Wraith would gift to those she felt worthy of it.

-=Kamala=-

Jinx nodded and their little pyro-girl swung around to point at the sylvan teen, “Is – P-... Pah-...”

“Is – Pankaja,” Wraith supplied, with a wide grin that Jinx knew she sometimes carried, herself.

To this name, Jinx almost nodded. However, something quickly clicked in her head and she frowned. The more she thought about it, the more exasperated she became. Worse, Charcoal had already accepted her name—not that it was a bad one! Unfortunately, she saw the pattern that Wraith was probably using and she couldn’t in good faith let that continue. It was just tacky and somewhat insulting, in a way.

“Waitaminute, waitaminute, waitaminute,” Jinx waved her hands and switched to Hindi, since she knew it was the verbal language Wraith better understood and spoke more fluently, “You are Aparajita, because you are ‘unconquered.’” Wraith’s smile faded slightly, but she nodded. “And she is Rajani, because she is ‘the dark one.’” To this Wraith again nodded, now frowning slightly at her lack of enthusiasm over the names. She rubbed the bridge of her nose in mild vexation. “And... he is Pankaja, who is ‘born of mud’... because...?”

Wraith held her arms open wide, grinning widely as an image flashed into Kamala’s mind. It was a large pot filled with soil. Suddenly, the image was supplanted with the same pot, but this time housing small tree.

“Wraith,” Dr. Iyer began, having obviously received the same imagery, but she didn’t really know where to take this one.

“Hm,” Li’l V gave another disapproving noise.

“People can be named in different ways. It does not always have to describe them,” Kamala reasoned. Wraith’s dubious frown showed Jinx exactly what she thought of that, so the hex-caster tried again. “I just do not want them to be given a name they will be unhappy with later. If they do not like the name you give them, but we call them that name anyway... then how is it any better than the guards who called us by the numbers they put upon us, even though we did not want them?”

Wraith gasped. Quickly, the girl reached down for Charcoal and pulled her tightly against her side. Kamala was swift to minimize the situation and do damage control. The last thing she wanted Wraith to do was give up; the idea was sound... Hell, it was probably necessary for some of them. Even so, there needed to be boundaries.

“It’s okay! It’s okay,” she rushed in English before she remembered herself and switched back to Hindi, “Charcoal likes Rajani. You heard her.”

Charcoal couldn’t follow the conversation, but she definitely understood her name. More than that,
she perceived the names tossed around and Wraith’s clear distress. She reached up and tugged on Wraith’s sleeve.

“Charcoal – is – Rajani,” the girl repeated in English.

“You see?” Jinx explained, “We must make sure they like their name. And... and maybe we should not limit ourselves to just how one appears. We are more than how we appear—more than the numbers, more than the color of our skin, and more than the powers we possess. There are many things that describe us, but we do not have to be called by any of those things.

“Li’l V does not need a name that means ‘blue,’” Jinx explained, even though she had to admit to herself that ‘Charcoal’ and ‘Little Vishnu’ were made on the same basis of appearance. She had never really intended the quick nicknames to stick as they had. That made her feel hypocritical, and even more so when Charcoal readily embraced the name. “No matter what, we must help them discover their true names. A name is a gift, and we cannot force that gift upon them. That is what is important.”

There was a moment when she saw Wraith understood what she was trying to say. There was still a visible exuberance about the girl, so she knew she hadn’t crushed the idea under all the ideas she was tossing at the girl. Kamala relaxed slightly.

“Vi is not blue,” a small, calm voice spoke, startling Jinx. She looked over toward Li’l V, who sat upon the table beside Drus. He still had that serene expression upon his face. As far as she knew, nothing had managed to distress the kid. Li’l V tapped his chest while shaking his head. “Vi is Vi. Vi is not Vi. Neti neti.”

Kamala gaped at the boy, trying to find words for why that train of thought had to depart before any of these kids got on it. She then slid her gaze to Wraith. The poor girl’s brows had pinched so tightly together. Why would the kid throw that into the mix at this point in the conversation? She had just gotten her message across!

“Oh, Vishnu’s Grace—please, please do not do that now,” Kammie urged the child, “They understand this much, at least... We cannot bring existentialism into this discussion now. It would only confuse them.”

Li’l V didn’t reply, but he didn’t add to her problems further. Jinx turned to Wraith, who apparently was still trying to understand what the nine-year-old meant. She moved over to the floating 11-year-old and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Do not worry about what he said. We can speak of it later. What he means is... complicated—like a maze.”

Wraith huffed. Seemingly deciding to ignore the blue child, the girl then regarded Drus. He had been watching quietly, neither participating nor ignoring them from where he leaned against the wall by the table upon which Li’l V sat. He was a true-to-life wallflower. Images came to Jinx and, from the looks on Dr. Iyer’s and Charcoal’s faces, so too were they receiving them. The giant tree stood in the IMRO crater... and soon other, smaller trees popped into the picture around them. Before long, the mental image was filled with lots of trees everywhere—so many that the enormous tree in the crater was no longer visible. Jinx blinked and focused away from the developing scene to take in the green teen’s expression; he had sprouted a minuscule smile at the girl’s idea.

“He – make – many – tree,” Wraith spoke in measured, English words. She put a hand to her chest, “Inside – he – is... many – tree...”
Kamala understood what she was attempting to say. Apparently, so did everyone else receiving her imagery. That was when Wraith came to a decision. She pointed to the older boy and, with a surety that wasn’t quite a declaration, dubbed him.

“Vipin.”

“‘The forest.’ ...So he’s the forest?” Kamala asked, likewise in English, “Hm... Honestly, I think it suits him.”

“Mm,” Li’l V noised, this time with a nod of agreement.

As she looked over the children, and then shifted her gaze to take in the rest of the cafeteria, Jinx felt something akin to pride. It wasn’t perfect; they hadn’t recovered the way she had hoped. There was no uprisng or boisterous clamoring as they chose names and goals for themselves. The truth wasn’t as pure as the vague tapestry of images her dreams of this day had woven in her mind. Instead, it was a little dingier, a little worn and frayed in some spots—but it was real. There was nothing imaginary about this situation, and Kamala was okay with that.

A tug at her vest pulled her attention onto the immediate presence of Wraith. The girl’s face was hopeful and an image slid into her mind of her sitting atop that large rock in the field, where she’d sung that first time. It didn’t take a mental heavyweight to discern the request.

“I will be leaving soon, to follow my Fate. My home calls to me,” she told Wraith in Hindi, but her expression was contemplative, “However, I believe I could sing one more.”

Wraith appeared satisfied with that, and Jinx made her way back to the table with her mate. She snagged her raincoat with a quick promise to return, and was out the door. She returned with her sitar case a handful of minutes later, and that immediately garnered the attention of all the children in the cafeteria.

They began to swarm her and she laughed, “Hey, hey—let me at least get in the door and settled before ya mob me!”

The refugees slowly opened up and allowed her to make her way closer to Wraith. After shrugging off her raincoat and her case, she opened the latter. As she removed the sitar, the medical folder slipped out with it and fell to the floor. Jinx froze for a moment, but quickly hastened to set her sitar on the table. When she turned back, she found that Dr. Iyer had already bent down to retrieve the folder.

Kamala could tell the woman had noticed the number on the file. Ananta calmly held out to her and Jinx fought the rabid, defensive instinct to snatch it from the doctor’s hands. Instead, she accepted the file with a mutter of thanks and tucked it away as nonchalantly as possible. She didn’t look the woman in the eye, not really wanting to see what might be on her face. Instead, she focused on her sitar and properly situated herself on the table—legs crossed, and her boot cradling the tumba. Once she fit the mezrab on her finger, she plucked a few experimental notes.

Her mind fetched around for something to play, and her idle strokes hit a particular sequence that made her pause. After a few moments, she concluded that it would work. Her chosen song wouldn’t be filled with light and hope and dreams. As with the reality of the situation, this song would be a little dingy but real.

The tune started with a repeating triuplicate of falling notes, ending on a deeper, bass thrum. This repeated several times until the main melody came in. It was a haunting tune, and perhaps a little too apt for the situation, but it was dear to her. Finally, the first of the lyrics struck and, aware of her
audience, she made sure to project her voice clearly. Unlike the original band that played this, she
didn’t bother to sound harsh. Her clear, soft voice echoing in the now nigh-silent cafeteria made the
song just that much eerier.

“There’s new blood joins this earth; And quickly he’s subdued. Through constant pained disgrace, The
young man learns their rules... With time the child draws in; This whipping boy done wrong.
Deprived of all his thoughts; The young man struggles on and on. He’s known—a vow unto his
own: That never from this day; His will they’ll take away...”

The chorus launched and she issued it gently despite the dark overtones it held. The IMRO would
always be unforgiven to her. She frowned, feeling a calm, righteous anger fill her at the lingering
thoughts. That place was well and truly gone, but it had left its mark on their bodies and minds; some
of those scars would never fade, and would remain on their bodies and in their memories.

“They dedicate their lives; To running all of his,” she managed to keep the bitterness out of her tone,
but her expression said it all. She knew that it probably was wise she’d decided to glare focusedly at
her sitar strings. None of the children deserved to receive such hateful looks ever again. Jinx forced
herself to let go of some of the tension in her shoulders and neck and made her segue into the
chorus again. “The old man then prepares; To die regretfully—That old man here is me...”

“What I’ve felt; What I’ve known; Never shined through in what I’ve shown. Never be; Never see;
Won’t see what might have been... What I’ve felt; What I’ve known; Never shined through in what
I’ve shown. Never free; never me—So I dub thee unforgiven...”

Kamala repeated the chorus, and then let the song seep into a wordless solo by sitar. She took that
time to unwind herself a little further and prepare for the series of refrains that would bring the song
to a close. She was unable to keep the anger from her tone completely as she came to the end, but the
lyrics were built that way naturally, so she didn’t let it bother her.

“...You labelled me; I’ll label you! So I dub thee unforgiven... Never free; never me—So I dub thee
unforgiven... You labelled me! I’ll label you! So I dub thee unforgiven... Never free; never me! So I
dub thee unforgiven...”

Jinx realized after the fact that her face was practically snarling at her sitar. She made an effort to
smooth the hard lines and straighten her mouth into a poker face before she looked up. She drew a
slow breath as surreptitiously as possible and finally turned her gaze on the children. Her eyes slid
toward Wraith. It was at that moment that she felt the compulsion to finish things. Kamala considered
her next words carefully.

“It’s time for me to leave. Don’t fear—don’t be sad...” Jinx struggled to find better words. In the end,
her brain supplied the perfect memory. Kammie smiled at the mass before her and quoted, “There are
no good-byes for us. Wherever you are, you will always be in my heart.”

Wraith reached out to tug insistently at her vest, her pale face marred with a frustrated grimace and
worried frown. Kamala then received an image of herself playing and singing, surrounded by
children. In the imagery, a light emanated from her and lit the cafeteria as though she were the sole
source of light. Suddenly, Jinx was gone, and the light began to fade along with color—until all that
remained was a cold, dull grey room suffocating in a murky gloom of encroaching shadows.

Jinx knew Wraith to be of strong character—independent and driven. To see how she felt about
Kamala leaving was disheartening. The mercenary shook her head and put a hand on Wraith’s
shoulder.

“You’ll be okay—you don’t need me to play music for you. You can have it anytime you want. You
could even make your own, you know.”

Wraith looked confused, and Jinx moved past her toward the nearby wall. Once she found the proper hexagon, she slid a small latch and pulled down a recessed keyboard to reveal an inlaid monitor. It was the work of about twenty seconds to bring up some music from her data storage on the HIVE Network. In keeping with her last song, she decided to queue some Metallica, then as an afterthought added Evanescence, Daft Punk, Linkin Park, and Three Days Grace. Her final stroke was a compendium of some classical Indian music. Having amassed quite a sizeable playlist, Kamala set them all to shuffle. By then, Metallica’s ‘Sandman’ had just finished and Daft Punk’s ‘Television Rules the Nation’ had begun.

“Well, that’s apt,” Jinx muttered.

When she turned around, she found an even larger crowd of children had surrounded them. Her brows went up; she hadn’t quite expected them all to mob around her like this—but the monitor wasn’t that large. She wasn’t sure what to do next. Thankfully, some of the Dark Way Prep instructors had taken her cue and were likewise opening up other monitors. Within the next few minutes, the tide of refugees let out as they disseminated back across the cafeteria, all of them gravitating around one of the many monitors.

Already, some of the instructors were showing the children some of the basic functions of how to navigate the songs. This was exactly what the kids needed—and what Kamala needed if she were to make any sort of graceful exit. Now that she could walk without trampling three kids with every step, she moved toward the table to pack away her sitar.

The mercenary smiled almost ruefully at Wraith, who had all but forgotten her in her attention to the console and its music. Jinx smiled at how enthralled they were and noted how the girl rested her hands on Charcoal’s shoulders in a silent, protective gesture. Li’l V and Vipin were next to them. Kammie felt like she was already seeing these four solidifying into a family unit much as Mikron, Baran, and she had.

Her eyes caught on Dr. Iyer, who was regarding her with a proud, gentle smile. She returned the smile with her signature Cheshire grin and waved, then quietly made her departure back toward the table. All around her, there was music—all sorts of music from some 20 or more consoles all about the cafeteria. These kids might not have voices of their own, but the silence that had been rancorously grinding their souls into powder for years would erode under this deluge of music. She hoped that some of them would even do as she suggested to Wraith and make music of their own. Kamala couldn’t think of a better way to undo the IMRO’s mute oppression.

As she reached her table, her grin exchanged itself for a more serious veneer, but there was no missing the satisfied glint to her eyes. Her eyes locked on Gizmo and Mammoth. Without a word, they stood and came to flank her. She then regarded the assembled League members.

“It’s time for us to go.”

“We’ll watch over them,” Batman said, and she could tell it was a promise, a sworn oath from the Dark Knight.

“Thanks. Some of HAEYP might be leaving soon, but they’ll do so at their own pace, probably. Not many of us pass up a free vacation, impromptu or not. Still, HIVE Five is currently here on its own expense, and I can’t afford to stick around too long. I think HIVE waived my Extraction Team insurance fee, considering what all happened here, but I do have to find another job.”

Nightwing smirked, “I don’t think your team will have a shortage of offers after this week.”
“Ha! You’re probably right about that!” Jinx replied with a grin, then sobered slightly, “Anyhow, now’s probably the best time to get our departure together. We’ll be leaving in the morning. ...I got a... rented stealth craft to return.”

She held Bats’ eyes for a moment when she said that and caught his almost imperceptible nod. Good, he understood what she was really trying to say. Once she hauled Jessie back to Coast City, she could have a talk with Dark Way Prep about Jessie’s media filters as well as Jessie newfound obsession with some Gotham girl. Then, finally, she would be free to return to Jump City.

“I think I’ll accompany you,” Raven stated, and nobody argued with her. As she stood, she addressed Nightwing, “I can check in with Titans East when I get back to Jump; free a few of them to head back to Steel. That should ease the burden on them and several of the Honorary Titans.”

Nightwing nodded his assent. Despite the obvious ulterior motives involved, it was a sound idea. With that, the four of them left to collect the last two members of their party. Jessie wouldn’t be happy with it, but wouldn’t fight both her and Prank on the matter. Prank would side with her on this, she knew. The enhanced hyena was loyal to Jessie and would do what was best for the jokerette, even if Jessie didn’t like it.

In the next 20 minutes, Jessie sulkily led them to the absconded stealth craft. It didn’t take them long to load up. Gizmo took up the piloting. Jessie, unwilling to vacate the captain’s cabin, took the co-pilot’s chair. Finally, Gizmo notified them that pre-flight checks were finished and they were ready to take flight.

Leaning back in her chair, Jinx allowed a tired, deflating sigh to leak from her lungs. She felt the weight of events tugging at every part of her being from her thousand-pound eyelashes dragging her lids to an inexorable, crushing seal to the sagging muscles that hung from her bones like strung laundry sheets.

Airily and with utter enervation, Jinx practically supplicated, “Let’s go home.”

~§~END CHAPTER 16~§~

Author’s Note:

Hey, everyone. So it’s been a Hell of a week, and I only have one day to get everything in order. Between the whole issue of migrating my work, there’s been a lot of shuffling and not a lot of time to devote to the schedule I had set up.

That said, I have read every review, comment, post, private message, and reply—multiple times, if I’m honest. I keep on top of those things and I do have planned responses for pretty much all of them. Just... no time to sit down and make them. This chapter, too, is crunched for time.

At the time of writing this, it’s Monday. With my current schedule, I work a ten-hour shift, 4 days a week. This leaves me a two-day weekend and a mid-week free day. Due to what my work is calling ‘all hands on deck’ for a ‘business critical’ day, I’ve worked one of my weekend days and only have today to recuperate and prepare for another round. It’s stressful and, frankly, exhausting.

Normally, I wouldn’t post my personal issues in a story here, but I just want everyone to understand why things got a little disjointed. I had planned to begin posting “Prey Mate” to Archive of Our Own after finishing my posting here on FFnet. As many have already heard, I had only half-jokingly
mentioned to my Beta-reader—when I first wrote the lemon aspect of this story back in January of 2013—“How long do you think it will take for someone to take a swing at this story over on FFnet?”

The answer: About six months.

Now, I love replying to my reviewers. I love keeping in contact and writing exorbitantly long replies and rambling on about things with you guys and giving you deeper insight into the story. That’s part of why I’m doing this. If the reviews become cluttered unnecessarily, I won’t be able to properly respond to actual reviewers. I’ll have to evaluate whether or not someone actually a reviewer, or just stirring up trouble.

Unfortunately, because some people don’t quite grasp the concept of a Non-Indemnity Clause or a Limited Liability Clause, it’s going to take me a bit longer to upload my story—it has to be formatted three different ways. I dedicate myself to quality and, because of that, I never do anything in halves. That means if I format a PDF, it will be formatted professionally and with multi-platform viewing in mind; if I format for HTML, the coding will be clean and uncluttered; and if I have to format for RTF, then I’ll make sure that the formatting isn’t lost in upload.

You’re likely to see this on Thursday instead of today, because that’s my other day off. Today, I’m dedicating to the author’s notes and just... decompressing from Sunday’s ‘all hands on deck’ crap.

So! On with the notes!

Now, someone made a comment about Jinx service the Lords of Chaos. That’s... not the case. Jinx serves the Urge of Chaos. It is one of the fundamental and super-sentient forces of the Multiverse that allows creation and change, as she’s explained to Nin, Terry, and Darryl. Along with Order, these powers allow all things possible. These powers are the forces used by the Source—the overseer of all and the origin of all Gods and their powers. Basically, the Source is literally the source of the DC Universe.

Jinx serves the force of Chaos, but not the Chaos Lords. She wouldn’t follow them anymore than she would follow Synnar, the Demiurge. When she enacts herself within its will, it is with a degree of mandate that come from above the Gods of the known universe. Yes, that’s quite a high level, but the Urge of Chaos is not petty or stupid. It know just how small and fragile Kamala is in the cosmic scale of the Multiverse. It doesn’t ask more of her than she is capable of providing.

According to JLU, Hawkwoman denies the existence of an afterlife... or perhaps is a straight-up atheist. Either way, I can understand her point of view in doubting someone that puts their faith into some entity that may or may not have their best interests in mind.

However, as Kammie pointed out, sometimes you just have to let people take their own course. Other times, you realize that your interference will only complicate matters or hurt you in the process. I’ll admit, I’ve been in a few situations where the best I could do is just... do my part and stand back to watch someone take what I’ve done and make things worse. It was necessary, because the alternative was to protract events and drag everyone through the mud.

Jinx has a magical moral compass that lets her easily navigate those situations. ...I’m a little jealous, honestly.

In the next part here, I had Lois piece together a few things and act as our foil to all the big-wig things going on in the Super realm of things. I like dragging things back down to the mundane and grasping an appropriate scope and scale of things. It also allowed me to go back to a few of those
little tidbits people might not have been paying attention to.

Oh, yes, Lois, Jinx is still very much affiliated with HIVE. I really liked the idea of her finding out and coming up with her own conclusions about HAEYP and Kamala’s link to it. Lois is cynical enough to understand the darker side of HIVE while also understanding its necessity in this situation because the world just didn’t have Metahuman orphanages, and your average CPS isn’t anywhere near prepared to deal with this kind of situation.

And here it is, folks. If you were wondering about what I was talking about with Wraith’s powers? Back in Chapter 14’s author’s notes, I mentioned not only her ability to self-transmute like Absorbing Man in Marvel Comics, but also a channeling power. This, right here, is a practical application of both.

Also... now you understand why I call our little pyro-Drow ‘Charcoal.’

Charcoal’s tantrum is... an embodiment of all the pain and suffering, all the helpless rage and unbridled retribution that had been suffered at the hands of the Warden. And so its destruction falls to those who were once its prisoners. This is the true and final fall of the IMRO. It is no more.

I had a bit more from deviantArt comments that was really pertinent here:

Charcoal brings back to me that quote by Slade Wilson in the cartoon, “It’s always the quiet ones, isn’t it?” Initially, Charcoal was just going to be a vague Firestarter type of character, but I decided that I wanted to do a little bit more than that as I wrote the scene. I talked to my Beta about it and asked him about the idea of making the Fire she wields as part of her—an extension of herself. He agreed, and that lead to me giving it a sort of... form like Disney’s Aladdin’s Genie (minus the wispy tail bit), but much more malevolent and featureless.

I wanted it to reflect both her young, childlike mind, so I didn’t give it a whole lot of defining features. It has fingers, but only two and a thumb. It has a head, but it’s mostly just a squat dome with eyes. Its mouth is just a lone gap in the fire, which later gapes impossibly. It’s body is a tube-like, fiery tornado with no musculature. I wanted something on par with what a child might draw on paper, and bring that to horrific life. However, I also wanted it to be her.

To that end, I made sure to make its attacks be an exaggerated form of a childish tantrum: the sweeping arms, the banging fists, the flailing thrashes. I didn’t want people to lose sight of the little girl inside the fiery giant, even when it took over the bulk of the actions and description. To that end, I used Kamala’s perspective to return to Charcoal a few times during the episode.

I’m sure a lot of people aren’t really thinking about all these things, and that’s okay. Hopefully, it’s all just subliminal and people take this stuff in without it jarring them out of their immersion to sit there and think about everything I write and why I wrote it that way. Heh.

As a character, I figured that as she matured, she would learn to control the body and refine it in all ways—size, shape, temperature, etc. As Charcoal is more or less an aside character for Prey Mate’s quest, however, I won’t really be doing anything with that.
Even so, I never saw that as a reason not to flesh out the people in my story. I’m of the inclination that no character should be just a place-holding cookie cutter.

It’s a bit hypocritical, I know, considering all the random mook guards in the IMRO that I killed as cannon fodder... they were nameless cookie cutter minions. Still, whenever I deal with a character long enough to develop them, I do so because it helps bring them to life in my head and makes the writing easier—even if nobody ever sees those little elements I add.

And now, we have a follow-up from our nature elemental. Remember when I said that I’d be more fully introducing the characters? Well, we haven’t quite gotten a name yet, but he’s definitely not idle. As Jinx said, Chaos destroys stagnancy and creates. The nature of The Green embodies both Chaos and Order. Not only has it buried and destroyed the IMRO, but it has used the remains and the rainfall of the monsoon to create and flourish this entity. Likewise, The Green also has a lasting Order and heartiness to remain for hundreds if not thousands of years. This is a hybrid tree; a mix of giant sequoia, banyan, and willow.

And, honestly, I think this talk here about Jinx’s power is pretty much the perfect summation of everything have to say about it. Yes, it was a little on the exposition heavy side, but it had to be said. It helped the Justice League—and probably Hawkwoman in particular—understand where Jinx stands on matters.

...So... now we move onto the major breaking of another of the IMRO’s impositions: Identity.

**Wraith** means well, I’m sure, but as Iyer knows, Wraith gets carried away and is also a little reckless. Jinx is a little skittish about this, especially with how much weight she puts upon her identity and the freedom of others to be who they want to be.

Never the less, here we are... **Charcoal** has accepted another name for herself. In this sense, Rajani is the public name she is putting forth to the world. The one she will accept from others. It is likely the name she will get registered publicly so they have something to put on paperwork. Charcoal—like Kamala—is her internalized name, the one that she will protect.

It’s a bit of a swap between Kammie’s division between her two names, but she still appreciates it and honors that decision.

And here we also see the methodology that will probably lead the majority of them to discovering their names. It will give them identity, if not exactly define who they are. Of course, then you have kids like Vi who have to be a little too smart for their own good.

**Vi** (pronounced like the letter ‘v’), is a bit of a philosopher—somehow. Neti neti is a term meaning, “not this, not this” or “neither this, nor that.” It’s an existentialism thing that, honestly, would only confuse and muddle any issues of identity at this point. It’s obvious that Vi is at peace with his own identity, and may not really care what anyone calls him.

And with that, I introduce the last of our newest quartet: **Vipin**!

Now, there’s more to be said on the future of these four... and I have it tucked away in comments across deviantArt, so I’ll just paste it in here!
I was trying really hard to display various emotions and I was trying to pack in several different things. A few areas just... stumped me for a bit, namely the whole naming conversation chunk and smoothly transitioning the naming part, the singing part, and the leaving into a solid, coherent scene. Initially the idea was to have her do the leaving scene (with the Ghandi quote and all) the next morning, but then I realized that putting it on the end of the singing/music part would work as a kind of buffer, making the leaving feel less like a single event of abandonment or something. Doing so turned the singing/music introduction into a parting gift rather than one last bid to help the children before she went to bed thinking about leaving all those kids alone the next day (Depressionville!).

As for those four... honestly, I hadn’t even really considered writing their antics. They have a lot of promise, and I won’t say never. Wraith would definitely be their leader, but probably the type that needed to be reined in from time to time. As you can see, she can get carried away with her own ideas. I feel that she’ll quickly even out; after all, all it took was Jinx pointing out that Wraith had responsibilities to temper some of her actions. Likewise, Wraith is growing as a person very quickly now that she is starting to consider others—especially Charcoal—in her actions. Her protective streak is going to be that of big-sister, or a sort of surrogate mother. If there’s going to be one major hurdle, it’s going to be her alternately protective and stubborn streaks combining into a frustrating combo.

Likely, she will clash with Li’l V a few times... and Vi will be the voice of reason and calm center of their little team, in a Raven-esque fashion. He will have logic and philosophy, as well as a very defined sense of both purpose and morality. He’ll be the one everyone goes to with their problems. If anything, his pitfall will be his pacifist nature, which will probably clash with Wraith or Charcoal; he won’t be unwilling to fight, but he’ll be a bit too passively resistant or focused on the defensive. In short, he’s the medic and counselor of the team, not especially a fighter.

Charcoal will be the quiet heart of the team; she’s fiery passion wrapped in a reserved package. As she becomes more outspoken, she will be more willing to open herself to others. However, with that will come a temper when she feels wronged. As we’ve already seen, that temper comes with temperature. She reminds me a lot of M’gann M’orzz—Miss Martian—with a rather interesting mix of shyness, with the good will of Starfire for a shoulder-Angel and Raven’s Anger for a shoulder-Demon. She will also have a gravitational pull as the quiet passion of the team. Everyone is protective of her, and there would be no faster way to get your ass beat down than to cause her physical or psychological injury. However, that’s not to say that her big brothers and big sister will even get the chance. By her very nature, Charcoal is a powder keg of emotions and for some time will probably be the easiest to manipulate due to her bashful, but powerful emotional biases.

Vipin is a bit of an enigma. He doesn’t really speak any language, save the language of the Green. Unlike Swamp Thing or Poison Ivy, who merely adopted the Green, Vipin has been one with the Green since his birth. He is truly one with the plants around him. Like them, he can’t easily converse in words others will understand. He makes himself known and expresses himself as any plant does: with a wealth of physical displays. Some of those displays may be beautiful, but they can also be dangerous, the bright colors merely a warning to would-be predators. I had an idea that he was possibly not even raised by any parents and that from infancy he was cared for by Mother Nature. However, plants don’t know when they’re in danger; many of them merely react. His capture by the IMRO, was probably one of the most peaceful, honestly. He likely
didn’t resist until it was far too late. He’s already a teenager and the silence of the IMRO had never been a problem for him; it might take quite a bit to get him to a point where he uses words of his own or even fully understands the words of others. Vipin’s machinations will be a wildcard, but you can bet he will look out for those under his care.

As a whole—a team—this group will be a diverse mixture of wildness and restraint, much like Jinx herself. I can’t truly see these ones as Titans; there’s too many rules and expectations involved for that. Reserve Titans or even supplemental Mercenary arms, I can definitely see. They won’t be villains for the sheer purpose of causing mayhem due to any maligned personality facets or desire to take power. The team will take power on more personal terms and won’t see the point in lording that power over others; they know what it’s like to be oppressed and all of them would have an aversion to that style of activity. That, in an of itself, might throw them into conflict with villains... but I still wouldn’t be too hasty to slot them into the Titan-level of superheroes because of it.

Even Jinx’s mercenary way of going about things feels wrong for this team. I’m not sure what their goal is... but Jinx has a goal and it’s to make a name for herself and show the world that she’s not only a force to be reckoned with, but also one you want on your side. Indeed, you can have that force on your side—for a price. Wraith’s team will be much more internally focused, protecting themselves and building up themselves rather than tearing others down or letting other people use their skills. However, that isn’t to say they wouldn’t help. As you’ve seen, Wraith and Charcoal enjoy helping... and in time, they might even learn how to that without vexing a lot of people! Wraith enjoys empowering those who are being mistreated. Charcoal just has a good heart and lots of good will to spread. Li’l V is likely to follow them to help where he can in that serene way he does, helping everyone who needs it. ...Vipin will follow because this is family; his decisions are a lot more morally ambiguous, just like Mother Nature.

Metallica’s “Unforgiven” was... probably one of the most fitting ones for the situation. It was one that I knew I wanted to introduce to the story at some point, as it had just a little too much meaning behind it.

And so that brings me to Jinx, leaving behind one last parting gift... Sound, a means of empowering the children and even showing them how to take back what has been stolen. Slowly, with every note of music, The Golden Rule of the IMRO will be crushed into nothingness.

Jinx’s farewell, here, “There are no goodbyes for us. Wherever you are, you will always be in my heart” is a quote from Mahatma Gandhi. It was also planned way back in 2013 when I first decided to take this to India and finish off the IMRO. It felt fitting, because Jinx didn’t have the proper words... but thankfully, someone already had!

I’m glossing over a bit of the mentions of Jessie, I know, but there will be plenty to address in Chapters 17 and 19, so I’ll save it for later. Jinx can relax for the flight back to the US and we’ll finish up the last of the loose ends of “Prey Mate.”

And that, Ladies and Gentlemen, brings us to a close on events in India! Once back Stateside, the story will be wrapping itself up over the next three chapters (plus epilogue)! See you there!

-Lynx

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**Story Mirrors:**
Now Available on Archive of Our Own!

“Prey Mate” on FanFiction.net

“Prey Mate” on deviantArt.com
Chapter 17

“...love will find its way / Through paths
where wolves would fear to prey...”
-Lord Byron, *The Giaour*

Prey Mate

by

Lynx Klaw

Chapter 17

~§~

-=Raven=-

It took them two days to get back to Jump. Most of that time they had spent in Coast City, speaking to the Dark Way Prep’s superintendent and working out new filters for Jessie’s non-exposure to Gotham. As the thought had already been planted and the damage done, it had been agreed that Jessie would be allowed limited and supervised access to Gotham-based material including some news archives. Jinx argued that it would at least slake Jessie’s thirst rather than just tempt her. With Jessie’s poor impulse control, temptation was the last thing the jokerette needed.

As for Jessie, she had been put on house arrest for the next few months. Jessie didn’t fight it after hearing that she would be allowed some feeds about Gotham. After hearing about that and getting a taste of the less oppressive restrictions, they’d actually had to drag the jester away from the console. Classes wouldn’t be resuming for another couple of days until enough teachers returned from overseas after setting up a more permanent presence in India to help the transition of the refugees. Jessie had holed up in her room at her computer and had immediately immersed herself in Gotham feeds.

Kamala wasn’t sure if it was such a good idea, but it was keeping the girl occupied. Moreover, they would at least know what Jessie was seeing and how it might affect her. Everyone—Jessie included—was aware of the risk of possibly triggering some of Dabney Donovan’s programming. So Jessie was to keep a journal of her thoughts and feelings after reading anything about Gotham. That way, if anything ever came of it, they might be able to see the shift in her reactions or even have one of the resident psionic therapists help her through it.

At the end of it all, things were looking much better than when Jessie had left. Of course, Raven hadn’t mentioned that, because she was aware of just how much the whole stunt had tweaked Jinx. She would have never guessed just how... *maternal* Jinx could be. Now, her mate was entirely tuckered out and sleeping soundly in the passenger of the HIVE-sponsored car.
When Raven had asked about that particular feature, Jinx explained that the car was free to take to any HIVE or Dark Way site, because invariably someone else would need it to go back to Coast City site... or somewhere else. The cars, Kammie explained, usually made a long, roundabout circuit between several sites before making their way ‘home.’

When Raven stopped on the outskirts of Jump for some food before heading toward the bay, she’d attempted to wake Jinx. Unfortunately, the girl was well and truly unconscious and wouldn’t rouse herself no matter how Raven shook her or called to her. When the demi-Demon didn’t get a response even from a gentle empathic prodding... and later a direct message sent through their link, she began to worry. To that end, she decided to contact her teammates.

“Too fuckin’ early for this shit, yeah?”

“Gizmo, it’s Raven.”

And just like that, she had his alert and undivided attention, “What’s wrong?”

“Jinx—I can’t wake her up. I can tell that she’s fine physically, but... she doesn’t even respond to my telepathic messages. It’s like she’s a half-step from a coma.”

Gizmo rubbed a hand across his eyes so he could see the screen properly before replying with a shake of his head, “She does that after a hard mission. Shoulda warned ya herself ‘bout that. Fuckin’... okay—see, she just kinda shuts down for a bit, like a phone with a dead battery. She’s gotta recharge or whatever. She’ll wake up, but it’ll probably be ta nosh on anything she can find an’ go back to sleep. She’s about as goddamn useless as a square wheel for the whole of it.”

“But she’ll be fine afterward? How long does this last? Should I take her to the Tower medlab to monitor her or—”

“No—no fuckin’ way. During Jinx’s little hibernations, she’s... really sensitive, emotionally speakin’, I mean. She needs familiar surroundings and peace an’ quiet. Otherwise, she can freak right the fuck out—and she won’t even be aware of it... or remember it, later. She once tore up the HIVE medical ward. I mean ‘they hadda pull some beds out o’ the walls’ kinda tore up.”

“O...kay, then. So I should take her back to her apartment and make sure her fridge is stocked.”

“Prob’ly best,” Gizmo uttered, then shifted and rubbed the back of his neck, “Hey, Demon-girl... when I said she needs peace an’ quiet, she—uh...”

“You mean that I shouldn’t be there,” she finished easily.

“It’s not like she fuckin’ -”

“I understand. She needs to be alone to sort herself out; anyone there would just... be in the way, no matter how well intentioned.”

“...Yeah.”

“Thanks, Gizmo. Get some sleep—you guys earned it. We’ll see Jinx when she’s ready.”

“Demon-Girl—Raven. ...She wouldn’t’ve made it outta there in one piece without ya. Ya kept ‘er sane, kept ‘er strong. I guess—just... thanks.” After a moment’s pause, the short mercenary shifted again. “Gizmo out.”

With that, her communicator blanked. Raven smiled. He was an acerbic, sarcastic, foul-mouthed,
little genius... but he was earnest. He would probably never be entirely pleasant to be around, but he would be there for Jinx when it counted—and that’s what was most important. Raven reached over to the passenger seat and stroked Kamala’s cheek. The girl didn’t even stir.

“So...,” she said to her slumbering mate, “Food.”

-=Kamala=-

Kamala woke to a capybara gnawing at her stomach. Her internal clock told her that she’d been out for something close to 26 hours since she fell asleep in the car with Raven. Six or seven of those hours she had likely spent in the car... She had been moved—and her first thought was that Raven had done it, but she wasn’t taking that chance. Regulating her breathing, she focused on what her senses were telling her.

She felt the soft bed under her, a lingering scent of incense hung about the area, and her ears strained against the quiet of the room—outside, light traffic moved through an urban setting. Her brow twitched as her eyes slowly opened. She was in her apartment, as she initially guessed. Kamala’s mind slowly relaxed with this knowledge.

Glancing down, she took stock of herself. She was tucked in, but only under the top comforter. That had to have been Raven’s touch; Kamala had a habit of kicking all the sheets away when she felt overheated during the night. Throwing back the royal purple cover, she found that Raven had also changed her into her favorite panties and tank top. Kamala smiled at the obvious attention paid to putting her to bed.

Her mate wasn’t curled against her, though. In her current, raw mental state, she warily looked to the other side of the bed. Raven wasn’t there. Jinx felt relieved—and guilt immediately pricked her afterward. She knew it wasn’t personal, but would Raven understand? She stared at the side of the bed that Raven usually took, biting her lip while trying to think of what she would say. Raven might not be in bed, but she could still be in the apartment... and that brought with it feelings of apprehension that just bred more guilt.

Her nigh vacant staring finally garnered a target. There, on the black pillow that still held a few traces of purple hairs, rested a note. It was a single page of printer paper, the kind she kept near the HIVE monitor for any printouts they needed, and was folded by thirds and standing tent-like. On the side that faced her was her name written in a flowing cursive she knew to be Raven’s handwriting even though she’d never seen it. It just fit her mate’s nature.

*Kamala*

*Daesem,*

*I called Mikron when I couldn’t wake you in the car. He said this was normal after a hard mission, so I stopped trying to wake you. I hope you’re feeling more rested when you read this. He also said you would be hungry when you woke up. I stopped by The Elysion Banquet to pick up some of that lamb souvlaki we enjoyed. It’s in the fridge. They lamented the idea of reheating the meal because the meat would lose some taste, but mentioned that heating it at a low power with a damp paper towel or the like would keep the meat from drying out. Mikron also said that you would do better with some time to yourself. I’m paraphrasing, of course, and I won’t repeat his exact words. Suffice to say he explained the situation in*
his uniquely uncouth vernacular. Take whatever time you need for yourself; get some rest, but make sure you eat! Even though you need to be alone, I figured you wouldn’t mind me leaving this.

When you’re feeling up to it, you can give my communicator a call or drop by the Tower. Don’t rush yourself, though. I want you as fully recuperated as possible. I will admit my intentions are not entirely selfless, but I don’t imagine you’ll mind that, either.

By the way, I couldn’t find your apartment keys. I searched your pockets and your mission pack. I had to have your landlord let us in. Apparently, he watches the news—so I’m sorry to say he recognized us both. On the other hand, he was more than happy to help me get you inside. He was quite impressed with what he saw, so you might have to put up with some praise from him at some point. I managed to convey that you were very exhausted and would probably be sleeping for quite some time. He said he would make a note not to let anyone disturb you until you stopped in—so don’t forget to drop by the front desk when you’re ready.

And because I can’t be there to say it in person: I love you, Daesem, and I’m so proud of you. I can’t put into words how much I admire your strength of heart. I look forward to being able to hold you in my arms again. Until that time, I will think of you often and fondly.

Dae Ter-il,

Raven

Kammie smiled and set the note back on the pillow. She stretched mightily and sighed. Despite her fragile emotional state, she felt bolstered just reading those words. With a yawn, she padded toward the bathroom. Despite her protesting stomach, she could at least see to some ‘morning’ ablutions before ‘breakfast’—even though it was closer to 1600 hours. Jinx took her time, savoring the hedonism of the moment while she rebuilt her mental fortifications even while allowing herself these vulnerable moments.

When she emerged into the kitchen, she found the large plate with a good number of skewers on the top shelf of the fridge, plastic wrapped and with a fuchsia ribbon tied into a neat bow on top. Beside it sat a bottle of Moscato, also with a pink ribbon bowed around its neck.

“...I’m going to murder that woman,” Jinx muttered, “with sex.”

Kammie woke up another 16 hours later. It was telling that her communicator had no messages. It seems that Mike had fielded any calls from teammates, siblings, and HF business alike. Raven obviously hadn’t called which was... strangely sweet and considerate rather than worrisome. Her mate obviously knew that she needed this time to recuperate fully from all her recent stressors.

Jinx was feeling more like herself, finally, as evidenced by the lack of nameless trepidation that the sight of her communicator incurred. It no longer felt like something loomed inside her apartment, making her want to tense as she turned every corner. Hell, she had even slept in the bed instead of the corner. She hadn’t done that of her own volition without Raven’s presence in... close to 11 years? That was if she was discounting the IMRO cell with its bed; no use resting in the corner. ‘Bed’ was a relative word, when she was on the streets, though. If that was the case, then it went back all the way to before she was cast out of her mother’s village...
‘Ugh, too long ago to matter,’ Kamala decided, and slid out of bed toward the bathroom.

A good forty minutes later saw Jinx at the table, polishing off the last of the souvlaki. Raven had left her a good third of what had probably been another family-sized platter. Afterward, she dressed herself in a tank and some capris jeans. She settled her favorite, black cap over her head—it had been a birthday gift from Nin last year and had a pink, skull-and-crossbones motif on the front. It went well with her Converse sneakers that had the same patterning.

Stuffing her hair bands in her pocket and settling her sitar case over one shoulder, Jinx made her way into the hall. She called upon her keys and locked the door behind her. That, of course, was the reason Raven hadn’t found them; Kamala had bound them to her holding ruby some time ago. Unlike the silver chalice and other artifacts she had stuffed in there over the years, the keys didn’t have any heavy security measures on them, and had been bound to the ruby for convenience’s sake. She could always recall them to the ruby, which meant losing or misplacing the keys was next to impossible. After banishing the keys back into ‘hammerspace,’ she made her way to the staircase. Due to her powers, elevators had always made Kammie nervous.

Soon enough, she found herself in the lobby. Jinx stopped at the front desk and smiled. The old man hadn’t even noticed her yet, his balding head hidden behind the paper. She made a little face when she saw that the headline was still on developments in India. Ignoring that, she decided to get his attention.

“Morning, Mr. Satō.”

The man lowered the paper and broke out into a wide grin. For as long as she had known him, he had worn that same thing—dark grey suit pants, a canary yellow shirt, and a black tie with tiny, white dots. A pair of rectangular glasses rested on the bridge of his nose, the lenses slightly tinted. Maybe he just had several of the same outfit, but she had never seen him dressed in anything else in the four years that she’d had this apartment.

“Ms. Malti—I hope you’re feeling better?”

“Much, actually. Turns out I tuckered myself out.”

“Yes, well, I hear destroying enormous, subterranean concentration camps can do that,” the landlord mentioned with an easy smile, “Your girlfriend had to carry you in. I was worried.”

“Yeah, it was a pretty rough week, but I came through it okay. Also, that was my—wife?” Jinx frowned. She really needed to find a better word for that.

“Yeah, let’s go with wife for now.”

“Then you are doubly blessed! Congratulations, Mrs. Malti, is it now?”

“Eh, that makes me feel old, Mr. Satō.”

“Old isn’t a bad thing, I don’t think,” he said with a satisfied smile, “I’m rather enjoying it. You just wait. When you get to my age, you’ll be thinking, ‘I’m so glad I’m finished with those younger years!’”

Kammie snickered, “I don’t think that’s how it works for most people. And anyway, you’re not old, just... aging—like wine. It just gets better with time!”

Now he laughed and reached beside him, “Oh, I wouldn’t go comparing me to such fine things. Ah—I just remembered: I held your mail since you went off. Luckily, not everyone has your address. I can only imagine the fanmail you would receive.”
“Or the hatemail,” Jinx snorted.

Now Mr. Satō frowned, “Perhaps, but let’s not linger on such things. Are you headed out to play again?”

“Yeah, it’s about time for me to show my pale hide again,” she acknowledged while flipping through her mail, “Junk. Junk. Bill. ‘nother bill.” Then she paused, coming across a yellow envelope with a honeycomb pattern. She blinked and stared at it, nonplussed. “Can’t be a paycheck. That mission was a total bust...”

“Is there a problem?”

“Mmmaybe? I might have to call Payroll, ‘cause somethin’... I dunno.” Jinx opened the envelope there and pulled out the two papers. One was obviously a paystub of some sort, which made no sense. The other paper was more helpful. “Oh, says I’m getting a referral bonus. Whenever someone ends up joining my school ‘cause of a previous student, you get $200.”

“What a nice incentive,” Mr. Satō commented.

“Yeah, but I don’t really remember—wait, how many?”

“Hm?”

“They’re saying I referred 2,851 new students! What the actual f—fudge,” she stammered, knowing Mr. Satō’s thoughts on profanity. He was one of the few people who ever got Mike to stop cursing. She quickly flipped over to the paystub and nearly dropped her mail, “Five hundred seventy thousand two hundred dollars?”

Mr. Satō’s brows rose, “They... say these things come in threes. And so you are triply blessed.”

She looked up at him, wondering if he actually knew there was credence behind that concept. However, the expression on his face was blank of any underlying connotations—mystical, religious, or otherwise. Kamala turned her eyes back to the paystub. After a few moments, she shook her head and stuffed the HIVE envelope and the two bills in a side-compartment of her sitar case.

“I think I’ll call them to verify this, just in case. Thanks for keeping these for me, Mr. Satō.”

“My pleasure, Mrs. Malti.”

“Hn. That’s gonna take some getting used to... See ya later, old man!”

With that, Jinx made her way out of the apartment and onto the busy, morning sidewalk. It was a Wednesday, so she was going to see if she could find Nin, Terry, and Darryl. They were long overdue for some talks and this recent mission had probably thrown up a lot of stuff they’d need to discuss, if only to settle their concerns for her. She was also rather high profile at the moment, so she would probably have to warn them to distance themselves from her if they didn’t want any part of that.

For now, however, she had someone else that deserved her attention. She pulled out her communicator and flicked it open. Kammie shot off a quick text to Gizmo to let him know she was back on active status. Her next few few swipes of her fingers connected her to another communicator.

“Hey, Poe-bird.”
She’d only meant to lift the living televisions high enough off the ground that they couldn’t walk anymore. The almost giddy glee that surged through her at the sight and sound of her mate hurled them past the rooftops in the downtown district. Everyone—even Control Freak—paused to watch their ascent... and then the spectacular amount of pieces into which they broke when they fell.

“Hello, kitten.” She surveyed her destruction and noted that the salvage store mostly dealt in broken electronics anyhow, and decided it wasn’t too great a loss. She then deftly prevented a power cable from ensnaring the leopard form of Changeling with a simple shield, freeing him to pounce-kick over an old, jumbo-sized TV that weighed more than Cyborg. “Are you feeling better?”

“Indeed, I am. I’m headed out to play some—probably the same spot as last time, on Halcyon South. If you wanted to join me-” Raven’s attention was pulled away by a large crash created between the unfortunate giant TV and Cyborg’s sonic canon. “Are you busy?”

“Depends on your definition.”

“Raven, see if you can-... Are you setting up a date during a mission?”

“No,” Raven droned flatly, “My sole focus and complete attention is unequivocally ensnared by Control Freak’s exposition on—why was he doing this again?”

Nightwing dragged a glove down his face, “I know you’ve been worried about Jinx, but can we-”

“Yo! Goth-girl’s got a date?” Control Freak butted in, “With Jinx?”

Nightwing shot her a withering look. Raven had the decency to hold up her hands in a gesture of surrender to the point. Then Raven frowned at Control Freak. Everyone here knew she could end this encounter with a sweep of her hand if she so wished. She had no idea why Control Freak thought he could get away with... Actually, Raven still wasn’t sure what prompted this situation. Regardless, there was no reason to treat it as seriously as Nightwing. Control Freak was never a major threat, only a major annoyance.

“I could be, but I seem to be otherwise preoccupied.”

“No kiddin’? You an’ Lucky Charms?”

Raven’s stare was sufficiently eloquent, but why be ambiguous? “Is there a problem, Control Freak?”

“Problem? Me? No—no that’s awesome!”

Raven rolled her eyes, “Why are we doing this, Control Freak?”

“You know, funny you should ask,” the obese geek began—but then paused in momentary contemplation. Quite suddenly, he grinned. Raven eyed him warily as he held up a philosophical finger, “And any other day, I’d be glad to tell you—but I owe Jinx a solid. So here’s what’s gonna happen...” The others tensed as Raven slowly descended toward him. Control Freak raised his remote and pressed the large, red button. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, with a static pop and dying, electrical hum, every animated electronic clattered to the ground in various disheveled heaps. “I’m gonna give up. Within the next ten minutes, the MTF van’ll pick me up. Within the next five minutes, you, Raven, will find yourself treating Jinx to an entertaining evening. So... scoot, on
He even had the audacity to make a shooing gesture toward her. Raven blinked once, slowly turning her head to take in Nightwing and Gar. She wasn’t sure whether to bristle or... thank him. Because he meant it—every word.

“What did Jinx do for you?”

Jinx cleared her throat, “Uh, hon—probably not the best thing to ask right—”

“Oh, man—so her team got hired on this one time to face off with yours truly, yeah? We gave it our best shot and I lost—fair’s fair. So as she was taking me in—"

“Freak, you should really stop talking. Freak—crap, he’s monologuing.”

“-and just after they finished confiscation, she slips me a mini-DVR projector with all six extended Middle Earth movies in full-HD, 2.39:1 aspect. I rigged it up and put that thing on the wall of M-Block’s cafeteria. Ohhh, man—it was so good, even the guards just sat there an’ watched!”

“Control Freak, shut up!”

“Jinx slipped you contraband?” Nightwing clarified, and Raven watched Jinx rub the bridge of her nose. “Come to think of it, I seem to recall you staying in JC Correctional for three months. You could have warped out with that DVR.”

“Dude, that’s not fair play. You don’t disrespect an honest gift, man. After we finished The Return of the King, I handed off the DVR to the hacks. Man, I was king of M-Block for the whole month it took to go through ‘em. You can’t buy that kinda cred. So yeah—I owe the strawberry mercenary.”

Rave raised a brow, “Strawberry mercenary?”

“Oh, my God, Freak! Shut up! Just. Shut. Up!”

Just then, she saw the MTF van approaching from a good distance beyond the blocked road. The police had been swift to cordon off the area when the fight started, so the van was making good time to them. Control Freak turned his back to her, hands clasped behind him as he affected a stoutly rigid stance.

“You fly back to Jinx, now, little Raven. Fly, fly, fly...”

Raven stared for a moment longer, then turned away and passed by Nightwing, “You can handle this from here, right?”

Nightwing’s domino mask couldn’t hide all his stink eye. The MTF Van’s back doors opened and Control Freak practically bounced his way to it. Then, before they could cuff him, Freak pointed at the boy wonder with a typical villainous grin.

“Next time, Gadget! Next time!”

With a mad cackle, he swooped out of sight and the MTF guards moved in to cuff the rogue. Raven shook her head. They still hadn’t found out what this whole situation entailed, but Raven was about two steps beyond caring.

“I’ll be there in about twenty, strawberry mercenary.”

Kamala hummed thoughtfully, “What was that, hon? I couldn’t quite hear you over the sound of you
not getting laid tonight.”

“Nothing. Must have been the wind.”

“Oh, never mind, then. See you soon!”

The communicator blanked and Raven let out a breath. Today was certainly turning out to be one of those more interesting days. She briefly wondered if this was an omen for good or ill...

-=Kamala=-

Walking down this particular sidewalk in this particular direction was always a bit of nostalgia. The man in front of her wore earphones, blotting out the world around him as he moved with the tide of the pedestrians. She had done the same when she had first moved into the apartment from the HIVE Academy. When she heard someone playing some form of street music, she finally unplugged. That day began a series of days filled with something like envy. The only place she had ever played was in the sanctity of her dorm room at the Academy; her apartment had other people in it and her walls weren’t soundproofed. In those days, she had always played very softly and without any amp.

It had never occurred to her to play out on the street like those others until she had seen one such performer just... going at it with a bunch of PVC tubes lashed together, pounding them with what looked to be rubber sole inserts. It was at that moment that Jinx realized that she could play anywhere with whatever instrument caught her fancy. Sure, there might be some haters—but what were they going to do? She was the Jinx!

After she had worked up the nerve, she had sat down and started playing on some random, clear spot along this sidewalk. A lot of people ignored her, but a good number of people paused for a few minutes to listen to her play. That first day, Jinx had played for hours and had even forgotten to eat. She did it the next week, when the urge to play louder grew and forced her and her sitar out of the apartment to pluck out some more riffing, heavier songs.

The third week was the same, and so was the fourth. The next month, she began playing twice a week. Eventually, she gained some small notoriety—thankfully not the kind that involved Titans, but people knew where to find her and by then she had started placing out a small shoebox for the donations that people seemed to keep giving her even if she didn’t need it. She was just playing because she wanted to play... Jinx wound up donating three quarters of it to a homeless shelter; it became a running theme, even to this day. It was never much, but Jinx had learned on the streets of another country that anything was better than nothing.

The third month, she had encountered Nin, who had done much the same as her with the violin. They met up every Wednesday, though Nin split up with her to play with two boys on Friday. Eventually, Nin had invited her to join them... and soon Wednesdays became their group days. It was an odd sort of band they made, but it was good. In that respect, it was very much like her team.

Returning to Jump—and this particular street—brought her back to those days that she had missed recently. She didn’t have to play alone, today. This wasn’t Bihar and there was no dire need to break the silence. This time, she was going to play for herself and for her friends. Everyone else was incidental.

Faintly at first, but with growing volume, came the thump and thwak of cement, plastic, and wood. Soon after, the pop and thrum of a djembe came to hear ears. The farther down Halcyon she went,
the more distinct the sounds became until she could hear the keening of a violin break through the percussive onslaught.

Soon enough, she could pick out the tune. It sounded like they were covering *Lacuna Coil* with a barebones rendition of *Our Truth*. She saw their small crowd before the song ended, and she slowly worked her way forward through the fringes of spectators. She stayed behind a few people while the three finished; she didn’t want to interrupt them. Likely, there would be some enthusiastic response to her return.

Of course, she didn’t really know *how* they would react. Kamala was sure the face of Jinx had been plastered all over the newscasts recently; they had only touched on her mercenary life before now. Kamala and Jinx were... different parts of her. She supposed she would see if they could reconcile the two. Many ‘normal’ people were put off by the power she was sure nigh everyone in the world had seen, now. *Knowing* that she was a Metahuman and actually *seeing* her power in action almost always garnered different responses.

Even so, she had quite a bit of hope—Nin, Terry, and Darryl had responded with interest to both the mysticism and mercenary aspects of her life. She had showed them brief glimpses of her power and lifestyle—some by design, others by happenstance. It wasn’t as if she threw them into the deep end without something to go on. Besides, they’d had time to assimilate everything they’d seen and heard by now.

As the song came to its close, Jinx gave into the facetiousness of the moment. She was behind a few people in the small crowd, and not easily visible. To that end, Kamala called out, “You do requests?”

Nin and Darryl leaned a bit, attempting to get a better view of her. Jinx grinned and shifted just slightly behind a broad-shouldered man to make it more difficult for them. Nevertheless, Nin replied to her, “If we know it, we’ll probably give it a try...”

“Hmm, how about a hug?”

After a half-moment of letting them struggle to find the speaker, the hex-caster slipped to the front of the crowd. She made it about two steps before Nin all but tackled her.

“Kammie!”

The girl hadn’t let go of her violin, so the embrace was a little one-sided, but Kamala made up for it by returning it with an almost spine-popping bearhug that lifted Nin clear off her feet.

“You’re back!”

“I noticed!” Jinx grinned at her rejoinder, and felt Darryl join in.

“Aww, group hug!” Terry said and crushed all of them into a mesh of limbs with his powerful arms.

“Frig-” Nin wheezed.

Finally, the moment was over and Jinx set Nin on solid ground. After a deep, rib-expanding breath, the girl stood back and took Kamala in for a few moments. Obviously, there was something on her mind.

“...How are you doing?”

Jinx didn’t give her a rote line—it wouldn’t have been right. She thought about it for a moment, and decided to answer with a something a little more honest than she would typically be with these three.
She had begun to open up to them before the mission; there didn’t seem much reason in holding back.

“I think I’m better than I have been in a long time, Nin. My soul’s a little bruised... but I’m healing.”

Darryl nodded and gestured to the amp, “Let’s play some. Gotta make up for all those solos you did.”

Kammie shifted her case’s strap and looked up contemplatively. She playfully hedged, “I dunno... I hadn’t really planned on it...”

“Sit your smartass down, Pinkie-pie,” Terry said with a grin.

Kammie jerked to a stop halfway to the amp, “You did not-”

“Now, now—let’s not fight, Kammie. Haven’t you heard? ‘Friendship is magic.’”

Jinx’s eye ticced once. Finally, then she threw up her hands, “Ugh!”

The others laughed as she seated herself. Kammie grumbled good-naturedly as she pulled out the jack from a side pocket and set about removing her sitar. While she settled and immersed herself in the familiar surroundings, she took a deep breath to savor being back on the streets of Jump doing what she loved. She removed her cap and shook out her hair horns, and heard the subsequent murmur that filled the area whenever she did so. This time, it was a little louder—but that was probably to be expected with recent events. She tuned them out in favor of focusing on her friends’ discussion over what to play.

“So you’re all in a mood for something heavy?”

“More or less,” Nin agreed.

“What about some Disturbed?”

The three exchanged glances.

“That could work,” Darryl admitted, “You have something in mind?”

“I was thinking Remember.”

Everyone was in agreement, and Nin started them out with some deep riffs which Terry and Darryl accompanied. Kammie added in a second layer to the lines as Nin shifted her heavy chords to support her. She began the lyrics, smoothly and calmly despite the instrumental heaviness.

“Sensation washes over me; I can’t describe it. Pain I felt so long ago; I don’t remember. Tear a hole so I can see; My devastation. Feelings from so long ago; I don’t remember...”

Kamala burst into the chorus as the song gained momentum. The second verse was even harder-driven as the four found their groove. After the second chorus, they had a rather large group filling the sidewalk. Finally, Jinx erupted into the bridge, capturing quite a bit more of attention as her vocals bounced off the buildings.

“If I can—Remember; To know this will—Conquer me! If I can—Just walk alone... And try—to escape... Into me!”

As the four of them rose into an instrumental break, Jinx felt her typical, mischievous grin alight her features. Tiny motes of pink dust occasionally floated from her fingertips, and she could sense the
four of them falling into a perfectly harmonious synchronization.

Her irises swirled with bright, coral energies—unnoticed by all with her eyes lodged on the strings, almost entranced in her concentration as well as her sense of purity. She was home, doing what she loved. When she delivered her next lines, her soft, menacing whisper amplified itself over their music through unnatural forces. The tone rasped out in an echo that had nothing to do with sound.

“Sensation washes over me... I can’t describe it... Pain I felt so long ago... I don’t remember...”

The rest of the song saw a larger crowd amassing. It was good this was one of the wider street venues and had enough room for such a gaggle of people. As people applauded their finish, she sensed a Demonic aura approaching and knew that her mate was inbound. Kamala’s grin grew.

Then she heard someone shout something from the crowd.

“Wazzat?” she called back.

“Pet by A Perfect Circle!”

Before she could even talk it over with the others, Nin was already glancing at Terry. The two nodded to one another and immediately set the buckets and violin into thunderous rhythm and wailing cries. Darryl jumped in without hesitation, and Jinx once again lost herself to the music, pulling her sitar into the mix after they suddenly fell quiet—leaving the opening lines to her. Once again, her voice whispered out over the music.

“Don’t fret, precious, I’m here...”

The quartet went through three more songs before Jinx spotted a dark shadow in the sky that swiftly descended into the shadows of the alley beside them. They had just started another song, another request. Jinx knew how to play it, but didn’t know the lyrics, so Nin took the lead vocals while Jinx provided the backing. It was better for Nin, anyway, because the girl had the better voice for this one.

Nin broke into chorus just as Raven strolled out of the alley like the supremely confident predator she was. The demi-Demon wore a navy midriff, halter tank and those flowing, black pants with the panels of cloth draping to ankle length from front, back, and sides. The side panels weren’t as wide as the front and back strips. They would have appeared skirt-like if Raven wasn’t in motion.

“Well, I won’t ever tell the world; that I don’t belong. Please don’t ever tell the world; That I don’t belong... That I don’t belong!”

Raven threaded her way through the fringes of the crowd and over to her mate. There, she leaned down to kiss the pinkette. There were a few murmurs, but Jinx ignored them and tried to focus on kissing back and keeping up with the other three’s instruments. Although a potent distraction, Kammie managed—if only just.

Nin hauntingly sang more lines of menace, “Can you still feel me, or did I slip away? A sick man, a monster—broken still today. I can’t explain what happens to me; caught in the game I’ve always starred. I could describe each mistake for you; tattoo it on my tainted heart!”

Raven settled beside Jinx, enjoying the music but also listening critically. Her daelorism raised a brow and brushed a thought toward her, ‘Isn’t this a little too darkly themed in light of recent events?”
Jinx gave a half shrug, her thoughts surfacing languidly through an inner echo of the song that Raven could hear thrumming in time with the actual sound, ‘*Was a request; I didn’t choose it.*’

That mollified Raven, though she did sense the demi-Demon’s concern for her and regarding its similarity to the aforementioned recent events. Jinx took time to pull up some appropriate thoughts on the matter.

‘*Don’t worry about it, hon. I use music as a medium of expression, but the songs we sing aren’t always self-expression. Despite their often very relatable themes, or their usefulness in displaying a current mood or train of thought, they’re always more... cathartic than traumatic.*’ Jinx turned a smile toward her while they went into the bridge. Her final thoughts on the matter wafted out, ‘*I play the songs; they do not play me.*’

-=Raven=-

The two of them fell silent, Raven’s head coming to rest on Jinx’s shoulder. They enjoyed their mental link and indulged in the mutual satisfaction they derived from that simple state of being. As the song ended, however, Jinx’s mind spiked to an awareness of something Raven couldn’t perceive. No sooner than Raven lifted her head than a quick thought shot into her mind.

‘*Don’t react.*’

She watched as a tall man strode forward. He wore a business suit and had a receding hairline that made his head gleam in the sun. The empath sensed his purpose and indignation—never a good combination. However, she took Jinx’s cue and merely watched the events unfold.

“Young lady, I don’t know how you aren’t absolutely ashamed of yourself.”

Jinx held out a hand to Terry and Darryl, both of whom had just begun to shift forward. Kamala calmly plucked the mezzrab from her finger and held it out to Nin, who dutifully if confusedly accepted the sitar pick.

“Shame is for those who act with doubt and regret, sir.”

The answer was obviously a little deeper than he was expecting and the businessman was thrown off for just a moment. However, with a straightening of his tie, he regained his momentum. The man barreled on from the little stumble and remounted his high horse.

“Well, you *should* regret what you’re doing! There are people—good people—out there who have *real* troubles. Using them as a gimmick is *sick*. Do you have any idea what they have suffered?”

“While I understand the sentiment you’re trying to convey, it’s unnecessary. My suffering has nothing to do with this. ...I believe you’ve mistaken me for someone I’m not. I’m going to ask you politely to leave us be,” Kamala said while shifting the sitar into Raven’s lap.

“The Justice League and that Jinx-woman in India didn’t help all those children for you to ride the sensationalism for attention,” he continued even as Jinx slowly levered herself to stand before him. He used her shortened distance from him to poke her in the shoulder with two fingers. “You’re a disgrace, and I won’t stand for it.”

Kammie glanced at her left shoulder, then slowly turned her gaze back to him, “Again, you’re mistaken for someone I’m not. I’m telling you that it is in your best interests to drop the matter. Please just walk away and we can put this behind us. I am also warning you not to touch me again.”
“Oh, I don’t think so, young lady. If you think I’m going to step down just because you act like a punk, you’re mistaken. Dying your hair and wearing contacts may be the fad, now, but you’re pushing it. We have to stand up for what’s right—and right now, that’s seeing you off!” He punctuated with another prod to her shoulder.

“Sir, do not lay your hands on me again. That is your final warning,” Kamala reiterated, and Raven saw her jaw begin to clench. That was it—Jinx had made her stand and her patience had officially ended. “Your intentions, though well meaning, are severely misplaced. I’ve asked you twice... Now I’m telling you: Walk. Away.”

“You can’t threaten me, girl. If you think—”

In the moment before his next syllable, Jinx evaded his approaching finger-jab and whirled into motion. Half a blink later, she had her right arm coiled about his forearm, and her open hand calmly insinuated against his elbow. Her other hand went to his shoulder and hoisted the man’s torso upward until he was firmly locked in place while bent over.

Kammie, with long years of practice in the field, scanned the crowd and her surroundings just in case this was some sort of distraction to get her into a vulnerable position. Her hard, sweeping gaze unnerved the onlookers. The gap between Jinx and the crowd widened slightly as they pulled away from the altercation. After a few seconds of scrutiny, Raven saw Jinx make up her mind and turned her focus to her restrained assailant.

“I will not say it again. You need to cool down and walk away. If you attempt to touch me again, I will retaliate. Are you listening to me? Do you understand what I’m saying?” The man made some pained grunt. “Don’t struggle, you’ll only hurt yourself. I’m going to ask again: are you listening?”

“Yes! Goddamnit, you’re gonna break my arm!” he nigh squealed.

“Calm down and stop moving! You won’t hurt yourself if you stop moving,” Jinx reiterated with an unbudging stance, “...Good. There—are you calm enough to hear me out, now?”

“Alright, alright—yes!” he almost yelped.

“Relax. I am not going to hurt you. Take a few breaths. Just breathe for a few seconds. ...Now, in a few moments, I’m going to let you go. Just walk away and we’ll both forget about this. I don’t want any trouble. I have no quarrel with you. Will you do that?”

“Okay—okay, fine. I’m calm. Just let me go!”

Kamala held him for another ten seconds, then eased her grip and stepped away from him. The man whirled, clutching his arm. She recognized the exact moment that he saw what everyone else in the crowd had. Jinx’s eyes held kindled chaos, filling her eyes with a solid, radiant fuchsia. A few motes of pink embers floated from her now-clenched fists, which she held at hip height—readied, but not threatening.

“Let it go.”

The man visibly wilted and staggered back, now hugging his shoulder and pulling in on himself. In the next moment, he’d turned and fled, knocking into more than a few people in the surrounding crowd. After watching him retreat for all of five seconds, Kammie unclenched her fists. The luminescence left her eyes and her fists unclenched.

Raven could see her irises were still charged, and her pupils had widened considerably. Jinx drew a breath and slowly let it out.
“Well... I think that’s lunchtime for us. How ‘bout we head to the pizzeria?”

-=Kamala=-

“Kammie....” Nin began slowly.

Her attention slid to her friend and saw the hesitant look on the other girl’s face. Jinx sighed and saw the crowd gawking unsurely as well. She turned her gaze to Raven, who had since stood—her sitar floated nearby, immersed in darkness. Okay, so maybe the crowd wasn’t on edge due to her display alone.

“It’ll be okay, Nin. Let’s just take a break; we’ll talk some,” Jinx said, her attention on the sitar only momentarily before she looked to Raven, “In the meantime, if that guy does something stupid, could you vouch that I acted in self-defense there?”

“I think,” Raven began quietly, “that you’ll find—at least for a while—that the Metahuman profiling rate is going to drop significantly.”

Jinx shrugged noncommittally and turned back to the frozen crowd. She stared back unblinkingly for several moments, and then cleared her throat, “Show’s over, boys and girls. We’ll be back after some lunch.”

With that said, they all began packing up. Jinx snared her floating sitar and stored it back in her case. With nothing of interest occurring, the crowd slowly began to disperse. In short order, the quartet plus hero took their leave. Her friends would obviously seek to fill their stomachs with pizza and their minds with answers in a single sitting. Kamala feared the latter would be a tall order, if not completely impossible.

~§~END CHAPTER 17~§~

Author’s Note:

Hey, everyone. Sorry for the long delay on this, but there’s been a lot of things going on in my life, recently. Not all bad, either! Got accepted as PA to a trainer, which—while not a higher grade of pay—opens doors to various positions such as team leader, supervisor, trainer, or quality assurance. I’m gunning for quality.

So, while that was good for goals, it did also change my working schedule, which was kinda bleh. However, in dealing with all the new-hires, I also caught a nasty bug... which then turned into a nasty cold. I’ve started a new medication that lowers my immune system, so that just made everything run me over like a steam roller.

All this came just recently after a visit to the ER and several follow-up visits. So... bills, bills, bills! My God, there hasn’t been a moment’s peace! It killed my urge to write for a while and overall productivity took a header. ...Anyhow, I’m finally getting all that shit settled, and now I’m trying to get back on track with my hobbies.

I won’t lie, there were also distractions. For example: Overwatch. Look at all the pretty skins! ...And scramble to get them, because they’re only live during event times. So I’ve been playing that quite a
bit, just trying to get all the skins during the time frame. I’ve got my favorites, and I’ll see about getting the stragglers next year.

Oh, and Diablo 3’s seasonal journey kicked in and I wanted their cosmetics (which, to date, have not repeated). A few things became available in Elder Scrolls Online, but if I’m honest, I’m not too concerned with those. They usually repeat and that’s not a game I play quickly or with any urgency.

That said, let’s jump into the meat of this!

No, I haven’t yet replied to everyone that left me reviews or PMs. I do intend to, and honestly, I may wind up just finishing these author’s notes and then just replying to reviews and comments as they come afterward.

So... Chapter 17.

Finally! We’re back state-side, and your regular programming resumes! Remember when I said there’d be more about Jessie to go over? Well, this sums up Jessie’s hijinks and also provides the necessary opening for all future events with her. You see, many of you have heard quite a bit about “No Laughing Matter,” the once-planned sequel to “To Catch a Raven” and the currently-planned sequel to “Prey Mate.” The story is split between Raven, Jinx, and Jessie. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t primarily focus on Jessie.

With a less-restrictive policy on all things Gotham, Jessie is now going to get some exposure to that which concerns Jinx the most. It’s almost inevitable. If you hear about Gotham, you’ll hear about Batman. And if you hear about Batman, you’re going to hear about the Rogues Gallery, including Joker.

You thought I’d provide a character like Jessie without bringing him into the situation? Oh ho ho... nooo! No, I’m gonna be taking things from everywhere. In the cartoon category, we have the following sources:

Batman: The Animated Series
Batman/Superman Adventures
Justice League/JLU
Batman Beyond
Under the Red Hood

And in the comic series. Jesus, what don’t we have? My short-list is as follows:

Batman: A Death in the Family
Batman: The Killing Joke
Batman: The Dark Knight Returns
No Man’s Land series
Batgirl series

Arkham Asylum: Living Hell

Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth

Sadly, I never went much further than those comics. There’s tons of comics and I only had time to go through those as highlights. I also have games I’ve logged an excessive/obsessive amount of time.

Batman: Arkham Asylum

Batman:Arkham City

No, I did not do the Arkham Origins..., because it was bugged. And the assholes who screwed it up decided to put out DLC to meet their contractual obligations and never patched the game so it was playable. Yeah, thanks, WB Games.

Still, between all that, I’ve got a pretty solid base for Gotham stuff!

Jinx’s crashing was something I haven’t really addressed anywhere, but it is a thing. I’ve written it into her history in a few different spots, but it’s never actually appeared in a story until now. Still, every little bit of characterization helps and this allows me to explore more areas of her past now that it’s been addressed.

Also, Gizmo is uncouth, rude, and standoffish... but he’s loyal. Granted, he’s greedy, egotistical, and prone to losing his temper, but that never overshadows his loyalty to family. When it’s business or the like, he won’t hesitate to stab someone in the back. However, when it comes to his team—his family, you don’t fuck with that. Likewise, when someone stands up for his family (or in this case, also marries into it), that puts you in his good graces. You’ll never hear that from him, but it will show in his actions.

I wanted to depict Kamala’s perspective on this, not just display how she reacts and how her crashes affect her physically, but also delve into the psychological aspect of it all. If it were purely physical, I would have just glossed over it, but this recovery is more mental than anything. With the various trauma she’s gone through with the IMRO and Brother Blood, it’s vitally important that Jinx have a ‘safe space.’ A place where she can feel how she wants to feel without reservation or concern for others. A spot that is hers and hers alone. Being able to shut out the outside world is the only way she can temporarily forget her hyper-awareness and just be.

I kinda struggled with Raven’s letter, if only because I’ve never really had to put something emotionally heartfelt into written paper before. It changes how you speak and things have to be thought out so as not to ramble... which I am extremely prone to do, as you all well know. Also, letters look awful when they’ve got tons of cross-out lines, and that just leaves you starting hundreds of drafts, etc. Bleh. Ever wonder why I’m more at home with some form of word processor where I can edit my writing? But Raven... she’s delightfully old-world. So I had to kinda slog through it.

Kammie has hammerspace. Any mage, technically, has that capability. And in this facet, it’s not even an ass-pull! Whenever I consider conjuration, bindings, and other things like that, I usually like to think through the logistics of it. Binding someone’s soul into an artifact among those sorts of
logistics. This is useful in Raven’s lore when I have to explain things via my system of magic and lore.

Also, it helps immensely knowing this stuff for myself, because I know there are those who would question it all. There’s parts of my Origin novel that will feature this quite heavily, so it’s best to understand my magical mechanics beforehand.

Ah, Mr. Satō... When I began writing this scene, this guy just popped out of nowhere. His appearance was just... there. He was like, a mix between some aging shopkeep seen in some old Chinese martial arts films and Psy. He’s a little on the heavy-set side, and his initial concept was to bring forth this kind of... indulgent, generous bumblebee-esque figure with a fatherly bent. He’s a Japanese national, I think, may have immigrated. He’s very personable, but also professional—very typical Japanese small business. His personality is slightly whimsical and easy going, but also not easily flustered. Seeing Mikron and Baran go up to visit Kamala, you kinda gotta be unflappable.

Mr. Satō looks out for Kammie as much as anyone normal can. I imagine him checking up with her when she goes to head out if she looks sick, tired, or sad... I could even see him having some non-intrusive words of advice when she looks angry or worried. So... yeah, kind of fatherly, but not enough to encroach on Jinx’s personal bubble and trip any of her paranoia.

I struggled with whether or not to give Mr. Satō any true affiliations with HIVE. To be honest, I still don’t know... and I think I’ll leave him ambiguous that way until I either have need of it or simply don’t waste time on it.

The fight that came up was actually a toss-up when it came time to write it. Initially, it was going to be Mumbo. However, the more I thought about it, the more I realized it didn’t quite make sense to have all the dialogue pass between them. Nor could I really see Jinx doing Mumbo any big favors. However, Control Freak is just this side of eccentric enough to be okay with defeat. He’s been captured before, but he doesn’t get all serious about it. Every time you see him, he’s positively gleeful like some wealthy, smarmy Bond Villain. I figured he wouldn’t take a loss personally—either with the Titans or with Hive FIVE. He fully understands that what he’s doing will reach a conflict with some group; in the case of the Titans, he’s counting on it.

He also struck me as the kind of villain that could be honorable to a degree. So if Jinx did him a favor, he’d own up to it. Furthermore, he wouldn’t spit in the face of the one bearing gifts.

That is mostly the reason that Kamala trusts him enough to give him the contraband. It’s a stranger level of ‘honor among thieves.’ He was caught, fair and square (and fair’s fair, as Freak says). It wasn’t even so much of a consolation prize as it was just a gift of camaraderie. Freak is your typical villain, but he’s a person—remember what I said about treating your characters like people?—and he likes to be trusted and respected. Far too many people look at him like a loser and a joke. ...But this is the same man who built a remote he can use to animate things and warp reality. To be honest, they’re probably just lucky he doesn’t have any bigger machinations.

Also, I wanted to keep his penchant for movies and the like, so I threw some bits in there. From the movie aficionado’s aspect ratio to extended director’s cut version, I wanted to make sure I kept Control Freak’s personality intact even as he rambled. His references are pretty blatant, I feel, but I still noted them. All my references in this fanfic are listed on deviantArt, actually, but I’ll throw this chapter’s references out there for you: Silence of the Lambs, Inspector Gadget, My Little Ponies. These ones are overt.

However, there are three paraphrased bits that I decided not to mention. Firstly, there’s a “The Incredibles” reference, speaking of the monologuing. Secondly, there was an “Elder Scrolls” (Oblivion or Skyrim, take your pick) reference made that many of the sneak-builts will recognize
(likely from some guard or bandit with an arrow sticking out of them), “Must have been the wind.” And lastly, during the Seether song, there’s the “Man in the Iron Mask” reference later in the chapter, but it was paraphrased from, ‘I wear the mask. The mask does not wear me.’ These were a bit too obscure to really be a direct reference or quote, rather than merely referential as I wrote it.

Oh, and Raven? Perhaps it’s best if you didn’t provoke the biggest source of your orgasms? Just a thought. Heh.

A bit more introspection unto Jinx’s civilian life, here. I like exploring the everyday facets of my characters, because it’s easy to pick situations and throw your main characters into epic quest lines and play with their powers and how they would match up against situations, obstacles, and adversaries. However, it is much harder to imagine what happens after. After the big quest, is it Happily Ever After? Do they fade into obscurity? Do they become myth and legend? Are they, perhaps, overshadowed by their own feats? Maybe they want to leave the limelight. Maybe they hide away, ensconced in a simple life (like a hermit on a backwater planet or a cook on a submarine). What happens before, between, and after quests and missions...? That’s something that’s a bit harder to explain, but the payout is worth it.

Kamala is the exact kind of person that would use her familiarity with mysticism to utilize her aura to enhance her voice and give it creepy echoes. Heh...

The thing about Raven and this relationship is simple, but it shows itself in different ways than most would expect. Yes, Raven is a private person, but not ashamed or hiding anything about her relationship; quite the opposite, actually—she’s very proud of her mate and pleased with the relationship overall. That does not, however, mean she’s going to go shouting it from the tops of mountains or make public declarations or demonstrations. However, if she does take any actions in public, it is mostly without consideration to the public. Basically, if you’re not Kamala, it’s none of your business.

There was never a point where Raven would actively hide that she was mated, but most people don’t think to ask. With how things have been recently, she’s been thrust into the public eye... but until now, she hasn’t really been close to the public. So now things will move into a more open forum from here on, I believe, simply because Kamnie is out there in the public.

Of course, that’s also a point to consider. Kamala may have to be a little more careful in the future, as I can see being open and accessible to become problematic if people should want to target her or Raven through her. Then again, Jinx has always been paranoid and this is where she’s perfectly justified. She’s made it this far in life, I doubt this will change how she approaches things very much...

You know, before I went into a position of customer service, I wouldn’t have thought that there were actually people out there that were such cliche, cookie-cutter bastards. But it’s true! You can find obtuse, conceited, overbearing, foolish, ignorant, self-appointed people with a sense of entitlement just like this anywhere you go! Not that you really want to go looking, but—nah, don’t worry. You don’t have to go looking for them. They’ll find you! No, really, you can’t escape them.

Jinx doesn’t take shit. However, when she’s out as a civilian and isn’t covered by any sort of local or government laws by contract or protocol when acting as a mercenary, the rules are very different. Considering that she’s also a Metahuman, there’s plenty of case for her to have the book thrown at her if she acts too freely either with her physical prowess or with her powers. Anything she does with her powers could conceivably be construed as aggravated assault—to start with. Yes, it’s shit, but this is the world she lives in.

Fortunately, this isn’t Marvel, where they put out Registration Acts and build anti-Mutant weapons.
Unfortunately, this is DC, where they just black-bag your ass and toss you into Suicide Squads with kill-switches.

Raven’s right, however. While this may not mitigate the Suicide Squads and other such programs, there will definitely be some more cautious creeping across egg shells now that the IMRO was exposed and people are wondering just what their governments are doing—or have already done.

And that brings us to the end of this chapter! Next chapter picks up pretty much immediately after this, but we’ll be summing everything up in the next three chapters! Lots of exposition and summation being done, and a few big moments left! Those will be more... personally important than action-packed.

That said, I’ll close this author’s note up and see you in the next chapter! Of note, with how things have been progressing lately, I may wind up doing monthly updates instead of bi-weekly. I’m going to take it easy on myself. I’ll keep you all posted!

-Lynx

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Prey Mate

by

Lynx Klaw

Chapter 18

~§~

“...love will find its way / Through paths
where wolves would fear to prey...”
-Lord Byron, The Giaour

“Mmm,” Jinx hummed into her slice of pizza. As regulars, they had only to walk in and their order was under way: one non-beef pizza with ham, mushrooms, black olives, and jalapeños. She savored her slice, slowly pulling it away and trailing a long string of mozzarella. “Y’see,” she spoke around her bite, working her mouth to reel in the stretched cheese line into her mouth, “This’s somethin’ I couldn’ get in India.” A moment later, she chomped off the string and savored her bite. Noticing Raven’s somewhat aggravated look, Jinx swallowed before continuing, “Nobody does a Jump City pie like Pizzeria Mafioso. Don Aquila never skimps on those tiny, important details.”

“So, uh... are we just going to ignore what happened back there?”

Kammie raised a brow, “Not really, Nin, but what do you want me to do? Idiots will be idiots.”

“Won’t this make things worse for us, calling attention like that?” Nin asked nervously.

Jinx’s pupils slowly narrowed and her form stiffly stilled, “Is... this because I’m a Meta? Look, my powers are a part of-”

“No—no, Kammie! You know better than that! I’m talking about the part where you practically picked that fight.”

“He’d already picked it half a block away from us; he wasn’t going to back down. There were, like, six different times he was going to take a swing. I practically tiptoed through his decisions and chose the path with the least violence.”

The table was quiet for a moment before Nin formulated the words that stuck in her head. She had a confused expression and Jinx could tell that, somehow, she had utterly lost the violinist.

“You—what? I heard what you said, but that doesn’t make any sense.”
“I second that, what does all that even mean?” Terry inquired.

“Um... which part?”

Darryl chimed in, “Just that last part at the end, most of the middle, and that whole chunk at the beginning.”

Jinx grunted and gave him a withering mock-glare. She supposed she had never really explained how her powers could affect things other than that brief introduction. Her little band never had anything to do with this part of her life. Kammie had meant it when she said that she wanted to open up to them a little more. With everything that had happened recently, there was really no time like the present.

“Okay, remember when I said my powers relate back to probability and chaos?” Triplicate head-bobs followed, so Jinx plowed onward, “I can sense probability. I’m not precognitive—not in the strictest definition of the power. I have no knowledge of ensuing events, but I do receive what I call ‘nudges’ in the right direction. If I need to do something, small or large, I’ll usually get a nudge from Mr. Chaos.”

“Mr. Chaos?” asked Darryl.

“That’s what I call it. It’s a super-sentient entity beyond the Deities, a primordial force of the universe. There are tiers to those forces, but Chaos is one of the main powers—called Urges.”

She paused, sensing that Darryl had another question, “What other Urges are there?”

“Obviously, there’s Order. If you believe in a higher tier, there’s probably the Creator, from which all things flow. Order maintains, but stagnates. Chaos creates, but also destroys. From these counter-balancing features, we derive Time, which goes hand in hand with Space. Once we have progression of Time and volume of Space, we then derive all of existence from them, which includes the Dimensions.

“You know that theory of a different Dimension for every minute shift in decision or occurrence throughout the universe? Well, suffice to say that’s a clusterfuck best avoided—when our lauded ‘heroes’ aren’t poking holes in said Dimensions and causing all manner of crises.”

Raven coughed.

“Anyway,” Jinx continued, “Let’s just focus on this Dimension—our dimension—and the Realms within it. Once there is Time and Space within the Dimension, there can be action at the behest of those entities outside those factors.”

Nin shifted somewhat uncomfortably, “And those entities are...?”

Her mate picked up that one, “Order, Chaos, Deities, and the Agents through whom they enact their will. Deities are outside the effects of Time and Space, but they still require Time and Space to act upon things. Urges like Chaos and Order are not bound by those rules, but rarely act in such a way, because to do so is a reality-shifting event that comes with dire consequences. That’s why they use Agents.”

“Didn’t you say you were an Agent of Chaos, Kammie?” Terry asked.

Kamala paused, taking a moment to finish her slice of pizza. The thoughtful look remained for several moments, “I—how can I put this...? I don’t worship Chaos; I’m a Vaishnavite, and I worship Vishnu and his incarnations as a Deity. That’s where I put my faith, and that’s how my soul will be
addressed...” The others knew she wasn’t finished, but they still had slightly confused looks on their faces. “However, I still serve Chaos within this existence. The two aren’t exclusive... or inclusive, if that makes any sense. I worship Vishnu and seek out enlightenment through my service to Chaos.”

Nin took on a vaguely disturbed expression, “But didn’t you say Chaos is... destructive?”

“And creative,” Jinx rebutted. “Remember, Order stagnates. Keep in mind: this isn’t about good and evil. Life as we know it is a product of Chaos and Order fighting harmoniously. We grow and slowly die, day by day, as our cells divide and break down. This is the action of Time. Through Chaos we grow, and through Order we are preserved. Chaos gives us birth to a new generation, Order sees a majority prevails to continue.

“That’s beyond the microscopic scale, though. If this planet dies, so be it.” Jinx held up her hands to prevent the outbursts she knew were about to come. “Our lives are just a small part of the cosmic universe and this planet isn’t exactly the only one with life on it, y’know. Superman’s planet didn’t make it. Y’know that’s why we have kryptonite? Those’re chunks of his destroyed planet. How’s that for bleak?

“Point is, old things are destroyed, and new things are created. When Order maintains control too long, worlds begin to crumble. On a smaller scale, people become complacent and corrupt. They stifle progression. ...Mind, progression is never without sacrifice. Chaos wills that I enact change in the world. I’ll probably never know just what I’m doing, but I have faith in both my Deity and my Urge.”

Jinx nabbed another slice of pizza and dropped it on her plate, “So let’s get back on topic. My powers are chaotically aligned for probability. I can follow those nudges I mentioned to great effect... and even promote certain probabilities, as I mentioned before.”

“So when you... blew up that building....,” Darryl began leadingly.

“Well, I didn’t actually blow it up. I mean, technically, I could have... but that would have taken a lot more power than I had—and you may have noticed that what I did was kind of a big-ass deal in the first place. What I did was promote every minute weakness the place had and made it extremely susceptible to breakage.” Seeing their blank stares, Jinx tried another way. She pulled a napkin out of the dispenser and handed it to Nin. “Give it a tug, but don’t tear it.”

Nin snapped it a few times for effect. Kammie held out a finger and touched the fabric of the napkin. A dim sheen of pink flashed over it, then quickly faded. “Try again.”

This time, Nin’s light pull had it rent in half and crumble in her hands. The violinist opened her hands and dropped several shredded pieces.

“See, I didn’t destroy it—I just made it easy to destroy. The weather—and those kids—did the rest. As for the other half of my powers... You guys ever played red hands?” More heads nodded, and Jinx smirked. The hex-witch held out her hands palms down and closed her eyes. “Nobody ever played me twice at the Academy. You don’t have to let your hands touch mine, even. Cheat if you like. It won’t make any difference.”

-=Raven=-

She watched as Nin let Jinx’s hands hover about an inch over her own as her mate suggested. Nin
gave some false taps against Jinx’s palms, but the hex-caster never flinched. Furthermore, Kamala always pulled away from an incoming slap—no matter how swift or silent. Nin made a nodding gesture to Terry, implying that they cheat as suggested. He didn’t have any luck by adding in a fifth hand into the game.

Darryl did nothing but watch. After two minutes of watching, he finally chimed in, “So you can sense the probability—the likelihood—that they’ll touch you and react accordingly.”

“’xactly! I don’t know where or how you’re going to try it, but I know that you are. If I get a nudge to pull away, I do. I get nudges more or less specific. Sometimes it’s more of a sudden need to do something, to act more than anything else. Other times, I just... know I have to move in a certain way or that I have to be somewhere or do something very specific—like needing to leave a door open, or knowing I need to reach out and grab something.”

Jinx pulled her hand away and grabbed the pitch-covered pizza silently floating from her plate toward Raven. Securing her slice on the plate, Jinx cracked an eye open at her.

“-or keep hold of it. I’m the thief around here, Raven.”

“You shouldn’t have been able to sense that,” she huffed and reached for another slice from the platter.

“Just because I didn’t get a nudge from Mr. Chaos doesn’t mean I can’t feel you flaring your aura this close.”

As Raven rolled her eyes, she felt Darryl’s search for clarification moments before the question came, “So you knew when you had to do something—or even not do something—to prevent an outright fight with that guy?”

“More than that, I knew when you had to not do something to prevent a fight. I told you there were numerous times when he would have gone swinging for the fences... and the first time would have been if you guys had tried to intervene. He was totally focused on me, and anyone getting in the way he would have only seen as a provocation or challenge.”

“...And that’s also how you managed to work around the Bat... and wind up doing a handstand on his shoulders?”

Kamala groaned and dropped her face into her hands, her voice a plaintive whine, “You saw that?”

“I think all of YouTube saw it, Kammie,” Nin pointed out.

“I am going to kill Seemore.”

“To be fair,” Terry placated, “you fought Batman and weren’t immediately beaten into paste. I’d say that’s an accomplishment. Why were you fighting him, anyway?”

“That’s... a bit, um, personal.” She saw her mate hesitate. Jinx had claimed that the three deserved to know more about her after these years. Kamala had always been circumspect with her other facets around the civilians. However, she could sense Jinx coming to a decision to continue. “I was feeling... helpless. Those children were calling themselves by the numbers the IMRO put on them. They couldn’t—they didn’t have anything else at that point. That fucking hellhole had stripped everything from them. I got them out, but I was worried it wasn’t enough... that I was too late.”

Kamala sat back, crossing her arms. Her irises began to burn brighter as she clutched her biceps. Raven slid an arm around her and clasped Jinx’s shoulder reassuringly. Jinx drew a breath and let out
a sigh, looking away as her eyes misted slightly.

“I fought for so long to stop being ‘3120’ and I wanted to fight for them. But you can’t do that; that’s a fight that has to be done for yourself... within yourself. So there was nothing to do but watch and wait.

“Batman was there, though. And I’ve heard that Batman always had an answer, always had a plan and the gadgets and the sheer, fucking willpower to make things happen. I didn’t like feeling as though I was doing any less with every resource I had at hand.”

“So you fought Batman... to show him you could fight, too—that you were willing to fight, any way it had to be fought,” Nin quietly added.

“That’s—yeah. I mean, it didn’t do anything, but I needed him to see.”

“Batman understands that, Kamala. Intimately,” Raven said quietly, but firmly, “And you’re wrong. Batman doesn’t always have an answer. He’s like anyone else. He has doubts and fears as well, and sometimes the opposition he faces is impossible to overcome. He’ll still fight, though. The man has no concept of surrender—and I think that’s what draws most people to him. He’s just a man, complete with his own flaws and shortcomings, but he stands for more than any one man could ever hope to be.”

“Batman’s not a person, it’s an idea—and that’s not something you can easily ignore or destroy,” Kamala put forward, “Nightwing told me that. After seeing him, listening to him..., I understand his... his mission statement a lot better now.”

“From what I saw, Kammie, what you did for those kids can’t really be measured by time or amount of labor. The media was in a frenzy just trying to get any information—sound bites, video clips, anything they could,” Darryl put forward with a gesture of the crust in his hand, “And I don’t think there was a time in any of those that you weren’t focused on the children. To be honest, they gravitated to you; it was clear—at least to me—that you were an anchor of sorts. If it hadn’t been you, it wouldn’t have mattered who led them from that prison or who sung to them or who destroyed that place. They felt a link to you—they needed that link. It was obvious that no one else was managing to connect to them in the same way.”

“That reminds me,” Raven interjected, “When you’re done playing this evening, we need to make a stop before heading back to the Tower.”

“What’s it like—living in Titan Tower?” Nin queried, and Raven got the sense that Nin understood the previous topic was over and done with.

“It’s like living in any other tower, I guess. Louder, definitely, but also livelier—those aren’t necessarily bad things, but I prefer more... calm.”

Nin blinked, and Raven sensed that had thrown the girl for a curve, “You’ve lived in other towers?”

This new question gave her pause. She knew that her life was definitely different from the average person her age. Then again, her life was bound to be different from anyone she knew here. Her ‘home life,’ as it were, wasn’t anything like anyone’s from conception to present.

“I grew up in a tower in Azarath,” Raven explained, and forestalled the next question, “Azarath is on a different plane of existence. It was a very... quiet place. It was peaceful, if not harmonious. I can’t really say I liked it there. Then again, at that point in my life, ‘like’ wasn’t something I even did. Most of my observations during that time were very factual, with very little emotional value.”
“Why?” Terry asked, and she felt an undercurrent of his anger.

Raven sighed and decided to open up to these three. They hadn’t judged her mate, she had no reason to believe they would blame her for her past. She had made the mistake of hiding herself and her origins from the Titans. She knew now that they would have stood by her even had they known.

“The monks of Azarath took in my mother when she was pregnant with me. They hid her—and me—away from my father.” Raven frowned, recalling the last time she had been to Azarath. “In the end, it wasn’t enough. The mystic, Azar, led them; it was she that raised me and taught me all I knew before I fled here from my father.

“Because my powers are fueled by my emotions, and my father could use my powers as a conduit, the monks of Azarath severed my emotions within my psyche and divided them—thus ultimately locking away a large bulk of my power and making it almost impossible for me to be manipulated by my father’s influence.

“Of course, that didn’t mean I couldn’t feel... My emotions were still there, just very muted and... hard to access? It’s difficult to explain. However, the monks knew this, too. So they taught me to suppress the emotions I did feel, and never to act upon them. That way, Trigon couldn’t use me or twist me into one of his children of pure destruction.”

“That’s-...”

“They were scared, Terry,” she gently interjected, “They were the ones to create Trigon, after all. When they left this realm and created Azarath, they cast off their evil and negativity. The power they used to cast it away gained its own sentience and fed off the negativity they sent with it. That, essentially, was the core of Trigon’s existence. He was literally an embodiment of evil. The people of Azarath had created their own boogey man that would go on to destroy entire universes—and consuming all their power for himself. By the time he returned to Azarath, he was practically god-like in power.

“They were frightened of him... and of me for being born of him. It wasn’t an unrealistic fear, either. I could have easily become that nightmare. The Justice League shares some of that fear. After all, I killed Trigon. I’m more powerful than he had been, and he destroyed realms on a whim.”

Darryl jostled the ice in his empty drink, “I still don’t think that excuses the monks or the League.”

“It doesn’t. I’m not happy with how I was raised or treated... I could have been more; they could have done more—done better. And it was definitely not very bright of the League to ostracize the one person who could have helped them prepare for Trigon. However, I won’t fault them for being afraid. That would be... hypocritical. I was terrified of my father; I spent the better part of my life running away from him, including a good half of the time I spent with the Titans. They taught me that living in fear was no way to go about life.

“So I stood up to my father... and somehow, I did the impossible. That’s probably what worries everyone. If it was impossible to defeat my father, what would it be like attempting to defeat me? To be honest, I’m not sure what it would take to stop me if I decided to do that. More than anything or anyone the Justice League has at their disposal, I’m fairly certain.”

“Hon, Unkindness-”

“Operation: Unkindness was a pre-emptive assassination that had little to zero guarantee of working, Kamala.” Raven reached up and tapped her Ajna chakra, “I’ve thought about the details since you told me of it.
“It sounds very nice on paper. Have Green Lantern and Spectre stifle my powers while Dr. Fate and Zatanna craft a binding artifact to serve as a phylactery. The problem with all of this is that it was a plan of desperation—and desperate plans often have glaring flaws.

“The major problem is that Spectre was only able to disrupt the control of my powers before due to the monks of Azarath having fractured my psyche. Even though I’ve chosen to allow my emotion to remain segregated, we’re no longer at odds. Without my powers disrupted, all it would take is a single, concentrated act to free myself from Green Lantern. Even were Martian Manhunter to join, he has his own problems with psychic overload I could easily exploit.

“Without them to hold me down, there’s absolutely no way they could keep me still long enough to bind me to any phylactery of sufficient power. Consider also, that this Ajna chakra is a focal locus,” Raven said, tapping the gem again, “It’s a cleansed ruby, and honestly rather superfluous; I use it mostly for tempering myself instead of helping me focus my powers. If I can easily fill a ruby’s power with a mere fraction of my aura, what exactly were they proposing to bind me? A purified diamond? Even one of those ancient, pure-blooded, Vampiric spirit-crystals would shatter before I offered even a token resistance.

“They concocted that asinine assassination plot before I defeated Trigon. I’m far too powerful for them to hold, and even if I just stood there and took it, they wouldn’t have been able to manage it—not completely. I would have enough power to obliterate the Earth a hundred times over on general principle even after they’d bound whatever they could of my essence.”

In Raven’s opinion, Darryl was unnecessarily circumspect with his next question, “If it was that pointless and hopeless, why does it make you angry?”

“They plotted my murder, Darryl. That’s reason enough. Their chances of success mean nothing to me.”

“You don’t Challenge a Demon, even hopelessly, and expect a reprieve,” Kamala explained further, “Everything about that situation—coming into her territory, trying to take away her power, attempting to kill her? Those are all grounds for an Open Challenge. In Demonic law—which is largely inspired by Demonic instincts—an Open Challenge means that their mere presence constitutes acceptance of that Challenge. That kind of Challenge isn’t done until the matter is settled completely; there’s no time limit and no restrictions to the methods used.”

“Is there a... ‘Closed’ Challenge?” Terry inquired.

“Nemet Shadur,” Kamala affirmed with a nod, “It literally means ‘Closed Challenge.’ It’s a binding arbitration through combat. They have specific rules—depending on the situation, you may be able to name a champion, but some circumstances require the Challenge be fought directly. The Challenge can go to first blood, to surrender, or to death. They take place before a panel with a defined area, possibly even within a purpose-built arena. There are rules to the combat itself—sometimes weapons are allowed, sometimes forbidden. It depends on the terms of the Challenge, which are usually gone over in detail before the combat begins. ...It’s all very chivalrous, in a way.

“Elab Shadur, the ‘Open Challenge’ is literally an unrestricted battle for supremacy that will take as long as it must to resolve itself. Days, months, years—it doesn’t matter. The Challenge is fought anywhere, anytime both combatants are present and may be won through any means you can achieve it... within reason. There are still dishonorable options in there—such as taking a hostage, using a living-shield, or using multiple combatants. Of course, that last bit assumes the Challenge wasn’t made to multiple combatants in the first place, but that’s beside the point. Open doesn’t mean ‘anything goes,’ it’s still a binding Challenge, it’s just a lot looser.”
Raven frowned, her mind’s eye sensing an aura of respectable proportions, “Speaking of the Daemos... I’m sensing one Nataj, possibly Fir Nataj close by.”

“What’s a ‘Nah-tazh?’” Darryl asked.

“It’s a ranking of Daemos; the tier of Nataj means ‘Greater,’ while the word Fir is a modifying ranking term meaning ‘High.’ There are four—technically five—tiers of Daemos: Lesser, Median, Greater, and Arch. The fifth tier is Arch Lord, but it’s less of a tier and more of a—”

“-big, goddamn glass ceiling,” Jinx interjected, earning a look from Raven. Jinx returned the look with an askance one of her own, “You can’t tell the difference between Nataj and Fir Nataj? The disparity in essence density is like... the size of Darkseid’s egotism.”

“I used to, but ever since my ascension to Scath, it takes a much finer focus for me to tell the difference. Before Trigon, I used my own standing as a scale. Back then, I could reliably tier myself in Olsat Ulrath—that’s a Lower Arch,” Raven added as an aside to Nin before turning refocusing on Kamala, “While that was still no small matter, it was at least comparable. Now, there’s this huge gap and every Daemos feels—…”

“Pitifully tiny?” Jinx suggested.

“...I was trying to think of something less insulting,” Raven admitted with a slight roll of her eyes, “but yes. Keep in mind that you also have had much more contact with the average part of Daemos life than I have. I spent most of my life trying to patently avoid it.”

“But aren’t you a Demon—Daemos?” Nin asked, then blanched, “Shit, was that... racist?” Nin turned to Terry, “Did that sound racist?”

“Anymore than calling the tiny Thai girl ‘Nintendo?’ I dunno, lemme check my Black Man license.” Terry pulled his wallet and glanced at the card. He made a show of examining it. “Looks like I can’t say, I only have ‘Class N - Thug Life’ qualifications to speak on this matter. We’ll just have to rely on our Token Demon Girl for this one.” He turned to Raven before drawling, “So whatchu say, Boo?”

Raven opened her mouth, but honestly couldn’t formulate a response to any of this. Nin shoved the drummer against Darryl, who deftly slid his pizza away from the two while giving them the stink eye. Jinx, on the other hand, burst into a fitful cackle.

Before she could give any explanation one way or another, the welcome bell above the pizzeria chimed. It was both her and Jinx’s instinct to glance to the door. Raven immediately sensed the demonic energy. She surreptitiously slid from the booth, just in case this somehow escalated to a situation where she needed some form of maneuverability. There weren’t many reasons for a demon to seek her out. Point of fact, most of the Daemos she ever sensed steered clear of her. She held them no ill will, but it was most likely a point of etiquette not to approach an Arch Lord without due reason.

The Daemos that entered was female, and glanced around only briefly. Her eyes—a beady, black set with pin-points of bright, fiery yellow—immediately swiveled toward Raven. Then they ticked to her left, focused on Kamala. Those eyes widened, and the woman’s lips peeled back to reveal twin rows packed with needly teeth.

Just then, Kamala turned in the booth and clambered onto the bench, then launched herself over it. The hex-caster cleared the corner of the table behind them, landing in the isle and dashing for the Demoness. Likewise, their visitor responded in kind.
The Demoness swooped down upon Jinx and scooped her up, swinging Raven’s mate around in a fierce bearhug. Raven slowly relaxed from her tension. Obviously, this was an acquaintance of Jinx’s. As they spun about, she studied the Daemos.

From what the demi-Demon could tell, she appeared humanoid for the most part. The Daemos, ostensibly named ‘Jenai’ if she went by Kamala’s exclamation, was dressed in what amounted to a cross-wrap halter bikini and a sarong. The only other piece of real clothing was a pair of open-toed footwraps. The reason for the toeless design was obvious, given the pointy nature of her digits. The hands Raven could see clutching Kammie were the same, with long and sinewy fingers tipped in conical talons that looked suitable for burrowing.

Jenai’s back was a stygian mass of flat-lying, pentagonal scales that overlapped one another. A broad set of them trailed down her spine, and there were large clusters at her shoulders, elbows, and down the back her her thighs and calves. The Daemos didn’t so much have hair as she did more scales—thin like blades of grass that covered her scalp, growing thicker and wider as they flowed back toward her nape, where they merged with the broad, spinal plates.

Beyond the dull black of Jenai’s scales, her general color reminded Raven of pale skin stained by crude oil—neither grey or beige, but some murky spectrum between. Jenai set her mate down and put her long, clawed hands upon Jinx’s shoulders.

“Erkaist, Kamala!”

“Denam, mosen denam—erkaist, Jenai,” Kamala greeted, “Qui se ter kaji’tae quat?”

“Im vestin ter-modelaen’ya ex il ban artres hasanen hal im-os Char,” Jenai responded with a broad smile.

“Roukanai? Im se daeyanet.”

“So daeyan se im-il. Zaj!” Jenai bounced animatedly, “Abel jete, im-kemegil ex ter-os bashor’um!”

“So saying, Jinx tugged her friend toward them. Raven could already feel her discomfort making itself known. Still, she stuffed it down in the face of Jinx’s enthusiasm. She wouldn’t ruin this little reunion, though she was curious what kind of connections Kamala might have with this Demoness that would warrant an invitation to a Clan ceremony...

-=Nin=-

She wasn’t quite sure what to make of the new addition to their growing party. The Daemos’ smile reminded her of things she had seen on episodes of River Monsters. However, the girl seemed genuinely pleasant, so Nin tried not to focus too much on her outward appearance. That was to say nothing of the Daemos’ stature, which was just slightly taller than Raven; Nin, already taller than Kammie, was a full head over the scaled woman.

That said, the pair’s enthusiasm was infectious, and Nin found herself smiling at the two as they approached. When the two were closer, she finally heard the elusive Daemos language that she had heard only piecemeal over the past few months. The two spoke in rapid fire with vowel-laden syllables.
“...esi im se leyard’tae al nol-kainr, valta!” the girl said, pulling up her sarong to gesture to the scanty, high-cut bikini bottoms. Kammie was quick to pull the sarong back into place; that was when she noted that the sarong had several strange symbols upon them, matching a silvery armlet with the same symbols.

“Jenai—jete dai se kretquare jet kam lang...”

The Demoness looked somewhat chagrined, “Ah, kel jete im vendaila.”

“Barkatri are,” Kammie waved away, then gestured to Nin, “Quat: im-os bashor’um... Nin shar al Hemtaga en Sirisopa, Darryl shar al Hemtaga en Maier, esi Terry shar al Hemtaga en Colt. Quan ter shedath treska English kel aretem?”

“Certainly,” said the Daemos with startling normalcy, “It is my honor to meet you, Nin of Sirisopa, Darryl of Maier, and Terry of Colt. I hope that you will forgive my mistakes; your language is not home to my tongue.”

“You’re more eloquent still than most people I talk to on a daily basis, Kammie included,” Darryl said with a small smile.

“Thank you,” said the Daemos, who then turned to regard Raven quietly. It hadn’t escaped Nin’s notice that Kamala didn’t introduce the Titan. After a few moments, she felt something like static in the air; the hair on her arms rose. Then, the Demoness introduced herself, “I am Jenai Kor, spawn of Nirqat Kor and Jalnaf Kor, of the Family of Kor. I hail from the Clan of the Dying Night in the House of False Tongues.”

Just as quickly as the slightly prickling sensation arrived, it disappeared. She didn’t have any idea what that feeling was, but she knew the boys had felt it, too. She also knew beyond a doubt that Jenai Kor had been the source of it. Nin glanced to Raven, and saw the uneasiness there. It was clear even to Jenai Kor, who seemed to pause in consideration of the purple-haired woman.

“I’m-...” Raven paused, and then sighed.

Nin next experienced a strange... pressure all around her that made her feel like her ears needed to pop. In the same moment, a warm breeze washed over her, penetrating through her clothes—through her skin, and settled into an almost thrumming press against her very bones. She felt it seep into her and she squirmed slightly, feeling at once overwhelmed with a fidgety restlessness she couldn’t explain. She watched as Jenai’s dark eyes widened considerably.

“...I am Baelat Scath-” Raven bent as Jenai Kor fell to a kneel, “Don’t—please, don’t. Stand, Jenai Kor. I dislike formalities.” The intangible pressure all around Nin dissipated like fog on a breeze, and Nin took a quiet, deep breath. Jenai Kor hesitantly took the demi-Demon’s hand and stood. There, Raven clasped Jenai’s forearm. The sorceress’ lips pulled almost imperceptibly. “I am Baelat Scath, spawn of Trigon and Arella of the Family of Trigon, semposdaemos of the Clan of Scath in the House of Scath... and it is a pleasure to meet you, Jenai Kor.”

If it wasn’t just her perception, Jenai looked a little faint. She didn’t understand much of what Raven had just said, but she could glean understanding from what she’d heard from Raven herself. Nin recalled earlier how Raven had said Trigon had god-like powers... and had held the title of an Arch Lord—that exclusive fifth tier of Daemos rank; the title and tier that Raven now held.

‘She’s Demonic royalty.’ Raven’s eyes twitched to her, regarding her coolly for a moment. Nin mentally amended, ‘And she dislikes formalities. Understood.’
The pull of Raven’s lips increased marginally as she turned her attention back to Jenai, “Your Clan holds place in the House of False Tongues; are you a deception Conditional?”

“I am, Baelat Scath, but I come here as Envoy for my Clan,” Jenai Kor admitted, then hastened to explain, “I speak now without deception; my words are my honor.”

“I wasn’t worried about your deception—and please, don’t call me Baelat; ‘Raven’ is fine.”

Nin broke in then, almost out of necessity. She needed to make some form of noise to shake off the strange sensations she felt, “Um—can I ask what ‘Baelat’ is?”

“‘Bael’ is a title, similar to our feudal title of Lord or Master,” Kammie explicated, “‘Baelat’ is its feminine version, equivalent to Lady or Mistress. A third, ‘Baen,’ is gender neutral, but fits the general meaning of Ruler.”

“Gender neutral? You mean used for both genders?” Terry asked.

“Kinda the opposite, actually. It’s for when the gender is unknown, or neither male nor female. Daemos aren’t restricted to binary genders. I believe Baen Temershad is a great, demonic Dragon, and—withina Human scope—does not meet the criterion for having a gender. Although, I think it spawned a daughter at some point. And when I say spawned, I mean formed her from its own essence. There wasn’t any pregnancy or anything; it just made her.”

Raven turned to regard Jenai, “You actually walked in on something of a discussion about the supernatural.”

“Super-natural?” Jenai inquired.

“Anything beyond the mundane mortal scope: magic, other realms, other entities, Deities, and other things.”

“But... magic is much a part of the mortal world.”

Raven shrugged, “While this is true, many mortals do not wield any magical prowess... and on this planet, technology has taken such precedence that magic has been incorrectly labeled as fictitious. Most people don’t believe it’s a real force in the world.”

“But they have religions—Kamala told me there are multiple pantheons active here.”

Raven held her hands up and shook her head, “I never claimed to understand that myself, but they somehow segregated great Ethereal beings as non-magical. To be honest, present company excepting, I’m surprised you didn’t get more reaction from the people of our city on your way here.”

“I did garner quite a bit of attention, most complimenting me on my... ‘costume.’ That is a form of armor, yes?” Jenai paused, her expression both confused and contemplative, “I was asked if I was on my way to the... ‘Sandy Eggo Kamikan?’ I apologize, I’m not familiar with the words they used.”

“Everything’s waffles with you Daemos,” Jinx muttered, then clarified, “No, that was the San Diego Comic Con. San Diego is a city very close to Jump City, and they were speaking of a comic-book convention. Some people dress up in costumes—a recreational disguise used to impersonate characters that they enjoy.”

“These costumes... they are more of that non-protective armor you insisted I wear, like this... ah—nol-kainr... the ‘beneath-armor’—that I am not to display?”
“That’s ‘underwear’... and yes, we have societal reasons why we don’t typically show it.”

“But the people I saw along the beach wore less than I,” Jenai stated with a frown.

“And that’s something we’ll talk about later, if you like. But you remember how some of the girls acted in the locker rooms at HIVE when you possessed me?”

“I still don’t understand why your Clan’s females were so focused on covering their bodies in a room designed for dressing and disrobing. Then they tried to court the males, who were segregated in their own locker rooms. It seems entirely more reasonable that, if they were attempting to attract mates, they should have worn less—or nothing at all.”

“Jenai, we’ve talked about that before. In our society, it’s not proper to display yourself without clothes or allow others to see you unclothed outside of certain situations.”

“But the cameras in the locker rooms let them see anyway,” Jenai argued.

“I know that, but—”

“Wait,” Raven broke in, “The boys had spy cameras in the girls’ locker room at HAEYP? And you knew?”

Kamala drew a hand over her face, “It was fine, Raven. Mike wouldn’t have ever done anything with it. It was just some harmless voyeurism. Besides, just to be fair about it, I made him install cameras in the boy’s locker rooms, too. All the boys knew it, too.”

“Kammie!” Nin exclaimed.

“Look, the videos never left the HAEYP intranet and Mike always had ‘em self-delete on a rolling, 30-day window. Only a few boys knew about them, and only three other girls knew. Nobody ever got weird about it.”

“That is majorly creepy in the first place.”

“You kinda had to be there, Nin. Mike would disable them when he went to shower, and my powers always put his cameras on the fritz when I was in the room. ...Although once, for his birthday, I decided to hold back my powers so he could see my class that week. A week later, when I started flaring my power again, he stopped by my room and thanked me for the extra feed.”

“What about the other girls... they didn’t know, but wasn’t that an invasion of their privacy?” Terry asked.

“Maybe? It’s not a big deal among the HIVE Kids—privacy, I mean,” Jinx reasoned, “We’re very close-knit, as I mentioned. We all knew entirely too much about one another as it was. So... yeah, we clothed ourselves and didn’t put ourselves on display, but if someone saw someone else naked, it wasn’t some big deal.

“Angel was probably the most skittish one of us—she had the most... um, trauma. Brother Blood—... I can’t talk about that right now.” Kammie’s voice wavered slightly, and she shook her head and quickly moved on. “The point is... she and Kyd Wykkyd hooked up. He was one of the boys who watched the feed; after our graduation, he told Angel about it. She wasn’t angry about it at all—and wasn’t even angry with me for not telling her.

“That sort of thing is too small and stupid to matter.”
Nin met Jenai Kor’s befuddled gaze. She felt as though they were both just as utterly confused with Kammie at this moment, but from diametrically opposite ends of the spectrum. After a few moments, the Demoness commented on just that.

“...I fear I shall never understand Humans.”

“Yeah, we’re completely mental, sometimes,” Kamala admitted, “Sooo, moving away from that, what brought you here, Jenai Kor?”

==Kamala==

“As Envoy, I come bearing these words: Dorlin Kor, on behalf of the Clan of the Dying Night, grants you—... na,” Jenai paused, obviously searching for the words. After a few moments, she shook her head, “il modelaen’ur ex al kam-then heimaj’ur hasanen en al pagendar.”

Raven immediately translated for both parties’ sakes, “An invitation to the first betrothal ceremony of the season. ...I wasn’t aware that Kamala was that well-connected with a Clan.”

“For her contributions and aid over the years, Kamala is honorarily Blooded. We count her among our people as lorikesh, a Clan sibling. She is accepted into all Clan events.”

Kamala blinked stupidly for several seconds, then finally managed to shake off the shock and asked the only pertinent question, “Whose betrothal?”

“He who is named of Kraeden Kel Denae, Blooded of the Dying Night Clan just this past Blooding Season.”

“No! Krael Denae finally got Blooded?” Kammie almost bounced in her seat, “I knew he could do it! Did he finally take my advice during his Blood-Trial?”

“He did,” Jenai smirked, “and his success was, as you say... ‘epic.’ The Elders said they hadn’t been this taken since Taelin Rah’s Perfidious Truth. I daresay the Elders are frustrated; that’s twice in as many decades that they’ve been fully deceived.

“After three years of Blood-Trials, Krael finally seized his rank. Once Blooded, he became worthy of courtship—and he took immediate advantage. It has been nearly a year of courtship, and a formal betrothal shall be announced at the beginning of the Life Phase, on the first day of Mating Season.”

Jinx was practically vibrating. “Don’t keep me in suspense, woman—who is the intended?”

Jenai Kor gave her an expansive, fang-bearing grin. A second later, the hex-caster gave a squeaking squeal and all but tackled Jenai out of the booth.

“Ter-nalikas!” Kamala enthused while hanging around the Demoness’ neck.

“Ter-denam!” Jenai returned while precariously balancing on the edge of the bench. Finally, the hex-caster released her friend and sat back. Jenai fixed her with an imploring stare, “You’ll come, won’t you?”

“Of course! When is it? I’ll keep my missions clear for that time,” Jinx was nodding, then froze as an addendum entered her mind, “Can I bring a guest?”

“You are an honored member of our Clan, you may invite as many guests as you like. For every
“Bond,” Raven supplied.

“-our bond grows.”

“I’ll definitely be bringing at least a plus-one,” Kamala gestured to Raven, “but...”

Jinx was quiet for a moment, and then regarded her friends. They were merely watching these events unfold, but they did seem very interested. Her mind concluded her machinations and she felt a gentle swaying of Fate’s path from Mr. Chaos. Everything was good for her intentions.

“How would you three like to get some first-hand experience with the Daemos? You’d be traveling to another Realm to view a Daemos wedding. It’s a once in a lifetime chance.”

“I’m definitely interested,” Nin admitted, “I have some vacation saved up, but I’d have to put in for it. When exactly is this happening—and how long does it last?”

“Same here,” Darryl put forward.

Terry nodded, “Oh, I’m there. Bein’ self-employed means I get to make my own schedule.”

“Formal invitations such as this are always given a hundred days in advance for auspicious purposes,” Jenai explained, “The ceremony is only a few hours in length, but there are festivities starting the day before and lasting until the day after. However, most Clans appreciate time to accommodate all those attending any such ceremonies, so they generally ask that those attending arrive three days prior to the events.”

“So six days total so the Clan can get a headcount, and probably one for recovering from the festivities before heading back to work, honestly,” Kammie told Nin, “You’ll want that extra day, just in case you get hung over or something.”

“The last time you reveled in our festivities, you partook of far too much nimajukam. It was good Brenata and Prenasa were there for you the next day.”

Jinx huffed, “It would have been better if I’d at least remembered going to bed with the twins.”

“Despite your inebriation, they had nothing but high praise for your mating prowess,” Jenai assured.

Raven was staring holes into the side of her face so hard she could feel the purple eyebrow creeping upward. Kamala rolled her eyes, “Look, I was drunk and looking for a good time.”

“Apparently, she had a very good time,” Jenai interjected reasonably, then continued, “Shall I then claim yourself and four companions?”

“Ah—well... Actually, it’ll only be three companions.” Kamala reached out and threaded her fingers into Raven’s own. She watched as Jenai’s beady eyes locked onto the gesture. “I’ll also be bringing my daelorisem.”

“You never told me you were betrothed to Baelat Scath!” Jenai said, the Demoness’ fingers fidgeting twitchily. Her eyes made spastic flicks back and forth between herself and Raven.

“We, uh... didn’t—exactly—do the whole betrothal, um, thing. It was more like-”

“Hush, you!”

“You know it is Clan tradition to hold celebration, Kamala. You never even announced your intentions!” Jenai complained.

“I didn’t really have any intentions, Jenai. It just sort of... happened last month.”

Raven appended, “It’s... fine, actually. I’d rather not make a commotion out of it. I am not one for parties...”

“Begging your pardon, Baelat—is not Kamala owed recognition by our Clan for her honored position, not only as lorikesh, but as the esteemed daelorisem of the Daetiran Scath?”

Raven winced and Kamala could feel the slow-flinching cringe through their interlocked hands. The demi-Demon must have just come to the realization that there was no way Jenai would let her wriggle her way out of this. Jinx, having had enough experience with the energetic woman, knew that they were about to be guilt-tripped and steamrolled into co-stars in this celebration. She would have warned her mate, but Kammie also knew that there was no escaping these types of ambushes. In many ways, they were like hugs from Starfire.

“Jenai, it’s Raven. I really don’t like using those titles... And I really, really don’t like-”

Her rebuttal collided against the injured, nigh-pouting expression on her Clan-sibling’s face and promptly shattered into innumerable pieces. She understood Raven’s reservations well; being part of a ceremony was one thing—a tolerable thing. Being part of the main attraction, however, was not copacetic with her introverted mate. Kammie watched as Raven wilted in a hunching motion, her mate clearly trying to sink into a cape she wasn’t currently wearing. Finally, the sorceress’ shoulders slumped into a line of defeat.

“...Alright, I’ll do it.” Raven surrendered and hastily tacked on, “but I’m not making any speeches beyond a general announcement!”

-=Nin=-

“I believe that would suffice to please the Clan,” Jenai Kor conceded, “though they may still be found wanting. The Dying Night is known for their extravagance regarding any of its festivities.”

Nin watched Raven wilt just a little more at that statement. For all this Arch Lord’s being such a big, goddamn deal in the world of superheroes and demigods, it was... humanizing to see Raven had this average side to her. At least she hadn’t formally placed any of this city’s heroes on a pedestal. She had seen enough news clips of the Titans over the years to have seen that they had their own inner workings, their own quirks—had seen them grow from young teens to adults as she graduated high school. She hadn’t known it at the time, but Nin now understood that she had been consorting with the criminal element all this time. Thankfully, Kammie had moved into those more ‘ethical’ ranges of mercenary work.

She sat back, sipping at her drink, just watching the developing conversation. Normally, she would be more active, but this sort of conversation was a little be outside her expertise. Jenai Kor must have noticed the Titan’s discomfort with the celebration, and looked ready to move on. Unfortunately, the Demoness chose the worst way to do so.

“Since you did not announce your intentions, I missed your courtship, Kamala. You must tell me how you courted and mated Baelat Scath—na... Raven.”
Raven and Kammie glanced at one another, and Nin noted how Raven’s cheeks and forehead slowly tinging into a pastel pink.

“Ah, Jenai—we didn’t exactly have a formal courtship. If you want to be particular about it, we spent several years fighting against one another,” Kammie explained, “And to be perfectly blunt, I was a criminal. We committed crimes for Brother Blood—usually whether we wanted to or not. You know how he was.”

Black smoke began to pour from the edges of Jenai Kor’s ink-well eyes, “Did you ever kill him as I suggested?”

“We didn’t. The students couldn’t... but once the Titans—specifically Cyborg—defeated him, we paid a very powerful mercenary to tear him apart and scatter his remains across the world. The HIVE Academy is under new... well, old management. The Headmistress returned.”

Jenai Kor nodded succinctly, “Good.”

“The point is that Raven and the other Titans were the ones that stopped my team from doing too much damage while we were under Blood’s heel. We got to know each other as rivals do. It was only after Blood was gone that we were able to strike out as freelance mercenaries the way I had always intended.” Kammie paused, seeming to consider something while glancing toward Raven. Nin almost missed the minute shrug and then her friend plowed onward, “I wasn’t supposed to know, but some of our missions were a third-party hire for the Titans—I guess because Nightwing didn’t want us to know we were technically working for him. It was okay, though; I went with it just to show that it was all... just business, and there was no personal enmity.”

“You knew Nightwing was hiring you?” Raven asked with a frown.

“The whole of Titans West take off for the polar cap and don’t call in Titans East to cover... and the very next day we get a strangely worded contract for the next two weeks that amounted to ‘protect the city?’ I’ll admit, his link to our client was untraceable, but all it took was some common sense to see him pulling those strings.”

“So you reconciled?” the Demoness clarified.

“Er—not as such. We just sort of... stopped being opponents. I actually hadn’t seen Raven anywhere but on TV for a couple of years. It was only recently that we met in person.”

Nin peeked over the top of her cup, and saw the frustrated confusion work across Jenai Kor’s face.

“You say there was no formal courtship... and you had not seen each other for years. How then did you mate?”

“Well, it kinda started with a chase-”

“You mean a mating chase?” Jenai Kor’s eyes grew wide and excited. Raven had found something extremely interesting about the table surface. The pastel pink on the sorceress’ cheeks had bloomed and was steadily inching its way down her neck.

“Sssort of? At the time, all I knew was there was this huge, inescapable tidal wave of black energy that wanted to crush me into paste. After her aura swallowed me whole, I woke up alive and well in her bedroom. At the time I was a little bit freaked and wound up jumping out a window from the thirtieth floor.”

“Twentieth story,” Raven quietly interjected as though the correction made some difference in the
telling. Jenai Kor must have shared her thoughts on the matter, because she leaned just a little bit forward stare at Raven. Her expression was a mixture of mild affront and disbelief.

An obsidian, smoky slime began creeping up the sides of the napkin dispenser in the middle of the table. Nin pressed just a little further into her seat cushion, her eyes now riveted on the dispenser and the energy slowly stretching over its contours. As the top of the metal box was swallowed, Kammie cleared her throat.

“I guess it was a mating chase, after a fashion, but I don’t think either of us was aware of what was going on. ...Thinking on it, now, I kind of reciprocated and chased her back. Both of those wound up with us in her bed—”

Raven coughed, her face taking on a more burgundy hue. The napkin dispenser began to rise into the air. Kammie absently reached out and pushed it back to the table. Once it was no longer defying gravity, the black aura dissipated from it.

“How does one accidentally initiate a mating chase?” Jenai audibly struggled with the concept even as the words left her lips.

“Not exactly accidental, it just wasn’t a conscious decision.”

Before the Demoness could question it further, Raven finally chimed in, “Jenai, I didn’t know what I was doing. At the time, I couldn’t think clearly.”

Jenai Kor’s eyes went wide with epiphany, “Were you... treska vos’ur? Ter-os kam-then?”

“No, my second.”

The Conditional affected an incredulous indignation, “Did you not know—”

“No, Jenai Kor,” Raven peevishly interrupted, “I did not. I didn’t have anyone to teach me about these things. I merely managed as best I could.”

“But... what did you do during your—... your—kam-then vos’ur?”

“First heat,” Jinx supplied.

“I locked myself in my room,” Raven explained with an edge of finality.

“Impossible—simply touching yourself wouldn’t suffice. The... heat cannot be conquered or routed in such a way!”

Nin watched as Raven’s fist balled, and welled with dark energies. She also watched as Raven visibly restrained herself from banging her fist on the table. However, there was no such restraint from the ensuing outburst.

“It didn’t!” The Titan instantly blanched at her words, then babbled onward, “I-I mean, I didn’t—... I —Black Hells!”

Raven buried her face in her palms, but Nin could see the girl’s face had gone scarlet in comparison to the pale-grey hands hiding it. Meanwhile, the napkin dispenser turned darker than midnight and peeled like a banana. The napkins inside instantly atomized.

“Hon, calm down,” Kammie consoled while caressing Raven’s hunched back, “It’s alright.”

Raven drew in a deep breath. Seconds later, she dropped her hands flat upon the table to reveal a
once more pale visage. There was not even a hint of blush on her suddenly placid features. Nin was
thrown by the sudden and abrupt change in demeanor. Those frigid, amethyst orbs turned to flintily
regard Jenai Kor.

“I don’t want to talk about this,” Raven declared in a monotone that broached no compromise.

It struck Nin, just then, what Raven must have been like all those years ago. She could see the results
of the people of Azarath having fractured this girl’s psyche and conditioning her to repress
everything. It was disconcerting to see, especially after having only dealt with a warmer, more open
Raven prior to any of this. Of course, there had been times when Raven’s tone was a little flatter
when she was concentrating or drier when imparting some tidbit of information. This was far more...
removed.

“I greatly apologize, Baela—Raven.”

“Rae—Raven, come on. Please don’t shut down on me.”

The mystic Titan’s right brow twitched; the only sign that the words had penetrated the icy exterior.
With another long inhale, and an equally slow exhale through her nostrils, Raven decided on a
course of action. “I need a few moments.” So saying, the girl turned into a solid shadow of herself
and stood up, phasing partially into the table. Nin could only stare as Raven then floated upward and
right through the ceiling, ostensibly headed for the roof or higher. Nin’s eyes fell back down to see
Kammie’s concerned expression leveled on the ceiling tiles. Her gaze was then drawn to the curled
remains of the dispenser.

“Is she going to be okay?” Nin hesitantly asked, running a finger over the ornately wrecked
centerpiece on the table.

“Yeah. Her mood might be hard to guess for a little while, but she’ll be fine. Right now, she just
needs to sort her mind out: how she feels, how she wants to feel, how to express it..., things like that.
Things that come naturally—to us. When the monks taught her to repress and ignore, it was a one-
way trip. They never showed her... never intended her to have an ‘on-switch’ for her emotions. She
had to invent that herself.”

“These monks..., they are dead?”

“Extremely,” Kamala informed somberly, “All but her mother, really. Trigon returned, looking for
Raven. From what Raven tells me, he turned their whole realm into a molten, razed landscape.
Everyone there was killed, but Raven assumes he left her mother alive out of spite—to force her to
bear witness to the destruction, his subjugation of Raven, and subsequent overtaking of the Earth.”

“A terrible fate, but I find myself lacking compassion for them.”

“I wouldn’t say that around Raven,” Darryl advised, “She sounded... conflicted regarding them.”

“Maybe, but let’s not dwell on this—Raven is very sensitive to being talked about. And I mean that
in an empathic sense.”

“Ah,” Darryl noised, and the topic ceased to be.

Jenai Kor took this lull in conversation to clarify things, “So your mating... it was a product of her
heat?”

“It could have been anyone, if she hadn’t stumbled across me and sensed my aura. Honestly, it could
have gone very badly for her—not just physically but also in regards to publicity.”
Terry held up a questioning finger, “I understand how that could be bad PR, how could it affect her physically? From you told me, girl’s a powerhouse.”

“That’s exactly the problem, Terry. She could have physically injured several people, possibly killed them, if she hadn’t been focused enough. I was lucky to be able to calm her enough to get her higher brain functions working before she went at me. At least then she knew what she was doing.”

“So... Demonic heat isn’t just a physical state, like with animals?” Darryl clarified.

“No,” Jenai Kor took up the answer, “It is more than a physical need. That alone could be ignored for a time or sated by oneself. Nor is it only in the mind, else Raven would have surely resisted. It is a matter of instinct. It is not enough to sate one or another; all three must be met before the vos’ur will retreat—and only then until the next wave during its cycle.”

“I guess you could say that Daemos are monoestrous, ‘cause their breeding cycles are yearly. They don’t have periods like humans do. As a semposdaemos, a half-Daemos, Raven also lacks a period... so she gets the Daemos breeding imperative.” Kammie stopped, and Nin knew that her friend must have read the nonplussed expression on her face. “Ah, I might have done some research into mating cycles during the whole bit. Anyhow, there’s more to a Daemos heat than just breeding. Daemos need other things to satisfy their instincts. They need to give and receive displays of power and prowess. They’ll engage in nesting or lairing to receive a mate into their territory or mimic the hunting and denning of prey during a mating chase. They also need the submission of or domination by a partner... possibly both, depending. There’s a lot more, but those are some of the more prominent... necessary elements.

“And Jenai’s right; there’s absolutely no denying it. The fact that Raven actually managed to stay in her room during her very first heat is—as far as I know—one of the few instances, if not the only instance, of any Daemos not mating when there were viable prospects.”

Kammie paused, tilting her head to the side. “She did mention to me that she very nearly rammed down her door at one point in her frenzy. Likely, that was the only thing that saved Nightwing from a very awkward situation. Though, knowing what I do of Starfire, she would have been very understanding if she had known what was going on. ...Maybe too understanding. Actually, I’m lucky Raven chose me before she told anyone about her heat. There may have been... offers she might not have declined in her state, yeah?”

“Kori is no stranger to maturation phases,” Raven informed as she approached the table, startling Nin and the boys with her sudden reappearance, “She’s gone through some rather drastic changes herself on her way to adulthood. ...She would likely have offered, as one would help a friend in need. While I’m sure it would have been physically satisfying in the extreme, Kori would not have been a long-term solution to the matter. Her heart has long belonged elsewhere.”

Kamala had been right, Nin reflected, in that Raven’s current mood was hidden under a flatter than usual tone. However, the tone was not so empty as it had been before. Nin felt it more apt to say that Raven was very... composed at the moment. Hopefully, they hadn’t ruined the evening’s mood. She had picked up during a lull in their playing that Kammie and Raven had plans for tonight...

When she glanced at Raven, the girl met her gaze with a steady stare with a slowly raised eyebrow. That was when Nin remembered what Jinx had just told her—about Raven being very sensitive to people talking about her... It apparently extended to thoughts, too, as this was the second time that Raven had responded to something she hadn’t verbalized. Nin rolled her eyes.

“Well, I think that’s just about our lunchtime,” she claimed, shuffling Terry out of the booth before standing herself, “Will you be sticking around for our playing, Jenai Kor, or do you have other—um,
Clan obligations?"

“My assignment was to inform Kamala of the upcoming celebration, but this is also a matter of opportunity for me. I am free to attain any power I can while here, and I do not need to return immediately. I shall accompany you to your performance, then perhaps check out this... San Diego Comic Con. I believe I could acquire quite a bit of power there.” Jenai then frowned, “And if I may ask... what is a ‘sandslash?’”

~§~END CHAPTER 18~§~
Pizzeria Mafioso is another one of my plot-bunny creations. It just... popped in there. Here’s an second generation Italian-American whose family immigrated to the US. The family had struggled, but made ends meet with military stipends, compensation, and allowances. Aquila Alesci always wanted to start his own business, rather than become a soldier; and so, rather than enlist, he instead opened a restaurant. That didn’t mean he didn’t learn anything from his family of Joes...

At first, it was named after his eponymous Aquila’s Pizzeria... and it remained that way until two made men presented the restaurant. They shot their mouths off and dropped the name of their boss—who Aquila had never heard of, because he didn’t have any dealings with the seedy side of Jump. When they got uppity, and tried to extort him, he defended his business with a pizza bubble popper and heat sink.

When it was over, one man was unconscious, and the other bled from multiple punctures from Mr. Alesci’s tools. He got right in the man’s face and demanded the man call his boss and put it on speaker-phone. Words are had between the owner and the boss, whom he asks what kind of practice it was to roll a fellow businessman just trying to make ends meet. He then forces the injured made man to explain himself to his boss.

Impressed with Aquila’s forthrightness, the boss comes down to meet him the next day at noon. He instructs the conscious troublemaker that both made men are to get themselves patched and clean up the mess they made at the pizzeria. By mid-morning, repairs had been made and nobody could tell there had ever been any trouble.

Don Spada met with Mr. Alesci and dined at the fixed establishment. Aquila, wisely, prepared the best pies he had ever baked and had a full spread of sides and for the Don, Underboss, and Consigliere.

The Don is impressed and gives the restaurant his endorsement along with an assurance that no trouble would come to him for his defense of the pizzeria. Furthermore, he wished to recommend this place as a neutral zone. Over the next few months, Aquila saw several Dons from other Families who had dealings with Don Spada. The story of how he met Don Spada became somewhat notorious.

All this heralded a change in the name of Aquila’s business, as the man simply couldn’t help himself. He renamed the place to Pizzeria Mafioso. The various Dons jokingly but honorarily named him “Don Aquila.”

And so things went well, right up until he meet a special group of mercenaries hired to resolve and issue with some Jump Rogues interfering with the organized crime business. They were there to get their assignment from Don Spada and end a thorn in his side that had been prevalent for the past six months. Jinx, Gizmo, and Mammoth took care of their problem in only two days. Their extreme proficiency right terrified a good number of the Families, but Don Spada just paid them and gave HIVE exemplary feedback.

Ever after, the HIVE Five likewise claimed Pizzeria Mafioso as one of their favorite restaurants. None of the Dons wanted to tell them to shove off, which was wise—because Jinx had never interfered with their business, and nobody was looking to make an enemy of her. Furthermore, Jinx was charming to Aquila; she her civilian friends became some of his favorite customers.

There was just... never any good place or good reason to put this level of detail about the restaurant
anywhere in “Prey Mate.”

And so... that amusing divergence aside, we see more explanations of Jinx’s powers. Of course, the trio is always full of snark, and this is one of my favorites scenes with them.

This, of course, leads to a breakdown of the magical world. (And ohhh boy, strap in for this one...)

The fact that Jinx knows about something above the Deities says something major. Yes, she understands that her powers come from Chaos, but not as an element of chaos, but Chaos itself. This, in turn, brought her to a broader understanding of the universe and multiverse around her. In general, if you know of these things, you are automatically of a higher tier of understanding than your average mage. There is a point of difference between knowing of these forces, and intrinsically working within said forces.

It’s the same with Jinx having knowledge of Raven having turned time back after Trigon’s primary and secondary emergence... That’s not to mention her knowledge of the dimensional Crises. Not all her knowledge came from those Cadmus files—and that’s what worries a lot of people.

I know there’s a whole level and hierarchy to the DC universe and the Source, Chaos, and Origin. When the Source—having become self-aware—created the Creator, Synnar, who was empowered with the Demiurge, both Urges of Chaos and Order were utilized (at least by my understanding). Now, I won’t say Kamala knows about Synnar... but most people of an enlightened mind are at least peripherally aware of the Source and the Urges. Does Kammie know about the Demiurge? No—that goes into a level of understanding about the nature of creation by the Source that might escape her.

This also precludes her knowledge of The Presence, Elaine Belloc, and Michael Demiurgos (with the Demiurge inside him). This is just as much as her lack of knowledge of Vishnu. Because who can truly know of the Supreme One? Sure, supernatural knowledge comes with a little look-see into a lot of the world’s workings... but there are limits. She only has a vague, conceptual image of all this and how it interplays. They physics—how all these epic powers formed the world—of creation and reality, however, she has a pretty firm grasp on. This boils down simply: the what is easier to understand than the who, the how, or the why.

Now, knowing about the Anti-Life Equation might not be so out there for her, but that’s the kind of thing she would stray wayyy away from. She doesn’t know and doesn’t want to know anything more; probably didn’t even want to know it existed.

As Jinx said herself, she enacts herself with regard to higher tier of power... but at a lower playing field. She’s perfectly happy not working on those higher playing fields, it’s not for her—and it’s too much responsibility.

Speaking of knowing, she knows about Lucifer. He’s so ostentatious that it’s hard not to know about him. She’s also wary of him—as many are—because he plays on those higher playing fields and is one of those higher tiers of power. So, while she and plenty of people know... few will want anything to do with him.

Hey, aren’t we just learning tons about DC lore today, huh? Heh... I’ve had a lot to say already and we’re still in the first POV of the scene! Don’t strain your eyes, folks, there’s plenty more to come...

This leads us into the demonstration of Jinx’s power! I’ve been wanting to do this for a while, and was thrilled to find space to fit an explanation to the trio of Jinx’s powers, just so they could understand the power that Kamala lives with every day and how it plays into just about every facet of her life.
So here we see how Chaos, probability, and promotion of unlikelihoods work into her powers. It’s not properly to say that her Hexes cause wide-scale destruction as they do provide the chance of wide-scale destruction. Yes, her hexes have some minor inertia and can cause forceful impact... which, honestly, is usually enough to start at least part of that destruction. Jinx works on a very domino-effect level. If she gives something a little *nudge*, usually the whole infrastructure will fall and fall like a house of cards.

So this next part revisits Kammie’s experiences back in India and with Batman, which I really liked, because it opens up the other side of her life to Nin, Terry, and Darryl. It displays why she’s had some quirks, why she acts certain ways, why she was private and reticent about sharing aspects of her personality or life with them. She was just beginning to broach the topics before she left for India... and a lot has happened since then, even in a short amount of time.

A large chunk of herself was put on display for the world—including for her friends. So now she has an opportunity, however unwillingly forced upon her it was, to bring them even closer to understanding her as a person. Not just Musician Kammie, Paranoid Kammie, or Friend Kamala, or Witch Kamala, or Metahuman Jinx, or Mercenary Jinx... But a step closer to showing them the more of Kamala Malti as a whole.

Speaking of getting to know people, we also have a bit more face-time between the trio and Raven. I really like this, too, because Raven doesn’t have a lot of relations outside of heroes, villains, mercenaries, and vigilantes. This is likely by design, as I imagine that she’s always felt distant from the average person—perhaps even had an idealized, romanticized, and also critical, cynical view of the ‘average person.’

Meeting people like Nin, Terry, and Darryl gives her a means of immersing herself in that without worry of close-minded bigots or extremely poor reactions, because they’re willing to give Kamala and her the benefit of a doubt, to look upon them as people rather than their working personas as Raven the Titan and Jinx the Mercenary.

We also revisit *Operation: Unkindness* here in slightly different terms than we have been throwing around before now. Yes, it’s not a good plan... and yes, it could do some damage. But here’s the thing. This plan was put together very early on and quickly, as few of them truly knew what it might take to resolve the threat of Raven and Trigon’s emergence. They’re trying to stop a tsunami by building a small dam and plugging the holes with their fingers.

From my exposition above, you’re perfectly aware that there *are* such creatures that could stand up to Trigon and Raven’s combined power... but those power are likely to cause untold collateral damage. See: Lucifer obliterating the House of Silence in Hell, ‘destroying’ (maybe?) billions of souls by his presence. See: Trigon obliterating entire Universes. See: lots of things in DC that wind up destroying parts of/all of the multiverse...

Oh, hey, did I say we were done with exposition? Nope! Whole chapter’s like this. Welcome to a glimpse of my Daemos and the Daezurev’s magically-binding system of lawful Challenges! The Challenges are very important, and you get to see even more exposition on this if you look up the little blurb I was/am writing on deviantArt, “Behind Pride.” In it, Raven (accidentally on purpose) takes something Arella says the wrong way and uses it as a launchpad for being a huffy, angry Demonchild.

Furthermore, at the end of the story, there’s a proper Closed Challenge where Raven fights another Daemos mano a mano. The rules precluded any of the other Titans joining the fight. It didn’t make a difference. One doesn’t Challenge an Arch Lord idly...

This next part goes into more on my system, but I figured I’d leave you guys with at least a scale so
you could understand the levels of power we’re discussing. We’ll start from the top, and work our way down to the least powerful Daemos:

**Seiljun** – God (compound word, lit. “beyond sapient”)

**Daetiran** – Arch Lord (compound word, lit. “forever overlord”)

**Fir Ulrath** – High Arch

**Ulrath** – Arch

**Olsat Ulrath** – Lower Arch

**Fir Nataj** – High Greater

**Nataj** – Greater

**Olsat Nataj** – Lower Greater

**Fir Durjena** – High Median

**Durjena** – Median

**Olsat Durjena** – Lower Median

**Fir Gravech** – High Lesser

**Gravech** – Lesser

**Olsat Gravech** – Lower Lesser

**Krimak** – Daemon Fauna

**Limeni** – Mortal

Now, I usually don’t bother going all Dragon Ball Z on things and assigning power levels to things, as I have better descriptors and explanations of their powers and abilities. However, if we were to
assume those styles of power, I do have quantifiers for what qualifies one as a certain level of power. This isn’t about size, mind. It’s based on the aura, and how densely the energy pervades that aura. That said, let’s get some numbers!

In the beginning, you take the level and take it to the power of itself.

Demonic Fauna—the Demonic beasts—would be 1. Taken to the power of 1, it equals—you guessed it: 1.

Thusly, 3 to the third power is 27. 27 is a standard Lesser.

Humans and Mortal Creatures I decided to put at a range between 0.5 and 0.5 to the power of 0 (which is, again, equal to 1). Yes, that means that some Humans are equivalent to Demon Beasts in power.

This isn’t exactly as far-fetched as it may seem. Most Demon Beasts at that rank (below Lower Lesser) are just as vulnerable to normal damage as mortal beings. Some may even be mortal—not having an indefinite lifespan.

However, consider a Shark, a Grizzly Bear, and a Tyrannosaurus Rex. All of these are mortal creatures... but a Human versus a T-Rex or a Grizzly or a Shark? Generally you can see the problem with a Human thinking of taking on any Demonic Beast. However, with weapons that we have today... we could tear some Demon Fauna to shreds (imagine a family of grizzly bears charging a .50 cal M-60 chain gun. Yeah, not much competition; big gun wins).

So... here’s that list again with numbers assigned:

**Seiljun** – Deities = minimum requirement of $1,000^{1,000} = 1.e+3000$ (So the Gods sit comfortably with 3 G’s of zeroes on them.)

Levels 101 through 999 are just developing levels of an Arch Lord’s power; herein you find powerful Arch Lords and Minor Deities—which may not be mutually exclusive terms, here. (The same applies to ensuing gaps between lower levels.)

**Daetiran** – Arch Lord = minimum requirement of $100^{100} = 1.e+200$ (A googolplex!)

**Fir Ulrath** – High Arch = $50^{50} = 8.881784197001252323890533447266e+84$ (Move 84 decimal places to the right. This is the last level before hitting Arch Lord)

**Ulrath** – Arch = $25^{25} = 8.881784197001252323890533447266e+34$ (Move 34 decimal places to the right!)

**Olsat Ulrath** – Lower Arch = $15^{15} = 437,893,890,380,859,375$

**Fir Nataj** – High Greater = $10^{10} = 10,000,000,000$ (10 billion, for those not counting the decimal
places at this point)

**Nataj** – Greater = $9^9 = 387,420,489$

**Olsat Nataj** – Lower Greater = $8^8 = 16,777,216$

**Fir Durjena** – High Median = $7^7 = 823,543$

**Durjena** – Median = $6^6 = 46,656$

**Olsat Durjena** – Lower Median = $5^5 = 3,125$

**Fir Gravech** – High Lesser = $4^4 = 256$

**Gravech** – Lesser = $3^3 = 27$

**Olsat Gravech** – Lower Lesser = $2^2 = 4$

**Krimak** – Daemos Fauna = $1^1 = 1$

**Limeni** – Mortal Creatures = 0.5 to $0.5^0 = 0.5$ to 1

Now, technically all of these are *minimum* requirements, so that *Fir Durjena* level *starts* at 823K, but can easily surpass a million... several millions, in fact, before they hit the next tier of Daemos, *Nataj*, at almost 17 million.

Consider how that plays into the description given here. Raven has difficulty distinguishing the difference between 387 million and 10 billion... So! Yeah, I’m pretty sure we’re well beyond scouter-crushing reactions, Vegeta, you don’t even wanna know what it says about Raven’s power level.

Raven *used* to be above 437 quadrillion. Now she’s above a googolplex. This essentially qualifies her not only for Arch Lord, but also as a minor Deity: Scath of the Church of Blood.

I absolutely love Terry for being an absolute smartass. But he also smooths over issues in a way only he could in these kind of situations and get away with it. Comes with being a *Real* Class N. Does what he loves, loves what he does.

And... I know shortening a name from, say, Robert to Bob is called a diminutive. But what is it called when you lengthen name like Nin to Nintendo? I still don’t have the answer to that.

Hey, everyone! Remember when I first mentioned that Kamala spent two weeks accidentally possessed by Jenai Kor back in Chapter 13? Well, here’s that Chekhov’s Gun! Jenai is a Daemos created specifically for Prey Mate; that is, to date, she has not showed up anywhere else. Unlike Admiakita, Lukamit, and Kera—who all have ties to one another, and usually come with mentions of
one another—Jenai is fairly new and doesn’t have much interplay in my worlds.

Before I get too far into things, let me go ahead and translate the Daemos stuff for the whole chapter here:

[Start of Translation Stuff]

“Erkaist, Kamala!” – “Greetings, Kamala!”


“Qui se ter kaji’taequat?” – “What are you doing here?”

“Im vestin ter-modelaen’ya ex il ban artres hasanen hal im-os Char,” – “I come to invite you to a very important ceremony with my Clan,”

“Roukanai? Im se daeyanet.” – “Truly? I am honored.”

“Al daeyan se im-il. Zaj!” – “The honor is mine. But!”

“Abel jete, im-kemegil ex ter-os bashor’um!” – “Before that, introduce me to your friends!”

“Ka, ka—vestin!” – “Yes, yes—come!”

“...esi im se leyard’tae al nol-kainr, valta!” – “...and I am wearing the beneath-armor, also!”

“Jenai—jete dai se kretquare jet kam lang...” – “Jenai—that is not something that one shows...”

“Ah, kel jete im vendaila.” – “Ah, for that I apologize.”

“Barkatri are,” – “Forget it,”

“Quat: im-os bashor’um... Nin shar al Hemtaga en Sirisopa, Darryl shar al Hemtaga en Maier, esi Terry shar al Hemtaga en Colt. Quan ter shedath treska English kel aretem?” – “Here: my friends... Nin from the Family of Sirisopa, Darryl from the Family of Maier, and Terry from the Family of Colt. Could you speak in English for them?”

Kraeden Kel Denae means “To Claim For Victory”

“Ter-nalikas!” – “(I) Congratulate you!”

“Ter-denam!” – “(I) Thank you!”
Nimajukam is a compound word of “nima jukam.” Nima means cold. “Jukam” is a portmanteau of “jugat’tae kam,” meaning killing one—or killer. Thus, the name of the wine is cold-killer. As its name implies, it burns on the way down and toasts you on the inside!

[End of Translation Stuff]

Jenai Kor is a deception Conditional, one of two I’ve written (excluding those who merely play extremely brief cameos). The other is Taelin Rah, whose story you can find in my deviantArt scraps, self-titled. If anyone wonders, it’s icon/thumbnail is the simple design on a white background; the design is Bael Temershad’s symbol. As an Arch Lord, much like Scath’s S-shaped symbol, this one is a very glyphic depiction of a dragon (Temershad is a Daemos dragon). As with Scath’s glyph, Temershad’s glyph can be used in reference to it for various purposes, including Summoning, Binding (hah!), or Scrying, etc.

Both Jenai and Taelin belong to the Clan of the Dying Night, which is one of several deception Conditional Clans—though a prominent one—within the overarching House of False Tongues. The House of False Tongues contains most of the deception Conditionals. The House of Five Truths contains most of the passion Conditionals, including Adimakita (Clan of the Watching Eye) and Kera (Clan of Answering Blood). Watching Eye itself is an offshoot of Clan of Answering Blood, separating for purposes of spreading the out the primary Clan to prevent overpopulation. Answering Blood and Watching Eye have very close ties, as bloodlines pass down between the Clans (such as the Family of Jalir, which Addie and Kera’s ancestry). Lukamit is an orphaned truth Conditional that was adopted into the Watching Eye.

...And look at that ‘little’ detour. Back on topic!

Here we have a proper Daemos greeting. Remember what I said back in Chapter 4’s author’s note about flaring one’s aura? If not, you can search for “flaring” at the end of Chapter 4. When I said “we’ll get into that more later—much later,” that is now. Heh.

It’s considered polite to flare one’s aura; it’s a method of greeting. Now, typically, one one do this aura flare quite a bit earlier, but Jenai isn’t in a Daemos territory in the Daezurev. As this is essentially unclaimed territory, there’s nobody to greet—and doing so may, in fact, draw the wrong attention. So meeting out in ‘the wild,’ she would only flare her aura like this in the presence of another Daemos or someone warranting such a display.

Raven has never been treated like royalty by anyone... save for the Church of Blood, up until it came to light she was opposed to acting in Trigon’s favor. Then enmity began for a few years before she killed Trigon... and then they instantly began sycophantic worship of her as they had with Trigon. All in all, not a good experience being exalted.

So yeah, Raven dislikes formalities. Also, because the Monks of Azarath were also a somewhat somber people, they didn’t do a lot of celebrations that weren’t, y’know, rituals or rites of passage or something. This is in addition to her nigh-on trauma surrounding her birthday. So! Once again, as it’s been stated in various fics of mine: Raven does not like parties, large gatherings, celebrations, birthdays, holidays, ceremonies, dances, festivals, tributes, dedications, or religious assemblies.

Another little snippet on my deception Conditionals: “I speak now without deception; my words are my honor.” They will use this exact phrase to express when they are telling the truth and need that fact to be clear. This is a phrase taught to and known by all deception Conditionals. It’s not
magically binding, but it could be. And ethically, it’s tying their words to their personal honor and the honor of their Clan... meaning lying at this point would be a grievous insult.

Deception Conditional Clans have a constant game of lying going. It’s how they teach their young to do well in their deceptions out in the world. However, there are some things they never, ever lie about. You never lie about something that does affect anyone’s honor: so you never lie about the outcome of a Challenge or make false accusations (caveat here, explained in a moment). You never, ever lie in matters of the heart—a deception Demon will never have a false relationship or seduce for any other reason than that seduction or to start a relationship. It all ties back to one’s honor.

Now, that caveat: In the eternal war and jockeying for power that is part of Daemos society between the four Archlords... false accusations made in another court or clan are used as part of subterfuge. Yes—these things are allowed, and said deception Conditional may never reveal that they are a deception Conditional and basically make a mess of their opposition, letting them destroy themselves from the inside. That’s the power of a deception Conditional, to sew havoc among their enemies and get stronger for it.

Daemos don’t have a term for ‘supernatural’ because everything in their plane of existence is just natural to them. Ethereal, Material, and Metaphysical are all just one big mush of reality for them.

Remember folks: Daemos don’t have a nudity taboo. All clothing is armor—in one aspect or another. Even if it appears decorative and impractical for protection, it will have certain requirements. If it’s just non-combat clothing, then it will still show heraldry. Heraldry is extremely important; it shows House, Clan, and Rank. If they are still considered children—that is, if they aren’t Blooded—the will have no Rank insignia. This visually allows someone to see your affiliations and rank. In addition to an aura-flare, it will give someone the amount of information needed to properly address a Daemos without insulting their station, Clan, House, Archlord, or (in the case of a child) give them too much leeway or responsibility.

So Jenai doesn’t really care if anyone sees her body, so long as they also respect what shows on her heraldry. Nothing else matters to her. Speaking of seeing bodies...

Here’s a story that’s been mostly consistent in just about any Titans story I write: Jinx and the infamous cameras incident(s).

The events unfolded pretty much exactly as explained here. This is a perfect illustration of the HIVE Academy family. It’s not about privacy, prudishness, or some misguided sense of belonging. Almost all the HIVE Kids are outcasts or otherwise ostracized in one way or another. With such a disparate and varying group, there’s no real ‘fitting in.’ For this reason, there’s practically no expectations or normality to base a. They also have no real need for secrets or shame. In a group with no real defining feature besides cohesiveness, they don’t have a need for making people genuflect to any customs or preconceptions. This, of course, leads us to the crux of the whole thing. With no shame, no conformity, and a casual acceptance of most things, there was no need for anyone to lie. Secrets were less things that were hidden and merely things nobody had asked someone about before.

Instead, they follow only three rules: Honor, Loyalty, and Respect. They don’t strictly operate within the law, or if they do, it doesn’t matter—obedience to rules and regulations is incidental. Likewise, so is the breaking of them. If you are part of their group, then you are as “in” as you’ll ever need to be. You don’t have to change or hide yourself, you don’t have to worry about someone coming down on your for any aspect of your life. They’ll take you as you are. However, they demand the same in
Jinx went over the premises already:

1. Family comes first, always and forever.
2. Trust one another, and be trusted.
3. Protect one another, and be protected
4. If someone fighting one of us, they’re fighting all of us.
5. When threatened, never fight fair, never hold back, and never give anyone a chance to hurt you or yours.

Because of these three codes of conduct and five rules, everyone worked well. Even when arguments occurred, there was always a line drawn at how those arguments took place. They also knew what to tell and what not to tell to the teachers and, more specifically, to Brother Blood. They would cover for each other, and work to keep the peace.

Mischief in a system like this is much less weighty or damaging. Pranks are expected, but not malicious. Minor destruction of meaningless things, jump-scares, and that sort of thing would be average, but contained and never personal. After all, they had to stay strong and survive this situation... but they also needed to lighten the mood from time to time. The rumor mill probably wasn’t a thing in this little world of HAEYP during those years. If someone wanted to know the truth, they asked and got an answer.

So, these videos... nobody would dare post them online. Nobody would dare use them to embarrass or manipulate anyone else. Nobody would use this for enjoyment at the expense of someone else. The girls were never in any danger from the boys or being taken advantage of. Yes, the boys enjoyed the view, but it’s a view provided by HIVE Kids, on HIVE Kids, for HIVE Kids—and most importantly, not against HIVE Kids.

In a strange way, it also served as its own form of protection. With so many boys watching the girls... every scar, every cut or scrape, every bruise would be visible. Whether it’s from training or Brother Blood or something else.

If some girl showed up in the showers injured, crying, sick, or even just looking off, they would have seen it. And those boys would immediately be hunting some answers. You didn’t want to be in any of those answers. Once Jinx had Gizmo install cameras in the boys’ locker room, the same would have been true there, as well.

You didn’t get a chance to become an addict in HIVE. Aside from the various teachers and trainers being fairly strict, you had your classmates, your family. Track marks or other telling signs of substance abuse would have been picked out in an instant. The HIVE Kids were their own security system, and they liked it that way.

Quite frankly, I don’t think this kind of thing would have worked anywhere else. This little microcosm in my story, and the way in which things were handled and experienced, wouldn’t have worked out anywhere else. The chances of someone breaking the strict class-only restriction would have been exceptional. However, due to their shared experiences with Brother Blood, they clung to one another and nobody could think of anything worse than drawing the Headmaster’s attention if something somehow got out.

Even afterward, once Deathstroke the Terminator had killed Sebastian Blood, that close-knit
mentality remained. Furthermore, they began passing it down into the newer students of the HIVE Academy. Now... the thing about the HIVE Alumni, as they exist now, still keeps with that microcosm. The further removed from the events that settled them into this situation, the less honed this feeling of solidarity will be.

So, as I mentioned, even a few years down the line, I don’t really see the ability for the ‘cameras incident’ to be something repeatable with the same level of discretion or conscientiousness. Jessie’s class, even the newer students admitted like Charcoal, V, and Vipin... there’s likely to be more team-based loyalty than school-wide. I’m not even terribly sure that’s a bad thing, honestly. Sure, that level of trust is a good thing, but what it took to create it—Brother Blood’s fear-mongering and abuse—is not an acceptable measure. This is not one of those ends justifies the means situations.

In summations, it’s not something Jinx can easily put into words to describe why something like voyeurism doesn’t even register on the list of things that bother her. Because it was family, it would never trigger her paranoia. Without any threat, there was no reason for her to feel insecure.

Y’know this author’s note is about half as long as the chapter, now?

Here’s plot-bunny feed for a future event! Here we have the invitation to the Clan for the betrothal ceremony. It’s likely, when everything is said and done, that those joining the ceremony from the Material Realm will be: Nin, Terry, Darryl, Baran Mikron, Dick, Victor, Koriand’r, Gar, Melvin, Timmy, and Teether. Arella is possible, but I’m still up in the air with that; I don’t know how far her trauma would go in the presence of demonic ilk other than Trigon.

Jinx isn’t a Daemos, but she’s been honorably Blooded by the Dying Night Clan. That gives her the same rights to the traditions as any other Daemos of that Clan. One of the Dying Night’s traditions is their focus on lauding accomplishments and celebrating relationships. As I mentioned earlier about the Deception Conditionals, there are certain things that one does not lie about. Relationships are one of those, and the Dying Night Clan takes that one step further. In a strange dichotomy for a Clan of Deception Conditionals, they celebrate the truth of a relationship. This begins at the courtship stage, but it’s mostly just verbal encouragement—no real celebration yet. For this reason, during courtship, it is customary of the Dying Night Clan members to declare their intentions. It’s important for two reasons:

1. Deception Conditionals are, to a one, introverted and somewhat shy. This nature helps them in their secrecy. Declaring one’s intentions is flying in the face of that, proclaiming the one they are courting as worth an overtly spoken truth.

2. In making their interest public knowledge, the Clan can show their support and share in this joyous time. It also shows respect to others within the Clan by allowing them to be part of your relationship.

Where Deception Conditionals are concerned, this aspect is very important to the Dying Night Clan. All Deception Conditionals use the same style of “king of the hill” game of lies to advance the Clan’s prowess and to determine rank and standing within the Clan. The Dying Night Clan is a very powerful Clan of Deception Conditionals... which means they are very good at deceiving—both inside and outside the Clan. This can and does bring about suspicion and competitiveness. In order to counteract any bad blood that may arise of this, they share certain inviolable truths.

If the relationship progresses to a betrothal, then the actual celebration is set. Raven has essentially skipped them both past the announcement of intention. This is the particularity I spoke of—if you’re going to court one of the Dying Night, then this announcement is important, even if it’s not part of your own Clan’s traditions. This, then, engenders respect to the Clan whether or not you’re a part of it, yet. Kamala was owed this as an honorary member of the Clan. However, the Clan also
acknowledges that this isn’t exactly how things are for the mortals of Earth, and that if Kamala were
to date another mortal, there would probably be no declaration of intent.

For this reason, both Raven and Kamala will get a pass on the intent to court... However, they’re not
going out of the formal declaration of their betrothal (even though it is retroactive). To do so would be
to deny the Clan the chance to show recognition and support. Thus it could also be construed as a
lack of trust.

Raven is reluctant, but not unwilling. Jenai isn’t fooling anybody, but she is insistent and Raven
knows that Jinx does deserve that recognition... and to do so would be something of a disgrace to
Jinx and the Clan of the Dying Night. Essentially, it would be Raven not deeming it important
enough to make said announcement—to take the time to acknowledge her mate. Raven knows this,
and that’s why she tries to wriggle out of it, but gives in when protest is made.

Raven knows that Jinx deserves that recognition, so it’s not even a major thing. When pitted against
her discomfort with parties and the like, it doesn’t hold a candle to Raven’s sense of honor.
Furthermore, her pride (something ingrained in her by Trigon), wouldn’t let her not make a claim of
some sort. So she sort of already wants to make said announcement... but would rather just make the
announcement and walk away from the party. However, the Clan won’t let her do that, and that’s her
only real grievance with the situation.

Next we have a few explanations on just what going into heat does to my Daemos, and why simple
methods aren’t available to taking care of the it. This is one of those odd bits of morphology, as the
breeding imperative actually precedes conception. The physicality of menstruation isn’t a thing that
Daemos experience, as they are more metaphysical than they are physical. Daemos control their own
fertility, so the breeding imperative is more of a kick-starter to let them know when they are capable
of conceiving (and reminding them once a year afterward).

You’ll be hearing more about deception Conditionals next chapter, too. I’ve merely prefaced a lot of
that stuff here, so you’re all going to be primed for next chapter! I was on a roll and figured I might
as well just put this forward. We are, after all, wrapping up “Prey Mate” in Chapter 19 and the
Epilogue.

...And that... takes us to the end of these Author’s Notes after a whopping 6.5K words! Thanks for
joining me on this huge wall of text! I’ll see you all in Chapter 19!

-Lynx

**Story Mirrors:**

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“Prey Mate” on FanFiction.net

“Prey Mate” on deviantArt.com
A confused frown rested upon Nin’s brow as the girl regarded her and Jenai Kor. Kammie was becoming regretfully accustomed to that expression as the day progressed. Kamala tried explaining herself in a different way. Apparently, the social customs of deception conditionals—particularly those of the Dying Night Clan—were not easy to grasp.

“I guess what I’m saying is that... They are going to lie to you, that much is inevitable. You should take it personally—because it is. But you shouldn’t be offended if or when you discover that deception. Internal Clan deception is more shared than inflicted. It’s never intended to do harm; perhaps cause some confusion, but no more. It’s how they train their skill for future quests and missions they’ll be tasked with by the Elders. You’re helping them, they chose you to help them.”

“Have you been lied to by them?” Nin asked.

“I, personally, have deceived Kamala infrequently over the years,” Jenai admitted, before continuing proudly, “She is very perceptive, however, and not easily deceived. To the contrary, she has deceived several of us quite often. She is unable to mask her deceptions as we do, as she is not tainorpex en roudailar. However, she has a savviness of both forethought and improvisation that, despite our ability to detect her deception, it is often very difficult to detect exactly what she has used to deceived us.”

Terry raised a brow at her, “Okay, I’ll bite: how do you lie to someone who can literally sense lies?”

“She likes to deceive our children by telling them blatant lies, but makes them discover the nature of the deception. It is good training, as merely sensing a lie is only part of engaging in a successful deception.”
“I also issue Challenges,” Kamala grinned.

Raven’s displeased gaze locked on her, “Explain.”

“Not in the same way that others of the Clan might, obviously. Physically, that’d be ridiculous... but my deceptions are intricate and powerful, so any who discover it receive quite a bountiful feast to boost to their seka.” Jinx’s grin went Cheshire, “Also, I make bets on those Challenges.”

Now it was Jenai’s black orbs that glowered at her, “I will win the gamble.”

“And just what do you have riding on this particular Challenge?” Raven inquired.

“One full year’s supply of Eggo waffles.”

Darryl and Nin snickered, but Raven hummed to herself. Nin merely rose a brow at the pinkette, “That still doesn’t answer Terry’s question, though. How do you lie to a deception-demon?”

“When you lie, you tell them exactly what they expect to hear.”

Raven hummed again, “Just what did you tell Jenai Kor, Jinx?”

“Six fears nothing.” Her eyes slid over to her mate, and she smirked. “Looks like I’ve got a new Challenger. See, I knew a year’s supply of waffles was bound to attract Daemos like moths to a flame.”

“Seriously, that whole waffles bit is actually a thing?” Darryl clarified.

Raven huffed and looked away. Kamala smiled at him, but took the wise option and said nothing. In the meantime, they had nearly made it back to their performance spot at the corner of a musical antiques store. As they slowed to a stop in front of it, Nin drew a deep breath.

“Okay, I suppose I can accept that. I just don’t know if I’m comfortable with it; I have no idea what they might lie to me about...”

“Oh—you don’t have to worry about that, Nin,” Kammie said as she began setting up the amp. “For one, they’ll never lie about matters of the heart. This betrothal ceremony is a perfect example of this. There are things they will not lie about to the Clan or, by extension, those under Clan protection. You’d fall under the latter. They’ll never lie about anything that could emotionally, mentally, or physically damage you. They are very careful about that sort of thing.

“To do that would actually weaken the Clan, you see. What good is a group of Daemos that destroy themselves from the inside? No, in the Daezurev—that’s the Demonic Realm’s name—you’ll find lots of politics and espionage. This basically makes the Clan like a... a mini-House to practice in so they’re prepared. That way, they can make their mistakes and learn without doing any harm.

“Think about this: Anytime you tell a lie, you gotta be aware that other people have lies set up that you might not know about. So anything you base your lie upon might actually be a lie in and of itself by another Daemos, and you wouldn’t know. So you gotta be careful. Of course, that’s a possible slippery slope, understandably. That’s why there are rules—limits upon what’s fair game and what’s taboo.”

Kammie took note of the slowly gathering crowd. A small group of pedestrians had already honed in on their presence, even though they’d barely started setting up. Likely, most of them were returning audience. She wondered how much attention their pre-lunch events would bring and how that would shape the rest of their evening. Honestly, she wasn’t sure if she expected people to have become
skittish around the known Meta or for them to blow up in a media frenzy. If it got bad, she’d likely have to send Nin, Terry, and Darryl on their way—possibly with Raven while she made her own escape. The last thing she needed was a swarm of paparazzi.

“They won’t, for instance, tell you that the betrothal is being held at the other end of the Clan grounds and make you miss the ceremony. They won’t say that something is free just to trick you into getting caught stealing from a vendor. And they will never lead you into a cave with a savardel nest on the pretense of safety. The theory is closer to the riddle-making of the Sphinges. Whether or not you ever realized you’ve been lied to, it’ll be a minor inconvenience at best.”

“Oh. ...What’s a—savardel?”

“Think a cross between a face-hugger from Alien and a wasp. It has these strong, grip-y legs with hooks on the end. It latches onto your body and stings you until you succumb to its venom. The venom binds a Daemos’ essence from leaving its core—including aura—and that leaves the rest of the body paralyzed. Once you can’t move, it uses its mandibles chew a hole into you. Once they’ve hollowed out enough, they burrow inside and hijack your body, and drive you back to the nest. Then they crawl out and the nest eats you alive.”

Jenai furthered the explanation, “We purge nearby caves of savardel nests every Seeding season to prevent them from adversely affecting the Harvest season.”

“...Yyyep, I could have gone forever without knowing those existed,” Darryl muttered.

Raven shrugged, “There are worse things in this Realm—”

“Don’t wanna know!” his voice rose to cut her off.

Jinx gave a small chuckle at that. Moments later, she felt a slight nudge at her senses. It wasn’t direly important, more of a ‘tap on the shoulder’ type of thing she usually got to make her pay attention. So, now on her figurative toes, Kammie was ready when Nin suddenly groaned.

“Oh, my God, Kammie.”

“What?” Kamala frowned.

“Six fears nothing? I can’t believe—”

“Ah, ah, ah!” she interrupted the other girl, “First, you can’t believe it because it’s a lie—obviously. Second, you have to be a Daemos to participate in the Challenge, and you’re not. And third, you can’t help them because it’s against the rules of the Challenge. What would you do with a year’s supply of waffles anyhow, Nin?”

Nin turned her eyes to Raven, “Your mate is evil. You know that, right?”

“I had rather noticed,” the demi-Demoness nodded.

Nin and Kammie checked their connections and the amp one more time before they began. With their final checks, the boys kicked around a few ideas for songs while the girls either vetoed or accepted, which was par for course since they would be the ones singing it. After they fetched upon a few titles to cover, they were set for afternoon. Between songs on a whim and requests, their performance take them into the evening.
“We good to-” Kamala paused as she felt her pocket vibrate, and held a finger up. Fishing out her communicator out of her pocket, Jinx flicked it open, “Jinx. Go.”

“Jinx, ya got two calls,” Gizmo delivered without preamble.

“Priority?”

“Smile and a Ghost.”

Jinx’s expression sobered immediately. She briefly glanced about the street. Nobody was close enough to really hear anything of importance, and would only crowd in once they began playing. Even so, she set her sitar half in her case and paced about six steps into the alley beside the music store. Kammie nodded, “We’re clear enough for that. Ghost first.”

“Nothin’ doin’. Guy askin’ for ya by yer handle. Said you were unavailable, so he thanked me an’ hung up. Real polite, but didn’t leave a name.”

Kamala didn’t like it, but he’d call back and leave more information if he wanted to deal with her. HFX didn’t just do the bidding of any random caller. With a shrug of her shoulders, she moved on.

“What’s my Smile doing?”

“Jessica Schier callin’ ‘bout your ward.”

She sighed, “And?”

“Apparently, she’s in trouble.”

“And?” Jinx repeated.

“for disrupting the class.”

“And...?” Ad nauseam.

“-by sitting on the ceiling and refusing to come down.”

“Aaand!” she obnoxiously urged him with a rapid circling of a finger and no small amount of annoyance.

“Well, she duct-taped Mr. Collins to the ceiling.”

Silence fell over both sides of the line. Jinx closed her eyes and took a deep, calm breath.

“...Okay, that’s a new one.”

“Ms. Schier’s waitin’ for yer call.”

Jinx grunted in reluctance, but nodded, “Patch me?”

“Good luck,” Gizmo said, and then a blank screen and ring-tone replaced him.

The face that came upon the screen next was young, maybe a few years older than her own. She knew that was a lie, though. Jessica Schier hadn’t aged a day since she was 24—and nobody knew how many times she’d celebrated that particular birthday. As far as Jinx ever found out, Jessica wasn’t a Metahuman. Nobody knew what she was, but Jinx stuck to her guns on her theory.
“Hey, Cheshire.”

“I haven’t worked in the field in a long time, Jinx. That handle’s been taken up by some other mercenary.”

“Pft, Jade’s got a mask. You’re the real thing, Jess,” Kammie said with a grin.

It was true, and a dead giveaway at the sight of Jessica’s facial tattoo. It was nothing but a white crescent of teeth that hung bright and stark above the curve of her right cheek bone. A series of stripes in the suggestion of a sitting cat that flowed down her cheek, with a series of lines forming an imaginary tail that idly traced tapering marks down the joint of her jaw and followed the line of her carotid.

Much as the name and tattoo suggested, Ms. Schier’s powers were an eclectic mix. Reports Jinx probably shouldn’t know about defined her abilities as ‘selective invisibility, intangibility, and extra-planar locomotion.’ In other words, Kamala surmised, a Cheshire Cat.

Jessica gave a conciliatory shrug, “Six of one, half a dozen of the other.”

“So... much as I don’t really wanna... Tell me ‘bout this whole thing? What needs doing?”

“Jessie got into an argument with Mr. Collins’ during his Scheming lecture on the nature of Leverage, with regards to Bluff versus Threat. I’m not sure of the particulars, but it escalated to Jessie sitting on the ceiling—a form of rebellion we are still trying to curb, mind you. At that point, Mr. Collins made the mistake of saying ‘don’t make me come up there.’ Jessie then said, ‘I can make you come up, but you can’t make me come down.’ That’s all the more detail I could get out of the other students. What ensued was Mr. Collins grabbing a ladder from the utility closet in an attempt to force Jessie down.”

“Ah, Hell...”

“Jessie appropriated three rolls of purple duct tape from the Crafts, Inventions, and Devices room—”

“But isn’t that—” Jinx began.

Jess continued on, “Yes, we keep the door secured. We’re still trying to figure out how she circumvented it; we were hoping you could worm it out of her. Regardless, she used all three rolls to secure Mr. Collins to the ceiling. With him restrained, Jessie came down and left the room. The rest of the class then followed suit. It was when our hall monitors found a few of them wandering the halls that Mr. Collins was discovered.”

“I’m so sorry, I thought she would be a little less volatile after we loosened her restrictions. Although, to be fair, it’s also in her IEP not to issue threats or shout at her.”

“That’s really the only reason Jessie’s punishment isn’t more severe. We’ve already issued the stick. We were hoping you could provide us with a carrot. You and I both know from her psych profile that she responds far more readily to positive reinforcement.”

“Ah... Okay—okay,” Jinx nodded absently, already deep in thought, “I’ll see what I can do. Is she there?”

“Yes, just a moment,” Jessica mentioned.

Kamala waited while she heard a door open and some muffled voices speaking briefly. Suddenly, Jessie appeared on her view-screen. Upon seeing Jinx, her ward immediately launched into an
ranting excuse.

“Jinx! Jinx, Mr. Collins is so wrong. Like, completely backwards, upside-down wrong. It’s not a bluff if you can or will follow through with a threat. Intention doesn’t matter with a viable threat! A bluff specifically implies an inability or unwillingness, yeah? Even if you don’t intend to follow through, it’s still a threat and not a bluff. So even if you start with a bluff, but then follow through, then your bluff actually becomes a-

“Jessie. Jessie. Stop,” Jinx interrupted, “Whether or not Mr. Collins’ logic was faulty, it doesn’t excuse you to tape him to the ceiling. Nor does that mean you can crack Dark Way security. Locked doors are locked for a reason. The CID room is for supervised classes only.”

“But, Jinx, all I-

“No—Jessie, please, listen to me! It hasn’t even been a week since we came home! You fled campus, you hijacked an instructor’s aircraft, you breached campus security..., and now you technically assault an instructor. I get that you feel you have to... to do something, but we can’t keep making excuses! You need to start thinking before you act. If you had just considered the fallout before doing any one of those things, you wouldn’t be on whatever detail Ms. Schier has you strapped with.”

“So I should just let him trot out all those baseless assumptions he makes about things? Just... not help when I see you need it? Just do nothing?”

“Jessie, I didn’t say that. There’s always things you can do; some of those things are better ideas than others. ...Did you call me before you left campus and crossed multiple international borders?”

“No, but you looked really stressed out-

“I was! And I worried about your safety on top of everything else when you inserted yourself into a volatile situation. ...Did you consider bringing a ‘Challenge of Curriculum’ to the your school counselor—Ms. Schier—like your student handbook says you should?”

“I didn’t have my handbook-

“Because you were sitting on the ceiling—again! It’s on everyone’s tablet, Jessie, just a few taps away. ...Did you check the charter next to the door to see if there were any active devices that could have hurt you before you entered the CID room?”

“I didn’t have time! Mr. Collins woulda slipped out of the hog-tie before I coulda-...”

Jessie trailed off, obviously realizing that her reasoning there was more than a little weak. She watched the jokerette do a slow cringe as the rest of her sentence died off from lack of sensibility. Jinx took a long, slow breath.

“And how did hog-tying Mr. Collins so that you could then tape him to the ceiling make anything better?”

“...Well, the duct tape over his mouth kept him quiet...”

Kamala coughed out a breathless chuckle mixed with a sigh. The attempt at humor was barely a band-aid for the stress this was causing her. Jinx shook her head slowly, “Jessie...”

“Okay, okay... I get it. I coulda done better.”
“Look, I can’t—I won’t—fight Ms. Schier on her punishment. But I don’t want you to think that’s all we’re here to do. We’re not trying to control you or force you to ‘do nothing.’ We’re trying to help you do better. Because you’re right, Jessie. You could have done better, and I know you can do so much more once you start focusing on what’s ahead of you. You’re going to absolutely astound everyone one day, but you’ll need to put the effort into making that happen, yeah?”

“I understand, Jinx,” Jessie muttered glumly.

“I know you understand, J. Now you have to do. And you don’t have to do it alone. Will you work with us?”

“Yeah...”

“Okay... So here’s the thing. Ms. Schier’s gonna set you up with an action plan, okay? If you can work with her and get into the habit of foresight, I’ll see about getting you something special for your collection.”

“Yeah?”

“I want to be clear—this is not a reward for disrupting Mr. Collins’ class. This is only if you help us help you. ...I’ll send you a genuine Gotham-forged Batarang from the Bat himself. If you show a marked improvement, it’s yours.”

Jinx watched her ward’s ruby eyes widen like saucers. Then the girl all but exploded, “Yes! Yes, I’ll do all the things—and all the thinking! Gimme a chance and I’ll show ya!”

“That’s all I’m asking, J. I want you to be the best jester you can be.”

“Yes-yes-yes—wait, no. No, hold up. Can you get me a batarang from Batgirl instead?”

Jinx squinted at her, “Jessie, Batgirl hasn’t been seen or heard from in, like... what? Six years?”

“Nuh-uh, Gotham got a new one! I want a batarang from the new Batgirl!”

“How do I even get into these kind of situations?” Jinx lamented, then huffed and asked instead, “How would you even know who it came from?”

“I’d know.”

“And you—know what? Forget it. I’ll try. I’ll see about acquiring a batarang... and if possible, I’ll make sure it’s one of Batgirl’s. Okay?”

“Hmm... deal!”

“Great, now hand me back to Ms. Schier and stay out of trouble!” A moment later, her favorite friendly ghost popped into picture, “Hey, Cheshire. Carrot is dangled. Though acquiring said carrot might... take a bit of doing. I’ll work on it. Everything else going okay?”

“No other problems. In fact, everything was almost scarily peaceful. I was becoming worried with how Jessie wasn’t socializing after she was allowed a few Gotham feeds. With some of the classes still on hold while the instructors get substitutes or tie up things overseas, our students have a bit more free time than usual. Her IEP case manager personally monitored all her Gotham content access. But when the weekend came up, she didn’t stay holed up in her room, so she doesn’t seem completely obsessed.”
Jinx nodded, though she wondered if they weren’t still treading a fine line, ‘Because that thin line between obsessed and completely obsessed is the only thing separating quirky behavior from a body count.’

“Well, hopefully this is just a one-off situation. She’s a little more pliant right now; you might be able to get her to tell you how she broke into the CID room. Nobody ever claimed mentoring a Metahuman was easy. God knows I gave the Headmistress more grey hairs than she already had. Keep me up to date with how this goes, yeah?”

“Certainly, Jinx. Take care of yourself, too. Oh—and congratulations on landing yourself that Titan.”

Finally, Jinx gave a stress-free grin, “Thanks, Jess. See ya later!”

As she came out of the alley, Raven was regarding her concernedly.

“Is everything alright?” her mate asked.

Kamala smiled lightly, “Yeah, everything’s good. My ward’s back to raising Hell, but between her counselor and I, we managed to mostly work it out...”

“There’s more to it, though, isn’t there?”

Jinx rubbed the back of her neck, “I’m gonna need a favor. I gotta speak with B. Nothing serious—actually, it’s a really strange request.”

“I get the feeling that’s common with Jessie.”

“Eh...” Kammie shrugged; she didn’t even bother attempting to deny that. Instead, she settled in next to her posse and situated her sitar. “Hey, I got our next song. It was kinda far down our queue, but I think it’ll fit the bill for getting us back in the groove.”

“What’d you have in mind?” Darryl asked.

Jinx began plucking some soft notes—just enough to give them a hint, “It’s the perfect song for all us... heathens.”

One bar later, she started them with some lyrics.

“All my friends are heathens, take it slow... Wait for them to ask you who you know... Please don’t make any sudden moves...”

Nin shook her head but grinned and offered a short pair of low, lurking notes that belied the gentle notes Kammie played.

“You don’t know the half of the abuse...”

Terry pulled in with a plodding percussive line on his buckets, and Darryl beat out a low supporting bass rhythm. The song slowly ramped up over the course of the song, but Jinx’s voice was a calm, cautionary tale of constrained violence. Her smirk was just this side of malicious.

“We don’t deal with outsiders very well; They say newcomers have a certain smell; You have trust issues, not to mention; They say they can smell your intentions.”
The song grew in volume as she brought them closer to the chorus again. Despite the relatively sedate pace of the song, it carried a nice depth when Darryl pounded an underline to Nin’s creeping strokes and bass cricket-chirp that sewed a line of darkness between Kamala’s twinkling notes. Altogether, the cover hopped to its conclusion like a March hare.

“Why’d you come? You knew you should have stayed...”

“It’s blasphemy,” Nin backed.

“I tried to warn you just to stay away... And now they’re outside ready to bust; It looks like you might be one of us...”

Jinx had her eyes closed for a good portion of it, just feeling the music calmly assert itself from the rather dissonant end it met before lunch. Now, however, she faced another unique fork in the road. When she finally looked up after their song, she was almost startled to see the number of people congesting the pedestrian space. Some even spilled out into the road; luckily it wasn’t too busy with traffic. No, traffic was light and there was only one vehicle of interest on the road currently. It was a WJMP local news van.

“Uh, guys...?” she said, drawing their attention before they could launch into another cover, “I dunno what kinda... publicity you’re down for, but if you don’t wanna become minor to moderate celebrities soon, you might wanna have Raven get you home.”

“You mean the news?”

“Yeah, Nin. I’m probably at least going to stay long enough to see what they want... and whether or not I need to contact my PR rep. But you guys don’t have to get mixed up in all that.”

Darryl gave her a glance askance, “Kammie, it’s been there since we got here. If I minded, I woulda cut out after lunch.”

And that showed just how distracted that phone call had made her, Kamala realized with a wince. A larger hint should have been that Jenai Kor was hiding—out of sight or just plain invisible. Jinx couldn’t tell. The Daemos was still nearby and listening, though; she could still sense Jenai’s aura. Deception Conditionals were shy by nature, but it would take more than a small crowd of unenlightened Humans to make her leave. She needed to keep better track of her surroundings. So soon after the events in India, it wasn’t unthinkable that someone would be stirring up trouble for her.

“CBS’s gonna love me,” Terry added.

Nin quirked a brow, “They want a show? Let’s give it to ‘em!”

So... it was now that her friends embraced their extroverted sides. Kammie rolled her eyes, then her neck.

“Alrighty, then. A show it is—let’s give ‘em Remedy!”

Nin grinned and immediately entered into a series of chords with Kamala. All four of them had their heads moving along with the beat—some of them just shy of head-banging, but they all enjoyed the song. Kamala and Nin sang the chorus together. It was Nin that took the bulk of the vocals, however.

“I don’t fall how you fall; I won’t hold on, you can’t let go; When it’s pain that I feared; I made you take it slow...” Their Nintendo gleefully belted out the lines with something just short of aggression, and Jinx joined her as the song ramped up into the second chorus, “I don’t cry how you cry! There’s
nothing left to me; You keep changing my life... Every day!

“If it burns, I’ll keep fueling the same dream!” the two roared into the chorus.

“Remedy!” the boys backed them, this time.

“If you fall, I’ll remember to save game.”

“Remedy!”

“I don’t want your remedy!”

The four of them jammed as hard as they ever had. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Raven’s head doing tiny little bobs in time with them. Her mate’s normally stoic expression was replaced with a small, content smile—which was as good as a beaming grin to Kamala. Nin closed them out with some impressive outro vocals as the various riffs and pounding rhythms finished to a sizable applause.

“Oh, boys and girls—you got about a minute or less. Take a breath and think about some things to say.”

“Quick question, Kammie,” Darryl began, “Far as I know, nobody ever got a name out of you when you were over in India. I think I saw a paper mentioning your work name. If we get to talking, what should we call you?”

She saw Raven canting her head to the side and Kamala smiled just a bit at his thoughtfulness, “Thanks for asking, Darryl. That actually means a lot to me. You can go ahead and call me Kammie as usual—don’t give them my full name, I don’t throw that around. Jinx should probably be avoided unless they bring it up first. Then you can use it in reference to my work, but... kinda make a distinction between the two: personal and professional, yeah?”

“I gotcha.”

Of course, she didn’t add that Raven most typically called her Jinx because that was the name Kamala had chosen for herself and because it was the name Raven was most familiar. However, her true name was only ever used on a personal level by Raven, something she appreciated greatly.

“Time’s up,” she called as she stood.

Just then, a man in a well-fit suit excused himself through the crowd along with a camera man. Said camera man wasn’t yet recording, but paying attention like he was ready for the go-ahead. Jinx’s eyes flicked to the reporter, pupils narrowing slightly as she waited for the inevitable introduction.

“Excuse me, Miss—” These types always called her ‘Miss.’ “I’m Jake Calloway with Channel 4 news. I was wondering if you could spare some time for an interview?”

“Well, Jake, that depends on what your piece is covering. You seem to have omitted that.” She said with an almost shark-like grin, “I’ll tell ya upfront: you came over to talk about anything in India, you can probably guess the next two words out of my mouth.”

“Let me guess, ‘No comment,’” Jake said with a wry grin that didn’t quite fit the professional persona.

“See, that’s some good reporter’s instinct you got there!”
Well, as long as we’re being candid, the piece isn’t on India, but it is partially on you. You did hit some headlines back before that whole can of worms overseas."

"Ooo, if you’re gonna go digging that up, you’ll be needing to get familiar with another three words and possibly my lawyers."

Jake took that in stride as well, it was points in his favor. "Well, we wouldn’t want to step on any toes, would we? What words would those be?"

"‘Allegedly’ and ‘extenuating circumstances.’"

"Ah, no—I don’t think I’ll be needing to cover anything along those lines. Listen—this bit’s off the record, but my brother Jack works down at JCB Trust. Word is, that used to be your team’s bank. Nobody else ever rolled it, heard you actually stopped a few that tried. And your boys never roughed up anybody. Even property damage was at a minimum."

"Heard your team went legit, even invested in... certain properties in the Business District. Past few years, Jack’s had more piece of mind at work than he’s had in a while. I’m not here to stir the pot."

"All that said, I’m not looking for a story on Jinx. I’m looking to do a story on you—and your friends, if they’d like. You’re big news, Miss, and I’d rather get in ahead of the spin. Read that bit Lois Lane did. Candid, real, but focused on all that stuff in Bihar, not much was said on you.”

Jinx rose a brow, taking a moment to assimilate all that, "So you’re lookin’ for an exclusive. Wanna help me clear the air of mystery, get things straight before every last shutterbug and tattle-rag weighs in on the matter?"

"Exactly!"

"Doesn’t hurt that you’ll get a nice leg up in the journalist society, either, huh?"

Jake grinned a winning reporter’s smile, "Well, I wouldn’t complain."

Kammie nodded, then glanced to her friends—who shrugged to her silent question—and nodded again, "Fair enough. We can talk—but keep in mind, my lawyers still might be in contact. They can get... enthusiastic about protecting their clients."

"Understood," he said with aplomb, "Now, before we get started, what name should I—"

"You can call me Kammie—no Miss. I won’t be giving out a last name and I don’t want to be throwing around the Jinx handle. That’s almost always... work related. None of what I’m doing here is part of my professional life."

Jake gave a single, succinct nod, "And that’s exactly what I’m here to dive into, Kammie. And what of you four?"

Nin, Terry, and Darryl decided to do the same, giving no surname. Then all eyes turned to Raven. It wasn’t like she was an obscure figure, either. She’d been seen with her hood down before and it would be unthinkable that her purple hair and pale face with that ajna chakra gem would go unnoticed. Jake just about did a double-take himself, obviously not having recognized her without her cloak and leotard until seeing her up close and personal.

"Say—you’re—"

"Off the clock, Mr. Calloway," she said dryly, if not a little forbiddingly.
Obviously, Jake was aware of Raven and Jinx’s typical interactions from a few years ago. She could practically see the gears turning in his head. After a moment, he opened his mouth.

“Would you prefer I call you by another name?”

“I have many titles. You may call me Raven.”

Kamala noticed that Raven was retreating behind a few of her personal barriers, and sighed. The sorceress was unlikely to unwind anywhere near the press. Her Poe-bird was never one for publicity, despite how much she found herself in the headlines.

“And, uh—I see you don’t play with the rest of the group. What brings you down here?” He was nervous, and clearly broadcasting it. The only question was how Raven would respond to that. If it were any other Daemos, she’d expect them to toy with him.

“Amongst you mere mortals, you mean?” Sometimes, Raven was no exception. She waited a beat, and just as he looked to backpedal on his wording, Raven continued. “I enjoy the music.” Then an arm slid behind and around her, fingers curling around her upper bicep and thumb caressing Kamala’s shoulder. “Particularly, I enjoy the music of my mate.”

“Oh. Oh. Ah—well, um-”

“Raven, you broke him,” Kammie chided, “Now how are we supposed to get this done?”

“But haven’t you apprehended her, like, ten times-”

“Eight,” Kamala interjected, “And I refer you to those words you need to keep in mind, Jake from Channel 4.”

Jake’s expression went distant for a moment, “…‘Extenuating circumstances.’ That was… People v. HIVE Academy…”

Both Raven and she stiffened so suddenly that it drew his attention, “Jake, those lawyers-”

“No. No, never mind, never mind—my brother just followed the news regarding your team for a while. We had a few talks. Trust me, I remember the coverage on that case and I’m in absolutely no rush to speak with their legal department. Let’s just back up for a bit.”

“Good thing this is all off the record; this’s a cluster-fuck so far.”

“Yeah, well, none of this was planned. We just got a call about Jinx being downtown, and well, here you are.”

“Okay... okay,” the hex-caster nodded, “Well, I can work with that. So... let’s stay away from India and legal matters. Keep it personal, as you said.”

“Absolutely. So—just a quick hello from our friendly neighborhood hero?”

“I am not a hero,” Kamala slowly enunciated, “I’m just a mercenary with a lot of history to settle.”

“Alright, Kammie. I can work with that. So... local soldier of fortune returns home after settling international scandal for some rest and relaxation?”

Raven snorted and muttered with a smirk, “Soldier of fortune.”

“No commentary from the peanut gallery, thanks.”
“All things considered, I think it’s the best you’re going to get as far as tame headlines go,” Raven admitted.

“I suppose so. Alright, Jake from Channel 4, let’s get this show on the road.”

Jake was waving over his camera man. Jinx took a deep breath and set her sitar in its case. Raven’s hand fell from her shoulders, stroked down her back, and settled for interlacing her fingers in Kamala’s own. Her mate’s expression was encouraging, that smirk having settled for a warm if small smile. She gave a quick squeeze to Raven’s hand and focused on the camera.

“Just so you all know, this probably won’t go on air until tomorrow,” Jake explained, “It’s not live, so we can go back and repave if there’s any mishaps. So don’t worry about mistakes. Just relax and answer however you like. I’ll be starting with Kammie and doing a bit of background building. Then I’ll take a few comments from each of you—ask a few questions about who you are, what you do, and then I’ll do a few wrap-up questions with Kammie.

“The studio may want to do a follow-up, but that’s up to each of you individually. If you want to provide any contact info, we’ll get in touch.” Jake held up his hands to forestall any concerns on that front, “No contact info you give me will go to the actual studio or any of its affiliates. I know people value their privacy, and I protect all my sources.”

“Man, that’s two reporters I’ve met this month with journalistic integrity. What’s the world coming to?”

As the camera man told them he’d be recording in a few seconds, Jake turned from them to face the camera but took a moment to answer sincerely, “It’s senses, I hope. ... This is Jake Calloway with Channel 4 News, on Halcyon South just outside of Volaire’s Antique Instruments, where people have seen a very familiar face from recent media busking for any passersby...”

It took a bit of time to get through the interview, but they still had some time to play some songs afterward before parting ways. Sometime near the beginning of the impromptu interview, she felt Jenai Kor’s aura fade. She supposed if the Demoness wanted to capitalize on the convention, she had to be on her way. Jake’s presence only brought them more attention, especially after their exchange —when the cameraman had stuck around for a couple songs to film some clips.

The last song Kammie wanted to play, however, was personal and she waited until the news van had departed. She didn’t want any questions about the song she wanted to sing, but she’d been tossing it around for a few years. Finally, she brought it up to her friends just as they had finished a cover of “Chop Suey!” that Nin had wanted to play—and surprisingly, insisted on doing the vocals. Kamala had known Nin had a solid voice, but didn’t know the petite girl could push out something that loud. So Kamala backed her for the softer vocals and let Nin blare the rest of the song. Terry and Darryl were in a frenzy throughout the whole thing, egging Nin on as soon as they recognized the opening notes Kammie put down on her sitar.

“Okay, so... I wanna tie up the evening with another we’ve been tossing around for forever.”

“Alright, what’s on your mind?” Terry asked. “I wanted to... do the Song of Chaos.”

Silence met her request. The others looked at her with a cross between confusion and concern. Raven cued in on this and had shifted to regard them all.
“What’s wrong?” her mate asked, just short of demanding.

“It’s a personal song,” Darryl answered, “She wrote it, came up with the original tune. Humming it around our places for weeks when she first got the idea. She worked out the general rhythm with us, did the harmony and the melody, and put down... the lyrics.”

Nin appended, “Lyrics she never finished. We all know how it’s supposed to end, but there’s a blank in the middle. Kammie, you told us you didn’t know how the song would end because the story wasn’t over.”

“I didn’t. I just... recently figured out the best way to do it. It’s time I put the past behind me and started a new chapter. I can end that song, now, and be happy with it.”

“Alright, Kammie—if you’re sure, we got you with this. Kick us off and you’ll have your Song of Chaos.” Then, quieter than before, Terry muttered, “Man, those lyrics are gonna take on a whole new meaning, now...”

Jinx took a deep breath and turned to Raven. She set her sitar aside and pulled her mate into a hug.

“Hey, Poe-Bird. I just... wanted to thank you—for everything. You’ve helped me sum up a lot of things in my life recently. This song’s never been played outside of any of our homes; this is the first anyone’s ever heard this and... it’s because of you that it’s complete. I know as an empath you can feel us when we play, so just sit back and appreciate how much this mean to me.”

-=Raven=-

“Okay, kitten, go ahead. Sing for me.”

Kamala sat and situated her sitar. After another deep breath, her mate began to play a tune that seemed reminiscent of Roma folk music, but a little bouncier—closer to that of carnival music. Nin’s violin came in slow and winding, the notes dancing complementarily to Kamala’s bouncing plucks. Terry set the rhythm to trot and Darryl provided it an almost timpani-esque underlining. Then Jinx began to sing, and Raven was certain there was some level of big-top performance influence to all this.

“Hear the rain and how it pours; Take some freedom, here, it’s yours; Running from the lands you call home...”

From the start of the verse, Raven immediately recognized the significance to Kamala’s past and drew in a silent breath. Suddenly, she understood why the ‘Song of Chaos’ had been previously unfinished. After another instrumental bar, Jinx began the second part of the verse.

“Not a mute, not anymore; Feel it building in your core; Let it lead you out from the gloam!”

The music swelled into more energetic notes and her mate brought in the chorus. “So tell me a story; Like I’ve never heard one before; Just give me a hint; Of the plot that’s in store!

“Now Mr. Chaos has a plan; And I can see that it’s just grand; So look for me far beyond the veil; And I’ll see you at the end of the tale!”

Raven watched as tiny motes of hex began to drift from Kamala’s fingers as they glided over the strings of her instrument. Kamala’s head bobbed carelessly, but she could feel the sudden malevolence and momentary hate that twitched through her, and now throbbed into the strings as
Kamala plucked them with just a bit more pointedness than usual.

“Watch as the Blood steals your mind; ‘Til yourself you cannot find; Who you are is not who you’ll be...”

Raven’s jaw clenched, but she didn’t interrupt Jinx.

“Bring the Titan to the ground; It’s your heart that you just found; Never mind, you’re lost, can’t you see?”

Raven rolled her eyes at that. The HIVE Five hadn’t so much brought them to the ground as rebuilt the Tower in their image... Nevertheless, the song tumbled into its second chorus, and Raven was surprised when it also changed as the timeline of this song progressed.

“So tell me a story; Like ones I’ve always heard before; I’ll give you a hint; Of the plot that’s in store!

“Now Mr. Chaos has a plan; But I can’t comprehend its span; Hey, I’m not here to take any sides; No, I’m just along for this crazy ride!”

Raven wondered what other turns this would take. If the next verse went along with Jinx’s history, the next major step was her freedom from Blood and her progression into a full-fledged Mercenary after graduating from HAEP... The demi-Demon wasn’t disappointed, and a small smile lit her features as she heard the third verse ensue.

Kamala’s voice was as mischievous as it had ever been, “Just a small, fragrant lotus; Tricking you without notice; Did it slip by you way too fast?

“What a pity, such a shame! Better luck on your next game; There’s no use dwelling on the past...”

It had been a self-taught lesson, Raven knew. She greatly anticipated the chorus, because she could feel Kammie’s triumph behind it.

“So tell me a story; Like one that we’ve all heard before; With more than a hint; Of the plot that’s in store!

“Now Mr. Chaos has a plan; And I’m sure that I’ll be a fan; So grab and hold on tight to the reins; ’Cause it’s about time to get insane!”

And what might be next? The demi-Demon pondered that, but waited for the short instrumental interlude to ramp up the gleefully malevolent tunes. From Kammie’s sense of novelty and satisfaction, she could tell that what was coming was fresh in mind.

“With her genius and giant; They stand ever defiant; They can put you down fast and hard.”

‘So modest, kitten,’ Raven smirked and snarked to herself.

“She’s always tempting your fate; Daughter of Destruction’s mate; So don’t let her catch you off guard!”

Ah, and there she was. The sorceress’ smirk tugged into a genuine smile. Kamala barreled into the chorus with happy elation that the felt when Jinx had accepted her as daelorisem.

“So tell me a story; Like one nobody’s heard before; Not the barest hint; Of the plot that’s in store!

“Now Mr. Chaos has a plan; Spun as randomly as he can; So you can’t even ask where she goes;
Because nobody—not even she—knows!”

The song this time entered something of a more frenetic intricacy and Raven knew they were ramping up for the finish.

“It’s not the truth, nor a lie; It’s just a cast of the die; Let chaos and fate take their hold…” Some of Jinx’s old defiance braced the lyrics, and Kamala’s tone became slightly more adamant. “Not a number, not a name; She’s but a Jinx, just the same; So different from that girl of old!”

And how—the IMRO had certainly discovered that. No chorus followed, but the the instruments blared into finale verse, and fell into a decrescendo that slowed in temp as the lyrics came to a close.

“She’s not what anyone thinks; But a Jinx—Oh, yes, a Jinx! Nothing but a Jinx – just – the – same!”

Raven regarded the crowd—somehow having grown larger than before and burgeoning along the sidewalk until they spilled halfway into the streets. Some of them obviously picked upon this song being about Jinx, but they could never know. In front of everyone, she had bared her soul to her mate and friends.

Without a firm understanding of Jinx’s purposefully obscured history, no one could hope to unravel the meaning behind some of the seemingly nonsensical lines of the lyrics. When Kammie finished, Raven leaned in a nuzzled into her shoulder.

“You’re lucky I don’t steal you away right now and hide you from everyone for the rest of the evening.”

Jinx giggled but just unplugged her jack from the amp and started packing away her instrument, “We should at least make a token appearance for your team mates at the Tower for dinner.”

Raven sighed melodramatically, “The things I put up with for you.”

They quietly said their goodbyes to Nin, Terry, and Darryl, then moved into the alley. There, Raven took them into the air on concave plate of dark energy.

“Uh, hon—the Tower’s southwest.”

“I know. Remember, we need to make a stop before heading back.”

“Oh. Where are we going?”

Raven pulled Jinx into her arms and let the energy wrap around them as they began to accelerate through the air. “You’ll see, kitten.”

-=Kamala=-

They dropped into another nondescript alleyway and Raven directed Jinx inside without much of a chance to glance at the storefront. There was a simple desk with a receptionist there, looking casual but focused. The woman looked up as they came in; she was in her late twenties. The receptionist had some framed glasses and her hair up in a bun. Jinx noticed the beginnings of a tattoo on the left side of her neck, disappearing beneath the collar of her button-up blouse.

“Hi, there, what can I do for you?”

Kamala’s eyes left her to track up to the interior sign behind her. It was the sign of a dragon spread
almost like the Bat’s insignia, but there was a negative space at its chest in a heart-shape. Above the horned head, it read ‘LeKher Studio.’ Below the barbed tail, it proclaimed, ‘Application – Cover-Up – Removal.’

Kamala stopped abruptly, her mind slipping a gear for a moment as she realized what kind of establishment she was in. She had locked up so completely that the receptionist gave her a strange look. She felt Raven’s hand went around her shoulder reassuringly, and a breeze of comfort waft into her mind. The look the lady was giving her morphed into something close to recognition. Now they both stood there staring at each other like deer in headlights.

“We’re your 6:30 appointment, a consultation for Kammie Luck,” Raven explained.

The woman’s brain kick-started itself and her professional demeanor took over, “Of course. Just let me inform Dr. LeKher that you’re here.”

“Raven?” Kammie quietly uttered, hearing her voice hitch just bit.

Raven’s response was just as quiet, “Let’s just listen for now. I just wanted you to know your options. As you said, Kamala: it’s time to put the past behind you.”

“I’m not sure if I can do this right now...” Kamala hated the slight tremor in her voice. “I-I really appreciate the sentiment, Poe-bird, but everything’s still a little raw.”

“Nothing happens today, kitten. Today we just listen. It’s okay if you’re not ready, now. Can you talk to them today?”

Jinx nodded. As long as she didn’t have to make any permanent decisions, she could handle that. She had willingly carried the blasted mark on her back for years... She shouldered that burden because there as no way to separate who she was from what had happened. Jinx—the very name she had embraced—was wrapped up in all of that. She had made it her own, but hadn’t cut the ties between it and the IMRO. This would be it: the final link to shatter.

There was no more cell, no more Warden, and no number. The scars she would always carry, but those were incidental. They didn’t mark, didn’t make her someone’s something. To rid herself of those numbers would be a physical act of liberation, no less important than walking out of the IMRO under her own power.

The others like her were no longer trapped in the IMRO. It was gone, and there was no real reason for her to carry the burden. She could factually understand that. Emotionally, however, she wasn’t ready for it. It wasn’t so convoluted as fearing her own freedom. No, she yearned for that every day of her life. What bothered her was the exposure.

Kamala would have to display her shackles to have them broken. She would have to let someone inspect and touch and treat her symbol of enslavement to that awful establishment. Jinx wasn’t ready for one simple reason: shame.

‘Funny; I thought I woulda been past this after everything in Bihar...’

“Ms. Luck? Are you alright, Ms. Luck?”

Jinx jolted out of her stupor, realizing that the woman must have already called upon her a few times. She barely resisted the urge to roll her eyes at the pseudonym Raven had made for her. She blinked several times and cleared her through from where it felt conspicuously thick.

“Uh—yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. Look, um... I have some concerns before I jump into anything. How
confidential are you guys, here?”

“Strictly confidential, Ms. Luck.” And now she heard the very clear tone of dissuasion used for screening just the sorts of inquiries might come their way. “Short of a warrant or a subpoena, we do not open our records to anyone without express written or oral consent by the customer or patient.”

Kamala nodded and took a deep breath, “Okay. So, I’ll admit I have no clue what I’m doing—but I guess that’s why I’m here for a consultation.”

“Exactly, so just head into that elevator over there and choose the third floor. A nurse will be waiting for you to get some background information.”

Raven moved with her to the elevator, but didn’t have to steer her. Kamala had finally gathered enough of her wits to get a handle on the situation. It really wasn’t that bad. She’d just have to keep telling herself that. Maybe she’d start to believe it. The ride was short and silent. The doors opened to another, smaller reception space and there stood a nurse.

“Hi, I’m Carrie. Follow me,” she said, leading them into another room with a few seats, an exam chair, and some large, boxy electronics. “We just have a few preliminary questions before we get started. First is the most important: do you have any allergies or reactions to any materials or drugs, such as latex or lidocaine?”

“I react... strangely to anything psychoactive. Other than that, no.”

“Do you have any medical conditions?”

“Nope.”

Everything went typical as with most doctors until a one question in particular took her off guard.

“Are you Metahuman or Extra-Normal?”

Kamala went dead silent, and her jaw tightened. Her pupils narrowed slightly and she fought not to glare or clench her fists. It wouldn’t do to get confrontational here, but she wanted to snarl at the nurse. Thankfully, Raven’s ever inscrutable tone broke in before she could do or say something rude.

“Does that matter?”

“It can,” Carrie explained, “Her skin pigmentation is a paler than the average Caucasian—and a light grey besides. Also, if there are any abilities that might become an issue, we would need to know. For example, most Metahumans have a slightly more advanced rate of healing and a higher metabolism. This not only affects the time it takes per treatment, but also the intervals between treatments. Sometimes, to get the effect we need from laser therapy, we have to use different types of lasers or settings to achieve the same result as we would a non-enhanced Human.”

Jinx sighed. That was pretty solid reasoning.

“I’m Indian, ethnically speaking. My genetic deviations are only superficial. What you’re seeing is natural; eyes, hair, skin, and all. There are no dyes, contacts, or other cosmetics. Never really needed ‘em. And like you said, I got a slightly boosted metabolism and generally heal up pretty well. Otherwise, I bleed like everyone else. I’m not bulletproof or anything.”

“Okay, so the only thing we really need to consider is your skin tone and enhanced healing, then. Is it physical only, or do you have any abilities?”
Raven’s expression didn’t even twitch, but Kammie was pretty sure her mate was amused. “That might take some explaining.”

“SparkNotes version: I can influence probability. I promote unlikelihoods. Good... bad... I’m the girl with the hexes,” Jinx explained, holding up her hand to display a brief series of sparks dancing along her fingertips.

“Will that affect our equipment... or the building?” Carrie queried after eying the trail of pink flecks that slowly dissipated in the air.

“Not while I’m lucid. Besides, the last building I happened to kinda deserved it, anyway.”

“I’ll bet,” Carrie muttered under her breath, then cleared her throat, “Anyway, I think that’ll do for background. Now... what kind of work are you looking to get removed?”

Well, she’d give the nurse points for not making assumptions, “I have a... very solid tattoo on my left shoulder blade.”

“How long have you had it?”

“Eleven years.”

Carrie scribbled away on her tablet for a moment, “Okay, we need to take some photos for reference and documentation. Would that be alright?”

Kammie’s shoulders hitched slightly and she forcefully relaxed herself as best she could, “I—yeah. Sure.”

“Jinx, if this is too much right now, it can wait,” Raven reassured, her hand seeking out and threading into her own.

She gave her mate’s hand another squeeze and slid her hand free to pull up her shirt in the back until it rested over her shoulders.

“It’s fine.”

Carrie tapped on her tablet a few times, “We’re a paperless company; all of our records are electronic. This will be a digital image stored only on our database. It won’t be uploaded or sent anywhere, and there’s no physical copies. We don’t even show these to other patients unless you want to sign a release for them for testimonial purposes only.”

“Definitely not,” Kammie uttered and slid onto the exam chair with her back to the nurse.

Carrie flipped on the overhead swivel light and positioned it until Kammie could see a large shadow of herself cast on the wall, “Now just hold still for a moment.”

Then there was silence.

“...Oh.”

Despite herself, she felt her shoulders slowly begin to hitch again. Kamala counted to twenty in her head before snapping, “You about done? I don’t like it when people stare at it.”

“I’m sorry, just a moment. The tablet’s not focusing very well...”
Kammie let her have the obvious excuse, just as long as this was over ASAP. There was a stereotypical sound bite of a camera clicking from the pad and Jinx yanked her shirt down over her scars and those disgusting, tainted numbers.

“Well, it looks like stencil blackwork—and there’s no blowout. Not the work of a scratcher, but definitely not done with any class.”

“I don’t think they gave a shit about class when they put it on me,” Jinx spat irascibly, but tried to cool herself down. It wasn’t this lady’s fault and it did no good to bite the helping hand. “I just need to know if it can ever come off.”

Carrie didn’t really comment on that, but Kamala didn’t expect her to. Raven’s hand slid back into her own and was a welcome anchor.

“Dr. LeKher will be in to see you in just a moment, okay?”

Jinx didn’t feel like speaking anymore just then, and merely nodded. Carrie left them be and the doctor introduced himself just a couple minutes later. He filled her in on what could be expected—that this would be a drawn out process, with each session likely gapped by a month or two. They talked about scars and such, which made Jinx snort.

“To be honest, scars don’t bother me. They don’t claim me, objectify me, or dehumanize me. I’m not disgusted whenever I see them.”

“I’m guessing there’s no way to know exactly what type of ink they used, but... it shouldn’t matter terribly as far as the procedure goes. My main concern is just how dark it is. Remember, the darker the tattoo-”

“The more challenging it will be to remove it completely, I know.”

“However, the scarring may actually be mitigated by your Meta-gene. I’m not sure.” Doctor LeKher shrugged and motioned to the wall, where his numerous certifications hung, “Ms. Roth brought you to me because of my experience in working with Metahuman and Extra-Normal skin. Besides Star Labs and the Mayo Clinic, we’re one of few Extra-Normal medical facilities around.

“Let me tell you, Atlantean skin? Nothing like ours. Minimal scarring—not that the soldier cared anymore than you did about that—but his skin was resistant as all get-out. The laser on those settings would have cooked anyone else. I was worried I’d need to get some specialized equipment. Might have to, one day.

“For you, though? You’re close enough to median human for me to believe this will be possible... but it will take time. I won’t lie, it may hurt quite a bit. Do you know how you react to any anesth-”

“I know how to manage pain. I’ll be fine.”

“...Are you sure?”

“Doc, I don’t want to be anything less than 100% conscious or 100% unconscious when there’s anything regarding medical. If I’m not aware of what I’m doing, I can... affect things.”

“Ah, right your influence over—probability, was it?”

“Yeah, I just-...” Jinx shook her head, “It’s not a good idea.”

Dr. LeKher nodded as he began pulling up more information on the tablet, “Fair enough. Alright, so
here’s what I would suggest…”

Twenty minutes later, Kammie Luck had an appointment scheduled at the end of August. She could have done it sooner, but she wanted a bit of time to get used to the idea and settle her mind about the whole thing. For now, however, she was going to kick back and relax the rest of this summer. It had been far too busy for her liking. Still, she wouldn’t have traded all that had happened for anything.

They made it back to the Tower for some dinner and an argument that almost devolved into a food-fight. Raven made good on her intentions and, right as the argument reached fever pitch, quietly phased them away from the table. As Nightwing laid down the law, Raven laid down her mate upon the soft sheets.

After several hours of vigorous lovemaking, the hex-caster lay awake and stared at the many lanterns hung above Raven’s bed. They were all lanterns, but they all had different iterations. Every one of them were befitting of the sorceress, though.

Kamala had gone through quite a few iterations, herself. First, she had rapidly transitioned from a girl to a thief, to a prisoner, to a number, to the Jinx. Kammie had then grown as a student, struggled as a pawn, rose above as an Agent of Chaos, and tempered herself as a mentor. She had taken on the responsibilities of sister, mother, leader, and Clan member. She had played the villain, the hero, and the mercenary. She had been both prey and mate. Kamala could honestly say that she was happy with who she was—and who she was becoming. That was truly something to treasure.

~§~END CHAPTER 18~§~

Author’s Note:

Hey, everyone! March has been busy and I’ve been hard-pressed to find the time (at the same time I have energy) to simply bang out another author’s note. Nevertheless, I’m finally buckling down and getting to this!

Firstly, a layover from my previous read-through of last chapter and the author’s notes: Do not actually throw pokeballs at Daemos. It will not end will, and you will never have enough badges to train them.

For more information on proper training Daemos, please refer to the unfinished work in my scraps “Slave to Fortune” (link: fav.me (dot) d5ou85m). Shameless plug over, on with the story!

Here’s the thing about deception Conditional clans: deception is potentially damaging to the clan. I mentioned this, last chapter, but I didn’t delve too deep into it because of this chunk of notes here.

Furthermore, as a deception Conditional, Jenai has already stated that “I speak now without deception; my words are my honor.” This is a phrase taught to and known by all deception Conditionals. It’s not magically binding, but it could be. And ethically, it’s tying their words to their personal honor and the honor of their Clan… meaning lying at this point would be a grievous insult to themselves and others.

Deception Conditional Clans have a constant game of lying going. It’s how they teach their young to do well in their deceptions out in the world. However, there are some things they never, ever lie about. You never lie about something that does affect anyone’s honor: so you never lie about the outcome of a Challenge or make false accusations (there’s a caveat here that I’ll explain later). You
never, ever lie in matters of the heart—a deception Demon will never have a false relationship or seduce for any other reason than that seduction or to start a relationship. It all ties back to one’s honor.

Now, that caveat: In the eternal war and jockeying for power that is part of Daemos society between the four Archlords... false accusations made in another court or clan are used as part of subterfuge. Yes—these things are allowed, and said deception Conditional may never reveal that they are a deception Conditional and basically make a mess of their opposition, letting them destroy themselves from the inside. That’s the power of a deception Conditional, to sew havoc among their enemies and get stronger for it.

These limits allow a smooth running. This applies both those things physical: Clan members, Clan allies, possessions, territory, etc.; and conceptual: honor, respect, sentimental attachment, goals, etc.

For example, a deception Conditional would not conceal or destroy an engagement ring due to the sentimental attachment. Likewise, if their deception had a chance to prevent someone from building a domicile before that year’s harvest—and that was a major personal goal. Then they would either mitigate, change, or abandon their deception.

Where it becomes important and distinction is necessary, the key-phrase of speaking without deception and claiming their words as their honor clearly conveys vital information.

In relating this to the story: the betrothal, commerce, and savardel.

Savardel are another of my creations, a Krimak—Daemos fauna. Krimak do not form Clans, but may form animalistic forms of communities like a clutches, families, hordes, packs, pods, prides, nests, schools, tribes, warrens, etc....

Most Krimak are not/do not start sapient, but may, over time, grow to be such. Some are more prone to it than others; one commonly sapience-developing creature is the Træhîn. Mind the bar on that H; in my Daemos, that makes it a voiceless pharyngeal fricative. Træhîn eventually transliterated over to the human-inhabited Realms, and became “dragon.”

I have a ton of them. Some import from my sci-fi work in the Riddick series, others are made specifically for the Daemos Realm. Either way, they’re interesting—and not all are high-octane nightmare-fuel!

Ah, and here we come full circle. That ghost-call you’ll see more of later... But don’t forget it! That’s... that’s something else, entirely. I won’t spoil it, but I will tell you that I’ll have a sizable chunk of author’s notes to dedicate to the topic.

Next up is a love for J-shaped names! To start with, we have Jessica Schier. This was originally a character I created back when I still did a lot of text-based RP. (Anyone remember the good ol’ days in AOL chats? Well, I say good...)

Anyway, Jessica Schier was created as a literal Cheshire Cat character, played straight. Her history, in short, is that she was simply hiking. Yup, that’s it. Of course, then she fell down a ravine and died. At the base of that ravine was another dead body—long decayed... and cursed. In a strange and unfortunate leap of magical prowess, the curse leapt into her body.

Jessica did not die, but became cursed—or blessed, depending on how you look at it. Her soul and her body are now one, much like a Daemons. She can selectively materialize parts of herself. This is actually extremely useful on its own, as she can appear opaquely, but be intangible; or be tangible but invisible. Add to that her ability to teleport and she’s one dangerous creature. Imagine, hearing
nothing but a disembodied chuckle just before you get shanked—and realize she’s teleported, invisibly into your safe-house and slits your throat. If she’s being all professional, you don’t even get a warning.

Interestingly enough, this concept helped me create something for my lore system in Origin. Now, there are similar creatures in the Daezurev: Jezair.

The full name for the type of Daemos is Muriveta Jezairpex, meaning “Hidden Fortress-Type.”

Muriveta – Hidden (lit. “hidden” from past participle of verb Muriv, “to hide”)

Jezair – Fortress

Pex – Type

They are related to the Sphinges; possibly a Sister-Clan. They are masters of summoning. They are the only Daemos to practice Phylacterism. Their Blooding consists of two parts. The first is to create a self-made miniature Realm, and its name known only to them. They second is to bind their core into that miniature Realm.

As the mini-Realm is only known to the individual Daemos, they are the only ones that can access, enter, or leave it at will. Most will leave their core safely inside, and instead summon parts or whole bodied vessels for themselves. They are extremely stealthy due to these vessels lacking an actual, detectable core. They have a faint aura associated with them, but it's difficult to impossible to track if they have a lead on you or simply unsummon said body part or vessel.

The Jezair are the only Daemos outside the Arch Lords known to have members that can breach other Realms—such as the Material Realm—without being summoned from the other side or have a portal of some sort leading them there. The Jezair are one of the few remaining, lasting, and self-sustaining Rogue Clans. They pledge to no Arch Lord and are mercenaries to support their own continued survival.

Jessica’s curse may have something in common with these Daemos, but I haven’t decided yet. Regardless, Jessica is HIVE Academy’s school counselor. I’ll let that sink in for a moment. If there’s someone that can keep up with all the craziness and be wherever she needs to be and as resilient as she needs to be in any given situation... well, Jess’s your bet.

This brings us back to Jessie. Thought we were done with her, already? Heh, no...

So, there’s not really a need for us to go into what happened, because it’s all right there on the page—screen, whatever. This right here, as it’s been said before, is the crux of the issue. Jessie is impulsive... and resourceful. Thankfully, the situation where they lose control of her is not a matter of life and death.

With the varying types of Metas, I imagine that quite a few of them have IEPs.

It was around the time of Suicide Squad debuting that I was finishing up “Prey Mate.” I saw the movie, and came across Twenty-One Pilot’s “Heathens” a while afterward. When I came across that gem, and I just had to slap it in here. I had a list of songs that I was going to put into this fic to start with. Over time, I pared down the list. In each section, there were several I felt were a must. Among them, Evanescence’s “Snow White Queen,” Nickelback’s “Hero,” Metallica’s “Unforgiven,” and Twenty-One Pilot’s “Heathens.” My two self-created songs, “Rabbit Hole” and “Song of Chaos,” also had to be in here... so the playlist was already fairly full!
As mentioned, I don’t really like songfics. It was never my intention to make one, but Jinx sings... and the lyrics were important in several scenes, so I had to go with it to an extent. Even so, I didn’t want to throw in the full lyrics unless it was something nobody’s ever heard—that is, my songs. Heh... Still, I like to think that I’ve struck a workable balance between the lyrics and the actual narration.

I love the idea that Nin is the group’s big voice. She’s an amalgam of influences I’ve seen over the years. She’s not much taller than Raven, but she reminds me of a Thai version of Flyleaf’s Lacey Sturm in “I’m So Sick.” Mix those kind of vocals in with violinist Christine Wu—with heavy inspiration from her cover of System of a Down’s “Toxicity” with Meytal Cohen.

In street performances, I have to admit, I have a lot of inspirations from YouTube. It’s my go-to for awesome stuff. Lots of what I took for the group—both individually and combined—came from just searching for videos of street performers. Add in other influences like Apocalyptica and 2Cellos, and you get something rather eclectic, but familiar!

Ah, and here we go with another journalistic endeavor! Poor Jake doesn’t really know what exactly he’s getting into. Lois is a fairly hardcore journalist, all things considered. She kind of has to be, what with all she has to survive. Kinda has a target painted on her back by now, yeah? Jake, though... He has other machinations, he just can’t seem to help shoving his foot in his mouth. However, he has more invested in this than simply moving up the journalistic ladder. This is a chance to meet the woman behind the stories his brother’s told him, and see what’s what for himself.

I don’t like to make characters that are white-washed with altruism, always approving, or open-minded. The real world isn’t like that, and I don’t like cookie-cutter templates for personalities—no matter how many people I meet that seem like they popped out of an encyclopedia of stereotypes.

Jake isn’t Kammie’s friend, but isn’t her enemy, either. He’s in this for himself, and is here out of curiosity and to pad his portfolio. Yes, there’s a minor familial investment here, but this is his job. Granted, he can be a little more real with her than he might others of a typical story... but that’s also a tool he can use to get his foot in the door.

This brings us to the final song of the story! This one, understandably, had to be iconic for obvious reasons. If this were a movie, I can see it playing as an ending montage of scenes and as the movie faded out to credits.

The self-explanatory “Song of Chaos” is something of a mix between Romani music and post-grunge. Strangely enough, it has two major inspirations for the jaunty cadence the song takes—although neither of them exactly fit the mold of what I just said. The first is My Chemical Romance’s “Mama” for the almost gleeful malevolence for the dark material, along with its underpinnings of vaudevillian cabaret-style. The second is Aladdin’s “Arabian Nights” for their brilliantly bouncing rhythm and meter/measure of the lyrics.

Now, I was able to throw together a rendition of “Rabbit Hole” on YouTube. I’ll admit is honestly crap, because I’m not any kind of talented composer of music. But the “Song of Chaos” is more complex and takes quite a bit more knowledge and capability than I am able to muster, so I hope my descriptions are apt enough to provide the feel of the music.

And finally, we have the closing scene of Chapter 19, which honestly came up to a bit of debate as I was writing it. At first, I was on the fence with it myself, and my beta was skeptical. However, as I talked out the reasoning and laid out a sample/skeleton of the scene, we both came to the conclusion that this scene would definitely be a big step forward for the development of Kamala.

The LeKher name is actually taken from the “Origin” novel I’m currently working on, and is the
name of a well-known family in Greycourt, the capitol city of Keji Province. LeKher means “the heart.” Due to a prominent event in Greycourt history, their family crest is a dragon with a heart in it.

Jinx is, understandably, quite a bit uncomfortable with the concept of being in a tattoo parlor... She’s not really opposed to them or has any major view on them. No, she only has one view for one particular tattoo—specifically on her body. Of course, she dislikes the IMRO tattoos on the other refugees, but it’s not her decision or place to take a stance on them. Some might hate them, others might not care, others might feel the same as her—disgusted and objectified by it.

Raven’s very tacitly not trying to force anything here. Any pace that they move at regarding this personal matter is Kamala’s to decide—her body, her mind, her choice. However, she’s also willing to nudge her mate in a healthier direction, especially knowing what the tattoo does to Jinx’s mentality.

This scene was a slight departure from my usual style to write, as it took place from Kammie while she was a little jarred and off-kilter. As such, I cut back on a chunk of the description; Jinx isn’t really taking in anything. I didn’t really give introductory descriptions of anyone but the receptionist, and then the nurse just kind to blurred into the background. The only things Jinx focused on was herself—her feelings, the tattoo, the base information that was important to her. Even the arrival of Dr. LeKher himself just sort of occurs around her. I didn’t say it, but I was hoping the mere omission would sell that Kamala’s mind isn’t exactly in the most aware state, turned more introspective.

This brought me to the concept of treating Metahumans in a modern medicine setting. There’s going to be things they need to know, but it’s still kind of a taboo subject in the DC world to make it a sticking point. Much like race, orientation, ethnicity, and religion—DC and Marvel also have an extra layer of things. However, where medical treatment is concerned, these are things we can’t just ignore.

With someone like Kammie, who is used to having such things thrown in her face, its a bit of a hot-button issue. This is true even with her friends, when she made a hasty assumption that they were concerned about her powers. Simply being a Metahuman has, from a young age, defined a lot of her interactions with people. She does try to temper it, but it’s sometimes difficult.

This last little bit was pretty much ab-libbed right at the end to find the proper ending sequence for what is essentially the end of the story—barring the Epilogue, which was already written by this point. I decided to end it where this all technically began: with Jinx in Raven’s room, looking up at lanterns. There was something pleasing about the story, which began with some songs and Jinx winding up in Raven’s bed while staring at some lanterns, ending with some songs and Jinx winding up in Raven’s bed while staring at some lanterns.

I had a feeling of progression that I wanted to incorporate, as well, but the wording took me a bit. For all it’s only eight sentences, I must have sat there for something like twenty minutes trying to decide on the proper path and wording of it all. Either way, I have to say I’m pleased with the result. I hope you are, as well!

Stay tuned for Chapter 20 – The Epilogue and the final author’s notes on Prey Mate! After that, I’ll finally shift focus over to responding to the various reviews! It doesn’t matter when you read this, know that I am always glad to talk with my readers—whether it’s just to say thanks or if you have questions, suggestions, or critiques. Whatever it is, I love to talk about my writing, the characters, the world, mechanics of my supernatural system, and just about anything!

-Lynx
Story Mirrors:

Now Available on Archive of Our Own!

“Prey Mate” on FanFiction.net

“Prey Mate” on deviantArt.com
Chapter 20

“...love will find its way / Through paths
where wolves would fear to prey...”
-Lord Byron, The Giaour

Prey Mate

by

Lynx Klaw

Epilogue

~§~

-=Richard=-

The Tower’s com chimed its private citizen noise; it helped to differentiate the various types of callers audibly. As Gar put it, that allowed them to quickly decide whether or not to ignore the call. While that was neither delicately put nor the precise purpose of the ring tones, it was functionally correct, so Dick didn’t bother correcting their resident shape-shifter on the matter. As it was, the private citizen in question showed up blank on identity, which wasn’t uncommon, but atypical of most of the high profile citizens that called upon them for any reason. Curious, Dick ambled to the console and put the call through.

The screen resolved itself into a relatively dark image, which didn’t comfort him. People leaving them messages while ensconced in shadows rarely had any good news. The room in the video was the back of an office; a bookshelf, laden with books and what looked to be a scotch decanter set. At the bottom of the screen, Nightwing noticed the solid oak plane of a desk. Upon the rich, dark surface rested a single folder, a fountain pen, and the single source of light: an old, solid-brass oil captain’s cabin lantern—turned down until it cast everything in an almost intimate, bronzed glow.

The man sitting in front of the desk had a round head topped with grey hair in an orderly and old-fashioned side part. His face displayed trophies of a life well lived. Gently but deeply engraved lines threw into relief the creased, natural frown of thoughtfulness and a set of crow’s feet that seemed to have tap-danced smiles into the corners of his piercing, grey eyes. Glasses caught the reflection of the lantern’s wick briefly, making it appear as though Hell blazed within his sockets. Below a Roman nose, laugh lines carved even deeper into his soft flesh, but the lack of any levity in the man’s expression merely made him appear grim.

He was a medium-set man, past his prime but in fair shape considering. He dressed himself in a white dress shirt and grey vest with a blue power-tie. Their caller sat deeply back into his chair, and rested himself comfortably with his eyes drifting to the folder.
The Titans’ leader surveyed all of this quickly, but was unsure of what to make of it. Carefully withholding his first instinct to put a hard trace on the call, he set it to passive scan with a seemingly idle sweep of his hand, though the man didn’t appear to be watching the screen.

“This is Titan Tower, what can we do for you?”

“Ah, hello, sir,” the man answered with more than a hint of British accent. His voice was deep, as expected of his stature, but not gravely or grave in tone, “I am calling for one of your current occupants. I believe she goes by the moniker of ‘the Jinx’ these days. I had attempted to reach her at her residence in the midtown, but received no answer. Would she happen to be available?”

The gentlemanly affectation did nothing to reassure him. However, at least for now, he played along. Dick had lived with Bruce and Alfred for a good chunk of his life and been part of that upper end of social circles’ functions during a good portion of that. He knew how to play the politesse game.

“Who may I ask is calling for her?”

The man didn’t glance up from his folder, but answered all the same, “I am the Jinx’s primary physician. I’ve a few questions in follow-up to a recent appointment. It shouldn’t take but a few minutes of her time over the telephone.”

It didn’t escape his notice that no name was given. He barely batted an eye at it, however. Maybe it was the way nearly nobody surrounding Jinx really had a simple identity. Perhaps he should have been more scrutinous, but just then Nightwing still didn’t know what to make of it. The Titan glanced to the console briefly; his passive trace sat still with absolutely no progress made. That merely drove his suspicions and he set the trace to a more intrusive setting.

“I’ll see if she’s available; if you would please hold for a moment?”

The man nodded twice, “Of course, of course. Thank you, sir.”

Nightwing muted and blacked out their feed. With a few deft taps of the keyboard, he even put some soft, classical music to help the illusion of hold. Meanwhile, he paged Jinx through her HIVE communicator; she had given him the ciphered algorithm to her private frequency just in case they ever needed to reach her or Raven under some strange circumstance. This fit the bill.

Moments later, both Jinx and Raven meandered into the common room from the elevator. He remembered them saying something about testing some kind of spell out on the training course. The pinkette had an apple in hand, only a couple of bites into it.

“You rang, Night-light?”

“Not me. You’ve got a call,” Dick gestured to the screen. Jinx’s eyes followed his hand to the screen. The apple, just recently brought to her mouth, slowly lowered. Her jaw, however, still hung open. Raven tapped a finger under her chin and Jinx’s mouth snapped shut. He watched as Jinx blinked several times and swallowed, her gaze tore away to stare at nothing for several moments. Finally, her eyes settling back on the screen, the hex-casting mercenary frowned slightly.

“Doc.”

Raven’s eyes began to bore a hole into screen, and Dick could feel the malice slowly leaking through their link. Raven wanted to hurt this man. He turned his gaze toward the screen, having already linked up Jinx’s singular word to past events. This was the IMRO’s Doctor...
‘Primary physician,’ indeed,’ Nightwing mentally grumbled, and made a check of his trace. It still stood at zero progress—the signal was bouncing around everywhere, as though mocking his pursuit. This man had some skillful protections in place, protections that took connections to achieve. Who was helping him?

Despite Raven’s static hiss of hate weaving into the threads of his link, their resident mystic moved into the kitchen to prepare some tea. Putting the issue of Raven’s reactions aside for the moment, Dick focused on Jinx. The others were curious, but didn’t know any details about the Doctor—other than the fact that there was a doctor. They might not have linked the two together; Nightwing only did so due to their discussion in India over her medical file.

“Do you want to take this?”

Jinx continued to stare at the screen with that nebulous frown and he wondered if she’d heard him. However, after some quiet deliberation, she answered, “I’d better.”

The hex-caster paced toward the console with a careful stillness in her form that emphasized her tension. A moment’s hesitation—a paranoid caution followed while her hand hovered over the feed’s blackout switch. Then, with a vicious chomp into her apple, she stabbed the blinking rocker switch with her free hand’s index finger.

“What’s up, Doc?”

“Hello, would I be speaking to the Jinx?”

The girl glanced at Nightwing. He shrugged. The Doctor still hadn’t looked up from his papers, but he now brandished his pen.

“Your eyesight really that bad? You’re supposed to be the doctor; haven’t ya heard readin’ in the dark is bad for your vision?”

The Doctor finally looked up from his file and seemed to pause. The man locked into stillness so complete that were it not for the lantern casting subtly moving shadows, he would have thought the video on freeze-frame. After a moment, the Doctor sat up straighter. The crow’s feet crinkled at the edges of his metallic gaze, which only minutely softened their sharp, analytical glint.

“Oh. I had rather wondered why the dial screen was so large—a video conference! Clever, very clever. I wasn’t aware such a thing had been installed in my office, much less in my very desk,” he said, leaning closer until his face nearly filled the screen, “Although, I must say, the picture is quite small.”

Jinx sighed through her nose, a prolonged, semi-exasperated breath, “Is it a touch-screen?”

“Why, yes—yes it is.”

“Double-tap the vid-window, Doc.”

Doing so, he abruptly sat back with the tiniest of twitches at the corner of his mouth, “Ah, triumph!”

With that, the Doctor reached out to the lamp to the right of his desk and turned it out. A perfect black swamped the picture before a clicking threw the image into a whiteout. The image slowly resolved itself from the sudden and stark contrast. Now that brighter, overhead lights had turned on and the camera had adjusted to the new light level, the Doctor looked far less sinister. Dick didn’t trust that at all.
“Now, where was I—ah, yes: I’ve a few questions, a follow-up from your last... visit, as it were. However, I see you are not alone; as a matter of confidentiality—something not previously affordable, unfortunately—would you prefer to move this conversation to a more private setting or perhaps I should call back at a later date?”

Nightwing saw her glance at the tracer program still ticking away fruitlessly, a mere three percent match now steadily attempting to decipher and triangulate the signal. At this rate, it would take well over an hour and a half to crack the signal and trace its origin. Jinx took another bite from her apple and chewed thoughtfully.

“Perhaps I could call you, instead.”

The Doctor raised his hands in surrender, “As preferable as that might be, I’m afraid I don’t have my number. I’ve only just managed to discover how to make this machine make outgoing calls.”

“...No big surprises in store for me?”

“Not quite; this is merely to flesh out my own files. As you’re well aware, I’ve had to start somewhat anew. I am making good pace, however! It is just fortuitous that I have a means of contacting you. You are one of the only patients I’ve had the possibility of contacting thus far.”

“Okay... Shoot, I guess.”

“When you last presented my clinic, you were unconscious due to the fast-acting sedatives the capture team used. I detected no other foreign chemicals in your blood, however. Is that correct?”

Jinx nodded, gnawing at her apple once again.

“Good, good,” he bobbed his head along with her and marked a few things on the file before him, “It was against my recommendation that the Warden had me administer a barbiturate.”

“That was sodium pentothal, wasn’t it?”

“Just so, regrettably. My blood tests some years ago revealed a strong chance that you would have some... adverse reactions.”

“Couldn’t stop talking about anything, nothing really made a lot of sense—focus was shot. Wasn’t quite the loosening of the tongue they had imagined, I don’t think.”

“And you’ve had no physical symptoms, allergic or otherwise, since their induction?”

“Nope. Think my Meta gene took care of the worst of it.”

Raven came around from the kitchen to stand behind and to the right of Jinx. This man had been responsible for patching up her mate, but Nightwing could tell that didn’t win him any points. The Titan leader wondered just what was going through her head—their link had subdued into a calmer blankness, wherein he could only sense her presence but nothing from it.

“Well, that was my major concern. I have, thankfully, been able to augment my files with your HIVE organization’s medical records and Dr. LeKher’s treatment plan.”

Dick saw Jinx’s empty left hand twitch closer to a fist, but quickly relax. It was the only outward sign of her displeasure. This man couldn’t have been affiliated with HIVE, else he would have been able to reach her far easier. No, the Doctor had to have acquired those records somehow.
“However, I believe they may now be a little out of date. Recent events seem to suggest it. This was not normally a concern, but I take it you are in a committed relationship with Ms. Roth, yes?”

“I—yes,” the mercenary answered with a slight frown.

“For how long, may I ask?”

“We were recently mated about a month and a half ago.”

Dick had wondered just how honest she might be with the Doctor. Apparently, she wasn’t holding much of anything back. He was certain she would be rather mistrustful of him, but it was strange to think that she would freely give away such information when she was typically so tight-lipped about... well, everything.

“I understand Ms. Roth is a hybrid entity, part of which I am aware spawns from the now deceased Trigon. Despite her appearance, however, I’ve no solid evidence of the remainder of her species. May I assume it was human?”

He and his teammates, sans Raven herself, stiffened. The demi-Demon in question didn’t even bat an eye. She calmly held her steaming teacup and regarded the man with that unblinking stare.

Nightwing’s stare turned into a downright glare as he tried to discern anything he could about this man. None of that was common knowledge. How did he know things, where was he getting his information? The level of intrusive detail he had was worrying. His first thought was some government agency—but who would take in someone from the IMRO?

“You may,” Raven spoke up.

“Yes, I suppose it does make sense. I’ve just a few more blanks to fill for the Jinx’s file. No change of residence or coverage; you’ve still your HIVE Global Insurance, yes?”

“No changes there.”

“And as you answered no to any foreign chemicals, I suppose that means you are not currently on any medications or in need of prescriptions?”

“No,” Jinx answered again.

“And I suppose I won’t be bothering to write you a prescription for a contraceptive, either.”

Jinx’s apple rose to her mouth, partially hiding her smirk.

“I don’t think so,” The hex-witch answered with a light chuckle.

The Doctor nodded sympathetically, “Yes, I imagine not. If Ms. Roth intended to impregnate you, I doubt anything as meager as a chemical contraceptive would prevent it.”

Jinx’s apple lowered once more, now hanging forgotten by her side.

Slowly, every head in the common room of Titan Tower swiveled toward said Demoness. The purple-haired young woman merely blew on her tea and took another sip. Dick’s mind nearly imploded at the implication.

“I-I though you said no big surprises,” Jinx said weakly.

“Oh. I wasn’t aware it would have come as any surprise considering your past affiliations with other
Daemos. Still, I suppose it is something I should leave the two of you to discuss. My last item of question regards your identity; there is nothing listed on your HIVE dossier or medical records, certainly nothing within my own. Are you willing impart a name on file?”

Jinx, still in a stunned semi-stupor, turned her head back to the monitor. She stared for several moments, and then merely shook her head slowly from side to side.

“Very well. I shall keep myself apprised of your missions and contact you semi-regularly in the future—at least until such time as I learn how to accept incoming calls upon this device. One should think to have an instruction manual of some sort when handling new equipment. Anyhow, I shall bid good day to the Jinx as well as Ms. Roth and her colleagues. I won’t take anymore of your time, today; who knows who might come calling for your attention before long—or what. The world, after all, stops for no one.”

The Doctor reached forward once more and so the screen blanked, leaving the common room in a state of sundering silence. Jinx’s numb stare went back to Raven. Really, everyone was staring at her. Nightwing’s mind was entirely too accosted to find where he wanted to begin parsing... what he’d just learned. Raven didn’t seem surprised, which only impressed upon him that she knew all this, already.

How had it never come up? More importantly, just how did that even work? His brilliant, obsessive intellect attempted to conjure the logistics of the latter question. And with that, Nighwing’s brain shut down.

“You can—do that?” Jinx finally asked, her tone bouncing upward into the squeaking octaves.

Raven took another sip of her herbal tea, calmly regarding her mate while simultaneously ignoring the blatant, stunned awe presently draped across the rest of them.

“That... would be entirely up to you...”

—The End?—

~§~END CHAPTER 15~§~

Author’s Note:

Alright, everyone! We finally made it! It’s been a ride, but this is the end of “Prey Mate!” First, I’d like to thank everyone for sticking with me this far and providing me with tons of reviews. I do read them and I do reply to them. Even if I’ve not gotten around to the last few chapters, that’s coming up after these notes. I’ll be focusing on other projects, but also I’ll have plenty of time to reply to everyone since Chapter 17.

I hope you’ve enjoyed reading the story as much as I’ve enjoyed writing it. I can honestly say that these author’s notes and the discussions they’ve brought up have been icing on the cake. Now, I don’t care if you’re just now stumbling upon this story, have been with me from the start, or if you’re reading this years down the line... If something pops in your head and you wanna ask me something, always feel free! These author’s notes and my replies to reviews aren’t about stroking my ego, they’re for you!
That said, let’s jump right in!

I have had this scene written for quite some time, even before I’d finished the other scenes outlines and such. It was the definitive end of “Prey Mate” and it simply sat in the folder for a few years as I wrote everything out. Then, as I neared the end, I—ah, doctored it up with some additions, like the mentions of LeKher’s treatment (which hadn’t existed as a scene at the time), since it was a medical procedure. I’ll get to why that’s important in a moment.

Y’know, one of the pitfalls in writing I often see is trying to remain suspenseful while not giving away a character’s identity. There’s a number of ways to do this, but the problem enters when you’re trying to obfuscate too much data. This is where we find the problematic “mysterious figure.”

You can’t admit the gender, describe their physical features, and you most definitely can’t give a name. What does that leave you with? Honestly, it irks me because it’s played out entirely too much. This is also a problem when your pronouns get overworked with a “they” or “them.” So what do you do with that? Of course, if you’re writing some form of mystery, you can’t just... up and start describing them or you run the risk of spoiling your story.

I always work it as a matter of perspective. In this instance, I don’t give context for who this is until a little ways in... but I’m perfectly comfortable letting a detective like the Boy Wonder catalogue this man and try to pick out any details he can to assist him.

Of course, this isn’t always possible. If there’s nobody around to witness things, and you are writing from said mysterious stranger’s perspective... honestly, that gives a bit of leeway, but complicates things, too. You immediately have an out on name, because most of us don’t internally monologue in the third-person. Lynx finds this easier to work with, but Lynx always tries to improve rote or tired concepts, as well.

Want my personal suggestion? Work a nick-name of sorts. If the media dubs them, or there’s an epithet they are known by... like “Blackbeard,” “The Ripper,” “The Bear of Markarth,” “Bloody Mary,” “Louis the Lion,” etc...

At least then, when you have multiple characters, you aren’t trying to say “they handed their sword to them.” Same thing applies to multiple same-gendered characters, as this story obviously hits that note several times.

Obviously, I’ve prefaced this character... so when the time comes to reveal him, he becomes Doc, or the Doctor. By this point in the story, nobody is going to even question who we’re talking about. He’s been mentioned and has taken on a persona and has his own gravity by this point. This is just... a formal introduction at this point.

And that... brings us to the discussion of the Doctor. Remember that ghost call that Mikron told Kamala about? Polite, but didn’t leave a name? Well, here we are again!

With the story over—not including sequels, mind—there’s nowhere for me to really provide any character development or exposition for him. It simply never came up and even within the plot of No Laughing Matter, there’s just... never a time where he becomes prominent enough for me to bother with providing the face-time for it. That might change in the future, but in the grand scheme of things, this reveal isn’t really a major spoiler for anything.

In my head, he sounds like a slightly deeper-voiced version of Donald “Duckie” Mallard from NCIS. He’s delightfully Old-World, and I suspect only plays at being as technologically inept as he seems. Granted, he may very well not know about certain tablet and smart-phone features, but his knowledge is entirely based on what he needs to do his job. ...I’ll explain what I mean by that in a
The Doctor has his own connections, obviously, and he is entirely to well-informed. That is, it shouldn’t be possible for him to know all the things he knows... and yet, he does. First and foremost, he is a doctor. He takes his profession extremely seriously. His goal is to treat his patients. Nothing that happens to those under his care goes without his notice. If you interfere with the treatment of his patience, you will most definitely rue it.

He wasn’t so much a part of IMRO as present within it. Oh, surely, he was hired on for the position and he accepted, but this not for the sake of the IMRO. This was for his own ends; don’t think for a moment that this wasn’t exactly where he wanted to be. The need for him there was great. The Doctor maneuvered events into a position where he would be the one to work within the IMRO’s confines full-time. Medical treatment there was entirely his domain.

But how? There’s a very simple answer to all of this... The obvious answer is that he has powers of some sort to go along with those connections—and it is very likely that those powers are the means through which he forged said connections.

Here’s the big secret:

The Doctor is an Agent of Order. Much like Jinx, he is not a large-scale enactor (such as Doctor Fate) and does not serve the Lords of Order, but the Urge of Order itself. If you recall Jinx’s conversations, there are two parts to Order and Chaos. Chaos creates, but also destroys; Order preserves, but also stagnates. All Agents know this duality.

The trick is not to get caught up in some spiral of imbalance. Jinx knows that they are two sides of the same coin, and that for every bit of order, there’s some chaos and vice versa. Doc knows this, too. He came to the IMRO because he knew that he would have to preserve the status quo—to keep as many of his patients as healthy as possible despite the Warden’s best attempts... He needed to keep things going just long enough for this stagnant edifice to fall through Chaos.

Put simply, the Doctor preserved Order while awaiting his counterpart. He knew something—or someone—would arise to serve this place the Chaos to make it collapse on itself. He wasn’t there to take part in the IMRO’s downfall; that would happen without any input from him. But the enactor of Chaos had to survive. It was, however, of some large surprise to the Doctor to discover that he would not just be enabling a source of Chaos, but a very Agent of Chaos itself.

Doc knew what Jinx was the moment he met her, even if she wasn’t aware of it herself. He patched her up and made sure she recovered swiftly, was healthy, and would continue on her Chaotic path. It was only when the Warden demanded he discover the source of her power that he bothered running those tests. He knew it was a bad idea, but he couldn’t tell the Warden that or even explain why. It would have tipped his hand.

Doc sacrificed his MRI machine to his service of Order. He doesn’t hold any ill will toward Jinx for killing it. Likewise, when she was injured and some guards decided to mess with her..., he dealt with them.

This did bring a bit of tension between himself and the Warden... but the Warden couldn’t afford to lose his premier physician on site, especially not when he was so good at what he did. The Doctor only subscribes to the concept of “do no harm” as much as you are his patient and not trying to actively impede his work. He will excise any hindrances.

The Doctor’s powers are two-fold. Like Jinx’s power, it’s not as simple as mere probability and foreknowledge. It’s all part of Order and preservation.
Firstly, Doc has the ability to know the best means of treating a patient with any an all given tools at his disposal. This means an almost prerequisite and intrinsic understanding of the ailment, injury, or affliction affecting his patient. Within this, he has an extremely high probability of success and his patience are granted a almost unnatural probability of recovery. It’s very possible the treatment and recovery are supernaturally boosted beyond what mere skill can provide.

Secondly, Doc has the ability to know his patients. It’s not omniscience; it’s more of a limited claircognizance pertaining to the treatment of his patients. This includes other treatments, either by self-care or other professionals—hence his knowledge of LeKher’s treatment plan. He doesn’t get these flashes of knowledge about their favorite color, what they had for dinner last night, or anything like that. (Well, if something they ate was poisoned he might...)

As a result of these two powers of knowing, he is a consummate expert in all things medical. Of course, there are many fields of medicine, so that’s quite an invasive amount of information he can have about someone. Neurology, endocrinology, osteology, hematology, pharmaceutics, rheumatology, chiropractics, cardiology, gastroenterology, dietetics, dentistry, ENT, ophthalmology, allergist, virology, bacteriology, dermatology, gynecology—those are just off the top of my head... Then there’s the mental aspects including psychiatry, behavioral therapy, psychopathology... There’s even additional fields that will apply for him and assist him in providing the best possible care in various situations, such as neonatology/natology, anesthesiology, genetics, field medicine, rehabilitation, prosthesis...

Imagine if he could just... take someone as a patient and immediately know the aspects pertinent to making this person as healthy and productive as possible? Yeah, that’s a ton of information. So... yeah, Doc is kinda scary. You also have to figure, with his abilities, he probably has some knowledge of functional parapsychology and metaphysics—because this is DC Comics universe and that stuff is a dime a dozen here.

Incidentally, this is why I say that his knowledge of technology is dependent on what he needs to do his job. If treating his patients requires the knowledge of how to work a tablet’s or smart-phone’s features... well, then he knows it.

Now... throw all that together with a sense that he needs to be going somewhere or doing something (much like Jinx gets her nudges)? This is a man on a mission. As I mentioned, he was not a friend, not an ally, and not really biased. He isn’t just a doctor; he is the doctor—the best doctor.

He stuck around and instilled some proper order and preserved lives until it was time to leave. When Jinx was recaptured, Doc administered Jinx’s barbiturate to the Warden’s specification and then got out of the IMRO as quickly as possible. He knew that Jinx’s return to the IMRO was the signal he had been waiting years for: the end of Order. Sides of a coin, this wasn’t a bad thing for him or his patients—well, other than losing all his patients’ files.

Doc was fighting a different battle. He as fighting to destroy the stagnancy that Warden’s version of Order brought. He knew that only death lay down that path, so he was called to correct the Order as much as possible until the natural flow of Chaos and Order could reassert itself.

Now that he’s out and about, you can bet someone would want to scoop him up. However, like Jinx, he’s not so easily controlled. Furthermore, he’s a doctor—and he still has patients that require follow-ups...

Jinx never really got any warning nudges from the Doc, so she never felt in danger from him—unlike just about every other person in the IMRO. This would make sense, since Order was giving way to Chaos, both sides would want to enable the activity of their respective Agents. As they were working together, it wouldn’t have made sense to have Kamala be reticent from the necessary help
she would need to survive the IMRO. That lack of caution persists even now, and so Kammie is perfectly willing to trust Doc to a point that might seem unreasonable.

Moving on!

Here’s the kicker I’m sure you all want to hear more about. Raven’s capabilities are wide and varied, especially when you take on the reality-warping powers that come with a being of such massive power.

No, Raven doesn’t necessarily need all the... plumbing... or complicated processes to spawn life in her mate. My Daemos can reproduce asexually, and depending on the type of Daemos, that may either be the common or uncommon method. A majority will take a mate—temporary or otherwise—to create spawn.

Those who don’t—like the Arch Lord Temershad—will take of their own essence and form a Hathori, a core. From there, they will fill that core with essence. It’s rather unlike an egg, however, in that the core is the soul/heart of a Daemos. Whatever penchants were added to the essence and the core determine what grows from it (much like a seed). The core will cover itself in an outer layer that will mature into a bodily structure—whether that contains a skeleton or not or some other, strange form of bodily mass is entirely up to how the Daemos-parent built it.

I had some notes on the matter of Daemos spawning in my notes, which should provide a clearer picture of how sexual and asexual spawning functions.

~§~

Over time, Daemos would want to procreate... They can do this in the usual fashion of copulation; that’s an adaptation they would have readily developed even in their animalistic, Krimak state.

The copulation would bring about a mixing of energies that would draw upon the mother (and could possibly be fed energy from the father)... and when it finished gestating, a demonic core (termed: Hathori) would develop, then form a Daemos body around it.

The hathori is both heart and soul for a Daemos. The offspring is a Daemos Spawn (termed: Posdaemos).

[...]

Alternatively, Daemos have the ability to form and craft their own version of a Soul Egg... a Demon Egg, as it were. These types of hathori are bundles of one (or more) parental energies. In this sense, Daemos do not need two parents. A Daemos can choose to take from their very own life-essence (termed: Hirau) and form this hathori... and thus define the form of the posdaemos to their liking. In a sense, it’s guiding their evolutionary path.

Many spawn born this way are exactly what their Daemos parents want, at least in the physical forms and capabilities they desire.

[...]

All Daemos parents, no matter the method, are known as Anadaemos.

===

On the subject of breeding, there are a few factors to consider.
When I say breeding, that means intercourse—as Hybrids cannot come about via the Essence-Spawning. Obviously spawning done with your own hirau, into a hathori identical to your own will only create another version of yourself. This isn’t a clone, as this posdaemos might have a completely different temperament and personality, even if you molded their physicality to exactly what you imagined.

Wherein two (or even more) Daemos combine their energies, this would still not create a hybrid.. as you are only dealing with what will be a single Daemos’ hirau. It is entirely likely (barring any meddling) that whomever creates the hathori for the hirau to fill... that is the type of Daemos the posdaemos will be.

It is only through birthing that a combination of the two anadaemos’ hathori can exist. Thusly, because it’s intercourse, there can only be two anadaemos—and the only way to make a hybrid of three or more types is through breeding a Daemos that is already a hybrid.

That said, Daemos can have something like four or five anadaemos (if you can find that many willing to sire a Spawn together), if the respective anadaemos decide to pour their hirau into a hathori.

The entire process this way is very non-sexual, so we’re not talking about an orgy so much as a complicated channeling spell.

It’s like giving a transfusion into what is essentially an orb of hirau, which will grow a body around itself—and can be molded on what Humans would term a genetic level.

[...]

Remember what I said about “the one who makes the hathori.” In this sense, if a passion-Conditional type makes the core... it will be a passion-Conditional type. If a Water-Elemental provided the hathori, but didn’t put any hirau into it—and instead six Passion-Conditionals provided said hirau...

The result is a Water-Elemental—with seven anadaemos.

That’s extremely unlikely, however, as there is a matter of pride and honor to consider—and a Daemos who doesn’t provide hirau for the hathori would be frowned upon (unless there were extenuating circumstances).

~§~

It wouldn’t take much tailoring, however, for Raven to basically embed a core into a ova-fusion style of mortal vessel, and allow the Daemos essence to empower the cell division, using the genetic material for the “shell.” The result would also be like Raven: having both a corporeal and incorporeal element to her existence.

...Incidentally, if you’re wondering about Raven’s biology in my system, she’s practically a three-stage entity. At the very base of it, there’s Raven’s hathori—her core, which holds all the hirau, the essence of who and what she is. This she keeps locked away and partially sealed (because there’s just so much goddamn power). Like other Daemos, around her hathori a physical (or metaphysical, to be exact) form developed. This is Raven’s bird-of-prey-shaped Soul Self. It infuses—and in some ways, possesses—Raven’s physical body.

If you cut the head off the bird-shaped energy... Okay, yes, it would hurt, but you wouldn’t be damaging Raven’s Hathori. With her level of power, it wouldn’t be unthinkable that she would just
reform the head. It would be a chunk of her power, though—depending on how much metaphysical mass was in the head. Do that too many times, and she’ll start to get drained.

That, however, does not replicate to her physical body. Her body is just fine. Likewise, her hathori wasn’t ruptured (unless it was in the head), so her life’s not in peril. This is is why Raven can completely remove her soul and still walk around doing things. However, if you manage to destroy her hathori, Raven’s physical body drops like a puppet with its strings cut.

This is why it’s hard to kill Daemos. Given enough time, they can replace limbs—and even heads. Some hathori are more fragile than others, and cutting off heads destabilizes the whole system too much, damaging the hathori shell... or the hathori is simplistic, and lies just under the surface of the body (as with some krimak) and cutting off the limb or the head is damage to the hathori. These are typically lesser Daemos, and mortals would find these Daemos killable. Maybe not easily killable, but more killable than more complex and powerful Daemos or hybrids such as Raven.

In Raven’s case... complex core, metaphysical Soul Self, physical body... this is why it’s particularly hard to kill Raven and other half-spawn such as her brothers (which don’t exist in my story—or at least, don’t feature for the purposes of simplified plot). Hybrids, or Half-Spawn, are termed Sempos, which is not specific to any species. One can also refer to them as Semposdaemos, an informal term specific to a spawn one half Daemos with the other half non-specific. However, semposdaemos can be pejorative depending on the context.

This brings me to the final notation on the story-side of things. Raven is a very private person. Yes, she has shared quite a bit of information with the Titans over the years, and she would likely be honest with them if they ever asked her a question. However, that doesn’t mean she is any less introverted. Because nobody ever thought to ask Raven if she could reproduce with or impregnate another female, she never had cause to mention she had a metaphysical means of doing so...

Oh! And I decided to show you guys my workspace! This will be up on deviantArt and, if I can get it to work properly, AO3. It will show my Scrivener workspace and the titles(!) for all my scenes. I felt some of you would enjoy seeing the titles and how I kept the story organized. I have to admit, I absolutely adore Scrivener. One of the best purchases I’ve ever made.

Now, I have two window modes of writing (helped by a program called PlaceMint). Scrivener is usually wider than it is tall, and normally not split-screen. I usually use split-screen when I need to reference a previous scene or—such as now—when I am reading along in the story in the top window... and writing down my thoughts in the bottom.

In the case of AO3, these will be posted as a bonus chapter. Don’t freak out when you see Chapter 21 on AO3 and nowhere else!

Finally, I wanted to throw out a quick thing, for those interested. Now, I’ll say right now that I’m a writer, not a musician. However, with my... admittedly amateur skill... I have created a rendition of the “Rabbit Hole” song that Jinx and her friends sing. If you’d like to check that out, here’s a link:

Link for typists:

HTTP// YOUTU. BE/ 44StaUD2wos
Now, you can’t copy this. These are not proper syntax as you see them, so you should ideally type this out. Sorry FFnet readers, I know that’s a pain. Alternatively, you could hop over to deviantArt or AO3, where I intend to use the HTML to post a link for easier clicking.

Link for dA and AO3:

Lynx Klaw - Rabbit Hole

And... yeah! That’s it! Thanks for reading and enjoying the story and these author’s notes! I look forward to replying to comments/reviews and the various conversations that will stem from them... See you in future stories and replies!

-Lyx

Story Mirrors:

Now Available on Archive of Our Own!

“Prey Mate” on FanFiction.net

“Prey Mate” on deviantArt.com
“...love will find its way / Through paths where wolves would fear to prey...”
-Lord Byron, *The Giaour*

**Prey Mate**

by

Lynx Klaw

BONUS!

~§~

**Prey Mate - Scrivener workspace 1**

the journalists a glance, but summarily dismissed them from her attention. Instead, the pink-haired mystic began murmuring to the pink-haired ex-prisoner.

“Um... excuse me... Miss?”

Lois leaned out a bit from the crowd—some journalist about five people to her right was trying to get the girl's attention. Neither Raven nor the seemingly dumbstruck girl paid him any mind. Couldn’t he see the girl wasn’t in any frame of mind to reply to him? Apparently, he couldn’t, because he continued trying to get her attention.

“Miss? Excuse me...”

Raven didn’t spare anyone a glance, but continued whispering to the girl. Lois could feel the tension rising. Something was about to happen and it wasn’t going to be pretty. If she had reacted badly to those kids’ loss of identity... just what must this be doing to the girl?

“Olsen,” she muttered wingrily, gripping his arm tightly until he stopped looking through his camera lens, “stay calm.”

Jimmy shored at her confidentially, but the tense tableau broke when the badgering journalist spoke again, “Um... Miss... Thirty-one-twenty?”

Lois drew a sharp breath. Did that mean really just say that? He seemed to realize what had just popped out of his mouth himself, eyes wide as though even he couldn’t believe what had just left his lips. Lois watched the train wreck play out across the girl’s muscles; they creased into one another, starting with a mild twitch at her nose, and then spasmodically bunching up around her hunching shoulders before working down seized arms into white-knuckled, trembling fists.

The pink-haired young woman whipped about, her eyes blazing with pink energy, brighter than the hue of her hair. Lois could hear something akin to a growl from her position only a few yards away. The girl’s teeth were clenched tightly, but that didn’t last more than a second.

“I have a name!” she bellowed.

The various news crews backed up slowly and warily. Sometimes, Lois hated being right. All that was left now was to do her job and hope it all worked out for the best.

~Kamala~

She stared at the mass of people in front of her, fighting the overwhelming urge to beat them all into the ground for uttering that awful series of numbers. Her fingers felt

**Prey Mate - Scrivener workspace 2**
**Prey Mate**

by Lynx Klaw

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**Chapter 7**

...Kamala called out her name, and beckoned her to come. She felt a sudden surge of fear in her heart, a fear that she couldn’t quite put into words.

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**Author’s Notes**

PAGE 4: “Welcome to the new Racnok story! This one’s going to be long, just read on to find out more. Each chapter consists of about 1,000 words each. The story is definitely going to take some time, but not much. There’s also a cliffhanger at the end of each chapter.”

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**Prey Mate - Scrivener workspace 3**

**Prey Mate - Scrivener workspace 4**
So... I figured I'd share my workspace with you guys. I use Scrivener to craft my works, as it has tons of useful features for organizing and formatting works. These showcase my workspace for "Prey Mate"!

These also show you the titles of each scene in "Prey Mate," of which there were entirely too many (and some of which were far too lengthy).

They look kind of squished here, but if you click the text links above each picture, they'll show you to the deviantArt page where you can zoom in.

-Lynx

Story Mirrors:

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“Prey Mate” on deviantArt.com

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!