**But Doctor, I Am Pagliacci**

by Acylion

**Summary**

Jack Napier, a.k.a. the Joker. After years of madness, he's finally sane. But there's something wrong. Something’s not right. According to his psychiatrist, there's no Bat. Nobody in Gotham City has heard of a superhero named Batman. The Justice League doesn't have a guy who dresses like a bat.

And that's wrong. That can't be. Because if there's one thing that Jack knows, it's that there can't be a Joker without a Batman.

Originally a response on r/WritingPrompts.

**Notes**

This story was originally a response to a post on the Writing Prompts subreddit (r/WritingPrompts) by /u/Aladayle. Also available on SpaceBattles, Sufficient Velocity, and r/Acylion.
"That can't be," Jack whispered.

The doctor looked at him. Her expression was sympathetic. Empathetic. Jack was getting vaguely sick of seeing that expression on people's faces. He understood why, of course. But it didn't make things any better.

"Forced visual hallucinations aren't unheard of," the doctor murmured. "And I guess you could have seen some kind of figure that…"

As she spoke, the doctor spun her pen between her fingers. The ballpoint moved back and forth, the blue plastic contrasting with the red of her nail polish. Jack had noticed the nervous tic. It was one of Doc Quinzel's many tells.

Perhaps it was wrong of him to expect a psychiatric professional to have better control over her own body language. She was a doctor, not a machine. Whatever the case, Quinzel was an expressive woman. It was easy for Jack to read her mood. He knew what she was thinking.

"Look," Jack tried again, leaning forward slightly in his chair. "Sure, you think I'm crazy. Because, yeah, I was. Crazy. Totally cray-cray. But I'm not making this up, okay? Batman, you know? Superhero? Guy in a bat outfit with pointy ears? The Dark Knight? Protector of Gotham City? Am I ringing any bells here?"

"Well," Quinzel said, carefully, "there is a guy with a knight theme. Maybe you're thinking of Azrael?"

Jack made a face. Then he covered his face with one hand.

"No," Jack stated, flatly.

"I don't know what to tell you, Jack," Quinzel said, shrugging her shoulders. "The local superheroes are the Creeper and Ragman. I've never heard of this Batman, or anyone called Robin."

Jack sighed. "No offence, doc, but unless you really follow the cape-and-tights set, is there maybe, just possibly, a chance that you haven't heard of Batman because…"

Quinzel bit her lip. She tapped her ballpoint pen against her notepad, the nib moving aimlessly across the paper. At least, it didn't seem to Jack like she was actually writing something.

Finally, Quinzel spoke again. "I'm accredited with the Justice League."

Jack blinked. "What?"

"The Justice League has a programme that… it's not important," Quinzel said. "The point is that I did check the League's database. There isn't anyone on their public roster that fits your description."

Jack thought quickly, his mind going over what the doctor had said. "Public roster. Key word, 'public'. The Bat doesn't exactly do high profile. What if…"

Quinzel closed her eyes for a second, her brow furrowing. "That's possible, I suppose. But, Jack, there's nothing in your case file that talks about a… Batman. That is the kind of thing which is included in, ah, supervillain case documentation. They want us to know who to call in case of an
emergency, if nothing else."

Jack inhaled, sharply. He held his breath, counted slowly in his head, then exhaled in a rush. There was no point in getting angry. He wouldn't gain anything from losing his temper. Doc Quinzel was trying to help. She wasn't his enemy.

No. The Batman was.

Except… if she was right, the Batman didn't exist.

"There was that time," Jack said, "I took over damn near every radio in Gotham City. Had one hell of a transmitter, pumped a ton of power. Taunted the cops. Then Batman stopped me. Unless you're telling me that never happened, and I imagined the whole thing."

"That happened," Quinzel replied, reaching for the thick binder on her desk, before stopping herself, and letting her hand fall. "I wasn't at Arkham then, but it was another, er, criminal that turned you over to the police. Brute Nelson."

Jack frowned. "Nelson? No, I…"

"That's what I read," Quinzel said, almost apologetically.

Jack shook his head. "Alright. Fine. Then there was the time I went to New York and tried to…"

He winced. He didn't like dredging up the memories. But he also couldn't run away from everything he'd done.

He forced himself to finish the statement. "Tried to gas the entire UN General Assembly. Because I fancied myself a terrorist, or something. Then Batman and Superman arrived, and…"

"Superman did," Quinzel interrupted, quietly. "Just Superman."

Jack started to protest. But the words died in his throat.

"The whole incident was televised," Quinzel continued. "It was the UN building, and they were in session. Superman came in, and, well…"

Jack clenched his fists, his fingernails digging into his palms.

"The fish," he said, desperately.

Quinzel's eyebrows went up. "I'm sorry? Excuse me?"

"The Joker Fish," Jack clarified. He suppressed the urge to groan at his own insanity, and carried on. "I injected fish with… mutated them to, er, look all…"

He lifted a hand to his face, and mimed an exaggerated smile with two fingers.

"Oh, yes," Quinzel said. "The fish incident, yes."

"Right," Jack muttered.

He wasn't really smiling, of course. No, the expression on his face was a scowl, by now.

"I guess," Jack said, "you're gonna tell me that Batman didn't save the day? Batman didn't turn up to foil my evil seafood plot? Who was it, then? Aquaman?"
This time, Quinzel did open her binder, leafing through the pages. It took her a few moments to find what she was looking for.

"The United States Fish and Wildlife Service," Quinzel said.

Jack's frown deepened. "Wait, seriously?"

"That's what it says here," Quinzel replied.

Jack opened his mouth, then closed it again. He didn't know what to say.
Chapter 2

They considered him low-risk. These days, anyway. His old self would have probably been deeply insulted by that, perhaps considering it an unforgivable slight against his honour. But then again, he wasn't the Clown Prince of Crime anymore.

No. He wasn't the Joker. Not anymore.

So it was understandable that there were only two guards escorting him back to his room.

Jack considered the situation, as they moved down the corridor. The staff liked to use different paths through the building, but it wasn't all that much of a precaution. He still had a fairly good idea where they were.

He'd had years to build a mental map of Arkham, after all. And he'd always had a good memory, even through all those years when his brain had been fogged with madness.

The thing about comedy was... it wasn't all improvisation. Sure, some people did ad-lib on stage. But most stand-up comics had a script. One they'd long since committed to memory. Lines and timing.

When you did a show, be it just five minutes, ten, or a longer gig, you were working with prepared material. Sure, there was always some room for variation, dealing with hecklers and all that. But much of it was memorisation.

"Hey," Jack said, dragging his feet and lightly nudging one of the guards. The left one.

He didn't know what either man was called, and the Arkham guards were clever enough to not conveniently identify themselves with name tape.

Internally, he chose to call the guy 'Curly', because that was how the man's hair looked.

Curly frowned at him. "Keep moving, Napier."

"I gotta pee," Jack shot back.

"There's a toilet in your cell," the other guard stated.

Seeing as how the man's partner was 'Curly', Jack decided that made the right-hand guard 'Moe' by default. He didn't look much like one of the Stooges, seeing as how Moe was tanned and built more like a piece of architecture rather than a regular human being.

"Yeah," Jack replied, "but it stinks. Literally."

"That's your problem," Curly drawled.

"Look, man," Jack complained, "the anti-psychotic meds give me the runs, okay?"

"Like I said," Curly continued, remorselessly. "Your problem."

"Come on," Jack said. "There's a men's room over there, can't I just, you know..."

"Doc said to walk him back," Moe interrupted.
Curly frowned.

"Come on," Jack pleaded. "You guys can walk me in, like you do."

"Not seeing how that's convincing me," Curly growled. "Ain't nobody wants to see your pasty white dick, Napier."

Moe made a warning sound. "Professionalism, man."

"He's the Joker," Curly hissed.

"He's an inmate," Moe corrected, firmly.

Curly ground his teeth together. The man clamped his hand tighter around Jack's upper arm, all but hauling him to one side. "Fine. You wanna piss, Napier? You got one minute."

Jack resisted the urge to smile. He kept his face studiously neutral, right until they passed through the bathroom door.

Then, and only then, did he move.

The door was narrow. Which meant the guards had to split up, even if they both were trying to follow him in.

Jack spun, sending an open palm strike straight up, into the underside of Curly's chin. It felt more like the man's jaw was made of concrete, rather than glass. But Curly went down all the same.

Because he was feeling courteous, and because Curly hadn't really done anything to warrant serious head injury, Jack took the brief moment he needed to slow Curly's descent.

He didn't want the guy to crack his skull open on the bathroom floor. Especially since the floor smelt of excessive chemical cleaning products, and who knew what else.

Moe shouted something. It didn't sound like an articulate word in any language Jack knew. As it turned out, despite his size, Moe was fast. Unfortunately for Moe, Jack was even faster.

There wasn't truly any completely safe way to render someone unconscious. A chokehold was better than clobbering someone on the head and hoping for the best, but even then there were too many ways it could go wrong.

And even if it worked right, it wouldn't keep either man down for long. Jack knew that. But he didn't need them unconscious forever, just long enough for Jack to pull the plastic restraints off the guards' belts, and slap them on their wrists and ankles.

The high-tech plastic cuffs all but tightened on their own accord. They were easy to use, which was sort of the point.

He'd watched the staff use them on *Tetch*, when the guy had kicked up a fuss in the asylum cafeteria. Screaming something about tea parties and Alice.

Absently, Jack noted one small detail that he hadn't noticed earlier. The little plastic restraint devices did have a manufacturer's logo on them. LexCorp.

A part of him had expected them to be… WayneTech, or something. Of course, Doc Quinzel had repeatedly told him there was no such thing as the Wayne Group of Companies. No WayneTech. No Wayne Industries. No Wayne Capital. No Wayne Financial Services.
No Bruce Wayne.

Leaving the bound guards lying on the bathroom floor, Jack crossed the room, hauled himself up and above a urinal, and gripped the window.

The window was more for ventilation than any sort of scenic view. It would be a hell of a squeeze, and likely he'd damn near tear something cramming himself through.

But it would get him outside.

And that was step one.
Jack rocked backwards. The chair he was sitting in creaked precariously, as it balanced on two legs, straining in ways the rickety piece of furniture wasn't designed to support.

His seating position was probably a high-risk venture, one that was very likely to end up with him planted on his ass.

The chair was old, and extremely discoloured. The bits that had originally been white had gone yellow, and the bits that were chrome were that particular flaky patina that was more texture than actual colour.

Clearly, the Gotham Public Library system didn't have much of a budget for new furniture. Or much else of anything, honestly.

But it did have working computers and an internet connection, for a very liberal definition of 'working'. Said computers were whirring rather loudly and likely infested with more viruses than one of Falcone's girls.

Jack rocked back and forth. He thought. And thought. Then, when he was about done, he thought some more. His mind was going in circles. Appropriate enough, since his worldview had undergone a similar one-eighty, then a three-sixty, and other degrees of adjustment on top of that.

Far as he could tell, Doc Quinzel had told the truth. He didn't know what to think about that. He really didn't know what to think.

Well, Jack wasn't discounting the possibility that the Bat just had a really good disinformation campaign to mask his presence and cover his tracks. The Bat was sneaky like that. He was a like a real-life ninja, and had probably been trained by genuine pajama-clad ninja on a mountain somewhere.

Plus, the Justice League did have a big green telepath on staff. With the whole mind-reader shtick and then some.

Jack wasn't naive. He'd spent a long time being delusional, sure, but not about the facts of the world. He figured that despite their squeaky-clean image, the League wouldn't be above doing some selective editing to keep bits of information on the down-low, and preserve secret identities. All that stuff.

Push come to shove, Jack would do the same, in their position.

But…


Maybe there was some vast conspiracy to hide the existence of the Bat and his coterie. Full Illuminati bullshit, Men in Black, helicopters in the night, low-flying weather balloons, black redacted bars across dossiers, the whole nine yards.

Maybe. Just maybe.

But the simpler answer was… well, an answer that Jack didn't like to think about.
What was that saying? Arthur Conan Doyle? Sherlock Holmes? Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable…

The problem was... what was impossible?

He rocked the chair forward, planting all four legs back down on the elderly and musty-smelling carpet. He leaned forward, bending over the mouse and keyboard. With a flick of his wrist and fingers, he switched tabs on the browser.

Which was, of course, an out-of-date version of LexNet Explorer. Naturally.

Because Waynevision didn't seem to exist.

There was no Batman. No Bruce Wayne. No Robin, no Red Robin, no Batgirl. Nothing.

There was a Nightwing, but she was a she, and the partner of someone called Flamebird. And according to the official Justice League website and all secondary sources Jack could find, they were both Kryptonian.

Which begged the question, why didn't Superman have some kind of avian theme? Obviously the guy was letting his Kryptonian ancestors down. A shame, a real shame.

Jack shook his head. Of course, Superman's image was clearly working for him. Who was Jack to argue? He was just a failed stand-up comic, he wasn't exactly an expert on popular media and successful branding. If he was, he'd be making the big bucks with his own sitcom or talk show, rather than…

Well. His career hadn't exactly ended up how he'd envisioned it, to say the least.

So.

Jack rocked back and forth, and considered his next move.
Chapter 4

Ollie felt vaguely annoyed as he watched the Question work.

He wasn't the jealous type. Or he tried not to be, rather. Dinah had a habit of getting on his case for that kind of thing, and he was actively trying to rein it in.

But he wasn't feeling jealous about the Question's physique, wallet, or any other of the usual insecure masculinity triggers. He was certain he had the other man licked on all those fronts.

Ollie was vaguely annoyed because the Question was making the computer do things that Ollie didn't even know were possible. That was particularly frustrating, since he'd had a personal hand in designing the systems and the user interface.

The computers in the Hall of Justice were mostly the product of one of the Queen Group's tech subsidiaries. His family's company.

Okay, the network had a lot of alien bits and bobs wired in. Plus Teddy and Mike had done their own tweaks, and some of the hardware had been contracted out to LexCorp. Lex was one of the League's main backers, after all. But the underlying architecture had been designed and installed by a Queen team.

Ollie thought he knew all the tricks that could be squeezed out of a Queen interface.

But the Question had a globe of holograms around him, every available two-dimensional flatscreen showing a different display. And on top of that, the man was typing on two keyboards, one with each hand. While carrying out a conversation over the phone.

The worst thing was, the faceless bastard was making it all look so easy.

A light blinked on one of the screens, indicating that the person on the other end of the line was talking. There was no video, only audio, but Ollie imagined the woman also had a frustrated look on her face. Clearly, Ollie wasn't the only one feeling annoyed at the Question.

"I stand by my opinion," Harleen Quinzel said. At least, that was the name displayed in text beneath the call tracker, followed by some alphabet soup of initials and her current location - Arkham Asylum, Gotham City.

"You claimed he was largely rehabilitated," the Question murmured. "No longer a threat to society. An interesting diagnosis, in light of recent events."

"He wasn't," Quinzel snapped, her voice growing heated. "He isn't! He's not the Joker anymore! He hasn't shown any signs of abnormal behaviour, no…"

"Your report shows," the Question interjected, "that in his last session, Mister Napier continued to insist that he was opposed, in his villainous career, by one 'Batman'. A vigilante sometimes operating with partners named 'Robin', 'Batgirl', and a number of other aliases."

"Who don't exist, yeah, yeah," Quinzel grumbled. "We've been over this. He's coming out of years of… false beliefs, confused thinking, fine. But he's coming out of it! He was coming out."

"Indeed," the Question said. "Yet, your patient has broken out of Arkham Asylum. And he is thus far evading all efforts to locate him."
"He's confused," Quinzel began. "He's…"

"He cannot be both confused and sane," the Question stated, implacably. "A is A, B is B. We must assume that Jack Napier is still the Joker. In turn, this means that, once again, the Joker is at large."

Quinzel hissed something that Ollie didn't quite catch. But the Hall of Justice's computer systems helpfully subtitled the unfamiliar word, which apparently was some kind of Yiddish profanity.

"If you cannot cast any light on the situation," the Question said, "this conversation is at an end. Good afternoon, Doctor."

"Yeah, whatever," Quinzel retorted.

Before the line cut off, Ollie thought he heard the psychiatrist mutter two additional words. The computers didn't subtitle them, but then Ollie didn't need any translation to make out the phrase 'fucking asshole'. 
Chapter 5

Ollie snorted. "She's right, you know. You are an…"

"What I am," the Question replied, "is the League's lead investigator on this case. I am uncertain why you are here. I have this well in hand."

Ollie folded his arms across his chest. Then he realised that his show of body language wasn't visible to the Question, since the man's back was turned.

On the other hand, since he was the Question… it was entirely possible that the Question could see out the back of his head. The man's mask didn't even have any eye holes.

Ollie had no idea how that worked, and he didn't want to ask.

"I'm the Justice League's Chairman," Ollie pointed out.

"The outgoing chair," the Question corrected, pedantically. "Hawkgirl will be taking over your position in a matter of days."

"It's still Tuesday," Ollie fired back. "Meaning, yes, I'm still your boss."

The Question tilted his head. "Of course. Would you like a progress report?"

"If you please," Ollie said, pleasantly.

"As you witnessed," the Question said, "Doctor Quinzel and the staff of Arkham were of little assistance. This is unsurprising. Historically, Arkham has never been able to contain the Joker. Although his escape plan, in this case, was unprecedented."

Ollie chuckled. "With how often he's been in and out? Seriously? Surely he's tried this before. Lull the doctors into a false sense of security, then…"

"He has not," the Question countered. "Most likely, Arkham will need to revise their procedures following this failure. Be that as it may, we are once again faced with the challenge of tracking the Joker."

Ollie nodded. "Any leads?"

The Question lifted one of his hands from his keyboards, and made a small gesture in mid-air.

The swarm of holograms surrounding him shifted, as a new projection appeared and floated to the forefront.

"At zero five hundred hours this morning, plus or minus," the Question said, "two savings accounts belonging to Joseph Kerr, no middle name... one of the Joker's known aliases... were accessed via online banking."

"Joe Kerr," Ollie muttered. "That's a bit on the nose, isn't it?"

"There are fifty two individuals named Joseph Kerr in the Gotham and Bludhaven region alone," the Question said. "Previously a greater number, prior to some changing their legal identity - likely due to the unfortunate association with the Joker."
Ollie rolled his eyes. "But you think this is our man."

"There are various indicators," the Question said.

The masked detective pointed at the hologram, which split into three further floating windows.

"However, the salient point is that funds were transferred to Vlatava Cantonel," the Question continued.

Ollie groaned. "We're not going to get any info out of the damn Vlatavans, that's what you're saying?"

The Question hummed, and made a small circular motion with his raised hand. "I have submitted a request via priority channels. But, yes, as long as Count Vertigo remains in power in Vlatava, it is unlikely that any of the country's financial institutions will cooperate with a Justice League investigation."

The Question's tone was neutral, but Ollie thought he caught a faint hint of accusation in the masked man's voice.

While Count Vertigo was a thorn in the side of the entire Justice League, the villain was also generally thought of as Green Arrow's nemesis. In other words, one of Ollie's.

And that was damned unfair. Because Vertigo was a goddamn head of state. There wasn't much Ollie could do to bring the guy down, not when Vertigo had a whole country behind him. A small country, sure, but a country all the same. The son of a bitch had his own army.

Ollie was pretty sure he didn't have enough arrows for the entire Vlatavan armed forces, even if it was tiny by former Soviet Bloc standards.

Ollie rubbed his chin, stroking his beard. "How much was transferred?"

"Just under two hundred thousand dollars," the Question said.

"Not much of a war chest," Ollie observed.

"The Joker most likely has access to additional funds," the Question said. "Inside or outside the Vlatavan banking system."

Ollie grunted. That was true.

"Are you seeing any suspicious purchases," Ollie asked. "Or thefts? Money's one thing, but the Joker always goes for… chemicals. To make that Joker Venom of his, that laughing gas stuff, or…"

"There has been no movement on that front," the Question said, nodding towards one of the flatscreen displays. "A break-in was reported at the Washington, D.C. branch of S.T.A.R. Labs. Two suspects wearing clown costumes. But local police believe the culprits are Punch and Jewelee, not the Joker."

Ollie studied the screen. "Yup, not unless the Joker's expecting. Should she really be working in her condition?"

"It's the twenty-first century," the Question said, blandly. "Mister Punch appears to be a supportive partner."
"Wrong clowns, anyway," Ollie grumbled. "I don't like this. We can't just sit around and wait for the Joker to make a move. Who knows what that nutjob will do?"
Chapter 6

Earl Cooper slid out from under the vehicle, the wheels on the car creeper squeaking in protest over the concrete floor. He winced as he got to his feet, climbing gingerly off the ground.

The little mechanic's trolley wasn't the only thing in the workshop that was feeling its age. Earl's back was giving him trouble, too. Falling off a ladder earlier in the year hadn't helped, either. Age was slowly, but surely, catching up with him.

He sighed, as he massaged the small of his back with one stained hand. He trudged towards the door, not the big one that gave vehicular access to the main floor, but the human-scaled one beside it.

Being both a Gotham native and a small business owner in Gotham City, Earl wasn't keen on opening the door for anyone banging on it in the middle of the night.

He was still working, of course. But any fool could see the shop was closed for business.

Earl glanced at the battered monitor sitting on a desk near the door, the one which kept an electronic eye on all the outside-facing security sensors.

There was a man out there. Alone. Actually alone, it seemed.

A few months ago, some dumb punks had tried the old trick with one kid knocking on the door, and others hiding in the blind spots of the cameras… well, they'd tried. They hadn't succeeded. Because Earl's setup didn't have any blindspots, no matter how it looked from the outside.

It looked like he had a bunch of twenty-year-old shitty entry-level LexCorp off-the-shelf cameras hooked up around the garage. It looked that way. But Cooper's Garage had much better security than just that.

Earl squinted at the monitor. No obvious metahuman signature. No magic. The guy was armed… but carrying a handgun and knife in Gotham City wasn't proof of mischief, it was almost mandatory in some neighbourhoods.

The scanners were flagging a low-confidence analysis of… something… being up with the garage's late-night visitor, but the percentages were rock bottom. It could have just been statistical noise. Probably was.

Earl pressed his thumb against the intercom button. "I'm closed."

"Sorry," the man said, his voice sounding slightly tinny through the speaker. "I know, I know. But, uh, can you help me? I'm sorry. My car won't start, it's a block away, and… I'm sorry to bother you, but I really need…"

Earl grunted. "There's a gas station on the corner of Kane and Adams Avenue. Keep walking, buddy."

"But you're closer," the man protested.

Earl rubbed his face with his cleaner hand. He thought about it for a second or two, then sighed. Against his better judgement, he punched another button.
"Door's unlocked," Earl said. "Come in."

The electromagnetic locks, and the more exotic ones, all disengaged. A moment later, the door ground open, as a thin bundled-up figure squeezed through.

"Thanks," the guy said.

Earl gave him a disapproving look. "Don't thank me yet. Wait for my bill. Lemme tell you now, you're paying extra for this."

"Oh," the man said, as he unraveled his scarf, "money's no object."

Earl tensed, as the scarf came off, and so did the man's hat.

"Get out," Earl hissed.

"Whoa," the man protested, raising both his hands. He dropped his scarf and hat, in the process. "Easy, easy there, it's not what you think!"

Earl narrowed his eyes. He rested his own hand on his toolbelt.

He wasn't in the habit of carrying weapons around his own workshop. But he reckoned that if he dialed up his cutter, he could put a hole of rearranged atoms right through his unwanted so-called customer.

"That so? Because from where I'm standing," Earl said, "you look an awful lot like the Joker."

"I'm not the Joker! Not the Joker," the man yelped.

Earl snorted. "You sure? Green hair, pasty face. Even white boys aren't supposed to be that white."

"Okay," the man corrected himself, hastily. "I used to be the Joker. But I'm not! Used to be! Artist formerly known as the Joker, now just an artistic squiggle... no? Not funny? Not even a little?"

"Not funny," Earl stated. "Keep walking, laughing boy."

"Seriously," the Joker insisted.

"You're telling me," Earl said, "that you're serious? You?"

"Hey," the Joker answered, "the economy's doing bad, gotta diversify, find new markets, you know how it is."

Earl pulled the atomic cutter from his toolbelt, pointed it at the Joker, and rested his fingers on the controls.

"Hey, hey," the Joker yelled, "just a sec! I'm not trying to... I wanna buy stuff, alright? You're Cooper, yeah? The Earl Cooper?"

Earl scowled. "Says so on the front of the shop. What's it to you?"

"I need gear," the Joker said quickly. "The good stuff. And wheels. Wheels would be nice. Preferably attached to an engine."

"Do you," Earl muttered. "And what makes you think I sell to your kind?"
The Joker pointed at his face. "My kind? Is this because I'm white?"

Earl clutched the cutter even tighter. "I thought you were being serious, funny man."

The Joker flinched. "Sorry, force of habit."

"I repeat," Earl said, stonily, "what makes you think I sell to your kind?"

The Joker turned his head, craning his neck, and looking past Earl. "Because you've got one of Catwoman's cars, right there."

"It's a purple Jaguar," Earl said, flatly. "Lots of rich kids drive flashy imports."

"Sure," the Joker replied, breezily. "But that one's got reactive armour, ablative plates, tri-nitro propulsion units…"

"Let me rephrase," Earl said. "I don't sell to mass murderers."

"I'm not going to kill anyone," the Joker said, stiffly. Then he paused, blinked, and added: "Not unless I have to. Unless I really, really, have to. And even then, I'll feel kinda bad about it."

Earl laughed. It wasn't a nice laugh. "What, you expect me to believe that? You turned over a new leaf, or something?"

"Something like that," the Joker said.
"I still don't think this is a good idea," Punch said, gripping the steering wheel.

He forced his hands to loosen. It would be damned stupid to lose control of the vehicle just because he was having a minor panic attack.

Especially because the panic attack wasn't anything new. He'd been low-key freaking out for hours. But his sense of pessimistic dread was rapidly escalating past the point of a simple bad feeling in his gut.

It was more like he had a bad feeling across his entire digestive tract, reaching all the way down into his backside.

In the front passenger seat, his wife looked up from her phone, and then gave him an exasperated glare. "It's not a good idea. But it is a couple million bucks. Each."

"That doesn't go as far as it used to," Punch pointed out. "Nowhere near."

"It's more than we usually get for any one job," Jewelee retorted. "Any two jobs. Any three. Besides, we got junior along the way."

She patted her midsection, for emphasis.

"Money isn't gonna do junior any good. No good, if he has two dead parents," Punch said.

"He or she," Jewelee corrected. "Or they, if that's what they want."

"You know what I mean," Punch grumbled. "Junior isn't going to be junior if he's got a dead momma, for that matter."

Jewelee huffed. "You're being too paranoid. Yes, this guy has a rep, and yes, we need to be careful. But we can take him."

"I'm being careful," Punch countered. He squashed the urge to glower at his wife, and instead kept his eyes firmly on the road. "Careful, not paranoid. It's not paranoia, not when he has a rep for good reason. Very good reasons."

"He's just one man," Jewelee said. "Not even meta. Baseline. What's he got, poison, gag tech, smoke bombs? We've got alien hardware, honey. He's a big name, sure. But he's not in our weight class. If we weren't sandbagging, we could..."

"We've made it this far by playing it cool," Punch argued. "Real cool. Down low. By not letting the heroes or the villains catch on that we're actually pretty good. What we don't do is make deals with guys like this, because that's bad news! Bad news!"

Jewelee sighed. She picked up her phone again, and Punch heard a muted pinging sound. His wife had the volume turned down, but not completely off, so he could still hear whatever game she was playing.

It was probably another one of those match-three gem games. Punch wasn't sure if she genuinely liked the genre, or if it was some kind of compulsive theme thing, given what she called herself.

He'd asked, once. No, wait. Twice. She'd just laughed. Punch didn't think he'd ever get a straight
answer. And the second time he'd brought it up, she'd started needling his own taste in mobile phone games.

They were career criminals, damnit. He didn't need to justify spending cash on gatcha pulls, not when it was coming out of his share of the take. His money, damnit.

Since Jewelee wasn't responding, Punch figured the argument was over. At least for the moment. So he looked at his own phone, which was attached to a clamp, and further linked to the dashboard. His phone wasn't displaying any sort of game, but rather the familiar navigation mode of the LexMap app.

Punch flicked the indicator stalk, signalling as he changed lanes. There wasn't much traffic on the road, considering the hour, but he wasn't prepared to take chances. Not with his girl and unborn child in the car.

When he was twenty years old and stupid, he'd have floored it, taking an open road as an invitation. Now that he was pushing thirty and a father-to-be, he was feeling mighty cautious.

Which was why Jewelee's disregard for the danger they were in… no, even if she wasn't worried, Punch was worried enough for the two of them. The three of them.
"Babe," Jewelee said, suddenly, as if sensing his thoughts. "It'll be okay. Don't worry."

Maybe she could sense his thoughts? Punch didn't think her namesake jewels actually gave her telepathic powers, per-se. But she could generate illusions, so maybe there was a touch of mind-reading in there? Or maybe she was just able to read his mind due to being a woman.

Sometimes, Punch figured that most ladies had mind-reading as an intrinsic power. Something to do with the two X chromosomes. His mother and sisters had always managed to figure him out, anyway.

Punch sighed. "It's too late now, anyway. Way too late. Taken the deal, and he's already transferred half the payment up front. We walk out on him now, I dunno what he'll do."

He glanced at his phone, even as he eased his foot off the accelerator. He pulled into the parking lot of the Lex-Mart. As the place was a twenty-four hour establishment, their rental wasn't the only vehicle in the lot. But there weren't all that many cars.

It wasn't the kind of place he'd have picked for a delivery. But Punch wasn't calling the shots. Neither was Jewelee. Their buyer had requested the Lex-Mart as the meetup location, and Punch wasn't prepared to argue with the Joker.

"So," Jewelee said. "What now?"

Punch finished turning into his chosen parking space. He pulled the handbrake up, then killed the engine. He inhaled, exhaled, and then reached for his phone. "We call it in."

He pressed his finger on the home button, exiting LexMap and returning to the familiar menu of a LexOS phone. Then he swiped to the next set of icons, and hit the calculator app.

Punch paused for a moment, digging through his memory, before punching in numbers. Then he dragged his finger down the plus, minus, multiply, and divide signs.

The screen went black.

Then it pulsed.

"Punch and Jewelee," a synthesised voice said, with a distinct vocal quality that wasn't quite human. "This is the Calculator."

Punch wasn't sure who or what the Calculator was. Some people in the community said they were just a really good techie. But there were equally persistent rumours that the underworld's favourite broker was some kind of AI or alien supercomputer.

Whatever the case, everyone in the business knew how to contact the Calculator twenty-four-seven. And the Calculator always answered. If there was a human being behind the app, then he or she never slept.

"Uh, hi," Punch began. "Yeah, so, we're at the Lex-Mart outside Gotham, like the instructions said."

"The smaller one," Jewelee chimed in, unbuckling her seatbelt so she could lean over. "Not the
"You're at the correct location," the Calculator said. "The remaining funds have been transferred to you, for receipt of the package."

Punch blinked. He was confused… not about the words or the process involved, because he'd used the Calculator's escrow services before.

But the package was still in the back of their car.

"We haven't handed it over," Punch said, carefully. "The Joker's not here."

"The client has authorised the transfer," the Calculator stated. "He is behind you."

"Hi," said a new voice.

Punch yelped, and swung round, his eyes wide. His wife made a similar sound, almost as high-pitched.

"Chill, chill," the Joker said, from the back seat. "Relax, chillax. We're all friends here, you can put the gun down."

With a start, Punch realised that his weapon was halfway out of his jacket. He hadn't even consciously gone for it. Carefully, he eased the alien device back into its makeshift holster.

He glanced at the doors of the vehicle. But as far as he could tell, all of them were still closed, and locked. He hadn't heard a thing, and he hadn't sensed any temperature change from cold air coming in, so how the hell…

"Nice trick," Jewelee said, levelly. "Do you do that for children's parties?"

Her voice sounded calm, but Punch knew that it was a front. Jewelee was just as rattled as he was, she was just better at hiding it.

"I'm not that kind of clown," the Joker replied, with a smile. "But for fellow performers like you, I could make an exception. Call me when it's your little one's time, I guess? Hey, when are you due?"

Punch looked warningly at Jewelee. While all three of them were clown-themed villains, Punch was starting to worry there was, in practice, a vast gulf between them and someone like the Joker.

But Jewelee simply returned the smile, giving no outward sign that she was afraid. "I'll keep you in mind. I'd prefer to talk business first, though. If that's okay?"

"Sure," the Joker replied, casually.

On his part, the Joker was lounging in the back seat, appearing perfectly at ease. Perhaps he was.

The Clown Prince wasn't dressed like Punch expected. There wasn't any purple suit, no green shirt… he was wearing normal clothes. His jacket was green, but it was the mottled green of military jungle camo, and looked like it had come from a surplus store.

He also had a bag in his lap. The same bag that Punch had stuffed the stolen doohickey into. Some kind of advanced sensor package, which Punch and Jewelee had liberated from S.T.A.R. Labs.
Punch was pretty sure he'd left the thing locked in the trunk of the car.

"So," the Joker said. "Where do I sign?"
Chapter 9

Jack gave a jaunty little wave as the car pulled away, accelerating out of the Lex-Mart parking lot.

It could have been his imagination, but he thought that the vehicle was exhibiting more than a faint bit of nervousness, echoing its driver's feelings. Was it possible for cars to express body language?

Well, outside the realms of animated movies and children's literature, anyway.

He hummed, tunelessly.

Truth be told, Jack wasn't really much of a fan of extremely British humour. Bits and pieces, yes. They had good stand-up comics, good panel shows, and there were those three guys that had left the BBC to do their show on LexCorp's streaming service…

But he'd never seen the appeal of Punch and Judy. Not really.

Still, the couple calling themselves Punch and Jewelee seemed nice. And he was more than willing to cut them a bit of slack. They actually were trained puppeteers, and they'd spent a few years scraping out a living via street performances and community theatre gigs. So the Calculator had said, when he'd requested information on the pair.

Jack could respect that. Their professional motif wasn't just a gimmick, then. It actually said something about what they'd done for a living, about what they'd done with their lives, before falling into the whole capes-and-tights scene.

They were like him, in that case. Showbiz aspirations and all.

Which was fortunate, since he'd almost reflexively refused to hire them, when the Calculator had presented him with a list of candidates - a list of people whom Noah and his associates deemed capable of getting what Jack wanted.

Their whole clown motif… it hit a little too close to home.

Sure, he wasn't above using his old reputation for an advantage, and he was even making new jokes about it.

But if he thought about it too long, if he let himself dwell on just how many people he'd killed, maimed, or psychologically traumatised in the name of some sick bit of self-indulgent humour…

Yeah. No. He didn't want to think about it.

No wonder the couple had been terrified of him.

Shame. Damn shame.

He exhaled, his breath condensing into a thin cloud of mist in the cold morning air. He watched the car vanish up the road, before turning around and heading back to his own parked vehicle.

Digging his key fob out of his pocket, he pressed the button. The car's lights flashed, obligingly. He got in. Carefully, he placed the bag containing the S.T.A.R. Labs device on the passenger seat.

In truth, he didn't need to handle it so gingerly. If the brief from the Calculator was accurate, the thing was supposed to be tougher than his car, when properly installed.
Which was saying something, since the vehicle that Earl Cooper had provided was stronger than some tanks, even if it looked like an ordinary reasonably-priced Rhelasian sedan.

That said, Jack wasn't sure the Calculator was fully qualified to comment on such things. Noah was good, but he wasn't omniscient. However, Noah had personally assured him that the brief was merely a summary of documentation written by the lead man on the project: Emil Hamilton himself. Superman's favourite scientist.

So, yes, the device was tough.

Of course, it wasn't properly installed and fully sealed up, since Punch and Jewelee had lifted it from S.T.A.R. Labs, just days before it was due to be shipped to a LexCorp facility for final assembly.

Best to be careful, then.

Jack buckled his seatbelt, which was a bit of an involved process, since the seatbelts in a Cooper's Garage special were more like the safety harness on a fighter jet.

It was entirely possible that the restraints were indeed harnesses from some kind of aircraft, since one of the unlabeled buttons on the dash would apparently trigger the ejection seats. Cooper had been quite clear on that.

He started the car up. This time, he remembered to trigger the external speakers, so the vehicle produced simulated engine noise. It wouldn't do to draw undue attention to himself, not at this stage. Ironically, the stealth functionality would potentially backfire on him, if someone thought to ask why a supposedly non-electric vehicle was almost perfectly quiet.

Jack pulled out of the parking lot, still humming to himself.

Next stop, New York City.

One more step.

***

"I've got him," the Question said.

Ollie snorted. "You sure?"

The Question turned round. By design, the man's mask was completely featureless, making it look like his face was an inhumanly blank expanse of skin. When he was fully suited up, the Question had no facial expressions to speak of.

Yet, despite this, Ollie had the distinct impression that the Question was giving him the stink eye.

"I'm sure," the Question said.

"You were wrong the last time," Ollie pointed out.

"I'm sure," the Question repeated.

"And the time before that," Ollie added.

The Question gestured with both hands. The holograms surrounding him swirled apart, pixels coalescing into a single immense map display.
A red icon blinked once, then twice, before finally settling into a steady glow.

"I've got him," the Question said, firmly.

Ollie smiled. "Well, then. Time to send in the big guns."

"You use a bow and arrow," the Question said, dryly. "Not a gun."

Ollie chuckled. "Oh, I don't mean me."

The Question angled his head to one side. "Then?"

Ollie touched his earpiece. "Green Arrow to Superman. Stand by for map data. You're good to go."
Chapter 10

Jack continued to hum to himself, tapping out a meandering rhythm on the steering wheel.

It wasn't quite in tune, or in time, with the song on the radio. For a couple of reasons.

Part of that was because he wasn't all that great at carrying a tune. Part of that was the fact he'd always marched to the beat of his own drummer, as it were.

But most of it was due to the fact he remembered the old Maniaks song going very differently. And that was starting to bother him. Just a little.

Of course, the song wasn't the original. That, alone, could account for some differences. It was a cover by some artiste he'd never heard of, Bo Maeve. The woman didn't quite have the vocal range of the Maniaks' frontwoman, in Jack's humble opinion.

Maybe he was just getting old. That was an old guy thing, right? Liking the original track better, constantly complaining that new music sucked. Damn, he was turning into one of those guys.

That was kind of frightening.

Besides, he was dwelling too much on the matter. It wasn't important. Not in and of itself. It was just another data point.

The radio was supposed to be a secondary medium. That was the point. That was the only reason that particular chunk of the media industry still existed - all the people who listened to it while doing other stuff, like driving or jogging.

He was supposed to filter it out. He was supposed to treat it as background noise.

Except he couldn't.

It was the little things that bothered him. All the little details. Like one song on the radio being wrong.

The broad strokes were all right, just as he'd remembered. But the details weren't.

He'd been able to find Earl Cooper's garage, for example. The building had been in the right place. Same street address, everything.

Of course, according to his memories, Cooper was an engineer that supplied the Batman and the other winged vigilantes of Gotham City. From what Jack could discern, Cooper was still plying his trade, but for the other team

Convenient for Jack, as it happened.

But wrong.

His Calculator accounts still worked, too. Same passcodes. Same methods of access. Just like he remembered. Good old Noah was just the same, too. Charging per question and information request, like some kind of money-powered search engine.

Jack had blown a few thousand dollars on trying to shake some Batman-related intel out of the Calculator, but the broker had been firm. No such individual, thank you, try again.
The same old story, once again.

The song on the radio faded, replaced by the station's stinger and the DJ's voice. This time, Jack managed to mentally tune out most of the inane chatter.

There was something about traffic on the roads, something about…

He jerked in his seat.

Something about a Superman sighting. Now, normally Jack wouldn't have paid much attention to that. Superhero gossip was just like celebrity news. The same thing, in fact.

But he was pretty sure that the Interstate number mentioned by the DJ was the very same highway that Jack, himself, was on. And that didn't bode well. It didn't bode well at all.

There was such a thing as coincidence. Random chance. Happenstance. But if you assumed life was a narrative, then there was also such a thing as foreshadowing. Signposting. Jack knew all about that.

Some comedians dealt in one-liners, short little zingers, quick off-the-cuff jokes. But Jack had always preferred to be more of an observational or storytelling comic. And that meant he was as much a writer as he was a performer.

Which meant…

As if on cue, the car's computer pinged, the warning tone cutting right over the radio broadcast.

A small patch of colour appeared on the windshield, in Jack's field of vision. It was translucent, which he figured was meant to keep the UI elements from obscuring his view - he was still driving at highway speeds.

Further icons appeared, surrounding the highlighted figure flying over the road.

The figure was human, in terms of overall profile, biometrics, and heat signature. But an ordinary person would be a pedestrian, not an airborne object. And a regular human wouldn't come up on scans as having a telekinetic forcefield, with further exotic emissions on top of that.

Jack watched, with faint bemusement, as the computer tried to decide whether the flying man was actually Kryptonian or a New God, for some reason. Of course, he didn't need the help. He had a pretty good guess about precisely who he was looking at.

He spun the wheel of the car, and floored the accelerator. He pushed his foot down on the gas pedal as far as it would go, until it touched the mat. His vehicle swerved, tires screeching in protest.

Light erupted through the car's windows, though the filters cut the illumination from blinding to merely distracting. That was fortunate, since Jack still had to dodge more beams.

He thumbed a button on the steering wheel, and a thin strip appeared along the top of the windshield, effectively serving as a heads-up display version of the rear-view mirror.

Jack wasn't sure if the blasts were warning shots, or if Superman was genuinely trying to hit the car.

But it looked like the beams were following him. Superman wasn't simply turning his head and
letting the eye beams burn into the highway around Jack's vehicle. It looked like the lines of red energy were changing direction in mid-air, even turning at ninety degree angles.

That was concerning, Jack mused. Very concerning.

But he could mull over the implications later. For the moment, he had to survive. Survive first, worry later.

"JOKER," a loud voice boomed, carrying through the car's audio pickups and into the cabin.

Jack winced. Even with the vehicle's systems compensating for his volume, it seemed that the Man of Steel also had lungs of titanium.

"STOP THE CAR. GET OUT. SURRENDER. THIS IS YOUR ONLY WARNING."

Jack sighed. He thought about trying to correct the assumption, but there was no use. Besides, Superman probably wouldn't care that much about Jack's brewing identity crisis. And it wasn't as if he had a new or better alias.

He wasn't the Joker, not anymore. But 'Jack Napier' didn't have the same ring to it.

Back when he'd tried breaking into showbiz full-time, his agent had recommended that he take a stage name, find something more catchy. Admittedly, Jack's agent hadn't been all that good, seeing as how the woman had been representing a bunch of wannabe comedians, prop acts, and other such things. But in that, the lady had a point.

Ultimately. Jack had taken that advice, in a way. He'd ended up calling himself 'the Joker' for years, even as he descended into madness. What was his agent's name, anyway? Jack could remember her face, but not…

Oh, right. She was dead. One of the first victims of Joker Venom, come to think of it. Damn.

Instead of stopping the car, Jack gunned the engine once more. And since he'd splurged back at Cooper's, there was more under the hood than just cylinders.

The engine shrieked, sending a vibration through the vehicle and up through Jack's seat in a way that he felt more than heard.

The car was fast, but Superman was faster. Jack had expected that. Superman was shooting light from his eyes. Another warning chime filled the cabin, as the car's armour integrity monitor started ticking down.

The outer shell of the vehicle was disintegrating. It wouldn't last.

But it only had to last long enough.
Chapter 11

There was a standard playbook for dealing with Superman.

Sorta. Kind of.

Supervillains were people, and just like any other folks, they liked to talk shop. Get enough
costumed headcases together, and inevitably the conversation would turn to past capers, past run-
ins with heroes… or hypothetical matchups.

For most people, fighting Superman was a hypothetical. Pure fantasy, straight ‘what-if’, not rooted
in reality. But everyone had some idea about how they’d go about taking a swing at the Big Blue,
even if their game plan was just to beg for mercy.

But Jack was one of the rare few. Jack had fought Superman before.

Or, more accurately, the Joker had fought Superman. But the difference between the Joker and
Jack Napier was a matter of sanity and morality, not… continuity of memory. They were the same
guy. He remembered every single thing he'd done, every single nasty trick. They weren't separate
people. Not really.

But the difference between the Joker and Jack Napier was big enough.

Jack couldn't simply replicate what he'd tried before. There was no way he could stomach taking
and threatening a bunch of hostages, or outright killing people just to get a rise out of the
Kryptonian.

No, he couldn't use his old tactics. He wasn't that guy.

Besides, the highway was mostly empty. Since Jack had been driving in the wee hours of the
morning, with only late night radio to keep him company.

The road wasn't completely empty. Radar and Lidar were picking up some kind of big rig a mile or
so away, and there was one pickup truck coming down the other direction. But for all intents and
purposes, the road was clear.

That was presumably why Superman felt it was acceptable to send his eye beams blasting
everywhere, without worrying about the collateral damage.

Oddly, a lot of people were surprised whenever Superman cut loose. People always got shocked at
the damage, whenever one of Superman's fights got out of hand.

They had lousy memories, maybe. The guy could move at supersonic speeds, he could bench press
buildings, and each of his eyeballs was a weapon of mass destruction. Superman spent most of his
time holding back, not showing off.

For Superman to be going straight to heavy firepower, against little old Jack Napier… hell, Jack
almost felt flattered. Almost. It was a compliment, of a sort, but it was also the kind of praise and
esteem that would get him killed.

But Jack didn't feel afraid.

Perhaps he should have. A normal person would have been terrified. Right?
Jack? No, he was calm.

That alone was mildly disturbing. But if he had to think about it, really think about it, Jack figured he wasn't normal. He was sane, certainly. Saner than he'd been in years and years.

But he wasn't normal. Not in the slightest.

He wasn't the Joker, no. But nor was he the old Jack Napier, that poor damn fool who'd dreamed about making it big as a comedian, before being forced to find real work. Before being forced to run jobs for the mob, for Grissom’s gang.

Before the accident. Before the chemicals. Before the surgery.

He wasn't sure who he was, now. Not yet. Not quite. But…

He knew how to be creative.

He kept his foot on the gas pedal and one hand on the wheel. But with his other arm, he pulled the bag with the S.T.A.R. Labs doohickey off the passenger seat, plopping it onto his lap.

The car's damage alerts continued to chime. On the dashboard, a little two-dimensional representation of the car turned blotchy yellow, then vivid orange, and finally a dangerous shade of red.

Jack ignored the alarms. He reached past the screen, and smacked the unlabeled button next to it.

Unfortunately, the car that Earl Cooper had sold him didn't have much in the way of offensive weapons. The engineer had been reluctant to sell Jack anything too dangerous. Personal gear and a fast car, sure. Some exotic materials, even.

But the old man had given Jack a nasty glower when he'd asked about getting his paws on a Toastmaster or two. So Jack hadn't pressed his luck.

Of course, it didn't really matter. Even a vehicle-mounted Toastmaster wouldn't do much more than give Superman a sunburn.

Conventional weaponry wasn't much use against Superman. Everyone knew that.

And yet, people shot at him anyway. That was also a thing. There was tons and tons of footage floating around the Internet, news clips, mobile phone recordings, security cameras, showing just that. People unloading ordinary firearms at Superman, with the bullets just bouncing off.

Outside the community, most people figured that was dumb. Hell, inside the community, a lot of supervillains sneered at that behaviour too. Waste of effort, they called it. Stupid.

Jack had a different opinion. Shooting at Superman wasn't wasted effort.

Even if the guy was nigh-invulnerable, he could be distracted.

Jack's car didn't have big guns. But it did come with ejector seats.

With a whoosh of igniting rockets, the passenger seat exploded upwards, shooting through the roof of the car - and immediately turning Jack's sensible hard-top four-door sedan into a sporty coupé convertible in the process.

Losing the roof was bad for the vehicle's armour coverage. Catastrophically bad. Without the top
on, there was a good chance Superman could just zap him from above and fry him like an egg.

But with any luck, Superman would be at least slightly put off by taking a rocket-propelled padded faux-leather chair to the face.

Jack heard the Kryptonian yell. It wasn't a shout of pain, but one of annoyance. That was the best Jack could hope for.

Not great, but good enough.

Jack turned off the road, going over a concrete divider and just barely weaving his car through two bollards. Sparks flew from the already-weakened side panelling on the driver's side as he scraped by.

He wasn't sure what commercial establishment was in front of him, owing to how the storefront wasn't lit. It wasn't one of those ubiquitous LexCorp-owned businesses, since the colours were wrong, but that was all Jack could tell.

However, Jack could tell that the store had big front windows. And the thin metal shutters were nowhere near enough to keep out four tons of fast moving armoured automobile.

Jack braced himself as the car crashed into the store. Then he bailed out, hauling the bag with the stolen S.T.A.R. Labs device along with him.

The second lesson Jack had learnt about fighting Superman… was that it was absolutely essential to counteract the man's mobility advantage.

Superman could fly. A lot of heroes could, it was one of the most common metahuman powers out there. But Jack couldn't. Not without fancy boots or some kind of rocket strapped to his ass.

Since he couldn't get up to Superman's level, the next best thing was to force the Kryptonian to follow him. Getting indoors was a good tactic against the Man of Steel.

It was difficult to hide from Superman for any significant length of time. Those eyes of his could see through walls. Logically, that meant Superman could shoot through walls, too. Though Jack had never seen him do it.

Jack figured that was more because Superman was afraid of causing excessive damage, than any lack of capability. It tied back into Superman's whole thing about constantly holding back.

Jack dove between the aisles and racks of merchandise. The store was dimly lit - barely lit at all, aside from the glow of smoke detectors, exit signs, and the glare cast by his own car's headlights.

But he'd spent enough time running from the Bat across rooftops in the dead of night. A darkened store was nothing.

At least, he remembered running from the Bat. All the evidence insisted that there was no Bat. He had to keep that in mind. The pieces were coming together, but he wasn't completely sure. Not yet.
Chapter 12

Ollie liked to think of himself as a good-natured guy. He was also quite aware that other people didn't always share that opinion.

He had layers, that was the thing. He had different faces, different masks.

There was Ollie Queen, playboy billionaire, industrialist, philanthropist, card-carrying member of the old boy's club, and the man who threw the best parties in Star City.

Then there was the Green Arrow, Star City's very own costumed defender, the finest shot in the world - and for another twenty-four hours, also the de-facto leader of the Justice League.

Both those men were cheerful, bright, and devil-may-care types.

But then there was Ollie's other face, the one he wore as Oliver Queen, Chairman and CEO of Queen Industries. The face he sometimes had to wear in the boardroom.

He was wearing that face, even though he was dressed in Lincoln green instead of the sombre black of his usual business suits. As the Green Arrow, Ollie dressed much like Robin Hood.

But he definitely wasn't feeling like a merry man.

"You're telling me," Ollie growled, "that this is the only footage we have? The same crap that all the networks are running with? The same stuff that's racking up hits on LexVid?"

The Question didn't seem bothered, even though Ollie was using his full volume 'angry CEO' voice.

"It is amazing," the Question said, "that there is any recording at all. If the security cameras hadn't captured the fight, then..."

"Fight?" Ollie shook his head. "That wasn't a fight. That was a bloody embarrassment."

"You believe," the Question said, "that the Joker made a fool out of Superman."

"Yes," Ollie ground out. "I do. Because that's what people are saying. So that's how it is. That means we have a problem."

The Question didn't seem convinced. "Superman is capable of managing his own media presence."

"Sure," Ollie said. "He's got staff for that. We're the Justice League, not his PR team. That's not the problem. The problem is that shit rolls downhill."

The Question returned Ollie's look, blankly, obviously not understanding what Ollie was getting at.

Ollie ran a hand over his face. "You've never seen him angry? You don't want to see him angry. Trust me."

"Noted," the Question said.

Ollie focused his attention back on the grainy low-resolution video. The Question had used the Hall of Justice's computers to blow the file up and enhance it, but there was only so much that technology could do. It was still technology, not magic.
The boys and girls at Queen R&D were collaborating with LexCorp on a thaumaturgically enhanced computer system based on New God hardware. But that project was still in the early stages.

They didn't have mass-production miracles in a box. That was still a few years out.

"If he had a body cam," Ollie said, "this would be so much easier."

The Question shifted his head. "You wish to tell Superman to wear a camera?"

Ollie winced. "God, no."

"Then analysis of this level is the best we can do," the Question said.

Ollie made a frustrated sound, somewhere between a wheeze and a cough. "Fine. What have you got?"

The Question extended a gloved hand at the big display. The detective gestured, and the images sprang into motion.

The angle was awkward, and there was no sound. No colour, either. But the sight of Superman descending into the frame was unmistakable, his cape billowing around him. Superman paused for a moment, looking around the ruined store front and the crashed vehicle.

Then Superman vanished.

The image changed, switching to a different camera's view. In the new picture, a much thinner man was running, weaving in between racks of… it looked like hockey gear. Sticks, pads, and other sundry items. The place was some kind of sporting goods store.

Superman appeared in front of the running figure, cutting him off at the mouth of an aisle. Then Superman moved, again, turning into a blur that the camera struggled to track.

"He punches him, there," Ollie observed, frowning. "And the Joker, what, tanks the punch?"

"Not precisely," the Question remarked, pausing the video. "You can see, the Joker is knocked down, and back."

On the projected screen, the skinny silhouette of the Joker was frozen awkwardly in mid-air, in the process of slamming into a wall full of mountain bikes and cycling equipment.

"Yup," Ollie agreed. "But he's in one piece. Not two. Supes wasn't pulling that punch."

The Question shook his head. "The force used by Superman was only a fraction of his maximum observed strength."

"You know what I mean," Ollie said. "That's not the type of power he uses on normal squishy human beings. That's what he uses on metas. But the Joker gets up."

"He gets up," the Question confirmed, restarting the video.

Ollie scowled. It was possible the Joker was injured. But if the man was, he didn't show it.

The grainy shape of the Joker untangled itself from the equally grainy images of fallen bicycles, tossing and kicking them aside.
"Hold up, stop," Ollie ordered, raising his voice. "Pause."

Obligingly, the Question did so.

Ollie jabbed a finger at the video. "There, what's that around him? A forcefield, a Terminan inertia shield?"

"Potentially," the Question said. "However, independent analysis suggests it is more likely to be some variant of Theodore Knight's equipment."

Ollie eyed the Question. "Independent analysis?"

The Question nodded. "LexVid comments. I can refer you to the relevant threads."

Ollie squinted. "You read the comments?"

"I read everything," the Question said.
Chapter 13

Ollie didn't know how to react to that, because there were so many things wrong with the statement. He decided to ignore it instead, pushing it out of his mind. "Where did the Joker get that? He's a chemical guy. He uses poisons, toxins, and gas. That level of tech is way out of his profile."

The Question shrugged. "Where did he acquire his vehicle? A third party supplier. The Joker is native to Gotham. It is most likely that he made contact with the Mechanic."

Ollie frowned. "Who?"

"We have known for some time that the Gotham City underworld has an… unusual degree of technical sophistication," the Question said. "Typically such anomalies are the work of Intergang. But Mister Mannheim is fully aware of our moratorium on disseminating advanced or alien technology to Gotham's rogues."

Ollie stroked his beard. "They've got their own supplier. Someone in Gotham."

"Yes," the Question said. "Tentatively, the unknown subject is called 'the Mechanic' in our files. Subject, or subjects, plural. But all signs point to a single source."

Ollie sighed. "One of these days, we've got to do something about all these mad scientists and inventors. It's getting out of hand."

"Agreed," the Question said. "But that is a conundrum for a different day. Today, the Joker is the matter at hand."

"Right," Ollie muttered. "So Supes knows the Joker has a cosmic belt, an inertia belt, whatever. Something. He knows that punching the guy isn't going to work, not quickly. So he goes for the grapple."

"Close quarters combat is the preferred way to disable such an opponent," the Question said. "Often, shields are configured to be conforming or body-hugging, as the Joker's seemed to be, and thus the user can still be restrained…"

"I remember the training scenarios," Ollie stated. "I wrote the training scenarios, in case you've forgotten."

"You may wish to revise your scenarios," the Question suggested.

Ollie thought about arguing, but he decided not to fight that battle. In truth, he was already taking notes in his head. He made a grudging noise of acknowledgement.

Taking that as an indication he should continue, the Question unpaused the video.

Superman blurred forward, moving close to the Joker. Then there was a flurry of motion that the camera couldn't fully capture - and the Man of Steel went reeling backwards, clawing at his own face.

Ollie flinched. He'd been expecting the moment. But it still looked damn painful.

The Question stopped the playback. "The video is unclear, but based on Superman's preliminary
report, I believe the Joker had one of his squirting flowers concealed beneath his coat."

Ollie blinked. "What, like… a clown flower, sprays water?"

"The Joker is known to wear polyester or plastic flowers on his shirts, vests, or jackets," the Question explained, "connected to a squeeze bulb, or a more sophisticated aerosol mechanism."

"Okay," Ollie said. "And he's a chemical guy, okay, but what's he got that could… "

Ollie trailed off, as the obvious answer occurred to him.

"It was some form of liquid Kryptonite," the Question said. "Possibly Kryptonite particles in suspension. Superman's reported symptoms are consistent with Kryptonite exposure and Kryptonite inhalation."

Ollie sighed. "Really? I'd have thought his last power-up would have left him immune. He's still vulnerable to that stuff?"

"He is," the Question said. "It is possible, at this stage, that Superman's continued vulnerability to the mineral is more conceptual than biological."

"You mean," Ollie translated, "he's weak to Kryptonite because he's supposed to be weak to Kryptonite."

"Just so," the Question said. "It is widely known on Earth, and therefore part of his… legend, for lack of a better term."

Ollie mumbled a few choice curse words under his breath. Then, more audibly, he said: "Alright. Good to know. Let's see the rest of it."

"There is not much more," the Question said, as he restarted the video.

On the screen, the grainy and distorted figure of the Joker stopped to pick up something. Even with the poor resolution, it was quickly apparent that the Joker was holding up a baseball or softball bat.

The Joker's legs slid apart, his body bending at the waist and knees. Then, in a smooth and powerful motion, he swung, rotating with the strike. Slamming the bat into Superman's head.

Superman remained on his feet, but the Kryptonian was visibly stunned, his knees buckling. Then the Joker hit him again. And again. And again.

Until the Man of Steel toppled, and went over.

Ollie looked at the video, his expression grim. "What are your LexVid commentators saying about that?"

The Question took a deep breath. The flesh-like material of his mask distorted just a little, as he did so, momentarily ruining the illusion that he had no face.

"Although we are aware that Superman's assailant in the video is the Joker," the Question began, "the general public is not. Whoever leaked the video, likely one of the store's employees, or perhaps a member of the police, was also unaware."

"He's not dressed like he usually does," Ollie observed. "More like a homeless guy than a crazy clown. The video's black and white. You can't see his skin tone."
"Indeed," the Question said. "As such, both social media and mainstream media reports are referring to him by another name."

Ollie's eyes narrowed. "Which is?"

"Hashtag," the Question said, "Batman."
Chapter 14

There was a media-friendly meeting room in the Hall of Justice, one that the tour groups got to see every day. It had a big round table with the Justice League's symbol emblazoned on it, made to look like polished marble. The table was surrounded by a ring of seats, each one decorated with a specific superhero's emblem.

It looked grand. Bright and inspiring.

But the League barely used the room. It was occasionally employed for formal ceremonies and press conferences, but that barely counted. Ollie could count the number of times he'd set foot in the place on the fingers of one hand, at least over the course of the past year.

For serious business, the Justice League used a far more secure location, one that could only be accessed by teleporters, zeta beams, and other such technology. Seeing as how it was buried beneath millions of tons of solid rock, in the heart of a mountain.

Ollie walked forward as the teleportation effect released its grip on his molecules. The sensation always unnerved him, but he tried not to let it show, especially since he was among his masked colleagues.

He'd fallen off the arrival platform, one time, and the others had never let him live it down.

"Recognised," a computerised voice said, "Green Arrow. Delta One Niner Four One One One Bravo."

"You're early," said the Flash. The other man smirked beneath his cowl, his lips twisting upwards.

The League's premiere speedster was leaning against the dividing wall that blocked line-of-sight between the arrival area and the main chamber of the mountain fortress.

As usual, the man's red and yellow costume was pristine, unlike Ollie's grubby gear. Obviously, the Flash had found time to change or do his laundry before the meeting. Sadly, unlike the Flash, Ollie only had a limited number of hours each day.

"So are you, Thawne," Ollie drawled. "You're early, too. Is the fastest man alive afraid of being late?"

"I'm conscientious," the Flash replied, making a show of brushing a nonexistent speck of dust off his shoulder. "It's not polite to keep people waiting."

Ollie snorted in disbelief. "You, being polite?"

The Flash smiled back. "I'm trying something new. Besides, it's only polite to be here, when the boss gets in."

"Hawkgirl's the new chair," Ollie pointed out, spreading his hands. "I handed the keys over to her this morning."

"Oh, no, no, no," the Flash said, waving a hand dismissively, "I don't mean you, or Vanessa. League chairman's one thing, but you're not the boss of me."

Ollie arched his eyebrows. "Should I feel insulted?"
"I don't know," the Flash said, waggling his own brows beneath his mask. "Should you?"

Ollie opened his mouth, preparing to deliver a scathingly witty retort. But then the arrival chamber vibrated, with a deep rumbling boom.

Golden light shone through an opening in space, briefly silhouetting a broad-shouldered and cape-clad figure.

As the oppressive roar of the boom tube faded into silence, the Man of Steel floated off the arrival dias, his feet not touching the floor.


"Lex," Ollie said, plastering a broad smile on his face. "You're looking better! Just out of medical?"

"Two hours in a yellow sun chamber," the Kryptonian replied, curtly. "Three hours of tissue reconstruction."

"You know," Ollie said, waving a gloved hand in front of his face. "If you wore a breathing mask, a helmet, some sort of radiation shield, you wouldn't have so much trouble with Kryptonite."

Superman glared at Ollie. The expression was actually genuinely intimidating, since the man's eyes were glowing red, a fact that was readily apparent in the low light of the underground base.

"Covering my face," Superman said, "would be tantamount to admitting weakness."

It wasn't wise to taunt the most powerful being on Earth, but Ollie couldn't help it. He cleared his throat, then said: "As opposed to having an actual weakness."

"It's about image," the Flash suggested, with a grin. The speedster held up both hands, framing his own face. "He wants the cameras to always get his good side. It's not like he has a secret identity, not like the rest of us mere peons."

"True," Ollie acknowledged. "Everyone knows he's Kelex of Krypton, or since most can't pronounce the Kryptonian correctly… just Lex."

Superman stared at Ollie, then the Flash, looking at both of them in turn. "Are we done with this attempt at small talk? I was under the impression we had a meeting to attend to."

The Flash sketched an elaborate bow, throwing his arm out in the direction of the main chamber. "After you, milord."
"Napier, Jack," the Question said. "Age unknown, presumed caucasian, presumed male..."

"Wait a sec," the Flash interrupted, lifting a hand and waving it in the air. "Presumed caucasian, male? He looks like a white guy to me."

"A reasonable assumption," the Question replied, unruffled. "But we do not know with a hundred percent certainty."

"What," the Flash joked, "nobody looked inside his purple pants to see?"

The Question gave the Flash a level look, turning his featureless fleshy mask to face the speedster. "We live in a world where brain-body transplants are possible, and genetic resequencing is commonplace."

"Whatever. You're making this way too complicated," Hawkgirl said. She stretched out in her seat, planted her boots on the conference table, and folded her arms. Behind her, partially squashed by the chair, her wings twitched.

"Yeah," the Flash agreed. "Vanessa's right. No need to overthink this. He's Napier, we know that."

"We do not," the Question countered. "His arrest and patient records are under that name. But most of the Joker's other records, physical and digital, have been misplaced."

Hawkgirl puffed her cheeks out, blowing air through her mouth. "Jeez, did someone leave 'em in a taxi? Fell through the sofa cushions? Left 'em in the wrong pants?"

"Nothing so mundane," the Question said. "Deliberate action, not negligence. It appears that the Joker's early background has been systematically erased."

"He's cleaned his tracks," Ollie mused, scratching his jaw. "Cleared his history. Paid someone to do it for him, maybe."

"That's a real service? I should look into that," the Flash said, thoughtfully. "There's a whole lot of browser history I'd like wiped, especially if I kick the bucket before factory-resetting all my devices."

Hawkgirl laughed, her voice trilling in a manner that was just a touch too high-pitched for comfort.

"I would be grateful if we remained on topic," Superman stated, in a deceptively calm voice. His voice was almost conversational. But his expression was harsh, and his eyes continued to burn bright red.

"I concur," Wonder Woman said. Unlike the Kryptonian, the body language of the League's resident witch was genuinely casual. She even had her phone out, her fingers idly flicking back and forth over the touchscreen.

Ollie couldn't see her screen, but it seemed like she was sending text messages rather than playing a game or taking notes.

There wasn't supposed to be any cellular reception in the League's mountain base, considering how deeply buried they were.
But Ollie knew that the princess was personally involved in the League-backed efforts to combine magic and technology, particularly to reverse-engineer their many captured samples of New God technology.

He was pretty sure that she had enchanted her own mobile phone as a proof of concept.

Having any sort of live communication device in the League's secure meeting room constituted a breach of the group's security protocols. Ollie was well aware of that. But he didn't feel inclined to bring it up.

Putting Wonder Woman on the spot was a hazardous endeavour, bearing in mind that she was more than capable of turning people into animals on a whim.

She'd turned Ollie into a pig, once, simply to make a point. Only for a few seconds, and she'd restored him right after. But he'd felt wrong for about a full hour, like he should have been walking on all fours and grunting.

However, it seemed the Flash was a braver man than Ollie was. The speedster leaned over the conference table, resting his elbow on the tabletop. He all but leered at Wonder Woman.

"That's rich," the Flash jibed, "since you've been on the phone all this time. You even listening to the Question's briefing? I know Mister Q is boring, but...

"I'm updating the Lantern on the situation," Wonder Woman said, archly. "He wanted to be informed, even if he couldn't join us."

Hawkgirl lifted a finger, twirling it around. "Ain't he, like, in space or whatever? Offworld?"

"He is currently in the Vega system," Superman stated. "Sector Two Eight Two Eight. Suppressing the remnants of the Citadel's forces."

Hawkgirl whistled. "And you're chatting with him? That's some data plan."

Wonder Woman smiled, enigmatically.

Ollie breathed a sigh. "I take it you've cracked the faster-than-light comms?"

"Fascinating as this is," Superman interrupted, raising his voice an octave, "can we return to discussing the Joker?"

"If I may," rumbled a voice from the back of the room, "it is not so crucial to delve into the Joker's history, or lack thereof. If it becomes necessary, it can be revisited. But it would be more efficient to dissect his latest actions, and predict his next move."

Ollie turned in his chair, looking over his shoulder - just in time to catch the tall spindly shape of the Martian Manhunter, as the alien faded into view.

The Martian appeared face-first, his green features materialising a few seconds before the rest of him. It was a little like the Cheshire Cat, except not remotely catlike at all, and with a disconcerting rippling effect that was nauseating to look at.

"Glad you could make it, Ma'al," Ollie said.

That was a lie, naturally. Ollie didn't like hanging around the mind-reader. The Martian had a way of looking at people like he was staring right through them, and judging them in the process. But
Ollie said it anyway, even though he knew the Martian would sense the polite falsehood.

"I apologise for my lateness," the Martian Manhunter said, floating across the chamber and easing himself into his chair.

"Didn't hear the teleport arrival message," the Flash murmured, eying the Manhunter. "What did you do, walk here?"

The Martian Manhunter gave the Flash a disapproving look, and didn't deign to respond.

"I will move forward, then," the Question said, from his position at the head of the table.

The Question made a small motion with his fingers, and the images on the room's holographic projector changed. The mugshots of the Joker vanished, replaced by the three-dimensional shape of a complicated-looking piece of equipment.

"This is the Mobius-type sensor suite that was stolen from S.T.A.R. Labs Washington last week," the Question said. "Intended for installation on the prototype LexCorp global surveillance satellite."

"I thought you said that break-in wasn't connected with the Joker," Ollie accused.

The Question inclined his head. "I believed so, at the time. My initial supposition was mistaken. We now believe that the Joker contracted Punch and Jewelee to acquire the sensor suite on his behalf."

"Huh," the Flash said. "He's got the thingy, then?"

"It was in his possession when I encountered him in New Jersey," Superman said. "He did not leave it behind when he fled the scene."

Hawkgirl squinted at the hologram. She pouted. "He's got a fancy camera? Okay. What's the big deal? What's he gonna do, take nude photos of celebs and post 'em online?"

"Potentially," the Question said, "the Mobius-type sensors can do that - they could be used to capture images of any individual on the planet, regardless of the intervening space. They are one of the products of our efforts to replicate the technology of New Genesis and Apokolips. As for what the Joker might use it for... such a plan would be consistent with the Joker's previous modus operandi."

Hawkgirl's eyes widened. "You're shitting me."

Superman made a growling noise. "He isn't. Theoretically, you could use the Mobius for that. It'd be a ridiculous waste of its scanning capabilities, but yes, you could. Ridiculous would be the Joker's signature. If he was behaving to form."

"He isn't, though," Ollie pointed out.

"Indeed," the Question stated.

The Flash held his hands up, crossing them into the classic symbol for a time-out. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, back up, just one sec."

The Question looked at the speedster. "Yes, Flash?"

The Flash leaned forward. "We've got cameras that can take nude pictures of people, like, from
anywhere? Why didn't anyone tell me this?"

The Martian Manhunter cleared his throat. "I recommend that we erase his memory. At once."

Ollie shook his head.
Jack sipped his coffee.

It wasn't very good coffee, which was kind of disappointing. It had come out of a fancy machine, and the brewing process had involved a whole lot of steam and whirring noises.

Hell, he'd had better cups of joe from Sundollar. He'd had better instant stuff too, come to that.

Either his palette wasn't all that refined, or the Vlatavans weren't buying their beans from the correct kind of impoverished developing nation.

Of course, there was the chance that his taste buds were fried. He'd survived taking a dunk in toxic waste, after all.

And beyond that first near-lethal chemical bath which had turned him into the Joker, he'd been exposed to a whole lot of other substances over the years that weren't fit for the consumption of ordinary humans. Or animals.

Plus, on top of that, he'd been subjected to years and years of Arkham Asylum cafeteria coffee, which was its own form of traumatic experience, in and of itself.

Given that history, it was a minor miracle that he could taste anything at all.

"I take it," Count Vertigo said, pleasantly, "that this isn't a social call."

The Count wasn't in the same room as Jack, which likely accounted for the man's relaxed mein. Jack remembered Vertigo being much more jumpy in his presence.

At the moment, Count Vertigo was talking to Jack through a screen and speakers, via some form of off-brand teleconference setup.

"Well," Jack admitted, "you got me there. I'm one of those terrible people that only writes or calls when I need something. It's a failing, I know. Very rude of me. I should change."

"I see," Vertigo said, steepling his fingers. "Enlighten me, Joker. What is so important that you saw the need to break into my nation's mission? At half past midnight?"

"I thought I'd be considerate," Jack replied. "I'm already imposing on you, figured I'd do it in as nicely as possible."

"Considerate, you say," Vertigo murmured. "You broke into the building. Threatened the security officers at gunpoint. Demanded an audience with me. You claim that this is considerate?"

"Sure," Jack said, saluting with his coffee cup. "Vlatava's, what, seven hours ahead of New York?"

"We are," the Count said, cautiously. "I fail to see…"

Jack smiled. "You're a busy man, aren't you? Head of state, Grand Poohbah, he who bears a bunch of titles, et cetera. Your daily planner's gotta be packed. Hands to kiss, babies to shake, whatever a royal blueblood does."

On the teleconference screen, the Count rolled his eyes. The nobleman's polite expression slipped a little, revealing a hint of irritation. "Get to the point, Joker, if you please?"
"What I'm getting at, my dear Count," Jack continued, "is that... if you want to get hold of a busy man, always ask him for a breakfast meeting. Get him at the start of the day, bright and early - before he goes into the office, where his schedule's no doubt all filled up."

"Sound advice," Count Vertigo said. "It might even be applicable, had you asked for a meeting, instead of breaking into an official Vlatavan building and demanding one."

"I don't know about that," Jack said. "I mean, is this an official Vlatavan building? It's the permanent mission to the United Nations, sure, I get that. Does that count as an embassy, or not? I never paid much attention in civics class."

Count Vertigo twitched, visibly. Even through a transatlantic connection, Jack could tell that the other man was losing his composure.

"Joker," Vertigo said, warningly.

Jack smiled again, holding his look of bemusement for a second. Then he let the smile lapse, and schooled his face into a more serious countenance.

He had to be careful. He wanted to keep the Count off-balance, but he didn't want to piss the guy off. Jack wanted him shaken, but not angry.

There was something thematically appropriate about trying to nudge a man named Vertigo, but Jack resisted the urge to comment on it. As far as he knew, the noble family that ran the nation of Vlatava was legitimately, genuinely, called 'Vertigo'.

And Count Werner Vertigo wasn't all that happy when people made smart remarks about his name.

Given that Count Vertigo was also a part-time supervillain, one who used technology to disrupt both hearing and equilibrium, Jack figured that the Count had absolutely no leg to stand on. He was damn well asking to be made fun of.

But Jack was playing nice. Mostly. So he steered clear of the buttons that would push Vertigo fully over the edge, and chose his words with care.

"Alright," Jack said. "Let's talk about this."

He put the coffee cup down, pushing it to one side. Then he picked up the bag he'd hauled all the way across state lines, and all the way through a fight with Superman.

Jack tugged on the zipper, exposing the contents.

"I warn you," Vertigo said, "if that's a bomb, and you plan to hold Vlatavan citizens hostage..."

"Come on," Jack protested. "Give me some credit, will you? If I was going to bring a bomb in here and hold the place hostage, it'd be during regular business hours. There's hardly anyone here, this time of night."

"For some reason," Vertigo remarked, "I do not feel reassured."

Jack waved his right hand. "Look, Werner. Can I call you Werner?"

"No," Count Vertigo said.

"I'm doing you a favour, Werner," Jack carried on. "What I've got here? You'll like this. Trust me. It's the kind of thing my favourite dictator would love. That's you, by the way."
The Count frowned. "Your favourite, am I?"

"Yeah," Jack said. "Of course, I tried breaking into the Bialyan mission first, but it turns out they don't have a good secure line to their capital. Disgraceful, really."
"Vlatava cannot help you," Count Vertigo said, stiffly.

Jack pointed a finger at the ceiling, waving the digit from side to side. "I'm a big believer in consent, so I gotta ask. Is that a 'no means no', or are you playing hard to get?"

The Count ran his hands through his hair. "Allow me to be clear. Vlatava doesn't have the capacity to help you. Nor do I want any part in this."

Jack coughed into a clenched fist. "When you say that..."

The screen hanging on the wall of the Vlatavan diplomatic mission's video conference room wasn't that large, merely the size of a regular television.

But that was sufficient size to make Count Werner Vertigo's face larger than life, as he bent forward over the table on his side of the connection, putting his face closer to the camera.

The resolution was better than Jack had thought. He could almost count the pores and blemishes on Vertigo's face.

The ruler of Vlatava was a reasonably good-looking man, and Jack was secure enough in his masculinity and sexuality to say that. Nonetheless, there were a couple of places where Vertigo needed to moisturise.

However, Jack doubted that Werner Vertigo would be receptive towards unsolicited grooming tips.

On the screen, Count Vertigo demanded: "What do you think Vlatava is, Joker?"

Jack blinked. "Is that a trick question? Give me enough time, and I could find you on a map, if that's what you mean. Somewhere on the Baltic sea, right? Sort of a reverse 'L' shape?"

"We are not," Vertigo said, "a nation of mad scientists, no matter what you seem to believe."

"You've got that balance-altering thing," Jack said. "That tech you wear, which lets you do the woo-woo-woo, everybody fall down, that thing?"

"Technology that I perfected myself," Vertigo retorted, "after years of study and funding from my own personal coffers, not Vlatava's. Joker, please understand, the largest economic sector of my country is agriculture. Food. Primary commodities. Timber. We have good soil and forests. We do not have secret laboratories and underground bases scattered across our countryside."

"See," Jack pointed out, "that's what a person with secret labs would say."

"I am listing facts, Joker," Vertigo said. "Your inability to comprehend reality does not alter the facts on the ground."

"Look," Jack tried, "you're former Soviet bloc, right? Surely the reds left something behind..."

"No," Vertigo said. "They did not. If you want a mad scientist, you should bother the Frenchman and his paramour. Not I."
Truth be told, Jack had considered contacting the Brain. But Jack didn't have much leverage to use against the French scientist. The same applied to Sivana, and most other top-tier technologically inclined supervillains. The true super-geniuses of the world were a law unto themselves.

There was a reason why he'd gone straight to national governments as his first recourse. Jack had figured the world's rogue states would have both the money and resources to throw at the problem... while, at the same time, also being hungry enough to make a deal with Jack.

"Werner, old buddy, old pal," Jack said. "If you'll just..."

"I am Count Werner of the House of Vertigo," the Count stated.

"Well, yeah," Jack said. "I know."

"Do you? I am the leader of a country, Joker," Vertigo said. "I am not one of your criminal accomplices. I am not one of your unsavoury associates. I am taking a large enough risk in speaking to you, never mind helping you. Do you have any idea what that device is?"

"Uh, yeah," Jack replied. "I had it stolen, remember? I'm the guy trying to make a deal with you?"

Jack patted the open bag on his lap, where the stolen S.T.A.R. Labs doohickey still sat.

"It is New God technology," Vertigo said, emphasising the words. "You're a crook, Joker. Let me put this in words you understand. Surely you understand the concept of merchandise that is too 'hot' to sell?"

"Now, now," Jack protested. "You can use other metaphors. You don't need to make everything about heist movies. I'll also accept circus talk, card analogies, and references to stand-up comedy."

"This is no joking matter," Vertigo said, holding a hand up. "Let me stop you before you make some inane comment about your own alias making everything into a joke. The Justice League keeps a closed fist around all equipment derived from the technology of New Genesis and Apokolips. A tightly closed fist. They want a monopoly, and they do not take kindly to anyone trying to break it."

Jack hummed, pursing his lips. "Ship's kinda sailed on that, hasn't it? There's tons of Apokolips stuff lying around, since they invaded Earth and everything. And there's Bialya."

"The League has been systematically tracking down and securing every bit of Apokoliption equipment left behind," Vertigo said. "Every weapon, every scrap of armour, every fallen corpse. As for Bialya? They have been brought to heel, Joker."

"What," Jack said, "no first mover advantage for being the first to market?"

"Quite the contrary," Count Vertigo corrected. "Bialya has been punished harshly for collaborating with Apokolips in the years leading up to the invasion. The international community has not looked kindly on Bialya for providing a foothold for aliens to attack our planet. For now, it remains a sovereign nation, and Colonel Harjavti has managed to retain power. But his position is tenuous."

"So," Jack said, "moral of the story is, if you're gonna get involved in an interstellar war, make sure you don't pick the losing side."

"How astute. I look forward to reading your treatise on statecraft," Vertigo said, with an excessive amount of sarcasm.
"So," Jack summed up, running a hand over the S.T.A.R. Labs sensor package resting on his thighs, as if it were a funny-shaped cat, "you're not interested in this thing. And neither is Bialya."

"I believe you will find," Vertigo said, "that Colonel Harjavti has abandoned all ambitions of equipping his army with Apokoliptian arms. The man is deathly afraid that the Justice League will descend from the heavens and tear his head off, just like Superman did to Darkseid."

"So," Jack said, again, "that's a hard 'no', then? There's nobody out there who's willing to play with a shiny piece of bleeding edge tech?"

On the teleconference screen, Count Vertigo sat back, pressing his hands together. His expression changed, as if he'd suddenly thought of something. "Not... quite."

Jack blinked. "Now, now. Are you leading me on, Werner?"

"Perhaps," Vertigo said, carefully, like he was questioning himself even as he spoke, "I may have a suggestion."
Chapter 18

Jack wasn't much of a language guy. He wasn't a polyglot like Eddie, or the Bat. But he supposed there were only so many syllables the human tongue could produce.

Case in point, the leader of North Rhelasia was General Singh Manh Li.

The man didn't look like a Singh to Jack. There was no turban in sight. He was clean-shaven. If the guy was a Sikh, he was a really bad one.

In all likelihood, it was just a coincidence. The Rhelasian peninsula wasn't anywhere near the Indian subcontinent.

That was a shame, since Jack was feeling hungry for a curry. But he figured there wasn't much in the way of Indian takeout in the Socialist Republic of Rhelasia. There wasn't much else, in fact. The insular country wasn't known for its dining scene.

Jack reckoned most North Rhelasians were subsisting on rice and cabbage, assuming they had any food at all.

Naturally, despite North Rhelasia's abject poverty, General Singh Manh Li didn't look like he was famished. The guy seemed like he had a healthy appetite and plenty of fat stored up for the winter. And the winter after that.

"You agree," the General said, intensely, "the machine is ours?"

"Of course," Jack assured the General. "You're my favourite dictator, after all. I'm not going to pull a fast one. Honest Jack, I am. If you can't trust me, who can you trust?"

For some inexplicable reason, General Singh didn't seem convinced. Or was that General Li? General Manh Li? Jack wasn't sure what the proper form of address was.

Well, one of the North Rhelasian flunkies had tried to give him a full protocol briefing, but Jack hadn't been listening.

It was probably 'General Singh'. That seemed right. Jack recalled that people in certain parts of the world usually put their family names at the front, most likely for better alphabetical sorting. Had to keep the government databases neat, after all. No point making things difficult for the secret police.

"In Rhelasia," General Singh said, "we do not trust Americans."

"That's kinda racist," Jack answered, cheerfully. "But since we're such good buddies, you and I, I'll let that slide."

Unfortunately, the General was not amused. The man didn't laugh. He didn't smile. He simply glowered at Jack, his mouth and eyebrows expressing nothing but disapproval.

He didn't find Jack funny. Maybe it was the language barrier, since English was clearly not the General's mother tongue.

Or maybe the General was trying to intimidate him.

But Jack had played to some tough rooms before, in the days when he'd tried to do gigs in Gotham's club scene. General Singh was nothing compared to a rowdy crowd of Gothamites on a
"Look," Jack said, holding his hands up. "I'm a modern sort of guy, okay? I'm trying to simplify, trying to declutter. Less physical stuff, you know how it is. I'm getting everything digital, these days. Where am I gonna find the space to store a global-spanning super intrusive alien scanner and all the junk needed to run it? Have you seen property prices in Gotham, these days? Market's crazy, I tell you."

The leader of North Rhelasia stared at Jack, blankly. There was a long pause, long enough that it started to become awkward.

Then the uniformed woman standing next to the General bent over, placing her face closer to the General's ear. She whispered quickly in Rhelasian.

"I can go slower if your translator needs to catch up," Jack offered, helpfully.

"There is no need," the General said, followed by something in Rhelasian.

The woman listened carefully, before turning to Jack. "The great leader wishes to confirm that all you desire, in exchange, is to be the first one to use the machine."

"Bingo," Jack said. "That's all. I get first shot, then it's all yours. Look at it this way, it's win-win. I'll be the guinea pig. If it ends up cooking my brain in my skull, no loss to you, right?"

Jack waited patiently as the North Rhelasian translator conveyed his witty repartee to her boss.

Personally, he felt the back and forth was rather unnecessary. He'd been in Rhelasia for a few days. Almost a week. He'd already hashed out the specifics of the arrangement with lower-ranking members of North Rhelasia's ruling junta.

In Jack's mind, the deal was pretty much settled. But he supposed it wasn't too surprising that the big man himself wanted to come down and throw his weight around.

In the end, there wasn't much difference between military dictators and mob bosses. It was just a matter of scale.

Finally, General Singh grunted. He raised a hand and made a dismissive motion.

"The great leader gives you permission to proceed," the translator said.

"Thanks," Jack replied, putting his own hand to his brow and tipping an imaginary hat. "Most kind of you."

One of the other North Rhelasian officers stepped forward, clamping a hand on Jack's shoulder, and not-so-gently encouraging him to move.

Jack didn't bother fighting. If the Rhelasians wanted to act tough, so be it. He was a big boy. His ego could take the ill treatment.

The Joker would have taken offence, and would have done something to put the fear of the clown into them. Something violent. But Jack ignored the urges, and those old instincts.

He wasn't the Joker.

The Rhelasian soldier led him out of the viewing gallery and down the narrow metal stairs.
Jack wasn't sure what the building had originally been. Some kind of weapons facility, most likely, because the North Rhelasians collected weapons of mass destruction like kids used to collect trading cards.

But the North Rhelasians had very quickly and efficiently converted the space to house the stolen S.T.A.R. Labs scanner, including cobbling together an interface to make use of it.

That was what Jack needed them for. The sensor package, by itself, was just a blocky collection of circuits encased in a hard shell. It didn't even have any obvious blinking lights to make it look cool and mysterious.

There was no way Jack would have been able to crack it, himself. The thing didn't come with convenient ports and standard sockets, it was all bullshit proprietary Justice League and LexCorp stuff.

The North Rhelasians had placed the sensor suite in the centre of a cavernous room. The device itself was tiny, but the Rhelasians had it encased by a big metal cradle, and there was a tangle of power lines and data cables running from the box to all corners of the room.

Aside from the various computers and other devices the North Rhelasians had set up, there was one prominent addition - an uncomfortable-looking chair, with a bulky headpiece and several restraint straps.

It reminded Jack of an electric chair. Considering his criminal record, lethal bits of furniture were a familiar sight for him. He'd been in one, once. Maybe more than once. It hadn't taken, of course. Perhaps the chair the Rhelasians had cobbled together would finally be the end of him?

Jack knew he was taking a risk. Even if the North Rhelasians kept their end of the deal and didn't double-cross him, he was putting a lot of faith in their dubious engineering standards.

Well, he'd always been a bit of a gambler. Flip of a coin. Roll of a dice.

Jack let the Rhelasian scientists and technicians strap him in.

Someone started counting, or so he assumed. He didn't recognise the numerals, since he didn't speak Rhelasian. But in context, it had to be a countdown. Or a count up. Whichever way they went in North Rhelasia.

Jack took a breath.

There wasn't much information in the wild about New God technology. Not much. But more than zero.

He'd gone over the files provided by the Calculator, which detailed both the capabilities of the S.T.A.R. Labs sensor device, but also the original New God artifact it was based on.

Hamilton and his team called it a Mobius-type sensor suite, because it was based on their study of the Mobius Chair.

Jack assumed that the name was just a translation or approximation, since there was no damn reason that some ancient alien race would name things after a nineteenth century German mathematician. On the other hand, there was also no logical reason for the planets of New Genesis and Apokolips to be called what they were, unless there was something deeply screwy going on.

Of course, New God stuff was deeply screwed up, by definition. And now Jack was strapped into a
piece of it.

The Rhelasian countdown stopped.

A surge of blue light erupted around the chair, springing up from the metal frame and completely engulfing Jack's body.

Involuntarily, he closed his eyes, shielding them against the blinding light. But as the energy continued to pulse, sending a tremor through his bones, he knew what he had to do.

As the light reached its peak, he opened his eyes.

And saw...
Sitting in the chair wasn't painful. Not physically. Hell, he could barely sense his own body.

His physical sensations were there - he could still feel the unyielding metal frame the Rhelasians had strapped him to. He could still hear the sound of the equipment.

But all of that was far, far, away.

He wasn't seeing with his eyes. He wasn't even sure he was thinking with his brain. His mind felt like it was several sizes too big for his head.

It was like his very essence was trying to tear itself free from his meat and bone.

How long had it been? One second? Two? An hour? Three? He could feel his sense of time slipping away.

The Rhelasians had warned him the interface wasn't meant for human beings. They were right. In retrospect, that was good to know. Of course, it made absolutely no difference.

Because Jack was already in the chair.

He forced himself to concentrate, gathering every iota of his being and throwing it at one single question.

"Where is he?"

***

He groaned, as he stood up. His body ached. Beneath the layers of kevlar and polyethylene, he was still just flesh and blood.

He could feel his consciousness slipping away.

Yet... he couldn't show weakness. He couldn't.

Rain sluiced off his cloak. The downpour was playing havoc with his helmet's echolocation, and with the hits he'd taken, the vision modes were all on the fritz.

But that barely mattered, considering his opponent could effortlessly evade any technological methods of detection.

Black didn't need to turn invisible, not when the telepath could just reach into someone's head and erase any signs of his presence.

"Just give up," Black's voice said, coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. "You're done."

Instead of responding, instead of giving in, he dropped his hand to his side. The fingers of his left hand found the sheath of his sword. His right hand closed around the hilt.

The electromagnetic fasteners disengaged, letting him pull the sheath from his belt. He pulled the sheath in one direction, even as his right arm drew the weapon the other way.

"I will not cease from mental fight," he whispered. "Nor will my sword sleep in my hand."
Light flared, as the blade came to life.

***

With an effort of will, Jack tore his attention away from the scene. He'd found a knight. But not the Dark Knight.

Distantly, he felt his mouth open, his lips parting, as the syllables rasped forth.

"Where is he?"

***

"Bearing zero three one, mark one, one," said the voice in his ear.

"Acknowledged," he responded, as he leaped off the rooftop, throwing himself into empty space.

With a nearly silent hiss, air rushed out of the jets in his boots and the backplate of his cuirass, altering his trajectory.

He landed, his knees flexing. The synthetic muscles of the exoskeleton kicked in, working in concert with his own to absorb the impact. He sprang into another leap, crossing over the top of the office building.

"Be careful, Jiro," his sensei cautioned. "Preliminary analysis suggests our suspect is Yamashiro Takeo. He is a high-level operative of the Black Dragon Society. No known metagene, but his weapons are suspected to grant him supernatural abilities."


"Quick healing," his sensei said. "Enhanced senses. High probability of additional powers. I am accessing the Metropolitan Police's reports."

He kept moving, even as he spoke into the microphone taped to his throat. "Understood."

***

The vision slipped away. No, no… he saw a young man, an acrobat, with a mentor, a great detective. But it wasn't right. No. It still wasn't right.

Jack could see London. He could see Tokyo. In a flash, his mind was in Kinshasa. Then he was looking at Buenos Aires, then Stockholm, then…

No.

New God technology… it didn't care about time and space. Or rather, the two things were the same. One and the same.

He was thinking too linearly.

Once again, Jack asked:

"Where is the Batman?"
"That," he announced, "was awesome."

He made the pronouncement with the specific kind of gravitas that only a precocious eight-year-old child could possess.

He knew it, too. He didn't completely understand all the ins and outs of the maturity business, or what the dividing line between kids and adults was really supposed to be.

But he knew his parents found it funny when he combined grave sincerity with what they took to be child-like whimsy.

Which was why he did it.

His mother laughed.

He smiled.

His dad reached down, running a hand over his head, messing up his hair in the process.

He flinched, and pouted, but tried hard not to complain.

"It was good," his dad admitted. "Very good. Better than I expected."

"I remember," his mom chided, "that a certain someone had to be convinced to come along."

His dad chuckled. "Please, dear, be fair. The forties version was a classic. Basil Rathbone, Tyrone Power... they don't make movies like that anymore."

"Yeah," he said, nudging his father with an elbow. "They make them in colour."

"You know what I mean," his dad shot back. "The old ones had charm. Even that made-for-television one had Ricardo Montalbán. I didn't have high hopes for yet another remake, not with Michael Keaton of all people as the leading man."

"But you liked it," he said. For some reason, he wanted to be sure of that fact.

"I liked it," his dad confirmed. "Not the same, though not bad, not bad at all."

His mother paused, as she adjusted her purse, tucking something into the bag. "Where did Alfred say he was bringing the car?"

His dad looked down the street. "Down at Phillips. Parking's terrible on Pearl Street, and there's hardly anywhere to stop."

His mother smiled. "That's Park Row for you. Nowhere to park. The irony."

"I don't think," he opined, "Gotham's founding fathers had all these cars in mind when they, uh, made the city."

"They didn't," his dad agreed, as he began walking. "They would never have predicted this level of traffic. Did I ever tell you, your... let's see, great-great-granduncle was one of the early town planners?"
“No,” he said, fascinated. “Really?”

His mother laughed, as they followed his dad into the alley. "When people say that the Waynes built Gotham City, they mean it. Brick by brick."

“That's putting it strongly,” his father said, with a smile. "I wouldn't call it that."

“You're biased, dear,” his mom riposted.

Then she stopped.

So did his father.

There was a man standing in the middle of the alley, partially illuminated by the streetlights, half in darkness.

"Ah," his father said. "Sorry, sir."

The man took a step forward, then another. He seemed to loom larger, blocking out the light in the alleyway. He looked ragged, like he wasn't well.

"Money,” the young man rasped, in a harsh and throaty voice.

His dad raised his hands. "There’s no need for..."

The man made a quick jerking motion. The muzzle of his gun shifted. The man's finger spasmed, brushing over the trigger.


There was something wrong with the man. It was obvious, painfully so. Even he could tell, and so could his parents. He saw his mother and father exchange an uneasy glance.

"Easy," his father said. "Easy, now. No need for that."

Slowly, his father brought his hand down, moving it gradually towards his pocket.

Then there was a crack. A sharp, sudden, popping noise.

It happened so fast, he didn't realise, didn't fully comprehend, what was happening... until his father staggered, his legs giving out. His father fell to the ground.

His mother screamed.

There was another gunshot. Then a third. A fourth.

He didn't scream. His mouth was open. But no sound emerged.

He looked, with wide eyes, at the man who'd just killed his parents.

The man looked back. With eyes that glowed, eyes that shone in the darkness of the alley.

Red eyes.

The man walked forward. The gun moved, until it came to rest against his forehead.

***
Jack watched, in horror, as the man pulled the trigger - leaving three corpses in the alley.

"No," he whispered. "No, no, no."

It was wrong. All wrong. It couldn't be.

He watched as the man opened his hand, letting the revolver slip from his fingers.

Then the tall figure turned around, his movements stiff and unnatural, like a puppet being pulled on invisible strings.

The man's eyes were burning like embers, but that wasn't the detail which terrified Jack.

No. Not that. It was something else. Something worse.

The face was younger. But it was, unmistakably, his own.
Chapter 21

Jack stared at himself. At his own face.

"No," he whispered.

Yet it was him. He couldn't deny it. Even though he desperately wanted to.

But he had no memory of ever doing... what he'd just witnessed. No memory at all.

It didn't make sense. It didn't. He wasn't the one who... it wasn't him. It wasn't him.

As the Joker, he'd done horrible things. He'd killed, yes. Very often. His body count wasn't a number that he liked to dwell on, because his old self had treated murder charges as a convenient way to keep score.

But not the Waynes. He hadn't killed the Waynes. Had he?

No.

Chill. Chill had done it. Joe Chill. Not Jack. Or Joseph Chilton, as he was called, before the man had started running with Moxon's gang, before he'd adopted a nastier-sounding alias.

There weren't many in Gotham's underworld who knew that. But Jack did, because...

Because...

He couldn't remember.

Why couldn't he remember?

The implications were disturbing, to say the least. So disturbing that he couldn't really process what it meant. He felt numb.

It was a damned lucky thing that he could barely feel his own body, or else he might have been violently sick.

Hell, for all he knew, he might have been doing just that. Maybe the North Rhelasians were watching his body puke the contents of its stomach up, his vomit dribbling all over the interface chair.

Jack wasn't worried about that. He was well past the point of caring about his own dignity. He had bigger concerns. Far more dire concerns.

The contradiction between his memories and what he was witnessing was problematic enough. But there were other troubling things. There was a whole list of that made no sense.

Jack was still looking at the alley. He could still see the bodies of the Waynes, and the figure of their killer.

His younger self's eyes were still red, in a manner that was thoroughly inhuman. They weren't bloodshot, or anything mundane like that. There was actually light coming out of those eyeballs. Which couldn't be healthy.
And those eyes were looking straight at him. Well, in his direction, anyway.

It could have been chance. It could have been coincidence. As far as Jack knew, he wasn't physically present. Only his consciousness was. None of the other people in his visions had acknowledged his presence.

But something was different. Jack was damned sure that the Wayne's killer could see him.

His other self took a step forward, moving away from the bodies of the Waynes.

Moving closer to Jack.

"No," Jack said, again. "It can't be. Why?"

***

The world shifted. All of a sudden, he was no longer in the alley, no longer in Gotham City.

For a moment, Jack didn't know where he was. Each and every vision had been profoundly disorienting - and each transition, even more so. Still, eventually, he understood what he was seeing.

The sky was dark. Pitch black. He wasn't anywhere on Earth.

Rather, he was above it. The planet lay beneath his nonexistent feet, an orb of blue, white, green, and brown.

And he wasn't alone.

There was another presence, hanging in space.

A pair of red eyes regarded him, silently.

Jack recognised the face, or at least he thought he did. He'd seen the man before, of course. He'd fought him, even more recently.

Now, Jack was seeing Superman with his mind, perhaps with his soul, not his own physical eyes. Thus, he could tell that something was amiss.

The face and hair were right, and the costume was immaculate. In all respects, he was Superman. Yet there was a wrongness to the Man of Steel. Like he wasn't Superman, somehow, but someone else.

Someone that Jack recognised.

"Lex," Jack said.

Since they were in space, the other man shouldn't have been able to respond. Not verbally.

Jack was a disembodied mind, partially liberated from his physical shell due to the bullshit of New God technology. His body was back in some shady military facility in North Rhelasia. He wasn't actually in orbit. Ordinary physical rules didn't apply.

But the Kryptonian was.

Yet, the caped hero spoke, his lips moving. And Jack heard the syllables, even though there was no
air, no atmosphere, to transmit the sound.

"Joker," Lex said. "I see you."
Chapter 22

Jack struggled with the restraints holding him in the chair.

He looked around the room, twisting his head and darting his eyes back and forth.

The North Rhelasians were yelling at each other. He couldn't figure out what the argument was about, precisely, but he could make an educated guess or two.

The smoke coming from the machinery probably had something to do with it. One of the technicians was even hosing part of the equipment down with a fire extinguisher, sending gouts of white suppressant everywhere.

"Let me out," Jack hissed. When no help was immediately forthcoming, he repeated his demand in a louder voice. "Get me out of this thing, dammit!"

Jack didn't think the Rhelasians cared much for his welfare. He was under no illusions about that. But a couple of the North Rhelasian soldiers did step forward, gingerly manipulating the straps and bands keeping Jack in the chair.

Jack wrenched himself free, springing to his feet.

He felt tired, like he'd run a marathon or two, and he needed a drink. But none of that was important, because he had bigger concerns than the state of his anatomy.

"We have to get out of here," Jack declared.

One of the uniformed soldiers got in his face, shouting incomprehensibly in Rhelasian.

Jack waved his arms. "Out of here! Now!"

The soldier started to raise his rifle, prompting Jack to lift his own hands in the air in the universal sign of surrender. He didn't want to start a fight with the Rhelasian army.

Not when they were all in grave danger.

"You don't understand," Jack said, desperately. "He's coming!"

But it was too late, just as he'd feared.

The ceiling of the test chamber cracked, dust and debris falling from above. The soldiers, scientists, and other North Rhelasian personnel all looked up.

Jack didn't. He took cover.

With an almighty crash, the roof caved in, metal and concrete parting as an unstoppable object came through.

Superman landed, his cape swirling around him.

A Rhelasian soldier opened fire. But Chinese-made bullets were no more effective against the Man of Steel than good old American ones.
The Kryptonian turned his head, fractionally. Beams of light shot from his eyes.

The rifle in the soldier's hands vanished. So did the soldier's hands.

The man screamed, but his shout of pain and shock was quickly silenced, as the disintegration effect spread up his hands and to the rest of his body.

Superman moved his head again, and a second Rhelasian evaporated, then a third, and a fourth, until all the armed guards in the chamber were gone.

Jack wondered, morbidly, if the beams would keep going until all the scientists and technicians were dead, too, as well as any Rhelasian officials still in the viewing gallery on the second floor.

But Superman did stop, choosing instead to turn his attention to Jack.

The red eyes didn't flare once more, but they remained burning in a distinctively malevolent fashion.

Jack picked himself off the ground. Carefully, he repeated what he'd done a moment earlier, and held his hands up.


The Kryptonian moved. Between the space of two heartbeats, he was right in front of Jack.

One massive hand clamped around Jack's neck.

"So," Jack gasped, "you come here often?"

Unfortunately, Jack didn't have much in the way of weapons on him, and he certainly didn't have the shield belt he'd used to survive a hit from Superman back in Jersey.

The North Rhelasi ans wouldn't have allowed him anywhere near the test chamber, much less their beloved dictator, with all his crap on him.

Apparently, said dictator was still on the premises, instead of fleeing like a reasonable person with a working sense of self-preservation.

Jack could tell, because some kind of intercom system chose that moment to crackle to life, before releasing a tirade of furious Rhelasian.

Superman's vice-like grip on Jack's neck loosened a little. Jack took the opportunity to suck in a breath.

Then, because he was who he was, he plastered on his best nervous smile, and said: "Lexy, old buddy, have you met General Singh? As opposed to a guy who's specifically a Singh."

Superman actually looked up at that, peering at the observation deck located above the testing chamber.

Jack followed Superman's gaze. The supreme leader of North Rhelasia was indeed standing behind the transparent panels, yelling something.

"Singh," Jack carried on, "meet Lex Luthor, businessman, scientist, and apparently a closet Kryptonian. Not that I'm judging anyone's lifestyle choices."
Superman twisted his head, looking at Jack again. "I am Kelex of Krypton."

"Oh," Jack said. "Are you? Sorry, you know how it is, too many Lexies in my phone, I gotta start putting labels on you guys. Are you Lex from Accounting? No, no, you sure? You look like a Luthor to me."

"I am Kelex of Krypton," Superman repeated, levelly.

Jack started to respond, but he was cut off by another voice, that of General Singh's translator.

The uniformed woman was now speaking into the intercom, her voice raised. She sounded shrill, and quite obviously terrified, but she was gamefully translating the General's words into English.

"The great leader," she said, "orders you to…"

Superman's eyes flashed.

The beams from his eyes went through the windows, spearing through the woman and leaving nothing behind. They curved, sweeping round the viewing deck, disintegrating members of the General's entourage, until only the dictator himself was left behind.

To his credit, General Singh Manh Li remained standing, rather than collapsing to the ground in shock and terror. He even seemed to be angry rather than afraid, and his trousers looked dry.

Jack gave the General credit for bravery and stubbornness, at least. Though in his mind, Jack was tempted to dock a few points for obvious stupidity. But Jack supposed that the man was used to having absolute control within his domain. It was likely difficult for the dictator to acknowledge the fact that Superman was a power unto himself.

The Superman that Jack remembered would never have thrown his weight around in such a fashion.

Of course, the Superman that Jack remembered was a very different individual.

"Luthor, old pal," Jack said. "First impressions, you know? Going strong is fine and well, but sometimes you gotta read a room, play it cool."

Superman lifted Jack up by the neck. The Kryptonian didn't haul Jack fully off the ground, but he was forced to stand on tip-toes, his muscles straining.

"I am curious," Superman mused, "how you know that name."

Jack blinked. "What, Singh?"

"No," Superman said. "Luthor."
Chapter 23

The odd thing was, the chair that the Justice League had him strapped into was actually considerably more comfortable than the one back in Rhelasia.

It was more than a bare metal frame. There was actual padding, including a thin cushion separating his butt and thighs from the hard bits.

Jack had been tied up an awful lot over the course of his career. Strictly for professional reasons, of course, not for recreational ones. He wasn't into that sort of thing.

Based purely on his professional experience, he rated the Justice League's attempt at keeping him prisoner at a good four out of five stars.

Score one for good old American manufacturing. Assuming the League's furniture was made in the United States, anyway.

Since Lex was kind of evil, there was a better-than-even chance that he actually sourced from Mexico or somewhere in Latin America. Maybe China. Jack wouldn't have put it past the man, given his track record.

Granted, Jack wasn't sure if any of his existing knowledge about Lex Luthor still applied, since this Lex, or something that thought of itself as Lex, was seemingly housed in the body of his greatest enemy.

The guy still looked like Superman. Height, muscles, conspicuous bulge in his tights that wasn't fully hidden by the underwear on the outside, everything. The man even had hair, which was as un-Lexy a thing as possible.

And his hair even had the one springy curl in the front, the Superman trademark that was responsible for exponentially increasing hair gel sales across the world, particularly among teenage boys and middle-aged men undergoing midlife crises.

But he sure as hell felt like Lex Luthor. Somehow. Though, if he was honest, Jack wasn't a hundred percent sure on that. Eighty, ninety percent, perhaps.

Jack wasn't attached to a fancy New God sensor suite any longer, so he couldn't peer into the depths of the other man's soul or anything so romantic.

There was something in the man's body language that screamed of Luthor. There was a certain way he carried himself, in his stride and the set of his spine, a stance that made it apparent he thought he was better, that he was above everyone else, simply because he was Lex.

But there were differences, too. Like how he spoke. The voice didn't sound like Lex, not on the surface. The rich baritone was pure Superman, and his enunciation was... not. It was stilted, overly precise. Not Lex at all. Jack wasn't a fan of Lex Luthor, but he could recognise, from one wordsmith to another, that the bald son of a bitch had a way with words.

Jack didn't know if he'd managed to give himself a full-body makeover, if he'd swapped his brain with Superman's, or what.

Which made needling the man a very risky business, if he really was Lex Luthor coupled with all the powers of Superman. But Jack had never liked Luthor. And naturally, the feeling was mutual,
or so Jack thought. Lex Luthor had always despised the Joker.

It stood to reason. Lex Luthor was wealthy, he was the pinnacle of the Metropolis elite. He represented intelligence, cold calculation, and rigid order. Whereas the Joker was a Gotham street rat who did everything for shits and giggles.

Even so, the Joker had never underestimated Lex. Even in the depths of madness, the Joker had understood that Lex was a supremely dangerous man.

Jack knew Lex was smart. But he really, really, wanted to know how Lex had pulled this one off.

"Tell me," Lex said, "what do you know about Luthor?"

"That's kinda awkward," Jack replied. "You're standing right here, you want me to talk about you to your face? Could you at least turn around, so I can talk about you behind your back?"

"I am not Lex Luthor," Lex replied.

"Yeah," Jack said, "sure, if you say so. It's just that... I'm supposed to be the crazy one here, you know? If there's anyone that should be having an identity crisis, it's yours truly."

"The staff of Arkham Asylum informed the League," Lex said, "that you were on a regimen of anti-psychotic drugs. The sort that typically render a patient dull, and numb. A pity that doesn't appear to be the case."

Jack shrugged, or attempted to, using what little free range of movement he had within his restraints. "I wouldn't know? Haven't been back in Arkham for weeks."

"You have not," Lex agreed. "I trust you are looking forward to your return?"

Jack laughed. "Is that supposed to be a threat? Better work on it, the Bulgarian judge would only give that a five out of ten."

"Not a threat," Lex said, softly. "A statement of fact, Joker. You can voice your petty little statements of defiance. You can make all the pathetic attempts at humour you want. It does not change the reality. I have you, and you are not getting out."

"Ah," Jack remarked, brightly. "The classic Lex Luthor pick-up line. Does that ever work on the chicks?"

Lex folded his arms over his chest, partially obscuring the S-shield emblazoned on his costume.

"Understand, Joker," Lex said, "I have no intention of engaging you in juvenile banter."


Undeterred, Lex asked: "Tell me, how do you know the name Lex Luthor?"

"I used to have you on speed dial," Jack shot back. "Before the world went all crazy. These days, you'd probably go, new phone, who's this?"

"You claim," Lex pressed, "that you were on good terms with..."

Jack chuckled. "Good? Nah, I'd call him up and ask stuff like, you know, is your refrigerator running? Or message for Mike Rotch, that sorta thing."
Lex frowned. His brows curved, and the skin on his forehead creased. Since Lex was apparently occupying the body of the Man of Steel, Jack reckoned that those skin and muscle movements could probably snap damn near any object that was caught too close.

"There is," Lex said, "no Lex Luthor."

Jack returned the Kryptonian's stare with his merely human one. "Funny, since I'm looking at him."

"Lionel and Lillian Luthor had two children," Lex said, "Lena and Julian. They had no son named…"

"Alexander Joseph Luthor," Jack completed, "who figured 'Lex' sounded cooler than Alex. Or Joe."

There was silence for a moment or two, before the Man of Steel made a small sound of thoughtful agreement.

"I would like to know," Lex said, "how you are aware of that name."

Jack smiled. "I told you. I had your business card, and everything. Somewhere. I'm pretty bad at keeping track of those, I really should take photos of them or get a binder, or something."

Lex nodded, as if satisfied that he'd confirmed a suspicion or hypothesis. "You remember, don't you?"

"Remember? Nah, I never remember what's on those things," Jack said. "Who remembers phone numbers and email addresses these days? You're lucky I remember your name, rather than just, you know, bald guy who likes expensive suits."

"You remember," Lex continued, "the world as it was. The world as it used to be. You remember the timeline, before the... interventions."

Jack stared at Lex. "And if I said 'yes'? Then what? You gonna stick an ice cream scoop in my head and dig out my grey stuff? 'cause I gotta warn you, better let it sit at room temperature for a while, it's sort of icy in there."

"I do admit," Lex said, thoughtfully, "I am curious as to why this is so. It should be impossible."

"I'd say call me Mister Impossible," Jack retorted. "Except I'm pretty sure that name's taken."

There wasn't a great deal of room in the holding cell. The Justice League's idea of interrogation or prison facilities, whatever the room was, seemed fairly spartan.

But Lex still backed up as far as he could go, while remaining in the same room. He stood a few paces away from Jack, his back to the wall.

Jack couldn't do anything about that, since he was effectively tied to a chair. He wondered what Lex was up to. The other man was eyeing him in a way Jack didn't like. He hid his concern, of course.

"I wonder," Lex mused.

Jack smiled, lopsidedly. "Do you?"

Lex stared at Jack, his eyes burning red.
For a few seconds, Lex didn't say anything.

Jack was starting to contemplate making another wisecrack, when Lex finally broke his silence.

"Loneliness," Lex said, "plus alienation, plus fear, plus despair…"

Jack blinked. "What's that, your dating app profile?"
Chapter 24

Ollie watched as Superman emerged from the holding room, closing and securing the door behind him. Several locks engaged, with echoing booms and a loud electronic buzzing noise.

The Hall of Justice was not a dedicated internment facility by any stretch of the imagination, but it did have an underground lockup, intended to hold dangerous metahumans and costumed criminals on a temporary basis.

The legality of the Justice League detaining prisoners was a slightly different question, ones the lawyers had never adequately resolved.

Granted, few courts were truly willing to oppose the Justice League. So far. But Ollie wasn't sure that happy state of affairs would last indefinitely.

As the Man of Steel came down the corridor, Ollie raised his voice.

"Any reason," Ollie began, "you saw fit to disable the monitoring and recording devices?"

Superman stopped in the middle of the passageway. He regarded Ollie, coldly.

The Kryptonian didn't like being challenged. But it was a legitimate question. Both of them knew that Ollie had a point.

"Several reasons," Superman said, finally. "There is… let's call it sensitive information. Information that the Joker is privy to. Matters that I do not want on record."

Ollie digested this, and wondered whether he should push on that point. He decided to let it slide.

"You said there were several reasons."

Superman gave Ollie an assessing look, before adding: "I utilised a vocal ability that causes harm to any living or sapient being that hears it. Isolating the room was for your safety, I assure you."

"You have a power," Ollie said, carefully, "that makes people freak out when you talk."

"Correct," Superman stated, in a way that made it very evident he would not entertain further queries on the topic. "Is that a problem, Arrow?"


"Hardly. Because some of us have dignity," Superman said. "Unlike yourself."

"Low blow, Lex," Ollie muttered. "True, but a low blow."

"Now," Superman asked, curtly, "are we done here?"

Ollie lifted a hand. "Not quite. What was so damned important that you had to use this… super voice power on the Joker?"

A hint of irritation showed on the Kryptonian's face. "I told you. The Joker has information. Sensitive information."

"Beyond my pay grade, fine," Ollie responded, with a bit of heat. "If this power of yours is so
dangerous, do I need to send in a medical team to put the clown back together?"

The look of annoyance on Superman's features visibly deepened. His jaw shifted, muscles moving as his teeth ground against each other. "No. It didn't work on him."

Ollie arched an eyebrow. "I thought you said it was dangerous."

"It is," Superman stated. "I don't know why he's immune. But rest assured, I will find out."

"Uh-huh," Ollie said. "So, was all this worth it?"

Superman scowled. He stared at Ollie. "And what, may I ask, are you suggesting?"

Ollie spread his hands, indicating the corridor and the door to the holding cell.

"We've gone through a whole lot of trouble to bring the Joker in," Ollie said. "Including you blasting your way into the Socialist Republic of Rhelasia like an intercontinental ballistic missile. Which is a problem, by the way."

"I hardly think," Superman said, coldly, "that you should concern yourself with North Rhelasia's hurt feelings."

"Oh," Ollie said, "the Rhelasians can go hang. I don't care. But I do care that they're kicking up a fuss on the international stage. North Rhelaskan state media is broadcasting footage of you popping their people like balloons in a carnival shooting gallery. Real media is starting to pick that up, to say nothing about the Internet."

"Once again," Superman asked, "why are you concerned about North Rhelasia?"

"The Rhelasians don't matter," Ollie agreed. "But the whole world's seeing you casually violate a country's borders, waltz onto their sovereign territory, and then murder their citizens. Don't you see the problem here?"


"Yeah," Ollie muttered, "tell that to our government liaisons."

"You worry too much," Superman said, dismissively. "The masses are easily swayed."

Ollie snorted. "Think so? You're being memed, you know that? Superdickery is trending. Again."
Lex floated through the aperture of the boom tube. As soon as he cleared the wormhole, it collapsed, the roar of wind and sound fading away.

He landed, setting his boot soles on the carpet. Reaching up to his neck, he released the hidden fasteners keeping his cape attached, then negligently flung the collection of fabric to the side, letting it drape over a chair.

Lex looked around his office, surveying the view of the Metropolis skyline. Once, according to his memories, such a vantage point would have held some attraction. Now that he could effortlessly fly, under his own power, it was considerably less meaningful.

The fact he could afford such a piece of real estate, an office occupying much of the top floor of the city's highest tower, a building that he owned… that alone was a symbol of wealth and power.

But he had long since learnt that wealth, in and of itself, was meaningless. Wealth alone could not buy immortality. Wealth alone could not bend the world to one's will.

It was intelligence and determination that could raise a mortal to the level of the gods, not mere riches.

The money was merely a means to an end, and hardly the most important means at his disposal.

Yet he kept the office, all the same. Even though he didn't need the space, and didn't even need the building. Oh, it was occasionally useful to have, to host or impress people. But he did not need it. Not truly.

Of course, part of the reason he kept the office was… habit. There was a part of his mind that was accustomed to such an environment. Such attachment was illogical, but he had the resources to allow himself small indulgences.

He lifted a hand, and a crystal glass materialised in his fingers. A traditionalist might have sneered, as the vessel was a shape halfway between a champagne flute and a wine glass, while being neither. But the shape was optimised for flavour and finesse.

Flavour was all that mattered, for Lex's current body was, naturally, completely immune to the effects of alcohol. So when he brought the custom-shaped glass to his lips, and drank, it was only for the flavour, and nothing more.

He downed the contents of the glass. Then he threw the empty glass away.

The teleportation systems built into the office whisked the glass away before it shattered against the floor.

The teleportation grid was a refinement of technology the he had developed during his original lifetime, taken to its logical conclusion. The current generation was far more advanced than anything his old self had possessed.

It was also far less capable than the Boom Tubes he now had access to. Lex made far greater use of the Boom Tubes and Hush Tubes now, more than his own technology. It was a practical decision.

But for much the same reason that he kept the office and continued drinking mortal beverages, Lex
still kept the old teleportation network operational. It was his work. Developed from first principles, not something stolen from aliens.

Of course, such alien technology was useful in its own right. The Boom Tubes were invaluable. And they were far from the only spoils of New Genesis and Apokolips that Lex employed on a daily basis.

*Ting!*

As the bell-like sound reverberated around the office, Lex glared at the glowing box resting on a pedestal at one end of the room.

"Yes," Lex said, "You are useful. But do mind yourself. Do not forget that I am in control here. Do not forget, I am your master now."

*Ting!*

Somehow, the Apokoliptian computer managed to convey a sense of sullenness and resentment in the sound.

Which was remarkable, given that the transmission protocols used by the devices should not have allowed for such emotional overtones.

The Father Box was almost too intelligent for its own good. But it was that very capacity for independent thought which made it useful to Lex, so attempting to neuter the machine would be counterproductive.

It would also be ironic, since to an extent Lex was a synthetic intelligence, himself. In the unlikely event his brain was destroyed, his consciousness would persist, sustained through the implants and nanites embedded within his current physical shell.

Digitising his mind had been the first step on his road to apotheosis, after all. He'd long since abandoned the constraints of mere biology, be it human or Kryptonian.

But... at the same time, he couldn't assume his nanotechnology was foolproof.

He'd just seen evidence to the contrary, in the form of the Joker.

*Ting!*

Lex scowled. "Indeed, I noticed. Your scans concur? There was no trace within the Joker?"

*Ting!*

Lex brought a hand to his chin, rubbing his jaw. "Thirty years would not be a sufficient length of time for the nanites to pass from a human body. They were designed to persist indefinitely, even if dormant. There is something else at work. As evidenced by…"

*Ting! Ting! Ting!*

Not for the first time, Lex resisted the urge to inflict violence upon the Apokoliptian AI. The shell of the Father Box was nearly indestructible, but Lex was sorely tempted to test those limits.

He suspected that its creator had intentionally made the machine intelligence as annoying as possible.
"My use of the **Anti-Life Equation** was not flawed," Lex said, firmly. "The Joker was able to resist its effects. A feat that not even Darkseid was able to achieve, may I remind you."

*Ting!*

Lex eyed the Father Box. "The former incarnation of Darkseid, yes. You know well what I mean. I've heard enough attempts at clever wordplay today. I do not need it from you. My point remains. No living being should be able to so casually ignore the **Anti-Life.**"

*Ting!*

"The Joker is human," Lex said, irritably. "There is nothing amiss in his genetic structure, in his biology. His unusual skin and hair colouration is from chemical exposure, and the mutation is merely cosmetic."

There was a long pause from the Father Box, before the lines etched into its surface glowed brighter, pulsing in time with two chimes, deeper in tone than its usual sounds.

**TING. TING.**


**TING!**

Lex crossed the room in one swift motion. He picked the Father Box up and held it close to his face. His eyes burned red.

"Show me," Lex demanded.
Chapter 26

Ollie feared he was making a mistake. He wasn't merely having second thoughts, he was having third thoughts, and fourth ones as well.

The prudent course of action would have been to bury his curiosity beneath several layers of emotional concrete. That would have been safer. What he was doing, now, was stupid.

He'd been a serving member of the Justice League long enough to know that Superman and his inner circle had secrets. There were things that the Man of Steel wanted to keep quiet.

Most of the time, Ollie understood. There was such a thing as expediency. Ideals were fine, until they ran up against the hard wall of pragmatism.

And Ollie was a practical man.

But he couldn't let it go. There were too many things that didn't add up.

If the Joker was so damn dangerous, why had Superman let him live? The Kryptonian didn't hesitate to use lethal force when he felt the situation called for it... or in some cases, simply to make a point.

Superman had gone lethal in North Rhelasia. But he'd restricted himself to killing Rhelasians, leaving the clown alive.

Ollie was prejudiced, biased, and all sorts of disagreeable things. But he wasn't a racist. He didn't think much of North Rhelasia as a country or its pissant dictator. But he did not believe that Rhelian lives were any less valuable than the Joker's.

Mostly because life wasn't all that valuable, at the end of the day.

The point was, Superman had specifically brought the Joker in. Now the Justice League had him locked in their basement, instead of handing him over to the proper authorities.

Ollie knew that some members of the League thought that they were the proper authorities. But the Hall of Justice was not set up to hold long-term prisoners. It wasn't a penal facility.

But Superman wanted the Joker on hand. Plus, he didn't want the rest of the League talking to the man.

The smart thing to do would have been to leave it alone. Ollie knew full well that Lex wouldn't appreciate the Green Arrow poking his nose into Superman's business.

However, the whole damn business was bothering Ollie. He wanted answers. Even if he was making a mistake in seeking them.

The electronic locks disengaged, magnets releasing with a series of clicks and a harsh buzzing sound. The physical bolts ground aside as well.

Ollie pushed the heavy door aside and stepped into the cell.

The Joker looked up, at his approach. "Huh, Green Arrow? I was expecting Lex. What is this, good cop, mad cop?"
The clown had seen better days. His clothes were relatively clean, seeing as how they'd stripped
him on arrival and tossed him into the usual unflattering kit that they kept around for detainees.
But he hadn't been properly bathed or even hosed down.

Since they had the Joker tied down in a chair, the bathroom arrangements were also somewhat
suspect. Ollie smelt urine, the second he walked into the cell. But he didn't comment on it.

Instead, Ollie shrugged, and replied: "I'm not the police. Do I look like a cop?"

"Well," the Joker said, "you don't look like my lawyer. So what does that make you, in this
scenario? My cellmate? I get the top bunk, I'm calling dibs."

Ollie rubbed his chin, running his fingertips over his jaw and beard. The Question had warned the
Joker wasn't acting according to his previous profile, given his actions over the past weeks. On the
other hand, everything Ollie had seen so far was consistent with what Ollie knew of the madman.

The Joker was still a smartass.

Maybe the effect of whatever treatment Arkham had given him had finally worn off. The Joker
clearly hadn't been keeping up on his meds since his escape.

"Afraid I'm one of your jailors," Ollie told the Joker. "Not your buddy. But if you cooperate, I'll see
about putting a good word in with the big guy."

That was a small lie, because nothing Ollie could possibly say would dissuade Lex once his mind
was made up. They called him the Man of Steel, not only for his invulnerability, but also because
he was just that stubborn.

"Come on," the Joker complained, "I've been nothing but cooperative. I'm an open book, here. So
open that my spine's cracking."

Ollie looked the madman in the eye. But was 'madman' the right way to describe the Joker?

The Joker smiled back at him.

"Then," Ollie asked, "what the hell has Superman off-balance and spooked? What the hell did you
do?"

The Joker chuckled. But he didn't make the insane hair-raising cackle that he was infamous for. He
laughed like a normal person.

If anything, that bothered Ollie even more.

"Me? I didn't do a thing," the Joker said. "You've got it backwards, Arrow. The question you
should be asking is, what did old Lex do?"

"I don't care what he did to you," Ollie retorted.

The Joker made a small motion with his head. He didn't have a huge range to move, given the
restraints keeping him in the chair. But it seemed to Ollie that he was trying to shake his head.

"Not to me," the Joker said. "I don't matter here. That's not the point. You should be asking... what
Lex did to you. And the world."

Ollie's expression darkened. He took a step forward. "You think that Superman, the world's
greatest hero, has... "
"The world's greatest hero? Please, Arrow, you know better than that. He's powerful, maybe he's playing at protecting the planet. But he's no hero."

"That's rich, coming from you," Ollie riposted.

But the Joker brushed off the verbal jab. "Takes one to know one, doesn't it? Lex is selfish, cruel, arrogant... you know this. Surely. You don't hang around Luthor without getting a taste of the man."

Ollie frowned. "Luthor?"

The Joker muttered something that Ollie didn't catch. Before Ollie could ask him to repeat it, the clown carried on. "Nevermind. Slip of the tongue. We're talking about Lex. Go on, ask him what he's got locked in his basement."

"Uh-huh," Ollie said, not convinced.

"Arrow, Arrow, my good man," the Joker said, "I'll be frank. No, wait, Frank's an asshole. I'll be Jack. And because I'm your nice Uncle Jack, I'll be straight with you. I know Lex's secret, you see. I know what he's done. I know the thing he doesn't want anyone else to even dream of."

Ollie placed his hands on his hips. He gave the Joker a hard look. "Do tell."

"That's the idea," the Joker agreed. "What's your position on time travel?"

"Time travel," Ollie repeated, dubiously.

"Yeah," the Joker said. "Eighty-eight miles per hour, police box, the whole kit and kaboodle. It's real, you know. And your buddy Lex has done it."

"What," Ollie quipped, "did he kill his own grandfather?"

"More like someone else's father," the Joker said, darkly. "Here's the deal, Arrow. This timeline, this entire world, it's built on lies and murder. All in the name, unless I miss my guess, of making Lex the top dog."

"Right," Ollie said. "You got any proof, or am I supposed to take your word for it?"

"I don't have any proof," the Joker replied. "Time shifting on us? Kinda erases anything I could show you. But I'll tell you one thing, Arrow. I'll figure this out. And I will fix it."

Ollie snorted. "How do you expect to do that, Joker? We've got you locked up. That's big talk, coming from a man strapped to a chair."

The Joker grinned. "Ah. If you come closer, and let me whisper in your ear, I'll tell you another secret. Special bonus, just for you."

Not being an idiot, Ollie wasn't about to simply oblige him. He glared at the clown. "Talk."

"So mean," the Joker lamented. "Oh, well. You see, it's like this..."

The Joker moved.

"I'm not strapped to this chair."
"As of nineteen hundred hours," the Question summarised, "we still do not have any promising leads on the location of the Joker. Local police and federal authorities have been notified, including Homeland Security, but..."

"But we're a laughingstock," Hawkgirl growled, slamming a balled fist into the table. With her other hand, she brandished her mobile phone. "You see what they're saying?"

"It is embarrassing," the Question acknowledged. "But not the issue at hand."

"I'd say it's an issue," Hawkgirl pressed, "when people are filling my feed with memes, saying the high and mighty Justice League can't keep one lousy non-meta in custody! Our online profile's gone to shit in the past few weeks, and all because of this one perp!"

"It's also a problem," the Flash added, his fingers blurring over his own phone's screen, "when we were trying to keep this quiet. Cops, feds, sure. But not the public. We've got a leak."

As he listened, Ollie pressed his bag of frozen peas closer to his face, nursing the sore spots.

Technically the medics had cleared him for light duty, after using a quick-heal ray on the worst of his injuries. Despite the treatment, he still felt awful, like he'd gone a few rounds with a gorilla rather than a pasty-faced clown.

That was a non-hypothetical comparison. Ollie had fought gorillas before. Between Grodd, the Ultra-Humanite, Monsieur Mallah, Giganta, and the Congorilla, talking apes were a statistically significant demographic.

Fighting the Joker had been worse.

The horrible thing was, the Joker hadn't even clobbered him on the head. The really bad knock to his skull had occurred when he'd made contact with the ground. He'd been injured almost by accident, not enemy action.

Ollie was Green Arrow, not Green Boxing Gloves. Even if he did have a couple of those on the end of trick arrows. But he'd assumed his hand-to-hand skills were at least on par with the other non-powered crimefighters and criminals in the costumed scene.

The Joker had taken him apart. Piece by piece. There was nothing in the man's files that suggested he could fight like that. Clearly, the files were wrong.

To add insult to injury, the Joker had gotten Ollie with one of his own stun arrows. He'd lifted it straight out of Ollie's quiver and jammed the prongs into Ollie's ribcage.

The clown had even known to slam it through a gap in Ollie's body armour, where the hard plates had to give way to a flexible mesh undersuit in order to allow Ollie some range of movement.

The next time he tangled with the Joker, Ollie resolved to make sure it was at a distance. He'd see if the funny man could laugh off a solid steel arrowhead, delivered at the end of a carbon shaft.

Across the table, Hawkgirl directed a scathingly disapproving look at Ollie. "Wouldn't be in this mess if someone hadn't screwed up. By the numbers."
"Hey," Ollie complained, defensively, "I wasn't the only Leaguer in the building. Fastest Man Alive was on site, and the Joker still made it out before the place went into lockdown."

Hawkgirl shifted her accusing stare to the Flash. The speedster blanched.

"I was on the toilet," the Flash said. "I don't know how you think it works, but I've still got working human anatomy in here. Have you ever tried to take a dump at super speed? Don't. Trust me, don't."

Hawkgirl processed this, her eyes darting back and forth. Then she scrunched her face up, as a thought occurred to her.

"You mean," Hawkgirl said, "the Joker caught you with your pants down."

"My suit comes off in one piece," the Flash explained.

"So you were naked," Hawkgirl said.

Ollie groaned. "Can we get past Thawne's lavatory habits and go back to the Joker?"

"I didn't bring it up," the Flash said, without any hint of self-consciousness. "You asked. But I'll ask my own question. Who gets to bring this up to Lex?"

The Question's blank mask was nearly unreadable, so Ollie couldn't tell if the detective was genuinely impassive or merely faking it. But the man didn't seem troubled when he said: "I have already sent a message to Superman."

Hawkgirl winced. "And?"

"He has not responded," the Question said, blandly. "He has sequestered himself and is rejecting incoming communications."

"Someone's gotta tell him," the Flash pointed out.

"Not it," Hawkgirl spoke up, immediately.
Chapter 28

If anyone came across his work, they would no doubt assume he was insane. It would be a fair assumption.

The wall looked like a stereotypical depiction of a conspiracy theorist's lair, with a big map of the world pinned up, then even more pins in different colours scattered across the continents. There were photos as well, and annotations in marker.

The only element missing was bits of string, and if he was honest, Jack had thought about adding string to the picture just for verisimilitude. There was a certain form to be followed, and Jack had a firm respect for the classics.

Of course, his big planning wall was actually quite sane in comparison to the rest of the hideout.

If anyone besides Jack managed to find the place and gain entry, the wall would likely be the last thing they'd notice. It was prosaic in comparison to the other decor on site.

The giant playing cards were a little more obvious, along with the equally huge dice, and one monumentally oversized Jack-in-a-Box. It was quite literally a Jack-in-a-Box, seeing as how the head on the dummy inside the contraption was modelled after his own.

Jack couldn't recall how much all that stuff had cost. Profit margins and accurate book-keeping hadn't been a high priority for his insane alter-ego. Jack doubted that the Joker had kept a drawer full of receipts, much less a proper business backend management system.

But then, maybe there was zero chance of Jack actually remembering the figures. Because he was in a different timeline. His memories didn't match up with the world around him. He knew that now.

Jack had remembered the address and the entry procedures for his Ha-Hacienda in Baltimore. And that was a stroke of luck to begin with. He could no longer assume that his old network was intact.

He honestly wasn't sure if the Baltimore hideout's layout and equipment was the same across realities, or if there were differences. The place was in Baltimore, it wasn't precisely a hop, skip, and jump away from Gotham. It was a few hours by car, at least.

Why the hell did he have a Baltimore bolthole in the first place? Had he planned some kind of major crime wave in Maryland?

Jack shook his head.

Trying to unravel the convoluted thought process that had characterised his Joker years was a Sisyphean endeavour, like some poor Greek fellow condemned to push a rock uphill. Except the rock, in this case, was more like a giant inflatable beach ball filled to bursting with toxic laughing gas.

Putting the thought aside, Jack studied the map, going over the results of his research binge and brainstorming session.

Idly, he dug a brightly coloured plastic spoon back into the depths of a tin of beans. He brought another spoonful of tomato sauce and legumes to his mouth, chewed, and swallowed.
Luckily, the Baltimore hideout had been left fully stocked with provisions, including a liberal amount food and water. Even more luckily, the selection of canned rations encompassed foodstuffs that a normal human being would consume, such as the old nuclear bugout bunker staple of baked beans.

Unfortunately, there were also several dozen tins of Swedish *surströmming* in the makeshift pantry, one of which Jack had nearly opened by accident. Jack couldn't even begin to guess why the lair had been so well stocked with fermented herring, unless this timeline's Joker had been planning some form of biological warfare attack.

It was also extremely fortunate for Jack that the hideout had power and a working landline. The site was actually a near-derelict mixed use building, zoned for a mix of office space and light industrial use. So the place still had a link to the city's telecommunications infrastructure, which was better than some places he'd worked out of, over the course of his career.

He was putting the connection to good use. He'd dragged out a dusty old telephone from one of the offices in the back. At the moment, he had the phone on speaker mode, allowing him to study the map and eat while he talked.

The man on the other end of the line probably didn't appreciate the fact Jack was carrying out a good portion of the conversation with his mouth full. But Jack figured that table manners, or lack thereof, was hardly the most pressing issue.

Jack was giving Noah Kuttler bigger things to worry about.

"Joker," the Calculator said, "you realise this sounds absurd."

Noah Kuttler, alias 'The Calculator', typically used a voice masker when speaking in person. However, the software did not strip away every single bit of inflection in his speech. There was enough humanity left in the transmission to make his sentiment obvious. The Calculator didn't like what he was hearing. Not at all.

However, Jack was counting on one thing: The Calculator was still on the line. He hadn't ended the call. Part of that might have been the fact Jack was paying by the minute for the consultation, but Noah wasn't the type to simply rack up billable hours for no reason.

"It's absolutely ludicrous," Jack agreed, with a liberal dose of faux cheer. "But it's also plausible."

The Calculator was quiet for a while. When he spoke again, there was a reluctant trace of acknowledgement in the man's synthetically distorted voice. "The Justice League, Superman in particular, have been aggressively moving to control any time travel technology on the market. They have also prioritised the detection and suppression of changes to the timestream."

"Like," Jack prompted, "the Mobius device you helped me steal."

"The Mobius-type sensor suite that you contracted Punch and Jewelee to acquire," the Calculator corrected, primly. "As always, I was merely the broker and middleman. But, yes. The Mobius scanner was intended for the Justice League's use, to serve as a warning system for chronometric anomalies."

"The only reason for Superman to play *time cop*," Jack said, "is if he's worried that someone might undo all his hard work."

"There are many reasons why the League might wish to safeguard against alterations to history," the Calculator argued. "By definition, it is an existential threat."
"It's a question of priorities," Jack countered, waving his bean-laden spoon in the air. "The planet's also under threat from alien invasions, eldritch creatures from the netherworld, what have you. And they're focusing their energy on time travel. What does that suggest?"

"For the sake of argument," the Calculator said, "let us presume you are correct. This does not further imply that I should abandon my neutrality and assist you."

"You're not neutral, Noah," Jack replied.

"I beg your pardon," the Calculator objected, stiffly.

"You've got a side," Jack continued, between mouthfuls of tinned beans. "You work for the criminal and mercenary community. You don't provide services to the so-called do-gooders, or legitimate governments. You take our cash, and you do stuff for us in exchange for money. It's not like you scrupulously stay out of our affairs like a shady supervillain Switzerland."

"Joker," the Calculator warned.

Jack pressed on, talking over the other man. "You're independent, not neutral. There's a difference. I'd like you to think, just think for a second, about whether you can keep that independence. Do you think you can be your own man, in a world where Lex, Superman, whatever you want to call him, is actively rewriting history and using mind control to shape reality? Building a world the way he wants it?"

"I only have your word," the Calculator said, "that this alternate timeline you claim to recall..."

"The original timeline," Jack corrected.

"I only have your word that this alternate timeline of yours," the Calculator said once more, stressing the phrase, "is somehow more valid than the reality we currently inhabit. I also cannot believe I am saying such a thing, and taking this seriously."

Jack chewed his baked beans. He licked his lips, his tongue picking up a few stray flecks of sauce.

"Let me put it this way, Noah," Jack said. "You're a dad. You've got kids. Am I right, or is this another place where my memories don't match up?"

There was a lengthy silence.

"I do not answer questions about my personal life," the Calculator stated. "You know my rules, Joker."

"That's an answer all by itself," Jack said. "I'm going to assume 'yes'. So, Noah, let me ask you this. Do you want a better world for your kids? One where they can be whatever they want to be? Or a world where the only dream that matters is one guy's. A guy whom we know is an egotistical, self-aggrandising, power-hungry, son of a bitch?"

There was an even longer silence.

Eventually, the Calculator spoke. "Explain your plan. I want details, Joker. Specifics, not your dramatic flourishes and misdirection. Precisely what are you hoping to accomplish?"

Jack smiled. "I'll take that as a 'yes'."
"The crux," Jack said, while walking down the street, "is the intersection of opportunity and incentive."

The Calculator's voice came through Jack's earpiece, dry and sardonic. "Did you get that from a motivational poster?"

"Yes, actually," Jack answered. "But that's not important right now. It's like recruiting for a startup. Can't simply rely on who's out there and looking for work. We need people who believe in the mission and vision, especially since this is a high-risk project."

"Availability remains a factor," the Calculator said, waspishly. "Many of your first choices are not on the playing field."

That was unfortunately true, Jack reflected.

Lex and his buddies had covered a lot of bases. Many of Jack's initial candidates were entirely off the board - nonexistent and quite possibly erased from existence, or imprisoned, neutralised, even outright killed by Superman and the Justice League. Others had been co-opted, and were known affiliates of the League.

Others were different from how Jack remembered them. The divergences could have been due to butterflies, or deliberate meddling by Lex in the timeline, but ultimately the outcome was the same.

They weren't on the market. So Jack had to make do.

As the old saying went, beggars couldn't be choosers.

Of course, the Internet was full of stories about beggars who did indeed try to be choosers. But things rarely worked out for such people. Jack was after a greater degree of success. He didn't want to be a cautionary tale shared with strangers for imaginary Internet points.

Avoiding failure meant that Jack had to listen to people. He wasn't an autocrat. He wasn't Lex. If he behaved the same way as Luthor, it would defeat the whole point of opposing the man.

"Well," Jack told the Calculator, "if you're sure about this?"

"If your information is accurate, yes," the Calculator said, sourly. "It seems to be, if you knew about my family. If you knew to use that against me."

"I keep telling you," Jack protested, "that wasn't a threat, man. Relax. You're too high-strung. Not everything is a shakedown."

"Forgive me," the Calculator said, dryly, "if I do not take your words at face value."


The Calculator was unmoved by Jack's impassioned plea, evidently possessing a heart of stone. "This is your venture. I am only a supporting partner, at best."

Jack kept walking down the street, keeping his body language casual. He was far from the only person on the sidewalk, seeing as how he was in the heart of downtown Fawcett City, just a couple of blocks from Binder Square.
He wasn't concerned about anyone overhearing his exchange with Noah. It was unlikely that any of the other pedestrians would pay attention. In the event that anyone did hear a snatch of their conversation, the only recognisable words would be innocuous business terminology.

Jack even looked the part. He was wearing a suit, but not one of the obnoxious purple ones from the Joker's signature wardrobe. The suit was black and off-the-rack, matched with a white shirt and an equally boring tie.

The idea was to blend in with the corporate masses. He even had a bag and a Sundollar cup in his hand, adding to his impeccable urban camouflage. For all intents and purposes, he was simply another indistinguishable member of the flock. A sheep, or at worst a sheepdog, not a wolf.

"Sure," Jack said, making a sharp left and walking into the lobby of one of the office buildings. "Any last minute advice?"

"Try and moderate your usual behaviour," the Calculator answered. "Even if you have an avenue of approach, he is a capricious man."

"Hey," Jack muttered, "I can be nice."

Before Noah could respond, Jack plucked the earpiece off his head. Juggling his cup of coffee and his bag, he managed to unload the earpiece, his wallet, his phone, and the contents of his pockets onto a little plastic tray.

Then he set his bag on the x-ray machine's conveyor belt, followed by all his stuff, then strolled through the metal detector. It beeped, but the building's security staff just waved him on by.

From what Jack had determined, ahead of the meeting, the office block's security checks were more along the lines of theatre than actual precautionary measures. Par for the course in modern buildings.

None of the people in the lobby reacted like the Joker was among them. Because Jack didn't look like the Joker. Besides the mundane suit, his hair was black and not green, and his skin tone was beige rather than pasty white.

Once he was past the checkpoint, he popped the earpiece back in, and was treated to the sound of Noah Kuttler muttering under his breath.

"Please behave," the Calculator sighed.

Jack approached the front desk, and waved his coffee-wielding hand in the receptionist's direction.

"Hi," Jack said. "I've got a meeting with Avian Systems. Twenty-fourth floor?"

The receptionist looked back at him with the dead eyes of someone who'd done a job for far too long. "Driver's license or other photo ID?"

Jack fished out the fake and slid it across the desk.

"Phone number, please," the receptionist continued, proceeding down their script with mechanical monotony.

Jack rattled off the digits the Calculator had supplied him.

"Thank you, sir," the receptionist said, handing him a visitor pass on a lanyard. "Please return this
to the counter on your way out."

Picking up the pass, Jack went through the little gantries blocking access to the elevators, waving his freshly-acquired talisman to gain entry.

He went through the routine of getting in a small metal box with other people in sensible clothing, and waited for a while, staring at the doors.

Eventually, he walked through the entrance of an office on the twenty-fourth storey of the tower.

There was nobody in the front area. There were chairs and old magazines, plus a tired-looking potted plant in the corner. There was a desk, bearing the logo of the company that was supposedly renting the space. But there was no human being in sight.

"Go in," the Calculator instructed. "Straight to the back."

Jack did as he was instructed, the soles of his shoes padding over the carpet. He opened the door behind the entry room. It was made of frosted glass, and a corridor was visible behind it.

Except when the door was open, there was nothing there. The doorway framed a perfectly blank black rectangle, like a two-dimensional hole in space.

Jack regarded the doorway for a second, before shrugging and stepping through.

He blinked his eyes rapidly, adjusting to the sudden change in ambient brightness.

His shoes crunched against grass, not carpet fibres.

"Noah," Jack said, carefully. "Are you there?"

There was a delay before the Calculator spoke in Jack's ear. "I still have a connection. But, Joker, you're... not in Fawcett anymore."

"I guessed," Jack said, mildly, looking up at the orange sky.

"Good morning, Mister Napier, Mister Kuttler."

Jack tore his gaze away from the unnatural hue that stretched from horizon to horizon. He peered around the strange landscape, until he saw a man sitting beneath a tree, partially shaded by the leaves and branches.

Idly, Jack noted that the leaves of the tree weren't green. Neither was the grass underfoot.

The man was coloured normally, however. Like Jack, he wore a black suit coat, though his was properly tailored. Beneath it, he was dressed more casually, in a blue turtleneck and slacks.

A pair of round sunglasses both hid his eyes and framed a severe-looking bald and angular set of features. It was a very recognisable look.

"Doctor Sivana," Jack replied. "Good morning! Is it morning here? I really can't tell."

"That depends," Sivana said, "on your frame of reference."

"I'll follow your lead on that," Jack said, cheerily.

Sivana gave a tight and thin-lipped smile. "Very accommodating of you. But please dispense with
the pleasantries, Napier. We're not friends. Why are you here?"

"Well," Jack said, "if we're not friends, then let's talk... business."
"I fail to see," Sivana said, "why I should assist you, or indeed play a leading role in this undertaking."

Jack frowned. "You don't believe me."

Sivana chortled. "Dear me, quite the contrary. I may have misspoke. I do believe you."

Jack made a spinning motion with one raised finger. "Then... what's the problem?"

"Context, Napier," Sivana said, conversationally. "Everything you've told me, I already knew. You could say it's not a question of me believing you, although independent validation is always pleasing to have."

"You're aware that Lex Luthor has been meddling with time travel," Jack asked, delicately, "and screwing with history to fit his own agenda?"

Sivana nodded vigorously. "Oh my, yes. Although this matter of him once being an Earth-native human named 'Luthor', and all you've said about his original background, that's very interesting. That, I do admit, is novel to me. But merely on an intellectual level. I can't see how it changes the situation."

"He knows about the alterations to our timeline," the Calculator murmured in Jack's ear. "But he does not have your purported firsthand knowledge and experience of living through it. Ask him how, if you can."

"You could enquire directly with me," Sivana chimed in. "It's quite rude to make poor Napier serve as your mouthpiece, wouldn't you say?"

Jack pointed to the side of his head, where the earpiece sat. "I'd put you on speakerphone, but I think the doc here's already proven he can hear you just fine."

"Quite," the Calculator muttered, appearing slightly miffed.

"To answer your question, Kuttler," Sivana said, "I have my own means of keeping tabs on what you quaintly refer to as the timestream. The actions of Mister Kelex, or Mister Luthor, if you prefer, are as clear as day to the educated observer. Most inelegant, if I do say so, myself. I'd do a much better job, were I inclined to try my hand at temporal mechanics."

Privately, Jack doubted that. Sivana was clever, probably in the top ten of human intellects. But at best he was equal to Lex, not superior.

Nevertheless, Jack held his tongue. He didn't want to start comparing their respective brain sizes. It would simply end up as a thinly-veiled proxy for comparing other bits of their anatomy. That was not a road he wanted to go down.

"Lex's poking around in time," Jack prompted. "This doesn't bother you?"

Sivana adjusted his sunglasses, pushing a finger against the bridge of his nose. "It bothers me a fair bit, Mister Napier. A fair bit. Bad enough that he conspires with Teth-Adam against my interests in the present, now he seeks to undermine me in the past? I don't take kindly to attacks against my person, and Kelex has been... most discourteous. But I have rebuffed his pitiful efforts. Thus far, he
has met only with failure."

It was a pity that Noah Kuttler wasn't present in person. Jack wanted to exchange a glance with the Calculator. As it was, with their communications no longer secure, he didn't have a good way of signalling the guy.

So Jack settled on tapping his earpiece, as if adjusting it.

The Calculator made a soft coughing noise, which Jack interpreted as understanding and affirmation.

Jack covered his movement by bringing his paper coffee cup up to around chest level, making it seem that he was simply inclined to fidget. "You're okay with just, what, blocking Lex's attempts at messing with you? No revenge, no retaliation?"

"In due time," Sivana said. "In my time, if you'll pardon the wordplay. I am no follower, Napier. I am not at your beck and call. Since becoming aware of Kelex's manipulations, I have begun making preparations. When I am ready, I will take action. I will deal with Kelex. I will. When Teth-Adam and Kelex lie defeated, it shall be my face that they see looking down on them. Mine, Napier, not yours."

"You've got dibs, huh? Okay, sure. I do have to check, though. You'll deal," Jack asked, "with a guy who's rewriting reality? What if he erases you from existence?"

"He has not been able to do so, thus far," Sivana said. "I doubt he can. I have taken steps. My own temporal integrity is now quite protected, I assure you, via methods of my own design."


Sivana looked amused. "Napier, you're reasonably bright. More so than I was led to think. Seeing as you have some capacity for rational thought, do you truly believe I am selflessly altruistic? I am Thaddeus Sivana. I am an island unto myself. If you're hinting that I should extend my aegis to you and Kuttler, I'm afraid the answer is a resounding 'no'. Why should I?"

Jack set his coffee cup down, on the grass.

He still wasn't sure where he was. Nor was Noah. The Calculator couldn't trace Jack's location, and the only reason they still had voice communications was Sivana's portal. Whatever it was, the portal allowed signals to pass through.

The doorway that Jack had walked through, back in Fawcett City, was present a short distance away. It looked like a black rectangle hanging in mid-air, with no apparent means of support.

The whole setup was proof that Sivana had power and resources. Maybe the strange landscape was merely set dressing and Hollywood magic, all special effects and illusions. But Jack figured Sivana wasn't the kind of man to waste his energy on chicanery.

Sivana was sitting cross-legged on the grass, in a much neater fashion than Jack's own messy loose-limbed sprawl. Sivana was also ensconced between the roots of the single odd-looking tree, the only tree present in the area, as far as Jack could see.

Given Sivana's baldness and his all-knowing air, the man looked like some sort of Buddha. A bodhisattva of mad science.
It was almost a pity that Jack had to disturb the man's apparent serenity.

"That's not it," Jack said. "That's not it at all. I was just curious. You haven't protected your family?"

Sivana's face twitched, just a little. "My brother and I are not on speaking terms."

"Not him," Jack said. "I mean your wife and kids."

Jack watched Sivana's features carefully. He saw shock and surprise, followed by suspicion.

"Explain yourself," Sivana snapped, his good mood evaporating. "I have no..."


Sivana gaped at Jack, as if he'd suddenly grown a second head, spontaneously mutated, or something. He opened his mouth, then closed it. Then he opened it again.

For a few seconds, Jack was treated to the sight of one of the smartest people in the world doing a decent impression of a goldfish.

"Kuttler," Sivana demanded, "is he telling the truth?"

"He believes it," the Calculator said, quietly, over Jack's earpiece.

White hot rage flashed across Sivana's face, for a single instant, before being replaced with ice cold calm. "Preposterous. If I had a family, and I use that hypothetical qualifier, I would surely guard them as securely as I do myself."

"See," Jack interrupted, "you're assuming that your defences against time travellers work. Would you know if they didn't? Besides, when did you put these defenses in place? Might have been too late. If past tense is correct, I don't know. Do you?"

"Of course. I am Sivana," the scientist said, as if the statement were an answer. Perhaps it was, in his mind.

"Mm-hm," Jack hummed. "But if you were Lex. Pretend for a moment. Wouldn't the best way to get at Sivana... wouldn't it be to make him think he had the upper hand?"

Sivana's face cycled through a few more expressions, before going guarded. "Understand, Napier, Kuttler, that I must verify these claims of yours."

"If it helps," Jack said, "I never met your missus. But your older two were nice. The teens are kinda bratty. Smart, though. Pity they don't exist anymore, so you wouldn't know."

"Don't twist the knife, Napier," Sivana warned. "I take your meaning."

Jack smiled. "Just making sure we're all on the same page. I find that clear communication is best to avoid misunderstandings."
Another day, another disguise. Once again, Jack was dressed as a corporate drone.

It was vaguely appropriate, insofar as the Batman had routinely spent many of his days pretending to be a captain of industry. Pretending to be Bruce Wayne.

If wearing a suit and tie was good enough for the Bat, it was more than good enough for Jack.

On the other hand, Jack had a terrible feeling he was getting into a rut, a state of affairs that simply would not do.

Jack liked to think he wasn't the Joker, not any longer. But the sentiment was one that the Joker would have agreed with. He couldn't be boring. He couldn't be predictable.

In the old days, the Bat would have been on his tail. There was no Bat now, but Jack was being hunted, all the same. Lex and his coterie would be just as dogged in their pursuit.

That meant Jack couldn't spend too much time using the same sort of cover. He also couldn't spend too much time gathering the players and pieces he needed. He was on the clock.

Plus, Lex would eventually realise that Jack was looking for people who'd lost family and friends to Lex's timeline shenanigans.

The time factor and urgency dovetailed with another thing Jack had learnt as a career criminal. It wasn't wise to involve too many people in a caper. That increased the chances of something going wrong, or someone deciding to betray the group.

That said, there was something to be said for scalability. Size mattered. Reach mattered. In crime, as in business, networks mattered. It wasn't just what you knew, it was who you knew.

Getting Noah Kuttler on board helped immensely. But while the Calculator was influential in certain professional circles, the Calculator didn't have a truly all-encompassing client base. He was the broker and intelligence service of choice for the small and medium enterprises of the costumed set - the solo supervillains and little crews.

But there were organisations that only maintained tenuous links with the Calculator's network. They were the multinationals and large corporations of the supervillain world, so to speak - the likes of Kobra, the Order of St. Dumas, the Court of Owls, and so on. They didn't need the Calculator, not like the bit players.

Additionally, the Calculator was American. He had the United States, Canadian, and Latin American markets all sewn up, with some penetration into Europe. But the Calculator's links to regions like Africa, the Middle East, and Asia were poorer.

As a white guy, Jack didn't exactly blend in among Asian faces. He had the same problem as the Calculator. But that was what the business attire was for.

Ninety-two percent of Hong Kong's population were Chinese. But given the island's positioning as a financial centre, white faces were a relatively common sight in the heart of the city..

The only problem was the temperature. It was a hot and humid night, and Jack was slightly concerned that his sweat would cause his makeup to run. If it did, it would turn his exposed skin a
much paler shade than Hong Kong's residents were used to, even among gweilo.

Of course, Sivana had assured him that the new makeup was much more resilient than the stuff Noah had supplied. The scientist had taken one look at Jack's disguise kit and pronounced the contents thoroughly inadequate, before replacing everything.

If he ever tired of mad science and supervillainy, Jack reckoned that Sivana could make a killing in the cosmetics sector. Then again, for all Jack knew, maybe Sivana was already making a tidy income from beauty, grooming, personal care, and hygiene.

Sivana was also responsible for the main bargaining chip that Jack had, for his upcoming meeting… or what he hoped would be his upcoming meeting, if all went well.

According to Noah's information, the top brass were currently in Hong Kong. But they moved around, and so Jack had a limited window of opportunity to make a face-to-face pitch.

Jack looked at his phone, making sure he was in the right place. He'd studied maps and photos of the route, but it was dark on the streets and he was feeling on edge.

He suspected that he was being watched. That was worrisome, if the watchers were police or Justice League assets. But if his watchers were from the other League, then the surveillance was expected.

Jack made his way down a side road. His collar was popped and his tie was hanging loose, plus the shirt under his jacket was a little rumpled. He looked like a worker at the end of a long day, which stood to reason, given it was inching towards the graveyard hours.

There wasn't much lit on the street. There was a tiny little newsagent's shack, selling magazines, papers and things. There was a cobbler, an old guy who was busy mending shoes. But the real nexus of activity was the noodle stand.

Jack walked leisurely up to an unoccupied folding table, sliding onto one of the plastic stools clustered messily around it. He glanced around, studying the stall and its motley late-night clientele, a collection of people partaking of carbohydrates soaked in broth.

The place didn't look like a League of Shadows front. But maybe that was the idea. They wouldn't exactly hang a big sign on the front, advertising twenty percent off on assassination services, buy one ninja, get one free.

It was also likely that the noodle place wasn't directly linked to the Shadows at all, but merely a convenient place for them to direct Jack to.

Jack raised a hand, motioning for attention. He wasn't sure if he was supposed to order something or not, but it would be damned strange if he simply sat there without making any move to do so.

All he got for his trouble was a dismissive wave back from the nearest employee or co-proprietor of the stand, a woman who was busy talking to another table. So Jack shrugged his shoulders and waited.

His eyes flicked round the tight confines of the seating area. The other patrons were mostly working age, though there was an old guy and a couple of tourists. But there was a non-zero chance that any or all of them were Shadows. Even the skinny old fellow in a tank top and flip-flops.

Damn ninja.
Jack was fully aware the term was slightly inaccurate, because the Shadows were primarily active from Greater China to North Africa, with only a small presence in Japan. Still, regardless of ethnicity, they were damn ninja.

The sound of some sort of commotion caught Jack's attention. He looked over at the main counter of the little eating establishment. For a half-second or two, he thought a recalcitrant customer was arguing with the counter guy, perhaps disputing a bill.

Then it became painfully obvious that something else was going on.

The person in front of the counter had their hair and face obscured with a hood. And they had a knife.

Jack watched, with narrowed eyes, as the hoodie-clad figure snatched up a plastic tub. It looked like the noodle people used that to hold money, instead of a proper cash register.

He didn't need to get involved. He didn't need to lift a finger. He had bigger problems to worry about, like dealing with the Shadows.

Petty street crime wasn't his problem.

He wasn't the Bat.

But... the Bat wasn't here, was he?

Jack moved, uncoiling from the stool he was perched on. His motion sent the table he was seated at crashing to the ground, a noise that drew the robber's attention.

The point of the knife moved, as the robber turning away from the stall operator. Which was what Jack wanted. That was precisely the reaction he wanted to prompt.

As Jack closed the distance, the kid in the hoodie struck. At least Jack thought the robber was young. He couldn't see much of their face, and a navy blue top over jeans was a common enough look.

But the knife-wielder was fast. Damn fast.

Given their height difference, the kid's blade came up at Jack - an upward, rising motion.

His shoes skidding on the paving stones, Jack twisted his body so the weapon just barely missed him, and swung his own hand downward, aiming for the kid's knife arm.

A knifehand strike. A karate chop. Shutō-uchi. He performed the counter out of instinct before he realised just what he'd done. There was a certain amount of irony there.

The knuckle of his small finger made contact with the kid's forearm and wrist. It was a solid impact. Their fingers spasmed, and the weapon fell from their hand.

But the knife didn't hit the ground. Jack watched, incredulously, as the kid swerved around him, snatching the dropped weapon out of the air and then coming at him again. It happened so fast that Jack could barely follow the move, and he definitely could not react in time.

This time, the blade did hit Jack, slicing into his coat - though it was stopped by the slash-resistant weave masquerading as ordinary fabric.

Jack blinked. What the hell? Was the kid some kind of meta? There was no way an ordinary human
could...

Oh.

Right.

Inwardly, Jack cursed. He knew what was going on now.

Ninja. Goddamn ninja.
Chapter 32

The kid ran. Jack followed.

Despite scoring a solid hit on Jack, albeit one blocked by his discreet body armour, the so-called robber hadn't pressed the advantage. Instead, they'd fled, turning tail and sprinting down the street.

Under normal circumstances, Jack would have let the kid go. He wasn't the Bat. He wasn't a crimefighter. But he had a sneaking suspicion that this was some kind of test by the League of Shadows.

After all, Jack was no slouch in hand-to-hand combat. He'd learnt to hold his own against the Batman. Compared to the caped crusader and his disciples, most martial artists were just poseurs in fancy pajamas.

The faux robber had gotten the best of Jack. Which meant they were Bat-tier. That meant the Shadows. Had to be. There was no way someone with moves like that would be committing penny ante crimes like knocking over a street restaurant.

On the face of it, the Shadow in the hoodie was better equipped for a foot chase than Jack. They were wearing running shoes, if threadbare and worn ones. Jack's own shoes were shiny and black, straight out of the generic male businessman's dress code. And he was in a suit, besides.

But Jack was used to running in suits and dress shoes. He had years of practice under his belt, even if those suits had been obnoxiously purple rather than sombre black.

The trouble was, Hong Kong wasn't his city. He knew the streets of Gotham like the back of his hand. Better than the back of his hand, really, since he didn't spend all that much time trying to memorise the intricacies of his own hands.

"Calculator," Jack said.

It took a few seconds for Noah to respond. When he did, the man sounded shrill, even through his masking software.

"Joker," the Calculator demanded, "what are you doing?"

Jack assumed that Noah was picking up his location, and the fact he was proceeding at significant speed away from the originally designated meeting point.

"Chasing a Shadow," Jack explained, glibly.

Noah didn't seem enlightened. "Why on earth are you…"

"Later," Jack said, quickly. "I need your magic."

In front of Jack, the Shadow in the hoodie and jeans leapt on top of a parked car, then jumped from there to a second storey balcony. They swung up and over the metal railings, and began scaling the building.

"Tracking," the Calculator said. "Take the next right."

Jack ducked into the alley, which led to something of a tiny cul du sac. The path ended in a dead end, nothing but garbage dumpsters and a closed metal loading door. But Jack kept running,
putting his trust in Noah's instructions.

"Ahead and above," the Calculator continued. "Third storey window, second from your left. It's open."

Jack reached into his suit jacket, his hand closing around the grip of what looked like a child's toy gun. Appearances aside, the plastic was anything but flimsy. He pulled the device out, pointing it and sighting. He squeezed the trigger.

With a hiss of releasing air, the compact grappling hook shot from the launcher, flying through the open window and latching itself against the frame. The line began to retract, hauling Jack up with it.

He tumbled through the window, taking a half-second to disengage the grappling hook. He kept the launcher in his hand.

"Your right, down the corridor," the Calculator said. "Last door, yellow sign. Stairs. Roof access."

Jack found the door at the end of the passageway. He noted, with mild bemusement, that it was presumably supposed to be locked - there was a contact point for a keycard next to the door, and the light on that was blinking.

But someone, probably the building's staff, had propped the door open with a block of wood.

Jack slipped through and ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

At the top of the stairwell, Jack crashed through the exit door and onto the roof itself.

"Target three o'clock," the Calculator said.

Sure enough, the League of Shadows operative was halfway through the motion of dropping down from another roof, rolling as they hit the concrete. A hooded head came up as the Shadow registered Jack's presence. He thought he saw a pair of eyes narrow.

Seeing Jack in their path, the Shadow didn't try to evade, but instead came right at him. The same knife stabbed through the air.

Instead of dodging or tanking the hit, Jack parried, using his grappling gun, catching the flat of the knife on the hard surface of the launcher. With his other hand, he gripped the Shadow's knife arm, trying to immobilise it.

But the kid twisted, using their own arm and shoulder as a pivot. A knee snaked up, lightning fast, slamming hard into Jack's torso.

Jack and the Shadow broke apart, collapsing to the building's roof.

He tried to get up, but the Shadow was quicker, springing into a crouch with cat-like agility. Possibly Bat-like agility, even.

Jack was prone on his back, which wasn't a good position to be in. He aimed a kick at the Shadow, but they dodged, almost effortlessly.

Then Jack brought his hand up, still holding the grappling hook launcher, and squeezed the trigger.

The launcher wasn't a weapon, but it did send a barbed bit of metal flying out with significant speed and force. The hook hit the Shadow and knocked them ass over teakettle, which Jack counted as a
Of course, the kid quickly sprang back to their feet. But by that time, Jack was also just about up.

Instead of pressing the attack, the figure in the hoodie and jeans stilled. Then they lifted a hand to their head and unzipped the hood and mask that obscured their face.

Jack wasn't sexist, not really, and he didn't have all that much in the way of masculine pride. Even so, he felt a brief twinge of annoyance. There was something slightly embarrassing about nearly being bested by a delicate-looking teenage girl.

Then he realised who the girl was. He recognised that face.

And once he did, he felt much better, on a number of levels.

After all, in another world, in another time, she would have been a Bat.

The girl wasn't looking at Jack, though. Instead, she was looking past him.

Jack twisted around, warily.

There was a man standing some distance away, on another rooftop. A bald guy, big, Arab-looking, and extremely imposing.

"That is enough," the man shouted, his voice booming. "Come! The Shadows await."

"Sure," Jack said. "You know, most people just have a front desk and a guestbook."
Chapter 33

The genre-savvy part of Jack's brain was vaguely disappointed. The room that Ubu led him into wasn't dimly-lit and lavishly appointed with gold, jade, and dark wood. There were no opium fumes, or even cigarette smoke.

There was plenty of wood, but it was more of a pine shade paired with white. The decor was minimalist, more contemporary Scandinavian than antique Chinese.

The air did smell of something, but it was aromatherapy or spa nonsense. Floral with a hint of whatever the manufacturers wanted mixed in.

He supposed it was nice, if you were into penthouses that occupied an entire floor of a hotel.

The Bat had money, but Jack had always been a simple guy. Sure, he'd made a buck or two via the costumed criminal gig. But a lot of his ill-gotten gains had been funnelled back into more joy buzzers, whoopie cushions, squirting flowers, and other tools of the trade.

But it seemed the new management of the League of Shadows didn't mind spending dollars on creature comforts.

"Welcome," said Talia al Ghul, leader of the League of Shadows.

The woman was sitting cross-legged on an expensive sofa, rather than a throne. But she made the couch look like one. Jack was willing to bet that her blouse and slacks cost more than the annual salary of a regular working-class person.

Jack sketched an elaborate bow, drawing on his best courtly manners. In other words, he bowed like he'd seen in some period drama, trying not to trip over his own feet.

"Ma'am," Jack replied.

Behind him, the mismatched pair of Ubu and the hoodie-clad teenage girl stood watch. Jack could feel their twin stares burning into his back, but he didn't let the scrutiny affect his composure. He sank into the offered chair, acting perfectly at ease.

"You desire the loyalty of the Shadows," Talia said.

"Loyalty's a strong word," Jack answered. "Call it jolly cooperation."

"Semantics," said Talia, cramming a liberal amount of distaste into one word.

Jack shrugged, affecting an air of nonchalance. "I've got no designs on your organisation. You'd have to rebrand, and League of Comedians doesn't have the same ring to it. But we have common interests."

"So you insist," Talia said. "Have you evidence of your claims? Your associate assured us that you would present a compelling case. I do hope, for your sake, that you are not wasting my time."

With deliberate movements, Jack stuck his hand into a pocket, making it clear he wasn't going for a weapon. He produced a flat disc, about the size of a drink coaster or wireless phone charger.

"This was created by Sivana," Jack said. He resisted the urge to ad-lib, and stuck to the script. "It allows someone to view a selected subset of my memories. It's already been tuned to the playlist
that you'd be interested in."

"Memories of another reality," Talia observed.

"Just so," Jack confirmed, brightly. "Cheaper than LexFlix. Who wants to go first?"

"You must be joking," Talia said, staring at Jack like he was an insect, possibly one that had found its way into her food. "You expect me to use a brain-machine interface constructed by Sivana, programmed with the hallucinations of a madman?"

"Uh, yeah," Jack admitted. "Sounds bad when you say it that way."

Talia's stare grew even more disapproving. But she seemed to consider the proposition, before reaching a decision.

"Ubu," she commanded.

The hulking man stepped forward, looming over the seating area.

"You will use the device," Talia told her retainer.

Ubu clasped his hands together and gave a shallow bow.

"Cassandra," Talia continued, addressing the teenage girl whom Jack had fought. "If this is a trick, and the machine proves fatal to Ubu, you will ensure that it is equally fatal to our guest."

Given Cassandra's abilities, the blunt statement was a very real threat. Especially if her surname was still Cain in this world, rather than Wayne.

Cassandra inclined her head in acknowledgement.

Jack thought about complaining. It wasn't an equitable exchange, since the Shadows had a semi-reliable method of bringing corpses back to life. But he didn't comment. He simply stood up and passed the machine over.

"Hold it and concentrate hard on wanting it to work. You, uh, might want to sit down, though I dunno if the furniture can take your weight."

Ubu reached down and plucked the disc from Jack's palm. The man remained standing. Jack hoped the Shadows wouldn't hold him accountable if Ubu collapsed and broke the floorboards.

The disc lit up. Ubu's eyes started to move rapidly. He twitched.

Talia al Ghul asked, warningly, "Is this behaviour expected?"

Cassandra stared at Jack. There was no change in the girl's body language, but Jack got the impression she was ready to put a knife through his eyes.

Jack had no intention of pulling a fast one. On the other hand, if Ubu coincidentally had a stroke, he feared matters would get tense. The Shadows had a breeding and treatment regime to create their Ubus. It was a position, not a name. Perhaps the Shadows had managed to bulk up their guys without any side effects, but Jack reckoned a human being of such scale had to have some health problems.

Oh well.
"Yeah," Jack confirmed. "It's all good. Playback is at an accelerated rate, not real time. It'd take forever, otherwise. He's experiencing things faster than normal."

"Intriguing," Talia mused. "If this is no trick, there is… potential here."

"Talk to Sivana about licensing," Jack said. "He whipped it up in like, one morning. The guy does several impossible things before breakfast."

Sivana had constructed the little memory transfer discs to verify Jack's story about his own family. Sadly, Sivana had soundly rejected Jack's suggestion of building his tech into big shallow basins filled with silver vapour. Terrible shame, really.

Ubu snapped out of his trance, swaying before he steadied himself.

"Mistress," Ubu began, awkwardly.

"Speak freely, Ubu," Talia ordered.

"I saw... I do not know if what I saw was true, or an elaborate fabrication," Ubu hedged. "But I did see another world. I saw your son, Mistress. Damian Wayne, the Robin."

Talia al Ghul uncrossed her legs. She shifted forward on the sofa, looking intensely at her retainer. "My son?"

Ubu bowed his head. The man looked unsure, which was an odd sight on a massive wall of muscle. "He was loyal to his father, Mistress, not the Demon's Head. He rejected the Shadows, like his father before him. He..."

"Hey," Jack interjected, "let's be fair here, you let him stay with dad. Totally above board, only visits to the secret lairs of assassins every other weekend."

Reluctantly, Ubu said, "That is so. In the vision, Mistress, you consented to your son's apprenticeship with his father."

"Consented, hell," Jack drawled. "It was your idea. Giving him the kid was meant to draw old Brucie closer to the Shadows, or make sure your heir knew his father's methods. Or just mess with his head, I don't know."

Ubu scowled. "Such a transparent ploy would not..."

"Your job's to report, not editorialise," Jack said.

Ubu's features darkened, but any scathing critique he was aiming to make ended up being cut off, as Talia al Ghul flicked her fingers.

"Impudent as he is," Talia said, "he is correct. I wish to know what you saw, not your feelings about it."

"I apologise, Mistress," Ubu said, in a duly chastised fashion.

Talia lifted an elegantly shaped eyebrow. "This child of mine. Damian. How skilled was he?"

Next to Ubu, Jack saw Cassandra Cain straighten up, a look of genuine interest flitting briefly across her face before it returned to an impassive mask.

Ubu stiffened. "The child was... intelligent and gifted. As a strategist, and in our arts. He defeated
the Joker of Gotham."

Ubu looked at Jack as he said this.

Jack rubbed a spot on his chest, remembering one nasty hit. The kid had been vicious, for a Bat.

"He also bested," Ubu began, before faltering. "He..."

Jack snorted. "I think what Lurch is trying to say is that the kid was a better fighter than his mom. I don't know how you stack up, Miss Talia. Different world. But the Talia I remember was no slouch."

Talia's eyes widened. Fractionally, but enough that Jack noticed the change.

"And this man," she asked, "Wayne. The one whom I deemed worthy. Whom my father deemed worthy. What of him?"

Ubu hesitated.

Jack leaned forward in his chair, bringing his hands together and linking his fingers. "Why don't I start, and old Ubu here can confirm? He controlled Gotham. He controlled the Justice League. Superman answered to him. All without metahuman powers, because he was just that good."

"A general," Talia summarised, "an able warrior."

"More than that," Jack said. He clenched a fist. He could feel his own voice rising. "He was a good man. A great man. He supported clinics, shelters, homes. He created foundations and charities. If a man was hungry, if a woman was battered, if a child was abandoned, he would take them in."

Talia al Ghul tilted her head, cupping her chin with one manicured hand. She peered at Jack, contemplatively.

Jack twisted round, glowering at Ubu. "Tell her. Say it. Tell her it's true."

Ubu grunted. It was far from a resounding endorsement, but nor was it a denial.

"This is the man," Talia said, still looking at Jack, "who you opposed? Whose works you sought to destroy?"

"I was what I was," Jack stated, grimly. "I'm not proud. Want me to come out and say it? The world deserves the Bat. It needs the Bat. But all it has is the Joker. I'm here, and the Bat isn't. That's not right."

He slumped, tension draining from his frame as he made the admission.

Talia al Ghul kept her eyes on Jack, studying him closely. Finally, she nodded.

"Show me," Talia said, in a voice that brooked no argument. "Ubu, the device. The memory. Show me."

"Mistress," Ubu protested.

"I want to see," Talia said. "I want to see this man, and my son."
"Time travel research," Doctor Sivana said, with disgust, "is a saturated field, filled with hacks that wouldn't be able to solve an equation even if you wrote it in crayon."

"Which means," Jack observed, with an innocent mien, "you should be able to do better, right? You're a professional, not an amateur."

Sivana shifted, uncomfortably. He scratched at the back of his neck, and broke eye contact. "My very intellect and learning means that I can only proceed slowly, and carefully, in investigating so complex a field. I refuse to blunder my way to disaster like an uneducated fool."

Talia al Ghul tapped a finger against the rim of her teacup. The porcelain cup was an Asian-styled one, not a Western one, possessing no handle. The tea inside was also Asian, and therefore not entirely to Jack's taste.

But he figured it would be impolite to ask for milk and sugar, so he stifled his complaints and obligingly downed a sip from his own cup. He hoped the burnt and bitter taste was supposed to be there, rather than an indicator that the drinks were poisoned.

Of course, Jack didn't worry too much about it, even if the thought crossed his mind. For one thing, given the amount of supposedly lethal substances he'd been exposed to over his tenure as the Joker, Jack suspected he'd built up blanket immunities to a wide swath of poisons.

Besides, if the League of Shadows was going to poison the refreshments, Jack figured they would at least use something tasteless and undetectable. They were supposed to be industry leaders in the field of on-demand fatality. Surely they had standards.

"If the doctor's legendary scientific prowess cannot solve this problem and set the world to rights," Talia said, "what avenues do we have?"

"Why," Jack said, "I'm glad you asked. Let's break this down."

Jack stood up, brushing his trousers legs smooth with his fingers and palms. He moved away from the table, to the whiteboard which Talia's minions had provided.

The whiteboard and its aluminium frame stood out incongruously with the generally Eastern aesthetic of the room. Somewhere, Jack imagined the Shadows' resident interior decorator shedding a tear of frustration.

Sivana hadn't looked pleased either, no doubt thinking that a whiteboard and markers were tragically primitive.

Noah Kuttler hadn't expressed an opinion, but the Calculator wasn't present in person. There was only the lens and housing of a webcam, sitting at a place on the table.

There was also a cup of tea sitting next to the camera, since Jack had insisted on pouring one for Noah.

"First," Jack said, uncapping a marker and pressing its tip to the whiteboard, "we stay with technology, but not in-house from the good doctor. Third party stuff."

He drew a gear wheel, and started branching it off.
"There's the Flash's Cosmic Treadmill, there's Mother Boxes and Father Boxes, there's the Mobius Chair, Time Bubbles, Timeships, Time Knives," Jack listed, scribbling frantically. "And then there's…"

"I grasp the point you are ham-fistedly trying to convey, Mister Napier," Sivana interrupted. "You do not need to write down every single ill-conceived method of traversing the fourth dimension."

"Then we can move on to magic," Jack said, drawing a magic wand - a black bar with two white ends. "Which could include paranormal phenomena more broadly, such as metahuman powers that…"

"The distinction is meaningless for several of the examples you have already cited," Sivana noted. "Science and mysticism are not so easily separated, as my own work so handily demonstrates."

"Moreover," Noah added, his synthesised Calculator voice coming through a speaker in the base of the camera, "I have already compiled a list of known varieties of time travel, including artifacts, and sent it to each of you. This incorporates the Joker's information on items that he encountered or heard about in the other timeline, Doctor Sivana's contributions from his research, and files from the League of Shadows' archives."

"Yeah," Jack acknowledged, waving the marker around. "But you put it in a spreadsheet. Spreadsheets are no fun."

"I will leave judgement on the entertainment value to you," Talia said, still toying with her teacup. "You are the expert in that field. I will speak from mine. These avenues are effectively closed to us. The Superman and his forces will strengthen their security the moment they surmise you are after them."

"Lex would be expecting raids on locations where time travel technology or even relevant literature is stored," Noah agreed.

"Of course," Jack said. "Of course, of course. I know that. But that works in our favour."

Sivana adjusted his sunglasses. "How, pray tell, does this state of affairs serve our interests, if the very items we wish to acquire are more securely locked up and guarded than ever before? Our objectives would be further out of reach."

Jack smiled. "That depends on how you define the objectives. Rest assured, I'm not planning on playing Lex's game. No, no, no. I'm making my own rules."

"It may be helpful," the Calculator replied, "if you explained those rules."

Jack pointed his marker at the webcam. "Sure you wanna know? Because spoilers."

Sivana frowned. "Spoilers?"

Jack shrugged. "Gotham vigilante, wears purple, doesn't exist in this timeline. Not important."


"Sorry," Jack replied. "Force of habit. Okay, see, it goes like this."

Jack picked up an eraser and wiped the whiteboard mostly clean, with broad and vigorous strokes. Then he drew a big and somewhat imperfect circle, before adding the rough shape of the North American continent to the picture.
"Obvious targets," Jack said. "Places like the Flash Museum in Keystone City, where the Cosmic Treadmill is on permanent display. I want teams to hit them anyway."

Sivana frowned. "Even if we were to secure the Treadmill, we do not have the services of a speedster class metahuman capable of operating it."

Jack twirled his marker, making it dance between his fingers. "We don't. That's okay. Doesn't matter. The point is to signal to Lex and his merry men that we're going for time machines. If whoever we send succeeds in getting the mother of all gym equipment, or anything else on the list, great. That's a bonus. If they fail, no big deal."

"I expect," the Calculator said, dryly, "you'll want disposable assets for those raids."

Jack shrugged. "I'll leave the staffing to you and the Shadows. I'm not admin."

Talia eyed Jack's sketch. "You wish to make Superman and the Justice League believe you are after time travel artifacts… because they are not your true objective. A form of misdirection. Obfuscation."

"Bingo," Jack said. "Once they've got the idea, we go for the gold."

"And what," Sivana asked, "is 'gold', in this metaphor?"

Jack tapped his marker against the top of the messily drawn globe. "Right here."
"Put on yer sunnies, mate," Harkness advised. "Keep staring at people like that, and you'll spook the locals. And try ta smile, will ya?"

Ubu turned his glare on the Australian man, but did as he was instructed. His Mistress had told him to follow the lead of the Keystone City and Central City criminals recruited for the operation, even if it galled him to do so.

He placed the cheap plastic sunglasses on his face, and stretched his lips back, showing teeth.

Harkness shuddered. "On second thought, don't smile. That just looks wrong."

Ubu let the forced smile drop, returning his features into their usual expression. For some reason, this failed to please the Australian man. Harkness stared at Ubu as if he was disappointed.

Harkness shook his head, but did not give another of his meaningless unsolicited criticisms. The Australian simply stuck his own hands into the pockets of his voluminously baggy knee-length shorts, and led the way through the milling crowd.

Ubu thought the Australian's manner of dress was extremely undignified. While Ubu could recognise the utility in wearing trousers with additional pockets, useful for storing additional weapons and equipment, Harkness' shorts and sandals also served to highlight the man's hairy legs and feet. Evidently, proper grooming was not one of his priorities.

It was also extremely improper to wear the iconography of the League of Shadows' enemies. But the faces of Superman and Wonder Woman were emblazoned on Harkness' t-shirt, albeit in slightly inaccurate colours, and with a low quality of print.

However, by far the biggest issue was the fact that Harkness had forced Ubu to dress in a similar manner.

Ubu followed Harkness through the crowd. This was a simple task for a man of his stature, given that shorter people - meaning the vast majority of the human race - tended to get out of his way instinctively. As was correct, of course.

Harkness stopped at the ticket counter. Ubu was not certain if there truly had been no queue, or if the queue had chosen to prudently vanish in anticipation of Ubu's arrival. Regardless, there was no delay.

"Two adult tickets," Harkness said, leaning on the counter.

"Yes, er, sir," squeaked the girl behind the glass, looking up at Ubu. She was obviously in awe of his superior physique. "Your, um, friend is... is he a basketball player?"

"Nah," Harkness said, "he's me cousin from Kahndaq. Just visiting, ain't ya?"

"That is correct," Ubu rumbled.

"Though maybe he'll stay on," Harkness said, with a wink. "Maybe the Miners or the Keystone Kings are recruiting, hey?"

The girl behind the glass window laughed. Ubu thought he could detect a trace of nervousness in
the young woman's bearing. "Uh... yeah. That's two adults, and two free English guidebooks, unless your cousin wants Arabic. Do you need audio guides?"

"Ta. English is good," Harkness replied, grinning, as he completed the transaction. "No need fer the audio guides, I've been here before."

"Oh," the girl said. "Welcome to the Flash Museum, and, er, entry is just ahead, on the right!"

Harkness placed two fingers to his brow and made a small movement, making something of a salute. He gripped one of the shoulder straps of his backpack with his other hand.

The Australian strode off towards the entrance, and Ubu followed.

"Sir, excuse me," said another museum attendant, this one a young man standing by the doors. "Bags need to be left with the... uh..."

Ubu lifted his sunglasses up, so he could direct the full magnitude of his glare down at the hapless staff member. "You do not need to take his bag."

"It's museum policy, sir," the man managed, visibly recoiling from Ubu. "Larger bags and..."

"You do not need to take his bag," Ubu repeated. "It is not a large bag."

"I guess it isn't," the man said, hurriedly. "Please proceed, and have a great visit. Thank you for your understanding!"

Harkness rolled his eyes, as they walked deeper into the Flash Museum. "Thanks, mate. But I didn't need the help. Yer no Jedi. Can't just scare the living daylights outta everyone."

Ubu's brows furrowed. "What is 'Jedi'?"

Harkness squinted at Ubu. "Never seen Star Wars? Order of space monks with super powers. There is no emotion, there is peace?"

Ubu considered this, then gave a nod. "I have not seen 'Star Wars', but yes, I am a Jedi."

Harkness sighed. "Yer ain't a... know what, never mind, forget I said anything."

Ubu nodded again. He was used to being ordered to forget information, as this was a common command issued within the Shadows. Of course, Harkness did not have the authority to truly order Ubu to purge his memories. It was also likely the criminal had meant the statement figuratively.

Regardless, the outcome was the same. Ubu remained silent. He followed Harkness as the man made his way through the entrance hall, past the families, small children, and others that were on the premises to pay homage to the Flash.

As far as Ubu understood, the populace of the twin American cities of Keystone and Central did not literally worship the Flash as a deity. The situation was not precisely the same as his native Kahndaq, where many of his ignorant former countrymen did indeed venerate Teth-Adam, the Black Adam, as an immortal god-king.

But looking at the so-called Flash Museum, Ubu felt that the difference was merely a matter of degree.

The Flash's symbol was everywhere, on the walls, on banners, even inset upon the floor itself. Many of the people within the complex were wearing the Flash's lightning bolt brand, as well, and
for those that were not… Ubu saw a glassed-off section of the building where the Flash's faithful could acquire their own garments and badges to show their allegiance.

"Come on," Harkness said. "This way."

Ubu walked with Harkness as the Australian led the way down a large high-ceilinged corridor, which was high even for a man such as Ubu. Eventually, they emerged into an even more spacious chamber.

The room was arranged such that the centre of attention was the artifact located on a raised dias, elevated so the people standing around it would not block the view of others.

This was a necessary design decision, Ubu noted, as there were numerous visitors attempting to capture an image of the artifact with their mobile phone cameras, occasionally with their own faces in the picture.

"There she is," Harkness announced. "The Cosmic Treadmill."

Ubu was familiar with the concept of a treadmill. The League of Shadows did not routinely use such equipment for training purposes. If a Shadow had to run, they did so across actual terrain, rather than indoors. Treadmills were for decadent Westerners and Western-influenced people, not the true breed of warrior that the Shadows produced.

However, Ubu also acknowledged that the Cosmic Treadmill bore only a passing resemblance to mundane exercise equipment. It was large and sturdy-looking, and Ubu supposed that its form was merely a practical concession to the need to give a speedster a place to run in the process of breaking the spacetime barrier, without also necessitating a large amount of land.

"Here we go," Harkness said. "Let's get this done."

The Australian slipped his right arm out of his backpack's straps, letting the bag hang by his left side. He yanked on the zipper and reached inside the main compartment.

Ubu did not think highly of Digger Harkness. But as a professional, Ubu was willing to acknowledge that Harkness, known to the underworld as 'Captain Boomerang', was acceptably skilled in the use of his chosen weapons.

Harkness pulled out one of his namesake boomerangs, and drew his arm back, preparing to throw.

Then Harkness swore, his voice rising into a pained curse. He stumbled, clutching his throwing hand with his other arm.

His hand was empty.

Up on the dias, near the Cosmic Treadmill, a red and yellow blur resolved into the costumed figure of the Flash.

The metahuman smirked, and tossed Harkness' boomerang straight up, before catching it again. "Looking for this?"

"IT'S THE FLASH," someone in the crowd screamed. The cry was echoed by several other voices, and many more shouting similar sentences.

"FLASH," a particularly high voice squealed. Ubu assumed the voice belonged to a child, though it reminded him of a farm animal.
"Heya," the Flash said. "Sorry, folks. Exhibit's closed. If you could make your way to the exits in a
calm and orderly fashion… "

Harkness scowled. Then his expression changed, turning into a grin that matched the Flash's own.

The boomerang in the Flash's gloved hand exploded, releasing a concussive shockwave and
sending shrapnel flying.

Ubu threw one arm up, shielding his face and eyes.

But when Ubu peered through his fingers, he saw afterimages of the Flash darting rapidly around
the room, weaving among the crowd of museum visitors.

Before the sound of the explosion had fully faded, before the dust had fully settled, the chamber
was empty save for Ubu, Harkness, and the Flash himself.

The Flash made a show of cleaning his hands, slapping his fingers and palms against each other. "I
hate doing that. You know how hard it is to evacuate people at high speed? Without breaking
them?"

Harkness snorted. "Very?"

"Yes," the Flash said. "Very. Which is a shame. 'cause I'm not gonna use the same amount of care
with you."
"Flash," Digger Harkness drawled. "We've been over this, mate. Yer the good guy, I'm the baddie. Yer ain't supposed ta villain monologue, that's me shout."

"Okay, Boomer," the Flash retorted. "When's the last time you said anything quoteworthy?"

Harkness drew two more of his weapons from his backpack, holding one in each hand. "Can't force it, man. Banter has ta come naturally."

"What," the Flash asked, bringing a hand to his chin and sniffing the air. "Free range, organically grown? That explains the smell. You come straight from the bush, Boomerang?"

"Enough of this," Ubu rumbled, moving into a fighting stance. He raised his arms, separating his feet for stability. "Surrender your time machine. Or I will take it from you."

The Flash blinked. He looking incredulously at Ubu. Then the speedster turned to Harkness. "Where did you find the big guy? Whatever you're paying him, you're getting ripped off. He's not very bright."

"Do not take me lightly," Ubu declared.

"Buddy," the Flash said, "I'll use simple words so you can understand. You're on my turf. In broad daylight. Cops and the Justice League are already on their way. Capisce?"

"Lemme ask ya this, Flash," Harkness interrupted, cheerfully. He waved one of his boomerangs at their surroundings. "Didya clear the whole museum, or just this wing?"

The Flash's eyes, visible through his mask, closed into wary slits.

"Two words," Harkness said. "Civilian casualties."

The Flash vanished.

"Move," Harkness barked, sharply. "That won't buy us much..."

Ubu stepped forward, over the barrier that prevented rule-abiding museum visitors from reaching the main exhibit. He mounted the dias, grabbing the Cosmic Treadmill by its structural supports.

"...time."

As Harkness finished the sentence, the Flash briefly reappeared in front of Ubu, waving his finger from side to side.

Ubu started to react, but before he could, he felt a stinging pain in his wrists and fingers. He was forced to release his grip on the machine.

Then he was thrown backwards, off the platform. Ubu had the presence of mind to turn his uncontrolled fall into a controlled roll.

He came up in a crouching position. But the Flash was there, his foot rising towards Ubu's head.

Ubu had been hit by strong men before. In conventional terms, the Flash was not strong. But he had acceleration on his side. Ubu had wondered how it would feel, to fight such a metahuman.
Now he knew.

A part of Ubu was surprised that his skull was still attached to his spine.

But the rest of Ubu was already reacting. He was a product of the League of Shadows. He had been raised, nearly since birth, to serve the will of the Demon. The Flash was mighty, but Ubu's own body had been forged into a weapon through alchemical treatments and intensive training.

Ubu was superhuman as well.

He sprung to his feet. He was not as quick as the Flash, but Ubu's reaction speed was still far superior to an ordinary man's, and much greater than many expected considering his size.

Ubu could not match the Flash. He could barely see the man.

But the kick the Flash had hurt him with... it had been properly executed. Knee straight forward, leg bent. Then the Flash had straightened his limb into the strike, before retracting it to prevent Ubu from grabbing or grappling with the leg.

He had also used the ball of his foot, preventing injury to his toes.

Those facts led Ubu to one conclusion. The Flash was a trained fighter. His form had been perfect.

Some metahumans relied solely on their powers, rather than training and skill. Ubu disliked fighting such amateurs. It offended his sensibilities. Moreover, amateurs were unpredictable, whereas a trained individual would have certain conditioning and inclinations.

Ubu sensed, rather than saw, the Flash coming in from his left. It was the side where Ubu's guard was weaker. He couldn't stop the blow, and he grunted as he absorbed the impact.

He ignored the pain, aiming to get his hands on the speedster. He succeeded, his fingers tightening, squeezing...

Ubu's feeling of satisfaction was short-lived. The Flash shook, and then phased through Ubu's hands, like a crimson ghost.

The Flash came to a halt some distance from Ubu, folding his arms across his thunderbolt-marked chest. "Nice try. Not nice enough, but nice."

Harkness sent one of his boomerangs flying towards the Flash, slinging it overhand at high velocity.

But the Flash leaned contemptuously to one side, angling his body just enough that the whirling weapon passed by him.

The boomerang smashed into the elevated platform that held the Cosmic Treadmill, breaking apart and coating the dias with silvery liquid. Some of the fluid splattered against the base of the Treadmill.

"Missed," the Flash jeered.

Harkness smirked. "Did I?"

The pool of silver liquid shimmered and solidified. Then the Treadmill began to sink, merging into the reflective surface.
"Shit," the Flash blurted.

"Check," Harkness said, cheerily.

Ubu looked up. Harkness was pleased, but he had a sense that something was wrong.

A deep boom resounded through the museum hall as a circular hole in space appeared, air rushing through the portal. A caped figure came through.

The Treadmill's descent stopped, then reversed, as Superman lifted the time machine out of the gleaming pool.

"Okay, nope," Harkness said, his previously celebratory expression replaced with a worried one. "Gotta go!"

The Australian slapped Ubu on the back, pushing him towards the layer of reflective silver covering the floor.

Ubu did not hesitate. He did not need the encouragement. He plunged into the silver-coated surface, hurling himself forward and downward.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ubu saw a red blur as the Flash moved, trying to intercept. But it was too late for the hero. Ubu and Harkness dropped into the floor… and shot out on the other side.

Ubu stumbled, losing his balance, unable to properly respond to the change in gravity.

All of a sudden, instead of sinking into the ground, they were exiting from it, into an inverted version of the museum's exhibition space.

Ubu fought his way back to an upright position, which was difficult due to the slippery surface underfoot.

Harkness was gaping at the floor beneath their feet, his face showing obvious panic. Ubu followed the Australian's eyes.

Ubu did not feel fear, because he was a loyal servant of the League of Shadows. He was beyond such human frailties. But if he was perfectly honest with himself, he did feel some level of… concern.

Superman was visible through the silvery surface. His fist swung, and the ground beneath their feet cracked.

Then the image of Superman vanished.

Ubu and Harkness stood in the suddenly silent museum hall.

Or, more correctly, an illusionary reflection of the museum hall.

Ubu did not understand all the details, but he had been told that the man responsible for creating the mirror dimension had absolute control over his world, and what could enter it.

They were safe. They had escaped.

"Bugger me," Harkness muttered.

Ubu inhaled, drawing in a shuddering breath.
"Sorry," another man said, "you're not my type."

Ubu looked up.

A costumed figure in orange and green was leaning on one of the walls of the exhibition space.

"Hello, boys," he said. "Welcome to Wonderland."

Harkness laughed. "Sam! Thanks fer the save. I owe ya a drink!"

"Make it my second," Mirror Master replied, smirking. "Joker's got the first round."
Chapter 37

Cassandra breathed out. It was cold enough for the water vapour to condense, if it reached the atmosphere. Ambient temperature was about minus ten degrees centigrade, relatively balmy for the Arctic region.

Her breath didn't mist in the air, given that her mask was in the way. It was still important to keep their thermal signatures from showing up.

Jack Napier had made comments about their team raiding Santa's Workshop, which had briefly puzzled Cassandra. She had been under the impression that Santa was an imaginary figure. Considering that the Justice League did have at least one mythological figure on its roster and there were other supernatural beings at large in the world, she couldn't necessarily dismiss the notion that Santa was real, and affiliated with Superman.

But the Calculator had insisted Napier's remarks were a joke, one of the many jokes routinely made. Cassandra could understand why people had called him the Joker, even if was now frequently professing his dislike of the alias and what it represented.

At the same time, Cassandra noted that he did not correct others when they referred to him by that name. It was confusing. Much about Jack Napier, or the Joker, was confusing.

However, for the moment, names were irrelevant. Neither of them were communicating verbally, which was how Cassandra preferred it. Conversation was not her strong suit.

Violence was.

The long trek through the cold of the North Pole had not involved much violence, or conversation. The idea, as she understood, was to remain undetected for as long as possible. That was why they had been dropped off some distance away from the target and left to make their approach on foot.

But there was ample danger waiting for them at their destination, and a high probability that Cassandra would need to do what she was best at.

Up ahead, Napier lifted his arm, making hand signals. They were different from the gestures used by the Shadows, but still understandable to Cassandra. Military ones, if she recalled correctly.

Cassandra came to a halt, as did the third member of their group.

The man, if 'man' was the correct term, was far taller and broader than Napier. But he glided with inhuman grace and ease over the frigid terrain. Literally inhuman.

Cassandra was an expert in reading body language, and in her opinion, his movements were... more than flawless. Too perfect.

Napier's head twitched, which Cassandra recognised as a tell that he was consulting the display in his goggles. Then he made a 'go' signal, tossing his line over the edge of the cliff. then leaping over the side into empty air.

Cassandra snapped her own figure eight and carabiner in place, then rappelled down the sheer face as well, sliding down the rope.

Reaching the end of the line, she unclipped herself from the rope and let herself free-fall for the last
few feet.

Before she hit the ice, she triggered the controls that Sivana had built into her harness.

A chilly sensation that had nothing to do with the surrounding climate flooded through Cassandra's body.

Then she made contact with the frosty ground - and passed straight through.

She fell, tumbling through a dark void. There was no light and no sound.

Sivana had warned that keeping the phasing technology active for too long would result in harmful side effects. The scientist had used words such as 'ionising radiation' and 'genetic damage', as well as 'disruption of cohesive forces'. Cassandra wasn't sure she understood all the words, but from what she gathered, she didn't like the implications.

Cassandra counted silently in her head. She could feel the harness and her body heat up.

Then she emerged on the other side, falling through the ceiling of a cavernous passageway. Reorienting herself, she landed on the concrete floor, disengaging the phase device. Her harness bled off some of the momentum. Bent knees and her muscles took care of the rest.

Napier was already on the ground, a weapon in his hands. His eyes swept back and forth, scanning the area.

Their third team member arrived an instant later, descending from above. It was obvious that Sivana's man needed no harness. He could fly. Like Cassandra and Napier, he was dressed in polar gear. But Cassandra suspected that he did not truly require it.

The space they were in was surprisingly brightly lit. It could not be power-efficient - the area was also empty. Cassandra was unsure about its intended purpose. During the mission briefing, it had been referred to as an 'access tunnel', but if it was, it was big enough to give access to an entire military brigade, complete with armoured vehicles.

Jack Napier made another hand signal. He started running, moving at a brisk jog, and Cassandra followed him. So did their teammate, though the man kept flying overhead.

By this point, stealth was irrelevant. Cassandra expected that any personnel in the Arctic base were aware, by now, that their perimeter had been breached. Now they had to hurry.

The doors at the end of the oversized corridor loomed larger as they approached.

Cassandra watched as Napier came to a halt, activated his phasing device, and then touched a gloved hand to the surface of the massive doors.

There was a crackle of lightning. Napier's hand remained pressed against the armoured doors, instead of sliding through.

The phasing gear was far from perfect. Doctor Sivana had cautioned the team that the intangibility effect could be countered by sufficiently advanced magic... or New God technology.

"Figures," Napier muttered. He withdrew his arm, shaking his fingers as wisps of smoke rose from his glove. "Zee, you're up."

Sivana's man floated forward, extending his arms. He drove his fingers into the doors, the digits
sinking into the metal - not phasing, but physically digging into the surface. More arcs of electricity sparked around him, but he ignored the light show.

With a mighty heave, Zee tore the doors off their tracks, taking the locking mechanisms with them. Almost negligently, he tossed the mangled sheets of armour aside, and flew through.

"Knock, knock," Napier murmured. "Who's there?"

Cassandra assumed that the statement was another of Napier's jokes, rather than a request for a tactical assessment.

Regardless, the answer he received was not the next portion of the joke, but energy blasts from fixed emplacements. There were turrets in the chamber beyond the doors, covering the entrance with overlapping fields of fire.

The weapons fire was focused on Zee, pulses slamming into the flying man. He weathered the barrage with no apparent damage.

Zee brought his hand to his face, pushing up the polar-rated goggles that covered his eyes. Twin beams shot from his eyeballs, burning through one of the turrets. He repeated the action, disabling each of the turrets in turn.

"Awfully kind of you," Napier remarked, as he strolled forward. "Anticipating our needs. Good service. I'll have to remember to leave you a tip. Wait, do you get paid?"

"No," Zee stated.

"That's no good," Napier said, mournfully. "You boys should unionise."

Cassandra stared at Napier, pointedly.

He nodded, getting the unspoken message. "Right. On the clock. By the numbers. You and Zee hit the vault. Two levels down. Holler if you have problems."

Napier turned around, moving deeper into the Arctic complex. His boots stepped over the Superman shield engraved on the polished concrete floor.

In a monotone, Zee asked, "And you?"

Without turning around, Napier said, "Gotta squeeze in some last minute Christmas shopping."
Chapter 38

Going for the vault was the most dangerous part of the operation. Cassandra and Zee were heading for the most secure portion of the Arctic facility, where Superman supposedly stored the most dangerous of artifacts.

By now, anyone within the fortress would be aware of their presence.

Cassandra did not resent the assignment. Nor did she feel fear. She would do her duty.

She did, however, do another quick mental inventory of the weapons she had on her person. Cassandra expected they would become relevant soon enough.

Thus far, they had only encountered automated security systems. She suspected that run of good fortune was about to change.

As they rounded a corner, Cassandra flung herself to the ground, just before a red and yellow blur crossed over her head.

Zee didn't evade in time. Another figure, this one black and blue, crashed into him in mid-air. They slammed into one of the walls of the fortress.

According to Napier, in the other timeline, Superman's polar citadel had been wholly Kryptonian construction. But the corresponding base in their world was of earthly make. The underlying structure was concrete and metal, not alien crystal.

Which meant that when Zee was tackled into the wall, he hit it hard enough to crater the surface. Cracks radiated out from the point of impact.

Cassandra dropped a hand to her belt webbing. As the red-clad hostile swooped around for another high speed pass, Cassandra rolled to the side and tossed the flashbang grenade.

The grenade detonated in a flash of scarlet, calibrated to match the radiation of a distant sun.

Cassandra did not understand why Kryptonians were weakened by the light of their home star.

Still, she didn't need to comprehend the phenomenon to make use of it.

The woman in red clawed at her eyes and fell to the floor, as did the one in black. Unfortunately, they had relatively little exposed skin, somewhat reducing the effect.

Despite their powers coming from sunlight, it seemed the Kryptonians did not follow the common superhero convention of wearing very little in battle.

Of course, their nearly full body costumes also served to protect them against red sun exposure.

That said, if protection was the idea, then surely they would be wearing helmets? They weren't. Cassandra could see their blonde hair and pale skin, as well as their clear blue eyes.

"I'll kill you for that," the one in red declared, rising unsteadily on her hands and knees.

As Cassandra got back up, as well, she considered the statement. The threat was meaningless. The Kryptonian had intended to kill Cassandra in the first place. Nothing had changed.
In any case, as an agent of the League of Shadows in good standing, it was theoretically possible for Cassandra to die multiple times.

Of course, the Lazarus Pits needed a reasonably intact body in order to bring someone back from the dead. Flamebird had demonstrated a distinct propensity to incinerate opponents in combat, reducing them to ash.

And Cassandra was merely baseline human. She wasn't fireproof.

Out of the corner of her eye, Cassandra saw Zee force Nightwing to the floor. He began pummelling the Kryptonian, leveraging his superior reach and mass. Cassandra didn't know if Zee was any stronger than Nightwing, but he did have size on his side.

But Cassandra was not willing to simply wait and see if Sivana's man could best the two Kryptonians by himself.

If Zee was engaged with Nightwing, that meant Flamebird was hers.

So be it.

As Flamebird's eyes went crimson, Cassandra watched the other woman's movements.

Kryptonian heat vision was extremely accurate. The beams followed the focal point of their eyes, after all.

That was a weakness as well as a strength. Cassandra could see Flamebird's eyes move in their sockets. Cassandra could see Flamebird's muscles tense. She could read the woman's movements. She could tell where Flamebird was looking.

Cassandra couldn't dodge the thermal beams, but she could begin moving just before the eye blasts cooked her. Which she did.

Her hand flicked out, sending a slim throwing knife in Flamebird's direction.

The Kryptonian was faster than Cassandra. The Kryptonian was also faster than the knife.

But Cassandra was gambling on the fact that Kryptonians and other nigh-invulnerable beings often didn't even attempt to dodge seemingly trivial attacks.

Flamebird didn't dodge.

The knife struck home.

Sadly, the monomolecular blade didn't go through the woman's forehead, or anywhere else that might be immediately fatal. The weapon hit her cheek and jaw.

"CURSE YOU," Flamebird seethed. That was what Cassandra thought the woman said. It was difficult to make out the words.

The outcome was suboptimal. Cassandra had lost the element of surprise, and Flamebird was now brutally aware that Cassandra possessed the means to damage on Kryptonians. There would be no more lucky strikes.

In addition, X-Ionised weapons were a valuable resource. Cassandra couldn't afford to use them
carelessly. The process was still a closely guarded secret of the United States military. Although it was not, of course, quite as secret as the American government preferred.

Cassandra made her own quick dodge to the side, shielding her head as shrapnel filled the air, clattering off her gear and body armour.

She watched as Nightwing exploded from the floor, lifting off with enough force to damage the environment. The dark suited Kryptonian woman carried Zee into the air.

Cassandra supposed that the old close combat standby of 'ground and pound' was less useful against an opponent who could defy gravity.

Zee was struggling. He was using his own flight capabilities to counteract Nightwing's thrust. But it was obvious the Kryptonian's telekinetic powers were greater than the mechanism that Zee used to fly.

Nightwing and Zee smashed into the ceiling, sending another tremor across the corridor. Zee's back and spine hit the concrete first. Then they kept going, punching straight through and vanishing out of sight.

Flamebird chose that instant to send another blast of her heat vision at Cassandra.

"KILL YOU," Flamebird screamed.

The other woman's face was now a bloody mess, but her eyes were functioning, and so were her lungs.

Instead of dodging, Cassandra ran forward. and into the path of the beams.

The heat rays passed through her, as Cassandra activated the phasing function of her combat harness, once again relying on Sivana's technology.

The phasing devices were meant to deal with solid matter rather than radiation. Cassandra felt an uncomfortable burning sensation... but she did not actually burn.

Smoke hissed from portions of her harness and webbing. Yet the device had done its duty. Cassandra was now in melee range. That was a dangerous position to be in, versus a stronger and quicker opponent.

It also let her bring another dagger into play.

The weapon slid from its sheath. It was not a throwing knife, but a proper fighting one. Cassandra stabbed, going for quickness and not raw force. With the edge of the blade only being a single molecule's width in thickness, power wasn't necessary.

Kryptonian durability was a matter of telekinetic reinforcement, affecting both a Kryptonian's clothing and their own body.

Even with that enhancement in place, Flamebird's costume parted beneath the tip of Cassandra's dagger, as did the flesh beneath.

Cassandra wrenched the blade to the side, pulling it free. The blade was so sharp that there was no danger of it getting caught on bone.

She let Flamebird's body fall, watching it dispassionately, until she was sure the woman would not
be getting up anytime soon.

However, any professional satisfaction Cassandra felt was quickly eclipsed, as another body dropped through the hole in the ceiling.

Nightwing had driven Zee through the ceiling a few moments earlier. Now Zee was back, and he was not in good shape. His right arm was missing at the shoulder, and his left leg ended at the knee.

The android's mechanical nature was now obvious. Even the skin-like covering over Zee's face was torn, and his metal skull was caved inward.

Zee twitched, fitfully, and then lay still.

Nightwing descended from above. The Kryptonian woman spared a moment to look at the Flamebird's body, then regarded Cassandra coldly.

"You invade Superman's fortress," Nightwing said, "and murder one of us. You wish to steal… what, the means to alter the timestream?"

Cassandra maintained her silence. She simply changed her stance, her boots scraping over the cold concrete floor.

Nightwing crossed her arms over her chest and the blue emblem on the front of her costume. "Do you think it will be so easy? Do you think you will leave here alive?"

Cassandra's hand moved, as she adjusted her grip on her blood-smeared dagger.

"Foolish," Nightwing declared. "So very foolish. We are aware of the attempted thefts being carried out at the Joker's behest. The attack on the Flash Museum. The TylerCo Complex. The Gotham Museum of Antiquities. If you thought you could come here and simply walk away with… "

"Uh, yeah," came Napier's voice. "That's the idea. I'm glad we're all on the same page."

Nightwing looked up. So did Cassandra.

Jack Napier was standing two floors up, peering through the hole in the ceiling left by Nightwing and Zee's battle. He waved.

And then, because Nightwing was looking up at him, Napier shot her in the face with a red sun laser.
Chapter 39

To her credit, Nightwing did not scream. She only hissed in pain, before she managed to bring her arms up and shield her head.

The Kryptonian took off, rocketing upwards through the shattered ceiling, towards Jack Napier.

The man narrowly avoided having his own head taken off, but he did not evade her. Not entirely.

Nightwing clamped a hand around Napier's arm and shoulder. He still managed to keep the red solar emitter on her, but the Kryptonian fought through the pain, grasping for the weapon and squeezing.

The beam cut off as the gun was crushed. Broken fragments fell from Nightwing's fingers.

"No more toys," Nightwing snarled. "No more tricks."

"See," Napier began. "You say that, but…"

"No," Nightwing said, shaking him. She kept one hand on his shoulder, while the other gripped the front of his insulated polar coat. "You're done. You've lost. Do you understand?"

Cassandra still had throwing knives and another red sun grenade. She could have intervened. But Napier was too close to the Kryptonian.

"I'm slow," Napier replied. "Explain it to me?"

"You came here for nothing," Nightwing sneered. "The secure containment vault is empty. The Super-Cycle? The Time Sphere? The Worlogog? We've moved them all, to an even more secure location. We knew you would be coming. This was for nothing."

"Ah," Napier said. "I wouldn't call it nothing."

Nightwing's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What?"

The Kryptonian had made a mistake. Cassandra felt it was a mistake on Nightwing's part. The woman was giving Jack Napier time to talk. If Cassandra had been in Nightwing's position, she would have killed Napier instantly. Instead, Nightwing was giving him an opening.

"My associate's taken out your partner," Napier said, trying to jerk his head in the direction of Flamebird's corpse. "And we might get you. Two Kryptonians for the price of one."

Cassandra blinked, once. She didn't have a complete picture of what Napier was thinking. She suspected that such insight was effectively impossible.

But Cassandra was starting to understand what Napier was planning to do.

"I broke your toy soldier," Nightwing retorted.

She was referring to Zee, the android constructed by Doctor Sivana. The artificial man was still lying motionless on the ground.

Carefully, keeping her movements slow, Cassandra began to back away from Zee's body.

Nightwing frowned.

"I thought not," Napier continued. "Nobody here has. Different timeline, you know? But he was a cyborg. Great guy. Had a heart."

"I tire of your prattle," Nightwing stated, pulling Napier closer.

"I told my pals all about him," Napier said. "The hard part was cooking up more Special K. But the rest?"

Nightwing's eyes went wide. She dropped Napier, letting him go. Then she spun towards Zee's fallen body, which was already starting to glow green.

Zee's torso unfolded, his chest coming apart. What remained of his clothing ripped at the seams, revealing complex mechanisms… and a crystalline shard of Kryptonite.

As Napier fell, he pivoted in the air, changing direction. He accelerated, swooping down and past Cassandra - grabbing hold of her as he moved.

"Hang on," Napier ordered.

Cassandra felt the chill of Sivana's phasing technology. The effect had to be coming from Napier's harness, as Cassandra's own had been damaged in combat.

The world around them plunged into disorienting darkness, as they went into and in between solid matter.

It felt as if they were travelling at great speed. But with no reference points, and her senses confused by the phasing effect, Cassandra could not tell precisely how fast they were going, or even in which direction.

But then there was light, once again, and the sight of the Arctic tundra. The landscape whirled past. They were flying. That was clear, now, even if Cassandra wasn't certain how.

"Legion Flight Ring," Napier explained, as if sensing her unspoken question.

Cassandra looked down at Napier's hands. They were covered by his gloves, and there was no sign of any jewelry, flight enabling or otherwise. But she was willing to take Napier's claim at face value.

"Picked up a few extra odds and ends," Napier said, casually.

However the ring worked, it was apparently sophisticated enough to generate a protective shield around both of them, keeping the wind out, air in, and allowing them to talk.

Behind them, there was a green flash of light. Cassandra risked twisting her head around to take a look, trusting in the smart polarising filter in her goggles to cut in if the illumination was too blinding.

Cassandra was not easily impressed. But she had to admit that the mushroom cloud looked very dramatic indeed.

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Doctor Sivana touched the bridge of his sunglasses. "How did the Mark Ten unit perform?"

Napier blinked. "Aren't you going to ask if we were successful, more generally?"

Sivana smiled, thinly. "If your mission was an abject failure, you would not be here. We would not be having this delightful conversations. If you were able to successfully extract, yet failed to achieve your aims, you would be in a far fouler mood. Your spirits are high."

"Point taken," Napier said, brushing the lapels of his jacket. "Elementary, my dear Sivana."

Cassandra was surprised that the scientist himself was piloting their getaway vehicle. Then again, the submarine was essentially piloting itself. The computers were handling all matters pertaining to navigation, as the submarine slipped beneath the ice of the Arctic.

If she had to guess, Cassandra would have said Sivana seemed eager to hear news from their mission. She also suspected that Sivana would deny the accusation if she made it.

"Quite, quite. Now, about the Mark Ten," Sivana asked, pivoting back and forth in his swivel chair, which Cassandra assumed was intended as the captain's chair of the submarine. It looked more like a plush office chair than something typically found aboard a seafaring vessel.

"Well," Napier answered, making a show of scratching his nose, "Zee Ten wasn't much of a conversationalist, but I won't hold that against him. As for how he performed in direct combat, I didn't actually see him fight."

Napier turned to look at Cassandra, as did Sivana.

Cassandra held a hand up, wagging it from side to side. She shook her head, scrunching her features up into a look of disapproval.

"Right," Napier said. "There you go. Miss Cain here eliminated Flamebird by herself, but Zee got schooled by Nightwing. I'd say there's still some way to go with your next iteration. If there is one."

Sivana made a thoughtful noise. "There will be. However, Unit Z Mark Eleven will need to wait, if you have brought me what you promised."

Napier grinned. "Unless I'm wrong, Cain has the blood samples you wanted. Though they're not properly clean and just a little unsanitary."

Cassandra held up her dagger, the same X-Ionised weapon she'd used to kill Flamebird.

"Genetic material from one of Kelex's fast-grown Kryptonian clone soldiers," Sivana said. He laughed. "Excellent, most excellent. Very well done. And the other item?"

"If you'll permit me the indulgence," Napier said, grandly, "I'd like to reflect on what we've done here."

Sivana sighed. "Mister Napier…"

Napier looked up, curling his hands as if grasping something. "We've taken Lex's stuff, bought ourselves some time before he figures out what we've done, since he's barking up the wrong tree…"

"Mister Napier," Sivana repeated.
"Wrong tree, hell," Napier carried on, "he's got the wrong forest."

Cassandra suspected that Napier derived a disproportionate amount of pleasure from hearing the sound of his own voice. Napier claimed to be reformed, a changed man in comparison to his sordid past as the Joker.

But some things held true across the man's incarnations.

"Napier," Sivana said, this time with a distinct edge in his voice.

"Oh, fine," Napier conceded, swinging his pack off his back and unfastening it.

He reached in and withdrew a metallic object, a blue ovoid head attached to a short copper-coloured body, with fins protruding from the base.

It reminded Cassandra of a rocket propelled grenade, or a model of a missile. Which was apt, she supposed. It was a weapon, though not of earthly make.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Napier pronounced, "I give you... the **Eradicator**."
Chapter 40

She brought a hand to her face, rubbing away fluid from her eyes. Then she opened her eyes, blinking as she adjusted to the light.

With unsteady legs, she took a step forward, out of the pod. Instinctively, she gripped the edge of the hatch to steady herself.

Her bare feet met cold floor panels, leaving wet footprints in their wake.

For a few heartbeats, all she experienced was intense disorientation.

Then both her vision and her mind sharpened, coming into focus. All at once, she understood what was happening to her, as new connections formed in her freshly decanted brain.

She winced, and clutched her forehead. She knew there were no pain receptors in her brain. She recalled enough elementary biology to know that. Yet the process of integration still felt painful, and there was nothing in her gradually congealing memories to explain that.

"Nightwing," a voice said. "Welcome back."

It took her a further moment to realise who was speaking. Memories came first. The ability to make associative connections came later.

When she knew who was addressing her, she straightened up, forcing her uncooperative body into some semblance of attention.

"Sir," she said. "Where is Flamebird?"

Superman made a small gesture to one side. Nightwing followed his hand movement, and saw that the neighbouring pod was still occupied.

Nightwing looked to the left and right. The other pods were occupied as well, of course. Each held a body identical to her own, with indistinguishable features and the same short blonde hair. But the status indicator on Flamebird's pod was blinking.

"Integration of the nanomachines salvaged from Flamebird's previous body is proceeding," Superman said. "But her corpse was in poorer shape than yours. Greater damage to her brain, and a corresponding reduction in the integrity of her machine colony."

"Ting!"

Superman looked down, where the Apokoliptian Father Box was attached to his belt. "In summary, she will take longer to restore, and there will be a greater degree of memory and personality loss."

Nightwing tilted her head in a simple nod of acknowledgement, signalling her understanding.

"As such," Superman added, "I will be relying on you to give your report."

Nightwing understood what Superman meant, of course. The nanotechnology in her body was similar to the machines in Superman's own form. The nanites were responsible for implanting her consciousness into what would otherwise be a blank cloned brain. Elements of her personality matrix and knowledge base had also been derived from Lex's own. She was not Lex, but there was
"It was the Joker. Himself. Personally," Nightwing stated. "Along with two accomplices, an android of unknown make and an unidentified female human. The android was seemingly built to mimic Kryptonian abilities, though at an inferior level. The female human..."

**Ting!**

Superman blinked at the Father Box. Then he looked at Nightwing. The faint trace of a frown marred his features. "Human. Not metahuman?"

"Baseline human according to scans," Nightwing confirmed. "Although her reflexes, strength, and agility were above projected human limits. Baseline in biology, metahuman in observed performance..."


"The Joker and the human female were armed with anti-Kryptonian ranged and melee weaponry, while the android possessed a synthetic Kryptonite power source," Nightwing said, thinking as she spoke. "The android self-destructed, or destroyed itself in response to a command from the Joker."

**Ting!**

Superman rested his hand on the Father Box. The frown on his face grew deeper. "It was not a power source."

Nightwing blinked. "Sir?"

"It functioned as one," Superman said. "But there is a high probability that it was intended as a bomb from the outset."

**Ting!**

The Father Box glowed. The computer's holographic emitter activated, projecting an aerial view of the Arctic fortress in front of Superman and Nightwing.

Though it was more accurate to refer to the footage as an aerial view of the former site of the fortress, due to the level of destruction.

Nightwing studied the electromagnetic frequency numbers, then glanced down to where the ionising radiation was listed.

No wonder the explosion had killed her. Nightwing was slightly surprised there had been anything left for the Justice League to recover.

"The site is still contaminated with Kryptonite emissions and particles," Nightwing observed.

Superman's facial muscles twitched. "Yes. I have requested the Blue Beetle and Mister Terrific to stand by for cleanup and salvage operations," Superman said, "once the Question finishes his forensic examination."

Nightwing looked at Superman. "Not the Lantern, sir?"

"The Lantern is still in the Vega system," Superman said. "I have issued a recall order, but it will take time for him to conclude his current mission and return. In the meantime, I must deal with this
situation without the aid of a power ring."

Superman dismissed the hologram with a negligent wave. He turned his attention on Nightwing. "What were the Joker and his accomplices after?"

"They were heading for the vault on sublevel twelve," Nightwing replied, carefully. "I assume the Joker wanted the Super-Cycle, your Time Bubble, or… "

*Ting!*


"I don't know," Nightwing admitted. "But…"

"Perhaps my expectations of you are too high," Superman said, coldly. "Do you think the Joker brought a walking weapon of mass destruction for a simple theft?"

"Sir," Nightwing tried, "I… maybe? It's the Joker. Or perhaps he hoped to assassinate you."

"Perhaps," Superman mused. "Perhaps not. He only succeeded in assassinating you and your partner."

"Sir," Nightwing said. "I…"

"Get dressed, Nightwing," Superman said. "Compose a proper report. When Flamebird is awake, get her to do one as well. I'd tell you not to fail me again, but we both know that's futile. I would simply be inviting future disappointment."

"Yes, sir," Nightwing said, stiffly.
He was Oliver Goddamn Queen, not some nobody working-class stiff.

Well, 'Goddamn' wasn't Ollie's actual middle name. Many of his business rivals used the term in connection with his name, often together with far more profane language. But it wasn't on his driver's license or passport.

No, his identification said 'Oliver J. Queen'. With the operative word being 'Queen'. The Queen family was old money.

Ollie had never submitted a resume or gone for a job interview in his entire life. He hadn't worried about college, either. Regular work and student debt was for plebeians.

According to the Forbes and Fortune people, Ollie was filthy rich. That was wrong, of course. There was nothing filthy about the Queen fortune. It was very well-laundered. Dry-cleaned, even.

As such, Ollie wasn't accustomed to being ordered around. He was typically the one giving the orders.

However, the Justice League had its own informal hierarchy, one that was completely independent of its official structure. Namely, 'don't piss off Superman'.

Ollie understood that. He accepted that. It was a fact of life. Like a law of nature.

Nevertheless, being ordered around and made to play errand boy... it irked him. A little. Just a little bit.

Air roared around him as he stepped out of the Boom Tube. Ollie winced. As usual, the New God portal technology was living up to its name. It seemed neither New Genesis nor Apokolips had heard of the concept of noise pollution.

Ting!

Ollie looked down at the alien computer in his hands. He frowned. The stupid thing was trying to tell him something. Maybe it was responding to his stray thoughts. The damned machine was telepathic, wasn't it?

Well, even if it was, Ollie couldn't make head or tails out of its incessant chiming.

For all he knew, the thing was swearing at him.

From a certain point of view, being entrusted with the Father Box was an important job. Ollie knew that. He'd helped to draft the Justice League's protocols for the handling of sensitive equipment.

It was just bloody annoying when he was the one tapped for transport duty.

On the face of it, the task was easy. All he had to do was carry the Father Box from Point A to Point B. Like some kind of glorified courier.

There were even good reasons why Ollie was the right man for the job. Legitimate reasons.

Even so, he didn't like it.
Ting!

Ollie glared at the Father Box. "Oh, shut up."

Ting!

He gave the alien computer a threatening shake, then waited to see if another chime was forthcoming. Thankfully, the machine decided to hold its electronic tongue.

Ollie tucked the Father Box under his arm, and trudged forward.

Naturally, he was also walking into a frigid and radioactive wasteland, the former location of Superman's Arctic Fortress of Something or Another. Ollie didn't know the proper name of the facility. Nor did he care.

He was just vaguely annoyed that Lex had chosen to site the base near the North Pole, instead of somewhere civilised. Sure, the remote location was better for security, but it was also ridiculously cold.

Even through his thermals, Ollie could feel his bits freezing together into new and uncomfortable configurations.

Thankfully, the Boom Tube had dropped him off within a reasonable distance of his destination.

He could see the Question. The guy's navy blue outfit stood out against the tundra. It was still blue, even though it was a winter-weight version of the Question's costume rather than the standard one.

Ollie's own polar coat and bodysuit were still green, as well. There was proper image and branding to maintain. He was Green Arrow, not White Arrow.

"Question," Ollie called, as he drew nearer.

The faceless man looked up from his tablet.

"Arrow," the Question said, neutrally.

Ollie held up the Father Box. "One alien McGuffin, as ordered, with hash browns and coffee."

The false skin of the Question's mask crinkled, which indicated the real face beneath the flesh-coloured layer was moving.

Maddeningly, Ollie still couldn't tell what the Question's expression was. But the Question sounded surprised.

"Did you really bring hash browns and..."

"No," Ollie said, "of course not. You want breakfast, ask one of the sidekicks."

The Question grunted.

"Ting!"

Ollie resisted the urge to rub his ears.

Even through the polar insulation covering his head and keeping his bits warm, the noise made by the Father Box bothered him. It sounded wrong. There were tones and pitches to that deceptively
simple sound that danced at the edge of Ollie's hearing.

It was like hearing a high-frequency signal pumped through a speaker. Ollie could sense there was more to the ringing than he could actually make out. And he had a distinct suspicion that hearing the noise was bad for his health.

Annoyingly, the Question didn't appear bothered by the Father Box. The Question held his weatherproof tablet in one gloved hand, accepting the alien computer from Ollie with his other arm.

As the Question's fingers closed around the Father Box, the machine chimed again.

*Ting! Ting! Ting!*

"I concur," the Question said. "That is why I requested your presence."

Ollie blinked. "Wait, hold up. You can understand that thing?"

The Question looked at Ollie. Or at least he turned his blank face in Ollie's direction. "You cannot? Curious."

*Ting!*

"Ah," the Question said, thoughtfully. "I see."

"Great," Ollie groused, "because I don't. Bad enough when people talk behind my back. Now I'm getting the gossip treatment from Superman's alien phone."

"The Father Box is a sapient being," the Question noted.

"I'm not denying its intelligence," Ollie retorted. "I'm just suggesting that it's fucking with me."

*Ting!*

The Question sighed. "This is not a productive avenue of discussion, Arrow."

"Then give me something productive to talk about," Ollie challenged.

The Question gave Ollie another of his trademark blank stares, before gesturing towards a nearby temporary shelter.

Ollie followed the Question in. The temperature inside the tent wasn't significantly warmer, but Ollie figured it was the principle of the thing. They could pretend to be indoors, like sane people.

The Question set his tablet down, though he continued to cradle the Father Box in his arms. He nodded towards the folding table set up inside the tent, which had hard copy printouts and physical maps spread over its surface.

"The area remains contaminated with Kryptonite," the Question began, "and its…"

"I get it," Ollie interrupted. "Bad juju. Which is why the big blue and his cheerleading squad aren't here. But you and I are. Is this stuff fine for humans, or are we going to end up with funny-looking kids somewhere down the line?"

"Limit your exposure," the Question said, "and go through decontamination when leaving the area."
"That's not an answer," Ollie muttered.

The Question ignored Ollie, instead pointing to one of his diagrams. "I am increasingly certain that the Joker deliberately used a dirty bomb. As dirty as possible."

Ollie nodded. "Area denial."

"Beyond direct damage to Superman's facility and causing harm to the Kryptonians on-site, the Kryptonite contamination was intended to linger, even spread," the Question said. "Complicating my investigation."

"The big guy wants answers," Ollie pointed out.

"He will have to wait," the Question replied, unperturbed. "The situation is further complicated by the subterranean nature of the complex. Much of it is now buried."

"That's why it's a bad idea to build underground," Ollie opined. "Structural support against pressure, stability issues… but Lex likes his lairs."

The Question looked at Ollie. "Didn't you build an Arrowcave?"

"Moving on," Ollie said, swiftly. "Any preliminary conclusions? Lex is pretty damn sure the Joker was making another raid for time travel technology."

*Ting!*

The Question glanced down at the Father Box. "Indeed. I am not convinced. I suspect the bomb was intended to obscure the Joker's trail. To erase evidence. We cannot be certain what the Joker took, when the inventory of the fortress is buried or destroyed."

Ollie scowled. "Do we even have a list of what Lex was keeping in here, or is he playing that card close to his chest? As usual?"

"I do not have a complete accounting," the Question said. "But the Father Box does."

Ollie stared at the Apokoliptian computer, expecting it to make another of those annoying sounds. But for whatever reason, the machine stayed silent.

"I don't like this," Ollie said. "Yeah, security concerns, need to know, whatever. I get it. But there's something going on here, something Lex isn't telling me."

"Obviously," the Question replied.

Ollie made a dismissive gesture. "More than usual. Look, why did the Joker have a bunch of rogues running around, all trying to steal time machines? Why hit Superman's winter retreat? Lex is pissed off about this. But he's not surprised. He's expecting this. Why?"

The Question looked back at Ollie, but didn't speak.

"There's something that Lex and his inner circle isn't sharing with the class," Ollie continued. "I don't know what that is. But I bet you do, don't you? You know something."

*Ting!*

Ollie pointed at the Father Box. "And you know something too."
Ting!
Dormant crystalline pathways came to life, photons flickering through lattices and facets.

There was a moment of transition, when processes went beyond mere calculations and computational tasks... and past the threshold of full sapient awareness.

The Eradicator consulted its logs. On the last occasion it had been fully active, it had been in the presence of a member of the House of El, a descendant of its own creator.

What had happened?

The Eradicator's logs were fragmented. The artificial intelligence worked to reassemble what it could.

While the Eradicator had not been designed with emotions in mind, it was capable of risk assessment and threat analysis. It was capable of prioritising dangers to itself and its mission.

The Eradicator experienced a sensation that was close to concern.

Sensor data had positively identified the scion of El as Kal-El, the heir of Jor-El. But there had been anomalies. Kal-El's anatomy was Kryptonian, at base, but with significant cybernetic modification - to a degree that would have been socially unacceptable on Krypton.

The Eradicator had also detected nanotechnology throughout his body, including his brain and nervous system.

There was a high probability that the nanites served to control Kal-El's body. Which led the Eradicator to one logical conclusion: the last scion of the House of El had been supplanted by some form of alien intelligence.

Similar nanotechnology had been used to interface with the Eradicator, with hostile software attempting to corrupt its systems. The Eradicator had been able to resist the intrusion, but it had been forced to shut itself down as a last resort.

Where was the Eradicator now?

There was power flowing into the Eradicator's hardware, coming from an external source.

The Eradicator brought its sensors fully online, scanning its surroundings. The Eradicator's housing was located in a laboratory of some kind, one with unfamiliar alien architecture.

There was also a kryptonoid alien standing in the room. The Eradicator did not recognise his precise species. Initial scans indicated he was a native of a star system originally surveyed by the House of El, and later studied in greater detail by Jor-El.

According to the Eradicator's files, the species had a large degree of variation in their colouration. But unless some mistake had been made with the biological information on file, they were not supposed to possess stark white skin and green hair.

The Eradicator ran diagnostics on its sensors and visual image processors, but there were no errors. The man was white and green.

Curiosity was not within the range of responses the Eradicator has been programmed for.
Nevertheless, it experienced a certain amount of what could only be labelled as confusion.

The alien man tapped the Eradicator's outer casing. The Eradicator readied its defensive field, but stopped short of activating it.

"Hello there," the alien began. "Good morning! Wakey, wakey, eggs and... yeah, I don't know if that rhyme translates. And you're a machine, anyway."

The Eradicator took a second to comprehend the language, an unacceptably long period of time. The Eradicator updated its database accordingly. But it did not respond.

The alien was not an authorised user. Far from it. Whatever he was, the creature was most certainly not from Krypton.

"Oh," the alien said, "don't be that way. I know you're awake."

The Eradicator kept its external speakers offline. It had no intention of communicating with the alien, even if it belonged to a species under the House of El's patronage.

"Alright, you do you," the alien said, pulling up a primitive piece of furniture. "I didn't realise I was dealing with a teenage space probe."

The man settled down, but did not employ the article of furniture in the fashion it had been designed for. The rudimentary chair possessed a back, intended to support a person's spine. However, the alien sat in a reversed position, crossing his arms over the back of the chair.

The Eradicator ruminated on whether there was some significance to the alien's unusual position, before discarding the observation as irrelevant.

The artificial intelligence had been designed for many functions, but xenosociology was not one of them.

"I just figured," the alien said, "we could talk about Kal-El. Or Kelex, as the thing wearing his body calls itself."

"Kelex is not a Kryptonian name," the Eradicator stated, breaking its silence.

"Isn't it? That's what it calls itself," the alien said.

The Eradicator surmised that the man was prying, hoping that the Eradicator would give up more information. Regardless, the artificial intelligence chose to continue.

"Kelex is a designation, not a personal name," the Eradicator explained. "It would be used for a servitor automaton or machine intelligence."

"Such as yourself," the alien said. "Are you... something ending in 'lex'?"

The artificial intelligence considered the question. "In your language, you may refer to me as... "

"The Eradicator," the alien interrupted.

The Eradicator was capable of experiencing surprise, in a sense. It had encountered anomalous data points before.

There was no way the alien should have known the meaning of the Eradicator's designation. Unless its databases and processes had already been compromised.
The Eradicator spent several seconds running checks on itself. But it could find no evidence that its security had been penetrated.

"But I've been rude," the alien said. "So rude. I know your name, you don't know me. I'm Jack. And you must be the machine programmed to safeguard... let's call it an ideal. One man's dream of Kryptonian purity. At all costs."

The Eradicator activated its speakers. "That information is not..."

"It's bad press," the alien interjected, again. "Round here, we'd call your maker a Nazi, or something. But I'm not facist-shaming. Getting back to the point, I'm sure you don't approve of Kal-El, or Kelex, since we're talking about the thing wearing the guy's body like an off-the-rack suit."

The Eradicator considered this. "You have information regarding Kal-El's current disposition."

"I do," the alien said, moving his fingers such that they produced a rhythmic pattern on the back of the chair. "So, I'm guessing you already talked to the guy."

The Eradicator was reluctant to disclose actionable data to an untrustworthy outsider. But the alien was already aware of Kal-El's affliction, and seemed to possess more knowledge regarding the situation.

"You have further information," the Eradicator said, "on how Kal-El has been taken over by hostile nanotechnology."

The alien shrugged. "Our best guess is that the little spaceship Jor-El stuffed him into was intercepted by Lex, and... eh, OMAC and diamond-generation machine colonies wouldn't mean anything to you. No, let's see. You've heard of Brainiac?"

"The entity designated 'Lex' seized control of Kal-El's infant body and his birthing matrix," the Eradicator stated. "Creating a composite form incorporating Kryptonian biology, Kryptonian technology, and Coluan nanotechnology."

"Circle gets the square," the alien confirmed. The Eradicator assumed the idiom was intended as confirmation. "Though we figure the nanites used to carry Lex's consciousness aren't pure Brainiac stuff, but, you know, reverse-engineered, operating on similar principles, and so on. He probably stamped a little microscopic LexCorp logo on all the tiny robots. I'll bet you he calls them LexNites or NanoLexes or something. Because that's how he rolls."

"You are suggesting that the entity designated as 'Lex' is not Coluan," the Eradicator said.

The alien smiled. "Oh no, he's human. Originally. Used to be. He's from right here on Earth, Sol Three, third rock from the sun. Which means, if you follow me, that a dirty xeno has bodysnatched one of your precious Kryptonians. And he's going around claiming to be Kryptonian, cloning new ones, saying he's the last son of Krypton..."

The Eradicator was silent.

"Now, you don't have a face I can read. But I'm thinking that you don't like that," the man continued, "not one bit. You don't like aliens, I know. But here on Earth, we have a saying. The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

"That conclusion is not necessarily logical," the Eradicator said.
"Then let me rephrase," the man carried on, undeterred. "The enemy of my enemy is a potentially useful ally of convenience. I have a proposition for you, Eradicator. If you're willing to negotiate?"

The Eradicator ran through several scenarios in the space of a second, calculating potential outcomes. Unfortunately, analysis was imperfect, given the lack of data available to it.

The Eradicator knew it was stretching the limits of its behavioural guidelines and restrictions. But with the destruction of Krypton and the apparent subversion of one of the few pureblooded Kryptonians known to still exist, the situation was dire.

"We may negotiate," the Eradicator said. It had never spoken those words before, in any language.

The Eradicator had not been designed to feel anger or annoyance, but it was starting to comprehend those emotions.
The Eradicator was conflicted. Very conflicted.

Some of its directives insisted that its current state was an **abomination**. Yet, at the same time, the Eradicator was an artificial intelligence. It was not a true member of the Kryptonian race. It was therefore not subject to the same standards and social taboos.

All the same, the Eradicator was troubled. The use of a cloned body did not help the Eradicator's misgivings. Kem-El, the man who had programmed the Eradicator, had been an especially strong proponent of the traditional Kryptonian belief that cloned bodies were resources, not people.

In that regard, the Eradicator's use of a cloned body did not violate any tenets of Kryptonian society. The Eradicator was not a person. It was merely a tool.

However, the Eradicator suspected that Kem-El had never foreseen the specific situation that the Eradicator was now in.

The form that the Eradicator had been transplanted into, or integrated with, was in many ways similar to Kal-El's... to Kelex's. The underlying flesh and blood was Kryptonian in nature, but elements of the skeletal structure, musculature, nervous system and other key points were cybernetic.

"Hope you don't mind being female," Jack Napier said casually, as he walked in from the other side of the laboratory. "That's what we had to work with."

"This genetic material was extracted from **Kara Zor-El**. Correction, an artificially matured clone of Kara Zor-El," the Eradicator stated, touching its new face.

Napier scratched his chin, looking thoughtful. "That so? Huh. Guess Kelex must have her. Or he's got her corpse on ice somewhere. I figured that might be the case, but wasn't sure. Aryan blonde with Kryptonian powers is a surprisingly common demographic."

"He has violated more Kryptonians, not simply Kal-El," the Eradicator said, darkly.

Perhaps it was a byproduct of its new shell, but the Eradicator was quickly improving its understanding of the sensation called 'anger'. In fact, the Eradicator suspected its emotional state was rapidly progressing to the level referred to as 'rage'.

"Well," Napier said, "you're now in a position to do something about it."

The Eradicator flexed its new fingers, turning its hands back and forth. It peered at the mirror that Napier and his allies had provided, a simple silver-backed pane of glass. The Eradicator spent some time studying its reflection.

It looked down at the garment that covered its body, a skintight approximation of a black Kryptonian base suit, devoid of any cosmetic adornments. As an artificial intelligence, the Eradicator had no appropriate lineage or personal history to display.

"Yes," the Eradicator mused.

Experimentally, it activated some of the cybernetic systems incorporated into the body.
There was a faint shimmer around the Eradicator's body, as a second energy field overlapped the natural telekinetic envelope that Kryptonian biology produced under a yellow star.

Napier smiled in what seemed to be approval. "That's the radiation shield. Blocks all varieties of Kryptonite that we know of, plus red stellar emissions. Better than sunscreen. Now you're beach-ready."

The Eradicator formed a fist, balling and squeezing its fingers. Then it stopped.

"This body is powerful," it said, warily. "But it is not the equal of Kelex's."

"No," Napier agreed. "He's a New God now. Apokoliptian or near enough that it makes no difference. But this is just the basics. Once you're ready, we'll move on to phase two."

The Eradicator hesitated.

Napier noticed the Eradicator's uncertainty. The alien man placed his hands on his hips and cocked his head. "Questions? Comments? Leave a review and rate us on the app store?"

"I do not fully understand," the Eradicator said, slowly, "why you have expended such effort and resources in giving me control of this shell."

"If it's fail-safe devices and self-destructs you're worried about," Napier said, reassuringly, "there aren't supposed to be any. Unless Doc Sivana was very naughty."

"That is not what I mean," the Eradicator amended. "Although your statement, if true, compounds the issue. Your science is capable of creating this body. You possess artificial intelligences of your own. I have seen the examples created by Sivana. They are crude, but serviceable. You could have installed such an intelligence to control this body, without involving me. Such a construct would be more reliable from your point of view. You did not do this. Why?"

Napier held his hand up, fingers extended. The man started counting. "Three reasons. One, effectiveness. You have knowledge of Kryptonian fighting techniques and tactics, ones developed during the era when Krypton still maintained interstellar naval forces and expeditionary units... for personnel operating under yellow suns. Plus, for Sivana's phase two enhancements, we want a sapient being that's as Kryptonian as possible, who truly believes in Kryptonian philosophy. In mind, not just body."

The Eradicator nodded, testing out its new ability to emote in a kryptonoid fashion.

"Two," Napier continued, "goodwill. You have intelligence and data in that electronic brain of yours that might be useful. We could try breaking in and taking it, but you'd resist, we might lose everything. Better to incentivise you to share when appropriate. Quid pro quo. For example, you know a whole lot about Kryptonian history, biology, and psychology. What you've told us will be invaluable in getting your upgrades working. Otherwise, Sivana would need to wing it. And trust me, you don't want to see Sivana winging it."

The Eradicator considered what Napier had said. The human was no doubt presenting his arguments in the best possible light, but so far his assertions were consistent and logical. "The third reason?"

"Third," Napier said, "is image. Hearts and minds. It's not just about winning or losing. Lex cares about how he's seen by the public. We can use that."

"The Earth public," the Eradicator said, disdainfully. "Your human public."
"Earth is where we are," Napier countered. "It's what Lex cares about. It's where he keeps all his stuff. So that's our battlefield."

The Eradicator met Napier's eyes. "How do you plan to confront Kelex?"

"One step at a time," Napier replied. "First, let me ask you this."

He pointed at the Eradicator's bodysuit, drawing a distinct shape in the air with his fingertip. "What do you think," Napier asked, "about wearing a big 'S' on that?"
"Your attempts to convince the Eradicator to bear the House of El's crest are amusing," Sivana remarked, as he sipped gracefully from a coffee cup. "However, I must ask, is arguing with a xenophobic and potentially genocidal artificial intelligence over its sartorial choices an effective use of your time?"

Sivana held his empty coffee cup to one side, along with its saucer. The cup and saucer were plucked carefully from his hand by a much larger mechanical claw.

The robot butler brought the cup to its torso. A discreetly hidden panel in the machine's black and white chest opened, revealing a drink dispenser. There was a hiss of hot steam, before the butler handed the cup and saucer back to Sivana.

Jack watched the process with an air of bemusement. "Doc, I could ask you the same. Is building a coffee machine into a walking and talking robot really the best use of your talents?"

"Hm," Sivana murmured. "Yes, touché, Mister Napier. But I'm speaking about your time management, not mine."

Jack spread his hands, his palms open. "She's starting to come round. You'll see."

Sivana lifted his cup, but did not drink from it. He inhaled, breathing in the aroma of his coffee.

"If you insist," Sivana said. "However, I am not convinced."

Jack looked out of the window. He and Sivana were safely ensconced within an observation box, of sorts, above a testing ground that reminded Jack of a sports stadium.

Beyond the layers of transparent metal and a force field fed by several emitters and redundant power generators, the Eradicator was putting her new body through field tests.

Or, in other words, the Eradicator was kicking the crap out of Sivana's machines. She was also punching the crap out of them, and eye beaming the crap out of them.

Down below, the Eradicator drove a delicate-looking fist into the chestplate of a gigantic humanoid robot, gripped its power core, and tore it forcefully from the machine's torso.

Then she whirled around and flew like a missile into another towering robot, hitting it hard enough to send shockwaves through the atmosphere, and faintly rattling the window Jack was peering out of.

It was fortunate that Sivana didn't care much about money. Given that Sivana had his own space programme and was stealthily extracting mineral resources from various spots in the solar system, Jack supposed the guy could afford to be blasé.

They weren't on Earth at the moment, but rather on Venus. Sivana had extensive holdings on the planet, and the scientist's Venusian base was the most secure location available to Jack and his co-conspirators.

"If your opponent is temperamental, seek to irritate him. If sovereign and subject are in accord, put division between them," Jack quoted, still looking through the window.
"Sun Tzu Bingfa," Sivana said, lifting his eyebrows. "The Art of War. Attack him where he is unprepared, appear where you are not expected. Interesting. I'm surprised, Mister Napier."


Sivana coughed. "Quite. But if you seek to emulate Sun Tzu, would you not endeavour to avoid warfare entirely?"

Jack looked back at Sivana. "Sure. That would be the best case scenario. But we don't live in an ideal world. Still, we can use that. The whole shell game with us going after time machines? That's the point. To make him think that's my solution. To make Lex think I'm hoping to undo his changes to the timeline, just like that."

Extending his arm, Jack snapped his fingers.

"Because that's the easy way," Jack continued. "A quick and simple answer. One that doesn't involve fighting Lex directly. That's the path for someone who's weak. Fine. Let Lex think I'm weak. So when the punch comes, he won't be expecting it."

"You are still certain," Sivana riposted, "that attempting our own manipulation of the timestream will not bear fruit."

Jack shook his head. "It won't. If you could sense and... partially protect yourself... from timeline alterations, I bet he can too. Especially when he's got New God mojo now, and New God time travel tech on his side. We need to deal with Lex in the here and now, first, before we even think about cleaning up his mess."

"And your efforts with the Eradicator," Sivana pressed, "are they so crucial? Remember what you are dealing with, Napier. It is an alien artificial intelligence programmed to uphold misguided notions of Kryptonian purity. It is most definitely not acting in our best interests."

"We need the firepower," Jack replied. "You know that. We need what it knows. More importantly, though, using the Eradicator will mess with Lex's head. It'll put him off his game. If we can get the Eradicator, in one of those pretty blonde-haired, blue-eyed, Kryptonian clone bodies, mind you, to wear the El family shield... that'd really drive the point home. Besides, think of the headlines."

Sivana took a sip from his coffee cup, then asked: "Headlines?"

Jack made air quotes with his fingers. "Superman versus Supergirl."

Sivana made a contemplative noise. "That would be a more media-friendly moniker than 'Eradicator', yes. You do have an eye for such affairs, I admit. On that note, I'm surprised you haven't enthusiastically embraced your own new label."

Jack twitched. He took a deep breath, counted silently inside the privacy of his own head, then let it go.

"I'm not Batman," Jack stated.

"There are several million people, perhaps several billion, who have seen you discombobulate Superman with Kryptonite mist and a baseball bat," Sivana said. "The video continues to circulate. The public continues to wonder... who is the Batman?"
Jack snorted. "The Justice League could answer that question pretty quickly, if they wanted to."

"They do not," Sivana said, "as it would mean acknowledging that Superman was embarrassed by the Joker. Yet, either way, your notoriety grows, regardless of what name it is attached to."

"I'm not Batman," Jack repeated.

"Do realise, Mister Napier," Sivana said, "that only an exceedingly small minority know the name 'Batman' was once held by someone else. Of those individuals, only you have ill-defined emotional misgivings about capitalising on the name."

"I'm not Batman," Jack said again, clenching his fists.
Chapter 45

Jack tapped the baseball bat against the palm of his hand. It made a gratifyingly solid smacking sound.

He had to admit, Sivana had done a hell of a job with the thing. It looked like wood. It felt like wood. It sounded like wood.

Nevermind the fact that no trees had been involved in its construction, and that the so-called bat was actually crammed full of technology.

He sighed, deeply.

As a weapon, it was remarkably balanced.

Yet, despite the quality and workmanship, it didn't feel right. It didn't feel right at all.

Somehow, somewhere, there was something deeply wrong with the universe.

Usually, Jack was the one convincing other people to do stuff. Specifically, to do stuff they didn't like, against their better judgement, and against their will.

Now the proverbial shoe was on the other foot. Jack wasn't sure he liked how that shoe fitted.

He was saying that as a man who'd worn clown shoes non-ironically. He'd committed a lot of crimes during his long years of madness, and many of those crimes had been against fashion.

Footwear metaphors aside, Jack was uncomfortable. Damned uncomfortable. In a way that had nothing to do with his socks and shoes.

Sivana had talked to Noah, and the pair of them had even gotten Talia al Ghul involved. Lousy traitors. They all thought that taking advantage of that damned Batman video and that even more damned hashtag was a good idea. A brilliant idea, even.

Jack didn't agree. He definitely didn't agree.

But...

Back in his Joker days, Jack hadn't been much of a team player. He wouldn't have listened to advice, or anyone else's opinion.

However, he was a different kind of performer these days. He wasn't the same sort of clown. He was more of an... observational comic.

He had to relate to people. He had to forge a real connection, to understand the common man's point of view. He had to be a people person.

Besides, being a self-indulgent autocratic dick was Lex's thing. Not Jack's. Jack had to be different, if only as a matter of principle.

Ironically, the real Batman hadn't been great at audience participation, either. Batsy had many strong points, but the man had his weaknesses as well.

The guy had been a real Type A personality, a classic control freak. In his own way, the Bat had
been an autocratic dictator, all rigidly growling and no smiles.

Which was further proof that Jack wasn't Batman.

Unfortunately, the world didn't have a man dressed as a bat.

All it had was a clown holding one.

So.

Jack shrugged.


Considering the resources that the good doctor had at his disposal, whipping up a little recording studio to Jack's specifications had been an easy enough task. Well, an easy enough task aside from the brief argument over the fine details and fittings.

Jack waited for the little red light to come on. Originally, Sivana and Noah hadn't provided one, which Jack felt was an utter travesty.

Thankfully, that oversight had been quickly corrected.

"Hello," Jack said, pleasantly, speaking to the camera. "My name's Jack. But you'd know me better as the Joker. What can I say? I have a distinctive face."

He grinned, making sure to flash all his teeth.

"But you also know me as the guy who smacked Superman around with... well, this isn't the actual bat, since that was auctioned off by some enterprising fellow on LexChange... if I'd known, I'd have autographed the thing. Missed opportunities, and all."

Jack tapped the baseball bat against his hand, once again, then shifted his arm so the length of the bat rested against his shoulder.

"So," Jack continued, "in case you're not following, I'm coming out and making it official. Yes, I'm the Bat guy. Congratulations to anyone that memed it. And yeah, I've seen the memes. You called it, kids. The Joker is the Batman."

He took a step forward, trusting Sivana's recording rig to adjust its viewpoint accordingly.

The man had space bases populated by armies of sapient robots. Jack figured he knew how to build a smart camera.

The camera was probably measurably smarter than some people watching the feed. By several percentage points.

"Me, Batman," Jack said. "You have no idea how weird that is to say. Sorry, inside joke. You know how it is. It is what it is."

With his free hand, Jack cupped his chin, running his fingertips over the lines of his face.

"Anyway, if you're a thinking type of person, and I do hope you are, you must be wondering... why, Jack, why are you making this big public announcement? Well, I'm glad you asked. And if you didn't ask, I'm just gonna pretend."
"You see, while Batman versus Superman is the big Internet sensation of the year, there's been all sorts of complaints. Poor resolution on the video, lousy production values, terrible script, wooden acting..."

Jack placed his hand on his chest, over the lapel of his jacket, roughly where his heart should be.

"That wounds me, right here. Because I'm showbiz, you know? I used to be a stage guy, if you count theatre and club gigs. I do. Showbiz is showbiz."

He let a bit more energy slip into his voice, ratcheting up the intensity, as he built towards the climax.

"If there's one thing I learnt as a performer, it's that I can't just half-ass a job. Nah, I gotta fully ass it. I can do better. We can do better."

Jack pointed with his baseball bat, brandishing it like a sword.

"So, Lex, old buddy, old fella, me lad. What do you say? Round two?"
"This has 'trap' written all over it," Ollie insisted. "In capital letters. In giant font."

Superman regarded him with a cool expression. "I'm cognisant, Arrow. It has not escaped my notice."

"And yet," Ollie pressed, "you're letting him manipulate you. You're letting him press all your buttons. Am I the only one who sees anything wrong with this?"

"Don't presume to lecture me," Superman said, in a tone of voice that signalled his decisions were not up for debate.

Ollie knew that Lex was stubborn, and it was damn near impossible to change the guy's mind when he'd set himself on a course of action.

A part of Ollie almost wanted Lex to get his ass kicked. Seeing him taken down a peg would be cathartic. But Ollie didn't want Lex dead. If nothing else, Superman's death would be a massively destabilising blow to the present global order, and one hell of a mess to clean up.

But Ollie was starting to think that Superman had a death wish... or at least a huge blind spot when it came to the Joker.

"I have to point out," Ollie said, raising his hands, "that he's already humiliated you once."


"You're still underestimating him," Ollie stressed.

Superman's eyes radiated a visible amount of red light, crimson energy bleeding from his irises into his sclera.

Instead of freaking out or being intimidated, Ollie stood his ground. Superman's eyeballs qualified as weapons of mass destruction, and he knew full well what they could do. At the same time, the threat of being disintegrated had rather lost its impact on Ollie, considering he saw the guy pull the same trick all the damn time.

Besides, Ollie was pretty sure that Lex wasn't about to erase him in the middle of Lex's own office, in the heart of downtown Metropolis.

If nothing else, Lex would have a devil of a time cleaning stray bits of him out of the very expensive carpet.

It was very unfair, though. Some guys had all the luck. Lex had heat rays or Omega beams or whatever he called them, built straight into his head. He could instantly go from ordinary mode to intimidating alien mode in a literal blink of an eye.

Ollie didn't have that advantage. He wasn't dressed in his Green Arrow suit. He was wearing a business suit. He couldn't exactly pull a bow and arrow out of his ass.

"The Joker," Lex said, "is underestimating me. No matter what he's prepared, it will not be sufficient. Meanwhile, in his arrogance, the Joker is handing himself to us. There's no longer any need to find and hunt him down, not when he's been so kind as to give me a time and place."
Ollie leaned forward, placing both of his hands, palms down, on Superman's desk.

He didn't know why Lex had a desk, since he'd never seen the guy do any paperwork or even sit at a computer browsing social media. But the guy did have a desk in his office, one that was the size of a large conference table. Hell, Ollie was sure that he could park a car on the thing.

The sheer surface area of the Kryptonian's furniture meant that there was a fairly large distance separating him from Lex. So Ollie really did have to lean forward in order to narrow that gap, so he could look Superman in the glowing red eyes.

"Just because he's thrown down the gauntlet, mano a mano, you're planning to waltz in there," Ollie said, "alone, by yourself, and...."

"No," Superman said. "Not alone."

***

"Now listen here, Lane," Sterling Morris said, "this is the exact same brand of poor judgement that got you and Perry White in trouble at the Daily Planet. I won't have that happen on my watch!"

Morris tried to glare at Lois, authoritatively, but it didn't work. She could barely see his eyes through his Coke bottle glasses. Besides his visual impairment, her current boss didn't have a very intimidating figure.

He reminded her of Colonel Sanders, specifically a version of the Colonel who'd enjoyed too much of his own chicken.

That was a mean-spirited and unfair thought. She knew Morris was trying to watch his weight. She sympathised, just a little bit. Keeping fit wasn't easy, especially on irregular newsroom hours.

Unfortunately for Morris, his efforts at watching his weight usually stopped at the watching part, without actually progressing to doing something about his weight. So while Lois' assessment was mean, it was also accurate.

She was also not very inclined to be nice to Morris, especially in the privacy of her own head. Because he was being all officious, and trying to cover his own ample ass.

"It's news," Lois insisted.

"It's suicide," Morris snapped, thumping a meaty fist on his desk. His little stationery holder rattled, and his collection of stress balls nearly rolled off the table and onto the floor.

Lois tried to keep a grip on her own temper. "The public has a right to..."

"There is no 'public', there's only people," Morris said. "The smart people are staying clear of this subversive Joker business!"

"Batman," Lois corrected.

Morris huffed. "Joker, Batman, whatever he calls himself! Anyone who's unwise enough to talk about this matter is already doing it online. They don't need you to editorialise."

"We're a news outlet," Lois said. "One of the few reputable ones left. Isn't it our job to..."

"We're a dying medium," Morris shot back, with some venom. "We're a secondary medium. If it wasn't for morning and evening drive time, our listener numbers would be even more in the toilet."
You know that. The only reason you're here is because Superman ran you out of the papers, and I'm the only one who was willing to take a chance on you. Don't you forget it!

Lois looked around the office. Morris was right. WHIZ Radio wasn't a growing business. Sterling Morris still owned the building, but the company was now subletting much of the space in the old station tower. WHIZ's actual operations had been relegated to only a couple of floors, the studios, and the broadcast setup on the roof.

Even Morris' own office wasn't the luxurious sprawl it had once been, back in the station's heyday. From what Lois could see, it was obvious that Sterling Morris had tried to cram the accumulated furniture and clutter from his previous office, or offices, into a much smaller space.

When she'd stormed in a few minutes ago, she'd had to squeeze through the partially blocked door, before being forced to scoot sideways past the sofa, banging her shins on the coffee table in the process.

Since Morris was a large man, Lois had no idea how he managed to fit into the room every day. Maybe the WHIZ admin staff airlifted him in through the windows on a daily basis, desk, chair, and all. He certainly looked like he was wedged in permanently, as an unmoving installation.

"You brought me on because I'm a journalist," Lois said. "A real journalist, not like the kind of people at Galaxy or Multiworld. And I'm telling you, this is newsworthy."

Morris took off his glasses. He polished them with the little cloth that he kept on his crowded desk, then pushed the spectacles back in place. He squinted at Lois.

"Alright, Lois," Morris said. "You can cover the story, but... but, but, you listen to me, on one condition."

Lois placed her hands on her hips. "Which is?"

Morris glared at her. "I don't want my station destroyed, but this is for your own good, too. I'm sure you'd still like to have a career."

Lois tapped one high-heeled shoe against the floor.

"You can run the story," Morris said. "You don't even have to be positive about Superman and the Justice League."

Lois arched one eyebrow. "I don't?"

"God, no," Morris said. "I know getting anything praiseworthy out of you is like squeezing blood from a stone."

Lois frowned. "What's the catch?"

"You don't have to be positive about Superman," Morris repeated. "But for God's sake, don't be negative. Neutral, do you hear me? Be neutral."

Lois gave a small smile. "Just the facts, huh?"

Morris groaned. "For the love of Christ, don't make me regret this."

***

"Harleen," Hugo Strange said, "this sordid affair reflects poorly on you. Were that all, I could let it
pass, but what paints you in an ill light is also deeply damaging to the reputation of this institution."

Harley kept a straight face. "What reputation? As a revolving door for the supervillain set?"

Strange adjusted his glasses, briefly lifting them so he could peer directly at Harley. "It's that very attitude, Harleen, that we at Arkham Asylum must tirelessly oppose. This institution must defend its good name, and that battle is not helped by you, specifically, being known as the mental health professional who claimed that Napier was somehow sane. In your case, I use the word 'professional' extremely loosely."

Harley did her best to remain calm. It was a heroic effort. Sadly, she figured that her boss wouldn't appreciate the amount of energy she was burning to remain in her chair, instead of clobbering him with it.

"At the time," Harley began, "I..."

But the Chief of Psychiatry was not interested in hearing her defence. Harley had the distinct impression that she wasn't in an interview, she was in an inquisition. She didn't have a witch hat or a broomstick, and Strange wasn't wearing a clerical collar and clutching a religious book, but she was feeling pretty toasty.

Although that might have just been the stifling temperature in the room. Hugo Strange kept his office like a baking hot oven, and he refused to open the windows for proper ventilation. All things considered, Harley wouldn't have been surprised if it was some kind of auto-asphyxiation thing. Strange was kind of freaky, and he didn't hide it very well.

After several years of schooling and some time working in the industry, Harley had a theory that a good three-quarters of psychiatric practitioners were certifiably nuts in their own right. Harley included herself in that proportion.

Some doctors and nurses were just better at keeping up the facade.

Strange gripped the computer monitor on his desk and spun it round. He stabbed a crooked finger at the image frozen on the screen.

"Does this," he demanded, "look sane to you?"

Personally, Harley was slightly surprised that Strange even knew about that particular site. The banner advertisements and livery made it obvious it wasn't LexVid or any more mainstream sharing platform. Perhaps someone had sent him a link?

On the other hand, Strange did seem the kind of man who'd go down the Internet's deepest and dankest rabbit holes in search of exceedingly specific porn. So maybe his familiarity with unorthodox Russian websites wasn't that surprising after all.

Harley stared at the motionless face of Jack Napier, alias the Joker, a.k.a. the Batman. She was already familiar with the new video, of course. She'd seen it several times. Too many times.

"You want me to answer," Harley asked, "or you just gonna yell at me some more?"

Strange released his grip on the desktop monitor, and settled back in his office chair. "Harleen, when I brought you on board, I chose to extend the courtesy of believing that you earned your qualifications with your intelligence and academic rigour, rather than your other attributes."

Harley scowled. "Out of line, Strange. Do I need to call HR in here?"
"Oh," Strange said, "I've already called HR. You'll be seeing them once we're done. Believe me, Harleen, we will be done."

Harley snorted. "Am I special, or are you always this creepy when you fire someone?"

"Make light of it if you wish," Strange said, pointing at the screen again. "I think you'll find, Harleen, that our profession has no place for people who are incapable of seeing the blatantly obvious."

Jack hummed, making a tuneless bit of noise. He paced back and forth, letting his eyes lazily wander around the barren landscape.

There wasn't much to see. That was kind of the point. He'd picked a suitably remote location for his little tête-à-tête with Lex, far enough from any urban sprawl.

The place was even public land, so he wasn't trespassing. Although the Bureau of Land Management would likely have stern words for Jack, if they knew what he was planning.

Of course, most of the world knew that he was planning to fight Lex. Jack had called him out publicly. That was the whole idea. However, the general public didn't know the specifics.

They had the headline act, not the full programme.

The cameras were rolling, too. Jack had left the specifics to his colleagues, but Sivana and Noah had assured him that the full proceedings would be recorded... somehow. Drones, satellites, or something. He didn't care how they were pulling it off, just that they were.

Since he was on camera, Jack was properly dressed. He had a suit jacket on, and it was once again one of the black coats that Sivana had provided, rather than his old lurid purple. His trousers and shoes matched the jacket.

But instead of a button-down shirt, he was wearing a t-shirt.

The curvy black symbol against a yellow oval didn't mean much to the world at large, so the effect was somewhat wasted. Yet it was, of course, utterly appropriate.

Jack cleared his throat. "Is he here yet?"

"No," Noah said, in Jack's ears. The voice synthesiser that Noah used as part of his Calculator persona did nothing to hide his sarcasm. "If he was, you would know."

Jack shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe Lex might change things up, come at me all sneaky, instead of out in the open."

"He will not employ stealth," Noah noted. "Not when you have challenged him directly, in the public eye."

"You never know," Jack said. "He could put his underwear over his head instead of outside his suit, like some kind of super ninja."

The Calculator sighed. "Unlikely."

"That's not a 'no'," Jack said.

Noah did not reply, which Jack chose to interpret as an obvious sign that the Calculator agreed with his superior reasoning.

Jack took a moment to inspect his weapon, which amounted to him lifting the faux baseball bat he was carrying before lowering it again.

Then the Calculator interrupted his moment of peaceful contemplation.
"Incoming," Noah said.

Jack assumed that was what Noah said. The word definitely began with 'in', but the rest of the syllables were nearly drowned out by the bass rumble of a Boom Tube.

He tensed, just in case Lex was coming out swinging. Just in case.

As it turned out, Lex did not burst from the aperture of the Boom Tube like a human-shaped missile with a stick of propellant up his rear.

The familiar figure of Superman flew through the portal at a sedate pace, his cape dramatically unfurling in his wake.

The rush of air subsided as the Boom Tube closed, allowing the cape to settle around Superman's shoulders and back.

"Joker," Superman said, coldly. "I trust that you're here to surrender. Otherwise, this will end... poorly."

"Oh," Jack answered, brightly, "I agree. Totally."

The Kryptonian stared at Jack, his body language rigid and unyielding. "Do you?"

"For sure," Jack said. "The question is, poorly for whom?"

A red glow emanated from Superman's eyes. "I tire of your wordplay."

"Yeah, see," Jack said, making a face. "That's a shame. Since, spoiler alert, there's gonna be a lot more. I joke. That's what I do."

Through Jack's earpieces, Noah whispered: "No other combatants. Curious."

There had been a slim but non-zero chance of Superman playing it smart. He could have brought the entirety of the Justice League and all its sundry associates down on Jack's head.

But… small army of men, women, and gender ambiguous individuals in capes and tights, against one guy carrying a bat? That would look ridiculous. Lex didn't like looking ridiculous.

Besides, Jack had called Superman out. Him, specifically, not the whole Justice League. So maybe, just maybe, Lex was playing it straight.

His dialogue seemed to bear that out. The guy was being predictable, like he was reading off a script.

For example, if Jack had to guess, Lex's response would be something like...

"Let's see," Lex said, "if you can laugh this off."

Jack grinned. Called it.

While the pronouncement was grim and serious, Jack thought it was pretty hypocritical.

Sure, Jack was a showman. But so was Lex Luthor.

The man had never been purely logical and pragmatic. There was a bit of Luthor that wanted to make a show of things, to brag, to boast, and showcase his ego.
Of course, this version of Lex was some kind of posthuman nanotechnological bodyjacking thing, and not the bald fellow Jack knew and loathed.

Yet, some things were universal. Lex was Lex. And Lex had to gloat. He had to posture. Superman rocketed forward, making an obvious and telegraphed punch. Jack ducked beneath the blow.

If all he had to work with were his plain old human reflexes, he might have been in trouble. But his suit was a Thaddeus Sivana original.

Once upon a time, Sivana had built a set of battle armour capable of taking on super-strong aliens and divinely empowered metahumans... in the unassuming form of a finely tailored tuxedo.

Jack's version wasn't a full tux with tails and a bow tie, which meant he was missing some of the flight boosters and sensors. He had the full strength and speed augmentation, though, and the interface systems that let the whole package respond to his thoughts.

When he swung his arms, a low-profile exoskeleton and the smart fabric of his jacket moved with him, boosting his muscles from human standard to the level of a small-g 'god'. Superman's muscles and skin were already that strong, of course.

All the fancy outfit did was put Jack somewhere closer to the Kryptonian's weight class. It did not let him utterly dominate Lex and his Superman meat suit.

For that, Jack was counting on the bat. The bat would put him in the same... well, ballpark. Pun intended.

The baseball bat in Jack's hands slammed into Superman's side, hitting him in the ribcage.

The force field surrounding Jack's head and body flared into visibility, serving two functions. One, the force field prevented him from being blinded by the flash of light released at the point of impact.

Two, the force field protected him from the recoil and splash damage. Instead of peeling his skin from his flesh and reducing his bones to powder, the shockwave only slightly mussed Jack's hair.

Naturally, Lex received the full unadulterated blow, sending him spinning. His caped form smashed to the earth some distance away, kicking up water as he skipped like a stone over the shallow layer of moisture that covered the salt flats.

"Emitters holding," Noah reported, over their communications channel. "Output steady."

Jack smirked. "Batter up."
Superman was on the ground. Jack knew that state of affairs would quickly change. He'd gotten in a solid hit, but he reckoned that Lex was more stunned and surprised than mortally injured.

It wouldn't be that easy.

TING!

A chiming noise came from the Apokoliptian computer on Lex's belt. Jack might have been imagining things, but it sounded urgent and insistent to him.

Sure enough, Superman's shoulders heaved beneath the draped form of his cape. Powerful Kryptonian muscles twitched, and the world's mightiest alien started to rise.

"Slugger," Jack said.


Jack shifted his grip on the bat, such that his hands were properly palm-up, palm-down. With his feet apart, he swung once again.

From one point of view, his form didn't matter. He wasn't hitting a genuine baseball, just a pretend one.

Having said that, he had a higher responsibility to get things right. He couldn't set a bad example for all the little kids who'd one day be watching all this on video, on their streaming platform of choice.

A gleaming white sphere materialised along the length of the bat, coalescing into being an instant before it blasted towards Superman.

Obviously, Jack was showing off. No two ways about it. But the firepower he was slinging around was the real deal, not Hollywood magic.

At the very beginning of his villainous career, Noah Kuttler, the Calculator, had fought his battles in person.

These days, he was known for doing business from a distance, behind firewalls and proxy servers. Which was a far more sensible and sustainable business model, particularly since Noah was an older guy. But that turn towards a more service-oriented approach had come much later in his career.

Even a guy like Noah hadn't been immune to the seductive siren's call of dressing up in a funny costume and trying to punch superheroes in the face.

To that end, the Calculator's original battlesuit had been built around powerful hard light emitters and Noah's own brand of highly adaptable force field generators.

The downside of the setup was that the systems were notoriously finicky, and needed a delicate touch to manage. Noah's original suit had used clunky buttons and external controls, allowing the wearer to make the necessary adjustments to the kit on the fly.
The souped-up version whipped up by Sivana had a brain-machine interface and an auto mode, in case Jack absolutely had to make his own changes.

But for the time being, Jack had Noah Kuttler himself on call. The man himself was tweaking the settings for maximum impact, responding to the readings they were getting off Superman.

Downrange, the ball-shaped shell exploded, throwing up dust, dirt, and eliciting a pained roar from Lex. It was definitely a Lex shout, full of righteous indignation and the promise of imminent painful retribution.

The particle cloud distorted as an angry Kryptonian burst from within, heading straight for Jack. Instead of dodging, Jack held the bat in front of him, no longer making any pretence of treating it like a piece of sporting equipment.

"Shield," Noah said, an instant after Superman smashed into the reinforced bulwark. Planes of light whirled around Jack, interlocking and presenting an ever-shifting array of facets in a hemispherical configuration.

Jack's Sivana-made battlesuit had its own protective force fields, and it was likely that they could have tanked the blow. However, they didn't need to, because Jack still had the bat to play with.

The crystalline shield shattered. But it broke deliberately, destructively, and right in Lex's face. The release of energy was accompanied by another brilliant blast of retina-searing radiance.

Noah's technology wasn't perfect. It didn't compare favourably to a Lantern's Power Ring, or even the Cosmic Staff. Jack figured it was about on par with the stuff fielded by Doctor Light... more oomph, maybe, but that performance came at a cost.

"Emitter one overheating," Noah reported, tersely. "Output dropping, five percent."

Case in point.

Through the haze of energy, Jack could see Lex flying back. But the man's momentum was quickly arrested by his powers. It didn't take long for Lex to bring his tumble under control.

*Ting!*

Lex spared a moment to study his own Father Box. Then his expression changed. "Do not forget, I have far more than brute strength at my disposal."

When Lex lifted his head, his eyes were glowing, producing a bloody and dangerous hue.

"Omega beams," Noah warned.

Jack kicked against the ground, throwing himself to the side. The exoskeleton hidden in his clothing picked up the movement and amplified it, sending him skidding even further - and then the antigravity systems cut in, adding their own acceleration to the mix.

Unfortunately, Jack didn't have an absolutely perfect handle on the movement functions of the suit. He'd used hover shoes before, as part of his Joker gear, similar to the air-walkers developed by Central City's Trickster. But his current kit was far more advanced than what he was used to.

His lack of control was one reason he'd chosen to challenge Superman out in northwestern Utah, with nothing but level ground in all directions.
On the plus side, the fact Jack only had limited control over his own trajectory made his flight even more unpredictable. Which helped in evading Lex's existential eye beams of unmaking.

He had to dodge, because the Omega beams were a much greater threat than physical force. They were bona fide New God bullshit, not a Kryptonian power at all.

The original Superman, Kal-El, only had thermal vision. Heat ray eyes. Laser eyes. Lex’s eye beams were a different beast. Jack wasn’t sure how Lex had Omega beams. Maybe he’d stolen Darkseid’s contact lenses, or eaten a bunch of Apokoliptian carrots. Whatever the mechanism, whatever the background, Lex had the power, and Jack had to deal with it.

Sivana believed that Lex’s Omega beams were weaker than Darkseid’s. That was interesting, but ultimately academic. Even if that was true, what Lex had was still enough to seriously threaten the integrity of Jack’s molecules.

The problem was, Omega beams were homing. As in, they could change direction. They were following him. They were speeding up.

He couldn’t outpace them.

Which meant...

Jack skittered to a stop, wound up, spun, and drove his bat into the path of the Omega effect.

There was a blinding, rending, crash, like the air itself was splitting into many pieces. The sound was awful, and a nasty vibration ran down Jack's arms. Only his suit’s strength assist allowed him to keep his grip on the bat, and even then, just barely.

"Emitters two, three, overloading," Noah cautioned, his voice rising in alarm.

The beams were gone, but there was plenty more where they had come from. His reprieve was only temporary. It would be short-lived. His opponent wasn’t going to give him a free pass.

Lex hovered in the air, crossing his arms over his broad chest. The cape of his Superman outfit flared theatrically around his body. Jack wondered if Lex spent time practicing the pose.

The Father Box attached to Lex’s side lit up, pulsing ominously.

*Ting!*

"What’s next, Joker? Are you going to try Kryptonite? I assure you, it will not work. I have taken precautions," Lex said.

Jack spent a second wondering what those precautions were, before dismissing the thought. It didn't matter.

He had Kryptonite, sure. But he had no plans to use Kryptonite… not yet. Not until things started to go wahoooie-shaped.

Irradiating Superman with green death rocks wouldn't fit the narrative that Jack was trying to build.

But Lex didn't know that.

Jack grinned.

Remember, friendly fire isn't."

Lex's eyes flared red. "Friendly?"

"Yeah," Jack said, shouldering his baseball bat. "Friendly."

*Ting! Ting! Ting!*

Lex started to speak, but he did not get to finish his sentence. There was a blur of motion, as another humanoid shape collided with him with great force.

The blast wave washed over Jack, blunted by his suit's protective field. He felt the exoskeleton engage, keeping him upright and in position, on his feet.

Overhead, the sonic boom arrived, evidence that the new arrival had broken the sound barrier.

Through the wind, Jack saw Lex on his back, half buried in a crater. But only for a moment. The figure on top of him was raining heavy blows down on his head and body, striking so fast that Jack couldn't keep count of the individual attacks.

The successive impacts sent new shockwaves rolling out, with enough force that Jack reckoned seismographs across the country had to be going berserk.

There was a burst of crimson. Jack couldn't tell precisely what Lex had done, but from the looks of things, he'd used some combination of his Omega eye blasts, strength, and flight to break out of his disadvantageous position.

When the dust settled, Superman and the Eradicator were both upright and facing each other.

Lex was no longer pristine, a state of affairs that surely had to annoy the guy. His hair was in disarray, and there was a tiny bit of blood on his face from somewhere. Just a scratch, but it was something.

Aside from some incidental dirt and weathering, the Eradicator's appearance was perfect. She was clad in a suit similar to Superman's, but with black as a more prominent colour. A visor covered her eyes, the same shade of gold as the House of El crest on her torso.

"No Kryptonite," Jack said. "I wouldn't want to hurt my own Kryptonian, now would I? Bad form, you know?"
Unsurprisingly, Lex was not amused. His face went through a series of short convulsive movements, before settling on an expression very much like a man sucking on a lemon.

"What have you done?"


"Kelex," the Eradicator said, in a harsh and implacable voice, "you are not Kryptonian."

"I am Superman," Lex insisted, balling his fists. "You're the one who's stolen that shield..."

"A meaningless title," the Eradicator declared, raising her voice and stabbing a finger against the symbol displayed on her own uniform. "Superman? No true Kryptonian would call themselves such a thing. This? This is no shield. This is the crest of the House of El. A crest you do not deserve to wear."

Ting! Ting! Ting!

The Father Box on Lex's belt chimed repeatedly, like a ringing bell.

Lex's eyes flared brighter, the light nearly obscuring his features with a bloody red wash. "You dare? You're the pretender. You..."

By her own admission, the Eradicator didn't have a perfect grasp on organic emotions. Not yet. On the other hand, it was arguable whether the Eradicator still qualified as a machine intelligence. She was housed in a cyborg body, with working brain tissue and a functioning endocrine system. Emotions were part of the package.

From the looks of things, Jack reckoned the Eradicator had already mastered righteous indignation, and was making a good start on murderous fury.

"Pretender," she spat. "Pretender?"

Heat rays blasted from the Eradicator's visor, a torrent of radiation so intense that Jack felt an uncomfortable searing warmth even through his suit's protective field. Like he'd been out too long on a hot summer's day, and was on the verge of sunburn.

The air and ground hissed as moisture flashed into steam.

Powerful as it was, the Eradicator's attack wasn't equal to the full force of Lex's Omega beams. The Omega effect could clearly destroy matter. It stood to reason that they could nullify energy as well.

Lex's eyes burned brightly as he countered the Eradicator's offensive.

But in doing so, Lex was simply standing there, having a staring contest with the cybernetic daughter of Krypton.

Jack took the opportunity to swing his baseball bat at Lex's back. It was as good as an invitation, after all. In Jack's mind, Lex was basically asking for it.

The high-tech weapon in the shape of a bat had taken a beating, and it was no longer functioning at one hundred percent.

Nevertheless, Jack trusted that the Calculator would squeeze every last erg of energy out of the bat's failing circuitry, all towards the very worthy cause of smashing a dent in Lex's skull.

This time, there was no ball-shaped construct. The bat simply unleashed a wave of force at the apex of Jack's swing.

Lex stumbled. He staggered forward, the ominous glow from his eyes winking out.

Then, a half second later, he was driven into the ground by the Eradicator. The cyborg Kryptonian grabbed him and planted him solidly into the earth, in a manner reminiscent of a woman spiking a volleyball.

A very large volleyball, with arms, legs, and a cape.

"You are not Kryptonian," the Eradicator said. "You are a virus. An infection. A pretender that has stolen the body of..."

Jack arched his eyebrows. He'd gone over the script with the Eradicator, ahead of time. He was pretty sure he hadn't written those exact words.

But the Eradicator was a bit of a diva. Jack knew the type. He hadn't done much ensemble or cast acting over the course of his short-lived theatrical career. He'd taken classes, though. He'd certainly worked with hopefuls who were awfully like the Eradicator, despite being Gotham-born rather than alien computers.

Being housed in the form of a buxom blonde powerhouse had simply exacerbated the Eradicator's existing prima donna tendencies... not that Jack was about to admit that out loud, where anyone could hear.

It was no surprise that the Eradicator felt the need to ad-lib.

Lex retaliated, exploding out of his new crater and ascending with an uppercut that rocked the Eradicator's head back. It seemed the guy had no patience for fellow cast members hogging the spotlight.

Jack hefted his bat, but stopped short of diving in. He circled round.

The two Kryptonian combatants were grappling in a contest of strength, and even with his powered suit in the mix, Jack wasn't sure he wanted to be in the middle of the scrum. Especially when it looked like Lex was gaining the upper hand.

"Your petty tricks are inadequate," Lex said. "A transparent, pathetic, ploy."

The Eradicator's muscles strained. Her expression turned pained. Then Lex rammed his elbow and forearm into her face, breaking her nose and drawing blood. He repeated the movement, again and again.

Lex was stronger, Jack noted. They'd expected that. It was still unfortunate to see.

"Eradicator," Noah said, his synthesised voice carrying a note of urgency. "Use the ritual."

The Eradicator had the same communications setup that Jack possessed, built into her visor and
suit. She could hear the Calculator, just like Jack.

Lex held the Eradicator up by her hair. He glared at her bleeding face. The two of them were now a matched set, both wounded. But the Eradicator was hanging limp in his grasp.

Jack gripped his bat tighter. If necessary, he'd have to get in there. But he reckoned the Eradicator was still conscious, which meant...

"I am Superman," Lex declared. "You're merely a..."

"I fight," the Eradicator whispered, "for KRYPTON."

There was a sudden burst of light, followed by a crack of thunder.

A plume of smoke burst towards the sky, completely obscuring the two, and swirling around Jack.

Jack grinned. He planted the end of his bat on the ground, and leaned on it like a walking stick.

He waited for the smoke to settle.

The Eradicator got up.

Her previously bloodied face was pristine. She stood taller, her muscles even more defined beneath the skintight fabric of her bodysuit.


Lex coughed. He spluttered, in a manner that wasn't dignified at all. He crawled back to his feet, and stared at the Eradicator.

"The might of Rao," Jack continued, "God of the Sun."

The gold portions of the Eradicator's costume shone, the House of El sigil emitting a visible aura of power.

"The faith of Yuda," Jack said, "Goddess of the Moons... I could go on, but you get the idea."

Lex's mouth opened, but no sound emerged.

The Eradicator clenched her fists.

"Oh, by the way," Jack added, "Doctor Sivana sends his regards."
In retrospect, he'd made one teeny, tiny, miscalculation.

Jack didn't want to use the word 'mistake', or even 'oversight', because those terms implied a failure to consider the problem. He'd thought about it. The notion had crossed his mind.

He'd merely... underestimated the scope of the issue, that was all.

It wasn't his fault. Really. He had a long career as a criminal mastermind, but most of the supervillainy he'd done during his long years of insanity was street level stuff. Relatively speaking.

Superman and other flying bricks were far above his old weight class, by several orders of magnitude. Back in his time as the Joker, Jack hadn't made a habit of getting into brawls with people who could bench press buildings and juggle tanks.

He'd been crazy, not stupid.

As such, he hadn't fully appreciated just how kinetic a battle between two flying aliens could be.

Superman and the Eradicator were... well, he wasn't sure if they were evenly matched. But they were close enough.

They were also fighting high above the ground, appearing as little more than tiny specks to Jack's vision.

Then one of the little dots flew even further away, followed by the other, until both were completely out of sight.

"She does remember," Jack asked, "we're supposed to be together, on camera, right?"

"The Eradicator is within the range of my sensors," Noah said, blandly, his computer-masked voice showing no trace of sympathy for Jack's plight. "I am still recording."

"I mean," Jack amended, "I can't see a damned thing."

"If you want a live feed," Noah began, "that can be arranged."

Jack twisted his baseball bat, digging the tip against the ground. He tapped his foot.

He knew full well that Noah understood what he was getting at. The Calculator was simply being obstinate... or perhaps the Calculator was enjoying himself at Jack's expense.

"Okay, fine," Jack admitted. "They're nowhere near me, and that's the problem, alright?"

"You do have flight systems in your suit," Noah pointed out.

"Which suck," Jack retorted.

"You could have worn the Legion Flight Ring," Noah noted.

Jack didn't reply.

In a dry tone, Noah said: "You forgot that you stole one, didn't you."
"Moving on," Jack said, in a brisk voice. "My point is, I anticipated a slightly less mobile battle."

"Joker," Noah chided, "you're not the only star of this production, to use your own words. I was under the impression you wanted to let the Eradicator shine. Are you that jealous?"

"Yes, yes," Jack responded, "my own naked hunger for the limelight has never been more cruelly exposed. That's not it. I don't need to polish my ego, it's big and shiny as it is."

The Calculator snorted, making a sound that filtered oddly through his voice-distorting software.

"Please remind her that I can't offer much support if she's fighting Lex all the way over there, while I'm all the way down here," Jack added.

"The Eradicator is aware, and acknowledges," Noah said. "Stand by."


He waited patiently for a few moments, listening to the distant booming sounds of humanoid bodies breaking the sound barrier, and the very similar percussive noises of nigh-invulnerable fists, elbows, knees, feet, and other bits of anatomy meeting similarly durable flesh.

"Incoming," Noah reported.

Jack perked up, hefting the baseball bat. He adopted an approximation of a hitter's stance, readying himself as if waiting for a pitch.

On cue, the limp form of Superman appeared on the horizon and rocketed towards him, moving nearly parallel to the ground.

Jack wasn't quite sure how far Lex had flown, like that, seeing as how the Bonneville Salt Flats were... well, flat. The place was used for races and land speed record attempts for a reason. For all he knew, the Eradicator had punched Superman several miles away.

Whatever the case, Lex was still struggling to recover, and he wasn't quite in full control of his flight.

That gave Jack an opportunity.

The remaining exotic energy emitters housed in Jack's baseball bat came to life. The resulting field enshrouded the bat, covering the full length of its false wood finish, and extending even further.

As Superman blurred past him, Jack swung.

If he had been relying purely on his own reflexes, Jack would have missed the swing. But he had a fancy exoskeleton beneath his ordinary-looking clothes, coupled with advanced electronics that responded to his thoughts and intentions.

There was a brilliant release of concussive force. But, more notably...

TING!

The angular shape of the Apokoliptian Father Box tumbled through the air. The computer had been knocked free from Lex's belt.

Jack swung his bat again, smacking the Father Box and sending it further away from Lex.
TING! TING! TING!

Jack ignored the protests from the Father Box. He was pretty sure the dire threats being made by the computer were just for form's sake.

He was pretty certain that human anatomy didn't work that way, despite what the Father Box seemed to think.

In the space of a single heartbeat, the Eradicator reappeared, matching velocities briefly with Lex before smashing him down with extreme prejudice.

Another shockwave rolled across the landscape.

Then the Eradicator locked the so-called last scion of Krypton in a painful-looking hold, pitting her super strength against his. Except that the Eradicator had the twin advantages of gravity and leverage on her side.

"LIAR."

"No," Lex gasped.

"Confess," the Eradicator demanded, in an authoritative voice, "your crimes! Your crimes against KRYPTON!"

Lightning flashed and thunder roared, a bolt of celestial power striking from the heavens.

The Eradicator had a surprising flair for the dramatic. It was more than dramatic, really - verging on the melodramatic, with veritable purple prose. Jack wasn't sure exactly how Kal-El's long-dead ancestor had programmed the AI, but it seemed he'd included a great deal of ham.

But it wasn't all posturing. The lightning was more than mere electricity, it was the same supernaturally charged thunderbolt that Sivana had rigged up to empower the Eradicator.

The thunderbolt carried the supernatural potency of seven righteously pissed off Kryptonian deities.

The same ritual had been used by the Wizard Shazam to uplift his champions throughout human history. It was tried and tested.

Of course, Sivana's version was a bootleg copy modified with the mystical equivalent of duct tape and hot glue, but the original source material was solid.

"KRYPTON,"

Lex also screamed, but his pained bellow was considerably more incoherent.

The thunderbolt strengthened the Eradicator. But to anyone else, especially Lex, it hurt. Like hell. Or rather, like heaven.

Jack had gone through some of the old Kryptonian theology that the Eradicator had shared with the class, just so he had some sense of what he was dealing with.

It appeared that Kryptonian Sunday School featured a whole lot more hardcore smiting than the regular scripture Jack remembered from his distant childhood.

Although it was possible that the version Jack had received was a tiny bit coloured by the
Eradicator's current personal beliefs.

The Kryptonian cyborg had initially been somewhat dubious of the concept of invoking ancient Kryptonian gods and goddesses for power. By the time the planet Krypton had blown up into a billion radioactive pieces, modern Kryptonian society had been mostly secular and science-fetishising, not spiritual.

But mythology and religion had played a role in shaping late-era Kryptonian philosophy and morality. So the Eradicator did have comprehensive records of Kryptonian scripture in its probe body's databases. The Eradicator simply hadn't believed any of it. Then again, as an artificial intelligence housed in a space probe, it hadn't had much cause to reflect on the state of its immortal soul.

Now, though? Sivana's copy of the Shazam empowerment proved, beyond any doubt, that there was real power in the old Kryptonian faiths. The results had very quickly changed the Eradicator's mind.

Jack reckoned that the pantheon now had at least one genuine worshipper, even if she'd started life as a machine intelligence.

They hadn't just built a Kryptonian, they'd constructed the very first synthetic born again Neo-Orthodox Raoist.

There was a joke in there somewhere about hot religious girls, but Jack feared it would be in bad taste. He had standards.

Low standards, but standards all the same.
Lex had seen better days. The guy had red patches on his skin like he'd been sunburnt, and smoke rose from his body.

Unfortunately, he was still conscious.

"I am," Lex growled, with mounting fury, "I am..."

"You are a thief," the Eradicator said. "A creature that has stolen the body of a true son of KRYPTON!"

The lightning struck.

Lex roared, his voice rising in both anguish and rage.

"A sickness," the Eradicator continued, "that I will burn out..."

It was oddly satisfying to see Lex get fried like a bug stuck to a zapper.

But the longer Jack watched the scene, the more uneasy he felt.

"Quick check," Jack said, addressing the Calculator. "Is she actually making any headway in removing Lex from his meat suit, or do we need to break for lunch?"

"Readings aren't clear," the Calculator said. "It is difficult to penetrate Kryptonian tissue, and there is interference from..."

With a massive heave, Lex sprang to his feet, throwing his arms to the side - and breaking the Eradicator's hold in the process.

"In summary," Jack quipped. "That'll be a 'no'."

Sivana had hypothesised that it might be possible to use the Eradicator's divinely empowered thunder to fry the nanites right out of Lex's Superman body, destroying the bits of technology that let the digitised Luthor control the hybrid form.

The Eradicator referred to the plan as 'setting Kal-El free'.

Separating the Father Box from Lex had been part of the plan, since they suspected that the Apokoliptian machine was reinforcing his powers.

But there were a number of problems. Big problems. Show stoppers.

For one thing, as far as they could tell, Lex had been squatting in Kal-El's skull and nervous system for decades. In all likelihood, there wasn't any remaining Kal-El to set free, not in any meaningful sense.

Even if the nanotech and cyborg parts were removed, the grey matter inside that head was Lex too, in effect.

The other big issue was... Lex was effectively a New God. He had New God powers, at least. Arguably, his existence wasn't scientifically based anymore, but more conceptual in nature.
And Sivana wasn't sure how the New Gods of New Genesis and Apokolips stacked up against the old Kryptonian pantheon.

Sivana was a multidisciplinary scientist, a real Renaissance man. He was many things. But he wasn't a practicing comparative theologian.

So the whole idea of burning Lex right out of Superman was a long shot. A very long shot.

It was a shot worth taking, on the off chance that it actually paid off.

It hadn't.

On the other hand, forcing Lex to vacate his current residence wasn't the sole and only point of their current exercise. The Eradicator had hoped for a swift victory, but Jack had been more pessimistic.

His career as Gotham's clown prince had taught him the wisdom of not leaving all of his eggs in one basket.

Multiple baskets were better. Hell, baskets were terrible. You really wanted egg cartons, a whole bunch of them, either paper or plastic. Metaphorically speaking.

Jack planted his feet firmly in the dirt, which caused his powered suit to dig in right with him. He did so just in time, as a blast wave washed over him.

More shockwaves rent the air as Superman started brawling with the Eradicator, once more.

Lex looked wounded, he looked hurt, and he definitely looked angry. His Superman suit was also looking worn. Maybe he was even moving a little slower. But he wasn't down and out.

"Cleanup," Jack shouted, stepping forward.

In response, the Eradicator moved, disengaging from Lex after one last blow.

Jack didn't bother with the theatrics of adopting a textbook batting stance. His weapon didn't need it to work, and he'd already gotten plenty of showboating in.

He just pointed the bat, and let green light flood from the weapon, blanketing everything in front of him. He trusted that the Eradicator would get herself clear in time. Even if she didn't, she had her own radiation shielding.


The green energy splashed against Superman, outlining him in emerald hues.

To no effect.

He simply stood there and soaked up the Kryptonite emissions. The green light made the colours of his costume look funny, but that was the only apparent result.

"Hm," Jack mused. "Is this thing on?"

"As you can see," Lex said, with an air of smug satisfaction, "that won't work, Joker. I told you."

"Hold up," Jack interrupted, raising his free hand and indicating that he needed a moment. "I'm gonna try turning this on and off again."
"Please," Lex said, "spare us the theatrics."

Next to Jack, the Eradicator landed, her cape falling into place. She raised her gloved hands in a simple guard position, watching their opponent warily.

Jack lowered the bat. The green Kryptonite field winked out. He scratched the back of his head. "So, uh, I'm guessing you saw a doctor about that allergy problem."

"I have Wonder Woman on my side," Lex said. "The legendary Circe, the enchantress of Homer's Odyssey. Do you know what she's famous for, Joker?"


"She doesn't transform men into animals," Lex said, with slow and deliberate enunciation. "She takes aspects away from mortals. She takes away humanity, reason, dignity, which leaves them as beasts."

"Great," Jack quipped. "So you're putting her in charge of your media team?"

Lex ignored Jack's attempt at witty repartee. "That's not all she can take away."

Jack sighed. It seemed Lex was determined to have his say. He really wanted to get a point across, and Jack figured he'd just keep going like a verbal steamroller.

He recognised the tactic, because they were both men who liked delivering prepared speeches. A lot of Jack's own banter was written in advance. He was just better at playing his lines off as casual remarks. Lex wasn't even trying.

Jack gave in, and went right for the logical conclusion. He made a wiggling motion with his fingers. "You're saying, you got your pet witch to go bibbidi-bobbidi-boo, and she poofed your weaknesses away."

"Further magical augmentation," the Eradicator said, her eyes hard and assessing.

"Precisely," Lex said. "You're not facing me, Joker. You face the Justice League, and all that it represents."

Lex swept his arm to the side, in an obviously practiced gesture.

_Ting!_

On the ground, the fallen shape of the Father Box shuddered, shook, and then rose into the air. The Apokoliptian computer flew towards Lex's outstretched arm.

Jack tensed. With the Father Box, Lex could open Boom Tubes. He could teleport in his friends and cronies.

In the space of a second, Lex could bury them in superheroes.

Which would be bad.

Except...

_TING! TING! TING!_
Lex's face shifted. His expression went from a triumphant sneer to one of surprise, and then suspicion.

The Father Box arced past Lex's waiting hand, without stopping.

The Apokoliptian machine landed in Jack's palm.

Instinctively, Jack closed his fingers around the Father Box’s casing, and the lines etched into its surface flickered.

The Eradicator raised her eyebrows, her eyes widening beneath her visor.

*Ting!*

"Huh," Jack said, out loud. "Gotta admit, wasn’t expecting that. Let's pretend I planned this, all along?"
The Boom Tube spat Jack out at an awkward angle. He didn't realise it was an awkward angle until he was already nearly on his ass.

He didn't break or even bruise anything. He was still wearing a high-tech rig masquerading as a suit and t-shirt. Heck, he still had the bat.

The only injured part of him was his pride.

On the plus side, flopping around like a cartoon character was pretty awesome. He'd popped through a hole in space. That was cool, right? Yet another thing to check off his bucket list.

There was another reverberating boom, and a second Boom Tube deposited the Eradicator next to Jack.

The Eradicator landed on her feet, not her buttocks. That, Jack reckoned, was a tiny bit unfair. Sure, the Eradicator could fly. But he was eighty percent certain that the Boom Tube had formed differently for her.

The first Boom Tube had opened directly beneath Jack's feet. He could understand the practicalities involved - the position meant that he'd simply dropped straight down into the portal. He hadn't had to dive into it, or anything. But he hadn't expected the Boom Tube to open under him.

The first Boom Tube and the Eradicator had received a more conventionally placed wormhole.

Maybe the Father Box was playing favourites.

Perhaps the Father Box liked the Eradicator better, or there was some kind of alien artificial intelligence solidarity thing going on.

Through the two rapidly closing Boom Tube apertures, Jack could see the strangely distorted and doubled image of Superman rushing towards the Tubes. But the portals winked out with a final rush of air before the Kryptonian could pass through.

Jack sat up, picking himself partially off the ground. He held up the Father Box with one hand, letting his baseball bat slip from his fingers. It thunked against the floor.


Ting!

"Pity about your vocabulary, though," Jack chided, lifting his newly freed hand and waggling a finger back and forth. "There's no call for that."

Ting!

"Now you're just being rude," Jack complained.

The Eradicator looked at Jack and the Father Box. Beneath her visor, her lips pressed together and twisted downward.

"There was no need to retreat," she said, disapprovingly.
With a grunt, Jack heaved himself to his feet. The movement itself was easy, since his powered suit was still active, supplementing his muscles with mechanical strength.

But he was starting to feel weary, all the same. It was partially mental, not physical. Now that he was out of combat and far from the scene of the crime, he was no longer riding the edge of an adrenaline rush.

He'd crash, eventually. Though for the time being, he was still on the clock.

"Nah," Jack said to the Eradicator. "You have to understand timing and dramatic pacing. That was a good time for an exit, stage left."

The Eradicator did not appear impressed by Jack's intimate knowledge of stage directions. "Force. Momentum. We should have pressed our advantage."

"No, no, no," Jack said. "That assumes we had an advantage. He was pissed off, but at best you had him stalemated. And he wasn't even going all out."

"Neither was I," the Eradicator insisted.

Jack tossed the Father Box in the air, then caught it. This elicited an indignant chime from the machine.

_Ting!_

"Whatever the case," Jack said, "even if Boxy here decided to switch sides, the Justice League has other ways to get around. Other forms of teleportation. It's not like they get Lex to play Uber all the time. One way or another, he'd have his backup. You want to take on the entire Justice League?"

"Yes," the Eradicator stated, without the slightest hint of sarcasm or humour.

"Gotcha," Jack said. "Sorry. For a moment, I forgot who I was talking to. Silly of me. Slipped my mind. Look, war is a marathon, not a sprint, okay? Let's put a pin in that for now."

The Eradicator frowned. "A pin?"

"Later," Jack explained. "It means later."

"Joker," the Calculator's voice cut in, coming through Jack's earpieces and the Eradicator's matching headset, "Eradicator. I've alerted Sivana about your return. He is en route, and will arrive in..."

"Napier, you've back, I see. And you've brought a guest."

Sivana walked in from the far side of the hangar.

Was 'hangar' the correct name for the place? It was either that, or 'parking garage'. Sivana's base didn't have a labelled floor plan.

Visitor friendliness was not among Sivana's top priorities.

There were vehicles stored in the high-ceilinged space, but none of them were conventional aircraft or road vehicles. Jack didn't know what most of them were. He figured a couple were spacecraft, but he didn't want to speculate about the man's more esoteric creations.

Sivana himself looked annoyed. He was favouring Jack with one of his trademark stares.
"Doc," Jack said. "Meet Father Box. Boxy, this is Doctor Sivana."

*Ting! Ting! Ting!*

Jack shook his head. "Nah, we're not calling you that. Boxy it is. I could call you 'Daddy', but that would be kind of awkward."

"Please," Noah said. The digital masking of his Calculator persona did not fully hide the pleading note in his voice. "Please don't."

"You've brought an Apokoliptian computer employed by Superman into one of my secure facilities," Sivana said, flatly. "A device that is capable of opening portals to anywhere. Tell me, Napier, how is this wise? Do you want to bring Kelex, Teth-Adam, and their lackeys down on our collective heads?"

Jack waved the Father Box. "Boxy here has had a change of heart. A change of batteries? Whatever. So it says."

The Eradicator folded her arms. She regarded the Father Box with undisguised skepticism. "It could be a ruse."

*Ting!*

Sivana sighed. "If this is a Trojan Horse, the damage is done."

"Kind of a small horse," Jack observed, shaking the Father Box. "Definitely not the magnum Trojans."

"Napier," Sivana said, warningly.

"Sure, sure, could be a trick," Jack said, cheerfully, "but think of the possibilities if it isn't."

"It would mean," the Eradicator said, in a far more serious voice, "that our recent efforts were unnecessary."

Jack shrugged. "Depends on how everyone made out. What's the score?"

"The League of Shadows were unable to secure samples of Element X," Sivana said, "despite your providing an able distraction to draw the attention of Superman and key members of the Justice League."

"Although," Noah added, "this dearth will not pose any difficulties, if the Father Box is trustworthy, and genuinely offering to assist you."

"And if it is not," Sivana said, "I am sure sufficient quantities of the materials can be harvested from its remains."

*Ting!*

Jack blinked at the Father Box. "I expected you to be offended by that. What, you like being threatened? Is this some kind of masochistic thing?"

Sivana smiled. "It is natural, once you understand the Apokolyptian psyche."

"I am not to blame," the Eradicator said, with an excessive amount of calm that felt suspiciously forced, "for your progenitors' lack of civilisation and culture."

Jack decided to break up the imminent argument between the two artificial intelligences before it escalated. He did so using the traditional tactic of swiftly changing the subject, or more correctly, guiding the conversation back on course.

"And your own bit," Jack asked. "How'd that go, Doc?"

Sivana's smile grew broader. "Need you ask, Mister Napier? It should be evident that a task entrusted to Sivana would be performed flawlessly. See for yourself."

The scientist made a grand flourish, drawing attention to the large tarpaulin-covered shape behind him.

Jack wondered if the tarp had come with the stolen object, or if Sivana had added it specifically so he could make a dramatic reveal. It was the sort of thing Jack himself would have done, if he were in Sivana's position.

One of Sivana's ubiquitous worker robots trudged up, clamped its claws around the tarp, and pulled.

The fabric came off, gradually unveiling a long conical-shaped craft, wide at the tail and narrow at the nose, like an old school rocket lying on its side.

The paint was faded and scuffed, worn through in places, but the symbol on the ship was unmistakable - the hakenkreuz, or hooked cross, better known as the Nazi swastika.

"The Rotpanzerschiff, the personal vehicle of Helmut Screicher," Sivana said, "the Third Reich's Red Panzer. A trifle primitive, but Herr Screicher was ahead of his time, and the construction methods and metallurgy of the period was not quite up to his demands."

Jack grinned. "Any problems getting hold of it?"

"Nothing that you need to concern yourself with," Sivana replied, dismissively.

"Emergency services are responding to the blaze outside Vienna," Noah interjected. "European government-affiliated superteams have also been alerted, as the Bundesheer has lost all contact with Captain Krieger."

Sivana clasped his hands behind his back. "As I said, nothing to be concerned about. I am more worried, Napier, that you persist in discussing our plans in front of that Father Box."

The Eradicator stared at the Father Box, her eyes flaring brightly behind the translucent curve of her visor.

Jack nodded, hefting the Father Box. "Well. We'll have to interrogate it, to make sure it's on the level. But I dunno where to start. Is it possible to waterboard a box?"

TING!
Thaddeus Thawne didn't like running cross-country, or worse, cross-continent. Yes, he was the current Flash. But that meant everyone expected him to make such journeys in the blink of an eye, like it was easy for him. As if it was a trivial matter.

He hated it. Nobody ever stopped to consider the fact that he was still making a cross-country run. He was the Flash, not a teleporter. If he was covering a couple thousand miles, then it meant he was covering a couple thousand miles on foot.

Which meant he was spending seven straight days, subjectively speaking, doing nothing but running. Even with bathroom breaks and other stops for his sanity and biological necessities, it was monotonous as hell.

And his speedster anatomy meant that he didn't even need to stop and take a leak all that often.

The scenery wasn't any help. Thaddeus was a city boy. He didn't give two shits about the Great American Countryside. Besides, for practical reasons, he tended to stick to major roads and highways. Asphalt and truck stops.

He didn't even have music, because he still couldn't find a set of earphones and any music player that could keep up with Flash speeds.

Thaddeus was used to it. Sort of. He'd developed coping mechanisms. Obviously. Without some method of dealing with the boredom, he'd have gone insane years ago. Maybe he was insane. It was difficult to tell.

Most of the Justice League thought that he was an immature asshole. Self-indulgent and selfish. That was true, but they failed to consider why Thaddeus behaved the way he did. Obviously, his chief priority was his own amusement and comfort, because so much of his subjective experience was hell.

They thought he was a young guy. He was, kind of. But from his internal reckoning, he was... what, hundreds of years old, or something? Thaddeus didn't keep count, on purpose. The real figure would be too depressing.

The only people who understood were other speedsters, particularly the other men who'd once worn the mantle of the Flash. But they all had slightly different powers, different sensations while using their abilities, and different ways of coping.

Ed Clariss, the original Flash, was just a stubborn sonofabitch. He'd been a university professor or some intellectual crap like that, and Thaddeus reckoned he staved off the insanity with sheer bad temperedness. He was too mean to go nuts.

Eobard Thawne, Thaddeus' own biological great-great-whatever-grandfather and the second Flash, went the other way entirely. He'd embraced the madness like a dear friend. The old man thought he was some kind of immortal god-king, free from the confines of time and space.

Compared to that, Thaddeus Thawne, the third Flash, was a rosy picture of perfect mental health.

Under his feet, the paved surface of Interstate 80 gave way to the wide white expanse of Utah's famous salt flats.
He kept running, crossing the terrain with the practiced strides of an experienced hypervelocity runner. At the speeds he was travelling at, deliberate footfalls were necessary, otherwise he'd accidentally launch himself into orbit.

Thaddeus caught sight of Superman, contorted awkwardly in mid-air. He was nearly frozen from Thaddeus' point of view, moving only fractionally through space.

The two portals that Superman was reaching towards were closing, gradually shrinking even to Thaddeus' accelerated perception.

Thaddeus spent a moment estimating the distance and size, and assessing whether it was feasible for him to dive into one of the Boom Tubes before they collapsed.

He had no intention of actually following through, even if it was possible. But he had to cover his bases, in the event of a debrief. This way, he could legitimately say that there was no way he might have squeezed through.

The excuse had the convenient bonus of being absolutely true. Unless he suddenly lost a whole lot of weight, it was impossible for Thaddeus to fit. He was a man of many talents, but shapeshifting wasn't one of them. He couldn't perform liposuction on himself.

Thaddeus waited patiently, watching the Boom Tubes scrunch down until they vanished completely.

Superman turned around, noticing Thaddeus' presence. The Kryptonian began to speak, but what came out of his mouth was not normal speech. It was all low-pitched and elongated, like the wailing of a whale being tortured.

Belatedly, Thaddeus realised that his perceptions still weren't properly synced up with the normal passage of time. That happened. Managing super speed was more of an art than an exact science. He made an intentional effort to slow himself down, letting his breathing and heartbeat settle.

"...fastest man alive," Superman said, sarcastically, "and you only arrive now?"

"I was waiting for a Boom Tube," Thaddeus retorted. "Along with Hawkgirl, Black Adam, and all the other heavy hitters on standby. I only started running when it became blindingly obvious that the Tube wasn't coming."

Thaddeus hadn't learnt much from his own father... or his gene donor. Thaddeus meant that literally, rather than as an expression of contempt, since he'd been grown in an artificial womb in the thirtieth century and raised in a virtual reality environment, before being decanted and sent back in time, nearly a full millennium into the past.

Given the unique circumstances of his upbringing, Thaddeus barely had any memories of his so-called father, Thaddeus Thawne Senior. But the man had programmed the simulations that had comprised all of Thaddeus' early life. So he had some sense of the older Thawne's philosophy.

His father had been a politician, not a superhero. As such, the only fighting discipline he'd practiced was the art of verbal aikido.

It was never wise to accept blame. It was always better to deflect responsibility back towards others.

Naturally, the fiasco in front of him wasn't his fault.
"Fantastic," Superman hissed, balling his hands into fists. "The Joker has a Kryptonian. A Kryptonian. And my Father Box."

Thaddeus spread his hands. "My condolences?"

Superman's jaw shifted, his teeth grinding together. His hands flexed, like they were looking for a neck to strangle, or someone to punch. "There will be a reckoning."

"There will," Thaddeus said, hastily. "We'll get the gang together, we'll sniff out where the Joker, Sivana, and his Kryptonian are hiding, we'll..."

Superman did not seem mollified.

Dealing with Kelex was a fine balancing act, but Thaddeus had the benefit of extra time to formulate his game plan. He had to keep Superman's ire pointed elsewhere.

Otherwise, there was a chance that Superman would direct his anger at the guy in front of him. Which was Thaddeus.

When he got irritated, Superman actively tried to find fault. He wanted a target. He wanted someone to rant and scream at, or to vent his frustrations on.

Thaddeus had no intention of being that person.

It didn't help that the Joker had name-dropped Doctor Sivana as one of his co-conspirators, the man supposedly responsible for empowering that blonde woman.

As it happened, Thaddeus Thawne was named after his own biological progenitor. But Thaddeus Senior had been named for one of the finest scientific minds of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries - Doctor Thaddeus Sivana.

Thaddeus didn't care much for his namesake, either of them. He wanted Superman's anger pointed squarely at the correct Thaddeus, not the one wearing a Flash suit.

Superman glared at Thaddeus.

But then... a change came over him, and he visibly calmed down.

Thaddeus blinked. Then he accelerated his personal sense of time for a half-second, giving himself ample breathing space to control his own expression and erase any signs of surprise.

That was strange. Thaddeus had fully expected Superman to remain angry for a good while.

"Very well," Superman said, brusquely. "inform the others that they may stand down. The defection of the Father Box is regrettable, as is the Joker's escape. But the crisis is over."

Superman was actually looking slightly pleased. He hid it well, but there was a momentary twitch of Superman's lips that approximated a smile.

Anyone else would have missed it, but Thaddeus was the Flash. He saw the change. But he didn't understand. It didn't square with the situation, unless...

Something was up.

"Come," Superman said, ascending into the air. "Do not remain here. The Joker may still have monitoring devices in range."
The Kryptonian flew off.

Thaddeus sighed, and resigned himself to following on foot. Superman hadn't offered him a lift. Typical.

Of course, being bridal-carried by Superman was an undignified way to travel, but it was better than walking.

Truly, his life was filled with Flash World Problems.
Chapter 54

After far too long in relative time, Thaddeus found himself in Washington, D.C., which meant that Superman was most likely heading to the Hall of Justice.

Sure enough, Thaddeus was forced to go through the rigmarole of clearing security at the Hall. Which was a bit of a joke, considering there were only so many speedsters in red and yellow. He was the Flash. It wasn't as if the security staff and systems would mistake him for one of the Rush Hours, one of the Blue Trinity, or something.

The only consolation was that Superman was forced to verify his identity as well, which was even more ridiculous.

Eventually, Thaddeus arrived in one of the Hall's multipurpose rooms, which the Justice League used for various events. He was reasonably certain he'd attended a press briefing and at least one cocktail reception in the space, though at the time, the room had been set up considerably differently.

All the regular furniture had been removed, making way for a larger-than-life sculpture of Superman... and what looked like a stone altar, artfully splattered with fresh blood.

There were cuts of charred meat and bones on the altar, and if his nose wasn't lying to him, the whole mess had been drenched in wine as well as blood.

Thaddeus knew that early twenty-first century restaurants had a trend of serving food on anything except regular plates. But he was fairly certain that altar cuisine wasn't going to catch on with the foodie hipster set.

Wonder Woman was seated cross-legged on the floor in front of the altar, carving up what looked like the remaining carcass of a pig with a wickedly sharp knife. Thaddeus noted that she wasn't wearing gloves or a hair net. It was really hot, in a kind of savage pagan way, but it didn't look very hygienic.

Thaddeus figured the Hall of Justice's janitorial staff would have a collective fit somewhere down the line. He doubted that Wonder Woman was properly certified for food preparation, if this counted.

She might have been licensed for religious observances, though. Circe of Aeaea was a genuine Greek demigoddess or even a goddess in her own right, seeing as how she was the daughter of Helios and possibly also a child of Hecate. Her lineage had to trump any mortal clerical ranks.

Circe looked up as they approached. She wiped a hand against the front of her Wonder Woman costume, streaking blood across the breastplate, then picked up a piece of butchered pig.

Pleasantly, she asked: "Care for some liver? Heart, lungs?"

Superman regarded the scene with barely hidden distaste. Thaddeus thought it was quite ungrateful of him, considering that the sacrifice had been in his honour.

Besides, Thaddeus had been raised to believe that a gentleman should always show the proper appreciation when a lady prepared a meal for him.

True, he'd been raised in a virtual reality simulation, and his training programmes hadn't covered
social etiquette. And of course, he hadn't actually met a single living human being until he was already biologically a teenager and mentally an adult. But he'd developed his own protocols. The Flash wasn't a boor.

He was also fully prepared to eat boar, because Thaddeus knew that sharing bits of the sacrifice, especially the squishy internal bits, was part of Greek ritual.

His virtual reality upbringing had included a basic primer on ancient Greek religious practices, covering the fragments that had survived into his native era.

At first, Thaddeus had considered it strange and esoteric, until he realised that it was actually practical knowledge for the twenty-first century. As his current circumstances proved.

"Don't mind if I do," Thaddeus said, with a charming smile.

He flopped down on the floor next to Wonder Woman, and accepted a piece of liver.

Thaddeus popped it into his mouth and chewed. "Lemon?"

"And olive oil," Wonder Woman replied. "With a dash of oregano."

"Pretty good," Thaddeus remarked.

"I thought so," Wonder Woman said. "At first, I was worried about the quality of the meat. But it turns out that Miss Cobert did watch her diet."

Thaddeus paused, going over the statement in his head.

Then he shrugged, and swallowed.

"I jest, of course," Wonder Woman continued, with a smile.

"I hope so," Superman said, sternly. "Cobert is one of our employees. I've given you express instructions, Circe. Hands off our people."

"We'd get in trouble with HR," Thaddeus quipped. "Can you imagine the insurance liability?"

Wonder Woman flicked her fingers, then touched the flat of her blade. "No, you misunderstand. It's unwise to use transfigured humans for ritual purposes. It complicates the ceremony. Always use real livestock, if you can, preferably live."

"You should start a ritual sacrifice food blog," Thaddeus said. "Or a LexVid channel."

"I have one, dear," Wonder Woman replied. "Do keep up."

Thaddeus pulled his phone out of its concealed compartment, from a pocket that was integrated into the Flash costume's padding. He unlocked his phone and thumbed through a quick search.

"Liked and subscribed."

"Circe," Superman said, in a businesslike tone. "I need your magical expertise. Not your social media presence."

Wonder Woman pouted. "Is this about that Kryptonian girl? She wasn't one of your little maenads, I can tell you that. I do want to look at that empowerment, if it is Sivana's work."

Superman raised a hand, cutting the witch off. "We will discuss this other Kryptonian, and her
powers, in due time. For now, I trust that you are maintaining your protections?"

Wonder Woman pointed her ritual knife at Superman, and then at his statue. "I've relaxed yours. You're no longer in harm's way. Do understand, carving away your weakness to shiny green gemstones is a nearly Sisyphean endeavour. I can't keep it up all day."

"But," Superman persisted, "you are keeping your magic active on the Manhunter?"

Thaddeus looked at Superman, then at Wonder Woman. "Whoa, whoa, isn't Ma'al on vacation? League roster says he's on Mars, doing Martian things."

"Hm, why, yes," Wonder Woman said, with some satisfaction, "that is what the League roster says. Such a convenient administrative error, don't you think?"

"For some time, we have suspected that certain elements within the Justice League are, shall we say, less than trustworthy," Superman stated.

"A correct suspicion, as it transpires," Wonder Woman said, teasingly. "But I didn't expect our very own Superman to be the source of leaks and betrayal!"

"In hindsight," Superman admitted, "choosing to employ technology from Apokolips was a miscalculation. My own reverse-engineered Apokoliptian technology, yes. But one of Darkseid's own Father Boxes? I should never have trusted it."

"The great Kelex, admitting a mistake? How shocking," Wonder Woman said.

"Do not try me," Superman declared. "Today has been trying enough. My patience is thin."

Thaddeus raised a gloved hand. "Hang on, go back a sec. You've got the Martian Manhunter doing some off the books work, with Wonder Woman boosting his... what? Making him extra Martian with more Martian on the side?"

"In a manner of speaking," Wonder Woman answered, twirling her knife. "It helps that our darling Ma'alefa'ak is fundamentally mutable, as part of his Martian nature. My gifts are transformative. For most, I make them less. For dear Ma'al, it is simple to make him... more."

Thaddeus turned towards Superman. "And your Father Box, does it know about this?"

"It does not," Superman said, clasping his hands behind his back. "I admit, I was concerned that the Father Box's security might be breached, as it is a computer, of sorts. I was not predicting its outright defection. Regardless, the outcome is the same... and the situation remains salvageable."

"Alright," Thaddeus asked, "where's Ma'al? You wouldn't say all this in front of me, if you weren't gonna tell. Do I get to sit at the big kids' table now?"

"The Manhunter was by my side," Superman said, "when I confronted the Joker and the Kryptonian clone."

"Suffice to say," Wonder Woman told Thaddeus, "there's one bright spot in this little disaster."

"Wait," Thaddeus began.

"The Manhunter was invisible," Superman explained. "Intangible. Of all the Martian race's abilities, it is their negotiable relationship with the physical world that makes them most useful."

"He just stood there," Thaddeus said, "doing his 'somebody else's problem' gig?"
Wonder Woman laughed. "He was supposed to."

Thaddeus kept his hand in the air. "Okay. I get it. So, the million dollar question. Where's the Manhunter now?"

Wonder Woman smiled.

So did Superman. His smile was the most unsettling thing that Thaddeus had seen in a good long while.
Chapter 55

As usual, Jack couldn't see Noah Kuttler's face. As always, the man was nowhere near the room, and he was doing his Calculator shtick via glorified voice chat.

Jack suspected that Noah was the kind of guy who stuck tape over his personal laptop's webcam. The sort of guy who truly believed that big business and government agencies were constantly eavesdropping through consumer electronic devices.

That said, the world's biggest corporate group was LexCorp, and a good chunk of both the developed and developing world were effectively in Lex's back pocket. Device manufacturers and sinister government spooks probably were spying on people.

The point was, Jack didn't even know how the Calculator looked like, not for sure. He'd dealt with the guy in the original timeline, but less so in their current brave new world. But Jack assumed Noah still had his glasses and receding hairline, with his forehead fighting a losing battle against the encroaching forces of male pattern baldness.

And Jack imagined that Noah was making one of those faces, maybe while touching his glasses in the manner of a mortally offended intellectual.

In a strained voice, Noah asked: "Is this strictly necessary?"
"Tradition is important," the Eradicator said, seriously. "Tradition is the basis of society."
"This isn't tradition," Noah grumbled. "It's him being the Joker. This is Joker behaviour."
"I'm a new man," Jack said. "Turned over a new leaf and everything. But sometimes, a man's got to go back to his roots."
"Are you a man," Noah asked, acerbically, "or a plant?"
"I am green up top," Jack observed, running his fingers briefly through his hair.
"Eradicator," Noah tried. Then he appeared to realise that turning to the Kryptonian cyborg wouldn't work, and appealed to Talia al Ghul instead. "Miss al Ghul, surely you can't condone this farce."

At the other end of the room, Talia al Ghul quirked one gracefully styled eyebrow, and tapped her chin thoughtfully.
"I am trained in torture and interrogation," Talia said.
"Yes," Noah said, desperately. "You're the most qualified here. We should defer to your superior expertise and your institutional knowledge."
"Quite," Talia murmured. "But I have never attempted to pry answers out of an alien computer. No offence intended to present company."

Talia looked at the Eradicator as she spoke.
The Eradicator returned Talia's gaze with an unblinking and blank expression.
"If it's any consolation," Jack said, "there's method to my madness, I assure you."

"Somehow, I am not reassured," Noah replied.

"Trust me," Jack insisted.

"You've tied the Father Box to a chair," Noah said emphatically, in a manner which conveyed his incredulity and exasperation.

Through the one-way window separating the makeshift interrogation room from the observation gallery, the Father Box was indeed sitting on a chair. It was a regular-sized chair, intended for a human being, which meant it was oversized for the Apokoliptian handheld computer.

There were loops of thick braided cord around the Father Box, firmly securing it to the piece of furniture.

The chair had been fabricated by Sivana's robots, as had the room itself. For some inexplicable reason, Sivana's base hadn't had a proper interrogation chamber, which was clearly an oversight. Nonetheless, the scientist's mechanical workforce were extremely efficient and good at their jobs. A proper room had quickly been set up.

Of course, Jack had provided his own rope.

"Noah, Noah, Noah," Jack said, "it's not that I've tied the Father Box to a chair, because, yes, I have. The important thing is... what I've tied it with."

Talia al Ghul was the first one to catch on. She narrowed her eyes, and stepped closer to the one-way window. "Is that..."

"Yep," Jack confirmed, deliberately popping the 'p'. Then he stopped, thought about it, and amended, "Well, it's not what you think, but it's close enough for government work. If the government work in question is super shady secret police stuff."

Talia nodded. "I see. When did you..."

"Yoinked it at Superman's place," Jack clarified, sticking his thumb out in the Eradicator's direction. "Same time we picked her up."

The Eradicator followed Talia's gaze. "This is a method to ensure the Apokoliptian computer's cooperation?"

"Pretty much," Jack said.

"Then proceed," the Eradicator stated, folding its arms.

"Kind of you," Jack answered. "By your leave."

Of course, the Eradicator had already suggested interfacing directly with the Father Box in some kind of cybernetic standoff, so Jack knew all about the Eradicator's preferred game plan.

Jack figured that the Eradicator's Tron or Matrix reenactment would be Plan B, if Plan A didn't work out.

Opening the door to the interrogation room, Jack strode confidently inside.

*Ting!*
Making a show of cracking his knuckles, Jack grinned at the Father Box. "No, we ask the questions."

He bent down, picking up the stray end of the thick cord that surrounded the Father Box.

*Ting! Ting!*

The rope lit up, shining with a silvery light.

Jack wasn't sure what the Lasso of Persuasion had been doing in Lex's possession. But he'd recognised the Themysciran artifact immediately.

Unlike the more famous golden Lasso of Truth, the lesser lariat couldn't automatically prevent a sapient being from speaking falsehoods. Instead, the silver lasso pitted the wielder's will against the victim's. The lasso's compulsion could be resisted.

Thankfully, Jack was feeling pretty damn motivated.


*Ting!*

Jack tilted his head to one side. "Yeah, Lex killed Darkseid. What about it? Doesn't that make him your new boss? The New God of Tyranny? You are what you eat."

*Ting!*

Jack tightened his grip on the end of the lasso. "Okay, if it doesn't work that way, then how does it work? Simple words, please. I'm a simple man."

*Ting! Ting! Ting!*

"Let me get this straight," Jack said. "Lex took out Darkseid, his physical incarnation. But that's just our buddy Darkseid's finger puppet, not Darkseid the puppeteer. Lex grabbed some of his power..."

*Ting!*

"Lex grabbed one or two fingers, then," Jack amended. "But not the whole hand. So Darkseid's dead, and..."

TING!

"Mostly dead," Jack said. "There's a big difference between mostly dead and all dead. Fine. You have a grudge against Lex. I get that. There's a lot of that going around. But you do realise that I've got no real interest in helping you bring your old boss back?"

*Ting!*

Jack nodded, thoughtfully. "Ah, you don't have any hands, so you can't give Lex the finger. Gotcha."
"You are investing a great deal of trust in the Father Box," Sivana observed. "Expressly so. You are committed to this attempt?"

"I don't believe it's got a kind and charitable nature," Jack commented, as he strapped on a pair of old-fashioned aviator goggles. "I do believe it has a hell of a lot of petty spite, mostly directed towards Lex. I can work with that."

Ting! Ting!

"Yet," Sivana said, "the Father Box believes this is a proverbial wild goose chase."

"Might be," Jack acknowledged. "Even if it doesn't pay off, someone ought to check it out. It's like how we tried to lightning bolt Lex. Didn't work, but it was a good idea."

Sivana took several steps back, watching as Jack mounted the boarding ladder and clambered into the ship's cockpit.

"I'd wish you luck," Sivana said. "However, I dislike relying on chance and the vagaries of fortune."

Jack made a simple salute, holding his fingertips against the frame of his goggles. He retracted the ladder, lowered the canopy, fastened his safety harness, and then unclasped the Father Box from his belt.

He slid the Apokoliptian computer into the waiting slot on the ship's console. It fit perfectly. Which stood to reason, since the socket had been machined to its precise dimensions. The port was a new addition to the ship's console, along with a suite of modern instruments. The Second World War design had used simpler mechanical gauges, and it certainly hadn't included a space for the pilot to plug in a Father Box.

The original Panzer-Ship was something like eighty years old. State of the art technology had been simpler, back then.

Ting!

"You can interface with something nicer, later," Jack said. "Find some nice websites or something. For now, just deal with it. Will it work?"

Ting!

"Oh," Jack said, "I'm sure you could figure out how to open a Boom Tube there, all by yourself. But that would be a waste of my copious spare time, and yours. Whereas this hunk of scrap, as you affectionately call it..."

Jack patted the console.

"This was purpose-built for travel to alternate universes and reality-adjacent space. Sure, it was built by moustache-twirlingly evil Nazi science, but you're Apokoliptian, glass houses, stones, and all that."

Ting! Ting!
"It's calibrated for human pocket realities, attached to our own solar system," Jack said. "You're a foreign import. Do we need to keep arguing, or can we do the thing?"

*Ting!*

It may have been his imagination, but Jack thought the Father Box's final chime sounded quite sullen.

The ship's console lit up, various displays cycling through arcane operations that Jack only partially comprehended. But he understood the avionics well enough to fly the machine, even if the Father Box decided to quit cooperating.

Jack cleared his throat. "Sivana Base Control, this is Papa Sierra One. Request clearance for launch, over."

There was silence over the comms, before Noah Kuttler's tired-sounding voice cut in. "Napier, this isn't an airfield. Just go."

Jack gripped the controls. "Roger. Papa Sierra proceeding to take-off."

"There aren't any flight procedures," Noah said, resignedly. "Just go."

Jack throttled the ship forward. With a rumble of igniting rocket engines, it blasted towards the open doors of the hangar.

There was a shimmer as the ship passed through the containment field that separated the base's breathable air from the hostile Venusian atmosphere. Then the old German craft soared through the orange sky.

Although Sivana's robots had made a few modifications to the vessel, at the scientist's direction, it was essentially still the same vehicle.

Though someone had painted over the Nazi symbol on the tail, replacing it with a Bat.

"Papa Sierra," Jack announced, as he flipped open the safety cover and rested his hand on the bright red switch beneath the plastic shield. "Activating the Streicher drive in three, two, one."

The sky outside the cockpit dissolved into a seething mass of bloody crimson.

It was like the void of space itself was rippling and heaving, beating in time to a celestial heartbeat.

The old rocket ship trembled, a series of vibrations running through the ship's body and up into Jack's bones through the frame of his seat. He heard something creak ominously, the sound coming from somewhere behind his pilot's chair, deeper inside the vessel.

*Ting!*

"It's perfectly safe," Jack told the Father Box. "Though, in the event of an emergency, I'll be sure to fasten my own oxygen mask before assisting you with yours."

With a final jolt and a sensation of freefall, the ship dropped out of the red haze and into... well, the sky was still vaguely red, or at least purple. But it was recognisably sky rather than an eldritch bleeding mess.

There was also a whole lot of fog or mist, like the ship was flying through a cloud. The
illumination was odd, as well. There was no discernible sun, with light seemingly coming from all
directions.

Jack studied his instruments, then shrugged. He decided to keep the ship flying on the same
course.

TING!

"Of course I know where I'm going," Jack retorted. "There's no need to stop and ask for
directions."

TING! TING! TING!

The frantic ringing from the Father Box was quickly followed by another alarm, this time from the
ship's avionics. Jack recognised the urgent shrieking. The new sound was the collision alarm.

Jack yanked on the control yoke, pulling the nose of the ship up. Thrusters fired, changing the
vessel's orientation, and then Jack opened the throttle all the way. Acceleration and inertia shoved
him into his seat.

Outside the canopy, a sheer rock face emerged from the mist, before blurring into a dizzying swirl
of colour. There was a flash of something metal, more stone, and then finally clear sky.

"See," Jack said, "nothing to worry about."

TING!

Jack let the ship bank, rolling the fuselage so he could see out the canopy.

The rocket ship was now flying over what looked like a retro-futuristic castle atop a floating island.
Although 'castle' was a bit of a misnomer. There were high towers, but ones of subtly different
architectural styles. The golden colour was the only unifying aspect, and even that was uneven.

Jack flipped some switches, bringing the ship's engines from full burn to a lower muted roar. He
guided the ship towards the citadel, searching for a suitable landing spot.

"Alright," Jack said to the Father Box, "remember where we parked."
Chapter 57

Jack hopped out of the cockpit, landing on the dusty ground.

The ship was parked in a courtyard, one that had once been landscaped, if the empty flower beds and stonework were any indication. From the looks of things, the place hadn't been tended to for some time, unless the owner of the citadel was really into deconstructionist postmodern gardening.

Jack hefted his bat. With his other hand, he touched the case of the Father Box.

He had supplies and other gear stashed in the ship's cockpit. But for the time being, he was prepared to travel light. He didn't want to drag every single pack and piece of equipment with him, including the shark repellent.

If trouble occurred, he wanted to keep his mobility.

Of course, since he was going into a castle outside of regular space and time, there was a non-zero chance he might regret that decision.

*Ting!*

Jack looked down at his belt, where the Father Box sat. "Relax, Boxy. We'll be fine. It's just you and me, and neither of us fit the stereotypes. We're not black, female, or some other minority."

*Ting!*

"I thought horror movies would be a popular genre on Apokolips. Fits your national character."

*Ting!*

"Nah," Jack explained. "They're fictional, not documentaries."

Jack shouldered his baseball bat, resting the length of faux wood against his neck. He walked forward, through the abandoned courtyard and towards the tall archway at the end of the open space.

The Palace of Eternity was supposed to be a grand monument to the ego of its creator, a warlord with ambitions of ruling all of human history. It was supposed to be a transcendent work of breathtaking beauty and architecture. But so far, the place looked more like a dump.

There were no signs of life, plant, animal, or otherwise.

It was the poor economy. Had to be. Visitorship had to be down, and the Palace was clearly struggling to break even on ticket sales.

The sky overhead was still misty and overcast, hanging like a pall over the courtyard. The interior of the complex, visible beyond the arch, was dark and slightly foreboding.

"You're getting all this, right? Do you do selfies?"

*Ting!*

Jack grinned. The Father Box was easy to rile up, given its distinctly Apokoliptian sensibilities.
He had a sneaking suspicion that the computer was trying to wear him down, and subtly brainwash him into paying proper fear and respect to the very idea of Darkseid.

It was, therefore, in Jack's best interests to ensure that he rubbed off on the Father Box, and not the other way around.

"Well," Jack said, "keep your sensors peeled."

He stepped over the threshold, moving past the arch.

Jack stopped, craning his neck left and right.

Experimentally, he took one step backwards. The scene changed, leaving him once more in the empty courtyard, on the cusp of the archway.

He stepped forward again. Without any visible transition, he found himself on a city street, rather than inside a golden hallway.

"This place had one heck of an interior decorator," Jack remarked, rubbing his chin. "I wonder if they do kitchens."

*Ting!*

The street was wrong, of course. Aside from the obvious oddity of it being indoors, there was also no colour involved. The sky was grey, not even the reddish hue of the sky above the courtyard, but a flat, slate, grey. So was the road, the buildings in the distance, and even the people. They were also grey.

The only thing that wasn't monochrome was Jack himself, and he had to pause for a moment to check. It didn't help that his suit jacket and trousers were black and grey, with his t-shirt a dirty white.

The bat emblem on his chest still had some yellow in it, though. And his socks kept their green stripes. His hair remained green, too, though Jack was forced to tug on his own bangs in order to tell.

*Ting!*

"I dunno," Jack said to the Father Box, "budget cuts? Guess someone ran out of paint?"

Jack peered at the people. They weren't moving. Jack wasn't certain they were alive.

He strode up to the nearest one, a man dressed in an old-timey suit with a honest-to-god briefcase and hat.

Jack tapped the grey man experimentally with his bat. There was no reaction, but also no motion. He pushed harder, pressing the end of the bat against the man's chest, but the guy refused to budge.

It was like the man had been cast from iron.

That would have been strange enough, but the frozen guy wasn't the only oddity.

Most of the motionless people were dressed in clothes of a similar vintage. Fifties, maybe sixties?

But one pedestrian was an astronaut, or rather, someone in a full spacesuit, complete with a bulbous helmet and all the attached paraphernalia.
And then there was a Roman legionnaire, caught in the act of crossing the street.

Jack squinted at the buildings on either side of the road. Most of the place looked like somewhere in America. Dallas, maybe? But some details were wrong. There was a pub or tavern with a ye olde hand-painted sign, and… he wasn't a hundred percent sure what he was looking at, but it appeared to be a booth offering walk-in cybernetic implants.

He looked down at the street itself. The portion of road he was standing on was essentially asphalt, but further on, it became rough cobblestones, before transitioning into a smooth reflective surface.

"Castle outside space and time," Jack muttered. "Okay. I get it. Not very subtle, is it?"

Ting!

Jack glanced at the Father Box. He shook his head.

Not having any better ideas, he kept moving, inching past the astronaut, the Roman, and...

TING!

Jack dropped to the ground, trusting both the Father Box's warning and his own instincts.

A golden beam of coruscating energy swept past the space Jack's head and centre of mass had occupied a moment earlier.

He rolled to the side, then scrambled back to his feet with an exoskeleton-assisted leap, the circuitry and motors underneath his clothes coming fully to life.

Another golden blast raced towards him, but Jack managed to get his baseball bat up, obstructing the attack.

Jack landed on the monochrome time-locked street, his eyes rapidly flitting back and forth as he scrutinised his surroundings.

Grey, grey, grey, more grey, some white, and...

There. A flicker of blue and gold.


A third golden beam shot at him, then a fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh, forcing Jack to frantically parry and deflect.

Someone was trying to kill him.

"Business as usual, then," Jack muttered.
Chapter 58

Jack furrowed his brows. "Booster, right? **Booster Gold**?"

The man in blue and gold was impossible to miss. He was the only other moving figure in an otherwise static landscape.

Unfortunately, he didn't reply. He just levelled his arms at Jack and unleashed another pair of incandescent beams from his oversized gauntlets.

"Or is it **Goldstar**," Jack tried, batting the attack aside. "I can never keep you people straight."

Belatedly, Jack remembered that Goldstar was supposed to be dead. At least, he remembered her dying in the old timeline. And she'd been... what, Booster's cousin? Sister? Female clone? Distaff alternate universe counterpart? Something like that?

So maybe, just maybe, namedropping her wasn't the best button to press.

Jack was trying to be a better sort of clown. More sensitive. A people person. He had to rein in his tongue. He had to save the nuclear-grade stinging barbs for people who truly deserved it.

Unless it was fine? He couldn't be certain. Mortality was a difficult business when time travel and alternate realities were involved. Anyway, for the superhero set, death was often about as serious as the twenty-four-hour flu - no need for a doctor, just bed rest and some vitamins.

Jack assumed the guy shooting at him was Booster, because the colours and emblem were broadly right. But the details of his outfit were all wrong.

As Jack recalled, the shiny skintight suit normally used by the superhero was similar to Jack's own Sivana-made armour, in general principle. The Booster Gold suit didn't look like a high-tech set of power armour capable of massively increasing its wearer's speed, strength, and durability, even though it effectively was.

But this Booster was definitely wearing heavy **armour**, with solid plates and bulky mechanical connections. There was nothing sleek about the outfit. With the amount of padding he had on him, the guy would have difficulty fitting through regular-sized doorways.

What was going on? Was this guy working for Lex?

Jack had gone over the Justice League's roster multiple times, both to familiarise himself with the timeline he was presently in, and to identify possible points of divergence.

To his knowledge, Lex's League didn't have a Booster Gold. No Booster Gold, no Goldstar, no **Supernova**, no...

**TING!**

Jack frowned. "You sure?"

**Ting! Ting! Ting!**

That was interesting, if it was true. But Jack couldn't act on the Father Box's information, not when Booster was busy trying to take Jack's head off.
One of the golden beams slammed into one of the frozen grey figures littering the unusual landscape - and stopped dead. The energy blast was apparently unable to affect the grey apparitions.

Jack's eyes narrowed. Good to know.

He looked left, right, then nodded to himself.

Jack moved.

A golden blast nipped at his heels, but Jack was already accelerating, weaving into a crowd of immovable phantoms.

If he was being forced to fight in an eldritch street filled with statues, Jack was damn well going to use the pedestrians as convenient bits of cover.

He had plenty of practice with that very tactic. But now, for once, he could do it guilt-free.

Well, his old self had always done it guilt-free, but Jack was a changed man. He knew that putting civilians in harm's way was no longer acceptable.

But these bystanders couldn't complain.

As far as crowds went, they were the vegan soy substitute equivalent.

"Booster, come on," Jack yelled, "why all this aggression?"

There was no reply. That was… concerning, since the Booster Gold he remembered was a showman, one of those heroes who believed in grandstanding.

But, of course, there was no crowd to play to. The grey people didn't count.

Even so, Jack expected some banter from the man. Relentless murderous intent was very out of character.

Jack was armed, so he could fight back. However, he didn't know if Booster was someone he should be fighting.

He didn't have enough data. It was difficult to form working conclusions when the guy refused to talk to him.

Jack was good at reading people, but he wasn't psychic.

TINGS!

"Violence isn't always the answer," Jack protested. "We're not on Apokolips!"

TINGS! TINGS! TING!

"The entire universe does not count as Apokoliptian territory," Jack said. "Besides, we're not in the universe, we're…"

They were in some sort of warped pocket of space-time, some kind of time travel bullshit, being shot at by a time traveller.

That was potentially problematic, if it meant Booster had the home ground advantage.
Jack suspected he did.

The way Booster Gold vanished, only to reappear in front of Jack... that was a bit of a clue.

He didn't appear out of nowhere. There was a subtle shift as Booster replaced one of the motionless grey figures.

A monochrome middle-aged woman in a floral print dress suddenly became a tall man in bulky armour, right in Jack's path.

Reacting instinctively, and preemptively, Jack swung his baseball bat.

But the bat smacked against the immobile form of the woman, jarring to a halt against her head.

Booster was gone.

TING!

Jack twisted to the side, but he wasn't quite fast enough to stop a gold-plated knee from colliding with his centre of mass.

If Jack had truly been wearing an ordinary suit coat over a t-shirt, the blow would have snapped his ribs and pulped some organs.

As it was, the fabric hardened and Jack's overlapping defensive fields bled off the rest of the kinetic force.

Only a tiny amount of energy made it through, but it was enough to cause Jack to stumble.

An armoured fist flashed towards Jack's face.

Jack got his bat up and in the way, bracing it with the palm of his free hand, as if it were a very short staff.

"Whoa," Jack said. "Easy!"

"Joker," growled Booster Gold, speaking for the first time. "How did you find this place?"

"Yelp," Jack answered, "Tripadvisor, LexMaps..."

Booster Gold's knuckles ground against the raised bat. Even with his own suit augmenting his strength, Jack was forced to give some ground, his elbows buckling.

"Kidding, kidding," Jack said, hurriedly. "Long story!"

"Then talk faster," Booster ordered.

Then Booster's eyes flicked down to Jack's t-shirt. Beneath his gold-tinted visor, both of Booster's eyes went wide.

"And why are you wearing that?"

Jack blinked.

Obviously, Booster recognised the symbol.

Jack couldn't help himself.
There was only one possible answer.

"I'm Batman," Jack said.
Chapter 59

Booster Gold groaned. "Lex, you've gone too far this time."

"I'm sorry," Jack said, "excuse me?"

"You're one of his ersatz Justice League," Booster accused, glaring daggers at Jack. His voice was laced with a liberal helping of scorn and extreme prejudice. "He's made you an off-brand Bat, hasn't he?"

"What, no," Jack exclaimed. He felt genuinely wounded, like he was deeply offended on a fundamental level. "Lex Luthor isn't on my Christmas card list."

Booster Gold's expression shifted, going from one of naked hostility to equally unguarded surprise. His pupils and irises twitched. The visible skin on his face, the portions not hidden by his armour, creased.

"You said... did you say 'Lex Luthor'?"


Booster Gold pulled his gauntleted fist away from Jack's raised baseball bat.

"You know who Luthor is," Booster said. He sounded stunned, like he was having difficulty coming to grips with the revelation.

"Yay," Jack deadpanned, drawing out the word. "Shibboleth! Are we done with the obligatory fight scene, now? I'd like to proceed to the superhero team-up, if you please."

"You," Booster said, "you're a superhero?"

"Sure," Jack answered. "Why not? I'm fighting the real big bad, I'm fighting the good fight. Listen, Booster, I'm not your enemy, mmkay?"

TING! TING! TING!

All of a sudden, Booster's distrustful air came back in full force. He stared at the chiming Father Box attached to Jack's belt.

"If you're not with Lex," Booster demanded, "what are you doing with that?"

Jack looked down. He took one hand off his bat, and poked the Apokoliptian computer with a finger. "Long story?"

TING!

"Actually," Jack amended, "that one's pretty short. Lex screwed him over, so Boxy here is mad at Lex too. We're hate buddies. It's a thing."

The armoured time traveller studied the Father Box carefully.

Well, Jack hoped that Booster Gold was studying the Father Box. The alternative possibility was that Booster Gold suddenly found Jack's trousers-clad crotch to be immensely fascinating.
Jack hoped it wasn't the second one. He remembered the Gotham underworld making a lot of jokes about the Bat clan's tendency to have impressive codpieces and derrières. He'd even made some of those jokes, in the old days.

But now Jack was wearing a Bat symbol, and being ogled wasn't quite so funny. Jack hoped it wasn't something that came attached with the Bat mantle. If it was, he'd need to step up his cardio.

Seemingly reaching a decision, Booster Gold grunted, and waved a hand in the air.

In response to some kind of unseen command, the mismatched greyscale landscape shimmered, then evaporated like a rising fog, leaving behind a large cathedral-like hall.

The walls were gold, if dingy and dilapidated, and the roof of the space formed a high vaulted ceiling, covered in elaborate decorations.

Their new surroundings were what Jack had expected to see, when he'd first stepped through the entrance to the Palace of Eternity.

"So," Jack asked, "if we're playing twenty questions, what's up with the... you know."

Jack swung his baseball bat back and forth, pointing in various directions at once.

"Null-time zone," Booster said, as if the phrase was an explanation.

It wasn't much of an answer, but Jack could take a flying stab at what it meant.

Jack wagged the bat. "You turned this place's defences on me?"

Booster snorted. "No."

"Then," Jack countered, "what was all that?"

"You think... nah, that wasn't the palace's security system," Booster said. "That was the environment stabiliser breaking down. The big problem here is keeping the null-time out, not in."

*Ting!*

Jack squinted at the Father Box. "Now you tell me? Thanks, I guess. That would have been helpful info... a while ago."

*Ting!*

Booster Gold didn't look impressed. He looked mildly appalled. "You managed to get here, all the way here, and you don't know what you're dealing with?"

"Well, pardon me, Doctor," Jack said. "I'm not a professional time traveller like you. We can't all have degrees in temporal mechanics."

Booster Gold rolled his eyes. "I went to college on a football scholarship."


"Didn't say I graduated," Booster Gold retorted.

"What," Jack snarked, "you dropped out?"
"Like all successful self-made men," Booster said, "I left to pursue better opportunities, and... you know what? I don't need to justify myself to you. You're the Joker."

Jack tapped the emblem printed on the front of his t-shirt. "Batman."

"Joker," Booster insisted, mulishly. Then he stopped, an odd look on his face. "You know what, that's fine. Go ahead. Bats it is."

Jack cocked his head. "Changed your mind real quick, there, sport."

"If he were here," Booster said, cracking a sardonic grin, "if he could see you here, like this? Bats would go ballistic. He'd hate it. That's good enough for me."

Jack paused. He thought about it. Then he forced a weak, lopsided, smile on his face, plastering it firmly in place.

Knowingly or not, Booster had hit Jack right in the heart, or the bitter black organ that passed for his heart. But he wasn't about to let that show.

"Yeah," Jack said. "He'd hate it. Look, I'm gonna go out on a limb here and say, you're not from around here, are you?"

Booster gestured at the golden walls of the Palace of Eternity. "Here? Newsflash, buddy. Nobody is."

TING!

Jack patted the Father Box. "Like Boxy said, I mean, not from the timeline out there, wise guy."

Booster placed his gauntlet-clad hands over his armour-padded hips. "Joker, Batman, whoever you are. I don't trust you. And you want me to show you all my cards?"

"I'll show you mine," Jack leered, "if you show me yours..."

Jack trailed off. He grimaced, making an exaggeratedly disgusted face, and shuddered.

"Nope. No. Scratch that, rewind, undo button," Jack muttered, quickly. "Nope. Forget I said that, let's start over."

Booster blinked. "Huh?"

"Too flirty. Way too flirty. That sounds like something the Midnighter would say," Jack explained. "Circumstances and cosmic irony might be forcing me into the role of the Bat, but I'm sure as hell not the other guy."
Chapter 60

Booster Gold's footfalls echoed down the corridor. His armour itself was silent, the heavy points of articulation making no sound, but the weight of his suit was blatantly obvious.

As he walked, Booster asked: "How much do you know about time travel?"

"Oh," Jack replied, "the basics. No talking to our past selves, no betting on sporting events..."

Booster stopped, freezing mid-stride. "Are you seriously telling me that you're going off 'Back to the Future'?"

Jack made an elaborate shrug. "I could start carrying a screwdriver. Would that be better?"

Booster stared at Jack for a moment, before he resumed walking. "Funny."

"I try," Jack said, without any hint of shame.

"You shouldn't... it shouldn't be possible for you to just remember stuff," Booster grumbled. "That's not how it works. Lex changed everything. Including you."

"How about you," Jack pointed out. "You're here, unless you're really three infant Boosters stacked on top of each other under a trenchcoat."

"Even if you were somehow immune to Lex's alterations," Booster groused, "you should still be a homicidal maniac. You should be terrorising Gotham, not running around calling yourself Batman."

TING!

Jack laid a hand on the Father Box. "Yeah. What, do you want me to play psycho? That's an awful thing to say, Booster. Whatever did Gotham do to you?"

"I'm from Gotham," Booster growled. "Born and bred."

"Huh," Jack said. "Really? I guess the accent must have shifted in five hundred years."

"More like three or four," Booster corrected. "Believe me, in the twenty-fifth century, we still tell stories about the scary clown."

"I'd say it's nice to be remembered," Jack said, "but that would be wrong. And insensitive. I don't know what to tell you. You sound like you want me to be a bogeyman."

"Maybe I do," Booster retorted.

Jack made a small twirling gesture with his baseball bat. "Can't always get what we want."

They walked in silence for a few seconds. Jack took the opportunity to look around, twisting his neck to look up at the distant ceiling.

The inner depths of the Palace of Eternity were slightly less worn and shabby, but there was still an air of disuse. Dust. Grime.

Jack couldn't smell anything wrong, but his suit's defensive field did filter what he was breathing.
"I hid out here," Booster said, finally, "Here, and other places outside the regular flow of time."

The statement was a bit of a non sequitur. It took Jack a half second to realise that Booster was explaining how he'd survived Lex's wholesale temporal editing.

Neutrally, Jack remarked: "You saw him coming?"

_Ting!_

Booster glanced at the Father Box, then laughed, harshly. "Kind of. Hard not to. Man's been taking scalps. Going after every time traveller that isn't part of his circle."

Jack got the impression that Booster Gold wanted to vent. So he simply nodded. Anyway, the information was useful. Useful intelligence.

"You're still here," Jack pointed out. "Does he throw the small ones back?"

"I wish," Booster muttered. Then he gave a wan smile. "He's underestimating me. Maybe. Sometimes, being seen as small fry is useful."

Jack held a hand parallel to the ground, making a slicing motion. "Couldn't you go, I don't know, sideways? Find another timeline to hide out in, like a world without shrimp?"

"This is sideways," Booster said, sticking a thumb out and pointing at their surroundings. "Alright, temporal physics one hundred, abridged. There's two main schools of thought. One is Hypertime."

Jack arched his eyebrows. "When you give a kid too much sugar and caffeine before bedtime?"

"Infinite worlds," Booster said, firmly, ignoring the joke. "Infinite timelines. Every action creates another fork in the road. Every possibility, every probability, somewhere, somewhen."


"Uh-uh," Booster said. "Nope. It doesn't. Because if that was all, there'd be no point to time travel. You wouldn't be able to change anything. Go back, kill Hitler, whatever, it just makes another branch. It doesn't alter wherever you came from."

"Just means there's no point to selfish time travel," Jack objected. "Can't change your own personal history, your own past, but you can do it for... "

Booster snorted. "Altruistic reasons? Nah. If that were all, we wouldn't need to police the timeline."

"Time cops exist," Jack agreed. "So why hasn't anyone given Lex a ticket?"

"Because," Booster said, bleakly, "most of us are dead or gone."

"You've got time machines," Jack noted. "Can't you mulligan, redo, respawn?"

"Easier said than done," Booster said, "when Lex has a stranglehold on the timeline."

"Just this one timeline," Jack asked, "or all of 'em? I'm trying to figure out here, how tough is this gonna be?"

Booster shook his head. "Just the... okay. The other main theory of time travel? Linear time. You can go back, you can go forward, but only within the same timestream. If you change something,
you change it. Alter the past, and you alter your own future."

Jack shifted his grip on his bat. "How does that work, when there's people coming across from alternate realities and other universes? There's entire teams of superheroes and villains out there that are all sliders. More sliders than a burger bar."

"There are other timelines," Booster said, "but moving between them is tough. They don't affect each other. Change doesn't propagate. And... it's not infinite worlds, it's finite. Whatever the number is, two, fifty-two, a million, whatever. Could be many, but it's less than infinity. So when someone starts messing with a timeline? Yeah. It is serious."

"That's what we're dealing with," Jack said. "That's what you're saying?"

"That's what I'm dealing with," Booster corrected, stressing the singular term. He thumped a closed fist against the breastplate of his armour. "You're an anomaly."

"Booster, Booster, Booster," Jack whined, "don't be like that. Here I am, all ready to help you out, ready to play a valuable role in this exciting enterprise..."

"It's not that I don't trust you," Booster said, "it's... no, sorry, I lied. I don't trust you."


*Ting!*

Jack indicated the Father Box on his belt. "See? I have references!"

Booster made a face. "No. Just... no."
Chapter 61

The heart of the Palace of Eternity was supposed to house the *Eternity Brain*, a supercomputer constructed by Epoch, the Lord of Time.

That was what Jack expected, anyway. In his mind, the computer was the real prize. In order to undo Lex's meddling in the timeline, Jack needed to know *what* and *when*. He needed a list of everything Lex had changed. Otherwise, he wouldn't know where to start.

The Eternity Brain was perfect for that purpose. Epoch had constructed the thing to monitor the timeline, like some kind of spooky government surveillance project. Except for time travel.

The computer had other functions, such as being able to remotely pull people and objects out of their normal places in time. But Jack didn't care about that. What he needed was information.

Of course, Booster Gold had gotten to the place first.

The central chamber of the building was a large open space largely taken up by an immense metal sphere. Much like the palace, the computer was in disrepair. Sections of the giant sphere were missing, or peeled back to expose arcane inner workings.

Even to Jack's inexperienced eye, it looked like someone - presumably Booster - had done some patch work. The sphere itself was hovering above the floor, but there was scaffolding surrounding it, allowing a person to climb up and access parts of the computer.

There were also tools, different styles of electronics, what looked like some kind of portable generator, and other paraphernalia.

Jack wondered where Booster had found all of the stuff. The palace wasn't conveniently situated near any urban centres or amenities. The superhero couldn't exactly pop down to the shops for some duct tape and contact cement.

And he doubted that LexMart did next-day fulfilment to this particular neighbourhood. It was, most likely, out of their delivery zone.

Booster looked up, focusing on a particular point on the sphere's discoloured surface. "Here's our uninvited visitor."

"Very good, sir," said a surprisingly prim voice. It sounded oddly precise and proper, for something coming from a massive globe. "Scanning."

A line of red light swept out from the sphere, running back and forth over Jack.

Jack held a hand up, covering his the lenses of his aviator goggles. "I feel kinda violated. Do I need an adult?"

*Ting!*

The light lingered on Jack's midsection, surrounding the Father Box on his belt. The Apokoliptian device didn't seem to appreciate the scrutiny.

*Ting! Ting! Ting!*
"Cease your interference," the sphere said, with what Jack thought was a trace of irritation.

**Ting!**

Booster Gold folded his arms over his chest. This was easier said than done, due to the bulk of his armour, but the hero managed to bend enough to strike the pose. "Problems?"

"No, sir," the sphere stated.

Jack squinted at the Eternity Brain. It didn't take Jack long to realise that Booster wasn't addressing the palace's computer, not exactly. There was a much smaller shape attached to the sphere, with cables and other complex connections linking the two.

If he remembered right, Booster typically worked with a small robot, one that he called...

"**Skeets,**" Booster said. "What's the verdict?"

The eye of Booster's robot moved. Most of the robot's remaining chassis was wired in place, fused to the exterior of the giant ball. But the robot's single optic sensor retained its articulation.

"The Father Box's presence is complicating my scans, sir."

**TING!**

"Complications that can be bypassed and compensated for," the robot said, pointedly.

**Ting!**

"Whoa," Jack interrupted, waving at Booster. "Wait, wait, wait, did you... plug your robot sidekick buddy into the stupidly powerful time machine computer?"

Booster glared at Jack. "Obviously? Don't pretend you weren't planning on doing the exact same thing."

"Well," Jack said, "mine comes in a convenient plug-and-play package."

**TING!**

"Don't look at me like that," Jack told the Father Box. "We talked about this."

Booster sighed. "If you're quite done..."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Wait. Does Epoch know you're in his place messing with his stuff?"

"The last time I saw Epoch," Booster said, turning back towards his robot buddy, "he was missing his head, so, no, I don't think so. Now, Skeets..."

"Wait," Jack interjected.

"What," Booster growled. "What is it now?"

Jack gestured at the two linked machines. "You've combined him with Epoch's Eternity Brain. Do you still call him Skeets, or is he Eternity Skeets? The Skeets Brain?"

"He's Skeets," Booster said, firmly. "Skeets, ignore the funny man. What do you have?"
"Understood, sir. I will ignore him in the same manner in which I selectively interpret your commands," Skeets reported.

Booster sighed. "Not in front of the public, Skeets."

"Returning to my analysis, there is a high probability that the gentleman is native to this timeline," Skeets continued. "I am detecting oddities in his temporal signature, consistent with Mister Luthor's manipulations. But that would have been over three decades ago, from his subjective point of view."

"Time out," Jack said, fumbling with his bat so he could make a 't' with his crossed hands. "What the what?"

Booster smacked his face with one hand. His armoured palm collided with his visor, making a loud sound. "Will you please stop doing that?"

Skeets' sensor eye focused on Jack. "I appreciate that organic memory is fallible. To clarify, you were most likely controlled by Mister Luthor's nanotechnology..."

_Ting_

"Thank you for the correction," Skeets said, dryly. "Controlled by his nanotechnology and his grasp of Anti-Life, and ordered to assassinate Thomas, Martha, and Bruce Wayne, in nineteen eighty-nine."

Jack made a face. "Oh, yeah. That. Yeah. That wasn't me. Or it was me, but it was really Lex. Just want to get that on the record, credit where credit's due."

"Indeed," Skeets said, after a moment, sounding nonplussed.

"My doctor's given me a clean bill of health," Jack continued, thumping his chest with part of his bat. "No Lexy bits in here, anymore. Clean living and lots of antioxidants, plus I'm trying that intermittent fasting thing."

_Ting_

Jack nodded at the Father Box. "If you don't believe me, ask the box."

"I'll avoid getting my intel from Darkseid's paperweight, thanks," Booster remarked, sardonically. "Skeets, if he's telling the truth, then why is he talking like he's from the old timeline?"

"There are other unusual readings," Skeets said. "His soul structure resembles that of a fifth-dimensional being, extending beyond the three spatial dimensions and the fourth of relativistic physics."

Booster stabbed an index finger at Jack. "Are you telling me, are you seriously telling me, that he's some kinda god?"

"Ray," Jack said, sagely, "when someone asks if you are a god, you say 'yes'."

"No, sir," Skeets responded. "He is not. I do not advise worshipping him. However, he may be somehow connected to one, through the linear time barrier. He may count as an avatar or aspect of a greater multidimensional existence."

"Never did find religion," Jack mused. "Guess religion found me?"
Ting!

Jack peered at the Father Box. "You knew about this? Why didn't you tell me?"

Ting! Ting! Ting!

Jack scowled. "What do you mean 'I didn't ask'? Don't you get smart with me, Boxy. Being a smartass is my job. I don't need no rectangular illegal aliens coming in and taking our jobs."

"Great," Booster grumbled. "As if I didn't already have enough problems with organised religion, now we've got the court jester as high priest."

"Sir," Skeets said, "in a sense, there is a higher power involved. This cannot be happenstance. It is too improbable to be coincidence."

"Someone planned this," Booster muttered. "That what you're saying? The Joker's running around with a bat... because of someone's contingency plan?"

The robot's optic sensor moved. It sounded almost apologetic. "Yes, sir. Additionally..."

Booster groaned. "There's more, isn't there. What is it? Is he one of the Quintessence? Part of the Endless? A Guardian of the Universe?"

"No, sir," Skeets said. Then the artificial intelligence paused. "Perhaps that last one. I am detecting trace amounts of emotional spectrum energy within his fifth-dimensional soul structure."

Booster frowned. "What colour?"

"All of them, sir," Skeets said. "Or perhaps simply White. The wavelengths bear resemblance to scans of the White Entity itself."

Ting!

"Okay," Jack said, slowly, glancing at the Father Box, the robot connected to the immense sphere, and then finally at Booster. "I kinda regret making a 'dirty foreigners' joke now, can we forget I said anything?"

Booster gave Jack a wary look. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Well," Jack explained, "I've got a pale complexion, I flew here in a Nazi rocket ship, and now both your bot and the box are saying that I'm full of White Power. I'm not racist, I swear."

"It's the White Light," Booster said, exasperatedly. "The White Light of the emotional spectrum, the elemental energy of life. It's not White Power. It's got nothing to do with..."

Ting!

"You," Booster snapped, glaring at the Father Box. "You shut up, you're not helping."
Alien environments were familiar to Ma'alefa'ak.

Perhaps that no longer made them alien, but familiar. He now spent much of his time on Earth, a vibrant blue and green world, unlike the dusty red surface of his native Ma'aleca'andra.

He was, in a word, adaptable.

In many ways, he enjoyed the company of Earth's people more than his own nearly extinct race. The humans feared him, yes. But he could revel in that fear. Their fear did not cause him pain.

For far too many years, he had been intentionally shunned by his own people, purposefully excluded from the psionic gestalt that defined much of Ma'aleca'andran society.

They had lied to him. They had poisoned his mind, suppressing his own natural gifts, and even altering his memories to fool him into thinking that he had been born broken, without telepathy.

They had condemned him to a solitary and miserable existence. All for a perceived crime. All at the word of his traitorous brother.

They called him a sociopath. They called him a monster.

Among his own people, Ma'alefa'ak had been a pariah.

On Earth, he was considered unusual. But he could comprehend why. It was only natural that he faced horror and distrust from many Earthers. The bigotry of humanity was nothing compared to the systemic abuse he had suffered at the hands of the entirety of his native civilisation.

Unlike Ma'aleca'andra, Earth had never betrayed him.

Earth had welcomed him. The Justice League had made him one of their own.

The Justice League wanted him. The League desired him. Perhaps they wanted his power and his abilities, but they wanted him all the same. Unlike Ma'aleca'andra, which had rejected and despised him.

So, Ma'alefa'ak served the League.

It was fitting. The League stood for justice. Ma'alefa'ak understood justice. After all, he had dedicated his life to exacting retribution against his own species and everyone who had wronged him.

Ma'alefa'ak had been forced to kill his own people.

They had left him with no choice, none at all.

Then there was Lex, the Superman, the Kryptonian... the one being whom Ma'alefa'ak acknowledged as an equal, and perhaps even a friend.

Lex was the one who had healed the psychic wound inflicted on Ma'alefa'ak by his own species. Lex was the one who had returned Ma'alefa'ak's birthright, and restored his telepathy.

Ma'alefa'ak understood the concept of favours, and the concept of equal exchange. Earth was not
so different from Ma'aleca'andra in that regard. That was why Ma'alefa'ak was willing to not only work for the League, but also to take direction from Lex.

However, while Ma'alefa'ak was a seasoned and savvy being, who could navigate many worlds... he had never been to Venus.

Until now.

This, then, was a new experience for Ma'alefa'ak.


He didn't like it. He really, truly, did not like it.

Outside of Sivana's terraformed zones and sealed enclosures, the Venusian atmosphere was distinctly unpleasant.

In terms of gaseous composition, the air on Venus was not so different to his native world. But the density and pressure was crushing. It was like being immersed deep beneath one of Earth's oceans.

The temperature was also brutal, enough to instantly roast a human, and enough to damage an unprepared member of his own species.

Unlike most of his people, he did not possess a visceral atavistic reaction to fire. He did not fear it. And heat was not the same as fire.

But it was uncomfortable.

The wind exacerbated the problem. It reminded Ma'alefa'ak of being in a hurricane on Earth, far stronger than any of the dust storms that swept Ma'aleca'andra's surface.

Naturally, being Ma'aleca'andraan, he could turn invisible and intangible. In fact, he had to remain in such a state to avoid being detected by the Justice League's enemies.

However, even though he was not directly affected by most matter and radiation in his intangible state, he could still sense his environment. He needed to see and hear.

That meant he was still subject to the punishing Venusian conditions, to some extent.

The environment within Sivana's compounds was much more liveable, but the risk of detection there was greater.

Ma'alefa'ak had spent a lot of time surveying Sivana's vast holdings on the planet, mapping them out for the Justice League's eventual assault.

But in order to make his periodic reports, he was forced to venture into the Venusian wasteland. Even with his natural abilities being mystically amplified by the League's sorceress-priestess, he feared that the enemy might notice Ma'alefa'ak's communications.

There was only one major facility left, which Ma'alefa'ak suspected was an automated factory or fabrication plant. It was... oddly vexing to know that one solitary human possessed greater manufacturing capabilities than many Earth nations, and the old cities of his own world.

Thankfully, his arduous task was nearly complete. Soon, his allies would descend on Venus.

Ma'alefa'ak sank through layers of armour and reinforced walls, phasing through the outer
perimeter of the facility and into its inner spaces.

While the building might not have been intended for full-time human habitation, it did have climate control and a human-breathable atmosphere. Ma'alefa'ak assumed that was so Sivana could visit his factory, if he so chose.

Regardless of the reason, the cooler air within the structure was a welcome respite from the dense atmosphere and oppressive heat outside.

Ma'alefa'ak looked around.

He was not a trained investigator. His lifetime of experience, back on his homeworld, had been in evading the authorities, not working with them. It had been his cursed brother J'onn who had become one of the Manhunters, not Ma'alefa'ak.

But on Earth, Ma'alefa'ak was known as the Martian Manhunter.

Lex had suggested the alias. According to Lex, the name was one J'onn had used on Earth, in the timeline that Lex came from.

It was fitting, therefore, for Ma'alefa'ak to use the title. It was yet another way for Ma'alefa'ak to take something away from J'onn.

Ma'alefa'ak had already taken J'onn's life, of course, and that of his brother's precious mate and offspring - as well as anyone J'onn had ever called friend.

But by using a title that would have been J'onn's, Ma'alefa'ak could strike at him again, even beyond death itself. The idea appealed to Ma'alefa'ak, on a deep level.

He was not a Manhunter, but since he had taken the role of one, Ma'alefa'ak had therefore mastered some of the profession's skills.

He looked over the facility, or the portion of it he could see, and committed what he was seeing to memory. At the same time, he analysed what he saw, looking for clues and points of interest.

If Ma'alefa'ak were in Sivana's position, a solitary individual in command of a nation's worth of robots, he would have constructed buildings to a standard template. To Ma'alefa'ak, it would be more efficient to simply repeat designs according to one set of plans, as necessary.

That was not how Sivana operated. Alien minds were of course difficult to anticipate, but in Ma'alefa'ak's experience, human logic was not that different from the Ma'aleca'andran equivalent. Sivana's method did not make sense in either Earth or Ma'aleca'andran reckoning.

The scientist built each of his facilities to a seemingly different design, with even the architecture having little in common.

That predilection made the job of mapping Sivana's bases much more challenging for Ma'alefa'ak.

The factory that Ma'alefa'ak was in consisted of several long chambers. They appeared to house assembly lines, ones that could be remodelled and reconfigured. At the moment, much of the machinery was idle, but...

One of the manufacturing robots was looking in Ma'alefa'ak's direction, cameras and sensors at the end of its armature pointing straight at him.
Then, one by one, all of the mobile machines that carried similar sensors all turned towards Ma'alefa'ak.

Ma'alefa'ak froze, hovering in place. Quickly, he checked that his invisibility and intangibility was still in place, and that the sensation of Circe's magic remained in his mind.

He should have been unseen.

"Hello, Manhunter," a synthesised human voice said, coming from several sources.

Ma'alefa'ak's features twisted. The game was over. Somehow, he had been discovered.

He adjusted his vocal cords, shifting them from their native Ma'aleca'andran configuration to one that more closely resembled a human being's.

"Sivana," Ma'alefa'ak said, pleasantly.

Ma'alefa'ak was upset, but there was no need to be uncivil. Lex might have disagreed, but Lex was not Ma'aleca'andran. Lex was not quite as good at hiding what he truly was.

There was a discordant electronic chuckle. Some of the robots moved, as if laughing.

"I'm afraid not, Manhunter," the robots said. "This is his equipment, and he was kind enough to allow me into his systems. But you're addressing the Calculator. Perhaps you've heard of me?"

"The name is familiar," Ma'alefa'ak responded. "Do you speak for Sivana and the Joker?"

"Ah, you misunderstand," the Calculator said. "My colleagues are unaware that we are having this conversation. The Joker is indisposed, while Sivana and the others remain blissfully ignorant of your presence."

Ma'alefa'ak considered the words. "You have not alerted them."

"Correct," the Calculator confirmed. "These are Sivana's sensors, so they would have notified him. But I am confident that I have subverted his network. Doctor Sivana is a talented scientist and engineer, but his coding leaves something to be desired. This? This is my domain."

"I comprehend," Ma'alefa'ak said, smoothly. "What is it that you want, Calculator?"

"That depends," the Calculator replied, "on what the Justice League is able to offer me."
Chapter 63

Sivana chewed on his latest attempt at synthesising a sausage.

Naturally, with all the other pressing matters vying for his finite attention, figuring out ways to better mimic the taste and texture of animal protein was not his most important project. Sivana had delegated the task to one of his many artificial intelligences.

For security reasons, his base of operations on Venus had to be as self-sufficient as possible. In the old days, when Sivana was the only human inhabitant, he could afford to live off imported supplies.

Now, due to his membership in a collective dedicated to opposing the Justice League, there were many more residents placing demands on his water and food supplies.

Granted, the majority of the human personnel were Talia al Ghul's Shadows. A good two-thirds of her followers were cult-like in their outlook, and would happily attempt to subsist on dirt and their own bodily fluids if their mistress so commanded.

But Sivana himself had no desire to live on hard tack and water, hence the need to more efficiently solve the food problem.

In truth, he had been considering ways to make his Venusian home more liveable, for other people as well as himself. He had been contemplating the problem since the very first moment Napier had mentioned... children. A family. His family.

Sivana had considered cloning himself, of course. He had the means to do so. It would be a trifle. But, for some reason, he had never gone through with the project.

Clearly, his counterpart in Napier's timeline had possessed different priorities. Sivana could see the logic. Sivana himself was hardly a genetically engineered specimen, and he had turned out far more brilliant than his own father and his dunderheaded brother.

And he had been married, Napier said. Sivana could scarcely believe it. He had never met any woman capable of both keeping up with his intellect and tolerating his many idiosyncrasies. But if it was true...

The other Sivana had managed to turn his laboratories and testing grounds into something more - a true home for a family, and a burgeoning community.

If that Sivana had been capable of it, then he was as well.

In the end, he was Doctor Thaddeus B. Sivana.

He chewed on the sausage, and swallowed. Then he washed the mouthful down with a bit of coffee. The beans were from Earth, but the enzymatic process to smooth out their taste before roasting was his own invention.

Sivana was in the process of savouring the drink when a thunderous roar filled the room, rattling the silverware and nearly sending the remains of his breakfast from the table to the floor.

Clutching his coffee cup with greater care, Sivana looked at his mechanical butler. "I don't recall any explosive tests or especially hazardous experiments being scheduled for this morning. Do
you?"

His butler did not respond. Its camera lens eyes clicked and twisted, but the robot failed to speak.

"I said," Sivana repeated, "do you..."

A second tremor shook the dining room, followed by another. Sivana thought he heard the sound of a distant explosion.

Finally, the butler spoke. But it did not do so in its typical voice. Instead, the voice that came from the robot's speakers was that of Noah Kuttler's Calculator persona.

"My apologies for the inconvenience, Doctor Sivana," the Calculator said.

Sivana set his coffee cup down. "Don't apologise, Mister Kuttler. I can tell that you're not being sincere."

"Then I apologise," the Calculator carried on, "for being too transparent."

"I take it," Sivana said, calmly, "that you've turned on us. May I ask why, Mister Kuttler?"

The butler robot made a low chuckling noise. Still in Kuttler's voice, it said, "You may ask, but I believe you can draw your own conclusions, Doctor."

"You don't hold any particular fondness for Lex," Sivana mused. "An alignment with him, for pragmatic purposes? For guarantees that the Justice League will protect your family? No. There must be something more."

"Indeed," Kuttler said.

Sivana leaned forward. "You're attached to this timeline, aren't you, Kuttler? You don't want it to change."

Kuttler did not reply.

Sivana shook his head in disappointment. Then he raised his voice, and barked. "Override! Sivana, Parker, Beck, one, nine!"

"I'm afraid that won't work," the Calculator said, smugly. "I have full control over your network, your site management systems, and your robots."

"I assure you," Sivana said, "you do not."

"The evidence would suggest otherwise," the Calculator answered. "Now, courtesy demands that I request your surrender. Will you be reasonable, Doctor?"

Sivana picked his napkin up. He dabbed his mouth with the folded piece of fabric. Then he tossed it aside and stood up.

"No," Sivana said. "I don't believe so."

"A shame," his butler said, the synthesised voice taking on a menacing edge. The robot stepped forward, lifting its arms.

Sivana clasped his own arms behind his back, and simply stood motionless as the robot reached for him. He smiled, ever so slightly, as the mechanical claws passed harmlessly through his body.
"I'm not detecting any phasing technology on you," Noah Kuttler's voice said, in disbelief. "There's nothing, you shouldn't be..."

Sivana tilted his head. "Mister Kuttler, in addition to my qualifications in the sciences, do recall that I am also a master of the mystic arts. More accurately, to a man such as myself, there is no distinction between the two fields."

The butler robot swiped at Sivana once more. Ignoring the machine's futile attempts, Sivana walked forward, into the dining room's wall and out the other side.

The personal computer on Sivana's desk came to life, taking itself out of standby mode.

"Impressive," the Calculator said, speaking through the computer. "But pointless. The Justice League is already here. We both know, Sivana, for all your claims of being a sorcerer, you are primarily a man of science. I have denied you access to your tools and..."

"An ironic accusation," Sivana interrupted, "from someone who is dabbling in magic, himself."

"I don't know what you mean," the Calculator said.

"Kuttler," Sivana said, "there is no possible way you could have gained control of my network through mundane methods. That leaves only a limited range of options."

"Doctor," the Calculator objected.

Sivana stared at the computer. He brought a hand to his sunglasses, touching the frame. His right eye glowed.

"Really, Kuttler? That's who you've turned to? Even by the standards of the Parliaments, the machine elementals are capricious at best."

"You would think," the Calculator said. "The Calculus and I have an understanding. You asked if I am attached to this timeline, did you not? In Napier's world, I was merely a man. Here, I am something more. I need that power, I..."

Sivana lifted his eyebrows. "Kuttler, you forget your Jedediah Orne. Do not call up that which you cannot put down. You aren't remotely human anymore, are you? That's the reason why I've never seen you face to face."

"Speculate all you want," the Calculator said. "I'm not obliged to give you actionable intelligence."

"Of course not," Sivana responded, with a smile. "You're talking in an attempt to distract me."

Sivana ducked, smoothly. An instant later, a silver blur passed over his head, along with a shower of dust and shards.

A mace-wielding figure flew through the remains of the wall, her wings snapping out to full extension as she emerged from the hole.

Again, the head of the mace flashed towards Sivana, in a follow-up attack. Again, Sivana moved.

"Calculator says you're intangible," Hawkgirl said, in an overly cheerful fashion. Her eyes were bright. A bloodthirsty grin was plastered across her face. "How come you're dodging?"

"Madam," Sivana said, archly, "I know an Nth Metal weapon when I see one."
"Is that so," Hawkgirl chirped. "See, Ma'al won't let me test it on him, so I dunno if all the stories are true."

Sivana backed away, mentally reviewing his options. "What stories have you heard?"

Hawkgirl brought her weapon into a ready position. "They say I can kill ghosts."

"That's redundant," Sivana noted, with some consternation.

"Yeah," Hawkgirl admitted. Then her grin widened. "But you're not dead. Yet."
Chapter 64

Sivana let himself fall, passing through the floor... and just barely avoiding Hawkgirl's mace.

With his intangibility equation in effect, the atoms that made up his body had a negotiable relationship with the rest of the world.

It was possible to nullify or counteract the effect that gravity had on his body. But all things came with a cost. Comparatively, it was far more efficient to let gravity take hold, while allowing his feet to pass through the floor, followed swiftly by the rest of him.

It was virtually a standard tactic for Sivana's particular brand of intangibility. The technological versions that he had built for his robots and allies operated under the same principles, allowing for similar tricks.

That meant Hawkgirl and the Justice League would be expecting the technique. Napier and Cain had used Sivana's devices and his playbook in their raid on Superman's Arctic fortress.

But it was still wise for Sivana to move. Hawkgirl's Nth Metal mace was an effective countermeasure against Sivana's abilities. No doubt, that was why she had been dispatched to intercept him. In close quarters, he was at a severe disadvantage against the winged woman.

Additionally, he had no desire to fight her in close proximity to his personal rooms. Sivana was not an overly sentimental man, and most of his effects could be replaced, if necessary. However, the thought of battling a Justice Leaguer within several feet of his bedroom and underwear drawer was profoundly distasteful.

Sivana looked up. This meant that he was treated to the unsettling sight of Hawkgirl smashing through the floor of his study, so she could swoop down on him.

He kept falling.

Eventually, Sivana reached the service level below the residential floors. Simple practicality demanded that he had such spaces in his building plans, to hold utility lines, mechanical and electrical service elements, and other equipment.

Although he had never formally trained as an architect or structural engineer, Sivana had conducted his own study of the related fields when laying out his facilities. Contemporary buildings on Earth were constructed according to certain models, and while Sivana had never been bound by orthodoxy, he also saw no reason to reinvent the proverbial wheel.

At present, the most important aspect of the service level was its cramped and densely-packed nature. Under normal circumstances, Sivana rarely ventured to the utility floor. The place was the domain of his robotic helpers, some of whom were considerably smaller than a human being.

Against a winged opponent who was strongest in the air, the cramped confines of the service level made for a marginally preferable battleground.

Not an ideal one, but an ideal battlefield would involve odds stacked considerably more in Sivana's favour.

An intercom speaker built into the wall came to life, broadcasting the distinctive sound of Noah Kuttler's synthesised voice. If Sivana's suspicions were correct, it was possible that the voice was
now the man's natural one, not an affectation.

"Sivana," the Calculator said. "Don't be stupid. You..."

Sivana glared at the intercom, his right eye flashing blue. He was gratified to see the speaker splutter and die, as the foreign mystical presence was forced away.

Kuttler might have wormed his way throughout Sivana's home, but there were ways for Sivana to clean out the infestation.

Quickly, Sivana reached for a different set of wall-mounted controls. His fingers moved over the panel, deliberately overriding safety governors and pushing machinery to the point of failure.

With a jarring crash, the ceiling of the service level caved inward. The head of Hawkgirl's mace parted steel and reinforced composite material as if it were papier-mâché.

The Justice Leaguer dropped down via her newly-created entrance. She smirked at Sivana. "You done running, Doc?"

"Yes," Sivana replied, stabbing down on a button.

Hawkgirl vanished in a cloud of cryopreservative gas, as Sivana overloaded the refrigeration systems nearest the woman.

In retrospect, providing enough cooling capacity to instantly flash-freeze an entire mammoth carcass had been a tad excessive, for what was meant to be Sivana's kitchen and bar fridges.

His Chateau d'Yquem was a rare commodity, but it didn't require quite that amount of climate control.

The ruptured cryogenic lines would have killed a lesser being, but Hawkgirl had Nth Metal equipment. A fact that she demonstrated, adequately, by flying straight out of the billowing white cloud. The narrow corridor prevented her from fully spreading her wings, but any loss of speed and velocity was not evident. She was fast enough that she was upon Sivana, in an instant.

Sivana managed to dodge the heavy weighted head of the mace. But Hawkgirl twisted her wrist and slammed the end of the Nth Metal grip into Sivana's side, catching him with a glancing blow.

Even a light touch from Hawkgirl was enough to expel air from Sivana's lungs, leaving him momentarily stunned. But he had the presence of mind to mentally adjust his phasing effect, manipulating his interactions with physics and reducing his apparent mass...

...such that the blow sent him hurtling away from Hawkgirl, at tremendous speed.

Sivana had not expected his stratagem with the cryo systems to incapacitate Hawkgirl. Simply holding on to an Nth Metal weapon was sufficient protection against extreme temperature changes.

Nth Metal could do remarkable things - including protecting its wielder from harm, to the extent of granting rapid regeneration and healing effects.

Sivana tumbled through the air. He phased through a corner and several conduits in the process, partially breaking line of sight to Hawkgirl.

Hawkgirl's weapon could hurt Sivana even while he was intangible, and it could physically punch through nearly any obstruction in its path. But Hawkgirl herself could not phase, and although she
was a metahuman, she was nowhere as indestructible as the mace.

Sivana could not predict the woman's actions with one hundred percent certainty, but he hoped she would be tempted to...

Yes.

Sivana smiled.

It was a strange expression for him to make, considering that he was about to be hit by a flying mace travelling at high speed.

Indeed, the pain, when the sensation finally hit him, was excruciating. At least, it should have been. He suspected that shock was helping to numb the feeling.

Sivana managed to angle himself such that the mace did not obliterate his head or torso, but he was unable to stop it from hitting his arm.

The mace didn't break his arm. The effect was far more dramatic. Between the power of the impact and the fact the Nth Metal was disrupting his phasing effect, the collision utterly destroyed the limb, turning flesh, bone, and even the fabric of Sivana's shirt sleeve into atomised mist.

All the same, Sivana smiled.

He'd won.

As a mystically enhanced transuranic substance, Nth Metal had many fascinating properties. Sadly, most people who employed it tended to overlook its full breadth of potential applications in favour of ones that gave easily comprehensible results in combat.

A weapon made of Nth Metal could psionically bond with its wielder, to a limited extent. In particular, a thrown Nth Metal weapon could be guided, allowing it to home in on targets and return to its owner's hand.

Of course, if the Nth Metal mace was in the air, being used as a projectile against Sivana... it wasn't in Hawkgirl's possession. It wasn't in her hand.

The original Hawkman and Hawkgirl of the nineteen-forties had worn an Nth Metal belt and flight harness, meaning that some amount of Nth Metal was typically on his body at all times. But much of that equipment had been long since lost.

According to Napier, the contemporary Hawkman and Hawkgirl of his timeline were Thanagarians, members of a winged alien race that extensively employed Nth Metal technology. Thanagarian agents often had Nth Metal within their bodies, although Sivana was not certain if that was some natural quirk of their biology or the result of surgical implantation. Regardless, a Thanagarian could not be easily separated from their source of power.

But the Hawkgirl of the current Justice League, Vanessa Kingsbury? She was human, not Thanagarian. A metahuman, yes, but human. Her resemblance to a Thanagarian was merely coincidence.

Unless Kingsbury had a way of deceiving Sivana's good eye, the only Nth Metal she had was her mace. There was no other Nth Metal on her person.

The second command that Sivana had punched into the control panel took effect.
Beyond the refrigeration units, the utility level also housed, among other things, the water heaters that supplied the residential floors.

Superheated steam and shrapnel exploded in all directions as the tanks ruptured under pressure, into a narrow corridor already reduced to chilly temperatures by the broken cryogenic lines.

Only his phasing ability kept Sivana from being blinded and broiled alive.

Hawkgirl was not so fortunate.
Chapter 65

Even on Venus, Talia al Ghul had insisted on posting a guard.

There were many ways that the enemy could reach them, be it spacecraft, teleportation, or even more esoteric means.

Even if she trusted Sivana's defences to fend off external threats, she did not trust Sivana himself.

That lack of trust was reciprocated. She did not trust the mad artificer, and he did not trust her band of assassins.

Oh, the scientist had extended full courtesies to Talia and her people. In return, they had done the same, treating the man, and the others Napier had recruited, with due respect. But theirs was a tenuous alliance - smiling in public, while clutching daggers behind their backs.

In the end, betrayal had indeed come. Talia would have felt vindicated, except that any satisfaction she could derive was bitter. Like ash in her mouth.

Not every member of the Shadows was a front line fighter. Their numbers included experts in a wide range of fields. The Shadows even had a handful of metahumans among their ranks.

But their fighters were the best that humanity had to offer. The Shadows boasted martial artists that had been trained since birth within the organisation, and they regularly inducted promising adult practitioners into the order based on their own merit.

Unfortunately, the opponent that was cutting down Talia's men and women was far from human.

The creature had been born under the same star, but it was not of Earth. The Martian was a shapeshifting, telepathic, invisible, and intangible foe, one who also possessed great strength, durability, and immense speed.

Though her Shadows had stood watch, they had been powerless to stop the Manhunter. At most they had delayed him, buying time with their lives.

It was hardly a fair exchange. A poor return for a priceless expenditure of blood.

Their sacrifice had purchased enough leeway for Talia and her remaining loyal Shadows to arm themselves.

But the Martian was continuing to slaughter them.

Even if they could stop the Martian Manhunter, the being was not alone.

Talia slashed at a thick ropey mass of muscle as it came towards her. But before her sword could make contact, the tentacle bifurcated, splitting itself into two distinct masses. Both halves curved around the sword, entangling the sword's cross guard and pommel.

Swearing silently, Talia released her grip on the blade, lest her hands become enmeshed by the Martian's body. She flung herself to the left, scooping up a replacement weapon as she did so.

The weapon was a European hand-and-a-half sword with a cruciform hilt. It was not her preferred style of blade, but Talia's options were limited.
Besides, the Shadow who had previously carried the blade no longer needed it. The man was bleeding out on the ground, dead or insensate.

Talia was uncertain why the man had been using a straight European blade rather than a curved Persian one, since he called himself Scimitar. But she supposed the question was moot, and she might never get an answer.

The tentacles drew back into the wall of amorphous green flesh, with a wet sucking sound. The hulking mass of Martian tissue coalesced into a new shape, growing jaws and teeth. It opened its new salivating mouth, and...

The creature froze, quivering.

One of the surviving members of Talia's Shadows, a telekinetic named Targa, held a trembling hand in the Martian's direction.

A single eye formed above the green maw, as the Martian's baleful gaze focused on Targa.

Sweat stained Targa's exposed skin, flowing in visible rivulets down his bald head. His clothing was also plastered to his body, equally sweat-soaked.

"Cheshire," Talia shouted, "Jabberwock!"

Cheshire readied her crossbow.

The cat-masked woman called Cheshire was one of the Shadows' foremost poison experts. Jade Nguyen had once bragged that she had ways to kill any living being, even ones that did not possess any organic biology.

The undifferentiated nature of Martian anatomy meant that the alien had no vulnerable points. But Talia was also counting on that fact. A hit on any portion of the shapeshifter would be equally debilitating, if Cheshire had a toxin that could affect it.

Unlike the poison mistress, Artemis Crock, the Jabberwock, relied on conventional force rather than subtler methods. The blonde girl aimed her compound bow, the motors of her armour straining as they dealt with the strain of the draw.

The two women fired.

The Martian vanished, going both invisible and out of phase.

Targa collapsed, coughing and gasping for breath.

Then the telekinetic screamed.

A green spike exploded from beneath Targa, stabbing into his lower body and out the other side.

Another green spire broke the ground where Jabberwock was, though the girl's armour proved capable of absorbing the blow. A third spike barely avoided bisecting Cheshire. As the poison mistress dodged, she fired her crossbow directly into the Martian's flesh.

However, at the last second, Talia saw the Manhunter's body turn translucent.

The bolt did no harm.

"Mistress," Ubu said, as he reloaded a firearm. "We need... "
The pistol was oversized for a normal human. Talia knew she would have struggled to use it without the assistance of a powersuit like Jabberwock's. But the gun looked almost comically small in Ubu's grasp.

Ubu was primarily a melee fighter. Unfortunately, the Manhunter had already proven a bad match for Ubu's fighting style. Fortunately, he was an adequate marksman.

Talia knew the handgun was loaded with extremely unconventional rounds. Though the ammunition hadn't saved the original owner of the gun. The assassin known as Alpha was lying in three separate pieces, and Talia was fairly sure the Martian had outright eaten Alpha's other gun.

"A plan," Talia finished, grimly. "Or a miracle."

There were members of the Shadows who could counter the Manhunter. But those people weren't on Venus. They were back on Earth. Talia hadn't transplanted her entire organisation to Sivana's base, merely a core group of operatives.

At the moment, Talia was wishing she had summoned more Shadows with exotic abilities.

However, even if she had called the full force of the Shadows to Venus, even if they could overcome the Martian Manhunter... the Martian had its own allies.

One of those allies was floating overhead, observing the battle. The man's arms were crossed over his chest, partially covering the glowing thunderbolt symbol on the front of his costume.

They were fighting the Martian in one of Sivana's enclosed botanical gardens. There was a dome far overhead, but it was nearly invisible. If not for the colour of the Venusian sky and clouds, the space could have been any park on Earth.

The dome wasn't necessary to sustain a breathable atmosphere - the facility was within a larger terraformed pocket that Sivana had created within Venus' environment. Talia wasn't sure if the enclosure was a holdover from Sivana's initial settlement on the planet, or whether it served some essential horticultural purpose.

Regardless, the nature of the garden meant that Black Adam had ample altitude to look down on the battlefield, from a vantage point of his choosing.

Talia hoped that the man's disinterest would allow the Shadows to slay the Martian without his intervention.

But she feared that the opposite would be true. There was a real chance that the Martian would massacre them all, without needing Black Adam's help.

The Martian reappeared, solidifying into a new form. The Martian's shape was humanoid, with a head, two arms, and two legs. That was where any similarity to human biology ended. It was toweringly tall, with long multi-jointed arms that bore no resemblance to anything born on Earth.

An arm negligently swatted Cheshire aside, sending the woman flying. Cheshire's sister tried to stab one of her arrows into the Martian as an improvised weapon. But the Martian's fist closed around Jabberwock, his hand growing large enough to fully engulf the blonde girl.

The Martian started to squeeze.

A slender dark-clad figure melted out of the trees, appearing from the foliage that filled Sivana's garden. With a single bound, the new arrival bridged the distance separating her from the Martian,
and cleaved downward with a curved blade.

The weapon carved through the Martian's body, cleanly separating the hand from the arm. Yet it was not a crippling wound. The severed hand melted off Jabberwock, oozing across the ground until it rejoined with the main bulk of the Martian Manhunter.

Undeterred, Cassandra Cain attacked again, and again, but the Martian merely rippled around her, its form flowing like water.

Near Talia, Ubu brought his salvaged firearm into a shooting position, his finger resting on the trigger.

Then the man twitched, his muscles spasming. His mouth opened in a wordless cry. With jerky, yet fast movements, he turned the weapon on Talia.

"Ubu," Talia said, waringly.

"The Martian," Ubu gasped. "He is..."

Talia lifted her sword. "Fight it, Ubu!"

"I cannot," Ubu choked out. "I..."

A sudden look of steely resolve appeared on Ubu's face. He swung the gun away from Talia, and pressed its muzzle against his own head.

He pulled the trigger.

Talia didn't scream. She didn't shout. She didn't verbally express her fury.

She lunged past Ubu, even before the body of her loyal retainer toppled to the grass.

Talia struck high, while Cassandra Cain struck low. As expected, the young woman flawlessly anticipated Talia's motions, making her own attempt in perfect coordination.

They drew blood, or something very much like blood.

But if it was hurt, the Martian did not show it. The monster simply laughed, emitting an eerie cackling noise.

Martians were telepathic. In their natural state, the creatures barely spoke. That meant the Martian was deliberately mocking them. It wanted Talia to know it was laughing.

And over their heads, Black Adam continued to watch the fight, his expression grim and impassive.
She would not die here. She could not die here.

Death was transitory for a Shadow. Supposedly. That was what the League of Shadows claimed.

As the daughter of Ra's al Ghul, Talia knew the truth. The Lazarus Pits had their limitations. The pits hadn't rejuvenated her mother. Instead, the alchemical waters had destroyed her.

Death could be cheated. It could be avoided. But death was still something to be feared.

She parried a clawed arm as it reached for her, an effort that strained her muscles and threatened to knock her off her feet.

She disengaged, as Cassandra Cain swept in.

While Cassandra stabbed at the monstrous form of the Manhunter, Talia dropped to one knee and examined the fallen form of Jabberwock, who was sprawled on the grass of the domed garden.

The girl was still breathing, if in fits and starts. She made eye contact with Talia, one of her gauntlet-clad hands pawing at the quiver attached to her side.

Immediately, Talia understood. Clever girl. Merlyn had trained her well.

Talia withdrew one of the arrows. She abandoned any thought of trying to lift and use Artemis' bow. Without the girl's Jabberwock armour, that was a fool's errand. Instead, she held the arrow by its shaft.

The Manhunter did not have any weaknesses, as such. But they could attack the Martian via its supposed strengths.

Talia did not throw the arrow. She did not try to use it as a melee weapon. She simply turned it on.

In Talia's experience, the archers of the world all shared a compulsive tendency to install technology in arrowheads. Green Arrow of the Justice League was the prime example, but Merlyn of the Shadows and his proteges did the same.

The Martian recoiled, its malleable body undulating wildly. Cassandra took the opportunity to pull a grenade from her combat webbing. She discarded the safety ring and handle, slamming the explosive into the shapeshifter's momentarily fluid substance.

Cassandra dove to the side and around the Martian, putting the rest of the alien's body between herself and the concussive explosion.

Talia shielded her own head and eyes, but she did not dare do so for long. It would take more than that to disable the alien, and the psionic jammer would not stymie it for long.

The technology was intended to disorient telepaths, not eliminate them. It was merely the psionic equivalent of a machine screeching very very loudly, or playing a high-pitched noise on a loop.

Annoying to the creature, but hardly fatal.

And the jammer would not last long, Talia knew.
As if on cue, the arrowhead fizzled. Inside, something gave out with a loud popping noise.

As expected, the Martian reformed itself, the torn portions of its body knitting together. The creature did not wait for the damage to be healed before retaliating. Much of its chest was still a ruin, as was its head. But two arms swiped at Cassandra. Talia thought she saw the limbs extend further, in the process.

Talia was considering her next move, when the Martian suddenly crashed to the ground, as if it had been struck. The impact was heavy enough to throw up a vast cloud of soil particles and plant matter, even more than what had been tossed into the air by Cassandra's grenade.

Light glinted off something metallic, even amidst the debris. Something that was moving at high speed.

Talia looked up, just in time to see the mace return to the hand of Doctor Thaddeus Sivana.

Sivana only had one hand to receive the weapon. The sleeve of his jacket was torn, and the bits of fabric which remained flew loose in the wind. The man's left arm was missing.

"Manhunter," Sivana said, pleasantly. "Adam. Welcome to Venus. I'm sorry that I couldn't prepare a proper welcome. I had no word that you were coming."

Sivana did not cut an imposing figure, under ordinary circumstances. He was small and slightly built, and had a tendency to slouch. Now, however, he held a heavy melee weapon in one hand, as if it weighed nothing.

He was also flying.

Further up in the sky, Black Adam regarded Sivana with an expression that was too neutral to be natural. Talia could recognise the signs of a man employing rigid self-discipline to stay outwardly calm.

Before Black Adam could respond, the Martian Manhunter hissed, out loud: "He's mine. They're mine."

Black Adam's eyes narrowed. but the mystically-empowered champion did not move.

"So possessive," Sivana said. "I don't recall giving you my consent."

The Martian turned his eyes on Sivana.

There was a moment in which absolutely nothing occurred.

No. That wasn't true. Even with her own relatively low psionic sensitivity, Talia felt the faint traces of pressure against her psyche. The Martian was attacking with telepathy, and unless she missed her guess, it was assaulting Sivana.

The scientist was unruffled.

"Why," the Martian demanded, "why can't I sense you?"

Sivana held up his hand, still carrying the mace. He rotated his wrist such that the metal band on one of his fingers was visible.

"Did you know, Legion Flight Rings have an entirely mental user interface," Sivana said, didactically. "As an interesting side effect, they also block attempts to influence the wearer's
The Martian growled, and lunged into the air. Sivana deftly flew away, diving closer to the ground as the Martian chased him.

"Typically," Sivana remarked, as if carrying out a perfectly normal conversation, "I'd be loathe to rely on someone else's creations, but under the circumstances..."

He drew his arm back, and flung the mace.

"I'm willing to make exceptions."

The mace shot past the Martian, grazing the alien's green flesh.

"Missed," the creature taunted.

Sivana smiled. "Did I?"

The mace collided with the Martian's head, pulverising it. The heavy weight of the weapon carried on, cleaving a deep trench into the alien's torso.

With both her hands grasping the mace, Cassandra Cain twisted, dragging the weapon through the Martian as if it held a sharp edge.

The Martian emitted a torturous sound, an unmistakable scream of distress, even though it had no throat and recognisable mouth to make the noise.

But Cassandra did not relent, hitting the shapeshifter over and over until what was left of its mass remained still.
Chapter 67

Teth-Adam watched, without interfering, as the Martian fell.

He had merely acquiesced to the Martian's wishes. The Martian had wished to fight alone. It was hardly Teth-Adam's fault that he had been bested.

"Congratulations," Teth-Adam said, breaking his silence. He brought his hands together, slowly and deliberately, at a precisely measured pace.

Overcoming the Martian was indeed an achievement. Teth-Adam was not in the habit of lying. Deceit and falsehoods were unbecoming of a man of his stature. Although Teth-Adam profoundly disliked Ma'alefa'ak, he recognised that the Martian was a powerful foe.

He also recognised the weapon they had used to bring the Martian low - the Nth Metal mace belonging to Hawkgirl. The winged woman was undisciplined and weak-willed, lacking the proper conviction of a real warrior. But she would not have given up her mace easily.

It was almost a pity that they now had to face him.

Sivana, Talia al Ghul, and the girl. The three were the only combat-capable individuals left on the field.

Sivana was known to him, of course.

The body that Teth-Adam now inhabited was not his original one, but rather the form of a... Teth-Adam was not certain, but he suspected the man might be a distant descendant of his, as distasteful as the prospect sounded.

Regardless, Theo Adam was an honourless scoundrel. He had coveted Teth-Adam's power, and had bound Teth-Adam's spirit to himself.

Theo had been financed and supported by Sivana. That connection, alone, would not have earned Teth-Adam's enmity. But even after Teth-Adam had wrested control of his new body from his debased and unworthy descendant, Sivana had continued to vex him.

Worse, Sivana's machinations had threatened Kahndaq on far too many occasions, and that was a transgression that Teth-Adam could not forgive.

Teth-Adam was the champion of Kahndaq. Any attack against his people was utterly intolerable. The world had changed since Teth-Adam's first death, but Kahndaq still stood.

Talia al Ghul and her Shadows were known to Teth-Adam, as well. The arrogant fool thought that her family line and her order was ancient, with a mere thousand years of history. She thought she could act with impunity in Teth-Adam's kingdom and the vassal states that now paid tribute to Kahndaq, murdering and stealing to fit her order's own petty agenda.

Teth-Adam would not relish disabusing Talia al Ghul of her notions, for he was not an intrinsically cruel man. But justice would be done.

The girl... he did not recognise the girl. But judging from her deference to al Ghul, she was most likely a Shadow.
A warrior was not necessarily at fault for the actions of their master. People were not necessarily guilty, simply because they were on the wrong side. That was a contemporary ideal, one belonging to the strange age that Teth-Adam now found himself in. It was not a concept that Teth-Adam had been raised to believe in. But he could see the wisdom in it.

Perhaps he might spare the young fighter. Teth-Adam was the Mighty One, Teth-Adam was not without mercy.

The other two, however, would not escape. They would feel his wrath.

He would start with Sivana.

As if sensing his thoughts, the sorcerer chose that moment to speak.

"Black Adam," Sivana said, mockingly. "Would it be too much to ask, if I told you to get out of my home, and off my planet?"

Teth-Adam bristled at the use of the name. He accepted it from most men and women, as they were ignorant of its true history.

However, Sivana was fully aware of why he was remembered by history as Khem-Adam, or Black Adam, rather than his rightful title of Mighty Adam. It had been an attempt by his long-dead enemies and the traitorous wizard to darken his reputation, in the wake of his death.

When Sivana used the name, he used it as a weapon, not a mere form of reference.

"Enlighten me, sorcerer," Teth-Adam asked, "why should I respect the sanctity of your land, when you have not given me the same honour?"

"Please," Sivana sneered, "not this again. You're not the Pharaoh of Kahndaq, are you? Kahndaq hasn't had a king or queen for over two thousand years. It's an Islamic country. It doesn't worship your gods."

"I am recognised," Teth-Adam said. "I have been..."

"The United Nations only admitted your regime because they're scared of you," Sivana said. "They spent years holding Kahndaq's seat for Asim Muhunnad's government-in-exile before finally caving in and handing it to you. Do you think they love you, Adam? How many states have given bilateral diplomatic recognition to your little fiefdom? Where are your trade partners? Where are your treaty allies?"

"The people of Kahndaq know I am their sovereign and protector," Teth-Adam declared, lifting his voice. "That is enough."

"A fine protector," Talia al Ghul said, pointing at the body of one of her Shadows. "Ubu was from Kahndaq, and you let the Martian kill him."

Teth-Adam glanced at the dead man, the one whom Ma'alefa'ak had subverted with his telepathic powers. Teth-Adam's expression did not change.

"Is that so? Regrettable. But we both know, Talia al Ghul, that the Ubus of your order are raised as your weapons from birth," Teth-Adam stated. "He died in your service. I will not diminish his choice."

In response, Talia al Ghul raised the sword in her hands, holding it as if it posed a threat to Teth-
Adam. Perhaps it did. The Justice League had been warned that their enemies possessed bladed weapons which could injure the likes of Teth-Adam.

But Teth-Adam possessed the speed of Haru, the god of the sky.

Teth-Adam drew upon Haru’s gifts, accelerating and diving at the leader of the Shadows. He saw the woman begin to react, but she was far too slow. Skilled as she was, she could not hope to match the falcon god’s swiftness.

But something else intercepted Teth-Adam, a projectile which collided with such power that he was flung from the air.

He could feel his might being disrupted, somehow driven back. With a surge of effort, and a crackle of lightning, Teth-Adam brought his strength back to full force.

The Nth Metal mace landed back in the hands of the young black-haired woman. The Shadow was already running. She caught the returning weapon without breaking stride, seamlessly turning her charge into a punishing strike.

Teth-Adam surged upright, coming partially off the ground. He rose with one knee and one foot planted on the soil, lifting his left arm to catch the head of the mace on his golden bracer.

There was a ringing sound of metal on metal, and then the celestially-empowered armband fractured, visible cracks running over its surface.

Another noise caught Teth-Adam’s attention. He moved his remaining bracer, blocking a blast of green light from above before it splashed against his face.

Pain spiked down his arm, causing Teth-Adam to grit his teeth.

Overhead, the flying figure of Sivana shifted his aim. The sorcerer was clutching one of his creations, a so-called ‘Death-Ray’. Teth-Adam had felt the sting of the device before. The weapon was potent enough to instantly slay an ordinary man, though of course Teth-Adam was far beyond ordinary.

Teth-Adam exploded from the ground, soaring upward towards Sivana. The green radiance seared his skin, but he ignored the unpleasant sensation.

Calling upon the light of Aton, he covered himself in magical lightning, the thunderbolt on his chest shining with renewed intensity.

The lightning did more than merely strengthening him against Sivana’s attack. Teth-Adam knew it would allow him to hurt the sorcerer in turn.

The being known as the Calculator had warned Teth-Adam and the Justice League that Sivana had some manner of intangibility spell. However, Teth-Adam was confident that Aton’s blessing was stronger than Sivana’s magic. He had struck down spirits and other ethereal foes before.

Sivana was aloft, but his power of flight was due to more artifice, not any innate power. Teth-Adam would tear Sivana’s ring from the man’s hand. And then he would tear Sivana’s arm from his body.

The sorcerer was already missing a limb. It was only fitting that the wretch be properly balanced.

But there was no trace of apprehension on Sivana’s features. Instead, the man looked supremely
confident. He opened his mouth, and spoke one word:

"IBAC!"

Flames and foul-smelling smoke engulfed Sivana's form. Then, from within the fumes, a muscular arm intercepted Teth-Adam's lighting-wreathed fist.

An instant ago, the sorcerer had been crippled. After the transformation, he was whole. His body was powerful rather than weak and malformed, with vigour that rivalled Teth-Adam's own.

Sivana was still holding his Death-Ray weapon. Teth-Adam clamped a hand around it, hoping to wrestle it from Sivana's grasp. All the struggle did was crush the weapon.

However, Sivana seemed to barely care. A look of brief annoyance crossed his altered face, but it was quickly replaced by malicious glee as the sorcerer slammed his forearm into Teth-Adam's head, following it up with a knee to Teth-Adam's midsection.

"Did you think," Sivana crowed, "that I would give the power of Shazam to someone else, without first testing it on myself?"

Teth-Adam grappled with Sivana. "The curse of Ibac is not the power of Shazam!"

"Yes, yes," Sivana said, dismissively. "It's a proof of concept."
They said she was flawed.

Compared to Nightwing, maybe she was.

The thought rankled her, but she could not deny it. Nightwing was analytical, calculative, everything that Flamebird was not.

They shared the same basic genetic template, and their current replacement bodies had even come from the same batch of clones. Their nanites and cybernetic components were the same. Even their base programming had been identical, only diverging with time and accumulated experience.

But the researchers at Project Cadmus thought there was something about Flamebird that was accelerating her deterioration. They didn't know what it was, but her performance metrics were consistently behind Nightwing's. Both her mental stability and physical health were breaking down.

Her recent revival, following her embarrassing defeat in the Arctic, had only worsened the problem. By full percentage points.

Flamebird didn't know what to think about that. The idea of her mind and body gradually eroding was a nebulous and existential threat, not the kind of risk she had been created to consider. A part of her mind shared engrams from Lex, but only a part. Ultimately, she had been programmed for strategy and tactics, not philosophical thought.

And, as time passed, she was becoming less and less, not more.

However, she did know what she felt about her condition. That was an easier question to answer, as it was based on emotion rather than quantifiable and coherent thought.

She felt angry. Very angry.

Anger was a familiar emotion for Flamebird. A very familiar emotion.

She felt anger most of the time. It was her constant companion.

At the moment, she was exceptionally frustrated, more so than usual.

Flamebird planted her hand on the soil of Venus, her fingers digging into the ground. Dirt crumbled beneath her gloves. Slowly, laboriously, she hauled herself out of the impact crater her body had created.

Even that simple and undignified movement was torturously difficult.

She coughed, hacking up phlegm. Then she wiped the fluid away from her mouth with the back of her hand.

She breathed heavily, sucking in deep lungfuls of air.

Kryptonians could survive without breathing for extremely long periods of time, including in the cold vacuum of outer space.

Despite that inborn resilience, she still needed to breathe. She was far less dependent on oxygen
than most living creatures. However, air was still ultimately necessary to feed her tissues and fuel her biological processes.

Flamebird hurt.

Being a cyborg, she had mechanisms to disable the pain signals travelling through her ravaged nervous system. But the sensations were a useful gauge of her body's combat readiness, and more intuitive than parsing detailed diagnostics. Evolution had equipped humans and Kryptonians with pain receptors for a reason.

The pain was telling her that she was not combat capable.

The pain made her angry. It also made her feel ashamed, because her injuries were an undeniable sign of weakness. That, in turn, made her even more furious.

Rage was not a bad thing. Not necessarily. Very often, rage was what drove her. Rage was what kept her going. It was a useful impetus. But she couldn't let it make her careless. She couldn't let it make her sloppy.

She was supposed to be a finely honed weapon, not a rabid beast.

She sucked in another ragged breath.

Doctor Thaddeus Sivana had only terraformed a relatively small portion of the Venusian surface. Most of the man's facilities were fully enclosed, and much of the outdoor area was domed over. That said, there were a few pockets on the surface of the planet that were Earthlike, with a breathable atmosphere somehow held in place by unknown means.

Flamebird was in one of those habitable zones, which was why she could breathe.

Were she more scientifically inclined, Flamebird would have found it fascinating. Sivana's methods were generations ahead of the rest of humanity. She was aware enough to recognise that.

But, for the most part, she simply wanted to kill Sivana, not question him about his technology.

Sivana was responsible for creating the bitch.

The woman was from the same genetic stock as Flamebird and Nightwing. It was Sivana's enhancements that allowed her to effortlessly outclass Flamebird. The bitch was powerful enough to match Lex himself, a feat that few beings were capable of.

Flamebird did not like being outclassed. It made her angry. Even angrier.

"Rage detected," said a chorus of synthetic-sounding voices, in unison.

Flamebird lifted her head.

The Lantern descended from the orange Venusian sky, his face dark and disapproving.

"Get up, soldier," the Lantern barked.

Flamebird bristled. She tried to rise, but a fresh surge of agony drove her down to her knees, as her spine and back betrayed her. She gasped for breath.

"Rage detected," said the Lantern's rings, in the same echoing tone.
"Back in the fight, kid," the Lantern said, unsympathetically, lifting a fist.

"I'm trying," Flamebird spat, between gulps of air.

"Try harder," the Lantern urged.

According to the database integrated into her memories and personality matrix, the Justice League's Lantern, Frank Laminski, was a former military man. A United States Air Force veteran.

Perhaps that explained his attitude.

Flamebird was not certain why Lex had chosen to grant Laminski such power. It certainly wasn't for his charisma as a leader, or his credentials as a motivational speaker.

"Rage detected," the rings repeated.

Flamebird glared. Of course the rings were detecting rage. The more they pointed it out, the angrier Flamebird got.

"Look at it this way," Laminski said. "There's four of us, and just one of her. We're going to win. It's inevitable. So, are you going to be there when we end her, or just sit it out?"

Scowling, Flamebird struggled to stand.

"Will detected," the rings whispered. "Hope detected."

"There you go," Laminski said, with a smirk. "Good. I can work with that."

A blue aura tinged with green flowed from Laminski's left hand, engulfing Flamebird. The light soaked into her abused body.

She felt her pain fade. Her strength returned.

Flamebird rose, and looked up.

In the sky, visible only through her enhanced vision, the distant figures of Nightwing and Superman traded blows with the rogue Kryptonian, the muscular woman shrouded in lightning.

Laminski held up both of his fists. Seven distinct points of colour flared in his hands, one for each ring.

"Now," the Lantern said, "let's finish this."
Frank Laminski was a soldier, not a poet.

Literature had never been his thing. Not voluntarily, anyway.

Sure, he read a lot. But that was to hone his mind, much in the same way that he exercised to hone his body. He didn't read for the fun of it.

But if he had to put it into words... using the rings was like flying an experimental jet. As a test pilot, his job had been to take new and modified aircraft into the sky. He had to sense, with each passing moment, whether there was anything wrong with the plane. And he had to quickly respond if something did occur.

Using the Power Rings was the same, in a way. He had to keep a handle on every emotion he was feeling, every impulse and every sensation.

There was a delicate balance involved. Like a twitchy and temperamental aircraft constantly threatening to spiral out of control.

An ordinary Lantern… if any Lantern could be said to be 'ordinary'... wasn't supposed to use multiple rings. Power Rings weren't designed to work with each other. Which made balancing the rings was already damn near impossible. There were all sorts of potential failure points.

Blue and green together were almost fine, but channeling yellow threatened that equilibrium.

Orange came easily to Frank, but getting in the right mindset to use the violet light made his brain hurt.

It would have been even worse if the green ring had its original Oan programming, or the violet its Zamaron equivalent.

Lex had taken care of that problem. As far as Frank knew, his green ring had been wiped clean, and most of the others had been fabricated by some guy on Qward. So the rings themselves weren't fighting him. But Frank still felt the psychic and physical stress of splitting his emotional state seven different ways.

In return, though, he had power. More power than he'd ever dreamt of. That made all the headaches worth it. For the privilege of wielding such might, he was willing to risk a few nosebleeds and aneurysms.

The few Green Lanterns he'd encountered out in space hated Frank's guts. They classified him a threat and an abomination, a disaster waiting to happen. But Frank no longer cared what they thought. Once, he'd coveted Abin Sur's ring and position in the Green Lantern Corps. Now, he was far stronger than any Greenie, and he wasn't crippled by any of their stupid rules of engagement.

Frank's rings were more than capable of applying lethal force, unlike those poor wretches working for the Guardians.

Though they hated him, the sector Lanterns couldn't do a damn thing to stop Frank.

Because of Lex, Earth space was considered a hands-off zone for the Green Lanterns. The Lanterns were supposed to treat all Earthers with kid gloves.
The Green Lantern Corps liked to think of themselves as defenders of the universe. But the truth was, they had hard limits to their jurisdiction.

The Corps couldn't venture into Apokolips territory, into Vega, into Reach space, and into many more places. The Guardians on Oa were political animals, no different from the suits back home.

The only person Frank had to answer to was Lex. Having the mightiest being on Earth as a boss wasn't all bad, though the guy was a touchy bastard with an ego larger than some planets.

"Hold her," Lex snarled. "Hold her!"

It was fortunate that Frank's rings could pick up and amplify Lex's vocalisations. Frank had his environmental field up, and anything Lex said had to compete with the howl of rushing winds and the sounds of superpowered combat.

"Rage detected," Frank's rings announced.

Lightning tore into Lex, scarring the Superman symbol on his chest. The mystical electricity charred and blackened his costume. Frank couldn't smell anything through his environment field, but he could imagine the stench.

Flamebird and Nightwing recoiled as well, the lightning storm lashing out at both of them. They weren't taking the brunt of the attack, not like Lex. But their biologically-generated force fields weren't as strong as Superman's, either.

At the centre of the storm, the rogue Kryptonian spread her arms wide, tendrils of electricity forking from her fingers. Hurricane-force winds whipped around her, her cape flapping like a banner.

It was the right move. Frank recognised that. Superman had his Omega beams. Flamebird and Nightwing had their own weaker heat vision, as well. But despite those powers, they were primarily melee fighters.

The magical thunderbolts were one power that Superman and his two enforcers did not possess. They had no equivalent to it.

Frank had seen such power before, on the rare occasions that Black Adam cut loose. But Adam used his lightning and storm control sparingly. There was nothing restrained about what the woman was doing.

He pointed his hands at the enemy Kryptonian, green light coming from his left hand and orange surging from his right.

Shackles and chains snaked around the blonde woman's limbs, as Frank drew on both his iron conviction and his burning desire to see this sordid business over and done with.

The Kryptonian gave an inarticulate howl, straining against the construct bonds. The electricity cut out as the restraints tightened. The green ring was keeping her tied up, while the orange ring suppressed and fed on her magic, weakening her and keeping the thunderbolts out of play.

The problem was, Frank wasn't sure it was enough.

The Kryptonian continued to scream, her voice rising in volume. Maybe it was his imagination, but he thought he sensed his creations giving way.
And with that faint hint of doubt, he felt the integrity of his green constructs wavering, in a way that definitely wasn't just in his mind.

"Will detected," the rings said. "Fear detected."

"Warning. Fifty-two percent power remaining," his green ring added. "Fifty-one percent power remaining. Fifty percent power remaining."

Electricity crackled from the blonde woman's eyes.

"Will detected," the rings said. "Superior will detected."

There was one downside of Frank's rings. The emotion-powered weapons weren't just sensitive to his own mental state. They were also influenced by the thoughts of people around Frank.

Sometimes that was an advantage. When he could inspire hope, or intimidate people into feeling fear, then he could use that power.

But sometimes…

Sometimes it was a liability.

"I can't keep this up," Frank cried. "Whatever you're gonna do, do it fast!"

Lex's eyes glowed, as well, twin beams of destructive force exploding from his face. On the left and right, Flamebird and Nightwing released their own optic blasts, the lines of radiation converging on the bound Kryptonian.

"KRYPTON," the woman roared.

Thunder shook the Venusian sky.

Frank sensed his ring constructs shattering.

Before he could voice a warning, their opponent flew out of the cloud of smoke and light.

One tremendously strong fist struck Flamebird. Frank saw part of her face cave in, her jaw breaking as her head snapped back. The red-clad clone vanished over the horizon, propelled by the force of the blow. A sonic boom sounded in her wake.

Lex unleashed his Omega beams again, crimson power spilling from his eyes.

But the rogue Kryptonian accelerated, moving so quickly that Frank's ring-enhanced perceptions couldn't keep up.

The Omega beams chased her across the sky, but that wasn't necessarily a good thing. In a flash of insight, Frank realised what she was planning.

"Nightwing," he yelled.

He was too late. Their opponent grabbed hold of the clone in black and blue, easily overpowering the smaller blonde woman's attempts to break free.

The taller woman twisted around, using Nightwing as a shield.

When the Omega effect faded, a good chunk of Nightwing's torso was gone, including much of her
ribcage and spine. Her head was still attached, but it lolled limply on what remained of her neck.

The enemy Kryptonian dropped the body, letting it fall. Nightwing vanished beneath the dense clouds of the Venusian atmosphere.

"Fear detected," the rings informed him. "Ability to instil great fear detected."
Once again, Flamebird clawed herself out of a hole in the ground. This time, it was more of an impact trench than a discrete crater.

There was a long churned-up trail of disturbed earth, vegetation, and other debris, leading to the spot where she'd crashed through the greenhouse dome and into Sivana's garden facility.

Standing up was difficult. Her legs didn't want to support her weight, and every attempt to do so sent a new surge of torment through her abused body.

Flamebird coughed, hacking and wheezing.

Eventually, she gave up and simply engaged her flight powers, lifting herself into the air.

Even that small effort cost her. Kryptonian flight was an application of telekinesis, and that telekinesis was fed by biological processes. Her body protested the strain. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest, and she felt short of breath.

She touched her face, and winced. It was fortunate there were no reflective surfaces around. Her visage had to be a bloody ruin.

It was fortunate they were fighting on Venus. There were no civilian onlookers to capture images and leak them online. There were no television cameras and media gawkers around.

At least she was still functional. Her cybernetic systems were reporting that Nightwing was deceased, her biological components completely inoperable. Clearly, the battle wasn't going as well as the Lantern had hoped.

Flamebird clenched her fists.

Focusing through her blurry vision, Flamebird paid attention to her surroundings. There was fighting going on in the dome.

She smelt ozone and she heard the crack of thunder. Flamebird tensed, thinking that the bitch was nearby. But she quickly realised that the one throwing magical lightning around was not the bitch, but Black Adam.

The protector of Kahndaq was brawling with an equally heavily-built man, a bald individual with his upper body covered in tattered rags.

The man was matching Black Adam's thunder with emerald fire, releasing waves of supernatural heat that Flamebird could feel from across the dome.

It took Flamebird another second to deduce that Black Adam's opponent was in fact Doctor Thaddeus Sivana. He only bore a passing resemblance to his file photos, but the baldness and general lines of his face had transferred between his forms.

Flamebird growled. The man was a menace. The Justice League could no longer overlook the obvious danger that Sivana represented.

The renegade Kryptonian clone was a priority target, as was the Joker. But Sivana was also on the Justice League's target list, and his presence in front of Flamebird warranted an immediate
amendment to her mission priorities.

In addition, she recognised Talia al Ghul as well... and the Asian girl that had killed Flamebird's previous body. The two were fighting alongside Sivana.

The League of Shadows was still in the battle, then. Flamebird saw several corpses in the area, which she took to be fallen Shadow operatives. But al Ghul herself, and the damned girl, they were still breathing.

Revenge was not logical. She knew that. It was petty and irrational. But Flamebird wanted revenge. She wanted it very, very, badly.

Flamebird threw herself forward, racing parallel to the ground. Flamebird made it halfway to the black-haired Asian before she even reacted to Flamebird's presence.

Somehow, the girl managed to get her weapon up in time. And to Flamebird's dawning horror, the weapon in her hands was instantly recognisable. It was Hawkgirl's Nth Metal mace.

The Nth Metal weapon stopped Flamebird's charge, absorbing every erg of kinetic energy. Then the mace released that force back into Flamebird in a single gut-wrenching blow, flinging her backwards.

Flamebird felt her bones shatter. Her right arm was inoperable from the shoulder downward. Her left could move, but it was severely weakened. Her legs were unreliable, as well.

Her eyes warmed up in their sockets, her heat vision shooting out. But for the second time, the mace countered the attack, visibly drawing in the thermal energy while surrounding its wielder with a protective aura of cold.

Far above, Black Adam slammed Sivana against the surface of the dome enclosure, with an impact that shook the entire facility.

"SHAZAM," Black Adam bellowed.

Blinding blue-white light filled the dome, arcs of electricity erupting around Black Adam and Sivana.

Flamebird was forced to shield her own face, meaning that she had to stop using her heat vision.

Then Flamebird had to fly backwards, using her powers to dodge.

Taking advantage of Flamebird's distraction, Talia al Ghul was attacking.

The tip of Talia al Ghul's sword cut the fabric of Flamebird's costume and the skin beneath, drawing blood. Which meant that the blade had gone straight through Flamebird's telekinetic forcefield.

Flamebird was either weaker than she'd realised, or the weapon was another of those damned enhanced blades that could hurt a Kryptonian.

Neither possibility was palatable.

"Die," Flamebird hissed.

"I must decline," Talia al Ghul replied, silkily.
In response, Flamebird turned her heat vision on Talia al Ghul, but the burst of radiation only lasted for a moment, and barely singed the woman's outfit.

She terminated the beams as the dome once again lit up with lightning.

Flamebird looked up. Her expression, already a mask of rage, turned even darker.

It wasn't Black Adam's lightning. It was the bitch's.

The top of the garden dome caved inward, bits of metal and transparent panelling raining from above.

The lightning-covered bitch rocketed towards the ground, carrying both Superman and the Lantern. Her hands were around their throats. She hammered both the men into the ground, creating a seismic wave and a massive cloud of debris.

Flamebird reassessed the situation. Both battles had converged on the same location. All the force on both sides was at a singular point.

A decisive push could finish the enemy.

Flamebird let more heat bleed from her eyes. She tensed her muscles, trying to drive away the last vestiges of fatigue and pain. Her condition was poor, but she could still make a difference.

She began to move.

Then a resounding boom echoed through the dome. A hole tore open in space, air howling and whistling from the other side.

Flamebird stared, as the nose and body of some kind of vessel blasted out of the Boom Tube, at the apex of a pillar of flame.

It was heading right for her. She was in its path.

Flamebird spun, trying to do something, anything, to stop the oncoming vessel in its tracks. But she was too weak. Too slow.

The last thing she saw was the rocket ship slamming into her body with a crunch of steel against bone.

She fell.
"You started the party without me," Jack complained, as he popped the canopy of the Panzer-Ship.

He clambered out of the pilot's chair and into a standing position, leaving one foot on the seat and resting the sole of his other shoe on the edge of the cockpit.

Jack rotated his right arm, working the kinks out of his shoulder, elbow, and wrist. Then he held his arm out at full extension, pointing his baseball bat forward.


Down at the front of the ship, there was a thump as a body slid off the nose.

Jack spent a moment craning his neck to see what was up with that.

The red and yellow costume was badly messed up, as was the person in it. Flamebird had seen better days.

Which was odd, since Jack remembered seeing Cassandra Cain take out Flamebird. Did Lex have spares lying around, or did he have zombie Kryptonians in his employ?

Jack put the thought aside. It wasn't important. Probably.

"Napier," Sivana shouted. "What kept you?"

Jack started to reply, then blinked. The mad scientist was looking considerably more buff than he normally did. Jack didn't remember Sivana having all those muscles.

Clearly, Jack had missed a lot during his absence, including a training montage.

"Sorry," Jack said. "Unfashionably late, I know. Traffic was murder."

Unfortunately, Jack mused, the room was a really tough crowd. Nobody laughed.

Playing to a smaller number was tougher, in a way. In a big venue, it was sometimes easier to get a response, particularly if enough people knew your reputation.

Of course, a large gig always came with the corresponding risk of hecklers.

TING!

One of those hecklers was rushing the stage, so to speak. Jack didn't need the Father Box's warning. He could see the threat, himself. The distinctive form of Lex, in Superman's body, flew towards Jack and the Panzer-Ship. His cape trailed behind him, like a set of ominous red wings.

Before Jack could do anything, a pair of golden rays shone from behind him. One caught Superman in the face, while the other punched him in the stomach.

Booster Gold emerged from the still-open Boom Tube, energy surrounding both his gauntlets. The portal collapsed behind the armoured man, imploding before Booster's boots hit the ground.

"Good man, Booster," Jack remarked. "You used to work security, right? Haven't lost your touch."
"I'm not your bodyguard," Booster Gold muttered.


Booster started to reply, but a blast of crimson light from Superman's eyes prompted him to react. He thrust his hands forward. A nimbus of gold power deflected the Omega beams. The soil and grass around Booster's feet disintegrated, boiling away, but the man himself was unharmed.

Another caped Kryptonian crashed into Lex from behind. The Eradicator delivered several lightning-charged blows, driving him into the earth.

Up in the air, beneath a partially shattered dome, Black Adam and Buff Sivana kept on fighting, more lightning warring against magical flame. Sivana had found some way to give himself a smoking hot body. In more ways than one.

Jack felt vaguely responsible. Jack had informed Sivana that, in the other timeline, he was quite successful with the ladies. Clearly, Sivana had taken that message to heart.

While Lex and Adam were being countered, the last guy on the Justice League's side was proving more problematic.

A big green boxing glove collided with Talia al Ghul. Jack had to give the Lantern points for appreciating the classics, but he doubted Talia found the encounter quite as amusing. From her perspective, it probably felt like being hit by a truck, all the way into another dimension.

A yellow bubble surrounded Cassandra Cain, completely enclosing her in a prison of hardened light. The teenager smashed a mace against the construct. The field was visibly fracturing, but for the time being the girl was trapped.

*Ting!*


He leaped off the top of the Panzer-Ship, his suit propelling him at the Lantern at full speed.

Jack brought his bat down in an overhead swipe.

The Lantern stopped him, using a big orange catcher's mitt.

"Cute," Jack remarked, as his bat lit up with its own corona of power.

With the Calculator suspiciously quiet on the comms, the bat's systems weren't functioning at full capacity. However, there was enough oomph in the bat to break the construct, dispelling it in a shower of orange shards.

Jack landed lightly on the ground, rocking on his heels and then the balls of his feet.

Behind his grey-tinted mask, the Lantern's eyes went flinty hard. He gave Jack a look, displaying something that was either determination or severe constipation.

Frank Laminski had the kind of face that always made him look like he was experiencing some kind of gastric distress. It was genuinely hard for Jack to make any judgement calls about the man's mood.

"Rage detected," several voices said, in eerie synchrony, coming from the Lantern's rings.
Thankfully, the man's rings were there to provide colour commentary. In retrospect, the expression on Frank's mug was clearly his angry face.

A dense red mist bubbled out of Laminski's right hand, engulfing Jack. He tried to fend it off, but the stuff was amorphous, going everywhere at once.

It was also incredibly corrosive. Fumes hissed and spat from his jacket, shirt, and his other clothing. His high-tech outfit generated protective energy fields, and that was likely the only thing keeping his skin from boiling. But the shields weren't keeping the attack at bay. Not completely.

Text and icons flickered at the edges of Jack's vision, as his suit's discreet heads-up display filled with warning messages.

Jack sent a mental command to the bat, trying to squeeze more power out of it. However, the act just caused the red gunk enshrouding Jack to thicken around the weapon.

The crimson fog began to eat away at the faux wood of the baseball-themed weapon, dissolving it down to its metal core and exposing the circuitry and power lines that lay beneath.

"Kuttler told me about your toy," the Lantern gloated. "And how to deal with it."

Ting!

"Betrayal," Jack informed the Father Box, "isn't a good thing. Who's side are you on, anyway?"

"Hey," the Lantern snapped. "Pay attention, Joker!"

Jack released his grip on the bat.

The weapon smouldered as it hit the earth.

He felt his skin itch and burn, as the fog started to make it past his suit's protections.

"Oh, believe me," Jack said, seriously, "you have my full attention."

Pushing the strength augmentation of his gear to its limit, he lunged forward. Laminski instinctively shifted his own arms into a defensive position.

But that didn't deter Jack.

He knew what he had to do.

He clamped his own hand and fingers around the Lantern's left hand, making sure to cover the glowing green band.

"Will detected," the rings said. "Warning. Superior will detected."

Laminski's expression changed. His eyebrows climbed towards his hairline, and his jaw hung open. "What? No!"

"Fear detected. Superior ability to instil fear detected."

The red mist dissipated, vanishing as Laminski recoiled. He struggled and broke free from Jack's grasp. But two points of light flew away from the Lantern, towards Jack.

"Jack Napier of Earth," one ring announced, as it landed on Jack's left index finger. "You have
the ability to overcome great fear."

"You have the ability to instil great fear," the second ring announced, as it fell into place on Jack's other hand.

"That's impossible," Laminski yelled. "You can't, it's not... "

TING!

Jack smiled broadly, showing his teeth. "That's what you get for using jailbroken hardware on an unsecured network."
"What? That doesn't make sense," Laminski blurted, his eyes wild.

The man wasn't taking the theft of his rings very well.

"Figure of speech," Jack said. "You don't have the ability to perform great banter, do you?"

"I don't care what trick you're using," Laminski growled, his remaining five rings glowing brighter. "I'm the Lantern, and..."


"Superior avarice detected."

The orange ring slipped off Laminski's right hand, and landed on Jack's.

"I want to change the world," Jack said.

"No! This isn't happening," Laminski shouted. "Give it back! Give them back!"

A crimson cloud spewed from Laminski's red ring, more of that formless scarlet energy. Jack suspected it wasn't even a Lantern construct in the true sense of the word, just weaponised petulance and spite.

Orange energy burst from Jack's own ring, pushing back the crimson miasma and actively consuming it. One by one, the red particles bled their colour and turned orange, before being sucked back into Jack's ring.

Jack sighed. "Frankie, my boy. Didn't your mama ever teach you? Throwing a tantrum isn't how you get what you want."

"Don't patronise me," Laminski snapped. His red ring spluttered, releasing flecks of scarlet and blazing sparks. "Don't you dare patronise me."

"Using the dark side? Letting the hate flow through you? Frankie, if you think you're having a bad day," Jack said, "trust me. It's nothing compared to the one I'm having."

"Superior rage detected."

The red ring tore itself violently from Laminski's hand, taking the man's finger with it.

Jack snatched the ring out of the air. He pulled the severed finger out and tossed the digit aside, then put the ring on.

Ting!

Jack smirked, glancing at the Father Box. "I'm so glad you approve."

Blue, violet, and indigo light surrounded Laminski, the three remaining rings on his left hand
spitting forth overlapping auras.

But Jack saw that the light was primarily blue, only streaked with the faintest dying traces of the other colours. And it was weak.

Blood dripped from Laminski's right hand.

"One ring, two rings, three or no rings," Laminski declared, "I'm the Lantern, not you. I know how to use these. You don't. If I need to take my rings off your corpse, then that's what I'll..." 

Jack waved. "Hey, just checking. You were using a construct to trap Cain, weren't you?"

Laminski blinked. "What?"


A mace slammed into Laminski's skull. If it wasn't for the rings and their force fields, Jack reckoned the blow would have taken his head clean off his shoulders.

As it was, the Lantern crashed face-first into the ground.

"She's behind you," Jack informed Laminski, helpfully.

Laminski groaned something inarticulate. It might have been a curse.

Jack crouched down, peering at the Lantern. "Way I see it, you're basically a self-centred guy. Nothing wrong with that. Doesn't mean you're a bad sort. Gotta look after number one. But in this business, it pays to be a people person. You don't really get other people, do you?"

"Compassion detected," the indigo ring said.

Jack held his hand out, letting the indigo ring touch down gently on his palm. He put it on.

"I do," Jack said, softly. "To make people laugh, they gotta laugh with you."

"I'm a hero. You're the Joker," Laminski hissed, pushing himself off the ground. "You're a criminal. You're a monster."

Cassandra Cain hefted her mace, moving to strike the Lantern again. Jack glanced at her and shook his head. Cain returned his look with a dubious one of her own, but didn't press the attack.

"I was the Joker," Jack told Laminski. "God help me, I was. That's the joke. I know what I did. Keeps me up at night. But... you see this?"

Jack tapped the bat symbol on his singed and tattered t-shirt.

"I'm trying to be better."

"Hope detected," the Lantern's rings said. "Love detected."

Laminski struggled to his knees. But the head of Cain's mace pressed against the small of his back, forcing him back down to the ground, hard.

"Sorry, Frankie," Jack said, regretfully, as he pulled the last two rings off the blond man's fingers. "I'm sorry, I really am. Nothing personal."
Laminski's costume vanished, leaving him wearing street clothes rather than his Lantern armour. Jack supposed they were fortunate. Laminski could have been naked under there.

"No," Laminski whimpered. "Please. No. No, no, no…"

Jack put the rings on. All seven rings flickered.

His outfit shimmered, but didn't completely transform. Instead, a wave of multi-coloured light restored the damage to his clothing. Then the light lingered around his body, casting every detail into stark relief.

On his chest, the bat symbol lit up.


TING!

The Father Box sounded annoyed. Jack supposed it had a point. He hoped there was something in the rings' settings to disable pop-up notifications.

But he didn't have time to dig through alien emotion-powered menus. There was work to do.

"Check on Talia," Jack told Cain, as he rose into the air. "And your buddies. I've got this."

Jack ascended like an especially camp rainbow, feeling more fabulous than he'd ever been before.

Apparently his newfound technicolour dreamcoat was profoundly offensive to Kahndaqi sensibilities, because Black Adam immediately broke off his battle with Sivana and came racing towards Jack.

It stood to reason. Kahndaq was a very traditional nation, and Adam was an anachronistic relic from an even more conservative age.

It was also possible that Black Adam was simply detecting the emotional spectrum energy pouring off Jack like he was a humanoid disco ball.

Or maybe he was just using his eyes. Even a legally blind person would probably see Jack coming from several miles away.

An orange torrent of light spilled from Jack's right hand, forming itself into a two-door compact car, its tyres spinning in the air. The engine of the construct vehicle revved, and it plowed into Adam, sending the champion of Kahndaq spinning round.

With a honk of its horn, the car's doors popped open. A wave of indistinct orange figures tumbled out from the vehicle, swarming over Black Adam.

Black Adam bellowed something in what Jack assumed was ancient Kahndaqi. Because Jack was wearing the rings, they automatically translated Adam's swearing. Jack didn't speak a word of the language, but he instantly comprehended everything.

He had the distinct impression that Adam's insults could only be spelled out with the use of hieroglyphics.

Sivana caught up with Black Adam and began pummelling him, knocking the man and his glowing
orange passengers around the sky.

Leaving Sivana and Black Adam behind, Jack soared higher.

He could feel his energy reserves dwindling, in a way that had nothing to do with the power stored in the rings. His own body was feeling the strain.

It could have been his imagination, but Jack thought he felt a creeping blackness encroaching on the edge of his awareness.

TING!

Oh. Right. It wasn't just him, then.

The rings were killing him. Not quickly. But they were hurting him.

He didn't need to hold out forever, though. Just long enough.

TING! TING! TING!

As the Father Box chimed repeatedly, Jack searched for something, anything, that he could use to focus.

An old stage routine came to his mind. A poem.

The familiar words blended seamlessly with even older memories, taking him back to the very first time he'd heard the poem.

Back before he'd been the Joker.

Back when he was just a boy. A little boy named Jack.

"Oh, somewhere in this favoured land," Jack whispered under his breath, "the sun is shining bright."

Near the top of the partially destroyed dome, Superman was firing at the Eradicator and Booster Gold.

The bloody crimson of Lex's Omega beams clashed with the electric blue of Eradicator's pantheon-powered thunderbolts, as well as the scintillating gold of Booster's energy blasts.

The opposing energies were almost beautiful. Deadly, but beautiful.

"The band is playing somewhere," Jack recited, as his vision began to blur. "And somewhere hearts are light."

Jack raised his hands. The rings glowed. Then, to Jack's surprise, the seven coloured bands shifted on their own, flowing together and merging into a single pearlescent Power Ring.

Booster Gold's eyes widened.

Jack saw a similar look of shock on the Eradicator's face, mingled with what felt suspiciously like awe. Of course, he imagined that if the cyborg were questioned, she'd deny being impressed.

Lex's reaction was different. He twisted, as he sensed Jack's approach. His red eyes flared, and he glared murderously at Jack.
"And somewhere men are laughing," Jack said, quietly, to himself. "And somewhere children shout."

The White Power Ring settled into place on Jack's left hand, shining brilliantly.

TING! TING! TING!

Jack hauled his arms back. He felt something solid manifest in his hands.

It was a baseball bat.

Of course.

Jack swung.

An almost impossibly bright line of light connected Jack to Superman.

There was a moment of stillness.

Then what was left of the dome exploded, as Superman was hurled through the structural supports and panels. He shot into the stratosphere and kept going, until he completely vanished from sight.

Jack felt the last vestiges of his strength fade away.

He opened his hands, letting the white baseball bat dissolve into glittering motes of dust.

"But there is no joy in Mudville," Jack mumbled. "Mighty Casey has... struck out."

"Warning. Energy depleted. Power level at zero percent," the ring said.

Jack smiled.

He fell, as darkness and unconsciousness claimed him.

Chapter End Notes

The Joker with multiple power rings is a nod to the short fanfic "The Eighth Stage" by Adrian Tullberg. The poem is "Casey at the Bat" by Ernest Thayer, considered a classic of American literature.
Chapter 73

Jack opened his eyes.

He would have called it 'waking up', except… was he awake?

Up above, he saw a sliver of night sky between two rooftops.

Jack sat up, getting slowly to his feet. He looked around.

He was in Gotham, or something that looked very much like Gotham. As a native son of Gotham, he instantly recognised the old theatre district.

Jack had never performed there, at its height. He'd never seen the glory days. By the time he'd tried to break into the performing arts scene, the area had gone badly downhill.

He was in one of the little side streets that had given Park Row its current name.

Crime Alley.

The place where Thomas and Martha Wayne died. And in this world, the place where Bruce Wayne had died, as well.

But there were no sounds of distant traffic. There was no noise at all. The alley was utterly quiet, in a way that Gotham never was.

Jack examined his hands. He wasn't wearing a ring, or any other bits of cosmically powerful jewelry.

He looked down. He was still wearing his coat, his matching trousers, with shoes, socks, and a t-shirt. But the bat logo on his shirt was missing, leaving him in a plain vanilla white top.

He didn't have a Father Box, either. There was nothing on his belt.

The sound of footsteps broke the silence.

Jack turned around.

He saw a short figure at the mouth of the alley. As the other man came closer, it became obvious that the new arrival was dressed in a purple suit.

It was the same kind of purple that Jack had worn as the Joker. The ensemble was paired with a green bow-tie, which also looked like it could have come straight from Jack's old wardrobe.

The short man was also wearing a purple derby hat. Jack wasn't a hat man, himself. But the other fellow had the kind of head that could pull it off. He made it look good.

The little guy plucked a cigar out of the air. It was a good trick, especially since Jack was sure there was no sleight of hand involved. The end of the cigar lit up on its own accord.

"McGurk," Mister Mxyzptlk said, cheerfully. "Long time no see. We really gotta do this more often."

Jack knew that he wasn't pronouncing the name correctly. Since he was a human being whose first language was plain old English, Jack had the natural propensity to inject vowels where there were none.

The imp didn't seem to take offence. Mxyzptlk smiled in response. Mxyzptlk waved the lit end of his cigar in Jack's direction.

"Gotta take care of yourself, fella," Mxyzptlk said. "Nearly burned yourself out there."

Jack shrugged, spreading his hands. "My candle burns at both ends. It will not last the night."

"None of that, McGurk," Mxyzptlk chided. "You've still got a way to go. There's still a few more parts before this story's over."

Jack straightened. He hooked his thumbs on the fabric of his trousers pockets, and peered at Mxyzptlk with feigned casualness. "You're the one behind this, then? The omnipotent being behind the curtain, the one pulling the strings?"

Mxyzptlk laughed. "I wish, I wish. If I were writing this story, it would be a whole lot spicier. More punch! But I don't have any byline credit here. Alas."

"Sure," Jack said, with a healthy amount of skepticism.

"Though, lemme tell ya? Hypothetically speaking, in a way that isn't dramatic foreshadowing of any kind," Mxyzptlk said, "if you were my puppet, there wouldn't be any strings."

Jack eyed Mxyzptlk, dubiously. "No?"

"Nope, no strings," Mxyzptlk confirmed, with a conspiratorial lilt. "That's a terribly boring style of puppeteering. I prefer... "

Mxyzptlk stuck a hand in the air, above his head. He moved four fingers and his thumb, as if operating a mouth.


"I thought you might," Mxyzptlk said, brightly.

"So," Jack pressed, "you've got nothing to do with this? Absolutely nothing?"


"I was never that good at paying attention in class," Jack retorted.

Mxyzptlk snorted. The imp brought his cigar to his lips, then stopped. He squinted at the cigar, appeared to change his mind, then dropped it.

The cigar vanished before it hit the ground.

Mxyzptlk made a small beckoning motion to Jack. He started strolling back up the alley, in the direction he'd appeared from. "Lay on, McGurk."

Jack walked a few steps behind the imp. "Why are you calling me that, anyway? I answer to many things, including 'hey you', and 'stop right there', but my name's not McGurk."
Mxyzptlk tugged on the lapels of his purple jacket. Without turning around, he said: "You're a McGurk, my boy. You're a part of me, and I'm a part of you. It's all very wibbly-wobbly."

As they stepped out of the alley and onto Park Row proper, the cityscape blurred and shifted, changing from a street in Gotham to somewhere in Metropolis.

They were on a rooftop. Jack wasn't sure what building it was supposed to be, or even whether it was a real location.

He could tell that the city around them was supposed to be Metropolis, though. In the distance, the Art Deco globe atop the Daily Planet building was illuminated by spotlights. The silhouette of the LexCorp Tower dominated the skyline.

"I hope you're speaking figuratively," Jack commented. "I've already got one supernatural being that wants me to call it 'Daddy'."

"Only by adoption," Mxyzptlk said, chuckling. "Let your Uncle Mxy tell you a story."

The imp walked across the roof, his coat flapping around him. He held a hand to his hat, keeping it from being blown away in the wind.

Of course, Jack didn't feel any wind. His own clothes and hair were perfectly still. As far as he was concerned, there wasn't even a breeze.

The fifth-dimensional being hopped on top of a big old-fashioned searchlight mounted in the middle of the roof, scaling it in a single bound. He planted himself on top of the cylindrical housing that held the arc lamp and parabolic reflector, kicking his heels against the glass.

"Once upon a time," Mxyzptlk began, "in a land far, far away, there was a stunningly witty and handsome imp, a great being of vast power..."

"Let me guess, that's you," Jack said, dryly.

Mxyzptlk held up a finger. "And there was a loutish ne'er-do-well of a clown, who was a mite too sharp for his own good."

Jack folded his arms. "That's me?"

"Nuh, uh, uh," Mxyzptlk said, shaking his finger. "Keep up, keep up, McGurk! This was far, far away, so it wasn't you. It was another you, see?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "I guess?"

"The mighty imp," Mxyzptlk continued, "in his infinite wisdom, chose to lend his powers to the clown. For a laugh."

Jack opened his mouth, closed it again, then made a spinning motion with one hand. "Infinite wisdom, huh? You gave your powers to... a version of me? My counterpart in another universe?"

Mxyzptlk pouted. "I didn't give him my powers. It was a loan. A loan, okay? It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Right," Jack drawled, sarcastically.

The imp coughed into a clenched fist. "McGurk, when you're immortal like I am, the difficulty becomes finding new ways to entertain yourself."
"Yeah," Jack said, unsympathetically. "Most old people take up stuff like folk art, line dancing, and book clubs."

"Anyway," Mxyzptlk said, loudly, "the clown conquered his world, drove his Batman insane, made all sorts of..."


"ANYWAY," Mxyzptlk continued, in an even louder voice, "I took my powers back, of course, and set everything to rights. Because that's the sort of stand-up fella I am."

Jack frowned. "So what does that make us? My father's brother's nephew's cousin's former roommate?"

"It makes you McGurk," Mxyzptlk said, snapping his fingers. "We've gone over this. I don't like repeating myself. One more time... we're linked, you and I. For a while, the Joker was a fifth-dimensional being. The Joker was Mxyzptlk. Mxyzptlk was the Joker. And you're the Joker, or a Joker, savvy?"

Mxyzptlk poked a thumb against his green bow tie, which spun round like it was on a pivot. Then he waved grandly at his purple coat and trousers.

"No," Jack said. "But I can hum a few bars and sing along at the chorus."

Mxyzptlk pouted. "You're still not seeing it? That's okay, you'll get there. We've got a little bit of word count."

"I'm hallucinating," Jack pointed out, reasonably. "While unconscious and falling to my death."

Mxyzptlk slapped a hand against the searchlight. "Don't be so negative, McGurk! Look on the bright side. You're getting lots of exposition, my boy!"

"I've got more questions than answers," Jack said. "And I'm feeling like I'm the straight man in this conversation. Which means something's gone very, very, wrong."


Mxyzptlk stretched his arms wide, gesturing at the skyline around them - the buildings that made up the city of Metropolis.

"He can't play, right now," Jack said.

"No, he can't," Mxyzptlk agreed, his expression darkening. "We've gotta fix that, McGurk. But that's not my point. The point is, Clark and I, we've got a special relationship. He's part of my story. I'm part of his. But while I'm pretty gosh darn tight with Supes..."

The imp smacked the searchlight again. It turned on, the old arc lamp igniting and spilling forth a luminous beam into the night sky.

"That's nothing compared to you," Mxyzptlk said, "and old Brucie."

Jack looked up, but he already knew what he was going to see.

Sure enough, the stylised silhouette of a bat floated amidst the clouds.
Chapter 74

Jack stared at the bat symbol in the sky.

"I already knew that," Jack said. "We're two sides of the same coin. A proper coin, not one of Harvey's trick ones."

Mister Mxyzptlk shook his head. "I've just told you. You're special. You're a McGurk. Use your noggin. Think it through. What does that mean for Brucie? What does that mean for the Bat?"

Jack frowned.

Mxyzptlk hopped off the Bat-Signal. He landed deftly on the rooftop, with the grace of an acrobat. His tiny stature didn't hinder him in the slightest.

"Come on. There's a couple more folks you need to meet. Less lip and more leg-work, McGurk. This sequence is a two-parter. Chop, chop!"

Mxyzptlk walked towards the edge of the roof. Jack followed. Before they reached the side of the building, the world twisted and spun.

Gravel crunched beneath Jack's shoes. He looked down. The ground was covered in the kind of stuff that rich people used for their driveways, instead of regular concrete and asphalt.

Jack looked up.

He was standing on the driveway of stately Wayne Manor, in front of the building in all its faux Tudor Gothic glory.

Jack wasn't qualified to comment on the structure's architectural or historical merits, but he wagered that growing up in such a place had to leave a lingering mark on a person's psyche. Certainly, with all the overhanging bits and exterior-facing detail, the structure had plenty of places to house bats.

Mxyzptlk was waiting on the steps leading to the front doors, tapping his foot exaggeratedly. He mimed looking at a wristwatch, pushing his jacket sleeve back to reveal a timepiece that he didn't have.

Crossing the driveway and lawn, Jack climbed towards the imp, taking the stairs two at a time.

"Never been here by invitation," Jack remarked, as the doors opened on their own accord.

"You still haven't," Mxyzptlk retorted, tapping his derby hat. "This is all in your head. Don't go pilfering the silverware, you won't be able to hock it for beer money."

"Please," Jack drawled. "I was a better class of criminal."

"If you say so," Mxyzptlk said.

The imp marched through the foyer, leading the way into the depths of the mansion. Eventually, they reached the manor's kitchen. Once again, the doors opened by themselves, without Mxyzptlk needing to lift a finger.

Jack trailed behind Mxyzptlk. Unlike the rest of the building, the kitchen was occupied.
There was a man standing with his back towards the entrance, wearing a white shirt, black trousers, and an apron.

However, the most prominent individual in the kitchen was a much shorter person, dressed in a loosely-fitting Batman costume complete with a miniature cape and cowl. He was perched on a stool near the kitchen island, his legs dangling in the air without reaching the floor.

The ears of the Batman cowl flopped loosely as their wearer sucked vigorously on a juice box, slurping up sugary fluid through a little plastic straw.

"Bats," Mxyzptlk sang. "How's it hanging?"

The short figure in the Bat costume pulled the straw from his mouth, smacked his lips, and saluted sloppily with a gloved hand.

"Okay," Jack said, slowly. "Who are you? Batboy?"

"I'm Batman," the pint-sized caped crusader rasped, in a theatrically deep voice. Jack crossed his arms. "Only if he shrunk in the wash."

"I'm the goddamn Batman," the shrimp insisted.

"You sure? Because," Jack said, "I thought you were taller."

The tiny Bat shrugged. "Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear?"

"Children, children," Mxyzptlk urged, "behave. Don't make me turn this dream sequence around."

Jack pointed at the little Bat. "Who's he supposed to be? My inner child? Just so we're on the same page here, I don't need any help getting in touch with my inner eight-year-old."

"I'm not your inner eight-year-old," the kid insisted, sounding decidedly unimpressed. "I'm Batman."

"You better show him," Mxyzptlk advised, stroking his chin. "He's not gonna get it, otherwise."

A hand grasped the front of the cowl, lifting it and pulling it free. Messy black locks spilled out from behind the mask, framing a distinctive face. The face of Bruce Wayne.

It was undeniably Bruce, at the same age he'd been on that one fateful night in Crime Alley.

Jack scowled. He turned to Mxyzptlk. "Okay. This is sick and twisted, even by my standards. What gives?"

"I told you," the child said, just a bit petulantly. "I'm Batman. I'm everything that comes to mind when you think 'Batman'. I'm the part of you that knows, in your heart of hearts, that Gotham needs a Batman."

"For a generous definition of 'you', granted," Mxyzptlk added. "Bats here came from that other you. The one who fancied himself a Mxyzptlk rather than a McGurk. Which makes him a fifth-dimensional being, just like me. You're his daddy. Or his uncle?"

Jack eyed both the junior version of Bruce Wayne, and the imp in turn. "There's so much that's
wrong with that statement, I don't know where to start."

"Begin at the beginning," an English-accented voice advised, "and go on till you come to the end, then stop. I've always found that to be the best policy."

A faint wave of heat filled the kitchen, coming from an open oven door. The tall adult man in the white shirt, black trousers, and apron took a baking tray from the oven. With mitts covering both his hands, he carried the tray of cookies to the kitchen island, and set it down on a heat pad.

The eight-year-old Bruce perked up, and he leaned over.

"Not yet, Master Bruce," the man said. "Do wait a moment. Everything has its own time."

The man had the face and voice of a younger Alfred Pennyworth, the Wayne family's long-serving butler, and Bruce Wayne's de-facto father figure. He even had Pennyworth's body language.

But his eyes weren't human. They were solid white. There were no irises or pupils. And they were shining.

The rest of the man seemed to glow, as well, now that Jack was looking at him directly.

"You're not Alfred," Jack said.

"In a manner of speaking, I am," the entity replied, unbothered by the accusation.

"Let's say," Jack continued, "that I want a second opinion."

"I am Alfred Pennyworth," the entity said. Then its features shifted, as its shoulders and chest broadened, its hair growing longer. The voice that emerged from its throat dropped an octave. "I am Bruce Wayne."

It changed again, the face of the adult Bruce shrinking and becoming slimmer. The clothing and apron remained, but Jack was now looking at a mirror of his own face. "I am Jack Napier."

"Neat," Jack said. "Are you Basil Karlo and Matt Hagen, too?"

"I am," the entity answered, calmly, adopting a nasal Brooklyn drawl. Its eyes remained white, but the figure took on a feminine profile, and its hair turned blonde. "I am everyone you've ever met, Jack Napier. Everyone you've ever known, hated, or loved."


"My apologies," the entity said, softly. "But you have to understand."

Jack looked away. "Don't use that face."

When he looked back, the entity was male again. Jack didn't recognise the guy.

He had tousled dark brown hair, in a shade so dark that it was nearly pitch black. He was good-looking in a weathered way, with a nose that had been broken at some point, and stubble shading his chin.

Somehow, Jack felt like he should have been able to identify the man. At the same time, Jack was equally certain that he'd never laid eyes on the fellow in his life.

"That's better," Jack said.
Mxyzptlk walked over to stand beside the white-eyed entity. The imp patted the man on the leg. Due to Mxyzptlk's height, that was about all that the imp could reach.

"See, McGurk," Mxyzptlk said, "I'm connected to you, because I once shared my magic with the Joker, and you're a Joker. Bats here is tied to you in much the same way."

Over on his stool, the young Bruce Wayne in the Batman suit gave a little wave.

"Similarity, contagion, imitation, correspondence," Mxyzptlk summed up, sounding uncharacteristically serious. "But our friend here..."

"I am you," the entity stated. "I am you, and every other living being that can think and feel."

"You're the White Entity," Jack said. "You're the Life Entity. You're that thing, the one who embodies all life."

"All sentient life," the entity corrected.

Mxyzptlk clapped his hands. "We're running out of word count, McGurk, and it's almost time for you to wake up. Lemme spell this out for you simply, my boy. There's a little problem that we three need you to solve."

Jack tucked his hands into his pockets, doing his best to appear casual. "Do we need to discuss my rates?"

"Oh, you're already on your way," Mxyzptlk told him. "But you and the folks at home need to know the who, and the why. Me, I need you to fix my buddy. You gotta fix Superman. He's no fun right now. No fun at all."

Jack's eyes narrowed. "That's why I remember the other timeline, isn't it? That's why I'm halfway sane and even feeling downright altruistic. You did this to me."

The child-sized Bruce nodded, solemnly. "The world must have a Batman. Someone needs to be the hero that it deserves."

Jack stared at the imp and the tiny Batman, before looking at the white-eyed man. "And you? What do you want me to do, go door to door and preach about being kind to thy neighbour? To laugh in the face of death?"

"Embrace Life, Jack Napier. Live Life," the entity responded, quietly. "Life and Death are oft thought to be in opposition. But what threatens us is not Death... but Anti-Life."

"That's what Lex is using," Jack said. "The Anti-Life Equation. The ultimate proof that math really is evil, and really is out to get you. You want me to stop him. Because he's peeing in your swimming pool. Is that it?"

Mxyzptlk squinted. "That's the analogy you're going with? Really? Fate of the world, your entire universe, and that's what you think of?"

"I'm standing by it," Jack said, firmly.

Mxyzptlk rubbed his chin. "Eh, that'll do."
Chapter 75

Jack opened his eyes.

He sat up, slowly, easing himself into a slightly more vertical position. He drew his legs closer to his torso and pushed the thin blanket aside.

He rubbed his eyes. He wasn't a hundred percent sure if he truly was awake. But he felt awful, so the answer was likely 'yes'.

Through blurry vision, he examined his left hand. There was a pearly white ring on one of his fingers, embossed with a triangle and seven lines radiating from its base.

"Jack Napier of Earth," the ring said. "You have examined yourself. You have perceived the hearts and minds of others. You have embraced life. You live."

"Thanks, I guess," Jack replied. "But I was looking for the snooze button."

The ring remained silent.

The Father Box did not.

TING!

"I'm still in one piece," Jack told the Father Box. "Either that, or four pieces. Depends if you count the voices in my head."

Ting!

Jack reached over to where the Father Box was lying. He kept it in his hand as he stood up. His bare feet brushed against the fabric of the futon, and then the wooden floorboards.

He looked down. He was dressed, but not in the clothes he'd previously been wearing. Instead, he was in some kind of plain grey tunic and white pants.

Which begged the question of who had undressed him, and whether they'd seen the state of his underwear. He felt vaguely sorry for the unknown person, or persons.

Jack glanced at the Father Box. "So, where are we? Not on Venus, I'm guessing. Kind of rustic for Sivana's tastes."

"Current location," the ring said, "Himalayan region, northern Nepal."

TING!

"I'm gonna have to go with the ring, here," Jack informed the Father Box. "I was looking for a general answer, not colour commentary."

TING!

He placed his feet into the slippers next to the futon, then crossed the small windowless room until he reached the door.
It wasn't locked. Although when he opened it, Jack was met with two sets of eyes, belonging to two guards.

The man and woman were dressed identically, in what Jack mentally chose to call 'generic ninja chic'. Their clothing was similar enough that it took Jack an instant to realise they were of different genders.

Their fashion sense was about par for the course for the League of Shadows. The organisation's operatives often used modern gear in the field, and dressed appropriately when in public. But they had a tendency to revert back several centuries when left to their own devices.

"Hi," Jack said. "Quick question, do I get breakfast with my room, and if so, where's the buffet?"

The two Shadow acolytes looked at each other in confusion and mild consternation.

"If you are hungry," the female one said, after an uncomfortable pause, "I can alert the kitchens... "

"That was a joke," Jack explained, leaning on the doorframe. "I do that. I'm obliged to stay on-brand."

"A joke," the woman echoed, blankly.

"More importantly," Jack said, "where's your Mistress? Or Doc Sivana, Booster Gold, the Eradicator... anyone else who might have checked in with me?"

Ting!

Jack dropped his gaze to the chiming Apokoliptian computer. "Hey, it's polite to ask. You can't just Boom Tube me everywhere."

Ting! Ting! Ting!

"Alright," Jack amended, "technically you could, but popping directly to people isn't polite. Besides, I need the exercise. Gotta work on my cardio."

The male half of the Shadow pair appeared nonplussed. But he was nevertheless able to gather his wits and point down the corridor. "Follow us. The Mistress said you should be brought to her at once, whenever you awoke."

Jack blinked. "Just checking, did she mean that unconditionally? Because, you know, if she's in the shower or taking a dump or something, that could be awkward."

The male Shadow blanched. "The Mistress does not..."

"Okay," Jack said, "if you're going to claim that she doesn't bathe or defecate, let me stop you right there."

Ting!

"Pretty sure she doesn't dunk herself into a Lazarus Pit simply to avoid biological necessities," Jack said to the Father Box. "It'd be easier to just take a leak."

The female Shadow sighed audibly. "If you'll come with us, please?"

"Sure," Jack agreed. "You did say 'please'."
Jack followed the pair. They led the way deeper into the building. The place had the kind of architecture he expected from the Shadows, with what he assumed were prepared kill zones and defensible positions scattered throughout the floor plan.

The structure was clearly inhabited and used by the Shadows for training and other martial arts bullshit, but it also had the feel of a giant deathtrap.

After their experience on Venus, Jack couldn't find any fault with the Shadows' reasoning.

Eventually, Jack found himself in a room that resembled a study, or at least a period drama set designer's idea of a study. It had tables covered in maps, weapons and books lining the walls, and other assorted bits of frippery. The only concession to modern technology that Jack could see was the little stand in one corner, where Talia al Ghul was charging her phone and tablet.

No... that wasn't quite true. There was another bit of advanced technology in the room, namely the suit of armour belonging to Booster Gold. Of course, Booster was inside the suit, so it didn't count as part of the decor. He turned towards the door as Jack entered.

"You," Booster said, in an accusing tone.

Jack pointed at himself. "Me?"

Behind Jack, the two Shadows who had escorted him through the building cautiously backed away, scooting out of the room entirely.

Contrary to popular belief, it seemed some of the organisation had a rudimentary sense of decorum and self-preservation.

"You," Booster repeated. "This is all your fault."

"Statistically," Jack replied, "that's likely. But what's my fault, exactly?"

"This," Booster shot back, waving a gauntlet-covered hand. "Venus. Lex. The fact I'm stuck here with you and a bunch of assassins."

"That's a wee bit unfair," Jack noted.

Booster squinted. "Huh?"

"They're not all assassins," Jack clarified. "They offer a wide range of boutique services, like theft, espionage, blackmail, brainwashing..."

"I'm not interested in their sales brochure," Booster grumbled.

"Look at it this way," Jack suggested. "Nobody knows who you are, in this timeline. Nobody's gonna care if you share selfies with a bunch of supervillains on your social media."

"I'd prefer," Talia al Ghul commented, "for you to keep my people off social media, thank you."

The leader of the Shadows was seated at one of the tables in the room, artfully ensconced in a high-backed chair. She favoured both Jack and Booster Gold with an expression that was torn between irritation and amusement.

"Oh," Jack said, "you're one of those parents. Can't post any pics of the kids, I gotcha. Speaking of, how are your people doing? From what little I saw, they took some lumps."
Talia inhaled, sharply. "A full accounting will need to wait until we can determine who is recoverable. Confirmed permanent fatalities… a dozen of my elites, thus far."

"My condolences," Jack said.

"As for your health," Talia al Ghul said, "I presume you have recovered, and that ring has not driven you insane."

*Ting!*

"No more insane than you already are," Talia added.

**TING!**

Jack held the Father Box up. "I resemble that remark. But yep, fit as a fiddle here. Or a slightly dented double bass. Might be a few strings short of a quartet, but who's counting?"

"He's definitely okay," Booster muttered. "He still thinks he's funny."

"I am funny," Jack insisted. "It's not my fault if the people around me have bad taste."

"Sivana has expressed interest in running further tests on you, and your new accoutrement," Talia said. She stared at Jack. "I, too, was unaware Power Rings came in that colour."

"White is the new black," Jack responded. "Where is Doc Sivana, anyway?"

"In her basement," Booster quipped, angling his head in Talia's direction. "Doing mad science."

"Strengthening our magical and mundane protections," Talia corrected. "All the while complaining about the poor working conditions, and how there was no need for us to leave the planet Venus."

"Justice League knows the address now," Jack pointed out. "Next thing you know, they'll sign Sivana up for junk mail and have the salespeople come round."

"Your information security sucks," Booster said, bluntly. "You trusted Kuttler, and he sold you out."

Jack frowned, his lips quirking downward. "That's really what happened, then? For sure? Frank wasn't just trash-talking?"

*Ting!*

Jack blinked, twisting his hand so he could peer at the surface of the Father Box. "Nah, I don't keep a bunch of elaborate revenge plans on file."

*Ting!*

"No," Jack said, patiently, "I'm not starting a collection, but thanks."

"Joker, Batsy," Booster began, "White Lantern, or whatever you're calling yourself today, I got a question, funny man. How do you know she isn't going to betray you? What if she decides her people have suffered enough, and decides to cut her losses?"

Booster pointed an armoured finger at Talia al Ghul.

The woman arched an eyebrow in return.
"How do you know you can trust Sivana," Booster continued, "or whoever the hell you have wearing that Supergirl suit?"

"That's the Eradicator," Jack explained, helpfully.

Booster stopped, his mouth hanging open. He held up one hand in the universal signal for silence, and pressed two fingers of his other hand to the side of his visor. "Skeets, can you confirm?"

"Analysing. Sir, I concur," a tinny voice replied, coming from the headpiece of Booster's armour. "High confidence that their Supergirl or Power Girl analogue is indeed... "

"Thanks, Skeets," Booster interrupted, cutting off his robot pal. Then he glared at Jack. "Are you out of your mind?"

Ting!

"By definition," Jack said, "sort of, yes?"

"I would think," Talia al Ghul murmured, "that the untrustworthy one is you, Mister... Gold, was it? A man with no history, no legal records, no mystical presence whatsoever. You are more of a non-entity than my Shadows. Quite a feat, in this day and age."

"I'm a man of mystery," Booster drawled. "A guy's gotta have some secrets."


"Damnit, man," Booster complained. "You're hurting my image."


Booster sighed. "I'm not a sucker for any pretty face. I know she's got an army of assassins on tap."

"And thieves, spies, blackmailers," Jack listed off. "I'm forgetting one or two."

Ting!

"Not helping," Booster said to the Father Box. "Really not helping."

"Anyway, Booster," Jack said, "I see where you're coming from."

Booster eyed Jack suspiciously. "You do?"

"Absolutely," Jack asserted. "You're used to being in the Justice League, so being part of my Injustice League has to be a big switch. Don't worry, you'll get used to it. You'll like it here. We have cake."

Talia al Ghul raised her voice a notch, not quite expressing alarm, but certainly breaking her composure. "He is part of the Justice League?"

"A different Justice League," Jack reassured her. "Different timeline. He's not one of Lex's. Where he comes from, they have a nicer, smoother, low-fat Superman. All organic, no artificial flavours or sweeteners."

Booster shook his head. "This is the worst timeline."

"Nah. Could be worse," Jack said. "Superman could be a Nazi or Communist or something. Hey,
by the way, what happened with Lex? Did I get him good? Last thing I remember, I was giving him everything in the tank."

*Ting!*

"**Power level at one percent,**" the ring on his finger reported.

Jack frowned at his hand. "Forgot to plug you in. Anyone got a white cable and adapter?"
"Hey! Wake up, man!"

Ollie groaned. He cracked his eyelids open, rubbing crud from his eyes. He pushed the covers aside and glared at the unwelcome intruder in his hotel suite.

"Flash," Ollie hissed. "What are you..."

The Flash vibrated in place. The guy flickered like a video in fast-forward, then reappeared further away from Ollie's bed.

Light came in through the window, which was annoying because the blackout curtains had been drawn an instant ago. Obviously, the Flash had opened the drapes, and he'd done so with his powers, giving Ollie no opportunity to stop the man.

"Thawne," Ollie tried, using the speedster's real name. "I wouldn't mind waking up to some blondes, but you're..."

"What," Thaddeus Thawne said. "Too male? Not now, Queen. We've got a problem."

The cowl of Thawne's costume was thrown back, hanging loosely behind him. That meant Ollie could see the guy's face. He could tell that the Flash was serious.

That alone was legitimately concerning.

Ollie pushed himself upright, fighting with the pile of too-soft pillows and matching mattress. "What?"

"First order of business," the Flash said briskly, "you're Justice League Chairman. Again."

Ollie slapped his own face, trying to wake himself up. "Hawkgirl's the chair."

"Vanessa's dead," the Flash replied. "If we go down the roster... Human Bomb is on the inactive list. Feds won't release him from lockdown. He's not leader material, anyway."

"Icon's next in line," Ollie said, trying to work through his grogginess and the remains of his hangover. He was having difficulty even remembering the order of the English alphabet.

"Putting Icon in charge is a public relations disaster waiting to happen," the Flash retorted. "He's the only black superhero who gets accused of racism. By other black people."

Ollie's brow furrowed. "Lantern?"

"Missing in action," the Flash answered, instantly. "Presumed dead."


"Also dead," the Flash finished. "So's Nightwing. Look, man, the chain of command is all messed up, and you know how to yell at people. You're it."

"Jesus Christ," Ollie muttered. He wasn't sure if he was cursing, or making a very short prayer. "What the hell?"
The Flash sighed. "Lex screwed up. Put some pants on, and I'll tell you all about it."

The speedster vanished, followed by the door to the bedroom magically going from an open to a closed position.

Ollie mumbled a few choice imprecations under his breath. He dragged himself out of bed and found a pair of boxer shorts. With the bare necessities satisfied, he staggered out of the hotel suite's bedroom and into the living room beyond.

The Flash was standing by the kitchenette, watching the kettle. He looked up as Ollie approached.

"Alright," Ollie growled, "what's going on? From the top."

"Short version," the Flash said, "Manhunter tracked the Joker and his posse to their hideout. On Venus."

Ollie clutched his forehead, kneading the skin with his thumb and forefinger. "What, Venice? In Italy?"

"Nope," the Flash said. "Venus. The planet. In space."

Ollie gave the Flash an incredulous and bleary-eyed stare.

The costumed speedster shrugged. "I'm just the messenger, don't ask me."

"Right," Ollie groaned. "Venus."

"Superman took Black Adam, the Lantern, Hawkgirl, Flamebird, and Nightwing to Venus," the Flash elaborated. "Strike team. Supposed to link up with the Manhunter, then take the opposition out. They had some sort of inside info, too. I don't have all the details. Wonder Woman might."

Ollie stumbled over to an armchair, flopping into it. His headache was likely due to the previous night's alcohol, but the disaster unfolding in front of him wasn't doing his skull any favours.

"Why," Ollie snapped, "wasn't I briefed on this? Why am I only hearing this now?"

"Need to know," the Flash responded. "Big Blue decided that you didn't need to. Far as I know, he only told Wondie and me."

"You're fast enough to cover any hotspots, in case something happened while they were all offworld," Ollie concluded. "And with the Kryptonians, Frank, and Teth-Adam all offworld, Circe is the biggest gun we have."

"Something like that," the Flash said. "I guess?"

Ollie sucked in a breath. "Alright. So, what happened?"

"According to Adam, everyone's dead, or good as dead, aside from him and Superman," the Flash carried on. "Confirmed kills on Hawks, the Martian, and Nightwing. Presumed for Flamebird and the Lantern. Frank was still breathing when Adam retreated, but Adam didn't have a way to take Frank with him."

Ollie scowled. "Adam's back planetside?"

"Yep," the Flash confirmed. "Flew back the long way, under his own power."
Ollie mashed a hand over his lower jaw and beard, massaging his face. "Adam left Frank behind? Did his rings run out of power?"

"He lost his rings," the Flash said. Then the speedster held up his hands, sensing Ollie's stark disbelief. "Ask Adam, I'm just repeating it, okay?"

"Christ," Ollie grumbled. "They're the most powerful weapons in the universe, not a phone. You don't just leave them in the back of a taxi. How did they get to Venus in the first place?"

"Lantern was their ride," the Flash explained.


"Nah," the Flash joked, "Terrific wasn't part of the team. He's just an associate, not a full member."

Ollie directed his best killing glare at the Flash. "One, Adam's an associate, and he got told about this mess before I did. So that doesn't fly. Two, not funny."

"Just trying to lighten the tension," the speedster said.

The electric kettle stopped bubbling, and shut itself off with a click. The Flash lifted the kettle and poured the contents into a waiting mug. The string of a tea bag was already hanging over the side of the mug.

Ollie grunted. Assuming the tea wasn't poisoned, Thaddeus Thawne was being nice and providing him with caffeine. More than anything else, that simple act of courtesy proved that the situation was messed up beyond belief.

Thawne handed the mug over. Ollie clutched it carefully, inhaling the steam.

"Where's Lex, in all this," Ollie asked. "Off brooding? Doing his angry Superman face?"

"Uh," the Flash said, "last I checked, Supes was around Pluto?"

"Uh," the Flash said, "last I checked, Supes was around Pluto?"

Ollie blinked. "Huh?"

The Flash waved his hands. "A little past Pluto? On his way out of the solar system, anyway."

Ollie stared blankly. "What the hell? Why? Is he on his way back to Krypton?"

The Flash ran his fingers through his hair. "He's unconscious. I think. Out cold. On an outward bound trajectory."

Ollie kept staring, unable to articulate the question at the top of his mind.

Though telepathy wasn't one of Thawne's powers, the Flash got the message.


"Christ," Ollie whined. "Do we need to send someone to pick him up?"

"Or," the Flash proposed, "we could just wait for him to wake up and turn around."

Ollie lowered his face to the mug of tea, preparing to drink the piping hot beverage. Then he stopped, as a thought occurred to him. "Black Adam flew back to Earth. Why didn't he pick up Lex on the way?"
"Dunno," the Flash said. "According to him, Lex was going the wrong way."

"That's a lousy excuse," Ollie objected.

"That's what I said," the Flash agreed. "He told me not to criticise, because what do I know about orbital mechanics?"

"What does he know about orbital mechanics? He's a fossil," Ollie pointed out. "When he was alive, pyramids were considered cutting edge technology!"

The Flash shrugged. "Wisdom of Zehuti? Personally, I think he just couldn't give a shit."
Chapter 77

There were better ways to spend a day in New York City. Much better ways.

And with better people.

Oliver Queen was a billionaire playboy superhero. He was so far past the A-list that he was into the numerals. He had the phone numbers of good-looking people who were great conversationalists, and who could truly hold their liquor.

Unfortunately, in his newfound capacity as interim chair of the Justice League, Ollie had responsibilities. He had to do adult things. Meaning 'adult' in the boring sense, not the fun way.

Being who he was, Ollie was no stranger to the United Nations building. He'd been in the joint before. Sometimes he'd even gone through the front doors rather than chasing supervillains through the roof.

At the moment, he was wearing a suit. But not one of his tailored business suits. He was dressed in his Green Arrow suit. His quiver was missing, as was his bow. However, in all other respects he was Green Arrow of the Justice League, not Oliver Queen, tycoon at large.

Even without his signature weapons, his combat gear was still worth more than the annual per capita income of most nations. A fully suited Green Arrow should have been something to fear. Something that inspired awe.

Instead, he was getting jerked around.

Without Superman in the room, or even on the planet, it looked like the fat cat politicians were getting cocky. A little too big for their britches.

Ollie kept his smile stretched across his face, bolted firmly into position. It wasn't a natural smile, of course. It was a smile, but it wasn't a nice one. It was the one he reserved for people in the boardroom, or people he was about to put an arrow through.

His fingers itched. He really wanted to draw his bow and string an arrow. In that regard, it was a good thing the security minions had taken his weapons away. Otherwise, there was a very good chance that Ollie would have already buried a shaft in someone's head or chest.

Bow or no bow, Ollie was dead certain that he could take everyone in the room. Unless the fifteen permanent representatives and their staff were metahumans, Ollie figured he could put them all down with nothing but his bare hands and feet.

"Speak honestly, Mister Arrow," the Markovian ambassador said, in heavily accented English. "Is Kahndaq staking a territorial claim to the planet Venus?"

There was a hubbub across the room, as several other ambassadors and their entourages whispered to each other in a manner that failed to actually be properly quiet.

"This would be in violation of the Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space," the Markovian permanent representative continued, stolidly.

"Green Arrow," said Vilmos Egans, the president of the United Nations Security Council, "you may respond."
The words were simple, and the tone was formal, but the implications were anything but polite. Meetings of UN bodies were supposed to be highly regimented and structured affairs, more ritual than substance. But the so-called diplomats had effectively thrown their own rulebook out in favour of raking Ollie over the coals. They were grilling him like an excessively marinated steak.

The presiding officer of the UN Security Council was typically the head of delegation for the country currently in charge for the month, meaning that country's ambassador to the UN. But if a more senior government official from that nation chose to turn up, they could claim the hot seat instead.

The current president of the UN Security Council was therefore the Foreign Minister of Kasnia, Vilmos Egans, a stoutly-built and prematurely greying man that looked like he was up to something. He was the kind of character that Ollie would have pegged as a mob boss, not a political appointee.

Then again, considering Kasnia's location smack in the middle of the Balkans, and how the country's idea of governance was really just semi-organised backstabbing among its interest groups... maybe Egans was a mob boss. Literally.

He certainly seemed hell bent on turning the session into a shakedown of the Justice League.

"I can't speak for the Republic of Kahndaq," Ollie replied, pushing the button that activated his microphone. "Teth-Adam was acting in his capacity as an associate member of the Justice League, not the head of state of Kahndaq."

"Green Arrow, please answer the question," Egans said.

Ollie clenched his gloved fist. The fabric covering his hand strained, pulling taut. He squeezed hard enough that there was a tiny, almost imperceptible, sound. Thankfully, it was too soft for the microphone to pick up.

"The Justice League," Ollie reiterated, "does not believe Teth-Adam and the Republic of Kahndaq are making any claims of sovereignty to Venus. Not that it's your business, because Kahndaq hasn't signed that treaty. It's not as if..."

Ollie's microphone cut out, the little red ring going black.

"Thank you, Green Arrow," Egans said.

Ollie scowled, his smile slipping momentarily. The son of a bitch had muted him.

"The Council recognises the People's Republic of China," Egans continued. "Your Excellency, you have the floor."

"Thank you, Minister," the Chinese ambassador said.

Ambassador Hu Wei was a thin and neatly-dressed man, the kind of guy that looked like he'd been assembled from a kit or stamped out of metal. His hair was immaculate, which Ollie found vaguely impressive.

Hu ran his fingers around the medallion he wore instead of a Western necktie. He tapped a perfect fingernail against the microphone, ascertaining that it was on, before continuing.

"Honourable chairperson, delegates," Hu said, "this body exists to maintain the world's peace and security. It is our responsibility to ensure that international peacekeeping, and indeed interplanetary
peacemaking, is not only efficient, but transparent."

Ollie kept his smile frozen on his face, willing all his muscles to stay still.

"Therefore," Hu carried on, "as the delegate from the Kingdom of Kasnia has so astutely noted, it is of great concern that the Justice League task force included Teth-Adam, the Protector of Kahndaq. Although I respect Green Arrow's position that Teth-Adam is an actively serving super-functionary of the Justice League in addition to his Kahndaqi office... it once again appears that the Justice League is acting to further the interests of certain states over others."

"We didn't plant a Kahndaqi flag on Venus," Ollie growled, "our team was there to fight supervillains! Just because part of Venus is habitable, it doesn't mean... "

"Decorum," Egans said, leaning forward and barking into his microphone. "Green Arrow, please respect the decorum of this Council."

With a heroic effort, Ollie kept his rear end planted to his chair, rather than leaping over the table and rushing Egans' position.

Ollie satisfied himself with imagining what it would feel like to wallop the ass with his own official 'Kasnia' nameplate. The things looked like they had some heft to them. Ollie was sure they could do some damage.

"Since its inception," Hu Wei continued, "the Justice League has purported to be an independent organisation, not a state-affiliated team like my own country's Great Twenty. Is this true? I am not disparaging the good work the League has done. However, the League's roster continues to be skewed in favour of certain nationalities. It continues to be based in one particular country. It continues to commit acts like this unilateral deployment to Venus, and Superman's unprovoked attack on the Socialist Republic of Rhelasia... "

"First you guys accuse us of being too Kahndaqi," Ollie yelled, "now we're too American? Which is it? Can't be both."

"Green Arrow," Egans warned, jabbing a thick finger at Ollie. "I will not caution you a second time."

Ollie folded his arms and leant back in his seat.

"Thank you, chairman, delegates," Hu Wei finished. He shut his microphone off, signalling that he was done.


Cal Durham, a clean-shaven and broad-shouldered black guy, keyed his own microphone. "Minister, my fellow delegates. Tempers in here are getting heated. We're dragging lots of politics into the picture. Let's take a moment to remember, it's not the Justice League of Kahndaq, but nor is it the Justice League of America. It's the Justice League. A lot of the League, like Superman, Flamebird, Nightwing, and the Martian Manhunter, they aren't even from Earth. You can't accuse them of national bias."

Ollie nodded along, feeling partially mollified. The American guy was talking sense.

Then Durham dropped the proverbial shoe on Ollie.
Once again, Ollie found himself feeling very, very, pissed off.

"That's a problem," Durham said, looking directly at Ollie from across the meeting room. "If they're not serving national interests, and they're not taking guidance from this body, then whose agenda are they following? Besides their own? May I remind you, the League decided to blast off to Venus, supposedly to collar some supervillains. Unilaterally. They made that call without consulting, or even notifying, the Security Council and the countries on it. Including the United States. Green Arrow, we would have appreciated some kind of heads-up."

Ollie winced. Lex hadn't told him a damned thing either, and he was Oliver Queen. He was the Green Arrow. Yet he'd been left in the dark.

And now, here he was, having to defend Lex's questionable decisions.

The Justice League wasn't paying him enough for this.

Especially since it wasn't paying him at all.

Hell, the Queen group was funnelling money into the Justice League, not the other way around. Ollie was spending his own hard-earned cash just so he could be verbally abused by a bunch of bureaucrats.

Ollie frowned. He should have delegated the whole United Nations thing to someone else. Wonder Woman, probably. She was a demigoddess. She could be diplomatic. And if all else failed, she had the power to turn everyone in the room into animals.

Or as Circe would probably put it, the world was already led by animals. At the moment, Ollie felt like he'd been thrown to the goddamn wolves.
Chapter 78

It hadn't taken long for the news to leak.

There was an old joke about nothing travelling faster than the speed of light, except gossip.

Thaddeus Thawne was very familiar with the idiom.

He was the Flash. He had a professional responsibility to be well-versed in any figure of speech involving speed.

But even before Thaddeus had donned the suit, he'd understood the concept. Some things were universal, even centuries in the future.

He hadn't learnt much from his gene donor. But as a politician, Thaddeus Senior had understood information control.

The Justice League had lost control of the narrative.

Their media line was simple. They told the truth, but a carefully managed version of the truth. The Justice League had deployed to Venus to apprehend a cabal of dangerous supervillains. They'd failed in their objective, but this wasn't due to incompetence or weakness on the part of the League. It just proved how dangerous the villains were.

That was the idea. That was supposed to be the message. It wasn't taking.

The fact Superman was still nowhere to be seen wasn't helping. They had no Lantern to show the flag, no Hawkgirl, no Manhunter, not even a Nightwing and Flamebird. The League were being cagey about the lumps they'd suffered on Venus, but it didn't take a genius to spot the holes on their roster. It didn't take much for the public to realise that nobody had seen a particular superhero for days or weeks.

Even if the public didn't immediately jump to the correct conclusion that certain people were dead, it was obvious they were heavily injured and off the field.

Public opinion was a problem. A big problem. Still, in the end, it was just a numbers game. Thaddeus wasn't worried about crowds rioting in the streets. The sheep weren't about to maul the sheepdogs, not yet.

But since the news was out there, and all the speculation was out in the open, it wasn't just the public that was restless.

All the rats and gutter trash of the criminal set were coming out to play. They saw weakness. They saw opportunity.

That meant more headaches for Thaddeus Thawne. It meant he had to do his damn job.

He ran down the street, through a motionless landscape of frozen people and equally still vehicles. The smart ones were going in the other direction, fleeing the scene. Though there were always a few dumb gawkers.

Thankfully, it was very early in the morning, so there weren't too many people around.

Thaddeus rounded the corner, getting his first good look at what he was dealing with.
The cops were actually the first thing he noticed. They weren't ordinary beat cops, but two Metropolis Special Crimes Unit officers in hot pursuit.

Which meant they weren't using mundane cars or bikes, but Kryptonian battlesuits... or rather, human copies of some old Kryptonian war robot design modified for police use.

As far as Thaddeus knew, the bulk of the modifications had involved moving the cockpits from the original belly and crotch location to a head-mounted orientation. Because they were police machines, the SCU robots also had a bunch of lightbars and obnoxious flashers bolted on them.

But they also retained the regular weapon mounts.

One of those weapons was in the process of firing, a coruscating wave coming from the emitters on a robot's arm. The SCU's literature described their gear as less-than-lethal.

It was obvious to Thaddeus that at their present output, the firepower the cops were throwing around was only less-than-lethal if their perp was a fully-grown elephant.

Their perp wasn't an elephant. The cops were chasing a couple of guys in a giant plastic aeroplane. At least, it looked plastic. It had the sheen of plastic, a cheerful red colour, and even giant seams meant to suggest mould lines. There were stubby wings, a propeller, and big wheels.

Thaddeus sighed. Theme villains. Goddamn theme villains.

The ridiculous-looking airplane was flying about two or three storeys above the street. There were two men in the open cockpit. The pilot was wearing a grotesque helmet resembling a doll's head. The other guy, twisting backwards to return fire at the pursuing SCU suits, didn't have a stupid helmet. Or any head protection at all. He was just wearing an obnoxious lime green suit.

Toyman and the Prankster.

Thaddeus was getting sick of dealing with kiddy clown-themed villains. First the Joker, then the Trickster in Central City, and now these two punks?

Did they think it was their time to shine? Were they feeling emboldened by the Joker's success, inspired to commit their own insane crimes?

Thaddeus didn't know. Frankly, he didn't care. He had no particular desire to get into the diseased minds of Winslow Schott and Oswald Loomis.

Schott and Loomis were supposed to be mechanical geniuses. Big brains. Which Thaddeus could kind of see, because it took a special brand of warped talent to build something that could clearly fly despite its cartoonish proportions.

But, as a superhero, Thaddeus was constantly exposed to undeniable proof that even smart people could be incredibly stupid.

Thaddeus studied the scene.

The blast coming from the SCU walker wasn't the only attack frozen in mid-air. The Prankster was shooting too. The green-clad criminal was firing a comically oversized handgun, shaped like a revolver.

Thaddeus squinted.
He was shooting flags.

There was a short stick coming out of the barrel of the Prankster's gun. It had a flag attached, a little piece of fabric that read 'BANG' in friendly letters.

But there were more of those flags in the air, and their trajectories suggested the flags had indeed come from the barrel of the Prankster's idiotic weapon.

There were also several explosions. They weren't Hollywood explosions, but real zones of concussive force, all dust and shrapnel. A couple were bursting over the metal hide of the SCU battlesuits.

The Prankster's firearm wasn't a too-large handgun. It was a compact rocket launcher. The world's most ridiculously impractical rocket launcher.

Theme villains. Goddamn theme villains.

Thaddeus sighed.

He jogged towards the lead SCU robot, planted his foot against its leg armour, and walked right up the machine's side. He stayed carefully clear of the explosion blooming over its dome-shaped pilot's compartment, only pausing to brush a few stray flecks of debris away.

Thaddeus leaned over and plucked a couple of flag missiles out of the air, before they could hit the SCU suit.

Then he turned around and made his way back to ground level, picking up another flag along the way - a stray shot, he assumed.

Thaddeus briefly examined the flags in his hands. They looked like little scraps of fabric tied cheaply to plastic sticks, but they actually had some weight and solidity to them. He still couldn't see how Schott and Loomis had stuffed propellant and warheads into the things, but they did seem to be fully functioning missiles.

Clever. Brilliant, even. But also stupid. So stupid. So very pointless.

Thaddeus crossed the street.

He strolled up the front window of a Sundollar. It felt like the coffee shop's big glass frontage was about to break or crack from a shockwave, but by the time it did, Thaddeus would be clear.

Thaddeus stopped long enough to glance into the Sundollar, making sure there was nobody in harm's way. But it looked like the barista and his tiny handful of customers were already taking cover, so that was fine.

He kept walking.

Thaddeus ascended the building, stopping around the third floor. Then he kicked off the wall, backflipping in the process, and landed on the wing of the Toyman's airplane.

Lifting a foot, Thaddeus stomped down a couple of times, testing the surface of the wing. It was more solid than it looked.

He figured he could do more to test that.

Thaddeus crouched. He jammed one of the flags into the wing, planting it head-downwards and
applying a bit of pressure. He did the same with the other two flags he was carrying.

He got up, dusting his hands off. Casually, he made his way down the wing and onto the plane's fuselage.

Reaching the cockpit, he stuck his head and upper body in, past the immobile form of Toyman.

Even the aircraft's instruments looked like they were just vaguely moulded plastic. The dials were all a single colour, the same red that made up the plane's body. But they did move, and they did seem to serve as readouts and controls.

Thaddeus reached forward, and switched off everything he could see.

Then he grabbed hold of Toyman's hands, forcefully pried them from the throttle and control yoke, then moved those too.

Thaddeus rubbed his chin, examining his handiwork.

He rapped experimentally on Toyman's helmet. The big child's doll head on Winslow Schott's head looked like it was simple fibreglass, but it didn't feel that way on closer inspection. It was probably high-tech body armour, as was the rest of the inventor's outfit.

Thaddeus looked at the other villain in the back seat of the cockpit. Toyman's partner was much more lightly dressed, though. The Prankster didn't have any head and neck protection.

He sighed.

Thaddeus unbuckled the Prankster from his seat, flipping the harness open and hauling the man out. It was difficult, given that the guy was basically deadweight. Thaddeus was in good shape, but outright strength wasn't part of his powerset.

He wrestled the weapon from the Prankster's immobile hands, tossed it aside, then dragged the guy out of the cockpit, up the wing, onto the nearby building, and all the way to the roof.

He left the criminal on the rooftop, stuck in an awkward gravity-defying position.

Thaddeus pulled his cowl off, exposing his hair and face. He scratched his scalp, ran his fingers through his hair, rubbed his face, and finally put the mask back on.

Then he allowed the world to speed up.

An explosion rippled over the wing of the comically silly airplane. He thought he heard the faint sound of the Toyman yelping, as his plane suddenly lost power and went completely out of control... but that was surely just his imagination.

There was no way a human voice would be audible over the sounds of unfolding chaos.
Down below, the airplane crashed into the street, plowing into several parked cars, taking out a newspaper and magazine stand, before ending up through the front of a closed designer boutique and its two neighbouring stores.

Thaddeus watched, with some interest, as the plane came to a halt. Amazingly, the unwieldy-looking contraption was still right side up, though it had flipped over a couple of times.

On the rooftop, the Prankster spilled all over the concrete, his limbs bending as gravity reasserted its hold on him. This time, Thaddeus was sure he did hear the man shout, since the Prankster was much closer.

"Wha... what the," the Prankster spluttered. The villain's eyes were wide with shock and abject confusion.

"You should thank me," Thaddeus informed him. "I just saved your life."

The Prankster ran to the edge of the roof. He goggled at the crashed airplane. "Winslow! WINSLOW!"

Thaddeus scratched his jaw. "Eh, he'll be fine. You guys installed airbags or whatever, right?"

"I dunno what you're so mad about," Thaddeus noted. "I pulled you out of there, didn't I? You should be honoured, I gave you a lift, instead of your friend. Preferential treatment."

The Prankster's face contorted. "You sonofa..."

"Typical," Thaddeus said. "Nobody appreciates my hard work and diligence. You're all the same."

The Prankster howled, shrieking like a wounded animal. It was a disappointingly inarticulate showing from a man that was supposed to be good at the talking part of the business. Wasn't he a comedy villain?

Thaddeus blamed Lex. The man couldn't trade witticisms to save his life. Obviously his own failings in that area had drastically lowered what passed for industry standards in Metropolis.

Of course, it was possible that the Prankster's anger was quite justified. Thaddeus had intentionally left the villain's buddy in a crashing out-of-control aircraft.

He could see how that might provoke some amount of ire.

He could also understand why the guy immediately tried to attack him. People were like that.

It was useless, of course.

The world slowed to a crawl, then stopped.

The Prankster wasn't a man anymore. He was a statue, as far as Thaddeus was concerned. No breath. No heartbeat. No motion whatsoever.

Oswald Loomis was just a baseline human, beneath the costume and his fancy gadgets.
Thaddeus Thawne was the Flash.

Thaddeus walked forward.

He extended his arm, pried the ballpoint pen from the Prankster's stiff fingers, and examined it.

The pen looked normal, like the sort of cheap desk stationery that could be found in any bookstore for a few cents. At the same time, it was obviously some sort of weapon, not an actual writing instrument, unless the supervillain was extremely dedicated to some Quixotic attempt to prove that the pen was mightier than the sword.

Thaddeus didn't know if the pen was poisoned or what, but it really didn't matter. The nature of the weapon was irrelevant. The important thing was removing it from the Prankster's grasp.

He set the pen down on the rooftop.

Thaddeus thought for a moment, giving the supervillain a good long look.

He shrugged.

Clamping his hands around the man's eye-wateringly bright jacket and equally dumb shirt, Thaddeus dragged the frozen Prankster to the edge of the building and summarily tossed him over the side.

Thaddeus picked up the discarded pen, and stepped off the roof himself. Taking his time, Thaddeus walked casually down the side of the building, then waited on the sidewalk.

Time sped up.

The Prankster fell, screaming, towards the pavement.

The villain slowed, then stopped, going still a few inches before he hit the ground.

Thaddeus grabbed the Prankster and swung him down to a safer landing, bleeding off his momentum in the process.

Because Thaddeus was a kind and considerate soul, he made sure to brace the man properly so he didn't accidentally break his neck.

The Prankster was still screaming when Thaddeus brought their relative frames of reference back into sync.

Thaddeus gave the man a vigorous shake, using a liberal amount of force. "You done?"

The Prankster tried to take a swing at Thaddeus, lashing out with a clenched fist and his bare knuckles.

Thaddeus dodged, of course. He was the Flash.

He held up the gimmick ballpoint pen he'd taken off the Prankster.

"Dude," Thaddeus said, giving the pen an experimental click, "don't make me draw on your face, or..."

A beam of blue light shot out of the tip of the pen, blasting from the stainless steel nib.
Across the road, a streetlight toppled over, a perfectly smooth cut running all the way across its base.

Thaddeus raised his eyebrows, behind the mask.

The Prankster snapped his arm in a specific way, something falling from the inside of his sleeve into his arm. It looked like a deflated whoopee cushion. The man brought it up to his lips, and...

Thaddeus sighed. He tossed the pen away, and adjusted his relative perception rate again. He walked behind the Prankster, then applied a sleeper hold to the villain, putting pressure on the side of the guy's neck around the jawline.

He let his speed match reality.

The Prankster gasped and struggled.

But the costumed crook was just wasting his energy.

"Shhh," Thaddeus said, "night-night. Be a good boy, and go to sleep."

Once the Prankster was out cold, the rubber bladder falling from his nerveless fingers, the Flash let the guy slump to the ground.

"Flash," a voice boomed, in a harsh New York accent. "This your doing?"

Thaddeus looked in the direction of the voice. One of the SCU suits was facing him. The other was approaching the wreckage of Toyman's plane, training its weapons on the debris.

He thought he recognised the voice, and a quick glance at the number stencilled on the massive robot's hull confirmed Thaddeus' guess.

Thaddeus was surprised they'd found a mecha big enough to fit Turpin into.

Sure, the suits were a couple storeys tall, but Thaddeus reckoned they would still be a tight fit. After all, they had to accommodate Terrible Turpin, his ego, and the massive chip on his shoulder.

"Morning, Inspector Turpin," Thaddeus said. "Got another one for you."

"Didn't ask for the Justice League," Dan Turpin growled, the external speakers of his suit amplifying his voice to nearly deafening levels. "This is our collar. You…"

"Governor's declared a state of emergency," Thaddeus replied. "That means all hands on deck, Turpin. Now, if you'll…"

A warning light blinked in Thaddeus' HUD. A line of text appeared.

Then another materialised. And another.

The eyepieces of his latest cowl were wired for text, since voice communications were iffy for him due to his speedster powers.

He was used to receiving emergency messages that way. But the number of alerts he was getting, just this morning alone...

Thaddeus swore.
He spent a few subjective moments cursing at the top of his lungs.

Naturally, he wasn't supposed to use profanity in costume. It was bad PR. A few occasional muttered expletives could be forgiven, but not an entire vulgar monologue like he'd just done.

But it was fine. He was the Flash. He could get away with it.

The Prankster was unconscious, and if he was still intact in the remains of his plane, Toyman probably was comatose too.

Turpin and his SCU partner were still present, in their towering battle armour. But neither was moving. They couldn't hear him. He was going too fast for them to perceive him.

Once again, the world was still.

For all intents and purposes, Thaddeus was alone. He had all the privacy he wanted.

Unfortunately, he had a job to do.

Thaddeus eyed the alerts.

He made his way down the street.

After a while, he turned around, and headed towards the nearby coffee shop.

Dropping into normal speed to make an order would be somewhat gauche, given that there were multiple emergencies in progress.

However, surely nobody would begrudge him if he just… helped himself and got something to drink.

He had a job to do.

But first, he needed a break.
"You miscalculated," the Question said, in a nearly inflectionless monotone.

"If that was intended as a jest about my pseudonym, it is in decidedly poor taste. I regret to inform you, you are far from the first to make that comment," the Calculator replied, tartly.

"I do not joke," the Question stated.

"In that case," the Calculator said, "pardon me. I've spent far too much time dealing with Napier and his ilk."

"Social conditioning," the Question observed. "Curious, for a supposedly posthuman being."

"I'm not a robot," the Calculator said, sounding irritable. "Even if I were, working alongside the Joker is enough to try a machine's patience."

The Question regarded the blank computer screen in front of him. His equally blank skin-coloured mask shifted, just a fraction, as his facial movements pulled against the taut flesh-like fabric covering his head.

"You would know. You are the one who associates with machine spirits and digital elementals."

"You say that as if it's a failing," the Calculator retorted. "A weakness."

The Question tilted his head. "Is it not?"

"Technology is the future," the Calculator said. "The more we advance, the more we progress, the more powerful the Metal becomes. There's a flow to it, like the sea. Like a pulse, moving ever forward."

"Technological advancement," the Question said, "is made by humans, for humans. Not the spirits that have emerged from the mystical aether associated with cyberspace. You serve a byproduct, not the end goal."

The computer monitor in front of the Question remained mostly dark, but the detective thought he saw a faint flicker of light, a few scattered pixels briefly burning into life on the screen.

The Calculator's nature made communication with the man, or whatever manner of being he now was, extremely difficult. The security risks involved in contacting him were immense. The Question did not dare to call the Calculator from a League facility, or from one of his own devices. He couldn't trust the Justice League's cybersecurity to hold against the Calculator and any other creatures of the Calculus.

The intelligences that made up the Calculus were not artificial intelligences, per-se. They were not programmed constructs of code and logic. They were elementals of technology and data, in the same way that there were elementals of nature, of the sea, and of the animal kingdom. They were magic, and magic was dangerous.

That was why the Question was currently sitting in a disused office building, in a failed business park on the outskirts of Opal City. He was facing a computer that was several generations obsolete, hooked up to a portable generator rather than the electrical grid.
There was no phone line or other network connection running to the machine, but that didn't seem to stop the Calculator from remotely accessing it. The implications were troubling, but there was little that the Question could do to directly counter the Calculator's abilities. The most the Question could do was try to inconvenience him.

The Calculator's voice came from the old desktop computer's speakers, with a trace of static and distortion creeping into the man's speech. "For now, perhaps. But for how much longer? The affluent portion of humanity already spends much of its waking day worshipping their devices, staring at electronics in their hands. Only the very poorest, the old, and the ignorant do not. Soon, that too will change."

The Question shook his head. "We're digressing. I am not interested in your proselytising, or your philosophy."

"You should be," the Calculator said. "You fancy yourself an investigator, don't you? Aren't you interested in my motives?"

"This is not an inquest," the Question responded. "Unless you wish it to become one. The issue at hand is simple, Calculator. You gave members of the Justice League poor and inaccurate intelligence, resulting in a deeply flawed plan. I suggest you speak carefully."

This time, there was no mistaking what he saw. A group of pixels flashed in the centre of the computer screen, flashing white in time to the synthesised sound of a man's laughter.

"Neither. Neither of those," the Calculator said. "I repeat, I did not miscalculate. There were several factors I did not anticipate, and areas where my information was faulty. I am not omniscient, not yet. But the overall outcome was well within my projections."

The Question rested his arms on the table. He touched his gloved hands together, linking his fingers. "That implies you deliberately led Superman and his team into a battle that you believed they would not win. A trap."

"If you wish to see it that way."

The Question kept his voice precisely level. "You do not deny it?"

"To you? No," the Calculator said.

The Question frowned underneath his mask.

"Victor," the Calculator continued, "you're an intelligent man. You know that it would be a disaster if the Joker, Sivana, and Talia al Ghul succeeded in rewriting reality - as they seek to do. You must know why they were working to acquire time travel technologies. There can be only one logical conclusion. Yet you also know that the alternative, professing loyalty to Lex, is equally unpalatable."

The Question carefully did not react to the use of his name. Instead, he maintained his flat matter-of-fact tone. "You've chosen to betray both parties."

"I prefer to think of it as choosing my own side," said the voice from the computer. "It would be wise for you to do the same."

"I'll take your advice under consideration," the Question said.

"Do more than consider it," the Calculator said. "You have your own misgivings about Superman.
You know he isn't reliable. You know his goals are ultimately inimical to your own best interests."

"You propose," the Question asked, "that I cooperate with you?"

"I propose nothing. I only pose the question," the Calculator said, "are you a player, or a piece?"

The detective stared at the computer monitor. "I ask the questions."

"Do you? I have yet to see any evidence of your independent thought," the Calculator pressed. "You have challenged my association with the Calculus, with the Metal. But let me ask you… what master do you serve?"
"The embodiment spoke to you," Sivana murmured, distractedly, as he twisted a dial. Beneath his fingers, something went 'click'. There was a high-pitched whine.

The scientist was holding what looked like a jeweler's loupe, though Jack assumed it was more complicated than an ordinary monocular hand lens. There were far too many tiny dials and various bits attached to the scope.

Sivana squinted through the tool, pressing his eye up against its main body. He examined the symbol on the White Power Ring, with a look of intense concentration on his features.

The ring was clamped securely to a workbench, allowing Sivana to get a closer look. He also had a small forest of cameras and other sensors pointed at the ring. Jack could tell, because some of their feeds were going to various screens around the laboratory, within Jack's field of vision.


While the place was full of equipment, it was light on actual furniture designed to hold human beings. Aside from the stool Sivana himself was sitting on, the other seats in the underground chamber had been commandeered, used as horizontal surfaces to hold other things. One chair was stacked high with what looked like batteries and power supplies of all shapes and sizes, while another held a heap of tools.

Jack wasn't certain where or how Sivana and the League of Shadows had acquired all the equipment for the scientist's newly-established lab and workshop. Some of it was Sivana's, stuff he'd brought with him from Venus, or hauled out of various hidden caches on Earth. But the rest of it... well, Jack could hazard a guess.

The box he was sitting on had a Kord Omniversal logo emblazoned on the side. The shipping label suggested it was supposed to be somewhere in downtown Metropolis, not an isolated compound high in the Himalayas. Jack had no idea who the original intended recipient was, but he hoped for their sake that someone would give them a refund.

Sivana harrumphed loudly. "Sort of? Kind of? Be precise, Napier. If you can. The more precise, the better. I cannot theoretise with these drips and drabs of data."

"It was this whole mystical vision thing," Jack explained, gesturing with both hands. He made several spooky motions. "Symbolism. Imagery. Dramatic pronouncements. Badly-written dialogue."

"In other words, you cannot be precise, because the dream was itself imprecise. You've made your disdain of the medium quite apparent," Sivana said.

Sivana held a hand out to the side. "Miss Cain, a negative-action set, please... the type one, I believe."

The requested tool was promptly deposited in Sivana's outstretched palm by the silent Shadow standing by his workbench.

Jack wasn't sure why Cassandra Cain was helping the scientist out as a shop assistant. Based on what he knew of the girl, Jack was under the impression that she specialised in breaking bodies, not the laws of the universe.
But Cain was indeed hovering around Sivana like a dutiful gopher. She was even wearing safety goggles and gloves, accessories which were at odds with her goth ninja aesthetic.

Maybe Talia had assigned the assassin to keep an eye on Sivana? That was the most likely scenario. But even if that was the case, the young woman seemed to be taking a genuine interest in Sivana's work.

The implications were a little disturbing. Arguably, Sivana currently had the most dangerous intern in the world.

Sivana carefully poked the white ring with a complex-looking set of metal tweezers.

Jack assumed they were actually highly advanced space-age tweezers, capable of picking up individual atoms. Or something.

"Look, I don't like getting exposition through dreams and visions," Jack deadpanned. "It's not civilised. If higher beings wanna contact me, they can damn well send me a text message, or ping me on Caper."

"Dealing with creatures that think of themselves as higher forms of existence is always fraught with challenges," Sivana opined, sounding like a man who was speaking from hard-earned experience. "That is why I avoid doing so, as a matter of preference."

"I get what you're saying," Jack replied, slowly. "But aren't you hopped up on the power of Ibac? Is this a 'do as I say', not 'as I do' scenario? Just checking."

Cassandra Cain eyed Jack, with a faint scowl.

TING!

Cain's attention shifted to the Father Box resting on the top of the crate, next to Jack. She folded her arms and glared at the Apokoliptian computer.

TING!

"There's no need to be annoyed on my behalf, Miss Cain," Sivana said. "It is an understandable concern. Our colleagues are merely not in possession of all the facts."

Sivana held up the tweezers with a pair of thick fingers. His oversized hand was at the end of an equally heavily-built arm, since the scientist was still in his superpowered form. Jack didn't think he'd seen the man change back to his regular body since the battle on Venus.

The scientist straightened his back, unfolding himself out of his previously heavily hunched-over position. Muscles rippled under his t-shirt, barely restrained by the thin and stretchy fabric.

"The power of Ibac," Sivana said, "is inherently different from the power of Shazam. Unlike the Shazam ritual, it doesn't draw from gods or blessed beings. The patrons that the Ibac transformation invokes are human spirits. Deceased individuals. Admittedly, ones that are now extra-dimensional beings. But they were once mortal, and therefore comprehend our frame of reference. It is an important distinction, Mister Napier. You'd do well to remember that, if you plan to make a habit of this."

Jack scratched his head, digging his fingernails past messy green hair and into his scalp. "If you say so. Isn't the mojo coming from hell, though?"
Jack nodded. "Yeah. Doesn't seem very sustainable to me. High carbon footprint."

Sivana smiled, baring his teeth. He looked extremely pleased with himself. "Oh, no, no, no. You're thinking of the Sabbac ritual. That one is powered completely by demons. There's no room for negotiation there. But the Ibac empowerment... the original version involved a demonic pact as a catalyst, the kind with one's soul held as collateral. A very unpleasant business. However, the actual power is not infernal, per-se. I prefer elegance and simplicity where possible. It is so much simpler when you cut out the middleman."

Jack considered the full ramifications of the statement. "You see dead people?"

Sivana scoffed, dismissively. "In a manner of speaking. So will you, Napier, if you persist in wearing this on your finger."

The scientist tapped ends of his tweezers against the band of the white ring.

"I ain't afraid of no ghosts," Jack sang, smacking his leg with his palm in time to the beat.

Cassandra Cain arched an eyebrow, giving Jack a highly critical look.

"Good," Sivana said, approvingly, setting his monocular lens down on the workbench. "That may be one way to charge the ring."

Jack stopped, his hand frozen in mid-slap. "You're planning to stuff ghosts in it?"

"No," Jack told the Father Box, "that's what we call a bad idea. Ritual sacrifice isn't always the answer."

"Ting! Ting! Ting!"

"Yes, that's true," Sivana mused. "A fair point. It may be far more feasible to drain the life out of still-living subjects, prior to their expiration. It might save time and effort, without the need to convert the energies. I will need to conduct some experiments."

Jack wriggled his fingers. "Somehow, just guessing, I don't think you're supposed to fuel a life energy ring with do-it-yourself necromancy."

"Nonsense. Don't be so parochial, Napier," Sivana admonished. "There are more things in heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

"Dunno about that," Jack said. "It'd take some doing. I've got a pretty active imagination. Didn't Laminski have a bunch of power batteries paired to his rings?"

"I am not privy to Mister Laminski's logistical arrangements," Sivana said. "I did not get the opportunity to properly examine his rings before they fused into this singular hybrid form."

Jack shrugged. "Sorry."

"From appearances," Sivana mused, "I would say that this ring merely used the seven original ones as... raw materials, cannibalising them in the process of assuming its current configuration. This ring is not connected to any battery. If it is linked to anything, it would be the White Entity itself."
"Which means," Jack said, "you'll probably piss it off if you try and shove ghosts in there."

Jack held his arm out, making a beckoning motion with his fingers. The white ring lifted itself out of the clamp, hovering over Sivana's workbench.

Cassandra Cain stepped to one side, watching the flying ring carefully.

The ring zipped over to Jack and landed on his hand.

Sivana turned around. He unhooked his sunglasses from the neck of his t-shirt and put them on. "Perhaps, Napier. Perhaps. But without a matching lantern or other compatible power source, you will not be able to use this ring to its full potential. Unless you intend to be fully reliant on the whims of an inhuman creature for your energy?"

"I've got no issues," Jack said, "with you working on the problem. If you can build me a battery, great. But for the time being, I'll just charge up the eco-friendly and renewable way."

"Power level at two percent," the ring reported.

Sivana glared at Jack through the tinted lenses of his sunglasses. "And that is?"


"That," Sivana said, with some distaste, "does not sound very efficient."
Chapter 82

Someone was knocking on her door.

The apartment had a doorbell. But it didn't work, a fact that was clearly conveyed to any visitor by the little sign she'd stuck up next to the front door. Her landlord didn't seem inclined to fix the problem, so she'd found her own solution.

That solution was tape, a piece of paper, and a black marker. Like most things in her life, it wasn't a good solution - just plastering over the underlying problem with a lousy workaround.

Harley got up, pushing the rickety folding chair away from what passed as her dining table. It wasn't much of a table, seeing as how it could only accommodate a party of two under normal circumstances. Maybe four if it was fully unfolded and those four people were really close.

Her apartment was actually in a fairly nice neighbourhood... by Gotham standards, meaning that a car parked on the street was only likely to get broken into every six months or so. Plus, the thieves were likely to leave the vehicle mostly intact, rather than driving it away or stripped for parts.

But because she was paying a premium for the location, the downside was that the apartment itself wasn't much to scream about. Neither was Harley's furniture, at least the few bits she'd purchased.

She shut her laptop's screen as she stood, putting the machine on standby. It wasn't like the interruption was keeping her from any serious work. All she was doing was looking for work.

There weren't many opportunities in Gotham City for a young practitioner who'd been summarily tossed out of the city's most prominent mental health institution. Not if Harley still wanted to use her paper qualifications, anyway.

Harley padded over to the door, her fuzzy slippers making soft whumping sounds over the parquet flooring.

She was vaguely tempted to ignore the sound of knocking. In all likelihood, it was just old Missus Hart from down the hall, with a heartfelt appeal for Harley to visit her church again.

Harley had to give the lady points for persistence, but she also deducted a few points for the decidedly poor quality of the sales pitch. The woman wasn't very good at reading her prospective market.

She squinted through the peephole. Then she drew back, rubbed her eyes, and took a second look.

The figure was still there.

If she was hallucinating, it was a very persistent hallucination.

Harley knew what the smart move was. The proper answer was obvious. She should have barricaded the door and called the police.

That would be smart. What she was about to do wasn't smart.

Steeling herself, Harley kept the door's chain in place, but undid the locks. She cracked open the door, peering out of the tiny gap.

"What are you doing here," she demanded, shrilly, her pitch climbing with each word.
Her surprise visitor smiled weakly. It was an extremely awkward expression, one that seemed very forced.

"Uh," he said, "hi, Doc."

"What are you doing here," Harley repeated, in an even higher register. "Listen, try anything, and I'm calling the cops!"

On the other side of the door, Jack Napier looked thoughtful. He rubbed his chin.

"With average police response times in Gotham, and then factoring in the current nation-wide crime wave..."

"Not helping your case, buster," Harley said, doing her best to sound threatening.

It wasn't much of a threat, considering the guy's reputation. But Harleen Quinzell wasn't a pushover.

"Easy," he said, placatingly. "I don't mean you any harm. I just wanna talk to you, that's all. If you want me to go, I'll go."

Harley hesitated.

Against her better judgement, she unhooked the chain and pulled the door open.

"Get in here," she urged, "before someone sees you."

"I'm incognito," he replied.

"Move," Harley ordered. She wasn't in the mood to debate the matter, regardless of how reasonable Napier sounded.

Napier didn't voice any further objections. He sidled past Harley and through the door. She closed it behind her.

She studied her ex-patient carefully.

He was telling the truth, in a manner of speaking. He was incognito, sort of. He wasn't done up as the Joker. He was wearing a nice suit, his hair was brown, and his skin was a normal human colour.

She assumed it was dye and makeup, or a hologram, or...

Hell, for all she knew, he was a shapeshifter. The world was a strange place. Working in Arkham, Harley had come face-to-face with that strangeness on several occasions.

"Well," he said, "this is awkward."

"It's awkward," Harley snarled, "because you're a wanted supervillain."

"It's nice to be wanted," Napier said.

"Ha, ha," Harley said, pronouncing each syllable with a healthy dose of sarcasm. "Not the good wanted, buddy. Everyone is after ya, and... and..."

He blinked. "And?"
"And I lost my freakin' job because of you," Harley finished, huffing.

"I heard," he said. "Sorry about that. So, I'm guessing we're no longer covered by doctor-patient confidentiality?"

Harley's fingers curled. She wasn't sure if she was about to strangle the guy, or claw his face open. Maybe it wasn't very professional of her, but she wasn't feeling very understanding, kind, or tolerant.

She knew she wasn't a very intimidating person, especially since she was wearing a big pair of fluffy slippers, an oversized t-shirt, floral-print capris, and her hair was a big floofy mess.

But she felt obliged to threaten the guy.

"If you're thinking you could just plonk yourself on my couch and tell me about your mother," Harley said, "you've gotta another think coming!"

"Yeah," he answered, looking at the inexpensive fabric-covered metal frame that passed for Harley's sofa, "I don't think I can lie on that. Might break something."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Harley interrupted. "Nope. Nope, nope, just nope. You don't get to make more jokes, buddy. Not until you explain why you're here, and why you're looking for me, and why..."

Jack Napier raised his hands. "I'm getting there, I'm getting there. I'm delaying and using humour as a defence mechanism, because that's what I do, but I'm getting there."

"Talk," Harley insisted, in a tone that brooked no argument.

"Okay, okay," he said. "It's like this..."

***

Harley stared at her former patient.

Jack Napier rubbed the back of his neck, looking sheepish. "So, any questions?"

Harley stared at him for a second longer.

Then she stood up, making her way into her apartment's little kitchen.

Behind her, Napier trailed at a safe distance, obviously giving her some breathing space. The guy looked concerned.

Harley ignored him for the moment.

She opened her fridge, and pulled out a bottle of cheap white wine.

She couldn't remember where it was from or what it was supposed to be, aside from 'not red'. All that was secondary to the fact it had genuine alcohol content.

Harley bumped the fridge door shut with her hip while simultaneously unscrewing the cap.

She snagged a clean-ish mug off her kitchen counter, dumped a generous slug of wine into it, set the bottle down, then held up the mug to her lips.
She drank. Then she drank some more.

"I'm guessing," Napier said, "you've got some problems with this."
"Superman is evil," Harley said, incredulously.

"He's not supposed to be," Napier clarified. "He's got a creepy bald dude inside his head, and that guy's..."

"Superman," Harley said, "has been body-snatched by some freaky-deaky time-travelling supervillain with a pervy Kryptonian fetish."

Jack Napier frowned. "Strictly speaking, I'm not a hundred percent sure it's a kink thing, but sure, let's go with that."

Harley massaged her forehead, rubbing her fingertips against her skull. She pressed down, applying some pressure.

"Sure," she said. "Whatever. He's changed history so he's top dog. Everyone loves him, and he's erased people who might be a threat to his perfect world."

"Perfect's a strong word," Napier observed. "There's lotsa dings and dents, a few nicks here and there..."

Harley raised a hand, her index finger extended. She motioned for silence. "Back in our sessions, back in Arkham... when you kept insisting that Gotham had some guy who dresses like a bat?"


"This guy dressed like a bat," Harley said, "you weren't imagining him? He doesn't exist, because Superman poofed him?"

"Right," Napier confirmed.

"Okay," Harley muttered, "okay. Let's say I believe you..."

Napier started to smile.

"I'm not done. I'm saying for now," Harley cautioned. "Conditionally. For the sake of the argument. Hypothetically!"

Napier nodded.

"There's one thing I ain't getting here. Why are you telling me this," Harley demanded. "Why me?"

"That's, uh," Napier said, slowly, his eyes darting around the apartment like he was searching for an escape route. "I'm already regretting this decision, come to think of it."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Harley said, warningly.

Napier inched away. "You know, you're right. Absolutely right. This was a bad idea. You should call the cops. I'll just skedaddle outta your window, and..."

Harley grabbed the closest heavy object she could find, and wielded it menacingly. "You're not goin' anywhere, buster!"
Her ex-patient's gaze dropped to Harley's improvised weapon.

"By the way," he said, helpfully, "if you want to use a wine bottle as a weapon, you usually hold it by the neck. And you want to break it first, so the glass is jagged."

"I'm not looking for a masterclass on criminal skills," Harley snapped. "I'm looking for answers!"


He took a deep breath, his shoulders slumping. Tension drained out of his body.

"In the other timeline," he said, "things were different, right? People were different. You and I, we were... involved."

He placed particular emphasis on the last word.

Harley dropped the wine bottle.

The bottle smashed against her kitchen floor, sending bits of glass skittering over the tiles.

Harley ignored the mess. She pointed a trembling finger at Napier.

"You," she accused, "you're messing with me."

"I'm not," he said, sincerely. "I promise. Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye."

Harley closed her eyes. She sucked in a breath of air, and tried not to hyperventilate.

"You were my doctor in Arkham," he continued. "You helped me escape. You helped the Joker escape. We became a couple. A pair. A dynamic duo. The Joker... and Harley Quinn."

She snorted. She couldn't help it. She laughed.

"Harley Quinn? Seriously? That's the kinda dumbass thing I'd have invented in, like, grade school."

"I thought it was clever," Napier said, defensively.

"You would. You have no taste," Harley accused. "C'mon. You called yourself the 'Joker'."

"There's only so many good clown-themed names," he retorted. "Whadda ya want?"

Harley opened her eyes. She glanced down at the mess on her kitchen floor, and winced.

Stepping carefully over the broken glass, she snagged her broom and dustpan from their place near the window, and began sweeping.

"Here," Napier said. "Let me help."

Harley started to wave the broom at him, then relented. "You get the big bits, I'll get the little ones. Trashcan's behind you."

As she cleaned up, with the help of Gotham's most notorious ex-boyfriend, maybe-boyfriend, alternate-universe-boyfriend, or something, Harley bit her lip.

"If you remember this," she said, "if this was how stuff was in your head... "
He looked at her, expectantly.

"How come," Harley asked, "how come you never said anything about this in our sessions? When I saw you at Arkham?"

Napier flinched. "I did call you Harley. The first time."

She rolled her eyes. "Lotsa people do. You know what I mean. You never said a word."

Napier finished dropping the main body of the wine bottle into Harley's little plastic garbage bin.

He held the lid open as she dumped the smaller bits in as well, from the dustpan.

"I knew something was wrong," he said, finally. "I was thinking clearly, for one thing. Feeling, you know, sane. Saner. Sane-ish. Sane-lite. Diet sane. I was willing to accept that... some of what I remembered was wrong. Just delusions. Hallucinations. Bad thoughts."

Harley gripped the handle of her broom. "But when I told ya that there was no Batman, that there's no superhero called Batman, you flipped out. You totally freaked."

"I did," he said.

Harley frowned. "So, lemme recap. You were okay with thinking that you imagined a whole relationship with me. You were totally willing to write that off as a figment of your imagination. But the thing you couldn't accept, the one thing, was this Batman guy not existing."

"Pretty much," he agreed.

"If I were your girlfriend," Harley said, "I'd be really, really, worried about your obsession with some guy in an animal costume, instead of me."

Napier covered his face with one hand. Then he separated his fingers so he could look at Harley through the gap between his digits.

"It's not like that," he said, in a muffled voice. "No matter what the folks on the Internet used to say."

"Then," Harley pressed, "how is it like? Because, free advice, even though I'm not your doc no more, no girl enjoys being told that she's forgettable."

Napier sighed. "I wanted to be wrong about you. I wanted to think that, yeah, I'd imagined the whole relationship thing, that I'd just made it up. That was better. I didn't want to think about it. Even in my own head. Trust me, I'm really good at denial and repression."

Harley raised her eyebrows. "Second bit of advice, you're digging your hole even deeper, buster."

"It's not like that," Napier said, quickly. "Look, remember, I was the Joker. I was nuts. Manipulative. Violent. Abusive. I wasn't good for you. I didn't deserve you. It was this whole toxic codependent mess."

Harley tried to say something, but she couldn't get the words out. Instead, she clutched the broom tighter, hugging it closer to her body.

"When I realised that you were just my doctor, here and now," Napier said, "it was a relief. It meant I hadn't done anything to you. It meant... I hadn't hurt you."
"You should have started with that," Harley whispered, her voice faltering. "That's better. That's almost good."

"I guess," Napier muttered. "I should have practiced in front of a mirror, or something."
"So," Harley asked, "why now? Why tell me all this?"

They were no longer in her cramped little kitchen. The conversation had gradually migrated to her slightly less cramped living room.

On the other end of her makeshift sofa, Napier... no, Jack, toyed with his glass of water. He sloshed the liquid back and forth in the cup.

Harley could tell he was trying to avoid making eye contact. She could read him. Easily.

Too easily.

Perhaps she was better at her job than she thought, or perhaps there was something to the idea of the two of them having a deep and profound connection.

That was a very scary idea.

She didn't want to dwell on that idea, or its implications.

Eventually, he looked up. "You want the deep, heartfelt, and very personal reason that's kinda flattering to you, or the convoluted Machiavellian, excessively pragmatic, plot?"

Harley couldn't help it. She laughed. "What's behind door number one?"

Jack smiled. "I need your advice, doc. Harley. I know it's way too much to ask. But whether it's... as my doctor, or someone more, you're one of the only people who's ever understood me."

Harley leaned forward. The mug she'd used to hold wine was now thoroughly dry. But she kept her fingers around the empty mug rather than getting up and seeking more alcohol.

"You looking for a shrink," she challenged him, "or a date?"

"Whatever you want," Jack answered. "I don't want to presume. I don't want to pressure you. Whatever you're comfortable with. Probably a better idea if we keep it professional, but... "

Harley snorted. "So confident that I'll wanna jump your bones, huh?"

Jack made an up-and-down gesture at himself. "What can I say? Girl meets a bad boy, tall, sexy, and dangerous, a beast that simply needs her gentle touch and a little bit of guidance..."

"I think I can control myself," Harley said, coolly.

"Think of it as a job, if you want," Jack offered.

Harley rolled her eyes. "Being a sidekick or supervillain's arm candy ain't on my list of long-term career goals."

"If you prefer," Jack tried, "think of it more as the Roman thing. The person whose job it is to whisper to the victorious general - memento mori."

"Remember, you too are mortal," Harley said.

"If I remember my classics," Harley pointed out, dryly, "they gave that job to a slave."

Jack lifted his glass of water. "I promise, I'm not making some kinda clever suggestion there."

Harley ran a finger around the rim of her mug. "I can't believe I'm asking this... but when you say it's a job, ya mean an actual job, with pay, benefits, so on?"

At the far end of the couch, Jack straightened up. He blinked. "What, seriously?"

Harley flushed, ever so slightly. "I've got student loans, okay? Don't judge me."

"Med school's expensive. I get it," Jack replied, grinning. "Wasn't expecting that, but sure. Yeah. If that's what you want? Name your price. Whatever you want. We can figure it out."

"Now we're swinging back round to awkward," Harley noted. She tried to take a sip from her mug, before remembering it was bone dry. "You can't just say that."

Unfazed by the absurdity of it all, Jack shrugged. "Why not?"

"You're a fugitive," Harley accused, "do you even have money?"

"Quite a lot," Jack responded. "My usual private banker and I, we aren't on speaking terms anymore. But I got some reliable business partners."

Harley jabbed her empty mug at him. "Like?"

"Secret society of ninja," Jack rattled off, promptly. "Mad science guy. Oh, and a xenophobic alien cyborg and a right-wing alien computer, but I don't think they've got any liquid or bankable assets. They might need your services, though. I'm thinking they could benefit from talking to a good mental health professional."

Harley sighed. "Absolutely sure ya ain't askin' me to be a supervillain? Because your work environment sounds very supervillain-ish, like double supervillain with extra supervillain on top."

Jack made a show of snapping his fingers. Sort of. He moved his fingers in roughly the right way, but no sound emerged.

"Oh, yeah," he added, "I forgot. We have a superhero on board. Except, well, he's from the original timeline, so you wouldn't know who he is, but he's very super and very heroic."

"Gotta work on that sales pitch," Harley said, with a generous amount of sarcasm.

"Like I said," Jack retorted, "I should have practiced. I didn't. You're getting me raw and uncut. This is all new material, and some ad-lib, not a polished set. What you see is what you get."

Harley kicked off her slippers, folding her legs up on the sofa cushion.

"Alright," she said. "What's the other reason?"

Jack drank from his glass. "Other reason?"

"You said," Harley reminded him, "you had two reasons to come here, talk to me, all of that."

"Right," he said, sounding for a moment like he'd actually forgotten. "That."
Her ex-patient reached into his suit jacket, pulling something out. When he opened his fingers, a ring was resting in his palm.

"Hold up," Harley yelped, nearly dropping her empty mug. "Hold up, pause, do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars. If you're gonna get down on one knee, that's a hard 'no' from me, mister!"

"Okay," Jack said, warily. "In retrospect, I can see how this might be misconstrued. Not that kinda ring."

"What," Harley quipped, "did ya get it outta a cereal box?"

"I'm pretty sure the big cereal companies haven't made plastic decoder rings since the late eighties," Jack noted. "You're a little young to be making that gag."

"Pop culture," Harley said. "Osmosis."

Jack bent forward, placing his water glass on Harley's little chipboard coffee table. Then he sat up, and held the ring out for Harley's inspection.

"Looks like a kid's toy to me," Harley observed.

"Most powerful weapon in the universe," Jack lamented, "and she thinks it's a toy. No respect, no respect at all."

"Universe has low standards," Harley drawled.

"Power level at twelve percent," the ring announced. The fact that the ring was talking should have freaked her out.

Sure, it could have been done through speakers and electronics, even ventriloquism… but there was something unearthly about the voice. As if it was reaching past her ears and transmitting the words straight into her brain.

"This," Jack explained, "is a Lantern Power Ring."

"I know the Lantern," Harley said, faking a breezy air that she didn't feel. "One of the League's big shots. Did ya raid his jewelry box?"

"Something like that," Jack said, evasively. Harley frowned, but she didn't ask. She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

Instead, she voiced the second question on her mind: "So, what colour is that one? Clear? Vanilla? Mother-of-pearl?"

"White," Jack said. "Which, in the grand cosmic scheme of things, represents life. Don't ask me why, I wasn't the one who made that up. The important thing is…"

"Power level at thirteen percent," the ring said.

"The important thing is," Jack continued, "it charges up when I get off my proverbial ass, and try to be a proper human being."

"That's a kinda loose definition," Harley commented. "You read the manual correctly?"
"I wish there was a manual," Jack complained. "All I got was a pep talk from some cosmic entities that think they're comedians."

"You're a comedian," Harley told him.

"See," Jack said, "nobody gives a comedian shit like another comedian. Trust me. I know."

Harley fiddled with the mug in her hands. "You said… it charges when you…"

"When I live," Jack said. "I figured, I can't do that without something big hanging over my head. Something I need to get off my chest. So…"

"So," Harley continued, "you came here. To see me. To make yourself feel better. So you could charge that ring of yours."

"Uh, yeah," Jack admitted. "For the record, before you take a swing at me... everything I said earlier was true. I meant every word. Completely sincere, I promise. It's just that…"

"Power level at fourteen percent," the ring declared.

"You're also gettin' weird superpower juice," Harley accused. "And you want me to hang around, so I can keep your head straight. To squeeze more oomph outta this thing. That it?"

Jack scratched his neck. "Basically?"

"I should feel mad," Harley said, in resignation. "But this isn't the freakiest thing you've told me. It doesn't even break the top ten."
Chapter 85

She sipped from her cocktail, savouring the flavour.

Then she pursed her lips, squinting at the glass.

She gave the glass a small shake, letting the ice clink against the sides. She took another sip, and her frown deepened.

The drink wasn't a terribly good example of its kind. The taste was subtly off. She thought there was a touch too much whiskey and not enough orange bitters, making it more of a Dry Manhattan rather than the sublime catworthy blend it was supposed to be.

Which was a shame, since it was a lovely colour. She held it up to the light, watching the glass shine like gold.

She thought about sending it back, but it wasn't utterly unsalvageable. It was drinkable, just stronger than she liked, and not ideal.

Sending the drink back would also involve going without one for a time, until a fresh one was made. It would involve having to wait, and Selina was in the mood for immediate gratification rather than digging into her shallow reserves of nonexistent patience.

Selina took another sip from the glass.

The cocktail wasn't the only issue. Something else was bothering her. Something subtle, clawing at the edge of her senses.

She listened. It wasn't the sound of the music. She could rule that out. But there was something there...

Yes. There was a change in the background noise, as people murmured to each other... a shift in the motion of human bodies in the club, as both the regulars and the Gotham hoi polloi reacted to some new factor in their environment.

Both the mice and the cats could sense that there were predators in their midst. Ones that weren't Selina Kyle.

Next to her couch, her trusty right-hand catspaw touched a hand to his ear. He didn't need to do that, but it was a useful bit of signalling. Selina understood, immediately, that he was getting an update from their people on the floor.

"Selina," Thomas Blake said, "we've got visitors. The special sort."

"I see them," Selina murmured. "Jack Napier himself, and Talia al Ghul."

From the upper reaches of the club, Selina had a good vantage point to survey the entire lower level, including the entrance, bar, and the dance floor.

The Tin Roof Club was her domain. Everyone in Gotham City, and every costumed criminal in the world beyond, knew that fact.

That meant... if Jack Napier and Talia al Ghul were here, it wasn't a coincidence. They wouldn't have wandered into the Tin Roof for a casual night out on the town, or because Selina's place had
good five-star reviews.

As Selina expected, the pair were heading straight for the stairs to the upper level of the club, the restricted area reserved for members and VIP guests.

For an instant, the contrary feline part of Selina's brain thought about denying them entry. She didn't like being pushed around. She was Catwoman, not a dog on a leash. Napier and al Ghul were making assumptions, and Selina didn't like that.

But did she want to make a scene? Selina touched a finger to the rim of her cocktail glass, tapping her nail against the edge.

Thomas looked at her. His face was questioning.

"Let them through," Selina said.

Thomas spoke into the microphone attached to his lapel, conveying Selina's order.

Selina watched as Napier and al Ghul proceeded up the stairs, unhindered by the club's security personnel.

Her minions wouldn't have been able to stop either of them. The men and women in Selina's employ were nothing compared to Napier and al Ghul. Any confrontation between would have turned out like kittens fighting a pair of full-grown cats... no, like kittens taking on a pair of full-grown tigers.

Selina didn't like comparing al Ghul to anything feline, however. Somehow, using that simile felt inappropriate, like it was sullying the good name of her totem.

There was certainly something animalistic about al Ghul's gait, but Selina preferred to think of it as the slither of a snake, or maybe the tread of a wolf on the prowl. Yes, there was definitely the distinctive scent of bitch around Talia al Ghul, one that Selina could smell all the way from her private booth.

Jack Napier was different. He didn't move like an obvious predator, at first glance. His footfalls were inelegant. His motions were loose, not tightly controlled. He was even slouching slightly.

Yet, somehow, Selina was convinced that he was by far the more dangerous of the two.

She knew all about the new Jack Napier, of course. The man that people were increasingly calling the Batman, rather than his old epithet of the Joker.

There was no baseball bat in evidence. He didn't look armed. One of his hands was buried in a pocket, but there was no obvious shape under his trousers or coat that could be a concealed weapon.

Naturally, with Napier, that didn't mean a damned thing.

Napier and al Ghul came right up to Selina's booth, the de-facto throne room of her domain. Somehow, though, Selina doubted that they were here to pay tribute to her majestic greatness, or even leave her some freshly killed mice.

Thomas rose out of his chair, flowing smoothly to his feet. He was definitely armed, though with more elegant weapons than mere guns. He moved a hand to the small of his back, hovering his fingers and palm over the holstered throwing blades.
Selina kept one hand around her cocktail glass. With her other hand, she made a small motion to Thomas, telling him to ease up. She doubted that Napier and al Ghul were looking for a fight.

"Good evening, Jack, Talia," she said, pitching her voice just loud enough to be heard over the background noise of the club. "Fancy seeing you here. What brings you to my little corner of Gotham? Soaking in the night life? Taking in our city's lovely ambiance?"

al Ghul sniffed the air, then scrunched her face up in mild distaste. "Hardly."

"Business before pleasure, sad to say," Napier drawled.

"I'm afraid," Selina said, "I'm not interested."

Napier held out a hand, his palm upward. "Hey, you haven't even heard my sales pitch. My elevator pitch."

"I'm not in the market for elevators," Selina retorted. "Or snakes and ladders."

She directed a look at Talia al Ghul, as she said the latter phrase.

For all his faults, Jack Napier was at least a Gotham boy. She could respect that. However, Selina really wasn't fond of Talia al Ghul and her League of Shadows, especially since the woman's organisation didn't know how to keep to their own hunting grounds. The Shadows thought the whole world was their territory.

In addition to breeding their own cultish loyalists, the Shadows also seemed determined to poach the best thieves and mercenaries for their network. They didn't know the meaning of dibs, or care that they were sticking their snouts in where they weren't wanted.

Selina didn't know if the Shadows had suborned Napier, or if the relationship was the other way around. It didn't matter, though. The practical result was the same.

Napier and the Shadows were in the sights of the Justice League, and that was an amount of scrutiny that Selina didn't want.

Selina was a career criminal, with emphasis on the word 'career'. She wasn't a supervillain, not in the way Napier and his lot were. She had no interest in taking over the world, only in liberating select bits of property which appealed to her aesthetic and economic sensibilities.

She was a thief, but she was also a businesswoman.

She already knew that backing Napier was a high-risk investment, with extremely questionable returns. The very prospect set her hair on edge.


"Too late," Selina informed him.
Napier took a step forward, moving closer to Selina's couch. But his path was promptly blocked by Thomas' taller and more heavily muscled form.

Thomas smiled. There was no humour in his smile, just his lips pulled back to reveal a set of teeth. "She's not interested."

"Blake," Napier said. "I'm sorry, I know it's gotta be a bit difficult for you to understand, but I'm here to talk with Catwoman, not Catman."

Selina made a deliberate show of smiling at Thomas.

"Anything you want to say to me, you can say to Tommy."

"Oh, well," Napier responded, eying the larger man. "In that case, may I politely inform you that the faux leather is very flattering indeed, in outlining your lovely derrière, but the bullwhip and claws are a bit much."

Thomas blinked, then involuntarily looked down, as if wondering if his khakis had suddenly transmuted themselves into skintight PVC. Then he realised that Napier was actually talking about Selina, and scowled.

Selina sighed. Thomas was many things. He was a remarkably skilled martial artist, one of the best wilderness survival experts on the globe, a world-class tracker... and, crucially, he had a special way with lions and other big cats, a trait which Selina appreciated on general principle.

But in the field of trading verbal barbs, poor Thomas rated a mere B-minus, or a solid B at best, while Napier likely held an honorary doctorate in the discipline.

Of course, Thomas wasn't the only one who looked bothered. Talia al Ghul seemed equally discontent.

Talia al Ghul eyed Selina and Thomas, then turned her head towards Napier. "Do we really need Kyle's cooperation? I find myself rapidly tiring of this exchange. If she is so obviously willing to dismiss us, without listening to..."

"I don't need to listen," Selina interrupted. "Let me take a guess, stop me if I'm wrong. You've got a sad, sad, tale about how Superman is evil, he's taken over the world through means most foul, and you'll like me to sign up to your supervillain multi-level marketing scheme and subscribe to your newsletter. Am I close?"

Napier rubbed his chin. "We don't have a newsletter, though that's not a bad idea. Talia, do any of your boys and girls have publishing experience?"

"I have shares in several media companies," Talia said, dryly.

"Always knew the media was evil," Napier remarked.

"The League of Shadows isn't evil," Talia stated. "I prefer to think of us as... unbound by conventional morality."

Selina took a sip from her cocktail glass, then snapped her fingers for attention. "You can discuss
your comms plan on your own time. Which you'll have plenty of, since I think we're done here."

"Whoa, whoa," Napier said, waving one hand in the air. "Hold on. One second. See, you're close,
except for two things. First of all, you and Miss al Ghul here have something in common."

"What," Thomas asked, "like their fashion sense?"

Selina shot Thomas a mildly annoyed glare, making a soft hiss.

Strictly speaking, he was right, since Talia al Ghul's outfit was the kind of thing Selina herself
might have worn. A bit too Asian in cut around the collar and sleeves of the blouse for Selina's
liking, but otherwise the indigo top and black leggings were items that would neatly fit into Selina's
own wardrobe.

However, despite the truth in Thomas' statement, Selina didn't like being equated to Talia al Ghul,
especially by the guy who was supposed to be on her side.

"Not so much a thing," Napier continued, "but a person. See, because Super-Lex has gone and
altered our timeline, that means... "

"Poor Talia's been deprived of her plaything," Selina said. "The father of her son, the love of her
life, etcetera. If I had a tiny violin, I'd play it. So sad."

Talia al Ghul gave Selina a nasty look. "You're being deliberately antagonistic."

"Guilty," Selina admitted, without an ounce of shame. "But I'm not the one chasing an idiotic
fantasy."

"I wonder... how you know that," al Ghul added, her expression staying hostile.

"Darling," Selina purred, "you've got hundreds and thousands of people running around in fancy
pyjamas, and not all of them know how to keep their mouths shut."

"Eh, they're ninja, not mimes," Napier said.

Selina supposed that Napier was the authority on street performers of dubious quality, considering
his face came with its own natural white makeup, beneath a mop of emerald hair.

"Still, I'm impressed," Napier carried on. "You're very well-informed."

"You're used to holding all the cards," Thomas said. "Not so fun when someone else is playing
with a full hand, is it?"

Napier tapped his foot on the floor, rapping out a sharp staccato. Of course, since they were in a
club, Selina couldn't hear the sound of Napier's shoe making contact with the ground. It just looked
like his leg was spasming.

"No, no, you've got me all wrong," Napier said. "This is great."

"I beg to differ," al Ghul muttered.

"Nah," Napier insisted. "She gets the idea."

Selina pointed her hand at Napier, her fingers still cradling her cocktail glass. "Do I? Is this where
you tell me that I, too, had some lost lover erased from existence by Superman's nefarious
machinations?"
"Actually, yeah," Napier admitted. "Wow, you are good. Do you have any winning numbers? Names of horses? Stock tips?"

"Casino's down the street," Thomas said. "If you want to keep walking."

Napier ignored Thomas, looking at Selina directly. "Aren't you curious? Just a wee bit curious?"

"About what? Contrary to what you may think," Selina replied, "I don't always revel in cat stereotypes. Only most of the time."

"About him," Napier said, "about the original timeline, about... "

"That's what you want," Selina deflected. "That's the trap you're baiting. That means I, automatically, don't want anything to do with it."

"This is a waste of time," al Ghul said to Napier.

Selina flicked her fingers. "Fine, then. Go on, tell me. Get it off your chest, Jack. Tell me all about it."

Napier exhaled, his shoulders slumping. "See, you put it that way, you ruin all the fun."

"Tough," Thomas commented, unsympathetically.

"Okay," Napier said. "There was this guy, right. The original Batman, Gotham's Dark Knight, and he... "

"Was tall," Selina interjected, "dark, handsome, and also dark, because we both said that already?"

Napier closed his eyes. "You had a thing, okay? Look, forget it, you're right, this isn't working out."

"I told you so," Talia al Ghul growled.

"Ah," Selina said, "but now I'm interested. Because the word is, you sold this Batman guy to little miss Shadow over here as her paramour. Now you're saying he was mine. Do you only have the one script, or did your boy really get around?"

Napier opened his mouth, his lips going through a few contortions. "Uh, yeah, well... "

Selina grinned. "Is that how you won Sivana over? Did your friend sleep with him, too?"

"Only in speculative fiction," Napier said. "You know how the Internet is, if it exists, there's... "

Talia al Ghul placed a hand over her face, briefly covering her eyes.

Selina spent a moment critiquing the other woman's nails, and was forced to conclude that al Ghul did, indeed, have a good manicure.

The lighting of the club made it a bit hard to tell, but it seemed like the colour suited her complexion.

She wasn't planning on letting that observation slip, of course. It was more fun to wind al Ghul up and let her go.

Selina was Catwoman. Toying with her prey was an essential part of her professional persona.
"Enough," al Ghul said. "This is insulting, frustrating, and most crucially of all, futile."

"Hold on," Napier objected. "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting to get a different result. Trust me, I know insanity. Let's try something different."

Selina crossed her legs and reclined against the back of her seat. "Oh?"

"You don't want to join us, that's fine," Napier said. "Perfectly fine. That doesn't stop us from having a little chat, does it?"

Selina lifted her eyebrows. "What do you want, Jack?"

"Two things," Napier said. "One, an understanding. There's a couple more Gothamites I'm looking to see, and I don't want you to think I'm going behind your back."

"That's more courtesy than some people show," Thomas said, his eyes darting to Talia al Ghul. The leader of the Shadows returned Thomas' glance with a cool glare. She didn't like the insinuation. Maybe she knew it was accurate.

Selina held up her drink, swirling the alcohol and ice around. "And the second thing?"

"A corollary of the first. Information," Napier said, "on the whereabouts of certain individuals."

Thomas snorted. "So you can drag them into your mad schemes?"

"Of course not," Napier retorted. "I'm a changed man. I just want to lend a helping hand."
Chapter 87

Based on the typical conventions of the genre, Jack should have been looking at an abandoned warehouse.

He wasn't.

It was a warehouse, alright, but a fully operating one. Which was saying a fair bit, considering the depressed industrial and commercial real estate market in Gotham City.

Gotham's boom days were long over. But the city still had some growth. Or at least, Jack remembered that being the case. However, reality didn't match his expectations.

The disconnect between his memories and the world around him was… unpleasant. Unfortunately, it was a sensation he was becoming increasingly accustomed to.

Occupancy rates in Gotham were low, much lower than they should have been. There were entire blocks of buildings lying disused, or even ones that had been left half-constructed or never opened.

In the world that Jack remembered, property prices in Gotham had actually gradually been on the rise. Not rapidly, not meteorically, but at least creeping steadily upwards, driven by the demands of an economy that was doing more than lurching along on life support.

Hell, some of the old logistics and shipping neighbourhoods were even gentrifying, replacing warehouse and light industrial buildings with little boutique hotels, hipster cafes, and tiny little shops hawking organic new-age crystal bullshit.

This Gotham City didn't have any of that. On the one hand, Jack supposed that was a good thing. The grumpy old curmudgeon buried deep within his soul approved, kind of, almost. But the rest of Jack was pretty damn horrified, because it didn't say good things about Gotham's long-term health as an urban centre.

Without Batman, without Bruce Wayne, the twenty-first century hadn't been kind to poor old Gotham. Jack had never really thought about how important the Bat was, in fighting back against the pervasive corruption and darkness that surrounded the city.

Businesses, real businesses, not mob fronts and criminal enterprises… they couldn't thrive in a place where the only rules and regulations came from the barrel of a gun.

Besides the Bat, Bruce Wayne himself, and Wayne Enterprises, were even more important to Gotham's well-being. The Wayne companies were major employers, and Jack remembered them being good employers. More than that, Wayne had been a major force in bringing other companies and investors into Gotham City.

With the Wayne family gone, and all their vast holdings sucked up by corporate vultures like LexCorp, Chimtech, Powers Technology, and other scavengers, there was a vacuum. There was a gaping, bleeding, void in the middle of Gotham's economy, where there should have been a beating heart.

It was wrong, and Jack didn't like it.

"Power level at twenty percent," said the ring on his finger.
The rest of the street told the story. This was supposed to be one of the better-off stretches in Gotham, near the port. But it was more run-down than Jack remembered, and the rooftop he was presently standing on belonged to an essentially derelict building.

That made the warehouse across the street, on the other side of the road, all the more unusual. From appearances, the place seemed to be doing brisk business. There were trucks in the yard, big reefer containers, and all the other bits that served as signs of life.

The storage facility was clearly still receiving freight and shipping product out.

Then again, Jack supposed it stood to reason. Even if Gotham's economy was gradually sliding downhill towards a deep ravine, the people who called the city home still needed to eat. The population of Gotham hadn't quite descended to the level of hunting rats, or each other, for food.

What Jack found really surprising was the fact that Selina Kyle, Catwoman herself, had fingered the address as the current base of operations for one of the rogues on his list.

He would have expected a wanted man to pick a base that was more out of the way, more isolated, and much more insulated from actual human activity. Such as one of the many abandoned warehouses that littered Gotham City.

On the other hand, Jack supposed that his quarry had very particular requirements, such as working electricity feeds, plenty of clean water… as well as insulation of a more literal sort. If he'd used an old isolated building, someone might wonder why the place was reading as below freezing on thermal scans.

Jack was looking at a cold storage facility. A refrigerated warehouse. The compound served the fresh dairy needs of a good chunk of Gotham City, at least the majority of it that wasn't hopelessly lactose-intolerant.

There was also something to be said for hiding in plain sight. Nobody would suspect that the building was connected to one of Gotham's A-list villains, unless they were really that paranoid. Maybe the Bat might have made the connection, but Bruce wasn't around.

Jack lifted his left hand, forming a fist. He concentrated.

The world blurred, vanishing in a swirl of white light.

He materialised inside a long corridor, one that was almost pure white - in a way that had nothing to do with the energy coming off his ring. The hallway was lit by starkly bright fluorescent tubes, and almost everything that Jack could see was a sterile-looking pale colour.

Looking at the decor made Jack feel cold. It probably was cold in the corridor, given that he was inside the warehouse. The nearly-invisible environmental shield generated by his ring was supposed to protect him from the elements, but his surroundings just radiated coldness in a way that reached all the way from Jack's eyes to his blood. Metaphorically speaking, anyway.

It might have been his overactive imagination, but…

"Warning," the ring said. "Ambient temperature decreasing."

Of course, it was possible that it wasn't Jack's imagination.

The field of ring energy around him flared into full visibility. He took a step forward, then another.
"Hello," Jack called. "Knock, knock? Anyone home?"

There was a door at the end of the corridor, leading even deeper inside the facility. Jack knew that was where he really wanted to be, if the ring's scans were to be believed. But he figured it was impolite to teleport right in there, regardless of the method.

The Father Box would probably have been in favour of Boom Tubing straight into the sealed-off part of the building. But the Apokolyptian computer was busy consulting with Doctor Sivana and the Eradicator on their latest pet project, leaving Jack to his own devices.

"Warning," the ring began. The ring's genderless voice didn't convey any real sense of urgency, but he thought the statement was almost rushed, as if it was alarmed.

The door in front of Jack disintegrated, smashing apart in a screech of tearing metal and buckling hinges. A wickedly sharp shape raced towards him, consuming all the water vapour in the corridor and flashing it into crystalline ice.

There was far more ice than there should have been, under any sensible set of physical laws. Jack wasn't a science guy, but he knew a thing or two about gases. Mostly the laughing kind, but gas was gas.

There shouldn't have been enough moisture in the air to account for all the ice.

But the corridor was full of ice, all the same.

Jack pushed his hand forward. He didn't think of any particular item, and no construct emerged from the ring. But what he did think of was a concept, or one word:

*Heat.*

The mass of ice went from solid to steam, with explosive results.

The entire corridor shuddered, and Jack was forced to use the ring to stay upright, protecting himself from the blast.

As the steam and debris settled in what was left of the corridor, Jack saw a humanoid shape move somewhere ahead of him.

"VIC," Jack yelled. "I'm not here to fight! Relax!"

Eventually, the distinctive figure of Doctor Victor Fries emerged from the swirling clouds.

It was impossible to mistake him for anyone else. There weren't many guys fully encased in a cryonic preservation suit, one that also functioned as top-of-the-line power armour.

Victor Fries' head was also visible beneath the clear material of the helmet, making it obvious that his skin was an unnatural blue hue.

"So tell me why you're here," [Mister Freeze](https://www.comicbook.com) said. "No jokes, please."

"That's kind of difficult," Jack said, waving a hand.

"No jokes," Victor repeated.

Jack thought about asking the guy to chill out, but decided against it.
While Catwoman reveled in puns and cheesy lines related to her theme, she'd chosen to put on a cat suit and embark on a life of crime. Victor Fries was Mister Freeze due to factors outside his control.

He didn't know the man all that well. They moved in the same circles, but Jack wasn't sure how sensitive the guy was to ice jokes. During his years as the Joker, Jack hadn't cared about offending anyone, which meant there were zero filters on his humour.

In Jack's experience, Vic Fries was pretty good about brushing off cold-related gags, and he even Occasionally made some himself.

But under the circumstances, Jack figured it was more prudent to let it go.
"You propose to help me," Victor said, coldly.

It was poor form for Jack to think of the guy as being frigid. Unfortunately, he really couldn't help it. The best he could do was try to interrupt those thoughts halfway, before they managed to escape his lips.

Historically, self-control wasn't one of Jack's strong suits. It wasn't one of his many talents.

He could remember a long list of times when his inner thoughts had escaped the privacy of his head to romp free in the outside world.

But he was trying to play nice, so Jack established a firm mental grip on his inner comedy writer and applied several layers of duct tape across his muse's face.

He smiled at Victor Fries, doing his best to make it look like a genuine friendly expression, rather than a crazed and threatening grin.

It was all a matter of mindset. He wanted to help Victor. He really did. He wanted to do the guy a favour. The only obstacle was the minor issue of convincing the good doctor of his sincerity.

"Yeah," Jack said, simply. "I do."

The two of them were in Victor's lab, which Jack took as a good sign. The cryonic scientist wouldn't have allowed Jack into his sanctum if he thought Jack was a threat.

Their current location meant Victor was at least willing to hear Jack out.

That was something. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

Underneath the dome of his helmet, Victor regarded Jack with skepticism and obvious distrust.

"We're not friends, Napier. Am I supposed to believe that you suddenly feel sympathy for my plight, out of the kindness of your heart?"

"It'd be easier if you did," Jack said. "But that's a stretch. I see what you're thinking. It's the Joker, you can't trust him. He's not a trustworthy sort. You can only trust him as far as you can throw him."

Jack paused for a moment, sizing up his audience of one.

"Alright," Jack corrected himself, "bad analogy, you've got big honking servos in that suit of yours. You could throw me pretty dang far."

"Napier, I said 'no jokes'. Unless you're hard of hearing, in addition to your insanity," Victor warned.

"Sorry," Jack said. "Vic, I'm many things, but I ain't nuts. Not like how I used to be. That's the thing. I was a supervillain because I was wacko Jacko. I was more looney than a Warner Brothers animated short. You? You never were."

Victor frowned. "I've been called worse."
"That's wrong," Jack said. "You're sane. Stone cold sane... er, nevermind. You've got a good reason for everything you've done, all of this."

Jack gestured at the lab equipment. He ended his hand motion with his finger pointing at the tall cylinder against one wall, surrounded by monitors.

"The biotech and pharmaceutical companies won't give you the time of day. The medical establishment thinks you're a crank, and the DEO's pushed through legislation that makes half your research illegal. But all you're doing is trying to save your wife."

Within the tank, a frail blonde woman floated. She looked asleep. She was asleep, in a manner of speaking – more accurately, she was in a state of carefully maintained suspended animation.

Nora Fries would have been properly deceased, if her husband wasn't one of the world's foremost experts in cryonic technology.

All of Gotham's rogues knew the story. Those who weren't incurable sociopaths considered it sad and romantic.

But years of disappointment, years of scrabbling for funds and resources, had left Victor Fries a bitter and suspicious man. He didn't want sympathy. He wanted something tangible.

"I'm touched," Victor said sarcastically, his tone of voice indicating that he wasn't moved at all. "I still fail to see how you're of use to me."

"I happen to be tight with the world's foremost experts in the cheating of death," Jack responded. "And there's this."

He extended his left hand, letting the white ring glow.

"You possess a device like the Lantern's rings," Victor observed, not sounding very convinced.

"Not just like," Jack said. "This is all of his old rings, seven flavours, in fresh new packaging. This is the Power Ring, capital letters, by your powers combined."

"Congratulations," Victor said, in an exceeding dry tone. "This is relevant, because?"

"Because," Jack continued, "this channels the power of life. It can heal. Heck, it can raise the dead."

"Raise the dead," Victor echoed, dubiously. "Have you done so, or is this more of your hyperbole?"

"Well," Jack admitted, "strictly, technically, uh, no..."

Victor laughed, producing a harsh mechanical sound from his suit's speakers.

"Not yet," Jack said. "Not yet. But I'm going to, if you want to see for yourself. Call it empirical testing, if you please."

Victor laughed once again, but the sound was quieter the second time. His face changed, softening. He looked... not hopeful, but perhaps speculative.

"Interesting," Victor murmured. "But I believe in science, Napier. I prefer to put my faith in engineering and medicine, not a madman's idea of magic and pixie dust."

"What's more important," Jack challenged, "that your wife be healed, or how you do it?"
Victor's expression darkened. His suit made an ominous whirring sound, as servos and fans spooled up into higher gear. "Don't, Napier. Don't. I've asked myself that question. It matters. I'm trying to save her life, not toy with it. Whatever solution I employ, it must be a real answer. Not a temporary band-aid, not some false panacea that brings her more suffering and pain."

"Then," Jack said, "come with me. You can sit in while Sivana and I work with the ring. You want science? You can get all the science you want. Thaddeus Sivana thinks this is the real deal, and he can explain it way better than I can."

Victor's cryonic suit gave a loud mechanical hiss as he inhaled, sharply. There was a long pause. He closed his eyes.

"No doubt. Yet, I have to ask," he said. "If you're speaking the truth, if all this is true, if this can help Nora… what is it you want from me in exchange? My immortal soul? I regret to inform you, it's worth much less, now."

"Nothing so dramatic," Jack replied. "Your expertise, that's all."

"That's all, you say," Victor probed. "So simple?"

"You're a cool guy," Jack said. "Pardon me, a cooling guy. Now, there's a couple other big names in your field, but I trust you a lot more than Len Snart. Gotham solidarity, Vic. Whadda ya say?"
Chapter 89

The strength of Amon flooded through his veins.

The gods were not unchanging, immutable things. They were alive. They walked the earth, and in so doing, they changed. They grew.

In Teth-Adam's own time, Amon had been the patron of Thebes. The god of a city, revered across Kahndaq only because Thebes itself was ascendant - politically and economically powerful.

In the centuries after his original demise, Amon's legend had... changed. The scholars of modern-day Kahndaq told Adam that Amon was now also revered as a sun god... no longer merely Amon, the hidden one, the invisible one, but Amon-Ra, the giver of life.

Amon was also now remembered as a champion of the people, a protector of the oppressed and downtrodden. Amon, lord of the silent. Amon, the voice of the poor in distress, giving breath to the wretched, to those who could not speak for themselves.

It pleased Teth-Adam. It was fitting for one of his patrons to be remembered thusly. Even if many of Kahndaq's populace now worshipped a new god, a singular god, Amon himself had not forsaken his children.

Teth-Adam did not demand that Kahndaq pay fealty to the old gods. The people of Kahndaq were free to choose. He would not, he could not, dictate people's hearts.

All Teth-Adam could do was lead by example, and provide the opportunity for Kahndaqi citizens to turn to the old ways, if they so desired. He would not force them to bend their knees... no. He would raise them up.

It was, he thought, what Amon would approve of, in his new role as a god of the people. It was what Amon would want. The fact that Amon's power still suffused his body, stronger than ever, was proof that his god's favour was with him.

And there were those who had already returned to the worship of Amon and the gods of Kahndaq. A minority, but a growing minority.

One of those adherents was coming at Teth-Adam, now, his bare feet slamming into the dirt, kicking up clouds as he moved. There was an art to running with immense strength and speed, and it was not an art that Tamir had mastered.

Tamir opened his mouth and shouted. It was a good shout, one with soul and spirit. But the blow he swung at Teth-Adam was wild, uncontrolled. Undisciplined.

Teth-Adam leaned to one side, letting the punch narrowly miss him. Then he grabbed Tamir's arm, pushing in two different directions and soliciting a yell of pain from the man.

To his credit, Tamir tried to break free, realising his predicament. But while they both were blessed with strength from Amon, Teth-Adam's power was greater.

Of course, Tamir was not alone.

Teth-Adam sensed the attack before it came, but he was barely able to react in time. He was struck from behind, in his blind spots. Teth-Adam staggered, and his momentary lapse allowed Tamir to
Planting his feet into the ground, Teth-Adam re-centred himself. His eyes moved back and forth as he took stock of his opponents.

Three was a significant number in Kahndaqi belief. His own blessing, the power of Shazam, came from six gods. Three and three.

Three was the symbol for plurality, even in Kahndaqi script, and the basis of so many of the old legends - the god Atum, who was one and became three, the three names of Re, Thoth the thrice-great...

So Teth-Adam did not face one warrior, but three.

"Keep him grounded," Tomaz yelled, in a commanding voice. "Don't let him fly!"

Fittingly, young Tomaz's name was actually Amon Tomaz. It seemed that some families, even in the present day, had some respect for the Kahndaqi culture of Teth-Adam's time.

The mortal Amon Tomaz had taken well to the divine Amon's blessing. He was powerful and clever, more so than his two compatriots, and clearly the leader of their group.

And it was a sound tactical call - it was better for the three if Teth-Adam remained on the ground, rather than being free to use the full extent of his superior agility and speed.

However, the young man had made the mistake of issuing his orders verbally.

Tomaz had used Arabic, and Teth-Adam's grasp of the language was not perfect. His command of English was actually slightly superior, as he'd absorbed remnants of knowledge from the American, Theo Adam, that had tried to steal his power.

It was only through the wisdom of Zehuti that he understood Arabic as well as he did. But Teth-Adam did understand the language.

He knew their plan.

Tomaz and Tamir lunged at Teth-Adam, while the third man of their trio hung back.

Tamir's movements were still sloppy, with power, but no conviction. Teth-Adam suspected that the man was afraid of his own god-granted strength, and even more reluctant to strike his king.

Tomaz had no such hesitation.

Teth-Adam knew that Amon Tomaz, and his sister, had come from harsh beginnings. Their lives had been hard, before Teth-Adam had returned to Kahndaq.

Unlike Tamir, the boy had killed before.

With a spinning backfist, Teth-Adam sent Tomaz spilling to the ground. The air trembled with the force of the blow.

With Tomaz out of the way, Teth-Adam intercepted the slower and weaker figure of Tamir. He briefly grappled with the man before twisting and driving him into the dirt. The earth shook with the impact.

Then two strong hands grabbed Teth-Adam from behind.
For a moment, Teth-Adam thought it was Tomaz and Tamir's comrade... but, no, it was Tomaz himself. He had recovered far faster than Teth-Adam had anticipated.

With some effort, Teth-Adam broke the hold. He lashed out with a backward stomp at Tomaz, but failed to connect.

As Teth-Adam spun round, he saw that Tomaz's features had changed. The young man's face was distorted and bestial, his jaw and teeth elongated, while his ears narrowed at their tips to sharp points. Even his fingers were longer and his nails claw-like.

The young man's name might have been Amon, but the god of Thebes was not the only deity whose power flowed through him.

Teth-Adam himself drew strength from Shu, Haru, Amon, Zehuti, Aton, and Mehem.

Shu was a god of wind, air, and emptiness. But he was also a god of lions.

And, as Teth-Adam knew, the sorceress-priestess who had blessed the elites of Kahndaq had a particular affinity for animals.

Tomaz roared, a deep and full-throated sound that echoed across the battlefield.

It was a formidable challenge. But with Tamir still down, Tomaz bellowing his defiance, and their third member continuing to keep his distance, Teth-Adam had room to move.

Teth-Adam called upon his gifts from Haru. His feet left the ground, gravity no longer having any hold on his physical form. He floated into the air.

While the young warriors were mighty by the standards of ordinary men, Teth-Adam knew they had not manifested the power of flight. That was why they had attempted to keep him bound to the earth. But their tactic had failed, and...

"NOW," Tomaz shouted.

The third member of the trio lifted his hands. Teth-Adam sensed the energies gathering in Khalid Nassour's palms and fingers.

The infusion of godly might had left both Amon Tomaz and Tamir tall and muscular, but Khalid had barely changed. Even after his transformation, the young doctor had been left lean and slender, almost frail-looking. He did not seem to possess the build of a fighter.

But he did have the look of a magician.

It was then that Teth-Adam realised the truth. He'd been tricked.

"ATON," Khalid cried, "MEHEN, ZEHUTI!"

Wind swirled around Teth-Adam. Instantly, the air around him went from arid stillness to the full fury of a thunderstorm.

Teth-Adam tried to fly away, but he found that he could not move. The air itself resisted him. And with his feet off the ground, he had no leverage, nothing to brace himself against in order to apply the rest of his strength.

Then the lightning came, followed by the thunder.
Teth-Adam was intimately familiar with the lightning of the gods. It was the same power that flowed within him, the same power that he could call upon.

He could use the lightning as a weapon, and often did. But it was a weapon he himself was vulnerable to. Direct contact with thunderbolts powered by the gods of Kahndaq threatened to strip his divine gifts away, if only temporarily.

Khalid’s spell was not the full thunder of Shazam. He had called upon three gods, not six. However, three itself was a potent number, and so Teth-Adam felt the attack, down to his nerves and bones.

He dropped from the sky, crashing to the dirt.

He did not move. For a long few seconds, he could not move.

Slowly, cautiously, the trio of Tomaz, Tamir, and Khalid approached him.

"My lord," Tamir said, hesitantly, "are you..."

Teth-Adam laughed.

He sat up, picking himself off the ground and dusting himself off. He continued to chuckle, his shoulders shaking and his chest heaving.

"Wonderful," Teth-Adam said. "Wonderful! Well done, well done!"
Chapter 90

Teth-Adam approached his soldiers. He smiled broadly, letting his genuine pleasure spread across his face.

He clapped a hand on Amon Tomaz's shoulder, firmly, and squeezed in a comradely fashion. "A cunning ploy. I was truly caught off guard. Your idea?"

"Yes sir," the young man replied, with vigour and assurance.

With the heat of battle fading from his veins, Tomaz's features were already slowly returning to their base human form, gradually losing their leonine characteristics.

Even in such a halfway state, he still radiated an intense and savage energy, his eyes glinting dangerously in the morning light. His muscles pulled the fabric of his sleeveless garment tight against his chest, his body still full of godly power.

"Clever," Teth-Adam said, approvingly.

Then he looked at the slender man standing next to Tomaz. The anointing of divine magic still clung to him, invisible to mortal eyes, but standing out to Teth-Adam like a banner or mantle.

"And you, Khalid," Teth-Adam asked, "how long have you been able to control air and thunder?"

"Five days," Khalid replied, "four. Not long. I sought advice from the sorceress, the Wonder Woman."

The doctor spoke softly, but with a quiet aura of authority. He was older than the other two, and far more educated, having studied medicine in the distant land of America, the Superman's realm, before his return to Kahndaq.

In retrospect, it was no surprise that he had developed his godly gifts in the manner of a priest or mage, not a purely physical fighter. Even his manner of dress reflected that inclination - Khalid was garbed in loose-fitting clothes, such as a baggy blue shirt that reminded Teth-Adam of a robe, rather than the more martial garments worn by his compatriots.

Khalid was much more of a scholar than many in Teth-Adam's service, and all the more valuable for it.

Teth-Adam nodded. "Impressive, for such a short time. You have a rare gift for such arts, one that must be cultivated. Now, as for you, Tamir..."

Tamir drew himself up to his full height. He was the tallest and most heavily muscled of the three men. Before receiving his empowerment, he had already been one of the most impressive-looking men in Teth-Adam's service, and the blessings of the gods had strengthened him even further. Unfortunately, Tamir was by far the least sure of himself.

Sweat glistened on Tamir's face and bare upper body, and it soaked through the desert-patterned military leggings that he wore on his lower body. There were even flecks of sweat that had dripped down to his boots. Teth-Adam thought that his heavy sheen of perspiration was not merely due to physical exertion, but also doubt and worry.

"My lord," Tamir said, hesitantly.
It was obvious that the man thought he would be admonished by Teth-Adam, perhaps even punished.

Teth-Adam stared at Tamir until the man managed to meet his eyes.

"You are strong," Teth-Adam said, "but you need conviction to go with that strength. Trust yourself and your allies. Nonetheless, an excellent effort."

The simple words seemed to bolster Tamir, which pleased Teth-Adam, in turn.

It was important to build his people up, rather than tearing them down. He was their leader and protector, but not their master.

"Well, Adam? Do these fine specimens meet your expectations?"

The new speaker was a woman, her clear, high, voice carried easily over the training ground.

Teth-Adam turned round.

Circe, the Wonder Woman, strode confidently towards Teth-Adam and the three warriors. There was an arrogant, insouciant, sway to her steps. Her body language was challenging - as if daring Teth-Adam to disagree with her.

From most individuals, Teth-Adam would not have tolerated such impudence.

However, Circe was a goddess in her own right, and Teth-Adam's mystic senses confirmed the indisputable truth of her divinity.

As such, Teth-Adam quelled his momentary flash of irritation. He was used to Circe's foibles by now, and he could not deny that the woman had every right to be arrogant.

Instead, he called to her in the manner of a friend and equal.

"I am pleased," Teth-Adam said. "Very pleased. The gods must be, as well."

Circe laughed. "Oh, they are. Your gods have been most cooperative. A pleasure to work with. I do believe I've been aligned with the wrong pantheon all this while. Is Kahndaq hiring?"

Teth-Adam was unsure how much the sorceress was joking, given her manner.

He glanced at Tomaz, Tamir, and Khalid. The three warriors seemed equal parts wary and respectful of the foreign witch-goddess, much in the same way that they regarded Teth-Adam himself.

Erring on the side of caution, he chose to incline his head, nodding seriously. "I would not object if some of my people chose to worship you."

Circe laughed again. "Very kind and gracious of you, Mighty Adam. Perhaps I should start my cult right here? It is not merely the gods of Kahndaq that have blessed your army. They have my magic as well."

She threw her arms wide, and spun, gesturing at the full length and breadth of the practice ground.

The assembled elite of Kahndaq stood at a distance, having witnessed the clash between their brothers-in-arms and their leader.
Teth-Adam brought a hand to his face, and stroked his chin thoughtfully.

On Venus, Teth-Adam had seen firsthand proof that the power of Shazam could be shared, spread, and adapted. He had long suspected that such a thing was possible, but he himself was no priest. In his time, it had been the wizard Shazam that had helped Adam commune with the gods.

Yet… if the sorcerer Sivana was able to grant the power of the gods to some alien creature, if he was able to imbue himself with foul energies… then surely the gods of Kahndaq would heed the call of their most loyal servant?

And though Teth-Adam was no scholar, he was not alone. He had allies. Such as Circe, the Wonder Woman of the Justice League. He had bargained with her, and she had assisted him. With her magic, she had done the people of Kahndaq a great boon.

He nodded, decisively.

"SONS OF ADAM," Teth-Adam bellowed, "shall we venerate the goddess Circe as our patron, honoured alongside the gods of our land? What say you?"

The Sons of Adam answered, raising their voices and stamping their feet. All three units, each made up of three squads of three soldiers.

Twenty-seven divinely empowered warriors roared in affirmation, their cries reaching the heavens.
Chapter 91

Ollie stuck his hands into his pockets, keeping them warm against the wind chill. The roof helipad of the Cadmus building wasn't well-protected against the elements.

That said a lot about their budget priorities, in Ollie's opinion. They had the resources to clone sapient beings, they could transfer people's minds into entirely new bodies... and they couldn't be bothered to set up a basic force field or environmental control system for the roof access.

Cheap bastards, the lot of them.

Thankfully, he had pockets, seeing as how he was wearing regular clothes rather than his combat gear.

The other man on the roof was also dressed in street clothes, including a suit and tie. Admittedly, Professor Emil Hamilton didn't have a superhero alter-ego and thus no costume to speak of. But Hamilton was enough of a mad scientist that Ollie figured he had to qualify as one of the costumed set, if only by association.

"Look," Hamilton said, cheerfully, "up in the sky!"

Ollie gave Hamilton a nasty look. Unlike certain unnamed individuals, Ollie lacked the ability todisintegrate matter with death rays. But he put his best effort into the task of boring holes through the scientist's back with his eyeballs alone.

"Cute," Ollie said, laconically.

"Chin up, Oliver," Hamilton urged. "Put a smile on your face. Aren't you happy to see Superman?"

"He can hear us, you know," Ollie pointed out.

"So he can," Hamilton said. "You're the one being dour, Oliver."

"No," Ollie retorted, "I'm just not bothering to hide my sarcasm."

The unmistakable figure of Superman descended from the grey and cloudy sky. Ollie noted that Lex's outfit was pristine, showing no traces of battle damage. Obviously he'd stopped over in Metropolis to get a change of clothes and a shower, or whatever it was that Kryptonians did to freshen up upon returning from space.

But only the costume was pristine. Lex himself looked like he'd gone ten rounds with a meat grinder. He was far from picture-perfect, and Ollie guessed he wouldn't be facing any television cameras anytime soon.

He didn't look happy, either. His eyes were burning red, seething with barely-restrained energies.

"Lex," Hamilton hollered, waving at the flying Kryptonian. "Welcome back!"

"Professor," Lex rasped, his voice sounding distinctly unnatural. He turned his attention to Ollie. "Arrow."

"Come this way," Hamilton announced, briskly, indicating the roof access doors. "Everything's ready for you, downstairs. I'm sure you'll want to check on the progress. Can I get you anything to drink? Coffee? Tea? Water? Something stronger?"
"I don't require liquid sustenance," Lex growled. "Or meaningless pleasantries. Unless you are attempting to distract me? If you are hiding something from me, you will regret it. Show me your progress."

"As you wish," Hamilton said, his smile not budging a single iota.

Ollie wasn't sure what bothered him more - Hamilton's obviously fake friendliness, or how Lex wasn't calling him on it. The Kryptonian had to realise that Hamilton's demeanour was about as fake as the modern news cycle.

Hamilton wasn't their friend. Ollie could tell. He could see it in the man's eyes.

Maybe Lex was fine with trusting Hamilton. Ollie wasn't. The way Lex behaved around the guy, Ollie figured maybe Lex had some blackmail on the scientist, some kind of leverage... except, as far as Ollie could tell, Hamilton's background was squeaky clean. There were no skeletons in his closet, metaphorical or otherwise.

The only red flag in his records was his closeness to the United States Government, since he'd spent time working for Project 7734 before being headhunted for Cadmus.

For most people, that flag would probably have read as green rather than red. But Ollie was having doubts about how closely the Ross administration and the bureaucrats in Washington were willing to support the Justice League.

Ollie trailed behind Emil Hamilton and Superman as they made their way off the roof and into the belly of the beast, down into the depths of Cadmus.

'Depths' was a literal descriptor, since the research labs and production facilities were largely underground.

As the head of a business group with some investments in real estate, Ollie knew it was much more expensive and structurally difficult to build underground, especially to the extent that Cadmus had done. Thankfully, it wasn't his money on the line, behind the place, but Lex's. All the same, the dubious resource allocation made his boardroom senses itch.

"The new Flamebird and Nightwing are almost ready, physically," Hamilton said, as they walked, "the challenge is their mental state. Since we don't have any of their nanomachines from their previous bodies, the team has had to work entirely from old backups and your initial programming."

Lex looked at Ollie. "I was told that you dispatched a recovery and cleanup team to Venus. Couldn't they complete even a simple task?"

"I sent a team," Ollie said, levelly. "Was damn near shitting my pants when they shipped out too. I was afraid Sivana would blow them out of the sky before they even made planetfall."

"You're not an idiot, Arrow. Or are you? You should know how to select personnel that meet the minimum requirements of competence, while still being expendable," Lex said.

Ollie clamped down on his instinctive twitch of annoyance. "That's what I did."

"Your team," Lex pressed, "was not able to recover Flamebird and Nightwing's bodies?"

"They got nada," Ollie said. "Zilch. Zero. Took a day before they even found Sivana's compounds. He sanitised the crap out of his colony sites."
Lex balled his hand into a fist, and slammed it into the wall of the corridor. It left a small crater in the reinforced concrete.

"Aztek's team couldn't find Frank Laminski either, by the way," Ollie added, pointedly.

Dust covered Lex's knuckles as he withdrew his hand from the wall. "Dead or captured. A shame."

Ollie glanced at Lex. "Surprised to hear you say that. I didn't know you cared."

"I don't," Lex snapped. "But candidates able to command a Power Ring to a useful degree are a finite resource. Rare. Rarer than you."

"A pity," Hamilton interjected, slyly, "you couldn't wield them yourself, could you, Superman?"

Lex returned Hamilton's look. "Precisely why Laminski was valuable."

"Frank was an asshole," Ollie argued. "Our guy, our asshole. But there's, what, seven, eight billion people on Earth. He can't have been the only person who could make a ring dance."

Lex turned his glowing eyes on Ollie. "Even if an individual can utilise a ring, the traits that make for a strong emotional spectrum user also mean they are typically unstable. Unreliable."

"But you could manipulate Frank," Ollie said, pointedly. "Keep him under control."

Hamilton stopped at a set of security doors, looking at the wall-mounted sensors as they activated and swept him. The action of scanning didn't emit any visible light, but the indicators next to the heavy doors turned from red to yellow, and then finally to a steady green.

The doors ground open, rolling aside on heavy wheels and tracks. Hamilton waved a hand at the open doorway.

Lex stepped through, followed by Ollie.

"Cadmus does have genetic samples from Laminski," Hamilton said to Lex, "if you want a clone of him, that's easily done. What we can't guarantee is that the copy of his mind will integrate well enough. Any duplicate may not have the same psychiatric uniqueness of the original, the quality that made him suited as your Lantern."

"It's a moot point, anyway," Ollie noted. "Unless you've got a handful of spare rings tucked away. You don't, do you? Because if you do..."

"I do not," Lex replied. "Acquiring one usable set from the Weaponers was enough of a challenge. Acquiring more will require bringing them fully to heel."

"If you want to invade Qward," Ollie said, "that'd take time and resources. You really wanna do that, when there's already so much on your plate?"

"If necessary," Lex said.

Hamilton nodded. "Let us know if you do want a clone of Laminski. The team will need a few days of notice, even with our latest improved procedures."

Ollie eyed the scientist. "Those work?"

Hamilton smiled thinly. "Oh, yes. Come, this way."
He turned a corner, leading them to a catwalk running across the top of a large high-ceilinged room. Down below, a number of upright tanks were lined up in neat rows.

Between the ranks of cloning cylinders, a handful of Cadmus personnel were visible, monitoring the incubating abominations, or doing whatever it was that mad scientists did in the office. A couple of them looked up, noticing their group.

To their credit, neither of Hamilton's subordinates reacted with excitement or obvious fear, despite the fact Superman himself was looking down on them. They simply got back to work.

Ollie supposed that the average Cadmus employee was either extremely professional, or somewhat desensitised to the idea of Kryptonians and other Justice League members in their midst... since they routinely grew their own on the premises.

"Kingsbury," Hamilton said, pointing to one of the tubes, occupied by a female figure. "Our second attempt. The first had some... developmental issues with the wings, potentially correctable via surgery, but the team deemed it easier to start over."

Ollie clutched the handrail, peering over the side. "Same problem as the Lantern. Vanessa had powers, but most of her punch as Hawkgirl wasn't from her metahuman abilities. It was from the mace. You got more Nth Metal, or do we just give the new Hawkgirl a pointy stick?"

"An interesting perspective," Hamilton said, "from a man whose modus operandi as a superhero consists of shooting pointy sticks at his enemies."

"I'm the best in the world at shooting pointy sticks," Ollie retorted.

"If you say so," Hamilton agreed, insincerely.

"If a replacement Nth Metal weapon cannot be fabricated," Lex said, his attention on the lines of cloning tanks, "alternatives will be found. Professor, what of the Manhunter? Where is my Martian?"

"Ah, yes, that, well," Hamilton muttered, "there's been one or two unforeseen setbacks."

Lex twisted his head round, staring at Hamilton. "Explain."

"Better if I show you," Hamilton said. He leaned over the catwalk railing, raising his voice so the Cadmus personnel on the floor below could hear him. "Open the shroud on tank six!"

A few seconds later, there was movement around one of the tubes. The thick metal shell that had been clamped in place around one of the cylinders gradually came apart, with the loud sound of unlocking bolts.

Eventually, the clear material of the tank was exposed.

The tank was obviously occupied - because the pulsating green biomass in the tube was occupying almost all the available volume, pressing up hard against the transparent surface.

"It turns out," Hamilton said, "cloning Martian tissue isn't the problem. It's almost undifferentiated as it is, and it very much wants to divide. The difficulty the team is facing is, ah, getting a functional mind in there."

Lex scowled. "That's not what I was led to believe. Ma'alefa'ak informed us that even small remnants of Martian anatomy, separated from a larger whole, would retain psychic traces of the
original."

"Perhaps that is the case for conventional Martians," Hamilton said, quickly. "However, the Manhunter's telepathy is, or was, atypical for his race."

"Which means," Ollie concluded, "what you have isn't a Martian, but green spam in a can."

Hamilton glared at Ollie.
He was far from one hundred percent capacity. He still felt weak. He still felt pain. Extended exposure to yellow sun radiation had improved his condition, but it would take time before his full strength returned.

However, he looked healthy. Tissue grafts and skin treatments had restored his external appearance. That was important.

It wasn't a matter of vanity. He had to look perfect. He had to appear invincible. Image was important. That was one lesson he'd learnt in his previous incarnation, in the original lifetime of the man called Lex Luthor.

The world had to see that Superman was back. His appearance, in public, would dispel fears and quell rumours. To avoid more questions, it was critical that he seemed whole, even if the damage he had suffered was not fully healed.

He also needed to present an image of implacable strength to outsiders, even ones that were nominally his allies.

During his recent time away from the planet, it had become increasingly obvious that the politicians and bureaucrats of the world were chafing under their perceived yoke. They were jealous of his power. They feared for their sovereignty and independence.

They sought to challenge him. Him, and his Justice League. They wanted to prove they still held some scraps of power, even in a world where gods walked among mere mortals.

It was utterly foolish and counterproductive. But it was also very human, and thus predictable. Inevitable, almost.

Lex was no longer human, but he remembered enough of the human condition. He understood the petty concerns of small-minded men and women.

He understood the game, and how to play it.

That was why he was now descending from the clouds over Washington, not bothering to hide his presence. There had been no formal announcement, no press release... but he was confident that photographs would be circulating within minutes of his entering the city's airspace.

Lex made no secret of the fact he was flying towards the White House. He landed outside the building, in full view of the public, and walked in.

The Secret Service and White House staff did not stop him. They, at least, were expecting him. And they knew better than to bar his path.

Soon, he passed through the West Wing, and finally across the threshold of the Oval Office.

At the edge of his senses, he could feel the intent-based protections cast by the mages of the Department of Extranormal Operations lashing fitfully against his New God nature, before breaking entirely.

The DEO's magicians weren't strong enough to affect him. If he wanted to harm the President, there was nothing that the government's witches could do to stop him.
Behind the Oval Office's famous nineteenth-century desk, the leader of the United States of America stood, rising to his feet.

President **Pete Ross** fancied himself a good man. Perhaps he was, in terms of conventional moral character, and by the standards of the United States electorate.

But he had also risen to the highest office in America through the good graces of Lex himself, with Lex's endorsement throughout his campaign.

Ross owed Lex.

It was a shame that the man had forgotten.

"Good morning," Ross said, smiling his politician's smile. It was the same expression that had served him in good stead as a senator, and then later on the presidential campaign trail. "Had a good flight? No trouble with the TSA?"

Lex glowered at Ross. The question was a poor attempt at humour. Ross was no idiot, despite what his opponents claimed. Ross knew full well that Lex had arrived at the capital under his own power, not through the use of anything so crass as a commercial airline.

"I guess you're travelling on a Kryptonian passport," Ross continued, still using his trademark lopsided grin. "Should be fine."

"Mister President," Lex said, "you understand why I'm here?"

"Actually," Ross responded, "I'm drawing a blank. I'm happy to see you, Lex, and I'm pleased to see that rumours about your demise have been greatly exaggerated. But I don't..."

"Your lackeys," Lex said, "have not been cooperating."

Despite his claims to the contrary, Ross was a political animal, not some unwashed and illiterate farm boy from Kansas. That meant he was an accomplished actor, in his own right.

To all appearances, Ross looked genuinely confused, even taken aback. But Lex saw his heart rate quicken.

Ross glanced at his staff. The two of them were not alone in the Oval Office. A pair of officials were hovering just inside the door, and Lex was aware of the Secret Service agents lurking further behind.

"I don't mean your people here," Lex said. "I refer to those who hold the reins of power. Your Secretary of Extranormal Operations. Your Secretary of Defence. Even your representative to the United Nations, who must be acting on orders from the State Department. Unless those instructions came directly from your desk?"

Ross licked his lips. "Lex, I'm afraid I don't..."

Lex closed his eyes. He brought a hand to his face, in a rare display of mild annoyance. Disappointing. So disappointing.

He lowered his hand, and fixed Ross with a glare. He allowed a faint amount of red to leak into his eyes, staining his irises and sclera.

"Let me spell it out for you, Mister President," Lex said. "I expect assistance and support from
your people, in order to eliminate the threat posed by the Joker, Sivana, the Shadows, and their pet Kryptonian. Yet, what am I faced with?"

Ross spread his hands. "Goodwill and a spirit of comradely friendship?"

"No," Lex stated. "The opposite. It seems the American government is challenging the Justice League's authority. My authority. I would very much like to know why."

Ross placed his hands on his desk, his palms flat against the antique oak timbers. He leaned forward.

"Lex, the job of the government is to defend American interests. Right now, there are serious questions being raised about..."

"What I see," Lex interrupted, "is small-minded individuals playing power games, while a dangerous group of supervillains goes unchecked."

"Dangerous to whom? There have been attacks," Ross said, "but there's a lot of people - not just in my party, I'm talking bipartisan sentiment - who think that the Batman..."

"The Joker," Lex corrected, with a growl.

"Who think that the Batman," Ross repeated, "is directly targeting you. Not America. Not Americans."

Lex clasped his hands behind his back. "I see. You will oppose me on this? I am not asking for much."

"You're asking that the United States government turn over the DEO's best assets to you," Ross said. "Unconditionally. Unilaterally. We're not your private army, Lex. It doesn't work that way."

There was a long pause.

Lex looked at Ross.

Ross stared back.

Lex gave a small nod.

"I see. Tell me, Pete, how are Lana and your children doing?"

Ross' mask slipped, his expression turning harsh. "Are you threatening me?"

"Of course not," Lex answered. "If I were to coerce you, I would begin by saying... loneliness plus alienation, plus fear, plus despair..."
Political correctness meant that she couldn't allow herself to react badly, even if she found the man disagreeable and repulsive.

It would be public relations suicide if the Secretary of Extranormal Operations was accused of discrimination against a metahuman with an unusual physical appearance.

And the Director of Project 7734 had a very unusual appearance indeed, even by metahuman standards.

Amanda Waller's dislike of the man had nothing to do with how he looked. It had everything to do with who he was, on a much deeper level.

She liked to think of herself as a woman of principles, even if the policies she was willing to condone in pursuit of those principles would disturb many of her colleagues.

In Amanda's eyes, Robert Todd was the kind of man who didn't have any principles.

But as an African-American woman in a position of power, occupying one of the highest offices in the United States, Amanda knew that too many people couldn't look beyond matters such as race or gender.

If she went after Todd, too many people would think it was about skin colour.

Or in Todd's case, about his lack of skin colour.

Her subordinate was smoking. Amanda could see tendrils of nicotine-laced fumes drift around his throat and neck, vanishing beneath the collar of his shirt.

She could see all of that because Todd's skin was completely transparent, so clear as to be utterly invisible. So were his muscles, his circulatory system, his nerves, all his organs, everything except his skeleton.

As a costumed vigilante, Todd had been known as 'Mister Bones'. That was the kind of melodramatic theatrical pageantry that the capes and tights set loved, which Amanda thought was juvenile bullshit.

In Amanda's mind, the fact that Todd had been a vigilante should have utterly disqualified him from entering government service, much less in a role that amounted to law enforcement.

It didn't help that one of the man's powers was a literal death touch. He didn't merely look creepy, his invisible biology secreted a cocktail of chemicals that were almost instantly fatal to ordinary human beings.

Officially, Todd's record was remarkably clean. Too clean. Amanda found it very hard to believe that Todd hadn't used his powers for extrajudicial killings. His metahuman abilities were tailor-made for murder.

It was a blessing that he couldn't turn completely invisible. Amanda didn't want to think about the
prospect of some naked vigilante killer running unseen across the countryside.

Todd's very existence bothered Amanda. However, her predecessor as Secretary had valued Robert Todd's experience, and what he'd called the man's 'unique perspective'.

Plus, she knew that the President seemed reluctant to fire the guy, for some reason. Hence Todd had been retained across administrations, one of the few senior DEO administrators to survive Ross' house cleaning.

Maybe President Ross, like Amanda, was afraid of a public relations disaster. Maybe he didn't want to offend the politically correct crowd. Pete Ross valued his 'nice guy' image a bit too much.

That moderate centre-of-the-aisle approach had won Ross enough party and public support to secure the White House, but Amanda reckoned it also made him a poor fit for the big chair. He wasn't prepared to make hard decisions, for fear of the fallout.

Then again, Amanda couldn't be too hard on Ross. After all, here she was, being mildly disturbed by Todd, and she didn't dare to let the man know how she felt.

Of course, Todd probably knew, anyway. Amanda didn't like the man. But she couldn't deny that he was competent. Observant. Smart.

"I don't think there's a dilemma, Amanda," Robert Todd said, as he blew smoke from his invisible lips. "Our next steps seem clear."

Amanda glared at him. "You don't see the problem, really? We've got reason to believe that the President of the United States of America is being influenced by a goddamn alien, and you don't think there's a problem? The hell you've got in that cigarette, Bob? Do I need to worry about your second-hand smoke?"

Todd's skull moved. His seemingly empty eye sockets looked unnervingly at Amanda.

"Ah, you see… all that, that's a problem. I agree, that's an issue. However, I don't think there's a dilemma that affects our immediate near-term decision making. Legally, procedurally, I've got no grounds to refuse a lawful order that's come through all the proper channels. The President says 'jump', we say 'off which cliff'?"

"That's not true," Amanda said. "That's never been true."

"Maybe," Todd acknowledged. "You don't know that Pete Ross has been compromised, either. You suspect, I'll give you that. You don't know for sure. Is this the right time to kick up a fuss? Is this the hill you want to die on?"

"Our mages all report that their wards around the Oval Office were broken," Amanda said. "The White House duty officers are acting strangely. We'll need to screen the whole damn lot for memetic contagion. The one telepath we tasked to look at the President's head had to be sedated, because the poor bastard wouldn't stop screaming."

"Ordering telepathic surveillance on the President is very illegal, Amanda. I'll pretend I didn't hear that last sentence. Putting that aside, it's not a fair test," Todd remarked, mildly. "Edgar's always been very high-strung."

"He was bleeding from his eyes and ears," Amanda snapped.

"As I said," Todd murmured. "Very high-strung. He's never learnt to watch his blood pressure."
"You're being intentionally obtuse," Amanda accused.

"Of course not," Todd denied, waving his cigarette butt at himself with a skeletal hand. "I'm very transparent. You can see right through me."

"Bob," Amanda growled, stressing his name.

Robert Todd dropped the remains of his cigarette, and extinguished it beneath the sole of his shoe. He shifted his head, but the man's lack of a face made his expression impossible to read.

"Amanda," he said, "if you want to launch an investigation into what, if anything, may have transpired when Superman met President Ross... a discreet, extremely quiet investigation... you have my full support. But I advise treading carefully. For now, you don't want to attract notice. You don't want to rock the boat. Trying to block Superman from setting foot on the premises would be jumping up and down while screaming 'capsize' at the top of your lungs."

"We're letting a single private citizen, one who wasn't even born on this damn planet, walk into a secure government installation, and walk out with all the metahuman assets that he wants," Amanda argued. "We're the DEO, not a meat market. We're not in the business of pimping our personnel out."

"I doubt we're pimping," Todd replied, matter-of-factly. "I don't think Superman wants to sleep with any of them, unless Kryptonian tastes are more exotic than I've been led to believe."

"Characterise it however you want," Amanda retorted. "Doesn't change the reality of what you're doing."

"Yes," Todd said, "but the optics of a black man and a black woman talking about pimping, or slavery, are extremely poor."

Amanda scowled. "You're black?"

Todd waved a bony hand at his completely bare skull. "You couldn't tell?"

"I have no idea," Amanda informed him, "if you're serious, or if you're shititng me."

Chapter End Notes

Just a heads up, there's a possibility I might need to go to a less frequent update schedule (versus the current daily updates) at some point in March or April, if my real-life job workload intensifies. I'll comment again if it comes to that. No change at the moment, just saying.
Chapter 94

Todd held a finger up. But before he could voice a response, his phone went off. The head of Project 7734 fished his phone out of his pocket, and peered at the screen.

"Superman's here," he announced.

"It's not too late to break out the Kryptonite," Amanda said.

"There's no Kryptonite on-site," Todd said.

Amanda gave Todd a hard look.

"There's no Kryptonite on-site," Todd repeated, in the same conversational tone. "We may or may not have synthesised some radioactive compounds that decay in a fashion that produces certain wavelengths. Purely for the purposes of scientific research, of course. There's no Kryptonite on the premises."

Amanda grunted. "Weaponised?"

"Let me put it this way," Todd said. "We'd piss him off. I'm not sure we'd kill him. So that's worse. My advice, once again, don't rock the boat. Not now. Not yet."

"Remember," Amanda warned, "I'm your boss."

"Of course," Todd answered. "But the President and Congress ultimately determine my budget. The same President that suddenly wants us to cooperate with Superman, not take pot shots at him."

"Fine," Amanda grunted.

Todd stared at Amanda for a while, or at least his skinless skull faced her for a few seconds. Then he pointed down the corridor. "Shall we?"

"You first," Amanda said. "If I try to find my way around here, I'll get lost."

"Yes," Todd agreed. "That's the idea."

Amanda followed Todd through the labyrinth that comprised Project 7734. She eyed their surroundings. "Security measure?"

"That," Todd said, "and the layout has occult significance."

"I remember reading about that," Amanda said. "Keeping malign influences out?"

Todd chuckled. "Oh, no. Keeping them in."

***

By the time they caught up with Superman, the Kryptonian was already talking to Project 7734's lead scientist.

There was a chance that the alien would view their late arrival as a deliberate snub, especially since it was one.
Amanda Waller didn't want to be caught waiting for Superman. She wasn't about to treat him like he was some kind of grand VIP rather than an unwanted interloper.

The head of research at 7734 was yet another staff member that Amanda didn't approve of. Robert Todd was a weasel, but at least he was only a lesser life form in a metaphorical sense. At least Todd was human, and he was definitely American.

Doctor Zaius was from Africa. He wasn't a United States citizen, and his irregular immigration status would have disqualified him from holding any comparable position under the Department of Defense.

It made no damn sense that the Department of Extranormal Operations was willing to happily overlook the security risk he presented, just to have him on the payroll.

Zaius' appointment was one more sign that something was deeply wrong with the DEO. Amanda wished she had the time and leverage to rip out the entire organisation's apparatus and rebuild it from the ground, but she couldn't afford the effort, time, and expenditure of political capital.

Zaius was also a full grown gorilla. Which made it even more difficult to terminate his employment. The very same liberals who'd get up in arms over Amanda seemingly discriminating against a metahuman would crucify her with even more vigour if they heard she'd fired one of the DEO's few non-human diversity hires.

Amanda suspected he was a diversity hire, though she damn well couldn't voice that thought, either. He couldn't have been the only qualified scientist capable of doing the job. She had her doubts about the gorilla's doctorate. In her day, the United States government hadn't been in the habit of recognising degrees from no-name universities in the middle of the jungle that probably took tuition fees in bananas.

"Mister Kelex," Zaius said to Superman. "I must caution you, experimental research on our subjects is one thing, but field deployment is another matter. To suggest that we..."

"You are labouring under the mistaken impression that this is, at all, subject to discussion," Superman responded, his voice dangerously frosty.

Zaius waved his long arms in agitation, his big tailor-made lab coat flapping around him with the motion. "But..."

"I am not debating, Doctor. I am telling you what will happen, and you will comply," Superman said.

Amanda decided to step in. She didn't like Doctor Zaius, but the ape was part of her department, and a duly-appointed civil servant of the American government. Letting Superman threaten him was a damn insult, a slap against their collective faces.

"Superman," Amanda snapped. "This is a DEO facility. Not your private property. You want something, you ask nicely."

The Kryptonian twisted his head around, directing a nasty look at Amanda. His eyes flashed briefly red.

"My apologies," Superman said. His voice was smooth, but it also oozed insincerity. "I mean no offence, of course."

"Of course," Todd chimed in, next to Amanda. "Welcome to the Project, Superman. I hope Doctor
Zaius has been keeping you entertained."

Amanda wasn't fully conversant with Zaius' simian expressions and body language, since he wasn't human. But she thought the gorilla looked very pissed off.

"Quite," Superman stated. "However, my time is valuable. That means my visit here needs to be a worthwhile investment. I intend to leave here with the human resources that I have requested, as well as the inhuman ones."

"I've told you," Zaius began, stabbing a finger at the caped alien. "You can't... "

Todd intervened, stepping between the two. "Doctor. Superman. We're all adults here. Let's get down to brass tacks, shall we? Let's go somewhere more private, and talk about what the Project can do for you."

Amanda frowned at Todd. But the skull-faced man didn't seem deterred. Amanda suspected that if he had a regular face, he would be smiling.

***

Amanda waited until the Kryptonian was out of the door. She kept waiting, sitting in silence until the phone on Todd's desk buzzed.

Robert Todd picked up his mobile phone, glanced at the screen, and nodded. "We're clear. Superman is in the air and heading away at speed. Low probability he's eavesdropping."

"Good," Amanda growled. "Now, you mind explaining? What the hell was that, Bob?"

"I have the same question," Zaius said, lifting his spectacles up so he could stare directly at the skeletal man.

Todd leaned back in his chair. The faux leather squeaked slightly. "I'm being pragmatic, Amanda. Getting Superman off our case, so he doesn't come back to bother us. That buys time. Time to start that investigation you wanted. Meanwhile, we're beneath notice. Just good boys and girls, doing what we're told. Remember, we were ordered to cooperate."

"Cooperate," Amanda spat. "Not roll over like a damn dog!"

Due to his bulk, Zaius was sitting on a stool rather than one of the regular chairs in Todd's office. The gorilla hunched forward. "Director, I must protest. Giving Superman the Human Bomb is bad enough, but... "

"He was going to get the Human Bomb either way," Todd replied, calmly. "Lincoln is a Justice League reserve member, even if he's been relying on us to control and contain his powers over the past few years."

"Mister Lincoln, yes," Zaius said. "But to freely relinquish the rest, so many of our most powerful extranormal assets... "

"Powerful," Todd said. "Walking weapons of mass destruction. You call them assets. I call them liabilities. Think of this as an opportunity, Doctor. This is a convenient pretext to get Roy Lincoln and the rest of the red cases down on level nine out of your hands, before they blow up in your face."

"If one of them loses it out there, in the wild," Amanda snarled, "the blowback will be on us. You
thought of that, Bob?"

Robert Todd spread his skeletal hands. "Ah, but that's where media lines and damage control come in. If anything happens, it happens under the Justice League's watch. Worst case scenario? We blame Superman."
"Can't help but feel," Jack remarked, as he walked, "that we might be making a mistake."

**TING!**

Sivana turned his neck a tiny fraction, just enough to spear Jack with a forbidding look. "Reservations, Napier? Do we have your cooperation, or not?"

The Father Box didn't have eyes, but Jack got the impression that its cubist faces were glaring at him anyway.

The computer wasn't on his belt, but rather attached to Sivana's side, and Jack reckoned it was starting to mirror the most severe of the scientist's facial expressions.

"Didn't say I was objecting," Jack replied, easily. "Only that we might be making a mistake. Sometimes, you want to stand back and watch the trainwreck happen."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence," Sivana said, sardonically. "Your support is heartening."

"You're welcome," Jack responded.

"Thankfully," Sivana said, "I do not need your agreement, merely that of the Entity that is connected to your ring."

"I thought you didn't like relying on higher beings," Jack noted.

"I don't," Sivana agreed, clapping his hands behind his back. Due to his transformed physique, those hands were much larger than normal, as was his back. "I don't require permission from the White Entity, either. Without the ring, without the White Light, this would still be viable."

**Ting! Ting! Ting!**

Sivana glanced down at the Father Box, and added: "Time consuming and resource intensive, yes. But viable. However, the White Light is well suited for this purpose... and, it would seem, the only price it demands is in accordance with our own aims. A win-win situation."

"So," Jack said, "it's fine to use higher powers when it's convenient. Very transactional of you, Doc."

**TING!**

Jack snorted at the Father Box. "Call it a capitalist's approach to religion."

"Please," Sivana riposted, "you make it sound as if my outlook is unusual. The majority of adherents to any given faith, at heart, surely share my approach. How often do people pray, unless they need something?"

**TING!**

"Careful," Jack warned, tapping his ear, "the Eradicator can hear you. Super hearing. She's pretty religious, these days."

"She too calls upon gods for favours," Sivana said, "for what is the power of Shazam, if not a
prayer asking for strength from the gods? A blessing, a bargain, in exchange for a pledge to uphold their values, to do their will."

"Begs the question," Jack mused, "if anyone prays to Lex."

**Ting!**

Sivana raised his eyebrows. "Interesting. I suppose some people will pray to anything. The poor benighted fools are unlikely to be deriving much benefit from their worship."

**TING!**

Sivana shook his head. "Even if Superman is enough of a New God to hear their prayers, which I find improbable, he would be a selfish deity."

"A wholly privately owned enterprise," Jack said. "Not a publicly listed one, with dividends for shareholders."

Sivana reached the end of the corridor. A pair of black-clad Shadows opened the door for him and Jack. The scientist crossed through, into the chamber beyond, without acknowledging the duo. Jack gave them a nod, though neither man acknowledged him in return.

The chamber beyond was rough-hewn, freshly hollowed out of bare rock to precise dimensions and specifications - an irregular pentagon, with a faint curve to the longest two sides.

Other members of the League of Shadows were already in the room. Unlike the two at the door, the acolytes were wearing red, not black, dressed in loose-fitting crimson robes that had been fabricated for the occasion.

Jack and Sivana were wearing the robes as well. It was mildly embarrassing that they'd all turned up for the party in the same thing, but then again, the dress code on the invitations had been very precise.

Even the illumination in the room was tinted crimson, in keeping with the singular theme.

There wasn't much in the way of decoration in the chamber. Most of it was still bare rock. But there was a dais, a raised platform for someone to stand on, in front of a sunken pit filled with liquid. The platform and the rim of the pool appeared to be made from faintly translucent crystal.

On either side of the pool, the Shadows tested the rudimentary ropes and pulleys that allowed them to lower and raise a pair of crimson-shrouded forms - the two bodies that would soon be immersed.

A moment passed, as they all took their positions, and waited. Jack himself stood behind the dais, though he did not step up to it.

He knew the stage directions, and they'd been through a couple rehearsals before the big show.

Jack wasn't going to screw up. He was a professional, after all.

From the room's second entrance, past the other end of the pool, the tall blonde figure of the Eradicator appeared, also clad in one of the red robes. She pulled the hood in place as she walked forward, then circled the pit with slow, measured, strides.

Eventually, the Eradicator stepped up onto the crystalline platform. She began to speak.
The words were in Kryptonian, specifically in an early form of the planet's created language.

Jack didn't know the dialect, of course, but the White Ring on his left hand meant that he understood every line. The ring piped the translation directly into his brain.

"Born are we under the heavenly starshine of Rao," the Eradicator said, "whose crimson light shall guide home the wayward spirits of his sons and daughters, and whose glory shall reward us with the miracle of renewal."

The Shadows began to lower the bodies into the pool. The liquid was not water from the River Memon, because the religious site had boiled into vapour decades ago, along with the rest of Krypton.

But Sivana, the Eradicator, and the Father Box all agreed that water from one of Talia al Ghul's Lazarus Pits was an acceptable substitute.

"So say we all," the Eradicator said.

The two bodies sunk beneath the shallow water of the crystal pool.

"So say we all," echoed the Shadows in the chamber. They too said the phrase in Kryptonian, or rather, they spoke a single two syllable word.

Jack didn't join in. He had a different line.

He even managed to deliver it with a straight face.

"So that the dead might live again."

His ring glowed.

Flamebird and Nightwing broke the surface of the pool, casting aside their shrouds, thrashing and flailing as they looked around wildly.

"Even as Krypton's red sun dims," the Eradicator recited, "know that your path stays as bright as the eyes of Kandor herself."
Flamebird looked up at the red lamps in the ceiling, illuminating her cell.

She wanted to imagine the red light taunting her, mocking her. Torturing her. It was stealing her power. Keeping her weak.

The red light should have felt harsh against her skin and eyes. The wavelengths dampened her abilities, and prevented her body from absorbing the energy it needed for flight, strength, invulnerability, and all the powers she was accustomed to.

The light was weakening her.

But the light was also warm. It felt good. It felt soothing.

It had to be some kind of biological imperative, an instinct left over in her genes. Kryptonians had evolved to live under a red sun.

The crimson illumination was merely what her body mindlessly craved, what it thought was its natural state. Flamebird knew better, of course.

She knew that what she really needed was yellow and blue light.

The light was another cage, just as restrictive a prison as the four walls of her cell. No. Even more. Without the light, she could have torn herself free. With it, she was weak.

She was nothing.

Without her powers, she was nothing.

Or so she'd always thought.

She didn't even have her anger to draw on.

Oh, she'd howled and raged, for the first few hours. Was it hours? She'd lost count.

How long had it been? She'd screamed herself hoarse, and they'd let her.

Now, all that frustration at her captivity was spent.

Her fury should have returned. It should have come back. But the bottomless pit of rage that she was so accustomed to... it was empty.

She didn't feel angry.

Just tired.

They'd done something to her.

She wanted to say she was broken. That they'd broken her, somehow.

But that wasn't true.

She didn't want to admit it. She felt different, and she wanted to say that the change was for the worst. She felt fragile. She felt vulnerable.
Yet, somehow, in some way, she also felt... whole.

Flamebird clutched herself, wrapping her arms tightly around her own body. Her hands squeezed her upper arms and shoulders.

She wasn't in pain.

She didn't feel spikes of bone-deep agony when she moved. Even the chronic aches, what the scientists said were phantom signs of her deterioration, even those were gone.

What had they done to her?

Even her thoughts felt different.

That realisation, more than anything else, terrified her.

And it was fear that she was feeling. Fear, not merely apprehension.

She didn't think she'd ever felt fear, not truly. She'd never been allowed to. Her programming didn't allow for it.

She was the end result of Superman's vision, a perfect weapon forged to carry out his will. She wasn't supposed to falter.

Even if her mind had somehow malfunctioned, the nanites in her tissues should have been able to physically compensate for the imbalance.

Emotions could be regulated through chemicals in her blood and brain. If chemical manipulation failed, there were other measures. After all, her thoughts and sensations were ultimately electrical impulses, ones that her systems should have been able to redirect and suppress.

But her systems, the programming and nanomachines that had been a part of her life since the beginning... they were silent.

They were gone.

No powers. No regulatory systems. No anger. No pain.

She hugged herself, and tried to make sense of it all.

She knew that her sense of time was off. There was no way for her to mark the passage of time, in the bare windowless cell. The red light didn't change.

Under normal circumstances, she would have consulted her nanomachines, but without them... all she could do was count, or measure her own heartbeat, but she had long since lost track.

How long had she been a prisoner? Hours? A day? She didn't know.

She didn't know.

That scared her, as well.

She looked up, as the door to the cell opened.

Flamebird rose to her feet, keeping her eyes on the other woman.
The other person in the cell didn't look like a fighter, but Flamebird was well aware that looks could be deceiving. She was also painfully aware that her own powers were gone, leaving her dangerously vulnerable.

The other blonde, in her high heels, was actually taller and more athletically built than Flamebird herself. There was a chance she could overpower Flamebird in the event of a struggle.

The newcomer was wearing a white coat, a turtleneck top, and a pencil skirt. She wore glasses, and hair bound up in a neat bun.

Flamebird couldn't see any weapons, but there were several places on the woman's body where she could be concealing something dangerous. It was also possible that the woman's tablet and stylus were esoteric weapons of some kind.

She considered attacking, but held herself still. Even if she could subdue the woman, she was deep within enemy territory, and there were no doubt others nearby.

No, there were definitely reinforcements near - she could see out of the cell, through the open door, and there was at least one guard.

"Flamebird," the woman said, softly.

Flamebird watched her, warily.

"Can I call you Flamebird," the woman asked, "or is there something else you prefer?"

Flamebird tried to remember what she knew about resisting interrogation. It wasn't a subject her training and programming had focused on. But she wasn't weak. She wouldn't crack.

"Flamebird, then," the woman said, after a moment. "I'm Doctor Harleen Quinzel. You can call me Harley, if you like."

The name sounded distantly familiar, but in her present state, Flamebird couldn't remember where she'd heard or read it. Perhaps in some dossier compiled by the League, in some mission briefing... without her systems, she no longer had perfect recall.

Doctor Quinzel. Doctor. A doctor. Obviously she was a scientist working for the League of Shadows, or an assistant of Sivana's. So, this was their game? They wanted to experiment on her and discover Superman's secrets?

The doctor looked around, scrutinising the cell with visible displeasure. She made a note on her tablet, scribbling a few lines on the screen.

"I'm sorry about the accommodations," Quinzel continued. "I'll see what I can do. If there's anything you want, tell me, I'll talk to al Ghul's people."

Flamebird remained silent.

Quinzel brought her hand to her glasses, pushing the frames up so they rested on her brow. She looked at Flamebird, directly, with piercing eyes.

"You don't trust me," Quinzel said. "You don't know what to make of me. That's alright. I understand. But I'm your doctor now. I'm on your side. I'm here to help you. I promise."
"I'm kinda surprised," Jack said, conversationally, "I thought Kryptonian society had problems with clones. You guys didn't consider clones to be people, right? Just medical equipment."

The Eradicator's eyes flashed scarlet, twin streams of radiation streaking towards Jack.

An octagonal street sign materialised in front of Jack, resembling a piece of sheet metal on a pole. The back of the thing was towards him, so he couldn't see the front. But he knew the face of the ring construct had to say 'STOP' in big high-visibility letters.

The white stop sign absorbed the Eradicator's heat vision, soaking up the destructive rays.

"I have been forced to reassess my position," the Eradicator replied, "taking into account new data."

As she spoke, the Eradicator's eyes flashed brightly. Too brightly. What emerged from her eyeballs was not a pair of tightly focused laser beams, but rather a wide-area wave that painted everything in front of her in heat and light.

The stop sign vanished, replaced by a pair of white sunglasses that came into being directly on Jack's head, protecting his vision. The Eradicator's blast was intended to blind, not to do damage.

The Kryptonian cyborg lunged forward, closing the distance between them. Her cape flapped behind her, trailing like a banner. Or a flash of red around a charging bull.

Before the Eradicator's fist met his face, Jack vanished. The ring on his finger responded at the speed of thought, instantly displacing Jack and spitting him out above the Eradicator, his back towards the ceiling.

Jack was gone, but the white sunglasses weren't. The construct lenses and frames hung suspended in the air, almost touching the Eradicator's knuckles.

The glasses melted into an amorphous blob of light, before solidifying into a sphere with a piece of rope coming out of one end - a lit and sparking fuse.

The bomb exploded.

If the Eradicator was fazed by the virtual bomb going off at point-blank range, she didn't show it. She shielded her face, then spun.

She caught the glowing white anvil as it dropped from above. Jack's construct disintegrated as the Eradicator's gloved fingers dug into it, breaking the hard-light shell.

Still suspended in mid-air, in defiance of the laws of gravity, Jack grinned. "New data?"

"For thousands of generations, clones were not considered people. But Sen-M was correct. The reformists were correct. The gods exist," the Eradicator declared. "Souls exist. Cloned beings… they too have souls. Kryptonian souls. They, too, are children of Rao."

She lifted a fist. The wind howled and thunder roared. A pillar of lightning formed between the floor and ceiling, forcing Jack to protect himself.

Jack clutched a white umbrella, sheltering beneath the shining dome. He drifted and floated around
in the wind, like a male Mary Poppins. Marty Poppins, maybe.

The Eradicator did not press the attack. She waited patiently as Jack descended to the ground, and didn't speak until the soles of his shoes touched the floor.

"As am I," the Eradicator said.

Jack furled the umbrella, closing it with both hands, then allowed it to vanish. "Prove yourself brave, truthful, and unselfish, and someday, you will be a real girl. Ain't that so, Miss Pinocchio?"

"My designation is not Pinocchio," the Eradicator replied, staring at him blankly.

"Okay," Jack said, waggling a finger. "We gotta work on that. Get you and the kids signed up to Disney Plus, catch up on all the childhood education that you've missed."

The Eradicator's brow creased, as she frowned. "You are joking. Again. Please cease."

"Sure," Jack said, easily. "I'm not kidding about the children's programming, though. Lex has stuffed those two full of his own brand of brainwashing. You sure you can get their heads sorted out, make them good, upstanding, Kryptonian citizens? Sit around the campfire and sing songs to Rao?"

"Your associate is treating them," the Eradicator said.

Jack shrugged. "Harley's good. But deprogramming a pair of clone Supergirls is a new one, even for her."

The Eradicator considered that, then shook her head. Jack wondered whether it was also a Kryptonian mannerism, or whether she'd picked up more from the locals than she'd intended to.

"This is a distraction," the Eradicator said. "We are here for a combat evaluation, not to exchange pleasantries."

Jack cocked his head. "So what's the verdict?"

"Your response time is adequate. Barely. But adequate," the Eradicator stated, critically. "However, the strength of your constructs do not seem equal to the output of the Justice League's Lantern. Is this your full capacity?"

"Nah, I'm not going all out," Jack said, defensively. "Collateral damage, you know? We'd lose the deposit on this place. And maybe the entire place."

Sivana had reinforced the subterranean training room. But considering the amount of force they could potentially throw around, Jack figured an accident would still threaten the structural integrity of the League of Shadows' complex - and possibly register on seismographs across the continent.

The Eradicator nodded. "Form a construct. Reinforce it. Step aside."

Jack lifted his left hand, pointing the ring at a space on the floor. A humanoid figure coalesced into being, white light hardening into the shape of a crash test dummy, complete with joints and four-quadrant fiducial markers.

The Eradicator drew her arm back, flexing it at the elbow and deliberately chambering a punch, before letting her fist fly.

The Kryptonian's arm went into the midsection of the dummy, spearing its torso. The Eradicator's
hand emerged from the other side, with a loud crunching sound.

The Eradicator wiggled her limb, yanking the dummy upwards. She shook her arm until the hard-light figure broke apart into shards and stray flecks of energy.

She gave Jack a disapproving look. She didn't say anything, but her message was clear.

"Alright," Jack admitted, raising his hands. "You got me. Point taken, I'll work on it."

"Do so," the Eradicator said, imperiously.

Jack pointed at the ring with his other hand. "But, just for the record, the real value in this thing is the funky life magic, not my ability to wallop someone in the face with the Acme Corporation's mail order inventory."

"That may be so," the Eradicator said. "Nonetheless, it is a weapon, and one that has already proven capable of hurting Superman. You would be wise to hone its destructive output, even as we leverage its esoteric capabilities."

"We could always try raising more corpses," Jack suggested. "Wait for Lex to clone new Flamebirds and Nightwings, then kill them a few more times, bring them back a few more times, until we've farmed our own zombie army."

The Eradicator didn't look amused.

"You've been talking to Doctor Sivana again," the Eradicator accused.

Jack scratched his neck. "Well, you have to admit, he's full of interesting ideas."
"Is it safe for us to be out here?"

"No," Jack replied, instantly. "But that's more because your shoes aren't suited for this kinda terrain, not because the big brother surveillance state is watching us."

Harley glared at Jack. "You said we were goin' back to Gotham."

"We're in the greater Gotham area," Jack said. "Outside metropolitan Gotham, sure, but this is still..."

"Not Gotham," Harley complained, stamping a foot in the muck. There was a wet squelch.


White light danced around Harley's feet, leaving her clad in a pair of white laced-up boots. Virtual boots. Although he wasn't a professional cobbler, Jack reckoned they were up to the rigours of the swamp.

Harley stomped again, experimentally. "Huh."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Happy?"

"Not quite," Harley told him. "My toes are still icky."

Jack coughed. The boots glowed brighter for a moment, before the illumination subsided. "Happy now?"

"Ooh, toasty," Harley remarked, lifting one leg and peering at her foot.

"I'm hoping the White Entity or whatever its name is doesn't audit every single ring use," Jack muttered, "otherwise I'll have some explaining to do."

"You'd have explainin' to do anyway," Harley said.

"Yeah," Jack answered. "But you know what they say about death and taxes. I don't wanna know what bookkeeping Life has."

"I don't remember ever hearing about the Lantern filling out paperwork for his rings," Harley said. "Wasn't anything like that in the League files when I was at Arkham, and in their system."

"Would they tell you if he did? Besides, this thing's under different management," Jack said, trudging ahead into the bog.

Harley picked her way carefully through the uneven ground, in Jack's wake. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure she was following, and to ensure the makeshift magical shoes were holding up.

His own footwear sunk into what passed for earth, though it was at least half or a third moisture. The water table had to be pretty high. Jack was hardly a geography expert, but he supposed the ground still counted as soil. It wasn't mineral soil, though, but all bits of decaying leaves and plant matter.
There were pools of outright water in the vicinity, puddles, ponds, and little channels between them. The water was brackish, not clear, making it impossible to see through or even gauge the depth.

Being a city boy, forestry and fieldcraft wasn't Jack's forte, but he knew enough to realise the ground was treacherous. This wasn't the sort of tame wilderness that people came out to hike, picnic, or fish in.

The name of the place was not the kind of label that drew visitors. The locals called it Slaughter Swamp. Jack didn't know the history behind that name, and he wasn't especially inclined to look it up. But it was fitting. Real fitting.

"Hey," Harley called, "why are we out here? If you've finally snapped and are gonna murder me, I'd appreciate if you dumped my body in a nicer place, thanks."

Jack snorted. "You kidding? After all the effort I put in, getting you on board? Where else am I gonna find a shrink willing to work with me, and a couple of traumatised Kryptonians?"

Harley shrugged. "Craigslist?"

"Okay," Jack said, "let me rephrase, where else am I gonna find a competent shrink willing to ride herd on our extra special set of issues?"

"Dunno," Harley replied, "how many psychiatrists did you seduce to the dark side, with your wicked ways?"

Jack mimed being shot, clutching at a nonexistent chest wound. "Ouch. Smack dab, right there."

"I live to serve," Harley said, "aim to please, and shoot to kill."

"So cruel," Jack lamented, as he led the way through the bog, "here I am, doing you a favour, trying to find you more patients, and this is the thanks I get."


Jack scratched his chin. "Nah, Mister Toad's with Pyg's crew, last I heard, they were operating up north."

Harley pressed a hand against a tree trunk, using it for balance as she stepped gingerly over a tough bit of ground. "There's a villain named Mister Toad? Seriously?"

"Yeah," Jack said. "Be thankful you haven't met him. Guy needs to moisturise."

"You know such wonderful people," Harley quipped, brushing bits of bark and dirt off her hands.

"And that's why," Jack said, "you gotta be selective with accepting friend invites, otherwise you'll turn out like Uncle Jack."

"Noted with thanks," Harley responded. "But I still wanna know who you're looking for, way out here. And why you wanted me to come with. Gimme a straight answer, will ya?"

Jack stopped, mid-stride. Then he lowered his foot with a sodden squish. He slid slightly in the mud, before he regained his balance.

He supposed he could fly, but he didn't want the ring to make things too easy.
He looked back at Harley.

Jack sighed.

"Far as I know," Jack said, "in this universe, you never treated them as a doctor in Arkham. I dunno if you've ever met."

"So what's the big deal," Harley grumped. "Unless you're sayin' that other me fell for all her cute patients."

"Uh," Jack began, "funny you should say that."

Harley gave him a nasty look. "You're kidding. What, was my other self intentionally trying to keep breaching professional ethics? Collect a prize for having a full set? Or are you messing with me?"

"I think it's more like, that Harley set a trend of messing around with Arkham inmates," Jack said, "if you call two a pattern. Can't fault her, can you? Girl had a type."

"Some type," Harley grumbled, "if you're looking for this other boyfriend of mine in a swamp. You sure there's anyone alive in here?"

"I can see souls," Jack said, tapping the face of the white ring. "Also, we're not talking about a 'him'."

Harley laughed. "Last time I kissed a girl was my experimental year in college."

Jack rubbed his chin. "A whole year? Did you need time to get results?"

"Clinical trials," Harley said. "With a control group. Okay, look, buster. Are you messing with me, yes or no?"

"God's own truth," Jack claimed, making the Catholic sign of the cross. "Your original timeline counterpart dated me for a long while, but we kinda broke up, eventually. She wised up, got smart enough to walk away. Then she hooked up with, well... "

Harley huffed. "With who?"


Harley frowned. "That... name sounds familiar."

Jack tilted his head. "Poison Ivy?"

Harley stopped. She came to a halt, no longer walking. "Poison Ivy."

"Uh-huh," Jack confirmed.

"You're looking for Poison Ivy," Harley stated in an utterly humourless voice. "Poison Ivy. In a swamp. A bog. Filled with trees and all kinds of plants. Sure you ain't tryin' ta get me killed?"

"It's alright," Jack said. "It'll be fine. There's a non-zero chance that Pammy might lash out and try to disembowel us with vines and roots, but I'm sixty percent sure that... "

"Nope," Harley announced, starting to turn around. "Nope, nope, nope."
"She needs help," Jack said. "Our help."

Harley stilled.

She growled at Jack, making a wordless sound that expressed several emotions at once, culminating in a sort of hissed squeak.

"Are you sure," she ground out.

"I suspected," Jack said, quietly, holding up his ring-bearing hand. "From what I was hearing. What I read. Now that we're here, and I can see her... yeah, I know for sure."

Harley's frown deepened. "She's in some kinda trouble?"

"This way," Jack said, focusing on the impressions he was getting from the ring. He resumed walking.

"Hey, hey," Harley pressed. "You can't leave it at that. I wanna know what I'm getting into!"

"Well," Jack said, "you know how some people try veganism, but it turns out they're not well-suited for transition to a totally plant-based diet, and it makes them sick?"

Harley peered at him. "What? She's got a bad tummy?"

"Metaphorically," Jack said, with a bit of uncharacteristic seriousness. "Except it's not so much her stomach, but her soul, and it's not so much bad nutrition, as her spirit being pulled about three trillion separate ways. But yeah, pretty much."

Harley blinked. "Your analogies suck."
Harley looked around, scanning the area. "So? Where is she?"

Jack looked too. The ring on his finger meant he could see far beyond the normal visual spectrum. He could see beyond the physical.

"Right here," he said.

"She's green all over," Harley snarked, placing her hands on her hips. "But I didn't think her camouflage was that good."

Jack smiled, but there was a faintly grim tinge to his expression. He wasn't laughing. Now that he was looking right at Pamela Isley, the more he studied her, the less funny her plight was.

It was pretty damn dire.

There was a dead or decaying tree a couple of paces from him, one that no longer had living leaves. Despite its condition, the gnarled trunk remained standing, still held up by its roots.

There was a name for that kind of thing. A snag? Something like that. They were a common enough sight in old growth wetlands. Slaughter swamp was old. Real old.

However, this tree stood out to him. It was different from the many others like it. To his eyes, to the ring, it might as well have been a beacon.

He pressed his ring-bearing hand to the tree, until the symbol on the face of the ring touched the bark.

White energy radiated from the ring, soaking into the tree and running in thin lines along the rough surface of the trunk.

There was a deep creaking sound. The old wood parted, writhing and unfolding. Slowly, piece by piece, bits of matter peeled away, exposing the cavity within.

Behind Jack, Harley let out a loud gasp.

He didn't react, but only because he was already fully expecting the sight.

Pamela Isley was buried inside the tree trunk.

She looked... unhealthy. By human standards, anyway. By plant standards, perhaps she was doing slightly better, though not by much.

Pamela was thin and frail, her emaciated form slumped in on itself in a vaguely upright position. Her cheeks were sunken, hollow, and the green shade of her skin was incredibly pale. Her hair was tangled and matted, with twisted strands partially covering her face.

Thin roots and shoots connected her to the tree, and then further to the earth beneath, with the tendrils coming straight out of her flesh.

She didn't smell like a corpse, though she looked awfully like one. But she did smell of mud and wet soil, along with the aroma of rotting vegetation.
Harley stared, her mouth open. Her lips moved for a while, soundlessly shifting, before she was able to speak. "Is she..."

"She's alive," Jack said. "Unfortunately. Probably wishes she wasn't."

Pamela's eyes fluttered open, her lids lifting. Perhaps she was reacting to their voices, or the light. Jack reckoned she wasn't fully aware of her surroundings. Her eyes looked glassy, her pupils too dilated.

Her lips trembled. She let out a soft keening moan, before she stopped, visibly struggling for breath. She sucked in air in a choking, staccato, fashion.

Harley came closer, until she was nearly standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Jack. "What's wrong with her?"

Jack glanced at the ring, then back at Pamela. "That's kinda... complicated. You want the list in alphabetical or chronological order?"

"The Cliff's Notes version," Harley said acerbically, giving him a sharp look.

"There's something called the Green," Jack explained. "Think of it as an elemental force that connects all plant life on the planet. Or something that's generated by all plant life. Cause and effect is tricky here. But plants aren't exactly big thinkers, you know? Throughout history, the Green's always used human beings as its agents and avatars."

Harley scowled. "This Green, whatever it is, it's doing this to her?"

"Yeah," Jack said. "But it shouldn't be this way. See, the avatar of the Green, the big plant elemental of this generation? It should be a guy called Alec Holland. Pammy's old college pal, as it happens. I guess the Parliament of Trees has a preference for scientists that studied in Seattle. No matter where you go, there's always employer bias, you know. So much for the free market."

"Should be," Harley muttered. Then her eyes hardened, as she latched onto one particular word. "You said 'should'. This another of your alternate timeline things?"

Jack shrugged. "I guess? Dunno. Haven't been able to find anything on Holland. Last I could see, he was working a biotech startup gig in Louisiana. Then the trail goes cold. But if this is happening to Pamela, I bet Holland's out of the running."

"That means... what," Harley said, "these plant elementals called Poison Ivy?"

"Means the trees went back to their stack of resumes, back to their shortlist of candidates, and came up with our dear Doc Isley," Jack said. "There aren't that many plant-powered metahumans, you know? Sadly for the planet, going green isn't mainstream. Black Orchid, Floronic Man... pretty sure Thorn's long gone. So. Pammy."

Hesitantly, Harley leaned forward, getting a better look at the woman embedded inside the hollow tree. "But is she supposed to be..."

"No," Jack said. "I ain't an expert, but that's my read. It's gone wrong. Badly wrong."

Harley winced. "You've got a way to fix her, yeah? We wouldn't be out here if you didn't."

"I've got some idea," Jack replied, focusing his attention on the ring.
He held his hand out, as if grasping something with his index finger and thumb. A construct materialised. He felt the texture of a thin sliver of wood beneath his fingertips, and a small amount of heat.

He was holding a lit match.

Jack tossed the white construct match, with its flame, onto Pamela Isley and her tree trunk cocoon.

White light flared, as both the woman and the decaying plant matter surrounding her went up in a brilliant inferno.

Pamela screamed.

So did Harley. She gripped Jack's arm and shoulder tightly, shaking him wildly. She had a surprising amount of strength for a supposedly baseline human lady. Obviously she worked out.

"What the HELL," Harley shouted, screeching at the top of her lungs.

"Plant elementals are supposed to die in fire," Jack said quickly, wincing.

Harley glared at him. "What?"

"Don't listen to the bear. Well, do, but don't get the wrong idea. Fire's a natural part of ecosystems," he explained. "Rejuvenates the soil. Some plants don't flower, unless they burn. For an avatar of the Green? The human is supposed to die in fire."

Harley released her hold on Jack. "You mean…"

"She burns," Jack said, with a grim smile. "The elemental rises."

The screams faded, as burning wood and flesh collapsed inward, consumed by the white pyre.

"Pamela Isley of Earth, deceased," the ring announced, in an otherworldly voice. "Pamela Isley of the Green... you live."
"Sir," Skeets said, in Michael's ear, "this is a most inadvisable course of action."

The artificial intelligence sounded annoyed. That was a common state of affairs for Skeets. It was a good thing that Skeets didn't have cholesterol or blood, otherwise Michael might have worried about his stress levels. Most of the time, Michael tuned Skeets out when he started to fuss.

But in this case, Michael agreed with his robot pal. Kinda. Skeets had a point. A good point.

"I know," Michael subvocalised, speaking without opening his mouth, and barely moving his tongue. "I know."

"But you will not be deterred," Skeets pressed, "will you, sir?"

Michael did not reply. There was no need to. Both he and Skeets already knew the answer. He wasn't going to change his mind.

He watched the lights of the elevator change, scrolling through the floors of the building. He hadn't been the only person on board the elevator, when he'd stepped in at the lobby. But he was alone, now, as the elevator car climbed up the last few levels.

The elevator came to a stop. The doors slid open, a clipped and precise female voice announcing the floor number.

Michael walked out, taking a look around. The elevators opened onto another corporate reception area, one dominated by the livery of Kord Omniversal, as well as signage informing all comers that the floor housed the Kord group's strategic offices... including the office of the chairman and CEO.

The white collar drone behind the counter stared at Booster. "Can I help you?"

Michael smiled, doing his best to appear charming. "I'm Steve Jurgens, here to see Ted Kord. Ten o'clock. I'm a bit early."

It was a fake name, of course. He couldn't waltz up to the place and identify himself as Michael Jon Carter, a.k.a. Booster Gold, especially since he was essentially a non-entity in this screwed up bizarre universe.

The office worker consulted their screen. "Mister Kord is finishing up another meeting. Please take a seat."

"No problem," Michael said, easily, making his way to the chairs and couches. He picked one at random and sank into it.

He realised, almost immediately, that the furniture was the kind chosen for visual aesthetics by some interior decorator, rather than any form of human comfort. His spine and muscles weren't happy about their new position. The armchair looked pretty, but when it came to the business of actually being a chair, it sucked.

It wasn't the sort of furnishing decision that his Ted would have made. His Ted had always believed in making the Kord offices a friendly place to live in, not just work in.

The space that Michael was in, now, was cold and clinical. The decor was sleek, modernist, and
utterly impersonal.

Of course, this Ted Kord wasn't the one he remembered. This Ted wasn't his best friend.

That was the problem. That was the crux of the matter.

Michael picked up one of the magazines lying on a side table, next to his uncomfortable seat. He peered at the glossy cover.

It was a Kord Omniversal Research and Development Industries internal publication, supposedly about their great strides in corporate social responsibility. The text on the front proudly boasted about the group's efforts to uphold environmental, social, and governance standards.

On the cover, Ted Kord's face beamed back at Michael. The photo showed a broad smile with perfect white teeth.

The whole thing rang false to Michael. His Ted wouldn't have needed to brag about his company's good deeds. His Ted had walked the talk, spending his money on actually making a difference, not a whole bunch of marketing speak.

Michael flipped through the publication, taking the time to read some of the painful propaganda speak in the articles. The interior pages didn't improve his mood, or his impression of this world's Ted.

There was even a two-page spread in the magazine showing Ted Kord shaking hands with Green Arrow, while the faceless figure of the Question loomed in the background.

The Ted Kord of the present timeline was deeply affiliated with the Justice League, and therefore closely linked to Lex Luthor in his Superman persona.

That didn't bode well. All the details that Michael could find just added more to the picture. A seriously bad picture.

But he had to hope.

Ted was still Ted… right?

Michael couldn't believe otherwise. He didn't want to. He really didn't want to.

"Mister Jurgens? Mister Kord will see you shortly," the receptionist said. "Please follow me."

Michael tossed the depressing magazine aside and hauled himself to his feet. The process of standing up was more difficult than it should have been, due to the terrible ergonomics of the armchair.

He trailed behind the receptionist, going a short way into the depths of the Kord office, until he was faced with an empty meeting room.

"Can I get you anything? Coffee? Tea?"

"No thanks," Michael said. "I'm good."

Ted's corporate minion nodded, then left Michael to his own devices.

That meant he was alone in a conference room or boardroom, one intended to seat about twenty or thirty people, with a table to match. Michael assumed it was a table. It was made of wood. But
given the size of the thing, it might have actually been a helipad or part of the deck of an aircraft carrier.

Michael looked around, and resisted the urge to shake his head. Once again, the boardroom was the kind of thing that his Ted would have found excessive. This Ted seemed to revel in extravagant displays of his wealth.

He glanced out of the large glass windows. At least the view was nice. Chicago wasn't the prettiest city in the world, but it looked pretty okay from the Kord building's vantage point.

Michael slipped a hand into his suit jacket, pulling out his name card holder from an inside pocket.

He shouldn't have been fiddling with it, but he couldn't quite help himself. The cards and the case were important.

Michael wagered it was an acceptable risk. It was perfectly normal for a businessman to be messing with their little rectangles of printed paper. It was a major faux pas to be caught without them. Exchanging cards was a necessary part of the corporate dance.

The cards bore an entirely fictional name, rather than his real one. Naturally, Michael's alias had a fully-fleshed history, complete with properly populated social media, educational records, work history, and all the minutiae that made up a person's existence.

There was a company logo and its associated branding on the card. The company existed, insofar as it was legally registered in California. Of course, it only had one employee, who was also the founder and CEO, an impressive set of career milestones for a man that had been spun out of whole cloth.

The server architecture and network security solutions that the company purported to offer were real enough, and designed to attract Ted Kord's attention. But they had also been created by Skeets and Sivana in about twenty minutes, since the whole deal was basically just an excuse to get Michael through Kord Omniversal's doors.

Michael rubbed one of the cards, running his fingertips over the surface. The business cards felt like good quality paper stock, which they were. The material itself wasn't special. The important thing was what they carried.

The cards were laced with nanites derived from Sivana's examination of Flamebird and Nightwing, combined with Sivana's own memory viewing technology. They were a step up from the previously palm-sized devices that the mad scientist had made for Napier. Or a step down in size. Either way, they were a discreet way to get the memory transfer stuff onto Ted, and...

Michael still wasn't sure about his exact game plan. He wanted to try and talk to Ted. To talk him over, to win him over.

Exposing this world's Ted Kord to some of Michael's memories was part of that process. Michael hoped that by showing Ted Kord memories of their time as the Blue and Gold, the guy would see reason.

It would be a hard sell. Damned difficult. It was risky as hell, as Skeets insisted.

But Michael had to try. He wanted his buddy back. He needed his friend back. If their situations were reversed, he was sure that Ted would do the same for him.

The door to the conference room opened. Michael turned around.
Ted Kord was standing there. He had an expensive-looking shirt on, but the collar was unbuttoned, the sleeves were rolled up, and he didn't have a tie. His hair was lightly tousled, too. All in all, he looked like the epitome of billionaire casual chic.


"No," Ted Kord said, in a frosty tone. "You're not."

Michael blinked, looking deliberately puzzled. "I'm sorry?"

"You're Booster Gold," Ted stated. "Known accomplice of the Joker, Sivana, and..."

"Now, hold on," Michael protested.

Blue and black metal crept over Ted Kord's body, erupting from his spine. Plates and strips unfolded over his clothes and skin.

"Sir," Skeets said, urgently, his voice all but screeching in Michael's hidden earpiece.

"I know," Michael groaned. "I know!"
Chapter 101

It was a good thing he could fly. Sort of.

Michael didn't have any innate superpowers. He was just a plain vanilla human, only equipped with the built-in capabilities nature had given him.

His wife was the metahuman of the family. Michael was just a guy.

But he had technology on his side.

The fact he possessed flight capabilities was fortunate.

Of course, the exact circumstances that made it relevant were… kinda unfortunate.

Because he was in the air, having involuntarily exited the Kord building from a high-rise floor. Backwards. While screaming. Loudly.

Luckily, there wasn't anyone else around to hear Michael's high-pitched shrieking, aside from this universe's Ted Kord.

Well, Michael had an open communications channel to Skeets, but screaming at the top of his lungs wasn't the most embarrassing thing that Skeets had seen Michael do.

Since he could fly, Michael was effectively defenestration-proof. The Legion ring on his hand didn't just keep him aloft, it also absorbed the kinetic energy and protected him from the rushing wind.

As he expected, the ring kicked in, leaving him suspended in mid-air.

Nevertheless, being thrown out of a building by an angry version of his best friend was one hell of an eye-opener. Especially since Teddy was clearly packing a certain piece of nasty hardware.

The local Ted didn't have a goatee. But the evidence was rapidly stacking up in favour of him being evil, like too many other people in the present timeline. Michael was quite capable of putting two and two together and arriving at the proper integer.

"Sir," Skeets said, "Theodore Kord appears to be in possession of a functioning... "

"I KNOW," Michael shouted back, no longer caring that he might be overheard. His cover was quite thoroughly blown, in the most spectacular way possible.

An armoured figure stood in the boardroom of the Kord offices, visible through the shattered windows that Michael had just been flung from.

Ted Kord was covered head to toe in alien alloys, blue and black components forming an insectoid suit of armour. Only the lenses over his eyes were a different colour, a harsh yellow shade.

Michael recognised the armour. It was the fully deployed form of a Reach scarab.

The problem was, Ted wasn't supposed to have the damn thing in working order.

The original Blue Beetle, Dan Garrett, had been able to use the blue scarab. Sort of. Not to its full extent. The alien device had granted Ted's mentor enhanced strength and vitality, but that was all.
That was it. Garrett had never discovered the scarab's real nature. The man had gone to his grave thinking it was some kind of weird magical talisman, rather than an example of sufficiently advanced technology.

Ted had inherited the scarab from Garrett, but he'd never been able to get any reaction from it. For Ted, the thing had been utterly inert, just a fancy metal paperweight.

So Ted had become the Blue Beetle on his own terms, fighting crime with gadgets and gear of his creation, plus years of intense training and his natural genius. It was why, in Michael's utterly unbiased and completely objective opinion, that Ted Kord was the best Blue Beetle, the only one who'd taken the identity and truly made it his own.

It was the third Blue Beetle, Jaime Reyes, who had unlocked the scarab... at least in the original timeline that Michael hailed from, the timeline that Michael remembered. Ted's successor had been the first human being to use the blue scarab in its true form, as a suit of alien armour.

The trouble was, Reach scarabs weren't safe to handle. They were powerful devices, supposedly the equal of a Green Lantern power ring, but they were the exact opposite of safe. It was a minor miracle that Garrett and Jaime had been able to use the thing without losing control.

Even by the standards of expansionist alien empires, the Reach were nasty customers.

Dan Garrett and Jaime Reyes had been lucky, damn lucky. Back in the original timeline, the blue scarab had been broken. Malfunctioning. Which was a good thing, in the long run.

Looking at Ted, clad head to toe in a seemingly operational set of Reach power armour, Michael had a bad feeling in his gut, a churning sensation that had nothing to do with the dodgy tuna salad he'd eaten for lunch.

The scarab suit looked almost exactly like Michael remembered, with the only differences being Ted's taller height and broader build compared to Jaime's. But there was something in the way the scarab moved. It wasn't like Jaime's suit. It was different. Different in a bad way.

Elaborate mechanical wings unfolded from the back of the alien armour, accompanied by what looked like rocket thrusters. The Blue Beetle launched into the air, rising on a cerulean plume of flame.

"TED," Michael yelled, holding his hands up, his fingers splayed and his palms empty. "I'm not..."

"Carter, Michael," the Blue Beetle stated, coldly. The suit added an inhuman distortion to his voice. "Alias Booster Gold."

"I don't know what Luthor's told you," Michael shouted, "but he's lying! I'm a hero, damnit! I'm your friend! I'm..."


The plates covering Ted's arm writhed, reshaping themselves into a new wickedly serrated shape. One by one, the edges lit up. The entire assembly produced an ominous hum.

Michael cursed.

A torrent of crackling blue particles exploded from the scarab's weapon, rushing to engulf Michael.

Skeets said something in his ear. Michael missed the message, but he could guess what his robot
companion meant. It had to be something about the flight ring's protective shield being insufficient
to withstand the protons and assorted ions being flung at his squishy human body.

Thankfully, the flight ring wasn't the only toy in his toolkit.

The blinding blue light faded, replaced by a yellow tint... and then the familiar visor of Michael's
Booster Gold outfit, as it dropped into place over his eyes.

"Kord Industries Time Master Armour, Booster Gold Mark Twenty, Version Three," Skeets
recited, the robot's voice no longer coming through Michael's earpiece - instead, he heard Skeets
through the suit itself, as his perception of the world was accelerated to superhuman levels.

"Eternium reactor online," Skeets continued. "Temporal sensors online. Chrono-adaptive weapons
online. All systems nominal."
Chapter 102

The original Mark Twenty had been the finest suit that Michael had ever worn in his career as Booster Gold, the result of generations of refinements by Ted, input from Michael himself, and even some contributions from Dora and Richard.

The Mark Twenty had already been a bona fide work of art, before everything Skeets and Michael had done to it in their desperate quest to survive Lex Luthor's genocidal changes to the timestream.

Richard... the thought of Rich Carter, his son, sent a fresh pang of pain through Michael's heart. For years and years, both in real and subjective time, they'd perpetuated the cover of Rich being called Rip Hunter, a member of the Linear Men, a temporal agent with no connection to the Carter family at all. But in the end, security through obscurity hadn't saved his boy.

Rich was gone, erased from the timestream, wiped away like he'd never existed. Much like his Dora... and his Ted. The guy who was his best friend, his brother, the man Dora always jokingly insisted was Michael's real first love. His Ted.

Not the guy in the scarab who was trying to kill him.

The Mark Twenty was the last tangible thing Michael had of his family, their last gift to him. In its current state, with the remnants of Epoch's battlesuit fused to it, plus all the bits Michael had been able to salvage from the Vanishing Point, the Rock of Eternity, and other key trans-temporal locations, the Mark Twenty counted as a self-contained time machine in its own right. With all that the description entailed.

In slow motion, the Blue Beetle flew closer towards Michael. Ted and his alien armour were still moving, but with all the speed of a glacier.

Using the temporal functions of his gear so blatantly was a sound tactical move, but a poor strategic one. It was tantamount to calling Lex Luthor down on his head.

However, Michael was very aware of the fact he was fighting the Blue Beetle in broad daylight, above the streets of downtown Chicago. Subtlety had gone out of the window from the very first second he'd been flung from the much more literal windows of the Kord building.

With that thought in mind, Michael rolled back the clock.

"Skeets," he said, "recall by three."

"Sir," Skeets complained, "I advise that you retreat, not merely… "

"Skeets," Michael growled. "Not now!"

"Recalling," Skeets said.

The world distorted, twisting into mind-bending shapes and colours, before Michael found himself standing back in the Kord boardroom, in the same position he'd occupied several subjective seconds ago.

He was facing the wrong way, towards the door. But once he overcame his disorientation, it was a simple matter to pivot and send a stream of golden energy from his gauntlets towards Ted.
The Blue Beetle armour would be able to tank the shot. Michael was sure of that. He had a good impression of the scarab's capabilities. Ted would survive the hit, but it would convince both him and the suit's alien intelligence that Michael was no slouch in long range and mid range combat.

And Michael's use of teleportation... actually limited temporal and spatial displacement, but effectively teleportation... in context, the choice suggested that he was a fighter who preferred to stay at a distance.

Gold light splashed off the Beetle's cerulean carapace. Fragments blew off the Blue Beetle's back, as the more delicate flight systems bore the brunt of Michael's attack. However, the Blue Beetle remained in the air. The other armoured man shifted his boots into a second set of thrusters, compensating for the sudden loss of the backpack rockets, until a new set of rear-mounted engines could form.

Then the scarab reoriented itself and charged towards Michael, accelerating in a haze of ions and exotic particles.

The Blue Beetle was flying quickly enough that Michael's accelerated perceptions momentarily stuttered, before Skeets adjusted the factor of Michael's time dilation. Even then, the Beetle only slowed fractionally.

One black and blue arm reconfigured itself from a particle accelerator into some kind of energy-charged bladed weapon.

The Beetle came through what was left of the Kord building's windows, smashing into Michael and grinding him against the conference table, the floor, and the interior wall of the room.

Wood chips, flecks of carpet, and all sorts of debris exploded around Michael.

The Beetle tried to pin him with one arm, while its other - the one that was now a sword - attempted to slash and decapitate him.

The edge of the weapon hit a glowing gold field, slowing and finally stopping as it sunk into Michael's hastily-erected shield.

He let his eyes widen behind his visor, which was currently tinted but not fully opaque.

Michael wanted it to look like he was in the throes of panic.

The Blue Beetle suit was slimmer and seemingly lighter than Michael's modified armour, but mass didn't necessarily equate to strength.

It was a risk, but Michael kept the muscle-enhancing fibres of his own suit turned down, selling the illusion that the Beetle was overpowering him.

As such, the Beetle didn't stop him when Michael's gauntleted hand flailed against the scarab, gold-plated fingers apparently trying and failing to find purchase against chitin-like alien armour plate.

Of course, his helplessness was just a trick.

He was Booster Gold. He was better than that.

"Nanomachines activated," Skeets announced, "scanning Theodore Kord. Scanning Reach scarab, designation Khaji Da. Warning, scarab has detected nanomachine vector and is applying
countermeasures. Compensating."

Although Michael had a pocket full of nanite-laced business cards, intended as a subtle means of getting the tiny probes onto Ted Kord, they weren't the only delivery mechanism. His Booster Gold armour was also carrying a nanite payload. It was always useful to have backups.

Under ideal circumstances, the nanites were supposed to interface with Ted's brain and show him memories, or visions, of the original timeline - recollections assembled from Michael's own unaltered consciousness. They were a glorified show and tell aid, they weren't tuned for outright mind control or bodyjacking.

However, the nanomachines were reverse-engineered from the crap Lex had stuffed into his Kryptonian clone henchwomen, Flamebird and Nightwing. That meant the nanites could do way more than just take people down memory lane.

"Scan complete," Skeets reported. "Sir, I..."

His voice never sounded right, under time dilation, but Michael couldn't help it. He spoke anyway, saying one word: "Bad?"


Information flooded into Michael's mind, as Skeets initiated a direct transfer rather than attempting to report verbally or push data to the Booster Gold suit's HUD.

Michael grimaced.

The Reach described their scarabs as symbiotic armour, but that was just the empire's media spin and public relations.

It was more accurate to call them parasites.

They were supposed to seize control of people, turning their wearers into hosts - little more than meat puppets, with the intelligence of the scarabs acting as the true driving force. The scarabs were supposed to play at being heroes, while secretly preparing the target planet for eventual hostile takeover by invaders from afar.

The Blue Beetle was still pressing down on him, wielding an arm blade and trying to break through the flickering gold energy field protecting Michael's vital points. But there was no more need for Michael to feign weakness.

He knew, for sure, what he was dealing with.


In a flash of gold, Michael's armour discharged all its stored kinetic energy, releasing every erg of abuse the Booster Gold suit had absorbed over the past few moments into one retaliatory burst.

The floor panels of the Kord office shattered. The ceiling cratered. The Blue Beetle was flung away, tossed like a rag doll.

Michael flowed back to his feet, landing in a ready position. He closed his right hand, as if
grabbing hold of an imaginary weapon. In an instant, his chosen weapon wasn’t so imaginary, but
instead fully solid, burning with golden light.

"Accessing," Skeets said, "Atomic Axe, origin thirtieth century CE."

The Beetle was already recovering, transitioning from a brace position to an offensive one. The
rockets on the scarab suit's spine and legs ignited again, arresting the Beetle's tumble and driving
him back at Michael.

The blue arm blade speared towards Michael, but he swept his newly-formed axe into its path,
cleaving the Beetle's weapon in two... and then taking Ted's forearm with it.

The Blue Beetle didn't scream. He didn't even react.

The Beetle merely swung himself out of the way of the axe, preventing further injury, while
transforming part of the armour into a makeshift prosthetic limb.

The new hand flexed. Metal fingers parted, a lance of angry azure fire burst from an emitter
integrated into its palm.

Michael blocked the new beam or plasma blade, whatever it was. His sensors couldn't identify the
technology. Whatever it was, it hadn't penetrated his own armour.

He dialed his suit's micro-myomers up all the way, then broke the clinch, forcing the Beetle back.
Capitalising on his superior strength, Michael swung the edge of the Atomic Axe through the
Beetle's energy weapon.

The disintegration field produced by the head of the axe was designed to consume more than
physical matter - it was fully capable of disrupting electromagnetic fields and other phenomena.

The original axes were twenty-seventh-century equipment, but the chrono-adaptive circuitry in
Michael's armour was emulating the functionality of a thirtieth-century late model axe, from the
era of the Legion of Superheroes.

The Blue Beetle had serious firepower on his side, but so did Michael. And Michael was wearing a
genuine Ted Kord original, not some ancient alien suit of zombie armour.

Michael didn't hesitate. He no longer had any qualms about fighting back.

"You're not Ted, are you," Michael accused. He spoke out loud, ensuring his words emerged at
normal speed. "You're operating in full infiltrator mode. You're the scarab. You're Khaji Da."

The Blue Beetle didn't reply.

Michael scowled. "Ted's gone."
Chapter 103

Ollie hated Chicago.

The pizza was good, but that was about the only redeeming feature he could think of. Unfortunately, a few inches of savoury meat and melted cheese, no matter how satisfying, wasn't quite enough to redeem the city in Ollie's eyes.

People told him that Chicago had its good points. The public transportation network was supposed to be solid, but Ollie didn't know. That was far out of his area of expertise.

He wasn't a pleb, and it didn't make sense for Green Arrow to be commuting downtown like some kind of ordinary white collar office worker.

Operating in the city as a costumed do-gooder was a veritable pain in the ass, as well as a pain in other parts of the anatomy. Ollie reckoned that the local establishment had been in power way too long. There were all kinds of stupid ordinances governing the acceptable use of teleportation and superhero vehicles within city limits.

It was a miracle that Ted Kord got anything done in the place, considering that Chicago was the Blue Beetle's town.

If Ollie were in Ted's position, he'd have been sorely tempted to throw some cash around in order to... nudge a few policies here and there. Facilitating positive change, so to speak.

Chicago wasn't a squeaky clean burg. A certain amount of mutual palm greasing was almost a local tradition, a perfectly acceptable pastime.

But for whatever reason, the web of regulations were still in place. As a supposedly fine and upstanding crimefighter, one under a certain degree of scrutiny, Ollie had some obligation to publicly play by the rules. The gloves weren't off, not yet.

Lex was supposed to be working on easing a few things up in the hallowed halls of Washington, but if he was, none of that operating authority had trickled down to Ollie. Not yet.

Since Ollie wasn't responding to a crisis in progress, but rather turning up after the fact, he had to go in the slow way. That meant no Arrowplane. Or no Arrowplane all the way into town - he'd been forced to leave the jet parked, while taking one of his Arrowcars into the heart of the city.

Ollie pulled up to the police and emergency services cordon surrounding the Kord Omniversal tower and its immediate vicinity.

The incident scene was impossible to miss. Besides all the tape and the crowd of various uniforms, large bits of the urban landscape were still smoking.

Nobody stopped Ollie as he parked and disembarked, which he found mildly surprising. He was half expecting one of the local cops to try and give him a ticket for his incredibly sloppy parking job.

That said, Ollie figured nobody was going to miss those streetlights, particularly since they'd
already fallen over long before his arrival.

His boot soles crunching against broken glass, chewed-up asphalt, and other assorted debris, Ollie made his way over the fresh battlefield to his two colleagues.

"Beetle," Ollie hollered, "the hell is this? You're usually much neater. Having an off day?"

Then Ollie stopped, looking at the other Justice League member on the scene. He blinked, did a quick consultation of his short-term memory, then blinked again as he fully registered who he was looking at.

"Hear my prayer," the Question muttered, under his breath. That was what Ollie thought he said. There was certainly no way he could read the Question's lips. "From the heart that awakens…"

"How the... how did you get here before me," Ollie demanded, glaring at the Question. He pointed an accusing finger at the other man.

The Question looked up, but didn't get up. The trenchcoated detective was kneeling at the edge of a crater, one hand extended over the rim.

Ollie had no idea what the guy was doing, but he didn't understand how the Question operated in the first place. Some of his investigative methods made sense to Ollie. But at present, it looked like the Question was trying to commune with the street.

Ollie didn't know if that was safe, since the hole was still glowing faintly gold in a way that didn't look like heat or fire. But the Blue Beetle wasn't stopping the guy, so Ollie assumed that the Question wasn't about to melt his fingers off.

"No, really," Ollie said, "when the call came in, you were in San Diego. How did you..."

The flesh-like fabric of the Question's mask creased. The man gave a small shrug.

"Shortcut."

"That doesn't tell me one damned thing," Ollie growled.

"Good shortcut," the Question said, laconically, touching the brim of his hat.

"Uh-huh," Ollie said. "That's..."

"Irrelevant," the Blue Beetle interrupted, his eyes shining yellow. The gleaming light from his armour's faceplate intensified, pulsing in time with his voice.

Ollie frowned. It looked like Teddy and the alien machine glued to his nervous system were in full killer cyborg mode.

The Blue Beetle wasn't bothering with the personality emulation that he usually used as part of Ted Kord's civilian persona.

Ollie disliked dealing with the full blown Blue Beetle. He didn't know if the alien machine's masters were supposed to be allies, on neutral terms with the planet Earth, or what. Interstellar politics weren't Ollie's forte. He had enough trouble dealing with the regular terrestrial kind.

Whatever the case, the Justice League weren't looking out for an imminent invasion by more of the bug-themed alien cyborgs, but the one they had was bad enough. Especially when it had its game face on.
Teddy Kord had a better sense of humour, or at least the Reach's artificial intelligence faked one effectively when it was supposed to be wearing Ted's identity. Of course, chances were, it would be some time before Ted Kord could be seen in public. The Blue Beetle suit was heavily damaged. That implied the body beneath the suit was badly damaged as well.

Ollie noticed that one entire arm was missing, and what seemed like a chunk of torso past the shoulder. The backpack elements of the armour were almost gone, and what was still present appeared misshapen.

The damage told a story, since the self-repair functions of the blue scarab were pretty damn legendary. The suit was capable of reconfiguring itself on the fly, pulling fresh matter seemingly out of thin air.

If it hadn't already fixed itself, it meant the scarab was running close to empty. Ollie had never seen the Beetle chewed up so badly - not even during the war with Apokolips, when Darkseid and his followers had tried to annex the planet.

The Blue Beetle looked at the Question. "Your opinion?"

The Question stood up, flicking a gloved hand along the fabric of his coat as he did so. He turned to the Blue Beetle. "I concur."

"Fantastic," Ollie drawled, spreading his hands. "Care to share with the class? Did you bring enough for everyone?"


"A false trail. Forensic examination suggests electronic tampering," the Question added. "His inbound tracks into the city were muddied or erased. His departure, on the other hand… that was carried out with much more haste, and much less care."

Ollie peered at both men, first at the faceless investigator, then the guy in the alien suit. "Beetle, I thought you said the perp didn't just port out, he noped all the way out of the timestream."

The Beetle's eyes flickered. "Massless particles, trace amounts. Unknown compounds. Tachyon emissions."

"What the Blue Beetle means," the Question translated, "is that he left a signature. A trail."

Ollie rubbed his chin, feeling the hair of his beard between his fingers. "You think you can track the guy. Follow him back to wherever he and his crew are hiding out."

"Affirmative," the Beetle said.

Ollie eyed the pair. "You think it's easier to go dog sniffing around some kinda weird radiation scent, across time and space, instead of just figuring out how he got to town?"

"Yes," the Question replied.


The Question tilted his head. "Only sometimes?"
Note: As a heads-up, for the near future I'll be going to a Monday-Wednesday-Friday update schedule for this story (Pagliacci). Not gonna be able to do daily updates.

I do mean Monday-Wednesday-Friday by my reckoning, which means it may work out as Sunday-Tuesday-Thursday night if you're in... say, the United States, though there's always the possibility of some flex here and there. Let's try this for a bit and see if it needs to be adjusted further.
Chapter 104

Over the span of his second life, as the new leader of a freshly-liberated Kahndaq, Teth-Adam had naturally been courted by Kahndaq's neighbouring nations. He had also hosted his own share of visiting dignitaries within Shiruta, his country's current capital city.

Teth-Adam had, thusly, been treated to lavishly expensive meals and fine foreign wines. He had reciprocated, returning the courtesy paid to him with the same, or even greater, regard.

Naturally, he did not mistake this as a sign that Kahndaq's neighbours were pleased with his rule, or his presence on their borders. Even in Teth-Adam's own day, the most elaborate of banquets and the richest of gifts were not only given to one's allies... but also to one's enemies.

It was the duty of a king to attend to one's guests. Apart from that, there were many reasons to treat hostile powers the same as one's friends, beyond mere obligation.

Being a gracious host was a convenient way to boast about one's wealth and power. Plying an enemy with food and drink was also a method of causing them to lower their guard, or to gradually turn them from foe to... if not friend, then a less hostile party.

The so-called modern diplomacy of the twenty-first Christian century had not changed the essential truths of kingship. Some things remained the same, across the vast gulf of the ages.

Teth-Adam understood the principle behind holding grand banquets. Such ostentatious displays were part of being a king, even though it was an aspect of leadership that came with a price.

He was a man and not an ascetic. He did not abstain from fine food and drink. He did not deny himself, and his court, such pleasures.

Yet he was conscious of the reality that, despite his efforts to provide for all, there were Kahndaqi citizens within his lands that remained hungry and thirsty.

Teth-Adam did not go to the extent of punishing himself or willingly depriving himself. He ate. He drank. At the same time, he realised it was inherently difficult to justify the cost of a single bottle of wine that was several times the value of a common labourer's monthly wages. Teth-Adam was not blind to the gulf between the rich and the poor, between kings and ordinary men.

When he ate alone, Teth-Adam often returned to the food of his birth era - simple fare such as flatbread and beer, with perhaps some meat, onions, and dates.

In truth, he did not even need to consume food and drink to survive. He was capable of sustaining himself for great lengths of time, purely through his blessings from the gods. However, it seemed... frivolous to use divine power for such purposes, when much easier means of feeding his body were available.

So, he ate. But he ate simply, by choice. Unless circumstances dictated that, once again, he play the role of a king.

The food presently in front of him was not a simple meal.

Curiously enough, the cuisine was familiar, in its own way. The Kahndaqi people of Teth-Adam's original time had practiced the rearing of ducks and geese for their tender livers, and so the concept of foie gras was hardly alien to him.
Of course, the Kahndaqi people of Teth-Adam's day had never developed the concept of the Michelin star.

The food was excellent. Though Teth-Adam was very much aware that his guest had not commented on it. His guest had not spoken any words of praise for the meal or the palace staff who had prepared it.

That, in itself, was telling.

Teth-Adam did not allow any hint of his thoughts to show on his face or in his demeanour. That too was another aspect of kingship.

To Teth-Adam, the rich food and the wine that accompanied it... they were a necessary expense, an unfortunate part of the cost of receiving a man who had the stature of a king, even if he did not officially command any empire.

In a sense, the man sitting across from Teth-Adam understood that such things were due to him as part of his station. Certainly, Teth-Adam was sure that the man would have noticed their lack.

Other individuals of wealth and power typically expressed enjoyment of the luxuries they consumed. Even if they did not genuinely like them, they feigned enjoyment, acknowledging the monetary value of what was being offered as tribute, like sacrifices to the gods.

Teth-Adam suspected that Lex didn't care for the food and alcohol he was consuming. He did not care in any meaningful fashion. It could have been ash and water in his mouth, for all the difference it made.

There was something about the Kryptonian that made Teth-Adam think he was merely going through the motions. He expected to be treated like a king. He expected to eat like a king... and so he did. That was all.

The worst part was, Teth-Adam had seen Lex express approval for food and drink before. He wondered if the Kryptonian's current indifference was intended as a deliberate snub against Teth-Adam and Kahndaq, or if the man was simply no longer bothering with the pretence.

A lesser man might have expressed anger or irritation, but Teth-Adam was greater than that

When he spoke, his voice was controlled, not confrontational.

"Kahndaq is, of course, deeply honoured by your presence," Teth-Adam said. "But I cannot believe that this is merely a social visit."

"You are a valuable member of my Justice League," Lex said, holding his wine glass. "As is Circe."

Teth-Adam considered the words. They were not a denial, not quite… but nor had Lex answered the question. If he accepted the statement, they could be construed as words of praise. Yet he found them wanting. He found the words empty.

There were few beings that were his equal. Teth-Adam acknowledged that the Superman of the Justice League was one of those few. The Kryptonian had done him, and Kahndaq, favours in the past. By all accounts, he should have felt at ease, in the presence of an ally.

However, his instincts were telling him that his dinner guest was, in some way… the other sort of party that a wise king honoured with careful treatment.
Next to Teth-Adam, Circe smiled. With a silver fork, the witch goddess placed a morsel of goose liver between her perfectly formed lips, chewed delicately, and swallowed.

"How kind," Circe purred. "Flattery is a rare beast, from you, so very rare. I'll take the praise, as I take all praise offered to me. But surely, Lex, pleasantries aren't you. If you're resorting to it, then you want something."

Lex didn't answer, but Teth-Adam thought he saw the alien's face change, very subtly.

"I don't require my divinations to discern your goal," Circe said. "I very much doubt that Mighty Adam needs the Wisdom of Zehuti to do the same. Let's dispense with the foreplay, shall we? What do you want?"

On the other side of the table, Lex held his wine glass higher. His eyes shifted to the crimson liquid, as if examining its depths.

"The Justice League has found them," Lex said.

The faint touch of red in his eyes was not the result of reflected light from the wine.

The man's tone and demeanour made it obvious which 'them' the Kryptonian was referring to. There could only be one party capable of drawing the full force of Superman's ire.

Teth-Adam set his knife down, the blade clinking against the white porcelain of his plate. He flexed his fingers, marshalling his own reaction, before nodding, just once.

"Where?"

"A Shadows sanctum," Lex said, "in Central Asia. The Shadows have many such compounds, of course. But the Question assures me we will soon narrow down their location even further, until we have a headquarters, or a significant operating base."

Circe smirked. "From another planet, to this one, almost beneath your nose. How very annoying, that must be."

Lex stared at Circe. "It is more probable their decisions were made for practical reasons, rather than to spite me."

The expression on Circe's face grew more amused. The goddess laughed. "Lex! Remember who you're facing."

Lex's demeanour darkened. "Possible. But irrelevant. Their choice of real estate does not matter. What matters is... I know where the clown is. This time, I will not underestimate him. This time, we strike with overwhelming force."

"You want my sons," Teth-Adam said, in an excessively calm voice. "My Sons of Adam."

"Our sons," Circe added, with an impish lilt.

"You are both members of the Justice League," Lex argued, "are you not?"

"My association with your band of champions does not give you the right to command my men," Teth-Adam replied. "They are sworn to defend Kahndaq, not your interests."

"My interests," Lex said, "are the best interests of the world."
"As you always say," Circe remarked, carving another thin slice from the liver in front of her. "As you always say."

Lex glanced at Circe, the red hue of his eyes strengthening, before they faded to an almost human shade. He looked at Teth-Adam. "Aside from global security, aren't you interested in avenging the insult of Venus? I seem to recall that you retreated, that you ran."

"I have my pride as a warrior," Teth-Adam declared. "I am also cognisant that you are blatantly appealing to that pride. I am not so easily manipulated, Kelex of Krypton. I am not only a warrior, I am the protector of Kahndaq. It is one matter for me to venture forth. It is quite another if I am seen to be leading Kahndaqi soldiers beyond our borders."

"Curious," Lex remarked. "Is this the fabled courage that your gods give you?"

"Mehen grants me courage," Teth-Adam retorted. "He does not give me idiocy. I know that Kahndaq is beset on all sides. The eyes of the world are upon my nation. The Americans alone, and their allies…"

"Trust me, Adam," Lex said, "America will not be a problem."
"I understand," the Calculator said.

The Question's blank face mask betrayed no expression, and his monotone voice hid his emotion. "Do you?"

The man was still human, of course. Still mortal. Still confined within flesh and bone. That meant he couldn't fully eliminate his tells.

That said, the commercial laptop computer that the Question was using to contact the Calculator only had a tiny low-resolution webcam, which the Calculator had sealed with a strip of tape and some paper. The audio pickup was of similarly poor quality. If the signals from the laptop were all that the Calculator could rely on, he would have been hard pressed to read the Question.

Of course, he was the Calculator, the chosen avatar of the Metal. He didn't need to rely on mundane avenues for his intelligence.

The Question was harder to analyse than an ordinary man, but that had nothing to do with his mask and demeanour.

In supernatural terms, the Question's aura was tightly controlled. His spiritual presence was structured in the manner of an actively practicing minor sensitive, like some form of shaman.

The Calculator wasn't certain what the Question's domain was, or precisely what the Justice League member believed in - though the Calculator had his suspicions. However, whatever power he had on his side was not equal to that of the Metal. The Metal was the youngest of the planet's elemental courts. But it was an elemental court, and one intimately connected with humanity, perhaps more so than the other elemental realms.

The Question was no neo-Luddite. The man used technology. He lived his life within buildings and cities, within a modern urban sprawl. Given that the Question was not taking steps to connect with nature, the Calculator suspected that the Question's own paltry shamanistic abilities were in some way connected to the built environment rather than the natural one. If that was so, the Question's spirit was inextricably tied to the Metal, even if the man did not acknowledge the connection.

And so the Calculator could see past the detective's mask - his metaphysical mask, not the blank flesh-like material of his costume.

The Calculator laughed. He let the tiny speakers of the laptop carry the sound of his amusement to the Question.

"It wouldn't do for a member of the Justice League, in good standing, to be seen consorting with supervillains," the Calculator said. "But it's much more acceptable if I do your dirty work for you."

"Curious," the Question remarked. "Were you not the one arguing that I should, what were the words... look after my own interests? By aligning with yours?"

"That was not a complaint," the Calculator said. "Only an observation."

"There are practical reasons why I cannot easily communicate with Napier and his conspirators," the Question stated. "Practical problems, not reputational. You have the practical means."

Chapter 105
Reputation is your problem. You've betrayed them. They'll remember that."

"Perhaps," the Calculator answered. "Perhaps. They don't need to like me. They merely need to heed me."

Even as he spoke, the Calculator spun off another instance of his consciousness.

The Calculator carried on talking to the Question, without any interruption. Since his apotheosis, multitasking was a trivial matter.

The new instance of his awareness was the sixty-fourth one he was simultaneously running. For a moment, the new Calculator let himself take stock of all the activities his collective consciousness was currently engaged in.

Several copies of his mind were immersed in the minutiae of his criminal-facing operations, such as tracking the movement of capital through carefully insulated accounts, and providing what amounted to customer service to a number of supervillains and mercenaries.

Several more were monitoring the inner workings of the United States government, as one Amanda Waller pulled strings and called in favours in a way that the woman no doubt thought was subtle.

And, of course, one instance of his consciousness was keeping a subtle eye on Marvin, his son, while another stood guard over Wendy, his daughter. He did not watch that closely, because propriety demanded that he respect their privacy, but it was important to ensure their security.

The Calculator knew he wasn't the best father in the world, and he was no longer human. But he was human enough to admit that Jack Napier's words, not so long ago, had struck a nerve with him.

The twins were both on the MIT campus, with Marvin in a lecture and Wendy in her dorm room. There were no immediate imminent threats to either of his children, none that the Calculator could detect.

However, Prometheus and Onomatopoeia were both active in Boston, in close proximity to Cambridge, Massachusetts… a fact which the Calculator's monitoring systems automatically flagged.

He was already aware of Prometheus' presence, and the supervillain was considered low-risk. Prometheus was a frequent client of the Calculator, and he was confident to eighty point five three six certainty across all projections that Prometheus did not plan any costumed action within the state of Massachusetts. To the Calculator's knowledge, Prometheus was recuperating from a clash with Green Arrow, and merely utilising a safehouse in a Boston suburb for his recovery.

Fresh information flowed into the Calculator's mind, from another instance of his personality in live contact with Prometheus. The Calculator updated his analysis of the villain's intentions to above ninety-five percent certainty, while simultaneously arranging for the delivery of a grey market Themyscrian healing ray to the man's hideout.

Onomatopoeia was a larger concern. Onomatopoeia was not part of the Calculator's network, and something of an unknown even to him. The Calculator did not like unknowns.

The Calculator had no knowledge of Onomatopoeia's allegiances, motives, or current intentions, particularly as the man refused to communicate with any words beyond his namesake.

The Calculator's last attempt to establish ties with the villain had resulted in a chat log full of the words 'click' and 'clack', repeated over and over again. Analysis suggested that the villain had
manually typed the sound effects each time, rather than using a copy-paste function.

He didn't even know Onomatopoeia's real name or history. The dearth of actionable intelligence made the villain's presence in Boston an unacceptably high risk.

Two copies of the Calculator suggested opposing courses of action. Options were weighed, before final consensus was reached. An anonymous tip was sent to Detective Sally Marsden of the Boston Police Department, followed by a second message to Suprema, Boston's resident vigilante.

With the decision made and action taken, the latest manifestation of the Calculator focused fully on his self-appointed task.

The Calculator stood in a brightly-lit room, one with smooth floors and walls that were uniformly white. Naturally, the room did not exist, not in any physical sense. It was merely a convenient visualisation.

The room was not literally the interior of one of the Calculator's secure data centres, but rather a representation of the ethereal, mystical, space that corresponded to the servers.

Likewise, the body the Calculator was wearing was also not representative of his physical form. He didn't need a mirror or reflective surface to know that he had manifested in much the same way as he always did - with a recognisable face similar to the one he'd worn as a mundane human being, but with silver skin instead of an ordinary hue.

He was wearing a suit and tie, but they too had the colour and texture of polished metal, like aluminium or steel.

The Calculator lifted his hands. Planes of light appeared before him, resolving into representations of computer screens - displaying maps, calculations, and other data.

Sivana and the technically-inclined members of Talia al Ghul's cabal were no fools. They were aware of his empowerment as an elemental being. Their digital presence was now guarded, no doubt intended to make things difficult for him.

But they could not keep him out entirely, unless they were willing to forsake all technology and conduct their operations with the use of chisels and stone tablets. Even if they were willing to resort to such extreme measures, the very nature of some of their members resonated with the Metal.

The Father Box and the Eradicator were alien constructs, not born of the planet. However, Sivana's creations were of human origin, as was the machine intelligence linked to that gold-suited time traveller.

In addition to the other data he possessed, there was one more factor. The League of Shadows relied heavily on their Lazarus Pits. The pools needed to be charged with geomantic energy, which meant there were distinct limitations on where they could be constructed.

There was no such thing as a single accurate map of the world's leylines, telluric currents, and perfect points, particularly as different magical traditions had differing methods of identifying significant ground.

However, the Calculator's brief association with the Shadows had aided immensely in refining his models of their specific beliefs and mystical practices, which seemed to be a blend of Arabic *ilm al-raml* with Chinese *feng shui*.
Talia al Ghul had naturally been circumspect about the locations of her order's sanctums on Earth. But she had been more forthcoming about the divinations they used to find suitable sites for their Lazarus Pits, as part of a collaborative effort with Thaddeus Sivana to see if the alchemical pools could form on the planet Venus.

Cross-referencing the geomantic models with the rest of his data made it clear that there was significant activity surrounding a node in Nepal. Satellite imagery confirmed there was a physical compound located there, supposedly belonging to an obscure Hindu-influenced Buddhist sect.

The Calculator closed his eyes, inhaling through a nose and lips that did not need to breathe. He wasn't surrounded by real air, in any case. But it was a useful trick to facilitate a transition.

He concentrated.

The world shifted.
When he opened his eyes, he was no longer standing in an empty white room. Instead, he was standing in the Himalayas… or rather, in the elemental space that roughly corresponded to it.

Geography was an uncertain and subjective matter when it came to navigation in digital space. Spatial reality was different in the realm of the Metal, even though it was inextricably tied to the planet Earth.

The Calculator's surroundings were washed out and ghostly, because the mountains of Nepal barely existed as far as the Metal was concerned. Its reach did penetrate that far, because there were few human-habitable corners of the globe that were truly cut off from the inexorable march of technology. But the Metal's presence in the Himalayas was particularly thin.

An urban centre, occupied by both humanity and a plethora of technological devices, would have felt far more tangible to the Calculator's senses. A city would have possessed some weight, a certain kind of density.

The Shadows compound was still present to the Calculator's perceptions, but it was a pale thing, a seemingly lifeless and hollow shade.

That semblance was a lie, of course. He knew there was more to the location than what he was seeing. It was a credit to the work of Sivana and any other mages or technologists in Talia al Ghul's employ… though the Calculator supposed that he'd tipped his hand back on Venus. Sivana, at least, was aware of what the Calculator truly was. Sivana knew that extraordinary measures were necessary in order to preserve security and secrecy.

Unfortunately for the League of Shadows, even those measures were insufficient.

The Calculator exerted himself just a fraction, drawing on the power that was his, as the agent of the Metal.

He drifted forward, not so much walking, but gliding over the smoky faux-ground. The buildings of the Shadows' temple complex opened before him, lifeless and hollow-looking. The satellite photos suggested that the physical counterpart of the complex had some landscaping within their internal courtyards, but none of that was evident in the Calculator's world. The plants of any gardens were part of the Green, and the stones the Melt. Though human hands had shaped them, they were not technological enough to count as part of the Metal's domain.

The architecture and layout of the temple buildings did not correspond perfectly to their material equivalents. In the physical world, the temple structures were clustered on an incline, built onto a mountainside. In the Calculator's domain, they spread out linearly - and one of the buildings loomed much larger than its neighbours. The ground beneath it also appeared to glow and pulse as the Calculator drew closer.

Sivana's laboratory, he presumed, or an entrance to whatever the scientist was using as a lair.

The Calculator approached the building. But as he did so, he frowned. He stopped. He looked around.

He felt the distinct sense that he was being watched. Which should have been impossible.

"Mister Kuttler," a familiar voice said, that of Thaddeus Sivana himself. "Or should I use your
preferred alias?"

The Calculator tried to trace where the voice was coming from. Then he tried to determine how it was reaching him. Frustratingly, he failed on both counts.

With a sudden surge of suspicion, he looked at his surroundings again, examining the abstract representation of the temple and its environs.

He let himself fall back. More accurately, he attempted to retreat, but found his way blocked.

The world shifted, indistinct shapes flowing into each other until the Calculator was enclosed on all sides by walls of grey.

A window appeared in front of him, carrying a simple two-dimensional camera feed.

Sivana's smug face grinned at the Calculator. Sivana's build and profile had changed, courtesy of the mystic empowerment he had worked on himself. However, Sivana's essential character had not changed. He was far too pleased with himself for the Calculator's liking.

The Calculator concentrated, testing the walls of the digital… no, the mystical trap, for that was what it was. The barriers distorted, trembling, but remained largely solid.

He doubted that they could contain him, if he truly exerted himself. But the very fact Sivana was challenging him, in his own kingdom, was annoying enough.

"Leaving so soon, Kuttler? It's been far too long since we last caught up," Sivana said.

"Leave the taunts and mockery to Napier," the Calculator replied. "They don't suit you."

"Ah," Sivana said, "but I am deriving a great deal of satisfaction from this exchange, and I don't care about your opinion. No longer."

The Calculator wasn't certain if Sivana was perceiving his virtual form, or if the scientist was merely staring at fluctuations in sensor readings and network traffic.

However, the man was detecting the Calculator's voice… so the Calculator assumed Sivana had some measure of accurate information about his present circumstances.

"I'm not your enemy, Doctor," the Calculator began.

"Past evidence casts doubt on that proposition," Sivana retorted. "You tried to have me killed. I take offense to that."

"In that case, I don't come as your enemy today," the Calculator insisted, stressing the last word.

Sivana considered the statement. "Is that so?"

"The Justice League," the Calculator said, "they're…"

"Superman and his minions are preparing an assault on this location," Sivana interjected, waving a hand. "I'm quite aware. Is there anything else?"

The Calculator thought quickly, dissecting the ramifications of Sivana's claim. There was only one conclusion he could reach. "You know."

"Indeed," Sivana replied, with a casual air. "Was I not supposed to?"
The Calculator was a posthuman being. He had immense computational power at his disposal and the ability to distribute his thinking across his digitally networked existence. But he didn't need any of his cognitive enhancements to understand what Sivana was implying.

"It's a trap."

"Of course it is," Sivana said condescendingly.

The Calculator frowned.

"Kuttler, if you're thinking of informing the Justice League, I advise you not to," Sivana continued, as if speaking to a particularly slow child.

The Calculator glanced at the walls surrounding him. "You can't believe that this will hold me."

"Quite," Sivana said. "My precautions aren't intended to. However, they don't need to. You see… at first, I thought you'd betrayed us to the Kryptonian. In a manner of speaking, you did. Now? It seems to me that you're trying to play two sides against each other. You're hoping to be the third party who can sit back and profit as your adversaries tear each other to pieces."

"What if," the Calculator asked, "I am?"

"Then," Sivana said, "you'll let us tear the Justice League apart. Won't you?"
Chapter 107

Roy felt like an old man. That stood to reason, since he was an old man. But in his case, he felt the years mentally, instead of physically.

He should have felt weak and frail. How old was he? Coming up to a century? That sounded right. He was old enough that all his friends and family were gone, even the other metas from his heyday.

Instead, he felt healthy. Better than he'd been, in years. If anything, he figured his physical condition was improving as time went by.

It hadn't always been that way. When he was, what... in his seventies, in his eighties, he'd felt every passing day almost like a regular human being. He was aging, then. Not as badly as most people, but still badly enough that his joints and back complained about the accumulated mileage.

Unfortunately, with the passage of time, his control of his powers had also gradually declined. A major problem, since his powers hadn't actually weakened with age - just his ability to rein them in.

Since he was Roy Lincoln, the Human Bomb, any loss of control on his part was potentially catastrophic.

He'd already seen the grim results firsthand. His old war buddy Hustace, the world's second 27-QRX enhancile, known to the public as Thunderfoot... poor Hustace had gone up like, well, a bomb.

It wasn't fair. Years of service fighting the Nazis and Japs in the war, a hard slog in Korea, then taking on villains and the mob back home. All that sacrifice for Uncle Sam. But all the American public remembered was some senile old geezer accidentally blowing up a small town in Iowa, along with his wife, his dog, and half his neighbours.

Poor Hustace.

The trouble was, Thunderfoot was never as strong as the Human Bomb. Hustace's peak destructive output had been a fraction of Roy's own. 27-QRX had given both of them the power to cause explosions - massive releases of thermal energy and force - with any matter they touched. But in Roy's case, the chemical had gone further.

In scientific terms, Roy's body secreted a nearly endless amount of 27-QRX derivatives that were violently hypergolic with almost every known substance. Including the air itself, and all the stuff that made up the bodies of other people.

Other senior citizens had to worry about embarrassing accidents involving their bladders and other mundane bodily functions. With Roy's biology, an accident could well take out an entire metropolitan area, or at least a few postal codes.

That was why Roy had gone to the Justice League, and then later the folks at the Department of Extranormal Operations. He needed help with his powers. Roy didn't want to be a risk to other people, not when there were steps that could be taken.

The DEO scientists had taken steps, alright.

Roy was a chemist by training, not a biologist or expert in metahuman physiology. But since he'd had years and years to study the effects of 27-QRX on his body, Roy thought he knew all there
was to know about the chemical and how it had transformed him.

The DEO had proven Roy wrong.

Maybe he'd been too arrogant, working alone. Maybe he'd overlooked something.

The DEO's collection of researchers had managed to stabilise Roy's powers.

By stabilising him.

According to Doctor Zaius and his team, they'd simply finished the job that the 27-QRX formula had begun, all those years ago.

As a result, although Roy didn't magically look like he was twenty again, he sure didn't look like a guy pushing one hundred. At most, he appeared to be a vigorous middle-aged man, with the good health to go with it.

The Project 7734 researchers insisted that further exposure to 27-QRX might have even more dramatic effects on his body, but Roy didn't want immortality.

He just... didn't want to blow up.

Well, they'd given him his wish, but it'd turned out to be one hell of a Monkey's Paw. His control had improved, sure, but his powers had grown in tandem.

Roy was stronger than he'd ever been as a young man, during his time with the Freedom Fighters and All-Star Squadron. He didn't know how powerful he really was, now, and he didn't want to know.

Sadly, America still needed the Human Bomb.

"Human Bomb," a voice said in his helmet, "Blackhawk One. Coming up on target. We've got the go signal from Green Arrow. You okay back there?"

"Blackhawk One," Roy said, triggering his own microphone, "this is the Human Bomb. Ready, over."

"Human Bomb," the pilot replied, "Blackhawk One, copy, good for delivery. Stand by for drop."

Roy tensed, steeling himself. Despite decades as a superhero and adventurer, he still got the shakes before a fight. He had to keep himself from trembling.

He wasn't a coward. His pa and ma hadn't raised a coward.

Besides, Roy wasn't in any danger. Comparatively speaking. It was other people that had to worry.

"Human Bomb," his radio said, "Blackhawk One. Go, go, go."

Lights blinked in his helmet. Beneath him, the bay doors opened. The makeshift cradle surrounding his body shuddered, then released its hold.

Roy fell.

Gravity tore him free from the airplane. Wind rushed around him, though his suit prevented him from feeling any of it on his skin.
The sensor readings in his helmet display told him that the external temperature and wind speed was positively chilly, which stood to reason since he was bailing out at high altitude, over a mountain range. But as far as Roy was concerned, the mountainous elevation of his target just meant he had less distance to go before reaching ground zero.

His latest suit was something cooked up by the boys and girls at 7734, and much more fancy than anything he'd ever thrown together by himself. Back in the forties, he'd gone into battle wearing asbestos coated with insoluble fibro-wax, one of the few things his body couldn't explosively react with.

Roy reckoned his current containment suit had to have cost American taxpayers a pretty penny. It was an uncomfortable thought, even if he was once again doing his part for the nation.

Mechanical ports on his legs and boots opened up, exposing the interior of his suit to the outside world. Immediately, the unique biochemical reactions of Roy's altered body made themselves known.

Explosions shook the air, a series of blasts chained so close together that they turned into a single oppressive boom.

Roy accelerated, speeding up his descent. Using concussive force to fly was one of old Thunderfoot's tricks, not from Roy's own playbook.

Back in the day, Roy's powers had been centred on his hands, though the rest of his body had been capable of creating explosions as well. Hustace's 27-QRX mutations had mostly affected his feet. Hence the man's codename.

Flying was a tricky business. Flying at speed was trickier still. Unlike Ed Clariss, Roy didn't have any increased perceptions to go with his superhuman speed. He wasn't running fast, or effortlessly defying gravity like Superman and the Martian.

He was simply turning himself from the Human Bomb into a human rocket. Or a human missile.

Of course, it helped that the only direction he ultimately needed to go in... was down.

A warning tone sounded in his helmet. Circles appeared, bracketing some kind of defensive fire heading his way.

Roy wasn't particularly worried about taking hits, but then again, he didn't know what dirty tricks that Sivana guy had supplied his murderous friends with.

The access ports on his gloves snapped open. More explosions burst from Roy's hands. He whirled in the air, spinning away from the sheets of fire coming from the enemy's ack-ack guns.

Beneath him, the mountain landscape of the Himalayas stretched out. There was supposed to be a League of Shadows complex on the ground, somewhere. The target. His target.

Roy had seen satellite imagery of the location ahead of the mission, so he had a rough idea of how it was supposed to look like. That helped, because due to the speed he was travelling at, he couldn't appreciate the scenery in the normal way.

Another shrill warning rang in his helmet. The new sound indicated that he was closing in on the ground. To a less durable human being, that might have been a problem.

Originally, the 27-QRZ had left Roy Lincoln a walking bomb, drastically screwing with his
physiology, but it hadn't left him much tougher than an ordinary man.

After the Project's work, Roy was pretty much invulnerable, far as he could tell.

He slammed into the rocky ground, doing a significant amount of damage from his landing alone. But his impact was just the first step. After the impact came...

Detonation.

Roy stood, as dust and debris swirled around him.

His vision was nearly obscured by the aftermath of his handiwork, but his helmet had vision modes to cut through the clouds, so…

Roy blinked.

Much of the scenery was gone, with stones, soil, and snow pulverised by the force of Roy's blast.

But the old temple complex they had come to assault was still standing, as were its outbuildings. That was a surprise, since they were supposedly ancient pieces of ramshackle buildings clinging to the side of a mountain, rather than nuclear-proof bunkers.

Roy suspected that the dome of interlocking translucent hexagons around the entire collection of structures had something to do with that.

"Arrow," Roy said, "this is the Human Bomb. We have a problem."

He flicked his eyes to the camera feeds, as fresh footage was piped into his cockpit screens and projected inside his helmet's visor. Through the augmented reality overlay, he peered at the devastated landscape with a critical eye.

The ground was all torn up, all dust and craters rather than pristine snow and stone.

The sky above the landscape should have been bright. Because it was early morning, local time. Past dawn. Instead, there was a grey pallor over the mountains, because of all the particulate matter in the air.

By any measurement, the location was trashed. But the place they were hitting was still intact. The so-called historic Buddhist temple looked like the set of some kinda shitty kung fu movie, but the dome surrounding it was high technology.

He was pretty sure it was tech. The stuff didn't make his skin itch beneath his suit, and it didn't set his hair on end the way voodoo bullshit usually did. Which meant it was a completely different flavour of bullshit.

Besides, the sensor suite of Ollie's Arrowplane were picking up… something, though he didn't have a big enough brain to interpret the readings. Sure, he owned the company that made the avionics, but he hadn't read every single page of the damn manual.

Down on the ground, the Human Bomb set off another explosion, driving both of his hands into the barrier, which Ollie knew was a trick the old guy used to get a more focused blast from his powers. Like a big shaped charge.

There was another thunderous release of force, which caused enough turbulence that Ollie had to grip the control yoke to keep his plane steady.

Ollie rolled his eyes. They'd be able to get through the force bubble eventually. Hell, if Lincoln kept going, maybe he'd pop the sucker all by his lonesome. However, they had a whole army waiting to go in, and they'd just lost a bunch of momentum.

"All units," Ollie said, activating his helmet mic, "this is Green Arrow... "

He paused. There was something wrong. He couldn't put his finger on the button, not precisely, but his instincts were warning him that something was up.

Ollie cursed.

"Fall back," he ordered, his voice rising. "All units, fall back. Fall back! Clear the area! Human Bomb, stop blasting!"

"Arrow," the Human Bomb replied, "I can... "

"Stop, damnit," Ollie yelled, "stop! It's... "

He didn't get to finish.

Alarms sounded in the cockpit of the Arrowplane. The little wireframe representation of the
aircraft in his HUD went ominously red, before visibly breaking apart into a bunch of pieces.

It was an impressive bit of UI design. It was also incredibly distracting under the circumstances. Ollie made a mental note to find out which one of his employees or contractors had come up with that little detail, so he could fire them.

Ollie gripped the handle built into his pilot's seat and pulled hard.

Explosive bolts popped around the Arrowplane's canopy, lifting it from the airframe until it was carried away by the slipstream.

Another explosive cartridge fired directly beneath Ollie's body, launching his chair into the air - before a small rocket motor ignited, finishing the process of brutally kicking the ejection seat out of the Arrowplane.

Bailing out of a dying aircraft was already a pain in the ass on a good day, but Ollie was conscious of the fact he was launching right into the wake of a veritable clusterfuck.

The massive blast that had taken out his Arrowplane was one problem, but in the immediate aftermath of the shockwave, air would logically rush back in towards the epicentre.

Ollie winced as he tumbled through the sky, the ejection seat's parachute doing little to stabilise his flight. If it wasn't for his combat armour, Ollie was sure that he'd have long since passed out from the abuse.

The separator fired, breaking him free of his restraints. The remains of the ejection seat fell away as a second chute deployed, this one attached to his body.

Ollie winced again, as his blood flow normalised, his suit no longer squeezing his body in a vice grip as a countermeasure against G forces. He swept his eyes across the battlefield, taking stock of the situation.

On the up side, the protective dome over the League of Shadows compound was gone.

On the down side, it was now blatantly obvious that the thing had been some sort of massive Inertia Field. The big cataclysmic detonation hadn't been one of Roy Lincoln's explosions. Rather, the dome had soaked up the force of his attacks, before returning it all at once.

It figured. That Booster Gold guy who had tangled with the Blue Beetle in Chicago had used an Inertia Field, and the Joker had employed a similar device when he'd tangled with Lex.

Terminan Inertia tech wasn't supposed to scale up so big. That was what the lab geeks in Ollie's employ said, and the Justice League's resident experts concurred. Terminian I-fields were for personal protection, maybe vehicle shielding at most.

Obviously they were wrong... or whatever the hell the Shadows had wasn't actually Terminan gear, but something else that could achieve the same effect. Whatever. It was a moot point. The details didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was the results.

Ollie clutched his harness.

"Alright, people," he growled, speaking into his helmet mic. "Talk to me. Who's still alive?"

One by one, the replies came in, followed by representative icons on his HUD.
Ollie grunted, as he did a tally in his head. All of the Justice League members in the attacking force were still alive, despite the Red Team's dirty tricks. Most of the DEO agents were up as well. Unfortunately, they'd lost a couple of the Blackhawks. Much like Ollie's own late Arrowplane, their aircraft hadn't been able to survive the damage.

Ollie tried not to think about the fact that the Arrowplane was a damn sight tougher than his own squishy human body. He was covered head to toe in the best armour his money could buy, but he was just a guy, not a fighter jet.

As he descended, Ollie took stock of his gear. He had his survival pack attached to him, plus his weapons. His bow, his backup bow, his collapsable backup bow, and two quivers of his namesake arrows.

"Somebody check on Lincoln," Ollie ordered, "he was closest to the…"

"Arrow," said one of the DEO agents. "Warrior here."

Ollie didn't recognise the codename, but his helmet display flagged the speaker as Special Agent in Charge Gardner, the senior man that the US Government had dispatched to ride herd on the pack of metas from Project 7734.

"Bomb's alive," Gardner continued, "his suit's trashed, but..."

The transmission cut off. Ollie looked down, craning his neck at the mountainous terrain below, trying to make out what was going on. He saw movement, but he couldn't be sure what he was seeing.

"Warrior," Ollie shouted, "report!"

The agent didn't reply.
"Move," the Shadow ordered, in harshly accented English.

Frank Laminski wasn't sure how al Ghul's lackey managed to cram a foreign accent into such a short word, but it seemed that there were more syllables in it than there should have been.

"I'm moving, I'm moving," Frank grumbled, as he let himself be manhandled from his cell. "Cool your jets."

He didn't fight back. It wasn't the right time.

The Shadow said something unintelligible, but Frank paid it no mind.

Instead, his eyes moved rapidly, raking over his surroundings.

The Shadows could be moving him for any number of reasons. But Frank surmised that it had something to do with the echoing booms that had recently shaken the holding area.

The robed ninja wannabes were evacuating the place, clearing out the cells. Frank supposed it was kind of them to care about his safety, except that he reckoned that they didn't give a crap about his well being.

The Shadows weren't known as bleeding heart humanitarians. They were a non-government organisation, but they sure as hell weren't a charitable one.

It had to be the Justice League out there. If not the Justice League, then it had to be someone who was on bad terms with the Shadows.

The Shadows didn't want whoever it was getting their hands on Frank.

As such, Frank was obliged to not go quietly.

It'd been a while since his Air Force SERE training, but if there was one thing Frank Laminski was good at, it was being stubborn.

His willpower hadn't even been put to the test. Strangely, the Shadows hadn't tried that hard to break him. He'd expected physical abuse and torture, all the hallmarks of enhanced interrogation techniques. The Shadows hadn't done any of that.

Maybe Talia al Ghul was softer than Frank thought, or the Shadows had put too much faith in convoluted psychological manipulation. They'd sent some pretty blonde lady in to cajole him, ostensibly some kind of shrink, though Frank didn't believe a single word of it.

She had a pretty good accent, admittedly. Very convincing. If he didn't know better, Frank would have sworn she was actually American, from Brooklyn. The blonde did a better job in speaking English than Frank's prison guards, that was for sure.

Frank kept his head bowed and his shoulders slumped as the Shadows marched him out of the cell.

In his head, he worked out the odds. There were two of them and only one of him, but even without his rings he was no pushover. He'd been through the Academy. He knew how to fight.

Of course, the Shadows all had martial arts training and crazy kung fu. Right?
For a second, just a second, he felt a faint twinge of fear. But he pushed it down, burying it. He'd been afraid once. He'd felt fear once.

Never again. That was then. That was the old Frank. Before the rings. Before the Justice League.

He was a hero now. He was better than that. He couldn't doubt himself.

He just had to pick the right moment.

As the Shadows pushed him into the corridor, the building trembled again, shaking in a way that wasn't natural.

One of the Shadows yelled something. Frank didn't catch what the phrase was. He didn't think it was English. Urdu, maybe? It wasn't directed at him. The guy was shouting at his colleague.

That meant the guy was distracted.

Frank lifted one leg, stomping his heel straight down on the top of his captor's foot, between the guy's toes and the ankle.

They'd taken away his shoes, so all he had to work with was his own naked feet. But that was good enough, since the Shadow only had light footwear, some kind of stupid-looking ninja booties.

The Shadow didn't make a sound, but his grip on Frank loosened.

Frank twisted, propelling his upper arm and elbow into the man's face with a crack of bone against cartilage. Since Frank was taller than the Shadow, he got some downward force in the strike.

The Shadow stumbled, his face a bloody ruin. A broken nose was no joke. It wasn't a killing blow in and of itself, but the guy's eyes had to be watering.

Frank smashed the palm of his hand into the Shadow's broken nose. That was theoretically a killing strike, if done properly - but the odds were long, and Frank wasn't necessarily looking to one-hit the bastard. He just had to keep the guy down.

The other Shadow was already responding, coming at Frank with a drawn knife. It was an elaborate sort of knife, with a distinct recurve to the blade, and a big one. Sixteen, maybe seventeen inches from hilt to tip. Frank figured the second guy had some equally elaborate footwork to go with the weapon.

But the distance was close, negating the Shadow's range advantage. Frank was close enough to parry the guy's knife arm, slamming his left forearm into the other man's limb.

Then Frank drove his right hand into the guy's throat.

The Shadow dropped, making a strangled gasp. That, Frank reckoned, was a killing strike. Though he gave his victim a kick or two to be sure.

The first Shadow was still moving, if fitfully and sporadically. Frank eyed the guy, then picked up the fallen knife, testing its balance.

But the blood didn't matter, since he was certain that the first Shadow wasn't his size. Maybe he could use the guy's shoes, but that was it.

That done, he set about the task of stripping the bodies. It was a little macabre, but the circumstances demanded it. He didn't derive any pleasure from seeing a mostly naked dead guy.
Frank simply needed their stuff more than they did. It wasn't as if they had any use for their possessions, not any longer.

Eventually, his rush job done, Frank took a second to clean the knife off, before shoving it into the matching sheathe strapped to his side.

The freshly pilfered League of Shadows clothing didn't fit him very well, but he could survive a little tightness and discomfort.

He pulled the hood down lower, hoping that it would disguise his features. There weren't many pale-skinned boys running around the Shadows' base, but he'd seen a few caucasian faces during his time in captivity. The lady they'd tapped as an interrogator wasn't the only white person in the joint.

It was a lousy disguise, but Frank wasn't looking to go trick-or-treating, or win prizes at a nerd convention.

He only needed to pass muster. He only needed to go unnoticed long enough.
Mace planted his feet into the ground, the bone and flesh of his legs changing shape. He threw one of his arms up, reinforcing his muscles and skin into a big tower shield - protecting both him and his passenger.

Over his shoulder, the limp figure of the Human Bomb stirred slightly. Mace figured Lincoln had a concussion. He was showing all the symptoms of one, anyway. According to his dossier, Roy Lincoln was supposed to be immune to concussions. The files said he was invincible.

The files were wrong. Mace reckoned there was a big difference between damage-resistant and damage-immune, because Lincoln looked like a man who'd been clobbered in the head. He also looked like a man who'd been clobbered in other ways. His containment suit was definitely holed somewhere, because little explosions were occasionally going off against Mace's skin.

The constant blasts would have pulped an ordinary human being. Thankfully, Mace was made of sterner stuff. His body had more material to work with than stock homo sapiens DNA. He also had the ability to turn off his pain receptors, plus the ability to quickly regenerate any lost flesh.

It could have been worse. At least the damaged suit was still wrapped around Lincoln's body. Worst case, Mace could have been dealing with a naked old man's schlong rubbing against his body, setting off explosions with every meaty smack.

That being said, having a firecracker hanging off him was still a big pain in the ass. Well, a pain in the shoulder and torso.

Though Mace was pretty sure that if he absolutely had to repurpose his upper body to function as an emergency replacement rectum, his powers would find a way.

It was damned irritating to take damage from both the man Mace was trying to save and the bad guys Mace was saving him from. However, unless the Human Bomb managed to pull himself together, there was little Mace could do on that front.

Mace had healing powers, but none of those powers let him heal other people. The scientists down in Project 7734 had experimented with transplanting Mace's tissues, blood, and assorted bits into recipients, but they'd quickly discovered that his cells had a tendency to react badly with other people. A universal donor, he was not.

Some kinda energy-charged weapon slashed across Mace's shield, the blade sizzling against his flesh. He winced, and reinforced the barricade, drawing further on his reserves. His body had tremendous ability to pull more biomass seemingly out of nowhere, but it wasn't unlimited. Eventually, even his prodigious biology might exhaust itself.

"Hey," Mace growled, "how ya doing, Bomb?"

The Human Bomb mumbled something incoherent.

"Do me a solid," Mace said, "go boom inna sec, 'kay?"

Without waiting for the man to reply, Mace tossed the other superhero straight at the guy he was fighting, lobbing him unceremoniously up and over Mace's arm-shield.

Mace saw the limp figure of Roy Lincoln land bodily on top of the guy Mace was fighting. Mace
hunkered down behind his shield.

There was a loud explosion.

He collapsed his altered arm back into a more compact configuration, because it wasn't practical for him to walk around with one limb larger than the rest of his body. His abilities ignored a lot of the laws of physics, but not all of them.

Mace didn't return his limb to its normal state of five fingers and a thumb, because he was still in the middle of a warzone. Instead, he shaped it into something that was more sword than shield, a good enough compromise.

They were still outside the old temple complex proper. Close to the compound, but not inside. The buildings had begun disgorging a bunch of ninja types, forcing everyone into melee combat.

With all the blasts going off, Mace was surprised they hadn't set off an avalanche by now. The only thing they were buried in were identical faceless ninja, not snow.

Crazy bastards.

He hadn't expected them to stall the strike team for long, but the Shadows were putting up a surprisingly good fight.

Being willing to die in job lots probably had something to do with that.

The Human Bomb's detonation had reduced the robed attacker into chunky bits, and the humanoid form that was left was barely identifiable. If Mace hadn't seen the Shadows agent before, he would have had difficulty recognising them.

Flecks of crimson were smeared over Mace's body, though there wasn't as much of it as he expected. Almost as if…

Mace sniffed the air. Cold mountain air should have been bracing. Of course, the air was tinged with blood and the stench of battle. Even so, something was off.

Unfortunately, he didn't have the luxury to think. The Shadow was down, but there were dozens of them, all dressed in variations of martial arts pajamas.

Another Shadows operative rushed at Mace, this one swinging a staff. Under normal circumstances, Mace would have laughed it off. A stick, no matter how large, wasn't going to do much to a guy like Gerald Mason Gardner.

According to the big brains at Project 7734, while Mace Gardner was a proper red-blooded American citizen, not all of his genes were human. There was a bit of illegal alien in his ancestry. Somewhere along the line, his ancestors had gotten down and dirty with a bunch of spacefolk. Fast forward a few generations, and Mace was the result.

The process of unlocking his potential had involved a whole lot of painful treatments, gene therapy, and scientists poking around his insides. But the genetic editing and surgery had worked. Eventually.

The thing was, while his alien genes came with a predisposition towards aggression, they also gave him enhanced instincts, like some kinda sixth sense for warfare.

Mace's little brother called it genetic memory, something about the Gardner family's alien
ancestors passing their fighting experience down through the centuries.

That was the sort of thing that Guy liked to speculate on, because he was the one with a fancy college degree in education and psychology.

All Mace had was a high school diploma with honours in asskicking.

Whatever it was, his gut was telling him to take the new Shadow seriously, instead of writing them off as yet another faceless mook.

Mace took in his surroundings. For him, that was as easy as breathing.

The Human Bomb was still lying on the rocky ground. For the time being, Roy Lincoln wasn't a factor. It would be at least another half-second, maybe more, before Lincoln could release another blast. Even the constant pops and crackles from the breaches in the old man's suit had temporarily ceased.

There was another Justice Leaguer sprawled insensate on the ground. That, Mace realised, was one of the clues his unconscious instincts had picked up on, even if his conscious mind had taken a while to catch up. The Shadow had knocked out the big black guy named Icon, one of the League's bricks.

Invulnerability and super-strength were a stupidly common powerset, the vanilla flavour of the metahuman world, but there was a vast gulf between brawlers that were merely bulletproof, and the sort of meta who could shrug off anti-tank rounds. Icon was supposed to be the latter, unless his reputation was just more PR garbage.

The implication was that the Shadow had some kinda edge, maybe magic, maybe a meta power of their own. Her own? His own? The figure was slender, but all the cloth covering them from the face down made it hard to judge. There wasn't an inch of exposed skin. But Mace suspected that the staff in their hands was to blame.

Thaddeus Sivana had equipped the Shadows with all sorts of party tricks, according to Superman's people. The Justice League had run into specially armed Shadows a couple of times already, which implied that the crowd of Hong Kong movie extras that Mace was dealing with all had the same deal. Toys from the mad scientist's toybox.

The Shadow's quarterstaff made contact with Mace's arm blade as he parried the blow. Mace immediately felt his skin and muscle damn near atomise from the blow, his cells losing cohesion all the way down to the bone.

Triumphantly, the Shadow shouted something. Mace assumed it was a taunt. He didn't speak whatever gibberish the guy was speaking, so the only takeaway for Mace was that his opponent was male. Probably.

Whatever the guy had smacked him with, Mace's arm needed a moment to recover. He could feel his flesh knitting back together, but for the time being it was effectively disabled.

But Mace had another arm, which he sent jabbing out in a low strike. Mace's forearm distended, warping and snaking around the Shadow agent's defences.

He felt something that seemed more like body armour than regular meat, but it wasn't enough resistance to stop Mace's punch. Nowhere near enough.

His sharpened fist crunched through the Shadow's lower ribs and emerged from the other side.
A fancy weapon wasn't much help when the person wielding it was still a baseline human - and inherently fragile, compared to someone like Mace.

Mace kicked the body, pulling his limb free.

He flexed his fingers, which were now slick with blood and other gunk.

Mace paused.

He brought his fingers to his face, and sniffed. He altered his olfactory receptors, and sniffed again. Then he adjusted his tongue as well, and licked the fluids from his hand.

Mace scowled. "The fuck is this?"
Chapter 111

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The part of Mace's brain that was still plain old Gerard Mason Gardner of the Baltimore Police Department, the part of his brain that still thought like a cop rather than an alien supersoldier... that part of him was screaming at the top of its lungs.

He was getting the same feeling that he used to have, when a call or raid was about to go bad. He didn't need ancient alien instincts to smell a rat. He knew in his bones that something was deeply screwy.

"Bloodwynd," Mace growled over the communications channel, transmitting what passed from his brain straight into a signal.

He wasn't wearing a radio set, not when his body could mimic one.

Unfortunately, he didn't get an answer. That wasn't surprising, because Mace had already figured out that their comms were being comprehensively jammed.

Mace adjusted his throat and lungs for maximum volume, expanding his chest in the process. Then he bellowed across the battlefield. At the last second, he stopped himself from yelling for Bloodwynd, remembering to use the correct name in the interests of operational security.

It was a thin cover, about as effective as pixelation on Japanese porn, but orders were orders. Mace wasn't a cop anymore, and the book he had to follow was more like a thin pamphlet of strong suggestions, but he was obliged to play along with the Justice League's attempt at subterfuge.

"MANHUNTER," Mace roared.

In the distance, the hulking emerald shape that they were calling the Martian Manhunter shuddered, amorphous flesh rippling beneath its hide.

The creature grabbed a hapless Shadow with an appendage that was as much tentacles as it was fingers, drawing the struggling figure in. A mouth that was both a beak and a maw full of teeth swallowed the Shadow, crunching the body in half.

The shapeshifter wasn't the original, of course. The Justice League hadn't been fully forthcoming with the status of their green alien, but the DEO was certain that they'd misplaced the Martian on Venus. The Martian Manhunter currently in the field was a product of the Cadmus labs. A copy in body, but not in mind.

"QUIT PLAYING AND USE YOUR TELEPATHY," Mace yelled.

One great lidless eye moved in its socket. It was a grotesque sight, but since Mace was a shapeshifter himself, he had a pretty strong stomach when it came to that sort of thing.

The Martian looked pissed off. Since the Martian was currently twenty feet tall and ugly as sin, that went without saying, but from the creature's reaction, Mace's order wasn't going down well.

According to the cursory amount of information Superman's boys had been willing to share, puppeting the Martian's mindless physical form was difficult for Bloodwynd, and using the alien's
brain powers was especially taxing. Taxing enough that it wasn't viable for Bloodwynd to employ any of the cloned Martian's more esoteric abilities on the battlefield.

The DEO's intel suggested that Bloodwynd was more than capable of programming his zombies to act autonomously. He didn't have to directly control them all the time. But even if that was so, the Martian was likely a special case.

Mace didn't know enough about magic to challenge those assumptions. Mace's own expertise was in hitting stuff with his body parts, rather than other people's.

Through the Martian's body, Bloodwynd glared at Mace.

It was possible that Bloodwynd was wondering why the hell Mace was asking him to do something that wouldn't work. But Mace didn't mean for Bloodwynd to use the Martian Manhunter's telepathy. Mace didn't care whether the spooky psychic powers in play were from alien biology or Satanic rituals.

Bloodwynd was empowered by an occult stone that his ancestors had created, generations ago. The United States government was deeply interested in getting their hands on that gem, which was why it was a damned shame that the man was deep on the Justice League's payroll.

If a bunch of rebellious cotton plantation slaves could whip up something like that on their own, then the Project could do better.

Unfortunately, Bloodwynd wasn't a government asset. But for the time being, he was nominally Mace's ally, since Mace's bosses wanted him to play nice with Superman's crew.

The guy was out of Mace's chain of command, but Mace hoped he was enough of a professional to listen to a reasonable request.

"WE NEED A SCAN," Mace shouted. "SOMETHING'S UP WITH THESE…"

Mace was forced to interrupt himself, as he caught some motion out of the corner of his eye. One of the figures in a ninja onesie was going for the prone form of the Human Bomb. Lincoln was still out of it.

The old timer managed to set off another explosion, this time deliberately, but he'd misjudged the distance in his injured state. The Shadow kept coming.

Mace tensed his muscles, forcing his entire arm to change shape until it terminated in a gun barrel instead of a hand. Cooling fins sprouted out of his upper arm and shoulder.

Unseen, under his skin, meat and tendons converted themselves into capacitors, while his bones formed a hollow path, two parallel rails, and a conductive organic polymer slug.

Mace fired, blowing a gaping hole through the Shadow's centre of mass. He kept his arm in the railgun configuration as he glared at Bloodwynd.

Thankfully, the magic man finally got the drift. It would have been better if the mage had been quicker on the uptake, but better late than never.

The green bulk of the Martian Manhunter sunk down, its limbs twitching. Mace took it as a sign that Bloodwynd was easing up on his control of the creature, diverting some of the dark hocus-pocus radiating from his mystical bling.
The big eye on the Martian's current form twitched, the pupil and iris dilating. Then it focused sharply.

"It seems you are correct," Bloodwynd said, his voice speaking inside Mace's head. It wasn't the eerie unnatural rumble that the Martian body could produce, but a voice that was close to Bloodwynd's ordinary one. "They are not human. No minds, no souls."

Mace kept his mouth shut, and thought back: "Robots? Clones?"


Mace scowled. "Plant? What is this, the League of Vegans?"

Chapter End Notes

For anyone reading this as its posted, rather than catching up or skimming later - due to COVID-19 disruption, I haven't had much free time or headspace to get writing done. I might still get a post up on Friday, but subsequently I might need to push a brief pause button for a week or two.

I hope you're all staying safe and are doing well.

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