Summary

Three months after 'Endgame', The Team begins tying up the loose ends left behind. However, their investigations into Mars, Lexcor, and the whereabouts of Vandal Savage lead them to more dangerous and disturbing findings. New allies and new enemies are uncovered as they face new uncontrollable violent meta teens, a mystery of growing teenage deaths, and strange alien attacks. But will their new allies help their investigation and strengthen their team? Or will they unwittingly be their demise? As Vandal Savage conspires with his new partner, Earth finds itself choking on the clutches of Apokolips.

All new major characters introduced are all characters from the DC universe. No OCs.

Takes place 3 months after season 2.
A quiet knocking on a door reverberated through the alleyway. Six teenagers stood behind an office building, shrouded by the hoods of their jackets, waiting for their knock to be answered. Their senses teetered on edge as anticipation scratched beneath their skin. They jumped at the loud creek of the back door opening.

The door opened wide, revealing two broad men in suits. They ushered them in through the back door, leading them down the hallway. The building’s dim light and silent halls caused an anxious shiver to slither up their spines. At the end of the hallway, the men opened two large steel doors, and directed them into a dark room.

In the middle of the room they saw a beautiful and daunting middle aged woman. She sat a shiny leather office chair behind a large wood desk. Her thick black curls fell past her shoulders. Her hazel eyes studied them as they walked towards her. She did not look like any preconceived notion on what a ‘crime boss’ might look like. Her spotless designer business suit tailored around her flowing blouse. Her hair, makeup, nails, everything, was flawless. A smile of pearl white teeth emerged beneath her deep purple lipstick. The two men moved to stand on each side of her.

“I see you had no troubling finding this place,” her voice was sultry. She gestured towards the two open chairs on the other side of her desk. “Please, have a seat.”

Two of the teenagers took the seats in front of her. The other four stood, placing themselves a few feet behind them. Their arms crossed and minds teetered on edge.

A feminine voice rang out from one of the teenagers in the chairs. “Thank you for honoring us with this meeting.” A native american accent rested heavy upon her word

“It is not a problem mi hija,” the woman in the suit chimed back. “Or should I call you Black Bison? That is your masked name is it not?”

She nodded, “Yes ma’am, but please address me as Jenny, Jenny Ravenhair, during our...business...meetings. If it pleases you.”

The business woman smiled, “Of course. Now, let’s see if I can get this right.” She pointed to the two other members standing behind Jenny. One, young woman with long blonde hair, and the other a young man with short black hair. “Summer Day and Jivan Shi: The Hyenas.” She then pointed towards the two other standing teens. One, a brown skinned young man with shaggy brown hair, “Sebastian Ballesteros: Cheetah. Aaaand...” She chucked as the other teen, who was much shorter than the other five, cowered behind Sebastian. The woman hummed beneath her smile, “I don’t believe I know that one.”

“She is new to our pack,” Jenny told her. “We rescued her after you and I first met.”

The business woman bared a condescending toothless smile. “Bringing in a rookie to a business meeting? I would say that is a bold move. Let’s just hope for your sake and hers, she is not a narc.” Her guards moved back their suit jackets to reveal pistols on their hips. The young girl shook as her eyes darted between them.
“I can assure you madam,” Jenny spoke. “The little one, Adalae, is of no threat to your or our...future endeavors. She is a pup whose powers have barely even blossomed.”

The woman shifted her gaze towards Jenny, “Well then. I’ll take your word for it. Make sure she is aware of our system of punishment for those who decide to... backtrack.”

“We understand clearly, mistress,” Jenny assured her.

“Excellent,” the woman chimed. She finally brought her gaze to the final member. The young Native American teen who sat the chair next to Jenny. His gaze was stern and unwavering. “And you,” she addressed him as she cocked her head. “Must be Tye.”

“Yes ma’am,” he affirmed. “Tye Longfellow. And yours?”

“Señior Tye Longfellow,” his name spilled off her tongue with a fiery flare. “You may address me as madam, ma’am, or La Dama.” She cocked an eyebrow. “Now, if I am not mistaken, you were on the other side not too long ago. Fighting the the good fight with that, what is his name, the Blue Beetle?”
A mischievous smile rolled across her face. “Now what on earth would make you stray from the path of those beloved do-gooders?”

Tye’s expression became fierce. “The Justice League have proven over and over that our struggles are of no concern to them. I am sick of seeing my people suffer.

And if I have the means to help them take back what is ours, I am ready to do it.” She watched as he clenched his hand around the edge of the chair’s armrest. “By any means necessary.”

“And that, I assume, is why you have contacted me?” La Dama asked.

“Yes,” Tye answered. “We’ve made some progress on our own but we need certain...resources to take our plan to the next level. To really make a difference in the lives of our people.” He placed his hand on Jenny’s as it laid on her armrest. He looked at her, as if for reassurance, before turning his attention back to La Dama. “Jenny said that you might have what we need.”

La Dama tilted her head up slightly. “Señior Longfellow, I can see that you have the makings of a great tribal chief in you.”
He nodded, “It is all I can hope to be.”

La Dama interlaced her fingers as she rested her elbows on her desk. “Well, rest assured I do have the resources to help you in your journey to become one. But I must be clear in the fact that these resources I do not hand out free of charge. My suppliers must be confident that their business partners are serious about their endeavors. You have caught my attention with your escapades so far. But playing ‘Robin Hood’? Taking from the rich and distributing to the poor only goes so far with the people above me. I can supply you with the basic tools you’ll need. But you must be willing to prove yourself with a more serious approach. A more...persuasive approach.” She leaned forward, “Do you understand?”

“Yes madam,” Jenny affirmed. “I assure you that that approach is already planned.”

La Dama snickered, “A proactive bunch you niños are. I’m impressed.”

“So we have to prove ourselves to your bosses.” Tye stated. “But I am going to assume that that is not the only thing you’ll need? For a steady supply on our end, you’re most likely going to need a steady supply of favors from us. Is that correct?”

A spark ignited in La Dama’s eyes, “Oh you are intelligent. You cut right to the chase don’t you?
Yes, to get what you need we’ll need to create a steady partnership. Once you have proven yourself, I will give you what you need, whenever you need it. And in return I need your help with a certain...errand.” She cleared her throat to make sure that all six of the teens were giving her their undivided attention. “My suppliers have created a profitable new product on the east coast. They are looking to spread it west. I have set up the partnership, but the intended buyers they wish to sell to are of your age range. I need your help spreading this product to your peers.” She straightened out her jacket. “After all....teenagers are much more likely to listen to their friends than adults.”

Tye squinted in stern curiosity, “What kind of product do you speak of?”

She tossed him a cocky smile, “A new...recreational product.”

An angry expression overcame Tye as he jumped out of his seat. The guards responded quickly, almost pulling their pistols out of their holsters. “You can’t be serious!” Tye shouted. “That is the kind of thing. That—that white man’s poison, that we are trying to save our people from! And you want us to spread more of it for you?!”

“Tye,” Jenny pleaded with him. She grabbed to his hand and placed her another on his forearm. “Please, my love, do calm yourself.”

La Dama raised her an eyebrow as Jenny’s eyes began to glow. She noticed Tye’s muscles relax in response and his expression soften. It became clear to her who within the young coupling was the one who was really in control. La Dama laughed. “S’all right.” She gestured to her guards to ease themselves as Tye sat back down. “He has every right to be..angry, on edge. You are so full of passion young Tye. It is understandable for you to be wary. I promise you that this..product, will be no threat to your people. I will make sure of it. And by giving you full control of its distribution, you have control of where it ends up.” A wicked smile flashed across her face. “Destroy the white man with their own poison, yes?”

A silence overtook the room as Tye warily debated within himself. But looking over to Jenny, he felt a little more at ease with her warm expression. She squeezed his hand, signaling that this was the right choice. She would be there with him the whole way.

Tye let out a heavy sigh, “Alright. We’ll do it.”

“Good.” La Dama smirked. “I’m glad we have an arrangement. Now, do not contact me. I will be in contact with you when the first shipment is ready for distribution. I should be able to let you know when and where by the end of the month.” She snapped her fingers at one of her guards. He hurriedly made his way towards the door and opened it. “My men will escort you out. It was a pleasure doing business with you. I look forward to our future interactions.”

The young team walked in silence out the doorway. Before leaving Jenny turned and said, “Thank you, La Dama.” The office door closed behind her and the other members of her pack.

“I must say I do love your methods of manipulation.” La Dama heard a voice emerge from behind her. The large television screen on her wall emitting a blinding glow.

A fearsome man with scars across his face appeared upon it.

La Dama responded with a seductive grin. “The manipulation of a man’s mind is one of a woman’s most powerful gifts.”

He grinned back at her, “Not that we doubt your methods. But are you absolutely sure these children are going to help us deliver effectively?”
“Their desperation stinks the room they occupy like an infection,” she sneered. “I have no doubt in my mind that they will obey.”

The man chuckled.

La Dama continued. “I take it you're pleased with the recruitment I’ve made for you, Vandal Savage?”

“Yes, undoubtedly,” he assured her. “Today you have helped paved the path for great things to come La Dama. You are free to consider yourself one with The Light.”
Mal Duncan propped himself lazily upon the couch at the warehouse. He rubbed his temple roughly as he sighed at the television. He made a constant effort to make sure he was not ignorant to current events. In fact his place on The Team meant that that was in his job description. But nothing made him feel disappointed like the stories on the news stations. His girlfriend Karen, placed her legs in his lap as she rested her head against the sofa’s armrest on the opposite end. She gave her attention towards her phone. Social media sounded much more appealing than her boyfriend’s daily “news indulgence”.

“Sadly the same story has made its way to the climax of our segment today,” A soft but intense voice spilled from the television. It belonged to a stern-faced, middle aged woman. The curls of her red hair were painstakingly placed upon her head. She spoke with a sense of urgency.

La’gann snorted as he laughed, overhearing the television from the kitchen. “Heh heh, climax.”

Karen rolled her eyes at him.

The newswoman continued. “The number of unexplained deaths in young men and women in the U.S. has increased this month since the initial increase was first noticed early in September.” It was now that the television captured Karen and La’gann’s attention as well. As the woman continued, her voice played over images and videos of sheet-covered bodies being rolled away in stretchers. “Large numbers of young adults ranging from ages 13 to 24 have been found ‘dropping dead’ according to authorities. And strangely enough, authorities have not been able to find distinct patterns. These deaths are occurring in some of the smallest towns to major cities. Victims from every social class and every level of health are reported. Doctors have found no abnormalities in their bodies, but many are suspecting that drugs may be the culprit.”

La’gann huffed, “I feel remorse for their families’ losses. But if it’s drugs, they should know better. I’ll never understand surface-people’s obsession with voluntary toxins.”

Karen have him a harsh “Shhhhhhh!” as she was trying her best to listen.

“- drugs really be the culprit of these tragic instances?” The woman asked. “I for one believe in the absolute possibility that these blooming young lives could have in fact been cut short by some kind of new drug. But it begs the question: If so, what are we doing to fail America’s youths? Why do they feel that they have no place go to for help? What sadness could drive them to such a means and end? As I have stated many times, our children need a place where they can learn that they have a place in the world. That is why I urge you help fund my campaign, to push for the American government to create Halfway Schools. Where trouble and misplaced youths can find meaning in their lives instead of diving into dangerous activities like drugs. By donating to me, Grace Godfrey, today you can make a difference in the future. You can save the young men and women of America from the distraught living conditions, expectations, and economy that we have created for them.”

“Ugggggghhhhhhhhhhh...” Karen groaned, “I hate these ‘news shows’. They’re nothing more than...just, places where public figures can twist events to fund their personal campaigns.”

Mal shrugged, “Well I guess this woman is supposed to be really smart. She has something like three
different degrees in psychology.”

“Wait,” La’gann interrupted. “Grace Godfrey? Is she related to that obnoxious Gordon Godfrey fellow that’s always on the Justice League’s case?”

“Apparently,” sneered Karen. “Looks like obnoxiousness and manipulation runs in their family.”

“Man,” Mal shook his head, stomach still in a knot from the story. “Why do kids feel the need to do stuff like that? I’m just glad that none of us have problems like that. Also makes me grateful for this place here, kids need a place where they can just vent and be themselves you know?”

He gestured towards the area around him. Since they now ran out of The Watch Tower alongside The Justice League, they had taken action to renovate their once temporary Bludhaven headquarters. It was a project insisted on by M'gann. She believed along the same lines as Mal. She believed the members of The Team still needed a place where they could enjoy each other's company outside of missions. And the Bludhaven 'warehome' had once been the only place where several of their members could live. With the help of The League, the renovation did not take long. It was no much larger by taking advantage of underground space and contained a more ‘homey’ feel. Several empty bedrooms were even created in preparation for recruitment of new members in the future.

“I still don’t know why you volunteered to live here,” Karen stated. “As much love Garfield and La’gann, playing den mother would drive me insane.”

The building and the ground below them shook violently. On the other side of the walls they heard the sounds of large collisions and muffled screams.

“Neptune’s Beard! What was that?” La’gann cried out.

“An earthquake?” Karen frantically asked.

Her question was answered as they heard more terrified cries. Through the floor, they could feel random vibrations from more collisions. Karen and Mal threw on their uniforms as the three of them charged outside. The source of the crashes had come from small meteors falling from the sky and crashing down onto streets and buildings. The three scattered, carrying citizens out of the way of the few meteors that had not yet reached the ground.

And eerie quiet filled the streets as the last of the five meteors landed. Hot steam rose from each of the small craters they formed. Mal, Karen, and La’gann warily stepped towards one of the impact points. As they peered over the edge, the meteor did not look like any type of rock that they had ever seen. It was egg shaped, black in color with glowing red designs. It appeared almost metallic.

They flinched as the egg-like meteor cracked. The shell ripped apart as a monster erupted from it, splattering slime in every direction. His roar was unlike anything they had heard from on earth. It spread the batlike wings upon his back, thrusting them downward, sending him upward with a large gust of wind. Guardian, Bumblebee, and Lagoon Boy raised their arms to shelter their eyes from the gust.

As they opened their eyes they found that they other monsters had done the same. For a brief moment, they hovered before descending towards the ground. They screeched as they smashed into buildings and charged through crowds of civilians, biting and clawing at everyone within range.

“Go! Get them away from the civilians!” Guardian demanded.

Bumblebee and Lagoon Boy nodded and raced after the creatures.
Guardian did the same and pressed down the receiver of his earpiece communicator. “Guardian to Watch Tower. We have...monsters...a-aliens in Bludhaven!” He shouted. “We need backup!”

He sprinted towards one of monsters as it proceeded to turn over and claw at cars in the street. At the last second, the creature heard Guardian come up behind it. As it turn his head to face him, Guardian smashed his fist into it’s face, causing it to stagger backwards. Guardian continued to strike it until the creature snarled, using the back of his arm to knock Guardian to the ground. Before he could regain his bearings, the creature pounced on him. It was then that Guardian was able to get a good look at his attacker.

The monster was also cerulean in color as well. It’s humanoid body alternated between walking on all fours and it’s hind legs. Massive claws rested on it’s hands and feet. He could see it’s lizard like-tail as it thrashed about. Bat wings and ears extended from it’s back and skull, respectively. It’s round, glowing red eyes did not blink. Drool pooled from behind it’s razored fangs. Black and red body armor covered it’s torso, thighs and forearms.

It pinned down Guardian’s arms as it snapped its jaws as his face. He frantically dodged out of the way of his terrifying bite.

“Guardian? What is the situation in Bludhaven? Can you provide details?” He heard the stern voice of Aqualad in his communicator.

Guardian placed his feet on the creature’s stomach and thrusted them upward. It sent it somersaulting away from him.

“There are monsters in Bludhaven. Five of them. Attacking…” he was cut off as one of the creatures emitted an ear-shattering screech. All the other creatures turned their heads toward the one calling them. It pointed its clawed finger towards the downtown cityscape. Guardian felt his stomach turn, praying that the skyscrapers not be their targets. The other creatures made noises in response and they lept into the air once more. Jetpacks on the back of their armor erupted as they speed towards the heart of the city.

“Guardian?! Guardian! Are you alright? Please respond.” Aqualad’s frantic voice came across the communicator once more.

“I’m fine,” Guardian’s voice was tense. “They’re headed downtown. I don’t know if we can fight them all!”

He watched as Bumblebee flew after them.

“Superman is on his way. ETA three minutes. Do the best you can to stall them.” Aqualad commanded.

“Copy that,” Guardian answered. He called over for Lagoon Boy. He noticed an unattended motorcycle tipped over in the street. To his fortune the keys were still in it. The rider must have been thrown off of it during the attack. “Hop on,” he waved over to Lagoon Boy. As soon as he hopped on behind him, Guardian revved the motorcycle at full throttle towards the monsters.

Bumblebee did as best she could to keep up with monsters in the air. The jetpacks made their wings were much more powerful than hers, she was only ever able to close in on them at around 25 feet. She felt her hands heat up as she shot her yellow energy blasts at them. Though now matter how much she fired at them, her shots seemed to cause no damage to their armor. The skyscrapers closed in on them faster and faster. A sense of urgency blinded her as she began to flail her energy blasts at them, desperate to bring one of them down.
She managed to strike one of the creatures on its back. It snapped its head in her direction and growled at her. It suddenly changed course from that of its comrades and lunged straight for Bumblebee. Before she could dodge it, it grabbed her by her biceps, and sunk his fangs into her shoulder.

Bumblebee screamed in pain. Through the sting running down her body she was able to twist her arm to fire an energy blast at the creature’s wing. It screeched and the two of them began to descend downward towards the ground. Bumblebee struggled in his grasp, it was determined to take her down with him.

With a flash of blue and red, Bumblebee found herself pulled from the creature’s clawed hands. She was sent spiraling backwards for a few seconds before fulling gaining control of her wings again. She looked up to find Superman. His mighty fist had bunched a chunk of metal as he grasped the center of the creature’s breastplate. He struck the creature’s face twice with his fist before it responded by striking it’s claws at Superman’s face. Superman yelled in pain at the contact, instinctively releasing the creature. He clutched his face.

Bumblebee flew towards him, “Superman, are you ok?!”
“I’m fine,” he said momentarily rubbing his eyes with his hands. He tore them away from his face, “Where did he go?”

They scanned the area below them and found the creature, aerially limping as fast as it could muster towards a school. The wind was sucked out of Bumblebee’s lungs as she noticed children scattered about it’s playground.

“After it!” Superman commanded as they charged in it’s direction.

Several children and teachers screamed as they gazed upon the incoming monster. It crashed and scraped upon the playground as it landed, disrupting the earth as it skid across. Superman and Bumblebee landed roughly on the ground a few meters in front of it. The creature rose, battered and smoking. They stood, unwilling to make any sudden movements in fear of what could happen to the children around them. The creature turned its head. It noticed how the other monsters were only moments away from colliding with the skyscrapers just a couple miles away. He turned towards them, his broken jaw fell agape as green blood streamed from between its teeth.

From it’s shattered jowls, he shrieked a coarse whisper, “Faaaa daaaaaaksaaaaaaad.”

It’s claw pressed an indented red button on his armor on the center of it’s stomach. The armor began to heat and glow bright red. Superman used his x-ray vision to peer under the armor. A look of horror engulfed his face.

“It’s a bomb!” He yelled. “Bumblebee get out of here!”

“Wha…” before she could fully respond, Superman picked her up and spun her into the air, sending her flying a mile outward. He grabbed the creature and threw it upwards. He had to get it far away from the children. Within milliseconds the monster was 10 feet in the air, 20 feet, 35 feet, 50 feet.

But it wasn’t fast enough.

Superman was blinded as a bright light pierced the air. A massive gust of hot air blasted through the play ground. He was knocked from his feet. His Kryptonian skin protected him against the heat. But the children were nowhere near as fortunate. He gazed in horror at the children on the playground tried their best to scream as their skin scorched. The smell alone made him nearly vomit. The blast crumbled the wall facing it. Cries filled his ears as bricks blasted inwards towards classrooms.
Superman desperately struggled to his feet to save the children inside.

After being thrown out of the blast radius, Bumblebee was finally able to regain focus. She screamed as she watched the bomb destroy the playground. She brought her gaze towards the other monsters. She stared helplessly as the other four collided with several skyscrapers. Three seconds passed after their collisions before the impacted areas erupted in a rabid blaze of explosions. The floors of impact, and the ones below and above them found themselves engulfed in a fiery hell.

The aftershocks threw Guardian and Lagoon Boy off of the motorcycle. They were winded with terror. Guardian felt his throat close in on him as he uttered, “No...we’re too late.”

*Mars*

October 15th 2016
17:30 EDT

‘This is an absolute OUTRAGE.’

M’gann jumped in her seat. Across the room sat another Martian who slammed his fist on the table in front of him, emphasizing his telekinetic words. She saw that his action had also jarred the attention of Beast Boy and Superboy, who had nearly fallen asleep in their seats next to her.

To Superboy’s left, B’arzz O’oomm sat tensely in his chair. He placed his hands in front of his chest in a desperate attempt for placidity.

‘J’ornell. I’m going to have to ask you to please calm down,-’ B’arzz’s words filled their minds but were just as quickly cut off.

‘No. You do not get to tell me to calm down,’ J’ornell, the Martian who had pounded his fist on the table moments before, boomed. ‘It has been four months. Four months since the first attacks and you four-,’ he daringly jolted his finger towards B’arzz, M’gann, Beast Boy, and Superboy. ‘Are going to sit here and tell us that you have essentially found nothing? The Martian civilians of my sector are absolutely terrified to leave their homes. They are fearful of the increasing uproar and...and the inevitable attack from the White Martian populace.’

‘Inevitable?’ M’gann spat at him. All the heads in the room snapped towards her as they were abashed by her angered tone. ‘With all due respect Councilman J’ornell. I would be wary of what assumptions of yours you voice around...present company.’

J’ornell glared at her. It had slipped his mind for a brief moment that she was in fact a White Martian. Consistent telepathic connection among their species, desecrated any chance for secrets. Yet, her Human/Green Martian hybrid form that she kept for esthetic comfort, had caused him to slip up.

J’ornell grumbled as he fidgeted in his seat. ‘Yes. Well. You can understand why this makes me so concerned then?’ Accusation dripped off of his words.

The tension thickened the air in their throats. Superboy could see the muscles in M’gann’s arms twitch as her hands curled into fists. He prepared himself to jump into action and physically hold her back in needed. He had known her for long enough to know when she was starting to lose her composure.

‘Are you suggesting that I am withholding information?’ She ground her teeth.

J’ornell chuckled, a smug smile rising in his voice, ‘Now who is the one making the assumptions?’
'I think that is quite enough.' Another voice charged in their heads. M’gann turned towards the speaker: a slim and elderly Green Martian.

M’gann shot him an apology, ‘I-I know. I-I’m sorry for my outburst, Supreme Councilman Dal’en.’

She felt the tension in her muscles release as she exhaled slowly. As of late, these meetings with the Martian Council had ruffled the feathers of her emotions more and more. When B’arzz initially asked for their help back in July, she had been confident in her detective abilities. But now she felt overcome with a sense of hopelessness; of uselessness.

It had begun with a series of small explosions among a few White Martian villages and shantytowns. Initially written off as accidents, these events grew in frequency and fatality. It became clear that these events were deliberate attacks, but by whom still remained a mystery.

The detail that riled M’gann the most however, was that The Martian Council, the supposed martyred leaders of her homeworld, had purposefully took no action. They made no public statement about the attacks against the white minority until their demands for answers became too loud to ignore. They had made no attempt in finding out who was behind the attacks, until whispers of White Martian counter attacks slithered into their ears. Her people were dying, being killed off in mass by an unknown assailant, and all that they cared about was the possibility of White Martians lashing out in anger.

So there she was, trapped at a round meeting table, the eyes of nine councilman, including the Supreme and B’arzz, weighing down upon her. At least she had the slight comfort of knowing that her two favorite men, Superboy and Beast Boy, were by her side. But it did not shake that fact that The Council asked her for her assistance knowing she was a White Martian. She should have easily been able to gain some kind of intel or clues from them by now.

‘No need to apologize,’ the Supreme Councilman stated. ‘Your irritation is justified. As well as yours J’ornell.’ He interlaced his fingers, placing his hands in front of him. ‘Please, M’gann you have to understand, in an investigation like this, having no leads on something this serious is...disturbing. I am sure that the White Martian populace is just as fearful as we and our people are. The fact of the matter is that they are still dying, and they are blaming us. And their anger is growing’

Superboy’s mind filled the telekinetic link next, ‘But haven’t you sent out...I don’t know...a PSA or something saying that we’re working on it? That there is an investigation?’

Supreme Councilman rubbed the back of his neck in irritation. ‘Believe me, we have. But as time ticks by they grow more restless. Their protests have become more vocal, longer, violent even.’ His voice became stern, ‘We need to end this. And we need to end it quickly.’

M’gann rubbed her hand roughly against her temple, trying to massage away the pressure headache building behind it. She sighed, ‘What is the death toll up to now and where was the attack yesterday?’

‘Our reports estimate around 15,000 and sector seven contained the latest attack,’ B’arzz answered.

‘And you mean to tell me that investigations on your side have come up with no results either? Have you attempted interrogating any of the Green extremists groups?,’ M’gann strained to ask calmly.

J’ornell scoffed, ‘Of course we have. And what has it done for us? Nothing but waste time. I say we spend our energy now in building up our city walls, placing our law enforcers along our borders.'
We should be taking the defensive.’

M’gann squinted in frustration, ‘Are you even trying for any sort of investigation Councilman? Because you seem far too excited to take more violent measures instead.’

Every being in the room fidgeted uncomfortably as they darted their gazes all around them. M’gann and J’ornell’s glares however, did not stray from one another. As growing seconds of silence passed, everyone on The Council squirmed more under her question.

Just when the tension in the room became almost unbearable, J’ornell inhaled and exhaled deliberately and noisily. He placed his hands flat on the table. ‘Look,’ he began slowly. ‘I am just going to say what everyone on this council had been thinking for a while now. The idea that Green Martians are behind these attacks is utterly ridiculous.’ As M’gann, disgusted, looked around the room. She found that all the Councilman avoided making eye contact with her.

J’ornell continued. ‘It is common knowledge that out of the two species of Martians, White Martians for the majority have been, well, the for lack of a better word...the degenerates of the two. They have been known for violence, crime, and much more immoral activities. Lets be honest here, these attacks have to be the result of crime between their own kind-.’

M’gann had heard enough. She cut him off. Her voice raised. ‘And Green Martians are far more known for their discrimination against their minority brotherin than any criminal stereotype we hold.’

J’ornell stumbled for words. M’gann tilted her head in curiosity, she continued. ‘Tell me Councilman, why is the idea of Green Martian Terrorism so unfathomable to you?’

He was physically jarred by her question, unable to control the twitch in his face that it caused him. ‘Terrorism? I-I wouldn’t necessarily call it that. Look, you are missing the point.’ He held his arms out to direct the rest of the members. ‘The point of this meeting is to address the deplorable results of our investigations. We need to address what is causing our lack of intel.’ He glared at M’gann once more, ‘Or should I say who might be causing it.’

‘J’ORNELL,’ the Supreme Councilman’s voice struck the link. ‘I hope that you are aware that your accusations are disgustingly obvious and quite uncalled for.’ He gestured towards M’gann, Superboy, and Beast Boy. ‘M’gann and her teammates have been nothing but generous and helpful in this whole debacle. It is her brothers and sisters who are dying. Why would she sabotage something such as this? Why would she have anything to hide?’

‘You sound so sure of yourself Supreme Da’len.’ J’ornell growled. ‘You mean to tell me that it hasn’t crossed your mind, even in the slightest, that involving her may have been a mistake.’ Supreme Da’len made a small muffled noise, but was unable to retort. J’ornell continued, ‘I mean, just look at how she appears before us even now. Even here she hides her true form from us. Why? What has she to hide? Who’s to say that she hasn’t found some way to keep information from us? For all we know, she might want them to attack!’

A low growl erupted from Beast Boy’s chest. He too was growing tired of J’ornell’s jabs against his ‘sister’. His lips began to curl into a snarl as he leaned into his direction. But, Beast Boy was abruptly silenced by M’gann’s hand being placed upon his shoulder. She gave him a reassuring look that calmed him. He sank back down into his chair.

M’gann rose slowly from her sead, her fingertips placed lightly on the edge of the table. She allowed for silence and gathered her thoughts before she spoke. ‘You know, every time I come to these council meetings I can’t help but to think about the millions of citizens that inhabit mars. And how
this council is supposed to serve, represent, and make important decisions for the entirety of those Martians, both kinds of Martians.’ She gave a cold, slow glance around the room, ‘Yet all I see at this table is a sea of green.’

Once again, M’gann found that the other Council members could not meet her gaze. ‘You want to make this about race Councilman J’ornell? Ok,’ She paused and waited for him to finally look her in the eye. ‘Let’s make it it about race. I am going to ask you a question, a question whose answer you can keep to yourself, but an answer that I want you to really think about nonetheless.’ She held her hand in front of her chest, examining the tones of green on her hand and arm. ‘If I were to sit before you in my true, White Martian form, would you take everything as seriously as you do when you see me like this? When I am green?’

There was no noise.

‘I find it funny that you are the ones that contacted me because you knew that I would be the best person to help you. Because of my peacekeeping experience with The Justice League and the fact that I have spent time with both Martian cultures, so I understand both sides. You are the ones that begged for my help. Yet I feel the need to come to these meetings looking like this not because I want to, but because I have to.’ Her voice began to shake. She was unsure how long she was going to be able to keep her tears held back. ‘Because J’ornell, if we’re being honest, you know, you all know, that when I look a certain way, the importance of my voice changes.’ Her voice cracked at the last word. She took a deep breath and eerily lowered her voice, ‘So before you get so...offended by the fact that the White Martians are, for once in your perfect history, not keeping quiet or staying in their place, how about trying to understand that they, we, are dying, being murdered. And maybe, just maybe, we refuse to have our voices and cries be ignored any longer.’

Superboy felt light headed. Her ferocity had made him forget how to breath. He jumped as M’gann pushed her chair out of the way. He and Beast Boy stood as well, for they knew that that was their cue for them to leave. They followed behind M’gann as she trudged towards the door.

She made no attempt to look back at the council as she stated, ‘We have to attend to our responsibilities on Earth now. We’ll commence with our investigation on schedule next week. Contact me if you find anything new.’ She then disconnected the link.

As they made their way towards the room containing their Zeta Tube home, Beast Boy and Superboy stole glances at each other nervously. It was almost as if M’gann’s anger was physically radiating off of her, heating the air around them. They did not want to be caught in the crossfire of her fury, yet they felt they should offer some sort of support.

As she fumed over the argument playing again and again in her head. Her pace quickened. Beast Boy found himself tripping over his own feet, trying to match her stride.

“Ugh. Sis!” He called after her, “I know you’re upset but could you slow down? I’m going to have to turn into a cheetah just to keep up with you.”

She stopped abruptly, nearly causing Beast Boy to run into her. She opened the door in front of them, revealing the Zeta Tube entrance. “I’m sorry you both had to see me like that,” she said softly.

Conner squeezed his hand on her shoulder. She placed her hand on his in response. “You had every right to assert your opinion,” he reassured her. “Those jerks needed to be set straight anyways.”

She smiled at him before leading the way through the doorway, “Let’s just head to The Watch Tower. I just want to submit my report to Batman so I can go home.”

“You got it,” Superboy told her, walking towards the Zeta Tube to punch in the code for their
transportation. As he walked past her, he slid his hand across the small of her back. Her breath hitched at his contact. She couldn’t help but smile.

“Yeah, Superboy’s right though,” Beast Boy chimed, breaking her moment. “They needed some of that sassy M’gann wisdom to put them in their place.”

“Yeah,” M’gann sounded unsure. “I just wish I wouldn’t have lost my cool. Now I feel like I shouldn’t have said some of the things I did. I might have...unsettled things even more.”

“Everything you said was right though,” Beast Boy tried to assure her.

She smiled and leaned down towards him, she placed a hand on his shoulder. She found his youthful optimism cute but ill-placed, “Thanks Gar but politics...is complicated. There are a lot of factors that go into it. I’m sure this is all really confusing to you. No one’s opinion, even mine, is completely right. When you’re older you’ll understand.”

Beast Boy twitched at her response. Even though he knew she meant no harm by that, it still rubbed him the wrong way. He squinted and shook his head, “But, I mean, it’s really not that complicated at all.” He wiggled his shoulder out of her grasp. He wished the she would take him seriously sometimes. “In Mr. Carr’s civics lesson last week he talked about the balance between governments and their people. He said...uh...how did he say it? Oh, yeah, the government is supposed to protect it’s people. So if like, the people feel that the government’s not protecting them enough, it’s actually the people’s responsibility to overthrow the government to make a better one.”

M’gann eyes widened in slight disbelief. Those were not sentences that she would have pinned to come from a 14-year-old’s mouth. Especially from someone as goofy as her brother. “Wow, uh, Gar. That..that was not what I was expecting you to say.”

Beast Boy smiled. He chuckled before answering, “Hey, I pay attention in school...sometimes. But, don’t get used to it.”

M’gann laughed.

“Yo! We goin home or what?” Superboy chimed in. His two green partners joined him in the Zeta Platform. They found themselves surrounded by a blinding light. Within a moment, they heard their authorization codes voice their arrival as the inside of the Watch Tower came into view.

Recognized, Superboy, B04
Recognized, Miss Martian, B05
Recognized, Beast Boy, B19

As they walked out of the entrance of the platform, they quickly became overwhelmed by a sense of urgency. Several members of The League buzzed about, frantically booming over their communicators and computer screens. They barked orders at one another and to those on the other end of their communication lines. M’gann’s attention was caught by the sight of Malcom, La’gann, Batman, and Black Canary crowding around a sobbing Karen. She sat on the floor, her hands on her face. Black Canary knelt in front of her, her hand placed lightly on her elbow. Her expression looked as though she was trying to give Karen comforting words.

M’gann ran towards them. Confused, she addressed them, “What’s going on? Is everyone alright?”

Mal was relieved to see her. “M’gann! I’m glad you’re here we-”

He was quickly cut off by Batman. “Mal, I’ll catch them up. I need you and La’gann to join Martian Manhunter in the computer room to see if you recognize any of the aliens you saw in our archives.”
The boys followed his orders.

“Aliens? What’s going on?” M’gann asked him. She found it difficult to not stay focused on Karen once again. M’gann’s concern grew even more once Karen began to shake. Her sobs made her breaths harsh and uneven.

“We had a situation occur in Bludhaven while you were gone,” Batman informed.

M’gann knelt down beside Karen. Black Canary looked over at her, “I haven’t been able to get her to speak to me,” she softly told M’gann.

“Karen,” she placed a hand on the back of her head. “Are you alright?”

Karen brought her face out of her hands. She turned towards M’gann, leaning her cheek into M’gann’s outstretched palm. “M’gann,” her voice cracked. She placed her hand over M’gann’s.

“I’m here Karen,” she reassured her. “Can you tell me what’s wrong?”

“Those-those babies.” Tears streamed down her face as she struggled to release her words. “Those little kids. I saw them. They just...they just blew them up.” She lost all the momentary composure that she managed to scrounge up. “They killed those poor babies!” She retreated her hand back to her face as Black Canary embraced her in her arms.

M’gann quickly turned her attention back to Batman, enraged. “What. Happened?”
“Dios I can’t believe he canceled on me, again!” Jaime let out a frustrated grunt as he roughly ran his fingers through his hair. Irritation steamed off of him. There was a heaviness to his step as he trudged through the outdoor shopping complex.

“Dang, isn’t that like, the second time this week?” Bart asked. They had made plans to see a movie with Tye, however, Tye had sent Jaime a text an hour prior saying he couldn’t make it.

“Yeah. He’s been like this for the past couple months. Ever since he got that new girlfriend of his, he keeps bailing on me. She better not be the reason for today.”

“Wait, Tye?” Bart raised an eyebrow. “I thought he was with that Asami girl?”

Jaime placed his hands into the pocket of his hoodie, “Yeah it’s really weird. They were like, a thing and then out of the blue she tells me he dumped her for some girl he just met.”

“Wait, so does she still live with him and his mom?”

“Yeah. His mom was the one that volunteered to take her in in the first place, there’s no way she’d just kick her out.”

“Heh. I bet that’s awkward.”

“He’s just been... *distante*, you know? I feel like he’s a stranger to me now.”

Bart looked over to see the discouraged look on Jaime’s face. Tye was one of Jaime’s closest friends. Outside of school, it was rare that he saw him now, let alone talked to him. Bart knew that Jaime’s pride would never let him tell Bart how hurt he was. But Bart was bound with determination to bring up Jaime’s mood.

“Ayyyy don’t worry ‘bout it her-man-o.” Bart assured as he nudged him with his elbow, “He just might be busy. Everyone gets flakey sometimes. I’m sure he’ll get over it. Girls have this weird superpower of making dudes crazy.”

Jaime chuckled. A small smile escaped from his lips, “Yeah, I guess.”

Bart laughed, “Heck, just look at you. Your goo-goo eyes for Wonder Girl were what made you join our rag-tag team in the first place.”

Jaime blushed. He shoved Bart on his shoulder, “Eseeee! I told you not to talk about that!”

Bart cackled, “Hey what kind of friend would I be if I didn’t poke fun at you?” Jaime smiled and shook his head. Bart continued, “Besides, we can still enjoy the movie without Tye. It’ll just be a bro-date.” He wrapped an arm around Jaime’s shoulder.

“Yeah, well, speaking of Tye...” Jaime and Bart stopped as they saw Tye about to cross the path in front of them. His eyes were glued intently to his phone screen. He took no notice of them.
“Well, habla del diablo,” Jaime raised his voice slightly, trying to get Tye’s attention. There was an acute sense of accusation in his tone.
Tye was startled by Jaime’s voice. He quickly placed his phone back in his pocket. “Jaime...what are you doing here?”

“Uhhhh, well, we were supposed to see a movie here in a little bit ese. You know, until you bailed,” Jaime informed him.

“Oh that’s right! Look, Jaime I’m really sorry.” Tye replied in a genuine tone. “I know, I’m a terrible friend. I keep double booking myself. I’ve just been really busy.”
Jaime knew that he couldn’t stay mad at him for long. Perhaps Bart was right, maybe his schedule was just out of control at the moment. He smirked as he rubbed the back of his head, “Ahhh no worries,” he chuckled. “Happens to me too. You know...being a superhero and all...what do you have today anyways?”

Tye struggled for his words, “I..uh..I have a...meeting.” He nervously darted to his eyes to the right and then back towards Jaime.
Jaime glanced over to where Tye’s gaze had wandered to discover an upscale steakhouse. Out of it’s front doors emerged a young woman. She approached them quickly. She softly locked her left arm around Tye’s right as she told him, “Tye, darling, they said they would clear us a table early.…” It was then that she noticed Bart and Jaime, realizing that she might have interrupted a conversation. She lightly leaned into Tye as she placed her right hand on his bicep. “Oh, my love, who are your friends?” She asked.

Her smile was seductive. She spoke with the same Native American accent as the young man she wrapped her arm around. Her long, black hair shimmered with a near-blue tone. Her deep hazel eyes carried a sense of power. Around her neck rested a large, round, gold amulet; it’s plating etched with an image of a bison. Slender arms and legs ventured out daringly from her short red dress.

Bart raised an eyebrow in appreciation. Jaime, however, was not amused. “My love?” he sneered mockingly.

“Bart, Jaime, this is my girlfriend, Jenny,” Tye introduced.

“Oh, so this is Jaime?” Jenny began. “I’ve heard so much about you.” She smiled slightly.
Jaime could feel his irritation starting to itch at his skin. His face contorted into an annoyed expression, “Really? Because I haven’t heard anything about you…” He turned his attention back towards Tye. “You know, if you wanted to cancel our plans to be with your...girlfriend, then fine, whatever, but you could at least tell me straight instead of making something up.”

“Hey, I just forgot that Jenny and I already made plans alright?” Tye replied defensively.

“Yeah, whatever.” Jaime huffed.

“Tye, dear, you should have told me you made arrangements with Jaime,” Jenny scolded. Her voice almost carried a whine.

“But-but I made our dinner reservations first,” Tye retorted.

“No, no you’ve been spending far too much time with me. You should not forget your friends.” She turned towards Jaime and Bart. “Please do not be mad at Tye. You mean so much to him. I would just hate to come between Tye and his friends.” Her face displayed feigned concerned. Her words barely hid her condescension. Apparently Jaime, was not the only one to sense this.
Proceed with caution Jaime Reyes, Jaime heard the Scarab advise him. Her voice analysis indicates manipulative intentions.

“Well, it’s first come first serve, I guess,” Jaime spat.

“Look, Jaime, I’ll make it up to you.” Tye tried to plead with him. “We can go skateboarding together tomorrow? Is that alright with you?”

“Yeah. Whatever. Fine. Just...just text me tomorrow. Adios.” Disdain grew in this voice. He huffed as he brushed past them. Bart followed him after awkwardly waiving goodbye to Tye and Jenny. The aura of jealousy fuming off of Jaime was almost suffocating. He needed to let this stew for a while so he could feel better later.

Bart allowed for around five seconds of silence between them (dear god did it feel like a lifetime for him) before chiming in. “You know….you have to admit though….she is pretty hot.”


Tye and Jenny watched intently as as the other two boys trotted away. Jenny leaned her slender frame into Tye.

“Is he the one?” She asked in a near whisper into his ear. Her hot breath and sensual tone stirred his senses.

“Yes. That’s him.” He replied. The look on his face seemed disappointed, guilt rising for the way he had been treating Jaime.

“He will not be a problem for us, will he?” Jenny asked him.

“What?” Tye turned towards her, slightly confused by her question. “No. No, Jaime’s a good person. He’s my best friend. He’ll warm up to you, he just feels...neglected.”

It was then that she cupped her hands around Tye’s face. “You misunderstand my question lover.” The amulet around her neck began to glow a dull light blue. As her eyes did same, Tye’s became caught in her trance. She saw the same light spark in Tye’s irises, marking that her controlling connection had been made.

“He will not be a problem for our future plans.” She stated to him firmly.

Tye’s face became stern. His brow furrowed with determination. “No. He will not. I’ll make sure of it.”

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Gotham City
October 27th 2016
01:45 EDT

The rancid smell of sewer rose from the manholes of the streets surrounding them. It seeped through the doors of dilapidated warehouse they currently occupied. Nightwing tried to convince himself that it was the combination of the ghetto’s stench and his fluttering stomach that was making him queasy. He tried his best to lie to himself.

“Um, earth to Nightwing? Are you going to help us gather evidence?” Robin asked him.

Nightwing snapped himself out of this thoughts, “R-right. Yeah. I’m sorry.”
“If you’re not ready to give this your full attention, perhaps it would be better if you went home,” Batman stated. The monotony of his voice was one that had taken Nightwing years to decipher. Others would have taken his words as condescension. The expression on Batman’s face softened slightly, “We’d understand if you did.”

Nightwing grimaced, “No. No I need to do this.” He took a few steps forward, careful not to disrupt the patterns of blood spatter on the ground.

The floor of the warehouse was an obscure painting of crimson and metal. As the blood dried, the metal from the shell casings on the ground shimmered brighter underneath the florescent lights. The bodies of three men were strewn about on the grimy tile floor. Their guns laid next to them, as cold and lifeless as their owners.

Batman observed one of the bodies diligently. “I recognize these men. I had been trailing them for a while.”

“Who were they?” Robin asked.

“Dealers. Crack cocaine to be precise. Mostly sold in low-income areas.” Batman paused before continuing. “I caught wind of them dealing around school yards...to kids, teenagers.” Nightwing felt his jaw clench, he knew what Batman was going to say next. “This fits his profile.”

Nightwing grunted, “Yeah. But it’s profile that we don’t even know for sure even is his. It can still be someone else.”

Batman brought his attention back to the bodies, “I supposed you’re right, we shouldn’t make assumptions. But we should follow every lead.”

Irritation shot pain down the muscles in Nightwing’s neck. He decided to focus his attention on deciphering the pattern of struggle around him. His eyes strayed towards the seeping chest cavity of one of the bodies. Nightwing was overwhelmed by the taste of bile rising in his throat. He was supposed to have lost the nausea for this type of sight long ago. So why was it creeping back? He was far too experienced to feel this way. Not since the loss of Jason and Wally did death shake him so. These men were just simple pushers, criminals, low-lifes; why did he feel the same for them?

“Over hear!” Robin barked. He knelt beside the third body, “This one’s still alive.”

Nightwing and Batman rushed over to his side. As they came closer, Nightwing could hear the sound of gurgling grow louder. Blood spilled down the corner’s of the man’s mouth as he tried to cough up that which had pooled in his lungs. Panic rose in his eyes as they neared.

“Listen to me,” Batman demanded calmly. He pulled the man up into a sitting position, “We will get you to a hospital. But I need you to tell me who did this to you.” The man was still hesitant, he struggled to form words. Batman continued, “If you don’t know his name, then what did he look like?”

A gurgle erupted from the man’s mouth. “R.rr..red,” he blurted. “The Red.” He sounded as though he was drowning. “Wore red...n’...red..lasers.” The man finally collapsed.


Nightwing growled as he turned away, running his hands through his hair. The contents of his stomach curdled further. He finally understood why the scene and the blood had upset him so. It was because the past four months someone had been picking off Gotham’s lowliest criminals. Someone
had been acting as judge, jury, and executioner for Gotham’s ghettos.

And all the evidence was pointing towards Arsenal.

Nightwing did not want to believe it when Batman told him of his suspicion. At the end of July, Arsenal took root in Gotham to go off on his own with the ‘hero business’. Knowing that if he wanted to fight crime; that would be a prime location to start from. At the same time, Batman, Robin, and Batgirl began to take note at the increasing slaughters of criminals in Gotham. And as the violence of these scenes began to grow, so did the curiosity of the media. Batman made it his top priority to find the culprit once the story caught the attention of the ever-aggravating Gordon Godfrey. His words had planted into minds of the public the idea that Batman himself was most likely the one behind the deaths. At that point Batman knew he had to shut this situation down.

Gathering evidence, he found that the murdered criminals were all linked within drug rings. More so hose who catered to and hired teenagers. It was a ‘passion’ that Batman deduced that Arsenal might have picked up from working on The Team. And from being a biological slave to The Light for eight years. A broken teen looking to save other broken teens. These criminals were in no doubt guilty of serious crimes, but none deserving such brutal and bloody execution.

One detail that struck Nightwing the most, was that the few survivors that were able to give a description all said the same thing. That is was a man wearing red who shot at them with red lasers. And, for the sake of irritating repetivity, his name was becoming known among Gotham’s criminal underworld as “The Red”.

After four months of inactivity, Nightwing knew that it was time to put on the mask again. He knew that it was time to suit up once more to help out a friend, just as they did for Roy not long ago. It was time for an intervention to find out the truth. The last interactions that he had with Arsenal played in his mind over and over again. One of the last times he talked to him, was to tell him he was kicked off the team. If he had given him another chance, had let him stay on, would any of this had happened at all?

His frustration spilled over with his fist colliding with the nearest wall.

“Uh..is everything alright?” Robin asked, already knowing the answer.

Nightwing signed audibly, “I just..I can’t help but think that I made a mistake kicking him off the team like that. I just...I just feel like I caused this.”

“No,” Batman interjected. “Arsenal was becoming a danger to the team. You had to make a call, and you made the right one. You did what you had to do.”

“Yeah but-“ he began but was cut off by an incoming transmission on his communicator.

The sound of Red Arrow’s voice filled his ear, “Red Arrow to Nightwing...we got ‘im.”

Gotham City
October 27th 2016
01:00 EDT

“You gonna make it?”

Red Arrow peered over to his right to see Batgirl with eyebrow raised at him. She must have discovered him nodding off again.
“Yeah. I’m fine,” he answered, rubbing his face. “These late nights are just starting to get to me.” He smiled and shook his head. “It doesn’t help that my little terror at home doesn’t let me sleep on my nights off either.”

Batgirl chuckled, “With you and Cheshire as parents, I wouldn’t expect Lian to be anything less than a terror.”

“Oh, I don’t think I told you” He added. “Get this, can you believe that Jade actually bought her toy ninja weapons? They’re like, little plastic ones, meant for kids. I can’t believe anyone would make those.”

She laughed, “Wait, are you serious? What’s it called? ‘Little Tikes Ninja Assassin Playset?’”

He laughed along side her. As they sat atop the edge of a high rise apartment complex, their conversation slowly began to dissipate. Red Arrow was then left to his thoughts in the heavy quiet. It seemed that their search for Arsenal had taken all of his physical and mental energy once again. It reminded him of his original search for him last year, haunted by the same eerie possibility that he might not be able to save him.

“Thanks,” he chimed. “I haven’t laughed like that in a while.” He pulled out his binoculars. “I appreciate you helping me look for him.”

Batgirl began to peer through her set, “Hey, on The Team or not, he’s still one of us. I just hope he didn’t—” She cleared her throat, unexpectedly choking one her words. “I just hope he’ll let us help him.”

“There he is! Ten o’clock!” Red Arrow briefly caught a glimpse of Arsenal as he turned a corner into an alley.

Batgirl jerked her binoculars in the same direction. She quickly stood up on the ledge of the roof. “Lets go,” she demanded. “We can catch up to him if we move fast.” She proceeded to jump onto the next roof, bolting across the top as fast as she could.

Red Arrow followed suit. He pressed his pointer finger onto the communicator in his ear, “Red Arrow to Nightwing...we got ‘im.”

Nightwing’s voice immediately filled his ear, “Copy, what’s his location?”

“He’s on the North end of Crime Alley.”

“Copy. We’re locking onto your coordinates now. We’ll meet you there.”

“Roger,” Red Arrow responded as he and Batgirl landed on the ground with a soft ‘thud’ of their boots. They landed a few meters behind Arsenal. He was lurking in the shadows of one of the many condemned buildings, attending to his mechanical arm. As they landed, he swung his body around, aiming the barrel of his laser towards them. The soft red lights from his arm gave harsh highlights to his face in the darkness. Arsenal’s face relaxed once he realized who had weaseled behind him.

He lowered his arm, the corner of his mouth showing the slight hint of a smile. He let out a breathy chuckle, “Ya-know, s’not smart to...sneak up on an armed man.”

Red Arrow’s face still remained stern. He crossed his arms, “If you were at the top of your game, no one should be able to sneak up on you.”

“Ttt,” Arsenal hissed. “Gimme a break, been out here all night. Wadda’ want anyways?”

As he spoke he slowly walked towards them into glow of the streetlight. Red Arrow flinched at the
sight of his physical appearance. Arsenal’s once pristine uniform was now tattered and grimey. His face was sunken and pale, muscle mass had slowly dissipated from his body. Red Arrow followed the trail of bruises down Arsenal’s arm. A sickness rose in his belly as he lingered on Arsenal’s hands; battered hands smeared with blood.

Arsenal caught Red Arrow’s gaze. He swiftly shoved his hands into his jacket pockets. Red Arrow quickly brought his eyes back up to Arsenal’s, there was something off about his stare. His eyes seem glazed, almost dead.

“What happened to your hands?” Red Arrow asked in a stern voice.

Arsenal shrugged his shoulders, “Got n’to a fight.”

“That fight didn’t happen to be in a warehouse, did it?” Nightwing had made his way around the corner and into their shared lighting. Through the poor light, there could still be seen a tightness in his jaw.

Arsenal jumped at his sudden appearance. He furrowed his brow. “What? No, haven’t been there n’while,” he answered.

“Are you sure?” Batman’s voice filled their space as he and Robin joined in their semi-circle around Arsenal.

Arsenal tilted his head. His eyes narrowed in confusion, “What? Waddayou all doing…” His eyebrows raised as a sudden realization came across him, he cocked a smile and laughed. It began as small laugher and then grew He leaned backwards and held his belly. Batgirl looked at Nightwing nervously.

Arsenal was able to finally calm his laughter enough to emit words. “Heh..heh, let-let me guess. This is an intervention?” He smiled as he shook his head, “Priceless.”

“Look, we just…” Red Arrow walked towards him and placed a hand on his shoulder, “We just want to make sure you’re ok.”

“Get your hands off of me!” Arsenal spat, roughly shaking his hand off of him. “Don’t you dare act like you care!” He snarled.

It was in their closeness that Red Arrow caught a whiff of something out of place. There was a smell that should have not been lingering on Arsenal’s breath at all. It became clear the reason for his muffled words and quick temper “Jesus, Arsenal” he asked, “…are you drunk?”

The flushness of his face increased. He turned his torso away from them slightly, “The hell does it matter to you?”

Nightwing’s face twisted in disappointment, “Going on patrol drunk? You think that’s something heroes do?”

“I don’t know,” Arsenal bared his teeth, he hastily encroached onto Nightwing’s space. “Does a ‘leader’ kick his friend off the team?”

“That’s enough Arsenal.” Batgirl shot at him. “We’re not here to have a petty pissing contest with you.” Arsenal turned his gaze towards her, she met it with the same ferocity. “We came to make sure you weren’t losing control, and now look at you!” She threw up her hands in frustration. “You’re out here patrolling drunk.” This time she encroached on his personal bubble. “So who's to say you don’t go overboard and kill?” Her words were filled with accusation.
His head shook in overwhelming confusion. He raised an eyebrow, “What?”

“What’s that blood on your hand from?” Batman asked.

“Told you.” Arsenal said through pursed lips. “Got into a fight. You know, keeping the city safe. What you all should be doing. Takin care of criminals.”

“Taking care of criminals?” Robin repeated. He crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Like you took care of those three men in the warehouse by the pier?”

Arsenal’s top lip crinkled as his shoulders hunched. He shook his hands in front of him. He couldn't tell if he was more irritated or confused. “What are you talking about?”

“Right before he died, one of the three pushers we found tonight said they were attacked by a man in red with red lasers?” Robin’s nose crinkled as he spoke, he tilted his head. “You’re saying you had nothing to do with that?”

Now Arsenal was just annoyed. He grew tired of their games. “What? I’ve been in this area of town al’night.” Turning away from them, he brushed off some of the dirt and grime from the front of his uniform and huffed. “Besides, if they were pushers, they probably deserved it.”

Their eyes widened at his words. Nothing that he was doing was helping to ease their suspicion of him. Red Arrow decided to take a softer approach.

“Listen, Arsenal, we just want to help.” He was desperate to connect with him, “I’ve-I’ve been in a similar position, and alcohol…it just makes it worse. Trust me, I’ve been there.”

Arsenal chuckled to himself and met his gaze, “Heh. Like clone, like original.”

The sound of an explosion cracked through the heavy air. They were jarred to attention by a sudden bright light arising just few blocks North of where they stood. Heavy smoke emitted from the lightsource as they heard frantic screams.

“Move. NOW.” Batman boomed. They bolted towards the source. The squeals of car alarms and frantic pedestrians bashed their eardrums more and more as they came closer. A wave of heat rushed over them as the round the corner to find three cars ablaze in their parking spots on the street. One, already decimated from the ignition of it’s gas tank, foreshadowed the impending doom of the other two cars. Their fires began to roar ferociously.

“We need to clear people out of the blast radius of those car-” Batman’s words were cut off as a three foot fireball came crashing through the air towards them. Nightwing felt it’s heat singe the tips of his hair as he barely maneuvered out of it’s path. He turned his head, straining to find it’s source.

Out of the smoke, they watched as a figure of a teenage girl stammered her way down the center of the street. She swayed as she struggled to keep her balance, her arms moving and twisting into almost artistic-like poses. Through the crackle of the fires, they could hear her soft laughter. She spun in place, adding a dance to her swaying as she came close to them; close enough for them to see her smile.

The skin from her fingertips to her forearms glew a burning yellow, their heat contorting the air around her thin frame. She laughed as she ran her hands up her face and through her red hair. Her wide pupils were glazed. Her lids carried a sleepy tone to them.

“Mmmmm...Warm..” she moaned. “Warm, so...warm”
“Jesus,” Batgirl chimed. “She’s high as a kite.”

“Did-did you do this?” Robin asked her in disbelief.

The girl dropped her hands to her sides. The smile dissipated from her face. She squinted her eyes at him in confusion, tilting her head to the left and then to the right. She looked as though her mind was trying far too hard to answer his question. Her eyes drooped further. She slowly raised her hands and stared at them. A dark grin slid across her face as the light from her hands grew brighter and hotter.

“I like,” she uttered, clenching her fists. “when things...go...BOOM!” It was on her last word that she pushed her fist forward, sending a massive fireball towards them that emerged from her hands. They dove out of it’s path, it collided with yet another car. As they scrambled to their feet, they watched as the girl began to float. She giggled and danced in the air around her, sending blasts of fire tumbling to the ground. Cries rang from the civilians on the ground as they tore from the flames.

“Batgirl. Red Arrow. Work on getting her down,” Batman ordered. “Everyone else, let’s get these people out of here.”

Arsenal scoffed, “I don’t have to follow your orders anymore Bats.” He ran past them, jumping on a fire escape to get a better aim at the girl, who was now six stories high. An actual challenge was finally placed right in front of him, he was not about to be put on babysitting duty to miss this.

Red Arrow grunted in frustration as he and Batgirl fired their arrows and Batarangs into the air. All of which were immediately disintegrated by the girl’s fire. One of Arsenal’s cannon blasts finally hit her. She cried out in pain as she dropped a few storied mid-air.

Batman heard someone call out to him as there was a tug on his forearm. He turned to see an middleaged woman. Worry plagued face. There was a frantic plea in her eyes as she begged, “Don’t hurt her!”

“Ma’am I need you to stay-” Batman began, as he tried to push her away to safety.

“Please,” she interrupted him. “That’s my daughter. That’s my baby. Don’t hurt her, please.” Tears swelled in her eyes.

“She’s your daughter?” Nightwing had over heard her cries.

She darted her eyes back and forth between them, “Yes. Yes, her name’s Deborah. Please, this isn’t like her. Something’s wrong.”

“What do you mean. Did something happen?” Batman asked as he placed his hands on her arms. The woman mumbled something inaudible. Her gaze fell to the ground, as if she were worried she might make things worse. Batman attempted ease her, “Please, I need you to tell me so I can help her.”

“I don’t-I don’t know.” She stuttered. “She went to a party at a friends. She came home and-and,” she began to shake, “Started lashing out at me, saying things that made no sense, like she was on a bad trip. I asked her if she took anything at the-at the party. She got angry, she-” The mother looked down to her wrist. Batman noticed that she had been holding it the whole time. He gently pried her hand off of it, she flinched at his contact, revealing a fresh, grotesque burn on her wrist.

“Did she do this to you?” Batman asked darkly.

The woman shook her head, almost as if she didn’t believe it really happened, “She wouldn’t normally do this.” She stated. “She would never hurt me. Something has to be wrong. I didn’t even
know she had powers. Please, help my baby girl. Something is making her do this.”

A frenzied yell shattered the air as Deborah charged towards Arsenal. No longer were her movements soft and twirling. A certain desperation came over her as the veins in her neck throbbed, fist clenched so tight they drew blood. She took a swing at Arsenal. Rage contorted his face as socked her in the jaw, sending her flying backwards. He fired his cannon as he ran towards her. She propped herself up on her elbows, wiping the blood from her lip. She growled low in her throat. Frantic, she began to swing her arms over and over, sending wave after wave of fireballs towards him.

A tightness rose in Red Arrow’s chest. Arsenal was going to be fried alive if they did not do something soon. An idea shot through his mind as he remembered one of the specialty arrows he had in his quiver. He pulled it out. On it’s tip rested a small metal cylinder with two small spiked prongs. It was a taser arrow. He placed it in his bow. A small prayer for success fell from his lips as he exhaled and sent the arrow flying.

The arrow made contact with her shoulder. Her eyes rolled to the back of her skull as all of the muscles in her body convulsed. She dropped to the ground. The arrow had stopped but the after effects of the electricity still left her body tingling. Deborah groan as she tried to get up, but still found herself partially paralyzed.

Before Red Arrow could let out a sigh of relief, Arsenal’s scream shattered the air around him. His teeth were bared savagely as he charged towards Deborah. He pounced and viciously landed upon her chest. Her eyes widened in terror as she was unable to move to shield herself. A primal anger shook Arsenal as he brought his fist down upon her face. Her attempts at crying out were suffocated by the pooling of blood in her mouth. She slowly began to lose consciousness as he punched her over and over again.

Red Arrow gasped at his vicious attack. Arsenal showed no sign of ceasing. “Arsenal! STOP!” He cried.

But he didn’t stop. Bile rose in Red Arrow’s throat as Deborah stopped moving. He charged towards Arsenal, who was so enthralled by his own violence that he took no notice of Red Arrow until he tackled him to the ground.

He grabbed at Arsenal’s head, smacking it down against the concrete. Red Arrow became irate. His body shook and his veins throbbed in his neck as he screamed at Arsenal. “WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU!? YOU COULD HAVE KILLED HER!” Arsenal gasped. His pupil began to dilate as his breathing slowed. He looked over to Deborah. Her face was swollen. Blood pooled from her mouth and nose. It finally hit him what he had done.

“I..” his breath shook and his throat clenched tight. He turned towards Red Arrow and whispered, “I didn't mean to.”

Flashes of red and blue spun against the concrete as police sirens wailed. Firetrucks rushed on scene to extinguish the blazes. Red Arrow pushed himself up off of Arsenal. He was too sickened by him to look at him any longer. He watched several police officers help the young girl to her feet. She moaned as her eyes fluttered open. The tightness in Red Arrow’s chest eased as he saw she was still alive.

“Was that really necessary?”

Batman turned to see the source of the question had come from one of his allies, Police Commissioner Gordon. His stern eyes and furrowed brows deepened the wrinkles on his face. His
thick glasses slid down the bridge of his nose. Flecks of red could be found in his grey hair.

“You never struck me as the person to beat the snot out of kids, Bats.” Gordon continued with a twisted lip.

Batman glared at him. “I can assure you it wasn’t me.” He turned his head to wear Arsenal was a moment ago, only to find that he had disappeared. He grunted and addressed Gordon once more. “And I will make certain it doesn’t happen again.”

Batman’s attention was drawn towards Deborah as he heard a familiar mechanical sound. One of the police officers snapped an Inhibitor Collar around her neck before leading her to the back of his cruiser. Batman glared.

“Where did you get those?” he asked Gordon.

“Oh, they were a gift,” Gordon answered. “Paid in full from LexCor.”

Robin overheard his answer. His eyebrows perked as he tossed Batman a worried look. Anything to do with Lex Luthor was something they should be wary of.

“Apparently,” Gordon continued as he pushed his glasses up. He placed himself next to Batgirl as he spoke. “They’re becoming standard issue for every officer. Departments all over the country are getting them.”

Gordon leaned into Batgirl. He placed a hand on her shoulder. "You alright sweetheart?" He asked in a hushed voice, making sure no one could hear but them.

"Daaaaaad," Batgirl let out a small smiled as she whispered. "Not while I'm at work."

His eyes crinkled with his close-lipped smile. "I know. I know. You're a superhero. But that doesn't mean I can't worry about my little girl."

Seeing as Gordon was currently engaged. Robin used the opportunity to approach Batman. He asked, “LexCor? LexCor is giving out Inhibitor Collars? Why?”

Batman hummed in frustration. “I don’t know Robin. But I don’t like the sound of that at all.”
This. This was the definition of despair, of agony. This was torture. And that was saying a lot, considering he grew up in a post-apocalyptic world. But never in his life had he experienced something as awful as this. The clicks of the second hand on the clock in the waiting room mocked Bart with every moment that passed. He couldn't help but count them.

8568.
8569.
8570.

He groaned. His foot tapped on the laminate floor with such ferocity that he was certain he was going to phase through it. He contorted in his seat with the half-hearted belief that maybe moving about would make time go faster.

“Bart!”

He perked his head up to see Artemis in the chair across from him. Her arms crossed stiffly across her chest as she pursed her lips in annoyance. “If you don’t quit fidgeting in that chair, I’m going to tie you down to it.”

Bart groaned again, “I’m sorrrrryyyy. I’ve just never...had to...deal with anything like this before.”

Aunt Iris was going into labor. And it was a good thing that Bart was already at a hospital, because he was certain he was going to die of boredom.

Now Bart didn’t know much about babies, let alone birth. The only education he had on the subject was the basics he learned in school and television. Lots and lots of television. So when Barry called to tell him they were taking Iris to the hospital, Bart did nothing short of panic. It was his father in there after all. His entire existence rested on everything going well today. So after a moment of hyperventilation he grabbed everything from his room that he thought Iris might need. He threw in his duffle bag anything that he thought might be the tiniest bit important; a blanket, pillow, water, first aid kit. Of course hospitals had those, but in a moment of hysteria he gathered it all at once and super speed and burst through the hospital doors.

When Barry went to get him at the reception desk, he was taken aback by Bart’s wide eyes and disheveled appearance. But Bart was more confused as to why Barry wasn't freaking out. Aunt Iris was in labor. Good god man, the babies were coming!

It was then that Barry told him something he will never ever forget. Bart learned that labor, on average, will last eight to twelve hours.

EIGHT TO TWELVE HOURS.

Bart couldn't believe his ears. He was supposed to be cooped up in the hospital for that long? That’s never how it is in the movies. No wonder Barry was so calm. He told Bart not to worry, that Iris was fine and surprisingly placid. She even took the time to do her hair and makeup before telling Barry that her water broke. She was a reporter after all. She was used to bringing new things to the world while looking her absolute best.
Bart was in shock. His jaw dropped at the thought of the causality of the situation, and even worse, how it wouldn’t be done within a 23 minute time slot. So now here he was, hitting his head against the back of his chair in boredom. He almost wished for the pain of labor instead of sitting down for another agonizing hour. Let alone the possibility of eight more.

He looked back up to Artemis. “I’m just.....antsy.” He sighed.

Artemis laughed, “Woah, you? I never would have thought.”

He smirked at her. “It’s just...I’m worried. I’m worried that they’re not worried. What if something goes wrong?” He ran his fingers through his hair. “Like, like what if something happens and they get hurt and I’m never born and I can’t save Blue.”

“Hey hey hey!” Artemis charged over to him. She knelt in front of him, taking his hands in hers. Her concerned eyes studied his face. “Breath. You’re going to pass out if you don’t calm down.” She inhaled and exhaled loudly with him. She placed a hand on his shoulder. “Everything is going to be fine. Iris is completely healthy. The doctors said the babies are completely healthy and Central City has the best OBGYN in the state.” Bart looked away from her in doubt but she moved her head to gain the attention of his gaze once more. She smiled as he finally looked at her again. “Everything is going to be fine. I promise.”

Artemis watched as his shoulders fell. His brows released their tension, causing the muscles in his face to relax. “Thanks.” He chucked. “You know, you’d think I was the one having a baby today.”

She laughed. “Well it is your Dad so I guess that...counts?” Her brows furrowed. She tilted her head and looked up at the ceiling, trying to decipher what she just said. “Sorry, it’s kinda weird.”

“Yeah, it totally is.” Bart chortled. He lowered his head and looked up at her with soft eyes. “Thanks. You really are a big help. It’s really nice that you’re here. Even...even though you really don’t have to be, if you don’t want to.” Bart nervously waited for her response. He prayed that she wouldn’t take his words the wrong way.

She gave him a tiny smile. “I know.” She looked away for a moment and looked back at him. “But even though he’s not here, Wally’s family is still really important to me.” She smiled a little bigger and bumped his forehead with her’s in a sign of affection. “You guys always will be.”

Bart smiled a little bigger in response. Little did Artemis know that her platonic affection and her approval will always be his goal. She loved Wally more than he could ever imagine, and now he carried the responsibility and the name of Kid Flash like he did once before. In Bart’s mind, there would never be any greater insult to her than to let down his title and his memory. “I’m happy you’re here. No matter what Artemis, you’ll still always be my cousin.”

“Thanks Bart.” her eyes softened as she reached to embrace him. They were only able to hug for a moment before they were greeted by a familiar voice.

“Hey.” Barry stood in waiting room. “Her contractions are steady now. The Doc said that she can have a couple more visitors for a bit if you guys want to see her.” The followed Barry through the noisy hall and into the clean smelling room that held Iris. She sat almost upright in her bed. Her body was neatly tucked under her blanket and she fingered through a magazine.

Bart groaned internally. This was not a good sign for his boredom.
As they entered the room, Iris began to greet them but cut herself off. “Wha-Bart?” Iris raised her eyebrows in surprise. “You’re still here? I wasn’t expecting you to last more than fifteen minutes.”

Bart huffed. “Yeah, well. If it’s possible to die of boredom I’m pretty sure I’ll find out soon.” He moved closer to Iris and pointed a finger at her swollen belly. “You hear that Dad? Aunt Dawn? Just get out of there already! I’m dyinggggg.” He whined.

Artemis smiled and rolled her eyes.

The stern cry of Mal Duncan came across their communicators. “Watchtower to Tigress, Flash, and Kid Flash. Do you read me?”

Barry slid his hand down his face. “God no not today.”

Artemis answered the call for them. “This is Tigress. We’re all here. What’s going on?”

“We have reports of an alien attack in New Orleans.” he answered. “We’re not sure if they’re related to the attack from earlier. But we need someone there now. Aquaman and Aqualad are on their way but we need someone faster.”

Barry grunted. He pressed his finger to his earpiece communicator. “Watchtower, this is literally the worst day-”

“I know.” Mal interrupted him. He calmed the panic in his voice. “And I am so sorry. But civilians are being attacked right now. You and KF are the only ones who can get there in time.”

Barry twisted his face in frustration. He looked at Iris with worrisome eyes and clenched his fist. Iris slipped her hand over it. Her soft eyes contained a hint of sadness. “You’re leaving.” She stated. “Aren’t you?”

Barry chewed on the inside of his cheek. He dreaded the possibility of this, having to choose between seeing the birth of this children, and saving the lives of strangers. “I..there’s civilians under attack in New Orleans.” He grunted. “I guess Bart and I are the only ones who can get there in time.”

“Barry…” she reached out to him. He leaned down towards her as he placed her palm on his cheek. She smiled. “Go.”

“What?” His eyes widened. He had not expected that answer from her.

“If the twins ever ask me where their Daddy was when they were born, I would be nothing less than ecstatic to tell them that he was out saving people’s lives.”

He chuckled as gave her a soft kiss on the lips, “You’re too good to me.”

She smiled and gave him a light, playful slap on the cheek. “I know. Now get out of here. You have a city to save.”

“I’ll stay here.” Artemis volunteered. “Just in case Jay and Joan don’t make it in time. I’ll make sure she’s taken care of.”

Barry gave Iris one last kiss before throwing on his uniform at superspeed. Bart did the same. He never left home without it. A wide grin splayed across his face. It was finally time for some action. Bart clicked the transmitter on his communicator. “Kid Flash to Watchtower. Flash and I are on our way!”
South Shore Harbor - Louisiana
November 4th 2016
14:40

“Look out!”

Aquaman found himself tackled as Aqualad called to and charged at him. They spiraled together underwater for a few meters. The blow from Aqualad almost knocked the trident out of his hands. As he opened his eyes he found that a large, black, metal orb blew past where he was just floating. Bubbles floated behind the orb as it collided with the shallow ocean floor. They watched as two more crashed into the water from the air.

“Are you alright my King?” Aqualad asked.


They were underwater in New Orleans South Shore Harbor. They rushed on scene as they heard reports of UFOs falling from the sky, landing in the city and underwater just a half mile from the coast.

Metal shrapnel flew past their head as the orbs burst open. The aliens that emerged from them resembled that of large crocodiles. But their hind legs were missing and their front paws resembled that of human hands. Black body armor with glowing red edges covered their chest arms and head. The cerulean scales clashed with their glowing red eyes. Their shrill screeches caused Auqaman and Aqualad to cringe.

With incredible speed two of the aliens swam pasted them. The heroes felt ill as they saw them charging for the boats floating above them. The other alien sped off in the opposite direction, swimming closer to shore.

“You go after him,” Aquaman ordered. “I will stop the two headed for the boats.”

Aqualad nodded. He sped towards the alien. He reached out his hand, grabbed the creature by the tail and yanked it back. It screeched and turned towards him. It carried in one of his arms a thick black cylinder. I was approximately two feet in diameter and two feet long. Three glowing red rings wrapped around it. Distracted by the sight of the object, Aqualad wasn’t able to move out of the way in time as the alien landed a hard punch across his head. He spiraled away from it. In his disoriented daze he watched as the creature place the cylinder on the floor. It pressed a button on the top, causing four metal appendages to emerge from the cylinder and pierce the sand. Vents opened at it’s top, sucking in and out water as the sand around it began to glow red with heat.

Finally composing himself, Aqualad reached for the Water-Bearers behind him. He could feel the energy pulse through his tattoos as he used them to send a large whip of water at the creature. It knocked him away from the device. Aqualad charged toward it.

On top of it there was a screen. It displayed a loading bar with characters of a language that he had never seen before. Whatever it was doing, it was almost complete. Aqualad became overwhelmed with a feeling of hopelessness as he had no idea how to shut it off. He turned his Water-Bearers into swords and attempted to pierce it. But found himself shocked as an electric pulse travel up his swords and through his body. There was a force field around it. Temporary blackness filled his eyes as the alien slammed it’s shoulder against him. It knocked him away once more.
The alien watched as the loading bar on the screen completed. Aqualad met it’s gaze. It smiled. With a clawed finger he pressed on the indent in the center of his armor. It began to glow red and boiled the water around it. Fear swept across him as he recalled Superman’s description of his encounter with the aliens in Bludhaven. The monster was about to blow himself up. As fast as he could Aqualad used his Water-Bearers once more to create a water shield.

“Foorrr Darrrks-” The creature began but was cut off by the explosion of his armor. Aqualad was sent flying backwards. His shield had protected him but there was nothing left of the alien or the contraption it was carrying. He had to warn the others.

“Aqualad to Flash and Kid Flash.” He boomed across his communicator. “One of the creatures was carrying some kind of bomb. You need to stop them before they activate them. Once activated they will have a force field that will prevent you from getting close to them until they explode.”

“You got it Aqualad!” Kid Flash chirped back. He and The Flash arrived only minutes before. They discovered the same aliens terrorizing the city as the ones that were found in Bludhaven.

The Flash ran up next to him. From what they had counted there was still one alien left that hadn't self-destructed. Barry spotted it a block and a half West of them. And just as Aqualad had predicted, it was carrying a strange metal object.

Bart spotted it and cackled, “Race ya to the last one gramps!”

Wide-eyed Barry tried to reach for him before he sped off. “Wait! You don’t know what that thing-” but it was too late. With a wide grin Kid Flash was already on his way towards it.

But the creature’s response time was not as limited as a human. He heard him coming. He set the bomb down and pointed it's right arm towards him. Kid Flash felt his heart skip a beat as the creature’s mechanical arm dismantled itself and morphed into a small cannon. It was like the one that Arsenal bore. As it fired a red laser beam at him, Kid Flash leaned backwards to avoid the beam, but in the process caused himself to fall. He slid at superspeed across the ground, sloppily colliding with alien. They rolled across the ground together. When they finally came to a halt, Kid Flash was on top of the creature. Terror swept over him as he found that he had activated the self-destruct button on the alien’s chest. His uniform began to smoke as the heat of it’s body grew.

Kid Flash found himself breathless as he felt a yank on the collar of his suit. In the blink of an eye The Flash hand scooped him and the cylinder out of the range of the alien’s armor bomb.

He set them on the ground. Just as Kid Flash was about to express his gratitude, he held his tongue at The Flash’s expression. His face flushed as he pointed his finger at him. “What were you thinking!” He spat, making Kid Flash jump. “Your carelessness caused him to blow up! We needed one alive Bart!”

Bart twinged, Flash was angry enough to use his civilian name in costume. “I...I’m sorry.” Bart stuttered “I just-”

“You just what?” Flash snapped. He clenched his eyes tight for a moment and exhaled with force to calm himself. The tension in his shoulders eased. He looked at Bart with narrow eyes. “You just weren't thinking.”

Bart searched for something to say. He wasn't sure what had caused Flash to snap at him so.

Just as Bart was about to respond, Artemis’s voice filled their communicators. “Flash, KF, what’s the situation in New Orleans?”
The Flash pressed on his earpiece “The land aliens are taken care of. It looks like they were able to evacuate everyone in time. I’m not sure about the water...”

“The Water invaders are taken of as well.” Aquaman chimed in on their communication. “They blew themselves up.”

“Well,” Artemis began. There was a smile in her voice. “Once you’re finished, there’s two little people here waiting to meet you.”

A spark ignited in Barry’s eyes. Bart watched a small smile grow on his face.

Sullen, Bart picked up the cylinder. He looked up at him with droopy eyes. “You..you go on a head. I’ll make sure this gets to where it needs to be.”

“You sure?” Flash asked.

Bart put on a false smile. It concerned him how good he was at them now. “Get outta here gramps. You know you’re dying to see ‘um.”

And with a wave of his hand, he was gone.

Just as Bart was about to sprint to the nearest Zeta Tube he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to find Aquaman staring down at him with Aqualad right beside him. He took the cylinder out of Bart’s hands.

“We’ll get this to The Watchtower for investigation and deal with clean up.” He assured Bart. “You just tell Iris ‘congratulations’ for us. We’ll visit as soon as we can.”

Bart raised his eyebrows “Really? So crash! Thanks!” And with a blur of yellow and red his was gone. Within minutes he found himself in his civilian clothes. He stood just before Iris’s hospital room.

There was a stillness to the room as Bart cautiously entered through the doorframe. There was a quiet to his steps, as though his presence would shatter the moment. His breath shook. The first thing to catch his eye was the sight of Iris. A tired smile played upon her lips. It complimented her disheveled hair and the bit of darkness under her eyes. All of her effort and pain had paid off.

She softly cradled one of the babies in her arms, gently rocking the small bundle of blue blanket. Artemis leaned in beside her hospital bed, gently playing with the fold of the blanket. She cooed soft remarks to Iris and smiled, brushing her finger against the baby’s cheek. Barry stood on the other side of her. As he held the pink mass of blanket, the smile on his face was remarkable. There was a sparkle to his eyes as he rubbed his nose against baby’s. He placed his lips on her forehead, giving her a gentle kiss. He rocked her gently as he inhaled against her skin. He had heard that there was something magical, wonderful, and inspirational about the smell of a newborn. It took him becoming a father to find out what they meant. It was a moment that he wouldn't trade for the world.

As he closed his eyes, his soft voice cooed against her. “They’re beautiful, Iris.”

Iris looked over at him. She began to tear at the sight of her husband with is warm smile as he placed gentle kisses on their baby girl’s head. He held her as though he never wanted to let go. The baby wiggled under his over affection. She squeaked as she reached a hand out to grasp his finger.

Iris raised her eyebrow. “I can already see someone’s going to get spoiled.”
Barry chuckled, “Oh, absolutely.”

Iris hummed to herself in amusement. She glanced over to her left to see Bart standing in the doorway. “Bart?” She tilted her head. He jumped at his name. “Would you like to hold the baby?”

Bart swallowed hard as he gave a couple small nods. His steps were slow and cautious. It was a bizarre feeling, his feet moving as though they were made of stone. His hands trembled slightly. Artemis could feel his nervousness. She carefully grabbed the baby from Iris’s lap, taking the blue bundle into her arms.

“Here.” She instructed as she came closer to Bart. “You just hold him like this. Ok? Make sure you use the crook of your elbow to support his head.”

“O-oh okay.” He stuttered. Before he knew it, Artemis placed the baby in his hands. He held his breath. He was so light, almost as if he were holding nothing. Slight terror coursed through his veins. He prayed he wouldn’t drop him. Why would anyone let him old a baby? Did they even know him?

Bart tilted his head. The baby squinted it’s closed eyes harder as he briefly wiggled his head, shaking his fists. Small purple splotches freckled his forehead. His bloated face contorted into random expressions. Bart twisted his mouth. He wasn’t going to lie, it was ugly. The tiny person in his arms looked more like an alien than a baby. A bald, squishy alien. He found it almost impossible that this could be his father. It didn’t even look anything like him!

And then the baby opened his eyes. Bart lost his breath as a large pair of light green eyes found their way to his. They were the same green eyes that Bart had seen his whole life. The eyes that protected, watched over, and loved him. A shudder escaped from his lips. With curious eyes, the baby reached out his tiny hand and placed in on Bart’s chin.

Before he knew it, Bart found himself choking on a sob. He swallowed hard. His chest heaved. “Hey Dad.” He took a moment to gather himself. “Long time no see.” He squeezed his eyes hard as tears streamed down his cheeks. It was he who now held the baby like he never wanted to let go.

A look of concern flashed across Artemis’s face. She rubbed her hand up and down his arm in support. “You missed him, didn’t you?”

Bart’s lips trembled. His watery eyes looked into her’s. He did his best to plaster on a happy smile. “Yeah...Yeah I really did.”

He looked back at the baby, biting his lower lip. He had missed him. He missed him more than anything in the entire world. But unbeknownst to Artemis, Barry, or Iris, it wasn't just missing him that had caused his tears.

It was the first time in nearly two years that Bart had seen his father alive.
Winter in Dakota City howled like pack of starving wolves. The wind was biting and unforgiving. It preyed upon any helpless patch of skin it found uncovered. If it wouldn't make him look like potential predator, Virgil would have considered wearing a ski mask outside at all times. He shivered as he nuzzled his chin into his down coat. A firm scowl twisted upon his face.

He mumbled behind his collar, “My body wasn’t made for this bullshit.”

He heard a giggle emerge next to him. It came from a thin redhead as she hid her tiny smile behind her white mittens. Her name was Frieda Goren and she was one of Virgil’s best friends. A toothy smile slid across her square jaw. She nudged her elbow against his side. Her purple pea coat gave for much more mobility than his pudgy parka.

“You’re such a whiner.” She teased. “I love winter.” She opened up her palm to catch the falling snowflakes in her hand. “The snow makes everything so pretty.”

Virgil huffed. “Yeah if doesn’t freeze you to death first.”

She gave him a pursed-lip smile. Her eyes squinted. “What is wrong with you? Why are you so grumpy?” She leaned in closer to him. “Losing sleep with your super-heroing again?”

The thing one needed to know about Frieda Goren, was that she was absolutely and unequivocally relentless. Frieda Goren, the inevitable future valedictorian of his class, did everything she ever wanted and did it well. She knew everything going on in the world around her. And if something were to break that control, cause a rift in her knowing, she would break it down until it howled it’s secrets for her.

So when Virgil arrived back in Dakota City after being kidnapped by The Reach, it did not take long for her to tear down his reserves. Virgil’s parents and sister were easy. They already knew. The Justice League needed his parent’s permission before allowing him to join The Team. The couple months he was away didn’t make for too much for a challenge. He supplied a generic story of a bus crash and temporary amnesia as the reason for his disappearance. As the story sufficed for his school officials and classmates, it did not please the hunger of Frieda Goren. No, she was far too clever for a story so convenient. It was a convenience she hungrily chewed up and spat out at him. She demanded a proper explanation over and over until Virgil broke. It took a whole three days of him being back before Frieda knew the secret of Static. His face turned red in the memory of how quick she made him squeal. It was a memory that she took a subtle pride in. He was no match for her badgering.

Virgil groaned. “Yeah, you could say that.” He tried to match steps with her and they continued down the sidewalk. The busy street bustled around them. Today he struggled to keep up with her pep. “Mostly just petty criminals. But they do cut into my beauty sleep.”

Frieda smiled. She pushed her white knit beanie up her forehead. It kept sliding down her long red hair and bangs. “Did you ever figure out that whole fiasco with those Reach drinks? You were helping out with that case recently weren’t you?”
Virgil sighed once more. He rubbed his face in his hands in frustration. “Yeah, but it just ended up being all for nothing. LexCor does have the recipe. Made it into a health drink. LexAid... or something like that. It still has the dopamine polymerase and an adrenaline inhibitor in it. But we can’t bust ‘um for that.” He shrugged. “It’s not like they’re illegal.”

Frieda perked her eyebrows. “Well what about the mitochondrial marker? The one they could potentially use to find metahumans?”

Virgil squinted his eyes and squished his lips at her. “Man you’re all up in my business today. This is all top secret info you know? You can’t tell anyone.” He shook his head. “God I can’t believe you bullied all this out of me.”

She smiled in triumph. Virgil’s oath of secrecy to The Justice League stood no match to her perseverance and nosiness. “I have to know everything, remember?” She said as she tapped her forehead. “It’s a blessing and a curse.”

“More like an annoyance.” Virgil teased. He continued. “Yeah the drinks still have the marker. But there’s a lot of political Bull behind it.” He grunted, struggling for words. “Black Canary explained it to us. I...I didn’t really understand it all. But what it came down to was that they could claim it’s part of their recipe. We don’t actually have any physical proof that they are, in fact, tracking metahumans right now. We just know they have the potential to. Plus, we don’t want to go public with it and have that kind of tracking get into the wrong hands.”

“The wrong hands?” Frieda asked. “Even worse than Lex Luthor’s?”

He shrugged. “Even worse than Lex Luthor’s.”

It was then that Virgil realized that they were in a residential part of the city. The high steel fences and brick houses marked it as one of the few wealthier neighborhoods. Well, as wealthy as upper middle class could get. He darted his eyes all around him as they walked. Frieda wasn’t leading them in the right direction.

“Wait. I thought you said we were going to the mall?” he asked.

“Yeeeah.” She responded. Holding onto the syllable as if it weren't quite true. “We are. But I kinda promised Francis that I’d stop by his party for a little bit.”

“Francis?” Virgil spat. “Francis Stone? You’ve got to be kidding me. Since when do you hang out with that tool?”

She shot him a disgusted look. “Hey, he’s not that bad.” Virgil raised an eyebrow at her. His lips pursed into a tiny line. She nodded her head left and right, giving her eyes a quick roll. “Alright he is that bad.” She agreed. “But I found out from our guidance counselor that his uncle is on the admissions board for Princeton. So...you know,” She said with a slight pout as she shrugged her shoulders. “We’re friends now.”

Virgil squinted at her. His cheeks bunched with a tight smile. “Frieda you little snake.”

She gasped at him as she slapped his shoulder. “Hey! Snake is such a nasty term.” She interlocked her arm with his. She puckered her lips as she thought of what to say. “Mmmm, I’m just..utilizing my resources.”

Virgil just smiled and shook his head.

“And...you know,” she added with a small voice. “I just, have to go to prom with him.”
“Wait, prom?” Wide eyed he snapped his head in her direction. She gave him a big fake smile and a shrug. He continued. “He’s making you go to prom with him?”

“I mean, kinda. And on like.. dates and stuff.”

“Dates and stuff?” He raised his brows at her response, curling his upper lip. “What does that even mean?”

“Look, it’s not that big a deal.” She assured. “He’ll talk me up to his uncle and I just have to hang out with him and occasionally stroke his ego.”

Virgil gave her a stern scowl.

She rolled her eyes at him. “I’ve already told him clear boundaries of what I’m not okay with.” She added. He grumbled under his breath and looked away from her.

“I’ll be fiiiiiine.” She assured again. “I promise.”

“Alright,” he responded begrudgingly. “Just-don’t let it get out of hand. Don’t let him make you... stroke anything you don’t want to. If you know what I mean.”

“With FRANCIS?” Her eyes went wide. She curled her lip and let out a false wretch from deep within her throat to show her disgust. Virgil boomed in laughter and she joined him. After a moment of catching her breath she was finally able to add, “Not in this lifetime.”

“Well just remember,” Virgil held out his hand, making a few sparks flash in his palms. “I will have to kick his butt if he hurts you.”

“Oooowhoooowhooo.” Frieda waved her hands in front of her mockingly as she bobbed her head. “Look at you, being all manly and territorial.” She led him up the steps to the front door of one of the houses. He could hear the muffled booming of music and people inside. She twisted the doorknob. “Come on Super Nerd. I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself.”

As they walked through the door, the smell of beer was overpowering. It almost made Virgil take a step backwards. He scrunched his nose as he took off his coat and added it to the pile on the floor. Frieda did the same.

“Girl you are far too fine to be seen with the likes of him.”

The both turned to see their classmate, Leonard Smalls, approach them. ‘Smalls’ being a name Virgil found ironic, considering Leonard did have a good 100 pounds of muscle over him. His dark dreadlocks rested on his shoulders. A goatee framed his malicious smile. He clasped a beer can in his hand.

“Oh, h-hey Leonard.” Frieda began. There was always something about him that made her nervous. Perhaps it was his large frame and the way he towered a foot over her. “How are you?”

“Just fine.” He answered. He raised an eyebrow at her. “But I know someone who’s going to be much better now that you’re here.” He smiled and nodded his head to the left. “Francis is the the kitchen.”

“Oh.” Frieda replied. “Thank you.” She started to walk past him. And just as Virgil was about to follow, he found Leonard’s large hand on the center of his chest, stopping him. Frieda tossed Virgil a nervous look, but he waved her off.
“Just to be clear,” Leonard declared. He leaned in towards Virgil, puffing out his chest in dominance. He smelled of alcohol and body odor. “The only way in hell that you’re even here, is because of her.” He nodded in Frieda’s direction. “Being a private party means that no one not here needs to know ‘bout it. Especially the principal or coach.” He gave Virgil a stern glare. “Got it?”

Virgil tried his best to bite back a snarl. Athletes like Leonard and Francis weren’t supposed to engage in illegal recreational activities. However, being that high up the high school food chain meant they could get away with much more than students with less athletic prowess. Lord forbid the principal find out they were drinking at have to sit out one whole game. Virgil decided that this was an argument that he was just going to have to let go for now.

“Absolutely.” He chimed, almost too enthusiastically. “Lips are sealed.”

Leonard removed the hand from his chest and put on a triumphant smile. “Perfect.”

Virgil started to walk away. He rolled his eyes, muffling under his breath, “S’not like they’d do anything about it anyways.”

When he arrived to the kitchen, he saw Francis chattering away with Frieda. His hand was already on her waist. His face too close for normal conversing. Virgil’s lip twisted upward. He wanted so bad to pry that slimy hand off of her. His spiked red hair contained blonde frosted tips. A red soul patch rested below his bottom lip. As terrible as the thought was, Francis just had the type of face that made Virgil want to kick him in the mouth.

A relieved look swept across Frieda’s face once she saw him. Virgil could only assume that her conversation with Francis was just stimulating.

“Oh heyyyy. I wondered where you went!” Frieda cried as she called him over. She turned back to Francis. “I hope you don’t mind me inviting him. We’re going shopping together later, we’re just stopping by on our way.”

Francis crinkled his nose as he glared at him. “Yeah I guess that’s cool.” He gave Frieda a mischievous smile and he tapped a finger on the tip of her nose. “You’ll just have to owe me.” He brought his beer up to his lips.

Frieda let out a distressed chuckle as she tried her best to smile. Virgil clenched his fist as he beamed at him. He felt a low growl start to grow in his throat.

But before it became audible, one of Francis’s teammate poked his head into the kitchen doorway. “Yo, Francis. Some of us wanna smoke. You got anything?”

Francis tore the beer from his mouth and placed it on the table. He almost choked with excitement. “Fuck yeah I do,” He responded with gusto. He wiped his hand across his mouth. “Just gimmie a sec. I’ll be right here.” He waved the boy off.

“Wanna join?” He asked Frieda. He wiggled his eyebrows. “I promise not to tell.”

She gave him a pat on his chest. “It’s alright, you go ahead. I’ll just...fix a drink.” She motioned to the bottles of liquor and mixers on the counter.

He chuckled and grinned. “Alright Miss Princeton.” He grabbed her chin and placed a firm kiss on her lips. Virgil looked away and pursed his lips in annoyance. “Don’t take too long.” He added before releasing her face. Of course, he couldn't leave without shooting Virgil a dirty look. A look that Virgil was happy to return.
“You’re not really drinking, are you?” Virgil asked once he was out of earshot.

Her eyes went wide as a hum emerged from her throat. “I might need to to be able to put up with him today.”

Virgil laughed. “You’d need a whole bottle for that.”

Frieda smiled as she poured herself a tiny amount of vodka in a plastic cup, filling it to the top with orange juice. “Sure you don’t want anything?” She asked.

“I’m good.” He assured as they made their way back into the living room.

As Frieda found a group of female friends to chat with, Virgil was drawn to the center of the room. Around the coffee table sat Francis, Leonard, and several of their classmates. As the rest found seats on the couch and floor, Francis took his place on his recliner throne at the end of the table. An ecstatic look emerged on his face.

“You score some of that Blue Dream again?” Leonard asked him.

“Naw dude, I got somethin’ better than pot.” Francis responded as he open one of the drawers of the coffee table. He removed the lid to reveal a several glass pipes, lighters, a grinder, and a few bags of something that Virgil couldn’t quite see. Francis picked up one of the bags between his pointer and middle finger. Written in permanent marker on the bag were the letters ‘NF’. In it contained a bundle of what reminded Virgil of weed nuggets. But they appeared synthetic and were white instead of green. The rough edges contained a blue tint. Francis raised his eyebrows and licked his lips in excitement. “This my friends, it the future.”

“I-I’m not sure about doin’ any hard stuff dude.” One of the boys replied with a shaky voice.

“Will ya shut up for a minute and let me finish?” Francis snapped at him. He rolled his eyes and continued. “It’s not like that. Anyways, so I picked this up when I went to visit my uncle in New Jersey last week. Apparently this shit is so new you can only get it on the east coast.” He took one of the nuggets out of the bag. He placed it between his pointer finger and thumb. “I shit you not it is the best high I ever had. Like the chillness of pot with the energy of coke.” He placed it in the bowl of one of the glass pipes. “It’s called ‘Spark’.” He leaned in towards the group, excitement radiating off of him. “You can smoke it, or grind it up and snort it, sprinkle it in your drink, whatever. And check this, it’s odorless and ya only need like a three hours for it to not show up on a drug test.” He pushed the bag he had just held towards the center of the table. “You can get it flavorless.” He then pulled out two more bags of Spark from the tin and threw them on the center of the table. One labeled ‘SM’ the other labeled ‘P’. He saw the curiosity growing in his friends’ eyes. A wide grin grew on his face.

“Or, strawberry mango or peach.”

Virgil twitched. He tilted his head and squinted his eyes, trying to remember where he had heard that saying before.

Francis continued, “But that’s not even the coolest part. Now, you only get this with the real high quality stuff. Check it out.” He placed the glass pipe to his lips and lit the nugget with his lighter. It began to glow a light blue as he inhaled. The smoke whirled up the pipe and into his mouth. He took the pipe from his mouth, and held his breath for a moment. His slow exhale caught the attention of the entire room.

Virgil’s mouth fell agape as an enchanting blue light flickered in Francis’s mouth as he exhaled. As soon as his breath was gone, the light dissipated.
Francis smirked, “Fuckin' sweet right?”

Excited murmurs filled the room as the crowd around him became interested in his new product. Francis pulled out the rest of his pipes and supplies out of his tin. “Help yourself,” He offered. “If you guys like it, I met a supplier who said he’ll help me sell it if I want.”

It wasn't long before intermittent flashes of blue emerged around the room. Virgil grew uncomfortable. Parties like these were not something he particularly enjoyed. Now that he worked for The Team he tried his best to stray away from being around anything illegal. He fidgeted where he stood, pulling out his phone to scroll through his social media to kill time. Once a seat on the couch opened, he placed himself upon it and continued to scroll.

Freida scanned around the room. She noticed how rowdy her classmates were becoming. Everyone started to wobble like newborn deer. Their laughter was far too loud. Those who weren't drinking or playing beer pong seemed glued mouth-to-mouth with someone else. She took a peek at her cell phone for the time. They had been there for nearly two hours. It was then that Frieda felt a hand snake around her waist. She shuddered at the sudden contact, jumping at the almost unbearably hot body heat radiating off of Francis. He tried to lean into her, stumbling over his own feet. She nearly lost her footing. It was more than apparent that he was intoxicated. Frieda grimaced as he nuzzled into her neck. She pulled her head away and turned to look at him. His faced sported bright red cheeks and dilated pupils.

“You feeling okay?” She asked him. He appeared as though he had a fever.

And idiotic smile formed on his lips. “‘Umm fine baby.” He slid his hand from her waist and clasped her hand. He tugged. “Got ssomthin’ in my room for ya. Uncle wanted me ta give it to ya.” He began to lead her away from the party.

“Oh. Uh..okay.” Frieda mumbled. She followed him through the crowded and up the stairs. “What did he give you? Was it the paperwork on Princeton admissions?”

“Ohhh...yeah.” he smirked. “Sure.”

He lead her through his doorway. She coughed. His room reeked of body spray. She tried her best to step around the dirty clothes on the floor.

Frieda cleared her throat, “So, where is it?”

She watched as Francis closed his bedroom door. A sick feeling rose in her belly as she heard the ‘click’ of his lock. A tingle of panic crawled through her skin. She had an idea of what he was trying to do.

Her breath hitched. “I..I-I want to go back to the party, Francis.”

“Aww c’mon baby.” He licked his lips, closing the distance between them. His walk carrying a strut. His face was inches from her’s. “Don’t be like that.”

She tried to move around him but he stepped in front of her. A chuckle rumbled in his throat. Her muscles trembled but her words remained strong. “Let me leave Francis. Now.”

With a lick of his canine, he was ready for his advance. His eyes moved to her lips. He grasped at her waist. “Not ‘til we’re done.” He kissed her hard and sloppy, their teeth clashed.

She pulled her head away and pushed on his chest. “No. Francis.” She stated. He grasped her even
tighter as he kissed her again. She growled as she shoved him away. “I said NO!”

Downstairs, Virgil was taken out of the daze of his phone screen as male partygoer plopped on the cushion next to him and bumped him. Virgil found himself squished against the armrest as a female classmate straddled the other boy. The sticky sounds of their tongued kisses made him look away in awkwardness. He grimaced. He tried not to see them in his peripheral vision. He found the effort obsolete however as they were pressed up against him on the now crowded couch.

But what made him even more uncomfortable was that everyone in the room appeared to be lip locked with someone else. If it wasn't for the blaring music, Virgil was sure that the collective noise would have been disgusting. He tried to avert his eyes as he saw several hands snake up their partner’s shirts. Their inebriated haze cultured sloppy dry humping.

Virgil groaned in annoyance. He was just about to attend to his phone again, when the girl next to him slipped her hand down the other boy’s waistband…

“WOW. Yep. Okay. Time to go.” Virgil boomed as he jumped off the couch. He scanned the living room and kitchen for Frieda. She was nowhere to be found. He called out for her as he climbed up the stairs. As he reached the top, his ear perked as he thought he heard a voice say ‘No. I said no.’ It sounded like Frieda.

Meanwhile, in the bedroom, Francis stumbled backwards after Frieda’s shove. With eyes half-lidded, a sheepish smirk played across his lips. “-Like a girl who plays rough.”

She twinged at his words. Her nose wrinkled in disgust “Fuck you.” She beamed. “I’m leaving.” She attempted to stride past him.

Francis’s brows furrowed in irritation. He clenched his teeth. “The fuck you are,” He growled. He snatched one of her wrists and yanked her back to him. Her arm twisted with the movement.

She let out a small cry. “Let go.” She demanded. “You’re hurting me.”

“I’m setting you up for Princeton.” His face became dark as his grip tightened. “You owe me.”

“I don’t owe you anything,” She barked. “I told you from the beginning Francis I wouldn’t sleep with you! Now let go.” She tried to wriggle out of his grasp but he held firm. “Let go.” She demanded one more time. He grasped even harder.

Her eyes went wide. She gasped at the realization that he was not going to release her. She cried out, “H-Help! Help me! Someone! -AH.” She cried in pain as he twisted her wrist, bringing her closer to him. He used his other hand to place a firm grasp on her throat. She began to tremble.

“No one can hear you,” he cooed as a vile smile formed on his face. “So you might as well use that mouth for something else.”

Bile rose in her throat. The heat of panic slithered up her spine. She rose her fist in the air. “Back OFF!” She shouted, slamming her fist down on his nose.

He released her with a yell. Fumbling backwards, he clutchèd his face. He wiped under his nostrils, looking at the blood that had dripped down. He bared his teeth. His brow furrowed in fury. “Fuckin’ bitch!”

From down the hall, Virgil was certain that that cry was from her. He desperately searched every room. He found one that wouldn’t open. He pulled on the knob and pounded on the door.
“Frieda? Are you okay in there?”

In the bedroom, Francis sped towards her. She tried to run. She heard Virgil’s voice.

“Virgil! Hel-.” She was cut off as Francis clasped a firm grip at the base of her hair, and yanked her back, just before she reached the door knob. She cried out as lead her across the room. “No. No. No. No! Let me go! Let me go!” Her voice cracked as her stern demands turned into pleading cries. He climbed on top of her as he threw her onto his bed. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She flailed her arms as he tried to pin them down. “Get off me! Get off me! Get of-ack.” Her words were cut short as she felt the firm pressure of his forearm against her throat. She gasped.

Francis brought his face inches from her’s. Malice soaked his voice. His pupils dilated to the extreme. “Now you’re gonna lay here like a good girl and pay me what you owe.” With his free hand, he began to yank her leggings down to her knees.

“No, no, no, no.” She tried to wiggle free, but he only pressed down on her throat harder. “Stop.” She gasped. “Stop. Get off me,” She tired her best to wheeze out her words through her closing trachea and tears. She could barely breathe. “Get off me. Get off.” She closed her eyes. A sob escaped her lips as she felt his hand grab at her panties.

A loud crash boomed through the room as an electric blast tore the door off the hinges. Virgil felt a primal fury rise in his chest at the sight before him. He roared as he tore across the room. He jerked Francis off of her, throwing him without care. Francis slammed into a full-length mirror on the wall. It shattered around him as he crashed onto the floor. A fire erupted in Virgil’s veins. He charged at Francis once more. He pulled him up by his collar, slamming his fist against his face. In his cloud of rage, Virgil had no idea how many times he punched him.

“Virgil STOP! You’ll kill him!” Frieda cried out behind him. Virgil snapped out of his haze. He loosened his grip and tired to look at her. Francis used the opportunity to shove Virgil off of him, sending him across the room. Frieda ran to help him up.

As Francis pulled himself up on his feet, steam rose off of his skin and dissipated into the cold air of his bedroom. His eyes glowed white. He growled as he grabbed a large shard of glass. As he stood he pointed it at them.

“You’re going to regret that,” he growled behind his clenched teeth.

Virgil lost his breath as a flame curled around Francis’s arm, from elbow to fingertips. It poured from the pores of his skin. His eyes went wide. He dropped the shard of glass. He opened his mouth to yell, to scream at the searing pain that he should have felt.

But there was nothing. His skin didn’t bubble like it should have. His body was hot, yes, but it felt comfortable, familiar, and powerful. He held his palm up to his face, examining his hand. He cooed at the realization the flames were coming from him. He created them. Though it may have been the drugs talking, something about the fire made it feel alive. It danced and morphed with his every thought.

Through his fingers, he saw Virgil and Frieda. They started to pull themselves up from the floor. Mouths agape and wide eyed, they froze as the light from his flames danced upon their faces.

“Go,” Virgil choked on his words. It barely came out as a horse whisper. He gathered more volume. “Get out of here! Now!” he commanded at Frieda as he shoved her towards the doorway. She stumbled out in terror. With a vicious grin, Francis sent a blast of fire towards Virgil. He quickly used his lightning to shield himself. As Francis’s fire dissipated, his shield fell. The clash of bright
lights sent Virgil’s vision white. He regained it long enough to see Francis speeding towards him. The instant taste of copper graced his tongue as Francis clocked him in the jaw. Just as Virgil climbed to his feet he felt firm hands on his throat as Francis began to choke him. He tried his best to fight him off. Sparks danced beneath his skin as he used his lightning to blast Francis off of him. But in his panic he underestimated his force. Francis’s body shattered his bedroom window as he flew through it and onto the street below. He landed next to a parked car.

“Oh shit,” Virgil chimed as he raced to the window. Shards of glass crumbled under the feet of his classmates as they raced out the front door. He could see Frieda ushering them away from the house. Their screams filled the air as they saw Francis’s body ablaze. Virgil pulled his mask out of his pocket and placed it on his face. He jumped from the window, sending his bolt of lightning below him to ease his fall. He raced towards Francis’s side. His fire was dissipating, but he was still breathing. Virgil let out a sigh of relief.

“What the hell did you do?!”

Virgil turned to see Leonard standing a few meters away from him. Veins throbbed in his neck, his muscles trembled with fury, his pupils were dilated to full extent.

“What. Did you. Do. To him?” He growled through his teeth.

Virgil held up his hands and waved them in front of him. “Woah woah. Hey it’s not what it looks like.”

Leonard charged at him. Virgil scrambled out of the way. The air rattled out of his lungs as Leonard’s fist collided with the parked car. It didn't make just a small dent, like the average punch. No, Leonard caused the nearly half the car to collapse around him. He withdrew his hand, it was unscathed.

Virgil shuddered. Leonard had powers now too? Since when?

Leonard ran towards him once more, again Virgil scrambled out of the way. Leonard’s fist slammed the spot on the ground where Virgil just was. The asphalt shattered around his hand.

Scanning the area around him, Virgil spotted a fire hydrant, he ran towards it. He used his powers to blast one of the caps off of the hydrant. Water surged through the opening. He used his foot to change the course of the water towards Leonard. He walked in Virgil’s direction, unmoved by the stream of water. Virgil shot his lightning through the stream. Leonard screamed as it hit him, his muscles shook violently. He collapsed onto the ground.

Police siren wailed at several cop cars arrived on scene. They raised their firearms at Leonard and Francis in precaution. Virgil watched as two other officers placed Inhibitor Collars around their necks. They slowly began to come to. The officers dragged them to their feet.

“What’s in the air!”

Virgil found himself staring down the barrel of a gun and one of the police officers raised her’s at him. He took a step backwards and felt his stomach sink in fear. But before he could say anything in his defense, Frieda jumped in front of him. She held her hands in front of her in a pleading manner.

“Static has other superhero stuff to do. I can tell you what happened.” Virgil gave her a nod. He was more than grateful for Frieda in this moment. He made a mental note that he owed her one. He used his power to reach for the nearest trash can lid
and hopped upon it. He quickly sped away from the scene.

His heart still raced from battle. Despite the cold, sweat dripped from his brow. Leonard and Francis never showed signs of powers before. So why now? How? They have always been bullies, but they had never been that violent. He raced towards the nearest Zeta Tube.

He needed to talk to The Justice League.

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*The Watchtower*

November 12th  
20:00 EST

The still quiet of space pressed heavy against Bart’s chest. He rubbed his arm, trying to fight off the chilling sadness as he gazed around the grotto. He hated those empty eyes of the holograms of his fallen comrades. They captured their bodies. But they could never display nor commemorate the complexities of their souls. It was only in these moments that he found himself very still. He felt small in his red and yellow as he stood in front of Wally’s image.

Wally.

He still felt gross wearing Wally’s old colors. Despite Artemis’s reassurances, he couldn't shake the words ‘fake’ and ‘unworthy’ from his mind.

He wrapped his arms around himself. Bart looked up at Wally’s hologram with only a tiny movement of his head, as if he didn’t deserve to look at him. For once the pangs of his stomach weren't from hunger, they were from guilt.

He was from the future. He should have known. He should have paid more attention to the lessons and stories from superhero’s past. He should have known that Wally would not have been able to keep up.

The image of Artemis’s face when he died, seeing everything within her break as she collapsed to the ground, flashed in his mind. Whenever he thought of Wally, that’s all it ever came back too.

He should have known.

…..

He should have known.

…..

It was all his fault.

“You shouldn't do that to yourself.”

Bart could have sworn his heart leaped into his throat. As though he appeared from thin air, Tim stood right beside him. Bart was amazed and terrified that every Batkid seemed to possess this skill. It was one he wished they’d use a little less.

“Jesus Tim!” Bart managed to choke out as he clutched a hand on his chest.

But Tim did not respond nor apologize. He only peered up at Wally through his black sunglasses.

Bart cleared his throat, “What uh, what do you mean? Do what?”
“Compare yourself to him,” Tim answered, his eyes unmoving from the hologram.

“W-what?” Bart lost his mental bearings for a moment. It spooked him just how well Tim always knew what was going through his mind. He gathered himself, quickly putting on the false persona that he showed everyone. “Psh, whatever dude you’re totally off. My super future brain can run on like attoseconds.” He waved his hand in front of him. “There’s no way you can ever know what I’m thinkin.”

Tim looked over at him and gave a small shrug. “Hey, I’m a detective, body language is my second language.”

Bart chuckled and gave him a friendly punch on the shoulder. He wiggled his eyebrows. “Ha. I bet Cassie can attest to that.”

Tim gave him a playful shove as he smiled, “Shut up dude.”

Silence fell between them for what seemed like an eternity. Bart felt sadness overtake him, as he once again fell to his thoughts.

“It’s not your fault.” Tim stated.

“What?” Bart was once again jerked from his inner musings.

“What happened to Wally,” Tim’s voice remained firm, “That wasn’t your fault.”

Bart’s mouth twisted into a grimace. He looked away from him. Guilt and embarrassment flushed his face red.

Tim tried once again to break through the silence. “I know you think-”

“It’s just not something I want to talk about right now.” Bart snapped. His brow furrowed and his fists clenched.

Tim raised an eyebrow. Bart’s stern glare gave him clear indication that it was not a matter to press any further. “Okay,” he responded. He made his way towards Jason’s, the second Robin’s, statue. He clasped his arms behind his back as he stared up at the towering figure.

“So like..uh,” Bart began. He rubbed his hand behind his head. “Don’t be mad if I ask this….but I’m like really really curious and everyone acts all weird when I ask.”

Tim turned his head towards him. His eyes went wide. “Uhhh you’re not asking me to give you The Birds and The Bees talk, are you?”

“Oh shut up,” Bart smiled and shoved him. “I know what sex is. Ass.” They laughed.

“No but,” Bart continued, “And I mean no disrespect when I say this, but who is this guy?”

Tim’s brow furrowed in confusion. He pointed his thumb up at the hologram, “Jason?”

“Yes...like,” Bart began. “I know he was on the team and he obviously died, but what happened to him? Whenever I ask someone on the team, they either didn’t know him, or they don’t want to talk about it.”

Tim let out a small hum. His eyes lowered to the ground momentarily. He rubbed his hands. “That’s uh,” he fumbled for his words. “It’s kind of a...it’s a really gruesome story.” He peered at Bart through the top of his sunglasses. “It’s not a story I really want to tell.”
Though he wanted this little mystery to cleared, Bart understood Tim’s wishes all too well. His mind also contained many memories of his past he never wished to tell. He shrugged. “All crash dude. I get it.”

Tim cleared his throat, “Hey well, I’m here because I think Batman finished the analysis on the alien device you picked up. Wanna hear the verdict?”

“Sure.” Bart responded. They walked towards the main meeting room. Familiar voices began to echo down the halls.

“See you’re working on that alien tech Kid Flash and I acquired.” Flash asked Batman. “Figure out what it is yet?”

“I believe so.” Batman answered. He typed away on one of the floating keyboards. “I’m waiting on Black Canary to arrive. Seemed fair to share my finding with the head of The League first.”

“Makes sense,” Flash added.

“I heard the news. Congratulations.”

It took Barry a moment to register what Batman was referring to. Sometimes the monotony of Batman’s voice made the context of his words hard to decipher.

“Oh. Uh, yeah,” Barry began. ”Thank you. Iris and I went with Dawn and Don.” He chuckled. “Well, more like she protested and I begged.”

“Dawn and Don.” Batman’s eyes never strayed from his computer screen. “Clever.”

Barry walked towards one of the windows. He stared out into space as he rubbed the back of his head. “It’s weird you know? How much a family changes everything. How you think you have your life figured out.” He smiled as he crossed his arms. “Then they completely rewrite everything you’ve ever wanted.”

“No one would blame you you know.” Batman replied.

Barry turned towards him, tilting his head. “For what?”

“No reason to play dumb Barry.” Batman chided. “You’re a smart man.”

Barry sighed. “You’re talking about retirement.”

“Correct.”

“I’ve thought about it.” Barry’s mouth twisted in thought. He huffed in frustration. “It was different when it was just me and Iris. But..if something happens to me now. I’d have so much I’d leave behind.” He turned towards the window once more. “I can’t imagine doing that to them.”

“But?”

“But, I couldn't leave you guys without a speedster.”

“We would have Bart.”

Barry groaned. “That’s the problem.”

Bart perked up at the sound of his name. In some form of morbid curiosity, he hid behind the doorway to eavesdrop on their conversation. Tim followed.
Barry continued, “Bart.” He inhaled and exhaled audibly. “Bart is no where near ready enough to go out on his own.”

Tim watched as the muscles in Bart’s face tense. He brought his gaze to the ground.

“Don’t get me wrong, I love the kid but...” Barry held out his hands in front of him. “He almost got himself killed out there last time Bats. He’s just...doesn't think. He doesn't think of the consequences of his actions.

Tim saw Bart clench his fist. He turned his head towards the wall. Was it to stifle his anger? Or perhaps to hide tears?

“But Bart’s not mature enough to be out on his own,” Barry stated. He stared out into the deep blackness of space once more. “I can’t leave.”

The robotic voice rang through the meeting area. Black Canary glided towards them.

“So,” She asked. “What’s the results?”

Tim and Bart came out of hiding to join them. Barry jump slightly. He was not aware that they were so close. He prayed that Bart didn't hear him.

“Analysis from the alien technology Flash recovered turned out to be a sort of seismic disruptor.” Batman brought up a schematic of the alien cylinder on his computer screen. “It has the power to not only vibrate the ground below it, but to also disintegrate some of it at the atomic level. In Layman’s terms, it has the power to cause earthquakes at anytime, anywhere.”

“But there weren't any earthquakes,” Bart recalled. “They blew up their machines almost right after they planted it.”

“I was suspicious of that too.” Batman added. “The device also contains a satellite transmitter. It turns out it transmitted data up into space to an unknown recipient before blowing up. I would assume this was just a trial to see if their devices could work on our soil.”

Tim raised an eyebrow. “Sooo, aliens are invading...to make earthquakes?”

Black Canary hummed in thought. “I have a feeling there is something more behind it.” She looked closer at the schematic on the screen. “This technology is Apokoliptional in origin.”

Bart’s eyes widened, “That’s not good.”

“Nice work Batman,” Black Canary continued. “We will have to investigate this further, be on our toes for more invaders.”

The robotic voice rang once more as Virgil appeared on the Zeta platform. He ran towards them.

“Hey! I’m glad you guys are here something hap-” He halted abruptly when he noticed the images on the computer. “Oh. Uh. I’m sorry. I didn't interrupt anything did I?”

“No, we’re just finishing up.” Black Canary smiled. “What is it?”

Virgil went on to recount all the events from earlier.
“And you said the Dakota City Police had inhibitor collars as well?” Batman asked him.

“Yeah,” Virgil answered. “I found it really weird.”

“It was the same in Gotham City too.” Tim added, pointing out a growing pattern.

Batman placed a hand on Virgil’s shoulder. “Thank you Virgil. You did a good job.” He turned his attention towards the screen again. “And I will expect a full witness report by 07:00 hours.”

Virgil grunted. “Aw but I had plans,” he tried to whine, but Batman peered over at him. His glare spooked Virgil into obedience, “Um, yes sir.” He was still getting used to the formalities of the superhero world. Surprisingly, it contained much more paperwork than anticipated.

“Oh, and Bats?” Virgil added. “So have you ever heard of that new Spark stuff? Because I think…” He rattled his brain for the right thing to say. It was only a theory. But he didn’t want to sound like an idiot. He decided to continue with it anyways. “I mean I know it might seem weird but...I think, I think it might have has something to do with their powers.”

Again, Batman’s eyes never strayed from his screen. “It’s a possibility. We’ll look into it.”
A chilling wind swept across the reservation as Jaime landed with soft steps on the ground below. Nightfall would be there soon and with it crept the cool air. A group of small children stopped to gawk at his Blue Beetle armor. Their brown skin and long black braids were sullied and disheveled from playing in the dirt. He caught wind of their hushed whispers to one another as their wide eyes followed him. He smiled, looking over to them as he walked past. One of the little girls raised her pudgy hand to wave at him. A smile bunched her chubby cheeks to reveal several missing baby teeth. He chuckled and waved back. She reminded him of his little sister.

He walked up the porch of a sandy, Pueblo-inspired home. It’s cracked window and walls reflected the impoverished aura of the town it resided in. Distant shouts of children and adults carried on in the distance. Jaime raised his fist to knock on the wood door. He groaned as he exhaled. One of the hardest things about being a superhero were cases that blurred the line between right and wrong. No one warned him of the crimes he’d have to investigate that were committed for survival.

Three months ago, large department stores and pharmacies in El Paso noticed their deliveries were coming up short. Mainly off of incoming semi trucks and trains. It started off with small boxes going missing in the middle of unloading. It was originally thought of as employee theft. But when the thieves adopted more forceful measures, they realized this wasn’t the case. Managers began finding their employees rendered unconscious and larger portions of their shipments missing. Knocking them out meant for more time to steal. While no one was killed, several broken bones and concussions did create cause for alarm.

El Paso Mayor Wesley Fermin requested a meeting with Blue Beetle after spotting him on patrol around the city. He asked for Jaime’s help in stopping the thefts. The business owners were becoming outraged and Mayor Fermin was running for governor. So his inability to solve these crimes on his own affected his campaign. He needed to end the charade before it ruined his chance.

Jaime had assumed that the missing products were expensive electronics and narcotics. But when he asked, he found his assumptions to be completely wrong. All the reported missing products were produce, canned goods, and antibiotics. There was also a list of several missing medications that Jaime couldn’t pronounce. Scarab informed him that their primary use, was for cancer treatment.

Witnesses reported seeing several figures, clad in black fleeing the scenes. They spotted later that night on the same reservation, at the same house, that Jaime currently stood in front of. He felt a sinking feeling rise in the pit of his belly. There he was, sent by one of El Paso’s wealthiest politicians, to interrogate some of the poorest people in his city over some missing fruits and vegetables. He felt like garbage; rotting, vile, garbage. But stealing was stealing. And being a superhero meant serving justice for everyone, even for the assets of greasy businessmen in their $3,000 suits.

The door rattled as he knocked. A Native American man appeared from behind the door as it creaked open. Specks of grey freckled his long black braid. Deep wrinkles around his eyes and mouth lined his face. His skin was rough. A yellow tint could be seen in the whites of his eyes. He stood with a wooden cane in his right hand.
“Oh,” he was startled by Jaime’s appearance in his armor. “Oh my. You are-you are that Blue Beetle hero I’ve seen on the news.”

Jaime cleared his throat. “Uh yeah-yes. Yes I am,” he fumbled. “I’m looking for the Tribal Chief? I was told...I could find him here?” He cursed the uptalk in his voice. He didn’t sound professional at all.

“Yes, that is me,” he assured. “How can I help you?”

Jaime glanced around him. He noticed several of the townspeople staring. “Uh, could-we possibly talk inside? There’s kind of something important and private I need to talk to you about.”

“Oh of course,” he replied with a genuine smile. He opened the door to allow him entry. “Please come in. Have a seat. It is not everyday that I get a celebrity in my home.”

Jaime chuckled nervously, “Thanks.”

The inside of the house was plain and homely. It smelled of burnt food and cheap incense. Jaime took a seat on the stained, matted sofa. The Chief wobbled behind him. His cane shook with each step. Before he sat down on the recliner, he let out a small groan. He clenched his teeth and hissed as he grabbed his side.

“Are you alright sir?” Jaime asked. He leaned forward, ready to stand to help him if needed.

“Oh no no. I am fine,” He assured as he sat down with caution. “Stomach pain. It makes it hard to walk sometimes.” He placed both his hands on the top of his cane. A small smile formed on his lips. “And you can call me Marvin.”

“Oh. Okay,” Jaime began. He cleared his throat in nervousness. “Um Marvin, have you noticed any influx of goods coming into the reservations. Stuff like food and medicine?”

He tilted his head in thought, “We do get donations from time to time. Mostly from churches or kind individuals.”

“Well, these individuals, did any of them ever seem questionable to you? Do you know where they get the donated goods from?”

The Chief twitched at his question, “I am not sure I understand.”

Jaime sighed, “Have you heard on the news about the department stores and pharmacies in the city being robbed? They’re getting jumped while unloading their shipments.”

Marvin began to rub his top hand over the other. He cleared his throat, “Oh um, yes. I have heard of that.”

“Well, several witnesses have seen some of the same people robbing the stores, come to this house.” Jaime looked towards the ground for a moment and then back up. He paused before continuing. “People are saying that they might be distributing or selling the stolen product here on the reservation.”

“Oh.” Marvin began to cough. He pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and placed it over his mouth. When it ceased he added, “I-I would not know anything about that.”

*He is lying Jaime Reyes,* The Scarab’s voice vibrated in in his mind. But he did not need his advisement to know The Chief was lying. His body language was all too obvious.
“Are you sure?” Jaime asked as he raised his eyebrow. “You haven’t seen any shady characters around?” He paused, biting his lower lip. “Or people…suddenly with medications they shouldn’t be able to afford?” That sentence left a vile taste in his mouth. He felt like a slimeball.

“No-no I have-” Marvin began to cough again. He brought his handkerchief to his mouth once more. It grew into a harsh fit. “Excuse me,” He wheezed. When he took the cloth away from his face, Jaime noticed fresh stains of blood speckled on it.

“Father? Are you alright?” A feminine voice rang from outside the room. He caught a glimpse of her figure rushing through the doorway to the living room. “Who was at the door?”

Jaime raised his eyebrows in discovery that the voice, belonged to Jenny Ravenhair.

She froze upon seeing the Blue Beetle armor. “Hello,” she said with a cautious tone as she walked towards him with careful steps.

“Jenny, this is-” Marvin began.

“Blue Beetle.” Jenny interrupted. She held out her hand. “It’s a pleasure.” Jaime stood and shook her hand.

Another teenaged boy appeared in the living room doorway. Shaggy brown hair framed his long face and high cheekbones. “Jenny? Are they back yet?” he asked. He froze and let out a small gasp at the sight of Blue Beetle.

Behind him emerged a young girl. Jaime deduced she couldn’t have been taller than Garfield. Her red hair was tied in a loose ponytail and tossed around the front of her shoulder. Her face was innocent and playful. She stared at Jaime with her large green eyes. “Woaaah,” She awed.

“Ohmigosh ohmigosh no way!” A huge smiled rose her chubby cheeks. She ran up to Jaime. “You’re that superhero from the news!” She darted her eyes all around his armor. She reached out her pointer finger towards his arm in curiosity. “So is that, like, your skin?”

He chuckled again. “Naw, it’s just armor. I’m just a regular person underneath.” Her eyes lit up.

The Chief erupted into another coughing fit.

“Adalae,” The girl flinched as Jenny said her name. There was a harsh scorn in her voice. “You and Sebastian take my father up to his room. He needs to rest.”

“Aw but…” Adalae began to whine. The brown haired boy, who Jaime assumed was Sebastian, grabbed her by the arm.

“You heard ‘er, move your ass.” He yanked her away with an amount of force that Jaime felt was unnecessary. She squealed. He shoved her towards the kitchen. “Grab his medicine.”

Sebastian helped Marvin to his feet. When Adalae returned, Jaime noticed the beige pills she brought were, not in a transparent orange bottle like one would get from a pharmacy, but in a ziplock bag. As if they were just gathered instead of prescribed. He found it odd and suspicious.

“I am sorry Blue Beetle,” Marvin groaned. His voice was hoarse, “I am not well today. But my
daughter Jennifer,” he placed a hand on her shoulder and smiled. “She can meet with you. She is on
the council and next in line to lead our tribe. She is a wonderful, smart, strong young woman.” She
gave him a soft smile. “I am sure she can help you.”

“Thank you father,” Jenny replied. “You should get some rest.”

Sebastian and Adalae led him out of the room.

Jaime turned towards her, “Um, so, I was telling him...”

“I know why you are here,” she interrupted. She cocked her hip to the side and crossed her arms.
Her blue sun dress highlighting her curves as she moved. The golden, bison-etched medallion rested
around her neck.

“You do?” Jaime asked.

She raised her chin as she spoke, “You are here about the missing cargo from those stores.”

“Yeah,” Jaime sounded confused. “But how did you know that?”

“I may live in squander hero, but I do have social media.”

Jaime couldn’t seem to find any words.

She continued, “I’ve seen the news articles, the opinion posts on the accusations. How we ‘dirty
Indians’ are tearing the city apart with our ‘looting.’” She sneered. “At least, that’s what we’re being
accused of. I find ‘looting’ to be a relative term.” Her lip twitched into a momentary snarl. “I do not
appreciate you interrogating my father. He can not handle such... uncalled for stress.”

His mouth fell slightly, “So you know that I’m here to investigate?”

She smirked, “Are you surprised? Not used to someone being one step ahead of you, are you?” Her
smirk grew into a full fledged grin as she narrowed her eyes. “Jaime Reyes.”

He flinched at the sound of his name. His jaw dropped, “You know?”

Her lips puckered into a pout as she twirled a strand of her hair around her pointer finger, “One of
the benefits of being pretty. Boys spill their secrets to you without even thinking.”

Jaime crinkled his nose and scowled. He retracted his Blue Beetle armor. “Guess there’s no reason to
be so formal then.”

She tilted her head, “I suppose so.”

There was a moment of silence between them. Jaime chewed on the inside of his cheek in frustration.
He couldn’t believe that Tye told his secret identity to her. “Look,” Jaime sighed. “I’m not here to to
bring anybody in. I’m just here to talk.”

“And so you have.” Her lips pressed into a thin line. “My father gave you his answer. He doesn’t
know anything.”

Jaime’s eyes narrowed. He took a step closer to her, sensing that she was hiding something, “What
about you then? Would you like to tell me if you know anything-”

Her voice rose as she talked over him, “What I would like.” She took a breath to calm herself, “Is for
you to leave my home.”
Jaime jumped as the front door swung open. He turned to see Tye, a blonde girl, and a black haired young man enter the room. Stuffed backpacks rested upon their backs. A surprised look flashed on Tye’s face.

“Jaime? What are you doing here?” He asked.

Jaime ground his teeth. He regretted retracting his armor. This investigation was for Blue Beetle, not Jaime Reyes. He didn’t want to expose himself in front of these two new strangers. “Some...friends of mine...had some stuff stolen from them recently.” Jaime explained. Tye raised his eyebrows. He looked over to Jenny. She pursed her lips and grimace, giving Tye a few small nods. Tye then instantly knew what he was really talking about. Jaime continued, “Someone said they saw the people who took their stuff bring it here.”

“Is that so?” Tye furrowed his brow, “So you came here to harass my girlfriend about it?”

Jaime crossed his arms and shrugged, “No. Just having a friendly conversation is all.” He bit his lip, studying the nervous looks on the two stranger’s faces. “Who are they?”

Tye shrugged and held tighter on the straps of his backpack. “Summer and Jivan. They go to our school.”

“Really?” Jaime raised an eyebrow in doubt. He nodded upwards, “What’s in the backpacks?” His question prompted their snippy banter.

“Homework.”

“Over Thanksgiving break?”

“It appears so.”

“You wouldn’t mind me taking a look then?”

“You have a warrant?”

“Tye!” Jenny snapped at him to shut him up. He looked away in defeat.

Jaime, Scarab began. I can easily use our x-ray vision if you wish to look into their backpacks.

“Don’t bother,” Jaime told it. He groaned, running his hand through his hair. “Look, can we take a walk?” His face softened as he looked at Tye. “Just me and you?”

Tye paused, thinking before he answered. “I suppose I can do that.”

“I’ll meet you at the old Kord Industries parking lot. In like, 20 minutes?”

“Sure.”

Jaime felt heavy stares on his back as he walked out the door.

Tye arrived at the parking lot to find Jaime pacing. He seem distracted, not even noticing Tye was there until he was almost right next to him. Both boys found themselves quiet. Their blank stares giving way that neither knew what to say.

Tye nodded his head towards the street, “You wanted to walk. Let’s walk.”
Jaime brought his hoodie up over his head. He placed his hands in the front pocket. He matched steps with Tye’s slow pace. Both stared straight ahead.

“I don’t like her,” Jaime eventually broke the silence. His gazed forward still.

“Good thing you are not the one dating her then,” Tye responded.

“Yeah, you’re right.” Jaime scoffed. “Because I wouldn’t share my secret identity with anyone I’m dating.”

Tye’s eyes went wide as he looked at him. “That-, I…” he shook his head and groaned. ”I am sorry about that Jaime. It kind of...just came out.”

“Yeah, I get it. Pretty girl.” His voice was calm. He gave Tye a small smile. “Makes you babble.”

Tye smiled back at him. He felt the tension between them start to dissipate. “I didn’t mean to snap at you. I know you are just doing your job.”

“It’s alright,” Jaime accepted his apology.

“Can I asked you a hypothetical question?” Tye asked. Jaime raised an eyebrow at him. Tye continued, “Hypothetically, if you did find out who was taking the stolen goods. What would you do?”

Jaime sighed, “I would have to report them. Or take them to the authorities.” His lips drooped into a sad frown. He glanced at the ground, “It’s my job.”

“But what if was for people in need? People who were dying and starving?”

“Then I would tell them instead of breaking the law they could ask for help from the government...or community….or volunteers maybe?”

“The community and the government do not give a shit about us!” Tye spat. His face contorted with anger,

“Tye…” Jaime stopped dead in his tracks. Worry weighed heavy on his expression.

Tye stopped as well. He took a deep breath to calm himself. “Reservations fall upon the responsibility of the federal government, not local. So you really think that they care what happens to us? Have you ever read a history book?” He snarled. “They are purposefully letting us die.”

Jaime’s mouth dropped. He shook his head in disbelief. He no longer recognized the person in front of him. This was not the normal behavior of the best friend he had known his whole life. “Tye what has gotten into you? I’ve never heard you talk like this before.” He narrowed his eyes. “Is this all really coming from you? Or maybe that new girl of yours?”

“Maybe my ‘new girl’ has just enlightened me to the way things are.” Tye quieted himself, realizing that he was on the verge of shouting. “The people and businesses of this town let all those products go to waste anyways. They don’t deserve them.”

“Tye you can’t keep doing this. I will stop you if you keep this up.”

Tye's face relaxed. “Keep doing what? I thought we were talking hypothetically?”

Jaime grunted and shook his head. “Look, politics aside,” his gaze fell to the ground and then back up at him. His eyes filled with sadness, “I miss you dude.” Tye felt a pang of guilt strike his stomach.
Jaime continued. He gestured towards him. “But this...this ‘new’ Tye, this...law-breaking, radical Tye,” He placed his hand on his chest, “I can’t support.” Tye looked away from him, a sad scowl playing on his lips. “I just-” Jaime continued. “I just want my best friend back.”

Tye turned his back to him. An ace rose in his chest as he felt it hard to breathe. “I have to go,” He heard his voice crack, “Jenny will be wondering where I am. And I need to check up on her father.”

As Tye took a few steps forward, sudden curiosity pinged Jaime.

“Hey,” He asked. Tye paused and looked over his shoulder at him. Jaime continued. “So..if you don’t mind me asking, what’s wrong with her Dad anyways?”

Tye’s eyes narrows. He turned away from him again before answering, “Liver cancer.”

There was never another moment in Jaime’s life where he felt more villainous.

It wasn’t long before Tye found himself on Jenny’s porch. He trudged through the front door and closed it. He leaned up against it, closing his eyes as he tilted his head up. He sighed. So this was what losing a best friend felt like.

“Well?”

He opened his eyes to find Jenny with crossed arms, staring at him, waiting for an answer. Jivan, Summer, Sebastian, and Adalae sat about the room. Their eyes were on him as well.

Tye sighed, “He pretty much knows.”

“Damnit!” Sebastian shouted as he stood. “I told you we were getting sloppy.”

“It does not matter anymore.” Jenny chided. “One more month, and we will put our final plan into action.”

“Woah, Jenny, I told you already,” Tye approached her. His brows furrowed. “I’m not comfortable with that plan. I will not kill for-”

“But, lover,” Jenny glided over to him. A seductive grin played on her lips. She placed a hand on his cheek. Her eyes and amulet began to emit a dull blue light, “You know deep down...it is the only way.”

Tye was under her spell once more as the same light sparked in his eyes. He clenched his teeth and snarled, “They will suffer for what they have done.”

_Palo Alto_
November 17th, 2016
23:45 UTC

The clank of the metal stairs rang in Artemis’s ears as she stammered up them to her apartment. She groaned at the pain in her muscles. These latest missions of capturing rouge metateens had put her skills and body to the test. They kept sprouting up more and more. She swooned at the thought of the hot shower that waited for her. She placed her key in the lock.
There was no one to greet her anymore. Not even her pitbull Brucely. He was currently at a friend’s. She found that in Wally’s passing there would be times where she couldn’t even feed or take care of herself, let alone someone else. It wasn’t fair nor healthy for him. He needed love that Artemis couldn’t give right now. Zataana protested, saying that animals were keen to human emotions and important for recovery. But that was a hope that Artemis couldn’t bear to rely on.

The loneliness of the place was chilling. She hated it. The quiet screamed at her. It was a cry that grew louder the longer she was there. Her apartment had lost it’s laughter and warmth without him there. So to fight it, she busied herself with mission after mission, making every excuse to not go back. It seemed that the warmth in her life was only found in the company of friends now. But at the end of the day, when they all returned to their civilian lives, she was left alone to the emptiness of that second story flat. She tried so hard to find that flare of happiness again, but the void only grew wider.

The hot water of the shower splashed all over her. The only thing that screamed louder than the quiet, were her thoughts when she was alone. Poisonous, unhealthy thoughts. She sighed, whether it was in sadness or content, Artemis wasn’t sure.

She heard that time heals all wounds. She laughed at the sentiment now. And although she attended his funeral, she couldn’t ignore the scratching thought in the back of her mind that Wally wasn’t really gone. They had been apart for an extended period of time before, how was this any different?

She climbed into bed. She stirred under the covers waiting for the ‘click’ of his key in the door. And the warm touch of his hand wrapping around her waist as he climbed into bed with her. She could hear the haunting tone of his “Hey Beautiful” echo in her mind. She would turn to meet him and find his green eyes. Eyes that held such longing and love, staring right through her. He would kiss her with a passion and need that was only theirs. He would hold and kiss her deeply and desperately in a way that was sacred between them.

She woke a few hours. In her daze she realize that she was only dreaming, those words and those kisses never came. Artemis glanced around her moonlit bedroom. All his belongings bared a crushing weight on her mind. Early after his death, those object brought her comfort, brought her a sense calm, as if he were still there. But now, it seemed that all they did was plague her soul. Not because of memories, no. But because they reminded her of everything she was forgetting. She began to lose the memory of what those kisses felt like. It took too much effort to recall how his touch sparked against her skin. The sound of his laughter began to fade from her mind. And that terrified her.

She grasped the pillow that used to be his. That flat, useless pillow, covered with a yellow lightning bolt pillow case. She held it to her face, and breathed, trying to fill her senses with him again. She choked. Artemis found herself unable to breathe as despair crushed her chest. As a sharp inhale finally filled her lungs, she buried her face and sobbed into the dingy pillow case. For the first time since his death, it no longer smelled like him.

There comes a time mourning when people fall apart. And, in the vast loneliness of her quiet bedroom is where Artemis fully broke. After four months, should could no longer allow a belief in miracles. Her wails shook the stillness of the room. She choked on her sobs, choked on the realization that she was alone. She slammed her fists on the mattress in her anger of not being able to keep herself composed. Up to this point, her small bouts of sadness had never been so severe. Up until now, she could, for a brief moment, mask her despair with the comforts of friends.

But now there was no more make believe. There was no more pretending. There was no more hope in happy endings. There was only acceptance. The ache in her chest started to suffocate. She had to face the realization that Wally wasn't coming back. Too much time had passed for her to pretend that
he was alive. Too much time had passed for that scratching thought to survive any longer.

It was time to get rid of Wally’s things. It was time for her to heal.
The Damsel in Distress

Bludhaven
December 4th, 2016
23:15 EDT

Howling winter winds pounded against the wall of the warehouse. Their cries went unheard as Garfield, disgruntled, turned the television up higher. It’s speakers we no match for a distressed Bart.

“Whyyyyyyyyy?” Bart wailed, letting his head and hands fall on his heap of homework spread out on the kitchen island. “I haaaate thiiiiiiiis.” He bunched his face into a pout. “I almost miss The Apocalypse where I didn’t have to do this junk.”

Tim sat beside him. He chuckled in amusement, gathering a few of Bart’s papers. Being Bart’s tutor proved to be both tiresome and amusing. “Sorry dude, but in this time, freshman have to take biology.”

Bart let out a dramatic groan, “But whyyyyyyyyy. Who the hell cares how plants photosynthesize, or whatever. Whyyyyy do I have to memorize every part of a cellllllllll?”

Tim shook his head, “Come on Bart just one more round of flashcards and then we’re done. Besides don’t you memorize things at superspeed anyways?”

“Well yeah,” Bart rolled his eyes. “But just because I can memorize something and-and spit it out onto a test doesn’t mean I actually understood it.”

The corner of Tim’s mouth rose into a half smile, “That’s funny. That’s what all the older guys say about college too.”

Bart’s papers were blown all over the floor as a sudden, chilling wind swept across the room. Jaime trudged as fast as he could through the front door. His fur-lined parka curled around his wind burnt face.

“Merida!” He slammed the door and tore off his gloves. He shivered, “Esta f-f-frio a-f-f-fuera.” From down the hall, Sphere rolled up to greet him with her mechanical chirps. Jaime gave her a few quick pats.

“Heyyyyy Her-man-o!” Bart greeted.

“What are you doing here?” Tim asked. “It’s Friday night.” He raised an eyebrow and smiled. “No hot date?”


That was a lie. Jaime had been on patrol in El Paso. Despite being Tye’s long time friend he knew that he had to stop him. He thought maybe if he caught Tye in the act he could somehow scare him straight. He didn’t want to tell anyone on The Team about it, even though he knew he could use their guidance. But Tye would certainly go to jail if he involved anyone else. Though, with a sigh of relief, he found that since he visited the reservation, all was quiet in El Paso. Maybe he had gotten through to him, for now.

“What about you?” Jaime grabbed the chocolate milk from the fridge and closed it. “You’re the one
with a girlfriend. You make Cassie mad?” He teased as he poured himself a glass.

Tim’s eyebrows rose as high as they could. “Trust me, a girl with the strength of an Amazon is the last person I’d want to upset.” Jaime laughed. Tim continued. “Naw she’s out gift shopping with the girls tonight for Raquel’s wedding.”

Jaime’s eyes went wide at the thought of having to go shopping with girls, “Woof. Dodged a bullet with that one.”

“Tell me about it,” Tim agreed.

“Guys!” Garfield scorned as he looked over the back of the couch and glared at them. “Shut up. He’s talking about us.” He turned his attention back to the TV. The other boys filled in around him in the living room. The boisterous voice of G. Gordon Godfrey grated their eardrums.

“Folks if I’ve asked you once, I’ve asked you a thousand times. Should we trust these so-called ‘Leaguers’ these ‘Superpowered Saviors’?” A collective groan filled the living room. “And most important of all (and the main topic of today’s show) when will the government force them to take responsibility for their actions? The collateral damage they cause?” Godfrey crossed his legs in his chair. His eyes narrowed and he peered into the camera. “The civilian lives that get caught in the crossfire?”

The boys found their full attention given to the television screen. Mouth agape, Garfield turned the volume up louder with haste. He was sure that he was not going to like what Godfrey had next to say.

“I am sure we all remember the tragedy of Bludhaven not three months ago,” Gordon continued. “All of the children who lost their lives in that alien terrorist bombing. The papers, ahh yes, the papers,” He waved his pointer finger at the camera. “The papers will tell you how braaave and valiant your Justice Leaguers were but,” He raised an eyebrow. “Where were they? Hum? As far as I could tell, the only ‘Leaguer’ doing anything was Superman and, well, we all know how well he helped.” Beast Boy felt a growl emerge from his throat.

The boys flinched as Godfrey jumped from his seat, his face furrowed in rage as he came closer to the camera. He hands curled into fists. “THIRTY-TWO! THIRTY-TWO children lost their lives that day, and EIGHTY-THREE adults were incinerated in the skyscrapers just five miles away. I say again, where were the other Leaguers? They have how many on their team?” His voice calmed. “Not to mention their proteges.” Harsh scowls emerged on all their faces as Godfrey continued. “Where was Batman during this? Or Robin or Batgirl or anyone? Did they suddenly not care? Were we ‘regular folks’ just not a priority for them? And not just that, but look at the damage they leave behind.” Images of the destruction after the attacks played on the large screen behind his chair as Godfrey continued. “Who pays for that damage? Huh? WE do. We the American people pay for the Justice League's sloppiness with our hard earned tax dollars. I, for one Ladies and gentlemen, have had it. And I am not the only one.”

The camera lens widened to show a middle aged woman with red curly hair and cat-eye glasses in the guest chair across from him. “Today on my show I have a special guest. My ever beautiful and sharp as a whip sister, Grace Godfrey.”

A smile spread across her red lips, "Thanks for having me Gordon."

"You are welcome. Now Grace,” Gordon gestured towards the audience. “Tell our kind viewers why you are here today."
"The same reason that you are Gordon." Her velvet voice spilled from her mouth. "Because I am worried. Worried and angry. I love this country, I love it's people, and most importantly, I love it's children. I'm sure you've heard of new superpowered teenagers sprouting up? Gordon, you cannot imagine what they are going through. One day you're normal and then the next you wake up and you're shooting fire from your hands!"

"I'd imagine it would be terrifying." G. Gordon added.

"It is G. And the Justice League has proven that they do not care about these children." The boys' looked around at one another, their faces bunching in confusion. "Children that only need support and guidance, The Justice League treat with the same amount of violence they'd show a homicidal maniac!" Her voice was almost panicked.

Gordon feigned astonishment. As if his show wasn’t scripted. "Whatever do you mean Grace?"

"Well, I'll tell you." Grace turned her full attention towards the camera. Stern, overplucked eyebrows furrowed over her green eyes. "On October 27th a young girl’s life was changed forever. “Deborah Morgna,” Photographs of a teenage girl montaged on the screen behind her. Long red hair framed her heart shaped face. White teeth complimented her emerald green eyes. The photos showed her smiling and laughing with friends during school and casual activities. Grace continued, "A student at Gotham North High School faced a new nightmare plaguing our young adults. After coming home from a night out with friends Deborah quickly found out that she was, what scientists are calling, a ‘metahuman’. Humans who have the genetic makeup for so-called ‘superpowers’.

"Wait, we fought that girl." Tim recalled as he studied the screen, remembering the fight with Batman, Nightwing, and the others.

Grace continued, pity plagued her expression. "As her powers unlocked, Deborah found herself unable to control her powers, creating a few small fires on her city block."

"Small?" Tim sneered.

"Scared, terrified, alone, Deborah ran into the street, crying for help!" Grace chimed at the camera. Her eyes narrowed. "When Batman and his crew arrived, instead of trying to help her, Deborah found herself the victim of a brutal assault. Savagely beaten even after she was tazed."

"What?" Tim snapped. His eyes narrowed and nose crinkled in confusion.

Grace placed her hands in her lap. She straighten out her posture as she glared at the camera with tension. "We had acquired video footage of the assault. Please be advised that this video contains graphic violence. Children and people with weak constitutions should look away now."

A cameraphone video appeared on the television. It was shaky with screams of pedestrians in the background, but the action it captured was still all too clear. It was a recording of that night. Tim watched as the video played Batgirl and Red Arrow firing their projectiles. Red Arrow fired his taser arrow and Deborah fell to the ground. A chilling roar scraped across the fuzzy audio as Arsenal pounced on on her. His fists slamming onto her face as she was helpless to protect herself. A string of blood rose off his fingers each time he brought his fist back to strike again. The boys’ eyes went wide. And, with convenience, the video stopped playing just before Red Arrow tackled Arsenal off of her.

"Jesus," Bart cringed as he covered his mouth.

"No way..its that-is that Arsenal?" Garfield gasped.

Tim clenched his teeth. His fist curled into a tight ball, "Yeah. And someone took a video of it."
This was not good.

Grace appeared again on the screen. She paused for a moment as she took a deep breath. “After her attack, Miss Morgna was admitted into the ICU at Gotham Municipal Hospital where she was then stabilized and required facial reconstructive surgery.” She grabbed the side of her glasses with diligence, pulling them up the bridge of her nose. “Deborah is currently in lockup awaiting her trial. I was able to get an exclusive interview with her.

A new video showed on the screen. Deborah sat in a steel chair. Her wrists were handcuffed and she sported an orange prison jumpsuit. Tears streamed down her bruised face and a nose brace covered her newly reconstructed nose.

Her voice stammered with sharp breaths, “I couldn’t-I couldn’t control myself.” Her cries were overdone and almost too pathetic. Tim could tell how forced they were. “I tried to stop but-but the fire...it just wouldn’t. It wouldn’t stop. I tried to get them to help me. I was so scared. I just wanted help, but they,” She sobbed once more. “They wouldn’t, they just kept attacking me. Why would they do that? Why?”

“Are you sure you weren’t under the influence of something?” Grace’s voice could be heard in the background. “Something that could have impaired your judgement or memory?”

Deborah shook her head vehemently, “No no of course not! I would never.”

“That’s bullshit!” Tim shouted as he jerked to the edge of his seat. The other boys jumped. His finger pointed at the TV as he addressed them. “I was there, that girl was high off her ass! She wasn’t scared. She was trying to hurt people.”

The video stopped and the feed of Grace and Gordon appeared once more. Grace addressed the camera. “And for those of you who are wondering, Deborah’s tox screen from that night came back negative for any drugs or alcohol. And the Justice League has yet to be made accountable for their brutal assault of a young girl.”

Stricken with rage, Tim jumped from his seat, kicking the coffee table out of his way as he stormed out of the living room. All they did that night was try to save innocent people’s lives. And now they were facing backlash from the public because Arsenal couldn’t keep it together.

“Turn that shit off dude,” Jaime ordered Garfield, seeing how upset the segment was making Tim upset. Garfield changed the channel.

Cat Grant appeared on the screen as a rerun from her segment played. “El Paso mayor, Wesley Fermin has been cleared of all charges today as accusations of money laundering and sexual assault have been dismissed.”

Garfield went to change the channel but Jaime intervened, “Wait, wait hold on a sec.”

Cat Grant continued. “Early last week, sexual assault charges were filed against Mr. Fermin by several women on the Tiguan Indian Reservation in El Paso. Money laundering charges also appeared, accusing Mr. Fermin of siphoning money from government aid programs. And also of collecting illegal taxes from the residents there. All charges were unanimously dropped this morning however, as the citizens filing the reports, confessed to their attempt at creating a smear campaign for Mr. Fermin as he begins to run for Texas governor.”

“Greaaaaat,” Jaime complained as he closed his eyes with a sigh. He prayed that Tye didn’t have anything to do with that. He wasn’t sure how much more trouble he could let him get away with.
Jaime, Garfield, and Bart turned their heads towards the kitchen as the heard the sound of Tim’s wrist communicator go off. Tim answered it. Batman’s face appeared on the floating screen.

“Robin, what is your current location?” His voice was urgent and hurried.

“I’m at the warehouse in Bludhaven,” he answered.

“Who is there with you?” He asked.

“Uhh Beast Boy, Kid Flash, and Blue Beetle. Oh and Sphere. Why?”

“I need you to all suit up for a mission right away. Zeta to the Zeta Platform in Minneapolis. From there I need you to head to Des Moines, Iowa in the Super Cycle. Do it now, there’s no time to waste. I’ll contact you with more details soon.”

“Uh. Wait but-”

“I'll explain soon. Suit up and head out now.”

And as fast as he appeared on screen, Batman disappeared. Tim turned to the other boys. “You heard him guys move out!” He boomed.

The four of them did as they were told. They Zetaed to Minneapolis and climbed into the Super Cycle. Its engines purred in the sky as Blue Beetle, Kid Flash, Robin, and Beast Boy rode in it through the crisp night air. They shared a common feeling of disorientation as Batman had yet to contact them with more information. Just as the boys’ whining was about to come to its peak, the communicator on Robin’s wrist cuff began to chime again. He answered the call and a video projection of Batman’s face played in front of them.

“I’m sorry for rushing you all out in such a hurry. I couldn’t waste time having you sit around while I retrieved details,” Batman apologized.

“Hey it’s cool Bats. We’ll forgive you this one time,” Kid Flash teased.

Blue Beetle gave him a quick jab in the ribs with his elbow. He drew his attention back to Batman. “What do you have for us?” Blue Beetle asked.

“As you know, three months ago several members of The Light, one of which being Deathstroke, a.k.a. Slade Wilson, were apprehended at the end of Artemis’s deep cover mission. Three weeks ago two of The Light’s former scientists, supposedly named Emily and John Madison, came to the authorities with additional incriminating evidence against The Light. They agreed to appear in court at Deathstroke’s trial next week if given federal witness protection and immunity. Apparently, they had left The Light of their own accord about a year ago and had been in hiding from them ever since. And they were tired of running.”

“So I take it we’re supposed to play bodyguard for them then?” Robin questioned.

The muscles on Batman’s face tensed, “I wish that were the case Robin. Emily and John were found brutally murdered in an apartment in Des Moines an hour ago. According to my sources, someone from The Light initiated a $120,000 bounty on their heads today.”

“Dios Mio...Merida,” Blue Beetle swore.

“So what are we supposed to do then?” Beast Boy asked.
“The Madison’s had a child, a 16-year-old girl who goes by Lily.” Batman stated. Next to his face on the screen appeared a picture of a young girl. The photo was slightly out of focus and appeared to be taken in passing. Her long, incredibly light hair appeared almost white, and covered most of her oval face. Her intense gaze peer over her shoulder

“Heyyy, she’s pretty cute,” Kid Flash chimed.

Batman sneered at his interruption. He continued, “Well, it appears that Lily escaped from the attackers. There is signs of heavy struggle at the crime scene and a trail of blood leading out of the apartment complex.”

Robin seemed skeptical, “Batman what makes you think she escaped? Couldn’t they have just kidnapped her?”

“No,” Batman stated firmly. “She was included in the bounty, and it was stated very clearly that in order to receive it the Madisons were to be killed, and nothing less.”

“So I take it you want us to find her?” Beast Boy asked.

“That’s precisely why I included you on this mission Beast Boy,” Batman said. “There will most likely still be law enforcement still at the scene, I need you to discretely infiltrate it and catch Lily’s scent. We need to track her down as soon as possible. According to my sources, some of the Mid West’s most deadliest of the criminal underworld are currently after her as we speak. Your mission is to find her before they do. I’ve gotten special permission from The League for you to bring her to The Watch Tower for now. Use the authorization code A14. With The Light’s connections, there is no certainty where on Earth she would be safe. You’ll bring her to The Tower so we can keep her safe and interview her. She might have important information on The Light as well. Martian Manhunter can wipe her memory of where the Zeta Tube is once everything is settled down.”

“Waaaait,” Kid Flash smirked. “Soooo basically our mission is to rescue a damsel in distress?”

Batman sighed, “I suppose you could look at it that way.”

“So crash!” Kid Flash exclaimed.

“Anyways,” Robin brought the focus back. “Do you have an address for us?”

“I’m sending it to you now,” Batman continued, “I wanted to send a female on this mission with you but everyone else is currently tied up. So remember to maintain a certain..sensitivity. Try not to come on too strong. Be prepared for her not to respond positively at first, after all men in masks are most likely who are trying to murder her.”

“Got it Batman,” Blue Beetle smiled. “Be sensitive and sweep her off her feet to safety.”

Batman grunted, “Just get there and get her out, fast. Over and out.”

The transmission from Robin’s communicator ceased as the screen disappeared.

“Dudes. Our mission is to save a cute girl,” Kid Flash stated with glee. “That is so crash! How often does that happen?”

“For real. It’s going to be even more awesome when I impress her with my super Scarab strength.” Blue Beetle bragged, flexing his arm.

“Ttst. In your dreams dude,” Kid Flash teased, shoving his shoulder.
Beast Boy rolled his eyes and groaned. He never understood what it was about girls that made the other guys act...well, crazy. “Yeahh, well she’s currently being hunted, so worry about getting her to safety first.”

“Guys, focus. We’re here,” Robin stated as he stopped the Super Cycle. He lowered it down into a cluster of trees just behind the apartment complex. He pulled up a blueprint on his communicator screen. “Alright, according to the schematics Batman just sent me, it’s the second floor window all the way to the left. It should lead right into one of their bedrooms. Beast Boy, can you climb up there and get in through the window?”

“Psh. Can I climb up there?” Beast Boy scoffed. He hopped up the brick wall with ease. He peered into the window, making sure no one was around, and slid his fingers under the crack in the window. There was an eerie stillness to the room. The scent within it was musky and floral, a confusing mixture of two bodies. This had to have been the parent’s room. From the other side of the closed door he heard stern voices, heavy footsteps, and the clicks of cameras. Batman had been right, CSI was still on scene. He morphed into a mouse and slide out beneath the crack of the door. He squeaked at the sight in front of him.

The unmoving, frigid bodies of the Madison’s rested in the kitchen. Their blood painted a crimson story of violence upon a canvas of floor tile and soaked wallpaper. Their wrenched figures were splayed about the floor. Fatal gunshot and stab wounds bled from their chests and torsos. The table and chairs in the conjoined living room and kitchen were either overturned or destroyed. Whoever these people were, they had put up one hell of a fight.

Beast Boy skurried his tiny mouse legs over to the ajar door next to the parents’ room. It was the only other bedroom in the apartment. The female pheromones in it were overpowering, Beast Boy was sure this was Lily’s room. He morphed to his regular form, opened the window, transformed into a bloodhound, locked onto her scent, and hopped out her bedroom window. He barked at his teammates to follow him, they did so from the air with the Super Cycle.

Beast Boy found spots of her blood along the trail, reinforcing the scent. He followed it all the way to a large abandoned warehouse, her smell was overpowering; she had to be in there. He barked rapidly, signaling that they had reached their destination.

“Alright team,” Robin started. “We might not be the only ones here so proceed with caut-”

The sound of rapid gunfire pierced the air. A sense of urgency rushed over them as they realized that they were out of time.

“We have to go now!” Blue Beetle shouted as he jumped from the Super Cycle. He jetted forward and crashed through a glass window in the ceiling of the warehouse. Beast Boy let out a loud roar and he morphed into a gorilla, tearing one of the doors off of its hinges. Robin quickly landed on the ceiling as he and Kid Flash jumped into the building through the hole that Blue Beetle had created.

Only slight streams of moonlight lit the the room as they were overcome by it’s vast darkness. The gunfire had ceased but their ears were filled with the sounds of painful grunts, cries, and the shrill clank of metal.

“Where are they? I can’t see anything!” Kid Flash exclaimed. Panic rose in his voice.

*Jaime Reyes, I am activating our Infrared Vision*, The Scarab stated.

Blue Beetle’s vision became blurred outlines of blues and greens. He looked around him until he landed upon multiple figures of reds and yellows. It was clear that they were in engaged combat. The
boys were shaken by another shot of gunfire. Blue Beetle began charging the cannon on his arm, adding moonlight to the room.

“There! Two o’clock! There’s a door in 300 feet!” Blue Beetle shouted. They charged towards it in desperation, fearing that they may have been too late.

“Be ready for what’s on the other side. Stay on guard!” Robin commanded.

Blue Beetle blasted through the doors with his sonic cannons. The four boys charged through the smoke, taking down the first armed assassin they laid eyes on. There were dozens of them scattered about. Each of them did their best to screen for the girl through the smoke and movement of attackers. But they found themselves unsuccessful. As the smoke and dust began to clear, they were engaged in less and less combat until eventually they found no combat at all. But the sound of fighting still rang in their ears.

When the dust finally cleared, they found not only the assassins that they knocked out, but bodies that they had not fought. They were beaten and bloody bodies; bodies that were no longer breathing. They brought their gazes to the center of the room. The girl that they were looking for stood hunched over a lying body of one of her assailants. Her breaths were heavy. She clasping a metal rod between her hands. The other end of the rod rested upon the bleeding pulp of a head of the body she stood over. Four more assassins stood in a semicircle in front of her, all tense in attack stances.

The girl looked up at them, the shadows casted upon her face only intensified her deadly expression of rage. Blood-specked hair fell out of the upright hood of her jacket. Through her raspy breaths, she contorted her lips into a snarl. The four other assassins still did not move. She raised the rod and managed to take a large breath before bellowing, “Come on! WHO ELSE WANTS IT?!”

The assassin in front of her reached to pull a pistol from his waistband. Lily responded quickly, tossing the metal rod at him. It clashed against his forehead, emitting a spurt of blood. Before his body even had a chance to hit the ground, she ran towards the female assassin on his left. She hit her in the jaw with a powerful uppercut. Lily then grabbed the two metal sais from the female assassin’s hands and kicked her square in the chest, sending her flying backwards.

Lily spun around, she took her newly claimed sais and thrust them into both sides of the third assassin’s torso.

A few meters behind her, the final assassin drew his gun. As if she saw it coming, Lily used the sais to spin around of the body of the attacker she had just stabbed. He let out his final cries as she used him as a human shield to protect her from the bullet’s of the final assassin gunfire. His gun clicked, signaling that the magazine was empty. She snatched the gun from her human shield’s waist and fired it at her attacker. The bullet found itself in the middle of his chest, he fell to the ground. Lily pulled out one of the bloody sais and ran towards the final assassin. He was still alive, his breathing bubbled, Lily straddled his chest. She held the sai to his neck.

Frantic she shrieked, “Who sent you!? WHO SENT YOU!”

The attacker made a tiny, whispered noise before completely losing the fight for his life to his wounds. Knowing that her battle was over, Lily collapsed, placing her hands on the ground beside her attacker’s head. She dropped her head, trying her best to catch her breath.

The boys watched in silence as her chest heaved. Even though they couldn’t clearly see in the poor lighting, they were all very aware of the astonished looks on each of their faces. Wide eyes a dropped jaws were shared between them.

Jaime Reyes….it would appear that The Kid Flash’s ‘damsel’ did not require your rescuing after all,
The Scarab stated.

“You’re telling me,” Jaime whispered.

Lily heard him. Thinking he was another attacker, she threw her sai towards his direction in the darkness. Jaime barely dodged the weapon as it flew past his head. She charged at him. As he backed away, she caught a glimpse of him in the moonlight. She threw a punch at his face, he dodged just in time.

“Wait! Stop!” Jaime attempted to plead. But Lily dropped down to the ground and swung her right leg at his ankles, knocking him on to the ground.

“Blue!” Kid Flash called out to him. Lily jumped at Kid Flash. She attacked him with a barrage of punches and kicks. Using his enhanced reflexes, Kid Flash dodged them, but if only slightly. She was much faster than a normal teenaged girl. He attempted to plead with her as well, “Listen we’re just trying to-” he was cut off as one of her fists landed upon his mouth.

“Hey knock it off!” Beast Boy snarled at her as he grabbed her arm. She quickly grabbed his wrist and twisted his arm with great force. Beast Boy heard a sickening ‘pop’ emit from his elbow. As he cried out in pain, the girl landed a powerful punch on his diaphragm. Winded, he toppled over.

“LILY, stop!” Robin demanded. “We’re here to help you!” She charged and engaged him. He blocked her attacks. Lily noticed how much more advanced he was at combat than the other boys. She took her opportunity once Robin raised both of his arms up in front of him to block. She grabbed his wrists and moved his arms out to his sides, leaving his face and neck vulnerable. Lily took the opening as a chance to headbutt him. She savagely brought her forehead down onto the bridge of his nose. He stumbled backwards, clutching his face. She went to charge him a second time, but Robin quickly grabbed a stun grenade from his utility belt.

“ENOUGH,” he yelled as he threw the device on ground. It flashed a bright blinding light, causing Lily to stumble back a couple of yards. The boys gradually made it to their feet. The light fizzled until it settled on a level just bright enough to lightly illuminate the room. Lily was taken aback by the sight of the people in front of her. She had heard about them, saw them a few times on the news, but never had she imagined that they would be here.

A confused look came across her face, “Robin? Blue Beetle? Kid Flash?” She saw that Garfield was the last to stand up. He however, she had never seen before. “Umm..Green Brat?”

Gar tossed her a disgusted look as he grasped his injured arm, “The name’s Beast Boy.”

Even though her hair and hood engulfed most of her face. The boys could still see the tension in her face. And even though her posture was more relaxed, she still took a defensive stance. Lacerations and bruises were scattered about her legs. Robin noticed a large trail of blood streaming from the right side of her torso all the way down her leg.

Lily’s voice was stern, “The Light must have gotten more powerful than I thought if they can send Capes to take me out.”

Blue Beetle softened his voice, trying his best to ease her, “Hey, hey we’re the good guys here. We work with the Justice League, we work to take down The Light. And we’re not here to take you out.”

Her fists were still raised, but she relaxed her shoulders a little more, “Well if you’re not here to kill me then why are you here?”
“Ummmm,” Kid Flash rubbed the back of his neck, “We’re here to...rescue you?”

She raised an eyebrow, then looked all around her at the multiple attackers that she had taken herself. “Oh. My heroes,” she snickered sarcastically.

She suddenly felt an unbearable pain from the wound on her side. She let out a loud cry as she clutched it and collapsed to her knees.

Kid Flash sprinted over and knelt next to her. He lightly placed a hand on her arm, “Hey are you alright?” he asked her.

She grit her teeth as she flinched, “I’m fine. It’s nothing.”

“Not with that much blood,” Robin knelt in front of her, blood still seeped slightly from his nostrils. “Let me see it.”

The girl reluctantly lifted up the side of her shirt, revealing a large gash. “One of those bastards nicked me at the apartment,” she told them.

“I have something that can patch you up for now in my utility belt,” Robin continued. “But you have to come with us. We have orders from Batman to take you to our base ASAP to protect you from those bounty hunters.”

“Yeah,” Kid Flash added. “We should skedaddle you outta here Lily before any more of those crazies show up.”

She chuckled, “Lily...I guess it’s time to let my cover identity die with my parents right?”

She pulled the hood off of her head, revealing long waves of snow white hair. As she brushed her hair back out of her face, her chilling, almost seductive gaze pierced right through them.

“The name’s Rose.”
Minneapolis  
December 5th, 2016  
01:18 UTC

The rushing wind against her skin did not help at all to ease the sting of her wound as they flew in the Super Cycle. Her face turned red with embarrassment as Kid Flash cleaned and placed butterfly bandages on her gash. She hated letting other people help her, letting other people see her in pain. And most of all she hated herself for letting herself get injured in the first place.

Kid Flash began to finish up by wrapping gauze all the way around her stomach. His lip had swelled and how the gash upon it still bled. Rose saw the large, dried blood streams from Robin’s nose. She noticed how the little green one next to her clutched his arm, trying his best not to cry from the pain of his dislocated elbow. A crushing feeling of guilt overcame her.

“Hey..so..uhh,” Rose began, rubbing the back of her neck. “I’m sorry for roughing you guys up. I..you know...I didn’t know if you were about to try to kill me..or not.”

Blue Beetle laughed, “It’s all cool chica. We did kind of come out of no where…” His eyes went wide. “Just remind us to never surprise you again.”

“Yeah, it’s all crash,” Kid Flash assured. His smile, Rose decided, was charming. Out of their rag-tag bunch, she pegged him as the cutest.

“Besides,” he continued, “Wouldn’t be the first time that we’ve been knocked out by a teammate, eh Blue? There was this one time that Blue was supposed to enslave the world andIhadtogobackintimetostoptheapocalypse .” he continued to babble.

The smile was fine. But the non-stop talking? Not so cute.

She quickly lost interest in Kid Flash’s stort. She turned her attention towards Beast Boy, whose eyes were now clenched tight with pain from his aching elbow.

“Ay,” she called to get his attention. He looked over at her. “Lemme see it.” He winced as she examined his arm. She put a firm grasp on his forearm and bicep. “Just to warn you, this is gonna hurt.”

“What..” Beast Boy tried to ask. He cried out as he felt a sharp sting travel down his arm as she popped his elbow back into place. But, almost immediately, it felt relieved.

“Hey! It feels so much better.” He smiled but quickly tried to wipe it off his face. “Thanks….” he stated, still pouting about her taking him down.

She smirked at him, “Don’t mention it Greenie.” She turned her attention back to the other boys, “So what is it exactly that happens to me now? I’m supposed to go to your little superhero hide out?”

“We’re taking you back to headquarters,” Robin affirmed. “Batman isn’t sure where you’d be safe right now. So I’d imagine he’d keep you in hiding, at least until Deathstroke’s trial is over.”

“Greaaat,” Rose rolled her eyes. She crossed her arms and leaned back in her seat, “So I’ll basically be under house arrest? Sounds like being bored out of my mind for an entire week.”
“Better than being dead,” Robin stated as he lowered the Super Cycle into a dark ally. He gestured towards and old phone booth. It was grimy and its metal casing had long ago began to rust and peel, “We’re here.”

Rose squinted her eyes in confusion. She pursed her lips and pointed. “Ummmm...So that’s a phone booth.”

“It is,” Began Blue Beetle. “But it also hides our teleportation device called a Zeta Tube. It’s what we use to travel.”

The Super Cycle began to chatter with mechanical noises until it morphed back into its normal Sphere form. Rose jumped as she instinctively took a defensive stance, “Woah, what the fuck!?"

“Oh. Yeah, that’s Sphere. She can morph into things...ugh....it’s a long story.” Blue Beetle had no idea where to begin.

However, Kid Flash seemed to know just fine. “You mean an awesome story! See Superboy and the original team where on this covert mission in the desert where they faced Simon and he was torturing Sphere and…” His words morphed together as he said them faster and faster.

“SHHHHHHHHHHHH,” Rose ordered as she pressed her pointer finger against Kid Flash’s lips. “From now on, only one story a day for you, kay Kid Motormouth?”

Beast Boy tried his best to stifle a laugh. She was funny, but he still wanted to pout about being beaten up.

Rose watched as one by one the boys stepped into the booth and disappeared with a blinding light. A feminine robotic voice announced with each of them:

*Recognized, Blue Beetle, B22
Kid Flash, B23
Beast Boy, B19
Sphere, C01*

Rose felt anxiety itch under her skin. She was about to be zapped to God knows where with a group of boys she didn’t even know. She was anxious about what could be on the other side. This nervousness, however, she would never let them suspect.


Activation code, A14 accepted. Access Granted.

He held a hand out towards the open door and smiled slightly, “Your chariot awaits princess.”

Rose narrowed her eyes. She huffed and charged into the booth. She crossed her arms, the corners of her mouth turned into a grimace. “Call me that again Birdie, and you’ll get a pair of cracked nuts to go with your cracked nose.”

Robin scowled, “Hum. Charming.”

*Recognized, Lily Madison, A14*
He watched as Rose disappeared into the light.

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_**Chicago - Water Tower Place**

*December 4th, 2016*

*20:00 UTC*

“I...I am in heaven.”

Zataana’s eyes went wide with wonder as she gaze the enormous mall that surrounded her. An open mouth smile crawld on her face as she took in the fact that she had over 100 stores to irresponsibly spend her money in. The other girls were going to hate her. She could shop for hours on end if left unsupervised. M’gann, Artemis, and Cassie had no idea what they were in for.

M’gann giggled, “I take it this makes up for me dragging you to Chicago in the middle of winter?”

“Oh, absolutely,” she replied. She marched towards ‘Forever Sixteen’. “Come on!” She called back to them with a smile. “This is my favorite store.”

Artemis rolled her eyes and leaned in towards Cassie. “Be prepared,” she warned. “Zataana’s a shopaholic. We’re gonna be here for a while.”

Cassie chuckled with a smile, “So much for just wedding gift shopping.”

Artemis smirked, “Yeeeew, I can _guarantee_ you she leaves with no less than seven bags.”

They joined M’gann and Zataana in the store, sifting through the racks of clothing.

“So, why is Raquel having her wedding so late anyways?” Cassie asked Artemis. “Her bachelorette party was months ago. Why wait until December for the wedding?”

“I guess they had to postpone for a little bit to save up because of Amistad. Babies cost a lot of money,” Artemis answered. “Plus, her fiancé is some kind of hotshot college football star. They had to wait until their honeymoon wouldn’t interfere with his practice schedule.”

“That makes sense.” Cassie replied.

As a few hours went by, the mall became occupied with less and less people. Zataana however, was bound determined to shop until closing time. Cassie decided she might as well shop for herself too. She sifted through one of the racks in the boutique they currently occupied. She stood close to the back, engaged with browsing while the other girls were near the entrance.

Stumbling down the aisle, two college-aged young men laughed through their inebriated haze. One was pale with long red hair and a slim figure. The other, black and muscular with black dreadlocks. They made their way into the store, giggling for no clear reason.

Cassie glanced at them out of the corner of her eyes. She shook her head, writing them as a pair of annoying drunks. The bars in the mall must have been closing.

The red haired boy smiled and let his head roll back before snapping it upright. He tried to whisper to the other man, “Duuuuuude.” He chuckled through the words, leaning on the metal racking. “Um so liiiiiiiit. That new shit’s gooood.” His voice squeaked at the end.
He spotted Cassie. A wicked smile crept on his face as he walked towards her.

“Hey baby how you doin?” Cassie jumped to find him next to her. She almost dropped the shirt in her hand. His pupils were dilated and glossy. His flushed face was uncomfortably close to her’s.

She lost her breath for a moment at the breech of personal space. She took a step away without even realizing. “Fine…” she replied in a small voice.

She tried to ignore him and continuing looking through the rack. She felt a tightness grow in her chest as he stared at her. His lustful eyes looked up and down every curve of her body. She felt a twinge of panic tingle through her.

“Damn,” he bit his bottom lip. “Those tight pants hug you nice.”

Cassie found it hard to swallow. For some reason, she felt disgusting. A knot twisted her stomach as his stare still lingered. It felt like an invasion.

“Okay…” she took a few steps away from him, trying not to look at him. Her muscles tensed.

His face twisted. He took a step towards her, “Hey, I paid you a compliment.”

“What’s up David?” The other young man addressed the red haired. He walked over, and stood next to him.

“I just complimented this girl, Nathan, and she didn’t even say thanks.” David whined.

Nathan took a step towards her. Cassie realized that they were pushing towards the wall. “No reason to be rude baby.” Nathan smirked. “You’re supposed to acknowledge a man when ‘e says nice things to ya.”

Cassie’s breath shuttered. Terror slithered up her spine. Why was she so scared? It’s not like she couldn’t fight them off if she needed to. She did have Amazonian strength. One kick to the nuts and, well, they wouldn’t have nuts anymore. But she found herself on the ‘flight’ end of her ‘fight or flight’ response. “Uh, s-sorry,” she stammered.

“You’d be prettier if you smiled,” David cooed.

Cassie pursed her lips. Her eyes darted in between them. She just wanted them to leave her alone.

She didn’t do anything to get their attention in the first place.

“What you doin’ later?” Nathan asked. “Why don’t you come back to our place?”

That must have been it. Maybe they thought she was a college student too. Maybe if they realized how young she was, they’d leave her alone. “Uh...Uh, I-I’m fifteen…” she stammered again.

They laughed. Mischievous smiles curled their lips. “Weee don’t caaare.” David’s words slithered from his mouth. Cassie felt the air ripped from her lungs.

From across the store, Artemis spotted Cassie out of the corner of her eye. She dropped the sweater she was holding back onto the shelf. She tilted her head to get a better look. Her eyes went wide at the sight of Cassie’s face. She snarled as the two men inched closer towards her. Artemis marched towards them.

“Hey!” She called out. They snapped their heads towards her. Artemis reached out her arm, brushing between the boys, and pulling Cassie away from the wall. “These guys bothering you?” She asked as she positioned Cassie behind her.
“Daaamn,” Nathan looked Artemis up and down. “You didn’t say you had a sister.”

“Chill baby, we just talkin,” David slurred.

“Yeah?” Artemis chirped. She raised an eyebrow in doubt. “Well it’s obvious she doesn’t want to talk to you, so beat it.”

Nathan wet his lips. He sported the same glazed eyes as David. “Mmm,” His eyes went down to her chest. “With tits like that, there’s no way we could leave you two alone.”

Artemis felt her face flush with rage. She gagged. “Oh fuck off, asshole,” She swore at him, disgusted. She turned her back to them and proceeded to push Cassie towards the entrance. “Come’ on Cass.”

“Hey whore, I was talkin’ you!” Nathan called after her.

Artemis grit her teeth. She knew if she stayed there a second longer, she was going to break their jaws.

“Come’ on, We’re getting out of here.” She barked at Zataana and M’gann.

“What?” Zataana asked, confused.

“Now.” Artemis boomed. “Let’s go.”

Zataana and M’gann followed behind her. Artemis was not someone to talk back to when she was angry. They exited the store and walked down the center aisle, stopping at a large water fountain in the center.

“You alright?” Artemis faced Cassie and placed her hands on her shoulders.


“What was that all about?” M’gann asked.

“Just some creeps in there harassing Cass,” Artemis still shook with anger.

“I-it’s alright,” Cassie started to feel alittle better. “I think they were just drunk.” She looked up at Artemis with soft eyes. "Thank you."

Artemis smiled, "It was nothin'." She squeezed her hand. "Girls have to look out for other girls, remember that."

“Daaaaamn, you didn’t say you had friends.”

Artemis snapped her head around to find the voice coming from David. They followed them out of the store. They crept closer to them, stumbling over their own feet.

“Oh Jesus Christ,” Artemis rolled her eyes. Why were they not letting up?

“What you fine ladiesss doing alllll alone?” Nathan asked, his words taking too long to form.

Zataana curled her upper lip in disgust. She pointed her thumb towards them as she addressed Artemis, “Are these guys serious?” She turned towards David who was only a few feet away from her and M’gann now. “Dude, piss off.”
M’gann crossed her arms, “Yeah, who do you think you are?”

“Come’aaaaawn.” He shrugged as he smiled. “Ya’ll just look so cold and lonely.” His eyes narrowed. “We can warm you up.”

Nathan took a few steps towards Artemis. “Especially you baby.” He lick his lips. Artemis all of her muscles flex. Her face tightened with anger. He smirked and reached a hand out towards her waist, “Heard Asian bitches got sideways pussy. Always wanted to find out.”

That was it. Artemis snapped. They were done. She snatched him by the throat, her nails digging into skin. She grabbed his wrist with her other hand and twisted his arm. He cried out at the sudden pain. Artemis’s face was inches from his. Her body shook with rage. Veins throbbed on her neck. “Motherfucker, we are not girls that you wanna fuck with,” she pushed her words through clenched teeth.

“Get off me bitch!” Nathan cried. He used his free hand to push Artemis off of him. He felt an energy rise within him. It was like a ripple on a water’s surface pulsating through him. It started at his core and ran through his limbs, until it pushed out of his hands. Translucent energy rings sprang from them. And Artemis found herself thrown across the aisle. Store windows shattered as the rings moved passed her. Nathan was pushed backwards with the force of his own energy. He looked at his hands in awe.

The girls called out to Artemis as she groaned in pain. Nathan cackled, he pushed his hands forward, emitting more energy rings. The other girls were thrown through the air as well. This time, more windows shattered and civilians around them began to scream. They rushed towards the exits.

“Dude!” David exclaimed. “How did you do that?”

Nathan raised his eyebrows. He pointed towards the fountain, “The same way you’re doing that.”

David turned around to find the water rising from the fountain, as if gravity had turned off. He gasped. He reached out his hand, the water funneled towards him, wrapping around his arms.

The girls tried to rise to their feet, only to be struck down by a rush of water. Artemis spotted a fire pull station, she pulled the handle. They needed to get the civilians out before anyone else got hurt.

The alarm pierced through the air. The two boys sent blasts of water and energy rings towards them once more. M’gann gathered herself. She jumped to her feet, using her psychic powered to divert their attacks.

“Zataana!” Artemis cried out. “Get us in uniform! I need my bow!”

Zataana nodded. M’gann’s shield was not going to hold for long. “Tup su ni ruo smrofinu!”

As grey smoke clouded around her, Artemis felt her bow form in her hand. The boy’s stopped and she shot her net arrow towards David. He gasped as it wrapped around him, knocking him towards the ground.

Cassie flew towards Nathan. He stumbled backwards as she struck him in the jaw. She went to hit him again, but he grabbed her arm, throwing her in the air. She flew through one of the stores, knocking everything down. The wall cracked as she hit the plaster.

M’gann, Zataana, and Artemis felt themselves being crushed to the ground as Nathan struck them with his energy rings once more. They were unable to move. His powers reminded Artemis of that of Vertigo’s.
He stood with his hands outstretched, his hands still pulsating his rings at them. He smirked, “What’s a matter babes? Can’t take what cha dish out?”

Artemis watched as a flying figure crashed through the ceiling. Nathan was tossed through the air as Wonder Woman slammed her shoulder into him.

M’gann smiled, “Wonder Woman! We’re glad you’re here-”

But Wonder Woman took no notice of her. She turned towards David as he stumbled to his feet, still wrapped in the net. Wonder Woman put on a wicked smile. She charged towards him. He gasped in terror as she punched him. She slammed him against the wall and grabbed him by the shirt collar. She struck him in the face over and over then moved on to his torso. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he tried to beg for mercy. He was unable to defend himself while wrapped in Artemis’s net.

The girls’ eyes went wide.

M’gann dropped her jaw in horror as the boy began to spit up blood.

“WONDER WOMAN STOP!” She cried, but Diana didn’t seem to hear her. M’gann called out her name on her psychic link.

M’gann gasped. She couldn’t hear anything. There was nothing. She was unable to hear Wonder Woman’s mind.

Nathan rose to his feet. Wonder Woman spotted him out of the corner of her eye. “Get the hell off him!” He cried. He tried to shoot his rings at her, but Wonder Woman lassoed him. She flew into the air, spinning him around and slamming him onto the ground. He laid there, unconscious. She charged at him and straddled his chest. She grasped her hands around his throat, his face turned blue.

Cassie trembled. She shook her head as her jaw dropped. She felt as though she was living a nightmare, watching as her mentor was choking an unconscious man.

“What are you doing!” She screeched. “STOP!” Her voice rang through the air. Wonder Woman looked over at her. Cassie swallowed hard as Wonder Woman flashed her a vicious smile. Diana turned towards a group of civilian onlookers. They gathered around them, holding up their phones, recording the scene in front of them. She chuckled, shot through the air, and disappeared through the hole she made in the ceiling.

Zataana felt a heavy pressure in her chest. She turned towards the other girls. Bewilderment plastered on her face. “What..what the hell just happened?”

M’gann heard the frantic footsteps coming towards them. Police officers and EMTs arrived on scene, attending to the injured. The placed Inhibitor Collars on the boys. They placed them onto gurneys, wheeling them away.


“R-right, right.” She pulled herself together. “Ekat su ot eht tseraen Atez Ebut!”

*The Watchtower*

*December 5th, 2016*

*01:00 EST*
Disgruntled faces could be seen around the common room as Superman, Wonder Woman, Flash, Martian Manhunter, Aquad, Nightwing, and Superboy gathered around Batman and Black Canary. Images and videos of the recent alien attacks displayed on the floating computer screens behind them. Their discussions of strategy were interrupted as the Zeta Beams announced the incoming arrivals.

Recognized Zataana 25
Tigress B07
Miss Martian B05
Wonder Girl B21

Black Canary raised an eyebrow at their interruption. “Ladies, we’re in the middle-”

But Zataana made no acknowledgement of of her. With grit teeth and furrowed brows, she marched up to Wonder Woman. She was ready to tear her a new one. “Diana what the hell?!” She screeched, holding out her open arms at her side.

Wonder Woman twinged in surprise at Zataana’s outburst. Confusion plastered upon her face. “I beg your pardon?”

Zataana’s fire was only fueled more. “What exactly were you thinking!?” Her arms flailed in anger. “Those kids had to go to the hospital Diana. Are you out of your mind?!” Her face was now only inches from Wonder Woman’s.

Diana narrowed her eyes. “Zataana, if you do not back away from me this instant, I will throw you back.”

Zataana tapped her finger on her own chest. “What? Are you going to hit me too?” She spat.

She shook her head. “WHAT are you talking about?” She snarled.

“Oh, don’t play dumb.” Zataana sneered.

“Okay, stop, right now.” Black Canary came between them, pushing them away from one another. “Let’s take a step back here.” She turned towards Zataana. “What has Wonder Woman done that has got you so upset?”

“W-we saw you,” Cassie stammered. She found her gaze difficult to bring up from the floor. “While we were in Chicago. W-we saw you beat up those metateens.” She rubbed the back of her neck. “I mean, jeez, Diana. They were super creepy but...jeez.”

“Wait, Chicago?” Wonder Woman questioned. “When exactly did you see me in Chicago?”

“Like, 10 minutes ago,” Artemis chimed. “We were just there!”

The other members looked around at one another. Their faces twisted in disorientation. “Girls,” Black Canary addressed them cautiously. “Wonder Woman has been here with us for the past hour or so.”

“What?” M’gann shot with a breathy voice.

“I think you all should see this.” They turned to see the voice had come from Batman. He had pulled up a video from a breaking newscast. The watched, speechless, as the scene from the mall replayed on the screen from phone recordings. The title, ‘Justice League Gone Too Far Again.’ rested on a red banner at the bottom.
Diana’s jaw dropped and horror crept in her eyes. “That’s—that’s not me. I would never act so violently! At least not towards someone unconscious or tied up.”

“We could be dealing with a shapeshifter here,” Nightwing suggested. “Maybe trying to tarnish Diana’s image?”

Superboy peered at the video, “The heck kind of shapeshifter can fly and has that kind of strength?”

“I’m—I’m sorry Diana.” Zataana tried to apologize. “I just got so worked up—”

“It is alright.” Wonder Woman placed a hand on her shoulder. A small smile crept on her lips. “I probably would have done the same if I saw one of my teammates act in such a manner.”

“Wonder Woman, please, I-I don’t mean to intrude,” M’gann addressed her. “But can I read your mind? Just to verify—”

“Why?” Conner snipped. “M’gann you just watched the tape.”

“No, no it’s not like that,” She assured. “The Wonder Woman that we saw in Chicago I...I couldn’t read her mind.”

Everyone’s eye went wide.

“What do you mean?” Kadur asked.

“I mean like, there was nothing. Nothing at all. No images, no words, just...static.”

“Do what you need to.” Diana nodded. I have nothing to hide.”

M’gann dipped into her mind. She really was Wonder Woman.

“This is not good,’ Batman’s voice was tense. “We are going to have to make a public statement about this. There is already a huge media uproar. The videos have gone viral.”

“Great,” Nightwing shook his head in contempt as he sighed, “This is the last thing we need. G. Gordon Godfrey did a segment on Bludhaven and the video that was released of Arsenal beating that girl. Because of it, The League’s public approval rating has had taken a big plunge.” He massaged the bridge of his nose with his thumb and pointer finger. He groaned and looked to Batman. “We need to make a statement on that whole debacle, and let people know we’re trying to bring Arsenal in.” He glanced around the room. “We should work on this together. Where’s Robin? Isn’t he normally with you on the weekends?”

“Robin is on a last-minute mission I had to assign with Beast Boy, Kid Flash and Blue Beetle.” Batman explained. “They should be arriving soon. That’s actually the main reason why I called you all here.”

He proceeded to explain to them about The Madisons affiliation with The Light and their murders. He advised that the boys would soon be bringing ‘Lily’ there for protection and questioning.


“She’s probably scared out of here mind,” Zataana added.

“Robin sent me a message saying she is injured but is up and moving around,” Batman assured. “I am hoping that she will be able to give us some information on The Light’s next move.” He grunted low in his throat. “To top off everything we have on our plate, I received word not too long ago that
Deathstroke escaped from prison just after the bounty was initiated. And the lawyers in his trial, have all conveniently gone ‘missing’.

“We’re never going to catch a break,” Nightwing’s voice was almost a whine.

They all turned their attention towards the Zeta Tubes as the robotic voice announced their arrival.

Recognized, Blue Beetle, B22
Kid Flash, B23
Beast Boy, B19
Sphere, C01
Robin, B20

They held their breath in anticipation.

Lily Madison, A14

Rose opened her tightly clenched eyes. She was not accustomed to the blinding light. With nervous breaths, she took a few cautious steps out of the Zeta Tube. She felt winded as she gawked at the sight around her. Her jaw dropped, her eyes darted all around her. Concerned looks of the others fell upon her bloody hoody, tattered athletic shorts, and bruised limbs. But she took no notice of them. She was too busy with the realization that she was no longer on Earth.

“Hol. Le. Shit.” A smile formed on her open mouth. She only seemed to take notice of Kid Flash, who had placed himself right beside her. “Are we in outer space?” She asked, bewildered.

“Yes. You guessed right.” He chimed.

Rose laughed with amazement. “You gotta be fuckin me!” She gave Bart a playful punch on the arm. He made a note that her friendly punches hurt almost as much as her real ones. “No fucking way!” She exclaimed and zipped towards one of the glass walls, gaping at the stars.

“Oh, Wow. She’s...forward,” Conner seemed puzzled.

“Oh my God!” Cassie gasped at the sight of Tim’s face. Dark bags formed under his eyes, bruises from when Rose headbutted him. The bottom of his nose was tinted red from the blood he wiped away. She ran to his side. “Are you ok!?”

“Yeah, I’m fine Cass. It’s nothing,” He assured with a scowl.

“Jesus,” Conner looked around at the injures. Gar with his bruises and Bart with his fat lip. Jaime retracted his armor, revealing a tiny line of blood sliding down the side of his face from where his head hit the ground. “What the hell happened to you guys?”

Garfield’s lower lip twisted into a pout. He pointed at Rose. “She happened.”

“What?” Batman asked.

“Umm..Bats?” Jaime addressed him, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand. “So... remember when you said she probably wouldn’t respond positively to us at first?”

“Yes.” He recalled.

“Yeah, well, it turns out our ‘damsel’ wasn’t so ‘damsel-y’”

Conner laughed at his realization. “Wait. Wait a second, did she kick you guys’s butts?”
“Yeah,” Garfield snipped. “That’s what we get for trying to help someone.” He leaned in towards Rose with his last two words, raising his voice.

“What?” She was plucked from the wonders of space as she realized that Garfield was addressing her. Rose turned towards them. She smiled and shrugged her shoulders. “Aww come’on. You’re not still salty about that are you? I said I was sorry.”

Zataana gave her a concerned look all around her figure. “Girl you look like a war zone. Are you ok?”

Rose waved her off, “Aw I’m fine.” She smirked and tried her best to bite back a chuckle. “Most of it’s not mine anyways.” A quick silence fell over the room. Rose looked all around her. She smirked and wet her lips, allowing the uncomfortable silence to sit for a moment. “Sweet set up you guys got here. Spooky, dominant, overbearing. Very... ‘Big Brother’. I think it suits you Capes just fine.”

Cassie’s face bunched in irritation. “Wow, ok. Um, excuse me, but just who the hell are you?”

“Team, this is Lily Madison—” Batman began.

“Actually,” She interrupted. “Lily was my cover name. My real name is Rose.”

Conner pointed at her. “This is the girl you sent them to rescue?”

Bart zipped over to Rose’s side. He put an arm around her shoulder. “Actually, she didn’t really need our help much.” Rose grimace at his contact. “You shouldda seen her fight! Girl’s got some moves.”

“Appreciate the compliment Motormouth,” Rose said as she plucked Bart’s arm off of her shoulder. “But I am not the touchy type.”

“Rose, I know today must have been very exhausting for you.” Kaldur approached her. Welcome and warmth soak his words. “I am Aqualad, or Kaldur’am, leader of the team that rescued you. We would understand if you’d like to clean up and sleep a little. Whenever you’re feeling better, some of the other members and I would like to discuss your parent’s involvement with The Light.”

“M’fine.” She shrugged and crossed her arms. “We’ll talk now.”

Kaldur tilted his head in uncertainty.

Black Canary approached her. She gave her a sympathetic smile. “Rose, hun are you sure? You’re parent’s just…”

Black Canary’s words trailed off. Rose raised her eyebrows, waiting impatiently for her to finish. “Died?” Rose ended it for her. “Yeah? And?”

“Uh, well...” Dinah found herself at a loss of what to say.

Rose shrugged again. “Some people grieve by crying, some people grieve by yelling.” She smirked. “I like to hit things. And I just hit a lot of people before coming here.” She gave a few content nods. “So I’m actually feeling pretty good.” She gave Dinah a quick pat on the shoulder. “Thanks for your concern though.”

“Oh...alright then.” Dinah answered, perplexed.

Kaldur cleared his throat. “Well, we would like to ask you if you knew what information your parents were going to bring against The Light in court? Or if you knew of any information about
their next plans?"

"Yeah," Rose tilted her head and chewed the inside of her cheek, as if creating a plan. She waved a finger between the two of them. "But...I don't see why this can't go both ways."

Nightwing approached her this time; "You want something in return?"

Rose raised her eyebrows in appreciation and she looked up and down his suit. "Oooo look at that," An ornery smile played on her lips. "Brains and bod. You guessed right."

He twinged as she winked at him. For someone who was just a victim of an attempted assassination, she sure didn’t act like a victim.

"If it’s your safety you’re worried about," Kaldur assured. "We can offer you protection-"

Rose rolled her eyes and groaned. "I don’t want protection. I can take care of myself."

"Then what is it you want?" Kaldur asked.

Rose hummed to herself. She raised chin slightly as a confident grin formed on her face. "I’m gonna join your team."

She found herself greeted with blank stares. A noise escaped Nightwing’s throat. "Ah-uh, um, excuse me?"

"You heard me," Her voice was firm. "I’m gonna join your team"

"Umm...alright...uh." Kaldur shook his head to clear his mind. "Forgive us if we seem a little taken aback Rose. This isn’t a situation or request we encounter every day. And unfortunately that is not how membership works."

Rose laughed. "Oh. Oh I’m sorry." She placed a hand on her chest. "Totally my fault." She pointed her thumb over to the Zeta Tubes. "Did you want me to go get a parent’s permission slip signed? Because I could swing by the morgue, but I don’t think they’ll be very talkative." Her tone and turned bitter by the last few words.

"I meant no disrespect Rose," Kaldur interjected. "But we can’t just let anyone-"

"Look," Her eyes narrowed as a tightness flexed in her jaw. "The truth is, I have nothing left." Quiet plagued the room once more. "I have no other family and no other place to go." She heard her voice rise. "It’s because of Deathstroke that that bounty was initiated, and Deathstroke is a part of The Light and The Light..." She choked on her words, taking a moment to suppress the water building in her eyes. "They took everything away from me tonight." She took a step towards Kaldur, closing the space between them. "And if you think I’m just going to sit back and roll over to that," she scanned everyone in the room. "Then you’re all out of your damn minds."

Rose found her words morphed into a hiss. "So even if you don’t let me join...I’m still going after them. With or without your help."

She cleared her throat, relaxing her muscles, calming the tension around her. "Besides, it’s something that we all can benefit from. Being the child of someone who worked for The Light, I do have insider information that you might find useful after all."

"And what exactly do you mean by that?" Nightwing asked.

She smiled. "Well, liiiiiike," She look up and bunched the corner of her mouth, thinking of what to
say. “Oh, for instance, did you know that Cadmus has hidden labs still testing on human subjects?”

She heard quiet murmurs erupt from the others. Their expressions were plagued with doubt.

“I believe you’re mistaken Rose,” Kaldur responded. “We shut down that part of Cadmus a long time ago.”

Rose’s scoff almost sounded like a giggle. “No. You went to D.C. and shut down one lab. You really think they’d only have one?” She laughed but just as soon quieted herself when she saw their firm glares. “Wait, you’re serious?” Her lips pressed together in annoyance. “You and your pals over there infiltrate a secret lab with dozens of underground layers, creating Genomes.” She shook her head in irritation. “Freaking, creating new life forms? And you seriously thought they’d have all that in only one place? In ONE lab?”

M’gann narrowed her eyes, “How did you know about us discovering Cadmus?”

She chuckled, rubbing her hand over her mouth. She nodded in Conner’s direction. “The same way I know your Superboy over there is a clone.”

“What?” Conner gasped. “You know about me?”

“Yeah.” She formed a mischievous grin. “You’re Superman and Lex Luthor’s gay science baby.”

Jaime absolutely erupted with laughter. He tried with all his might to stifle it with his hands. If looks could kill, the one that M’gann was giving him would have surely smited him in that instant. He felt a tear fall from his left eye as he suffocated his laughs behind his palms.

Rose appeared pleased with herself. “My parents started their careers at that lab D.C.” She looked over to Conner once more and pursed her lips. “They helped make you.”

None of the Leaguers or members of The Team seemed to know what to say. Rose sighed and rolled her eyes. She had a feeling she was going to have to give them more information before they’d be willing to let her on The Team. She continued. “But just before you guys exposed it, they were transferred to a Cadmus facility in New Mexico. Their jobs there started off with tweakings of Cobra Venom, studying what it did to the human body on a molecular level. They had an idea of what the Metagene was, they just hadn’t mastered how to alter or harness it. And then after a few years, Cadmus started experimenting with children and teenagers. Experimenting with weaponizing the Metagene.” She smiled at their confused faces. “Yeah, that’s right, Cadmus started even before your little ‘Reach’ friends did.” She cleared her throat. “When it came to testing on kids my parents… well they didn’t approve. They spoke out of turn about the experiments, threatened to contact the authorities, and eventually they refused to do the experiments all together.” She ran a hand through the top of her hair. “I come home from school one day and the next thing I know my parents throw me into a car with them with nothing but a few suitcases. That’s when they told me everything.” She counted each item on her finger. “They told me about Cadmus. They told me about The Light. About the experiments. The human testing. Everything.” For a moment, a ping of sadness flickered in her eyes at the thought of her parents. “They knew they could never leave Cadmus and still be allowed to live. So that’s when we started running. And we’ve been trying to find ways to take them down ever since. Tracking their every move.”

Kaldur looked around to Nightwing, and then to Batman. They both gave him reaffirming nods. “You have our attention Rose,” Kaldur advised her. “Tells us everything you know, and we will consider your membership. On a trial basis first of course.”

Rose smiled. They weren’t as hard to reel in as she thought they were going to be. “Well, According
to my parents, Cadmus has about a half dozen other labs. There’s usually a business fronting for it to keep it hidden while the real lab is underground. As far as they knew, each lab specialized in either biological testing, drug manufacturing, weapons manufacturing, or combative training.” Her eyes narrowed. “But all of them, I can assure you, have very active and unwilling human testing.”

Rose could see some of them whisper to one another, stealing glances up at her. She could see some of their brows crease with doubt. A pang of irritation grated under her skin.

“Rose,” Batman caught the attention of the room. He paused for a moment, taking in every inch of her body language and tones of her words. As much as he didn’t like what she was revealing to them, he was confident she was telling the truth. “You said Cadmus was involved in drug manufacturing, what did you mean by that?”

Rose turned her attention to the floating computer screen. The tapped her fingers over the keyboard, pulling up a picture of ‘The Reach’ soft drink and ‘LexAid’. “I’m gonna go ahead and assume that you know about the added chemicals in these and the mitochondrial marker?”

Nightwing raised his eyebrows. Was there anything that his girl didn’t know?

“Yes,” Batman assured. “We’ve been aware of the added chemicals since April.” Rose chuckled and brushed her bangs out of her eyes.

“You guys know that was done to pretty much put you on a wild goose chase right?”

In absence of their response, she pulled up images of their recent metateen fights. And news stories about the recent mysterious deaths of teenagers and young adults as well. She turned to face them and crossed her arms. “Have you heard of the drug ‘Spark’ yet?”

She watched as Batman’s eyes went wide. He recalled his conversation with Virgil and how he put his exposure to it in his report. “Yes,” everyone turned their head’s towards Batman. “Static recently had a run in with some rogue metateens. He claimed they smoked it before they attacked him.”

Rose hummed low in her throat, “That’s right. Cadmus created it. It’s a recreational drug that can be taken in in a variety of ways. If it’s real high quality, it makes a blue light in their mouth if they smoke it. Or, blue ‘sparks’, I guess. It contains the same mitochondrial marker. So the more kids that use it, the more they can track down. It has no smell and doesn’t show up on a drug screen.”

Nightwing rubbed his chin, “But why would they make a drug? Why not just keep using their drink? It’s not like its guaranteed to only go to kids.”

Rose smirked, “The drug contains a libido enhancer that takes full effect on those going through puberty, and dies off at around age 23 or so.” She raised an eyebrow. “Essentially, it makes for really, really good sex. Throw it at a bunch of horny teenagers, and you’ve created a huge market.” They watched as the amusement drained from her face. “But if not taken carefully, it’s easy to overdose on. Others experience intense violent outbursts and a sudden release of their powers.”

Robin’s eyes went wide, “My God. Batman, that makes so much sense. The kids that we fought recently acted inebriated and nothing appeared on their tox screen.”

“It was the same with those guys at the mall,” Artemis added. She shuddered at the memory. “Before they attacked us they were really...disgusting to say the least.”

“We need to get this off the streets,” Rose’s voice was critical. “Before anyone else gets hurt, or anymore kids die.”
“I don’t suppose you have any physical evidence that Cadmus is producing this?” Kaldur asked.

Rose shook her head. Sadness plagued her eyes, “No. My parents had files that they hacked into and stole from the lab at our apartment. But I guarantee those bounty hunters were ordered to take everything. I doubt there’d be anything left.

“What are these cities that you claim Cadmus is still running in?” Batman asked.

Rose shook her head. “No idea. The one my parents worked at in New Mexico doesn’t exist anymore. Before we started running, in a final act of retaliation, they released all the subjects and blew it up. So, that won’t be very helpful to us anymore. But what they did find out is where the drug facility is. Not the exact location, but the general area.”

“And that would be?” Nightwing asked her.

She smiled, “Gotham City.”

Batman tilted his head. His eyes narrowed “I believe that you’re mistaken Rose. If there was an influx of a certain drug in Gotham I of all people would know.”

She hummed in amusement, “You would think that wouldn’t you? That’s because the low quality product they’re trying to push out of Gotham immediately to avoid suspicion. The more pure stuff, the less lethal version, mostly stays on the East Coast. Drugs only make the news when people die from it.” She pointed to the news articles on the computer screen. “If you can find where the distributors are getting it from, then you can find the lab. And then from there we can hack the computers and find where the other facilities are.”

Rose received no answer. She looked around at all of their worried faces. She gave them a thumbs up, plastering a sarcastic smile on her face, “Wadda ya say guys? Are we in?”

Cassie however was not amused. She didn’t care for Rose’s attitude or the fact that she had waltzed into their headquarters acting like she owned the place. She marched towards the front the crowd, taking a spot next to Nightwing, “Okay, this all seems a little too easy to me. How do we know that we can trust her information, let alone letting her on The Team.” She crossed her arms. Her mouth twisted with doubt. “Can she even fight?”

Rose crinkled her upper lip in annoyance. She walked up to Cassie, getting in her face. “Uh, yeah. She can. Just asked your little boys toys who ‘rescued’ me.” She looked her up and down. “Besides, look who’s talking, Barbie. What’s your superpower?” Her voice raised an octave in mockery. “Shopping?”

Cassie’s face bunched in anger. “My superpower is I can throw you through a wall that’s what.” She sneered.

Just before Rose was about to retort, Nightwing placed himself in between them. “Oooookay I think we’re all just a little tired after a long day. How about you guys go home and get some rest? Rose, you can stay at our Warehouse for now. Batman and I will check up on the information you gave us and we’ll discuss further plans.”

Cassie huffed and Rose stuck her tongue. Kaldur placed himself in front of her, “Well Rose, I guess that settles it.” He held out his webbed hand. “Welcome to the team.”

Rose’s eyes went wide for a brief moment. She cautiously held out her hand and gave Kaldur’s a firm shake. The ache of nervousness finally fled her stomach. She smiled in triumph.
Well that was easy.
“Bart, you are not eating before the ceremony.” Jaime snatched a bag of ‘Extra Cheezy Chicken Whizzies’ out of Bart’s grasp and shoved it back into the cabinet. It was Raquel’s wedding day. And since neither Jaime nor Bart owned a tie, let alone knew how to tie one, Mal graciously offered himself for all their tie and tying needs. They arrived at The Warehouse to see Karen pacing and barking about in worry and irritation. They were supposed to leave in a half hour and Mal and just gotten out of the shower. She swore he would be the death of her. And since Jaime did not want her irritation to rise any further, he put it upon himself to play babysitter for Bart. At least until the reception. Then he could set him loose.

“Awww but her-maaaan-o. I’m hungrryyyy.” Bart whined as he clutched his arms around his stomach. His face looking pathetically heartbroken. “You know it only gets worse when I run!”

Jaime rolled his eyes as he went to fix the front of Bart’s shirt. How did he manage to miss so many buttons? “Yeah, I do, ese. Which is why we’re taking a Zeta Tube to Dakota City.” Jaime reminded.

“I know you, you’ll get crumbs all over yourself and stain your shirt if I let you eat now. You can wait an hour.”


Heavy panting could be heard as Rose made her way from the gym and into the kitchen. She pat the sweat away from her face with the towel that rested on her shoulders. Her cheeks were flushed red with exertion. She trudged past them and filled her water bottle with the sink faucet.

The boys tried the best not to stare. Rose tend to work out in only spandex shorts and a sports bra. Jaime watched her abs contract with each harsh exhale. Sweat trickled down the curves of her muscles. Jaime couldn’t help but be a little jealous of her body. She was built like a soldier.

Rose had shown incredible promise in her training sessions. Since they had ‘rescued’ her it was as though she was bound determined to prove herself. She was just as strong, fast, and vicious as she was back in the abandoned warehouse Des Moines. No one wanted to spar with her. Excluding her rounds with Black Canary and Nightwing, she almost always won. Kaldur and Nightwing were both intrigued and suspicious of her skills. She chalked them up to the teachings from her parents, and, of course, talent. Kaldur assured her that she would be cleared for her first mission soon.

“How was your run?” Jaime asked.

She chugged her water and gasped as she came up for air. “Fucking hot,” she answered, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. She raised an eyebrow, looking them up and down. “Nice outfits. You guys got that wedding today?”

“Yeah….” Jaime answered weakly. He rubbed the back of his neck as guilt pinged his stomach. “Sorry we couldn’t take you along. It’s kinda small. Mostly team members. The RSVP was a while ago…”

Rose loved seeing him squirm. There was nothing funnier than watching someone drown in their own awkwardness. She sported a small smile, closing in the space between them. “Is there an open
Jaime furrowed his brows in confusion. “Uh..n-no I don’t think so…”

Her mouth twisted in disapproval. “Then why would I wanna go anyways?” She threw her towel at Jaime’s face and headed towards her bedroom. “You losers have fun,” she chimed over her shoulder.

As Rose gathered her shower caddy, she heard a light knock on her doorframe. “Hey, uh, Rose?” She turned to see Bart standing in her doorway. Red rose in his cheeks as he rubbed his hands. He cleared his throat, eyes on the ground. “Umm, so, uh, Christmas is in a few days.” He looked at her for a moment before looking away again. “I-I know you don’t have any family. So uh, you’re uh, you’re welcome to spend the day with me my great grandparents in Central City.” His eyes finally found hers and he gave a tiny shrug, “If ya want.”

Rose gave a small hum and crinkled her nose. “Sorry, not into the whole ‘Christmas’ thing.” She turned her back to him, gathering her things once more.

“Oh, uh, okay,” He stammered. He couldn’t bring himself to walk away. He waited for a moment, watching, gathering up his courage. “I just…” he blurted. Rose turned in his direction once more, lips pursed in annoyance. He swallowed hard, finding it hard to look at her. “I know what it’s like….to be alone. To not have anybody left.” Rose’s face softened. He looked up at her with big, nervous eyes. He bit his bottom lip. “I just, don’t want you to feel that way. You wouldn’t be imposing, I swear-”

“Hey, Motormouth,” She interrupted. She walked over to him, placing a hand on her hip. A smile graced her face. “I know I’m not alone.” She reassured. “I gotta team.” She gave him a light punch on the shoulder. “And a speedster dude to be all gross and mushy to worry about me.” He smiled at her contact. “I’m fine. I promise. Thanks though.”

He gave a few quick nods in response. “Well, I should go, we’re gonna be late.”

“Hey if they happen to hand out any of those tiny liquor bottles as favors,” She gave him an ornery grin. “Nabb me a couple will ya?”

He smiled, “Alright but if Mal finds them, you don’t remember how you got them.”

She chuckled, “Deal.”

As Bart sped away and Rose closed her door. She pressed her forehead against it and clenched her eyes tight. She sighed. This was going to be harder that what she originally thought. She’s not supposed to get attached. She not supposed to let anyone else get attached. Because once she had achieved her goal, there was no telling what exactly they might do. There was no telling what they were going to do to her once she’s exposed. And letting any of them in, letting any of them get attached, would only make their hurt worse.

But Rose had to stay strong. She had to remember that this was all going to be worth it. She had to remember how important it was to use them. How important it was to lie to them.

“I’m going to get you out.” She reassured to herself, clenching her fists tight. “Just a little longer. Just stay alive.”

Gotham City
December 27th
02:46 EDT
“Whaddya mean you ain’t got no cash? This ain’t no charity.” The words spat from the dealers mouth with spite. From under the hood of his oversized jacket, Arsenal could see his face twist with anger. The dealer shoved the bag of product back into his pocket.

“Y’know I’m good for it. Cut me some slack,” Arsenal sneered. A tingling sensation rose from under his skin. He scratched at his fingers with his thumb. He wobbled with with the whiskey that coursed through his veins. He just needed one. One hit, that was all. Just something to take the edge off.

“I don’t do credit homie. Either bring me my cash or quit wastin’ my time,” He turned to walk away. Arsenal grit his teeth.

It wasn’t more than a few weeks ago that he had taken down his first dealer. He wasn’t that much older than Arsenal, trying to make a deal with a group of teenagers. But when he confiscated the product, it was nothing like he had ever seen before. Beautiful, almost crystal-like nuggets of white and light blue. He knew he should have turned over to the authorities, but a morbid curiosity got the better of him. It’s not like he was on a team anymore, so what harm was there in exploring? What harm was there in testing the side effects of this new, beautiful substance? What could be the harm of trying out this, ‘Spark’?

But the problem was, from the very first hit, Arsenal was hooked. It became a lover of sorts that he could not let go. It made him feel powerful, made him feel invincible, and most importantly, for a brief moment, made him feel worthwhile. It made him feel a little less alone in a world that couldn’t care less if he was there.

The light was pretty, he gave it that much. But what he enjoyed the most, was the icy heat the slithered through his body, as he shot it through his veins. Watching it melt, watching it swirl up the syringe, Arsenal could only describe it as foreplay. From the moment the needle pierced his skin, his worries disappeared. Shoving it directly in the bloodstream made his high almost instant. It made him feel wanted.

So when he needed his fix and found himself without funds, he was prepared to take more violent measures.

“Then I’ll take it from you!” Arsenal growled as he grabbed the dealer by the back of his coat. The man spun around, landing an elbow on Arsenal’s jaw. Arsenal swung his fist at him in a sloppy fashion, the liquor slowing his movements. The dealer grabbed him by the collar of his hoodie, landing a punch in his diaphragm. He shoved Arsenal to the ground, he clutched his stomach, wheezing. He cried out at the dealer kicked him in his gut.

One.

Two.

Three times.

It was almost impossible for Arsenal to catch his breath. He heard the cocking ‘click’ of a pistol’s hammer, as the man pulled it from his waistband. Arsenal found himself staring down the barrel.

“You’re gonna regret doin’ that,” he growled, placing his finger on the trigger.

A bright red beam of light flashed through the air. It landed on the dealer’s hand, knocking his gun the the ground. As Arsenal’s eyes tried to adjust, the caught of glimpse of a human figure knocking the dealer to the ground. With one swift kick, he was out cold. Arsenal groaned, pushing himself onto his feet.
He watched as the man who took down the dealer, picked up the pistol he dropped, placing it in the waistband on the small of his back. He held what resembled a shotgun in his right hand. Its creases and curves emitted a red light. It reminded Arsenal of his mechanical arm.

The man looked over his shoulder at Arsenal. His voice was raspy and harsh. He chuckled, “Oh look how the mighty have fallen.” He turned around. He gagged at Arsenal’s appearance. His red hair and almost grown down to his shoulders. It was matted and greasy. A ring of grime coated his the base of his neck. “Wow,” he snickered at Arsenal. “You always look this pretty? You’ll make all the other girls jealous.”

The man walked out of the shadows and into the glow of the street light. He was tall and broad. He bore black BDUs and a kevlar top, covered with a brown leather bomber jacket. A red mask covered the entirety of his head.

Arsenal’s eyes went wide, “You’re-you’re him. You’re The Red.”

He groaned in disgust, rolling his eyes under his mask. “Gaaawd I hate that name. It makes me sound like a frickin ginger.” Arsenal narrowed his eyes. The man cleared his throat. “Oh...uh, no offense there Malachi.”

Arsenal bore his teeth, pointed a finger at him. “You. You’re the one who’s been killing those pushers. And I’ve been getting the heat for it.”

The man held his palm up at him. “Hey, woah. Uh, you’re welcome. You have been getting the credit for all my hard work after all.” He tilted his head. “And let’s face it, it’s not like you deserve it. Hard to believe you were Green Arrow’s twerp.”

Arsenal sneered. His lips curled into a snarl. “There something you want from me smart guy? Or you just here to talk shit?”

He waved a finger at him. “Woah, ease up there firecrotch. It’s not about what I want. It’s about what the boss wants.”

Arsenal raised an eyebrow, “Yeah, and what’s that?”

He shrugged, “You.”

“What?” Arsenal furrowed his brows.

“Well, believe it or not, there’s someone who still thinks that you can be useful.” The man explained. He pointed to Arsenal’s right arm. “You like that arm? How would you feel about making it permanent? No more having to recharge. No more having to reload. The power source would come from you. They’ve just been itchin’ to try it on someone. All the boss needs is someone like you. Someone who’s already used his equipment.”

Arsenal pursed his lips, tilting his head. “Wait, his equipment?” His eyebrows raised. “Are you talking about Luthor? You can’t be serious! He’s your boss?”

He raised his shoulders, “Ehhh more like one peg in a small committee. I know you and Lex-y have some issues. But this is an offer you’re not gunna want to turn down.”

“Piss off.” Arsenal spat. “I’m not doing anything with him ever again. And I am not doing anything to put me in his debt.”

The man sped over to him. He grabbed arsenal by the collar, shoving him against the closest brick
wall. “Look at yourself!” He chided, his face inches away from Arsenal’s. “You think you’re a hero? You think you’re doing any good? You look disgusting, you reek of liquor.” He pulled Arsenal away from the wall and shoved him against it again. He cried out at the contact. The man continued. “You think you’re out here doing good, but what were you just doing? Huh? Trying to steal product from dealers? Are you serious?”

Arsenal’s eyes drifted to the ground, “Better taken by me than given to kids.”

The man grunted. He loosened his grip. “I’ll give you that ginge-y. But you are way, way out of the game. You’re going to get someone hurt. You are going to get sloppy and someone innocent is going to get caught in the crosshairs.” He narrowed his eyes, placed his gun in his holster, and clenched the front of his shirt with both hands. “And when that day comes you’re going to wish you had taken that offer, because I’m going to kick your ass.”

“Get your hands off me!” Arsenal screeched. He grabbed his wrists, trying to pull him off. But the man held firm until he pulled back his right fist, winding back for a punch. Arsenal felt a harsh release of his shirt as Batgirl jumped down from the rooftop, kicking the man across the side of his face. He stumbled away, losing his footing. Arsenal slid down the side of the brick wall. Batgirl reached down to help Arsenal up.

The man caught sight of them. His eyes went wide, “Well would you look at that.”

“Arsenal, are you alright?” Batgirl asked.

Arsenal brushed her hand away. “Don’t touch me,” he hissed.

The man made it back onto his feet. His laughter caught Batgirl’s attention. “Wouldn’t bother with him too much, red.” He advised. “He’s bein’ a sourpuss tonight.”

Batgirl took a defensive stance. “And who exactly are you?” She asked.

He smirked. “Go easy on the kid.” He tapped a finger on his chest. “I’m the one who’s been killing those pushers. Not him. Don’t blame him.”

“Thanks for the confession.” Batgirl grinned, raising her fists in preparation. “Now I can just skip to the fun part of knocking you around.”

He smiled behind his mask. “You always were a firecracker.”

Batgirl narrowed her eyes in confusion. Arsenal sprang up behind her. “Sshut up! I’m ssick of your mouth,” he slurred. He attempted to charge towards the man, but in his drunken haze, tripped over his feet. Batgirl’s face felt hot with secondhand embarrassment. She wondered how she was going to fight off their attacker and keep Arsenal safe at the same time.

The man sighed. “Look, how about we both just look the other way tonight?” He pointed his finger at Arsenal. “And you get him off the street before he gets his ass whooped.” His voice softened. “He needs help.”

Disgruntled, Batgirl nodded. As much as she didn’t like it, she knew it was the best option.

The man shrugged, “Besides, I still got a lot of work to do in Gotham. So I’m sure we’ll have meetings like this very soon.” He reached into his jacket pocket. When he pulled out his hand, Batgirl gasped. He was holding a Fatherbox.

He looked at her with soft, longing eyes. His voice almost sounded sad, “It was good to see you again Babs.”
Her lungs froze. That name. That was her nickname. A name that only the closest of her friends called her. She shivered. Somehow, he knew her secret identity. “What did you just say?” Panic hissed through her teeth.

The man held the Fatherbox up to his face. “Fatherbox, back to Base, please.” Within seconds, a glowing yellow boomtube opened below him. He fell through. And in an instant, he was gone.

Batgirl was taken out of her daze by a cry from Arsenal. He clutched at his cracked rib as he tried to stand.

“Arsenal…” she reached towards him with caution.

“Don’t touch me,” he hissed, swiping his arm at her. He almost toppled over.

“Jesus Arsenal you can barely stand,” the inner corners of her eyebrows turning upwards in worry. She placed a light hand on his forearm to help keep him upright.

“I said don’t touch me.” He tried to pull away.

In his movement, Batgirl caught a glimpse of the inner crease of his elbow. It was bruised and flecked red with puncture wounds. Her stomach turned. She knew all too well what those meant.

She clenched his wrist and jerked his arm towards her, outstretching it so that his marks were in plain view. “What the hell are these!?” She screeched. He looked away from her and tried to pull his arm away. But she held it in place. “What the hell are these Arsenal? You’re shooting up now too?”

“Just leave me alone,” His voice cracked. He finally pulled out of her grasp.

“No.” She stated firmly. “No, I’m not going to leave you alone because you can’t keep doing this.” He turned away from her, his eyes drifted towards the ground. She shook with anger, with fear. “You’re going to get yourself killed. I know you don’t care about yourself, but there’s a lot of people who do care about you.”

“Yeah right, Nightwing…” he tried to retort.

“Nightwing kicked you off The Team because of your selfish actions.” She interrupted. She grabbed his shoulder, turning him around to face her. “It doesn’t mean he wants you to drink yourself to death. It doesn’t mean he wants you to hurt.”

Arsenal felt water build up in his eyes. His breathing was shaky. “Barbara…”

“Those are the only options you get.” She let go of his shirt. She swallowed hard, her eyes sparked with a mix of sadness and pity. “We’ve already lost Tula, Jason, and Wally. I’m not going to lose you too.” Arsenal felt a tingle rise in his nose. Batgirl placed her hand lightly on his arm. “You deserve to get better. You deserve to be the hero I know you can be.”

Arsenal shook his head slightly. He looked away for a moment and then back to her. “I...don’t have the money…”
“I’ll pay for it.” She assured. “Don’t worry about it.” This would be an instance where she would have to use her ‘emergency’ Wayne Industries credit card given to her by Bruce. She decided she was going to just have to ask for forgiveness rather than permission.

His mouth gaped. “Barbara you can’t…”

“I can and I will.” She furrowed her brow. Her words were stern and certain. “What’s your choice?”

He felt his muscles tense. He choked back a sob. Because for the first time in what seemed like a lifetime, someone cared that he was there. It felt like, for the first time, someone actually wanted him to stay alive. He broke, falling to his knees as she clutched at hand to his face. For the longest time, his recreational substances, were the only things that made him feel like he wasn’t alone. But the bottles, his needles; his lovers. They were mistresses whose clawed grips he could not fight on his own. “Okay.” His voice cracked. Batgirl knelt in front of him.

“Okay…I’ll go.” He brought his hand away from his face, his watery eyes meeting her gaze. “I’ll get help.”
“911 what’s your emergency?”
“Th-they’re, they’re going to hurt a lot of people. They want to kill.”
“What is trying to hurt people ma’am? Can you tell me where you are? Are you in a safe pla-”
“Mayor Fermin’s campaign party. El Paso Convention Center, 5pm. They all have superpowers. Please, I-I think they might kill him.
“What is-”
“Metahumans. Please, stop them.”

The voices of the 911 call rang through the common area of The Watch Tower. Aqualad and Batgirl stood in front of the floating computer screen. Blue Beetle, Wonder Girl, Static, Bumblebee, Tigress, Batgirl, Rose, Nightwing, and La’gaan stood around them. They watched as the voice analyzer jumped up and down on the screen. The dispatcher, a throaty older woman, clashed with the high pitch of young girl on the other end.

Jaime felt his stomach drop at the sound of Mayor Fermin’s name.

“Approximately two hours ago we received a copy of this 911 call from the El Paso police dispatch.” Aqualad addressed them with a firm gaze. “In case you are not aware already, El Paso mayor Wesley Fermin is running for Governor next year. Tonight is his official announcement party. The guest list includes about 400 of his wealthiest and most influential supporters.” He pulled up several news articles about the Mayor’s scandals on the screen. “Mayor Fermin has recently been under spotlight. He has been accused of illegal taxation, questionable business practices, and sexual assault. All of these charges have recently been dropped but that does not mean that everyone believes he is innocent. The El Paso PD believes it is possible that the people the 911 call is talking about may be seeking their own form of justice.”

“And that’s why they asked for our help,” Static questioned. “Because they might be metahumans?”

“Correct.” Batgirl answered. “But Mayor Fermin has made it explicitly clear that he wants protection done undercover. Which is why we’ve arranged for all of you for this mission instead of League members. He is worried that costumed heroes watching the crowd and guarding the doors might make his guest...uncomfortable.”

Wonder Girl scoffed, “Glad to know appearance trumps safety.”

“Interesting enough,” Aqualad raised one of his brows. “When The League was contacted, Mayor Fermin wanted to know if we knew Blue Beetle,” Jaime jumped at the sound of his name. “And specifically asked for him to be on the team.” Kaldur’s eyes met his gaze. “He said that it may be tied to your... ‘investigation’. Is there something that you would like to fill us in on, Jaime?”

“Yeeeah…” Jaime rubbed the back of his neck. All eyes were upon him. He sighed. “A couple months ago, Mayor Fermin caught me out on patrol one night and asked me for some help. Some superstores and pharmacies were getting robbed while loading and unloading shipments. And some of the employees were getting roughed up. Some people saw the thieves flee to the Tiguan Indian
Reservation. But I haven’t been able to catch them.”

“And I haven’t received any reports on this, why?” Kaldur chided. “Jaime... do you suspect it might be someone you know?”

Jaime pursed his lips. It appeared as though he could not keep his suspicion hidden any longer.

“Well, I think Tye might be involved with it.”

Everyones’ brows perked at Jaime’s response. He elaborated, “Tye’s been basically off the map for a while. He started hanging out with a new crowd, got a new girlfriend. She’s... manipulative to say the least.” His words dripped his irritation at the thought of Jenny. “Her Dad’s the Tribal Chief, and I’m fairly certain they’re taking the product and giving it out to the people there.” He growled to himself. “But I don’t have any hard proof.”

“You can’t find any?” Kaldur questioned. “Or maybe, you didn’t want to find any?” Jaime’s gaze fell to the floor. He would be a liar if he said that Kaldur’s words weren’t a little bit true. All he had to do was let the Scarab scan their backpacks back at Jenny’s home. But that could have held consequences that he desperately didn’t want the responsibility of.

“Jaime, Tye is a metahuman.” Batgirl’s words were stern. “And what you say he might be involved in, could make him suspect for today. Do you know if the others in his group could be a concern for us? Do you believe that they are capable of extreme violence?”

“I don’t know.” Jaime shrugged, a fleck of sadness flashing across his face. “I really don’t know anymore.”

Kaldur hummed low in his throat. “You and I will discuss the importance of reporting information after the mission, Jaime.” Jaime’s eyes fell. He rubbed the tip of his right shoe on the floor. He felt like a scolded child. Kaldur addressed the rest of the team. “As for the rest of you, the squads and duties will still remain the same for the most part.” He pulled up a blueprint of the Convention center on the screen. “Nightwing and I will be Alpha. Our job will be to follow Mayor Fermin around as his personal bodyguards. Bumblebee, Static, Wondergirl: you three will be Beta. You will be rovers. It is your job to continue to move about the floor, keeping an eye out for any suspicious activities. Blue Beetle, Tigress, and Batgirl will be Gamma. You will position yourself by the main doors. You will be our first line of defense, keeping a lookout for any known Metacriminals...As well as Tye now. Rose, La’gaan, you are Delta. Miss Martian, Beast Boy, and Superboy agreed to Zeta between Mars and Earth for their mission today so we may use the Bioship. You two will fly it to the convention center where you will observe from the roof. And, worst case scenario and Mr. Fermin is attacked, Nightwing and I will usher him to the roof where you will fly him to safety.”

“Awww what?” Rose whined. “We’re the getaway car?”

"Is there a problem Rose?” Kaldur addressed.

“No.” She pouted, crossing her arms. “I was just hoping I’d get to punch somebody today.”

“Sorry chum.” La’gaan nudged her with his elbow. “Newbies get the soft gigs. Have to make sure you can handle the job first.”

Rose sneered at his touch. Artemis leaned into her, whispering in her ear, “Who knows. If La’gaan annoys you enough, maybe you’ll get to slap him around.”

Rose grinned and hummed in amusement. She liked the way Artemis thought.

“Seems like a lot of people for one mission,” Karen interjected.
“Our tip said that there might be metahumans but it did not say how many or how strong.” Aqualad explained. “We should be prepared. And though I doubt the whole space will be used, the center is 80,000 square feet. So we need as many eyes as we can get. We are going with the ‘better to be over prepared than under prepared’.” He pulled up a weather radar for Texas. Heavy rain clouds crept across it. “The weather in El Paso does not bode well for tonight so Zeta travel may not be available later. We will take the Super Cycle as well as the Bioship. The thing to remember in the mission is to not make yourself look obvious. You may eat and engage with others but still pay attention to your surroundings.”

“Make sure your communicators are functional and gather any weapons you may need,” Batgirl added. “The attire for his mission is formal wear. So don’t bring anything you can’t hide under your suits, sports jackets, or dresses. We leave in one hour.”

El Paso – Convention Center
December 29th, 2016
16: 27 MDT

A nervous tension weighed heavy across the small security surveillance room. Tye, Jivan, Sebastian, Summer and Adalae scattered about the area. Lost in their own thoughts as they sat in their dilapidated chairs. Summer sat at the desk that held the monitors. The screens showing every angle of the building as guest arrived. Her fingernails clacked on the desk with ferocity. She was unknowingly chewing on her other thumb nail as her eyes darted from screen to screen. A growing knot tighten in her belly.

Jivan ground his teeth at the sound of Summer’s tapping. They were all nervous, on edge and, quite honestly, a little afraid. The noise was the last straw for him. “Summer,” he snipped. She whipped around at the sound of her name. “I am about two seconds away from ripping those nails right out of your fingers.”

Her upper lip curled in to a snarl. A small growl rang from her throat. “Try it, and you’ll find yourself neutered, mutt.”

Summer yelped as a cold hand snatched the back of her neck. Jenny had snuck up behind her. Jenny’s voice was cold and unnerving. “I will not have such behavior from either of you.” Her eyes shot over to Jivan. His gaze fell to the floor. Jenny released Summer and unzipped the gym bang slung around her shoulder. “Not today. It is the most important day of our movement. And I will not tolerate your attitudes and tempers soiling it.”

“S-sorry, Jenny.” Summer stuttered, rubbing the back of her neck with her hands. “I’m just anxious.”

“As you should be,” Jenny advised. She pulled out a few items of clothing from the bag. “These are the waitstaff uniforms.” She threw each of them, aside from Tye, a pair of black slacks and a black longsleeve buttondown shirt. “Put them on. Make sure your weapons are on underneath.”

The sound of Jenny’s voice faded from Tye’s concentration when out of the corner of his vision, something seemed out of place. He narrowed his eyes at the top left monitor. The label at the bottom of the screen read ‘Rooftop Access’.

“Oh no.” His voice was almost a whisper. He rushed over to the computers. The others followed his movements with their eyes. He grabbed hold of the mouse, enlarging the screen. “We have
As though they appeared from thin air, the red vessels that Tye had come to know as the Bioship and Supercycle landed on the rooftop. Tye’s hand shook with worry as Cassie, Barbara, Karen, Dick, and Jaime exited the vehicles. They were clad in suits and formal dresses. They gathered, discussing last minute details of their assignments. Rose and La’gaan stayed in the Bioship.

Adalae let out a small gasp of excitement, she tried her best to hide her smile.

Tye’s jaw slacked in awe. “No no no no no.” He shook his head. “Jaime’s not supposed to be here.”

On the screen all but Rose and La’gaan disappeared into the building through the access door.

A deep growl rumbled in Sebastian’s chest. “Are you freaking kidding me!”?

Adalae flinched as his raising voice. She quickly put space between them. She knew all too well the consequences of his quick rage. The bruise on her cheek and cut on her lip as a result of their ‘sparring match’ that morning attested to that.

Tye spun around to face him. Sebastian jolted his pointer finger at him. “You said he wasn’t going to be a problem. Now he’s here with his team members? This is already a disaster!” Tye’s breath hitched as he watched Sebastian’s canines morphed into fine points.

Jenny placed herself between them. She held her palm out in front of Sebastian’s chest. Her eyes and Talisman started to glow. “You will calm yourself.” A light flickered in his eyes. The muscles in Sebastian’s face slacked into a blank stare. His shoulders fell as the anger fled his body.

The light dissipated from Jenny’s eyes. She turned and gazed up at the screen. “I expected something like this.” She placed the gym bag on the desk and rummaged through it, as if she were looking for something. “One cannot create change without expecting some resistance. It is not a major concern.”

Tye’s eyes went wide as his jaw dropped. “Not a major concern?” He scoffed. “Jenny, they all know me. Jaime has seen everyone here. We will not go unnoticed.” His voice cracked with panic.

A smirk played upon her lips. Her fingers curled around his chin. She placed a light kiss on his mouth to placate his worry. “You must have more faith in me love.” She rummaged through her bag once more. “You and I will remain hidden until our time comes. Jaime has only seen them once. I am doubtful he will remember them.” She glanced over at her underlings as they fixed the final buttons on their new clothing. “Especially not in their uniforms.” She pulled out a glass vial from the bag. A finely ground tan powder rested inside.

“What is that?” Tye asked.

“A backup plan.” She smiled. “A concoction of herbs and roots passed down from the medicine men of my tribe. I predicted something like this would happen” She rolled the vial between her thumb and pointer finger.

Tye swallowed hard. “It-it won’t kill them, will it?”

A small laugh escaped her. “No of course not. I still want them to be able to watch after all. Just a mild paralytic.” She turned to face the group. “Now all of you, listen to me. We’ve had a slight change of plans.”
Aqualad, Tigress, Static entered through the front doors with the rest of the guests. A delicate chandelier scattered the light through its crystals. It rested above a stage centered at the back of the room, directly across from the front door. In the left front corner there resided a wrap around bar. The right corner held a long buffet of delicate and expensive finger foods. Round tables were scattered about the room for guests to sit if they so desired.

Artemis fidgeted and fixed herself as they walked, pulling up the top of her strapless dress. Formal wear? Why the *hell* did it *have* to be formal wear? The only thing formal she owned was a homecoming dress from high school. However the hem came up to her shins now as opposed to the ground. The top dug into her rib cage, but it was the only thing with ruffles thick enough to hide her compact crossbow on her thigh strap.

He made a dramatic inhale, “I really hope I don’t have to fight anyone for this mission because I am literally about to pop out of this.”

Kaldur smiled and shook his head, “You know, if Wally were here, I am sure he would have something grotesque to add to that.”

Artemis laughed, “God that idiot would too.”

Kaldur noticed the others filing into the room as well. He chimed in on his communicator, “Alright team, take your positions.”

Barbara took a seat at the bar, Artemis lingered by the buffet, and Jaime sat at a round table in the center. Their eyes screen everyone as they walked through the front doors. Cassie, Virgil, and Karen began to meander about the center of the room, walking between tables. Kaldur and Dick took notice of Mayor Fermin, laughing boisterously with several other men. They approached him.

“Mayor Fermin?” Kaldur shook his hand. “It is a pleasure to meet you. The name is Kaldur. My...assistant and I.” He motioned towards Dick who had come up next to him. “Are here on behalf of the phone call earlier. We will be escorting you today.”

Mayor Firmin narrowed his eyes at him, trying to decipher his code. His brows perked in realization. “Ah yes! Yes, very good.” He gave Dick as firm handshake as well. “I do appreciate you boys.” The wrinkles on his face crinkled with a wide smile. His salt-and-pepper hair was slicked back on his head. A thin black mustache rested on his upper lip.

As an hour passed, Kaldur found himself nodding off. He wondered if begging to the gods for death was a reasonable request. He had already grown tired of Mayor Fermin’s mundane and pretentious business conversations. Mayor Fermin laughed just a little too loud, made jokes just a little too crude, and sucked up just a little too much for him to be tolerated for an extended period of time. It also did not help that Mr. Fermin was on his third glass of champagne.

“Oh I forgot to ask.” He turned towards Kaldur and Dick. The near empty glass resting in his hands. “Is that Blue Beetle fellow here?”

Dick cleared his throat, lowering his voice. “Uh..yes. Under cover though.”

“Oh.” Wesley responded. “Yes, well he’s been quite helpful and generous. Spending his own time tracking down those looters.” His face bunched in irritation. “No doubt in my mind it’s those...reservation filth.” Kaldur’s eyes widened at his words. Dick couldn’t help but grit his teeth. “Oh, I suppose I shouldn’t say that too loud.” Mayor Fermin chimed with a smile. He finished off his glass. “Wouldn’t be ‘politically correct.’” He waved over one of the waiters. He carried a silver tray of thin glasses that held the mayor’s favorite bubbly elixir.
The waiter approached them. His latino skin only did more to highlight the white of his smile. His brown hair was pulled back into a small bun. He had been following them around, waiting for the mayor to finish his glass. Because unbeknownst to them, his name was Sebastian, and Jenny’s powder had dissolved in their drinks just moments before.

He held out the tray, head tilting with a forced grin. “More champagne Mr. Mayor?”

“Why yes my boy, thank you.” He grabbed two glasses, handing them to Dick and Kaldur before grabbing one for himself. Sebastian snuck away, a mischievous smile forming on his lips.

The mayor cleared his throat, “Ah yes, now, where was I?”

“You were talking about your inability to be politically correct,” Dick replied monotone.

Wesley boomed with laughter. “That’s what happens when I get too much champagne in me.” He raised his glass. “Ah well, wouldn’t make a difference.” He leaned into them, lowering his voice. Well, as much as he could lower it in his tipsy state. “Not like anyone cares what those dirty Indians have to say anyways.” He laughed again, raising is glass a little higher. “Cheers.” He smiled, waiting for them to raise their glasses as well. Kaldur looked over at Dick with a scowl. And although Dick had his sunglasses on, Kaldur knew he was doing to same.

They sighed. They things they had to put up with for public safety.

They reached out their glasses, tapping it on his. All three of them took a swig together. Mayor Fermin brushed between them, attending to an rich supporter who had just arrived. His greeting was ever too exuberant. They turned to follow him.

“If I may be so bold to say,” Kaldur chimed, just out of hearing range for the mayor. “But he is a vile human being.”

Dick sighed again, rubbing his fingers on his temple. “God I hope he doesn’t get a seat in office.”

Across the room, Summer stepped behind the bar. She threw on a red bartending vest she snatched from the supply closet. She placed ingredients into a shaker, tapping in some of the tan powder that Jenny gave her. After several hard shakes, she poured the drink into a martini glass. She carried it diligently in her hand, eyes locked on a certain red head at the bar.

“Miss?” Barbara was pulled from her concentration by the bartender. A thin smile formed on her lips. Her blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail. She pushed a red drink in front of her. “Cosmopolitan.” She nodded to her left. “Compliments of the gentleman at the bar.”

“Oh,” Barbara responded, turning for a brief moment to see if anyone was looking at her. “Thank you,” she told Summer and placed her fingers at the bottom of the glass and placed her attention back to the front doors.

Summer stood there for a moment, impatient at Barbara’s lack of thirst. She cleared her throat. “Uh...sorry.” She caught Babs’s attention once more. Summer threw on an over zealous smile, sporting a fake valley girl accent. “This is like super embarrassing. But um...it’s like, my first day. I wanna make sure I do a good job. Will you tell me if it’s any good?”

Barbara groaned under her breath in annoyance. “Sure. No problem.” She took a generous gulp. Her eyes went wide as a lump formed in her throat. It was quite possibly the worse thing that she had ever drank. The green of the girl’s bartending skills definitely showed. She forced herself to swallow and feign a smile. “Um, little heavy on the lime but, great otherwise,” she lied.
Summer smiled again, “Great! Thank you.” She walked away to tend to other customers, relief flowing through her.

Jivan made his way through the crowd as well. He placed the finishing tan powder touch on top of his tray of desserts. With swift strides he approached a toned blonde in a short yellow dress who was picking at a small plate of finger food.

He held out the tray to her. “A chocolate eclair for the beautiful miss?”

Cassie turned to find she was being addressed by one of the waiters. Her eyes went wide as she smiled. Free fancy food and desserts? This was the greatest mission ever!

“Wow! Thanks!” She chimed as she nabbed one of them, stuffing it into her mouth.

Jivan chuckled as he smiled back, “My pleasure miss.” He tried his best to stifle his laugh as he walked away. Superheroes were so easy.

Lastly, Adalae sifted between guests. She held the tray high above her head. Being short was not conducive to keeping her tray from getting bumped into. She approached Karen. Her arms were crossed as she studied the room. Adalae lowered the tray, it held a three glasses lined with shrimp, a red sauce sitting in the middle. She pulled out the vile of tan powder from her pocket. She made sure no one was looking and….

Tossed the vile into the trash can next to her.

She cleared her throat. “Um excuse me, Miss?” Karen turned towards her. “Shrimp cocktail?”

Karen flashed her a smile before reaching for one of the glasses. “Yes, thank you.”

Adalae nodded and walked away. She bit her lip as nervousness rested heavy upon her. It was almost time. She hoped that she was able to help them.

Virgil’s voice chimed in on their communicators. “Um I just wanted to say...in case you guys haven’t noticed already….” Everyone perked their attention to the area around them. Virgil continued, a smooth cockiness flowing through his words. “But we look good.”

Everyone relaxed as they realized there was no cause for alarm. Karen stifled a laugh behind her hand. She pressed on the communicator in her ear. “Yeeeah you got that right! We’re probably the best looking bunch here.” She took a nibble of one of her shrimps. “Free food and fancy dresses? These are the types of missions we need.”

Dick sighed again as Mr. Fermin’s annoying and loud laughter boomed around him. He pressed on his communicator. “Personally, I would much rather be punched in the face by Bane.”

Barbara sported a wide grin as she whipped her head around. Mayor Fermin was surrounded by a group of his ‘friends’, laughing at some sort of joke he made that was in no doubt distasteful. She noticed the sour expressions on Dick and Kaldur’s faces. They stood, hands at their front, one gripping the other wrist. They seemed to sigh in unison. They look so done.

She laughed as he held her pointer finger to her ear. “Hey Dick, I got a free drink. How’s being with big and greasy over there treating you?”

Dick looked over to her spot on the bar. Though she could not see his eyes behind his sunglasses, his furrowed brows were enough to give hit at his irritation. She laughed and flashed him a teasing smile. Barbara watched as Dick’s and Kaldur’s attention was brought back to the mayor. Wesley
pointed to the stage.

Kaldur’s voice came across the communicator, “Mayor Fermin is about to give a speech. Be on alert for any potential attackers.”

Mayor Fermin stood at the podium on the stage, speaking into the microphone. He greeted and thanked his guests and urged them for donations. A large screen flashed a montage of photos of himself behind him. As Wesley held the attention of the entire room, Jivan, Summer, Sebastian and Adalae scanned the room for one another. Sebastian gave them reaffirming nods. Sebastian approached the front of the stage while the other three stood by the front doors. Summer pulled out a small black disc from her pocket. It was just big enough to cover her palm. She placed it on the small patch of wall between the two main doors. They stood, waiting for their final signal. Summer jumped as a loud crack of thunder rang from outside. She shivered with excited anticipation. It was almost time.

Mayor Fermin finished and climbed down from the stage. He was greeted by an array of applause. Several minutes passed and there was still no sign of trouble.

Jaime chirped on the communicator, “No sign of Tye or any other known criminals from what I can see. All clear where I’m at still.”

“Yeah, same.” Virgil added. Everyone also added their ‘all clear.’

Jaime sighed, “Maybe it was a false alar-”

Jaime was cut off as the sound of a slow clap filled the speakers. They turned their attention to podium again. Behind it stood Sebastian. A smug look played upon his face as he clapped into the microphone.

“Now, wasn’t that a wonderful speech?” He finally spoke into the microphone. He pulled it up from the stand, holding it in his hand. He motioned towards Wesley. “Let’s give it up for the man of the hour folks, Mayorrr Wesley Fermin. Come on, give it up.” He clapped with the microphone in his hand. His voice mimicking that of a show host. Wary and confused looks were exchanged among the guests. A few of them clapped, if only in disorientation. Barbara and Artemis abandoned their posts, walking closer towards the stage in suspicion. Barbara tripped a little as she stood. She shook her head, feeling light headed. She brushed it off to getting up too quickly.

Sebastian leaned on the podium, a cocky smile formed on his lips. “You know, Mayor Fermin has done so much to help our city, bringing El Paso to the thriving utopia it is today.” He stood upright. “Mr. Fermin has never been afraid to be a go-getter. To go out and take whatever it is he wants.” His eyes darkened. “Even if it’s without consent.” He look directly at the mayor as he gave him a large, false smile. He leaned in, pointing towards him. “Just like when he raped those native women from the reservation.” A few quieted gasped escaped the audience. Conversation began to still. The muscles in Wesley’s face tense with anger. Sebastian chuckled. “Oh no no no. I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I meant ‘supposedly’ raped.” He raised his voice. “It’s easy to get charges dropped if you threaten to tax their family into starvation if they speak up.”

Mayor Fermin snarled. He snapped at two of the other members of the waitstaff. “Get him down now!” They nodded and charged at Sebastian.

“Oh nooo.” Sebastian feigned concern, the pitch of his voice raising. It was almost sing-song. “People coming after me? Whatever will I dooo?”

He pressed on the center of his chest. His shirt shredded off of him as six red and black discs sprang
from under it. The black band that held them was wrapped around his chest. The discs spiraled towards the two wait staff members charging towards him. The discs stopped around them in the air. They shocked them with a red electrical pulse. They cried out in pain and landed on the floor.

Sebastian reached behind his back pulling out a laser gun that was attached to the band on his chest. It was black, its edges lined with a red light. He fired a shot onto the ceiling. He smiled, “Now, if you’d let me finish...”

Dick’s jaw dropped. He recognized them as Apokolips weapons.

The guests began to panic. Their cries rose and they rushed toward the door. But The Mayor held firm. He glared at Sebastian with a savage snarl.

“Everyone hold your positions. Wait for my signal,” Kaldur demanded. He and Dick went to place themselves in front of Wesley. The boys found their steps heavy. As they took their defensive stances, but the room seemed to wobble.

“Oh, no one is going anywhere.” Sebastian advised. “You haven’t seen the main act.”

And with that, Summer smashed the disc she placed on the wall with her fist. It emitted a red light as it sent electric signals to the wiring in the walls. The doors slammed shut. The clash of the metal startling everyone inside. They locked with a loud ‘click’.

Summer, Jivan, and Adalae tore off their black shirts. Black bands wrapped around their chests over their undershirts. Summer reached behind her, pulling an Apokolips laser gun off of her back. Jivan pulled a red lasor whip from his band. And Adalae pulled out a curved bayonet, the handle elongating into a staff. The razor tip began to glow red. Summer fired another warning shot into the ceiling. Some of the guests screamed as they stumbled away from the door. They pointed their weapons at them to keep them away from the doors. Summer and Jivan smiled with excitement.

Virgil could hear the pounding of his heart in his ears. His electricity sparked in his hand as he waited for Aqualad’s signal. He was ready to pounce. He snapped his head around as the table next to him fell over. Cassie collapsed onto the floor and brought the table down with her as she attempted to use it to hold herself up. Virgil rushed to her side. He rolled her over.


Her breathing was slow but her words were almost normal. She darted her eyes all around her as her body remained limp. “I can’t-I can’t move.” She swallowed hard. “Everything’s...heavy.”

Virgil pressed onto his communicator, “Guys, Cassie’s out...Paralyzed.”

Karen raced to Barbara’s side as she fell to the ground. “Barbara too.” Karen chimed in on her communicator.

Nightwing and Kaldur toppled as well. They groaned, trying to fight off the toxin. But it was no use. Wesley dropped to his knees.

“What’s the matter Mayor?” Sebastian asked with a smile. “Feeling groggy?” He approached the mayor and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. Sebastian sat him down on a chair, his body was limp. “Oh no, you get to have a seat, like I said you haven’t seen the main event.”

“What do we do?” Jaime yelled to Artemis. She reached for the bow on her thigh.

A loud crack of thunder rang inside of the room. The guests gaped in awe at the ceiling as a dark rain cloud spiraled and expanded until it grew to each corner of the room. Lightening flashed inside the
cloud. Its the thunder roared through their chests. Another flash of lightning blinded them. Two wind funnels emerged from the cloud and crashed upon the stage. When the lightning ceased, two figures stood on the front corners of the stage.

On the left was Jenny. She wore a black cloth dress that came down to her knees. A long red cloth with green trim was tied around her waist. A small leather satchel was strung around her shoulder. Her gold, bison-etched talisman rested around her neck. The fur of a black buffalo head with big grey horns rested on her head. A strap around her chin held it in place. The eye holes of her fur mask lined with her eyes. A train of fur hung from the back of the mask and trailed down her back. Disheveled hair was splayed upon her shoulders. She held a tomahawk in her left hand.

On the right was Tye. He was shirtless. Two red wolf paws were painted on each one of his pectorals. He wore tan animal skin pants and warpaint covered the entirety of his face. It was painted black from the eyes up and red the rest of the way down. His orange headband wrapped around his forehead. A fierce expression rested on his face.

“I am Black Bison,” Jenny boomed. Her words were slow and fierce.

“And I am Apache Chief,” Tye spoke with the same booming ferocity.

Jenny continued. “And we are here to seek justice for the crimes against our people.”

Sebastian beamed into the microphone. He held his free arm up to the air. “We are ‘The Pack’” He pointed at Wesley. “And we have come here for you, Wesley Fermin.”

Wesley’s face contorted. “I haven’t done anything,” He spat.

Jenny leapt in front of the mayor. She raised her tomahawk. “No more lies,” she hissed.

Artemis pulled out her crossbow. She fired an arrow at Jenny’s weapon, knocking it out of her hand.

“What’s going on down there?” La’gaan barged in on the communicator. “Do you guys need assistance?”

“Negative La’gaan,” Artemis answered, now placing herself in command. “You and Rose stand ready for extraction.”

Jenny growled. “Stop her!” She barked at Sebastian, pointing towards Artemis. He charged towards her, firing his weapon.

She rolled out of the way as she ordered on the communicator. “Blue Beetle, get the mayor. Bee, take out the other three kids.”

Jaime extracted his Blue Beetle armor. Karen, pulled up her mask, shrinking and flying towards the three other kids. Artemis threw a smoke bomb at Sebastian. He coughed and stumbled until he found himself on the other end of Artemis’s aerial kick. It hit him in the jaw, knocking him to the ground. He lay there and groaned, seeing stars. Artemis ran to help Karen with the three other kids with weapons.

Blue Beetle charged for Black Bison. But he was tackled to the ground by Tye. Tye straddled him, holding his wrists down to the ground.

“Tye, please, you don’t have to do this,” Jaime tried to plead.

Tye narrowed his eyes. “Yes I do. And you will not stop me.”
Jaime grit his teeth. “Then you leave me no choice.” He opened up the plasma cannon in his chest. It sent Tye flying off of him.

Jenny gasped, seeing that Tye was not getting up. She trembled with rage. She pointed a finger at Jaime. “You think you have defeated us but you are NOTHING,” she spat. She turned towards the other kids and shouted, “Release the beasts!”

Sebastian, Jivan, and Summer leaped high into the air and landed on three of the round tables. Growls erupted from their chests. The Team looked on in horror as the three teenagers hunched over the tables. Their bodies began to morph. But it was not smooth and streamlined like Beast Boy’s. Their bones and joints cracked under their skin. They trembled, digging into the tables as their fingernails turned into claws. Fur grew all over their bodies as their mouths painfully pulled into snouts. Their clothing shredded around them.

When they were done, beasts, indistinguishable from their human forms, stood on all fours in front of them. Jivan and Summer resembled that of hyenas. And Sebastian resembled a cheetah. But their arms and legs were longer and more slender than that of regular animals. Their ‘paws’ still resembled that of human hands and feet. They reminded Jaime of werewolves.

Drool dripped from their sharp snarls. Sebastian jumped at Jaime. And Jivan and Summer pounced upon Artemis and Karen.

Sebastian wrapped his clawed paw around Jaime’s throat. Panic rose inside of him as he felt his windpipe being crushed. Jaime heard loud yell as Rose appeared, drop kicking Sebastian off of him.

She stood. Her brows perked at the sight of the Cheetah in front of her. “Woah,” She smirked and motioned towards herself. “Heeeere kitty kitty.” Cheetah growled and charged at her, engaging both her and Blue Beetle in battle.

La’gaan joined the battle as well, assisting Artemis and Karen with Jivan and Summer.

Jenny’s stomach turned. They were losing. She heard a throaty laugh emerge from the seat in front of her. Wesley look up at her with a wicked smile.

“Didn’t quite think this through. Did you girl?”

Jenny’s nose crinkled with her snarl. “You did this? You had this planned, didn’t you?”

“I always have everything planned.” He chuckled. “And after today, I’ll have no problem using you as an example to finally get you _filth_ the hell out of my state.

Jenny’s hands curled into fists. She leaned towards him, “So you do admit it?”

He beamed at her, his nose crinkling in disgust. “Of course. Who are you going tell, hum? No one will believe trash like you.”

Jenny snatched the front of his shirt with her hand.

He laughed again. “You Redskins are nothing but leeches on the economy. Stealing government money while you do nothing but drink. You’re lazy. All of you. You raise the crime rate in _my_ city. Making it difficult for _my_ political campaign. So yes, I will stop at nothing to tax you and harass you out of my state.”

Jenny tightened her grip, “And I suppose the women you assaulted were just a side benefit then?”
A smug look splayed on his face. “Concerned citizens coming to my office complaining that they can’t ‘survive’ such taxation. I merely offered them a trade.”

“More like forced them,” Jenny corrected.

He licked his canine. “You Indian whores already suck enough money from government aid. I think it’s about time you actually sucked something to earn your keep. Don’t you?”

Jenny clocked him across the mouth. His face furrowed with rage. “I will see that your whole kind rots in prison for this.” Blood spat with each of his spiteful words. “You stupid, savage, prairie nigger.”

But instead of striking him again, she smiled. Wesley felt the pit of his stomach drop. Jenny stood up straight. Around her neck on a chain, just below the Talisman, rested a small black box. A red light blinked from it. “Smile for the camera Mr. Fermin.” She had gotten almost everything she came for. He gasped. “In an hour, you, your confession, and your death will be on national television.”

Her smile turned into a snarl once more. Her eyes and Talisman began to glow. Mayor Fermin felt himself lifted into the air and Jenny revealed her telekinetic abilities. She slammed his body down onto the table. She raised him and slammed him down over and over again. As Dick and Kaldur lay there, they could hear his bones cracking. They were able to twitch their fingers and the toxin was starting to wear off.

Across the room Blue Beetle was thrown to the ground by Cheetah. He rose only to find that Adalae charged towards him. Her staff raised high into the air. He turned the armor on his arms into razors to protect himself. She clashed the staff against his arms. He bunched his face in confusion however as he found she wasn’t exerting any force.

She leaned into him, almost whispering. “Blue Beetle. I don’t want to fight you. I just have to make it look like I am.”

“What?” He asked, puzzled.

“Her talisman.” Adalae advised. “Her talisman is the source of her power. If you take it off her body, or break it, she can’t do magic anymore.”

“Oh, uh, thanks.”

She looked over at Jenny and then back at Jaime. “Now push me down.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “Come on,” she whined. “I have to make it look like I’m fighting.”

“Uh...oh. Ok.” He stammered. He pushed back against her staff, knocking her down. He spoke into his communicator. “Guys her power is coming from the talisman around her neck. Try to tear it off or break it.”

“On it!” Rose announced as she gave Sebastian a quick kick to the face. She charged towards Jenny, who was still crashing the mayor against the table. Rose unsheathed one of her daggers. She spun around, pulled her arm close to her and then extended it, crashing the dagger onto Jenny’s chest.

Jaime’s eyes widened in horror. “Rose! Stop!”

To his relief, the dagger only hit the talisman. Jenny yelled as it cracked in half. The final beam of light that emitted from it shot Rose backwards.

Jenny trembled, holding the broken talisman in her hand. Her stomach dropped. She looked over to
her left as she heard a groan. Tye was finally getting up from being blasted by Jaime’s plasma
cannon.

“Useless,” she hissed behind her teeth. She ran up to him, putting his arm around her shoulders. She
saw Artemis blow a dart at Cheetah. He collapsed onto the ground, unconscious. This was turning
into a disaster. She reached into the satchel around on her hip. “Retreat!” She called out to her team
members. “Retreat!”
Jivan, and Summer ran towards her. They morphed back to their human forms. Their naked bodies
leaping between terrified partygoers.

Jenny looked around her. “Where’s Adalea?” She asked, frantic.

“Who gives a shit?” Jivan spat. “Let’s go!”

Jenny grit her teeth as the heroes ran towards them. The grotesque taste of failure sitting on her
tongue. Wesley was still alive and she was about to lose two team members. She pulled a Fatherbox
out of her bag. She held it to her mouth. “Home, please.” They disappeared into the ground as a
boom tube opened below them.

With their exit, the doors unlocked and opened. The guests spilled out. Artemis ordered their retreat.
The authorities were already on scene. She watched as an officer placed an inhibitor collar on
Sebastian.

They helped usher Kaldur, Cassie, Dick, and Barbara to the Bioship as the toxin slowly began to
wear off. They made their way back to Bludhaven.
Memories

*Bludhaven - The Warehouse*
*December 29th, 2016*
*20:12 EST*

“That was quite possibly the weirdest shit I’ve ever seen,” Virgil was first to break the silence as they exited the Bioship. It sat in its fully expanded form in the basement with them. Virgil found it odd that it hadn’t compressed yet. He helped Cassie out of the ship. The toxin was worn off for the most part. But she was still wobbly.

Jaime groaned, “I am not looking forward to this debrief.”

The Zeta platform behind them began to glow.

**Recognized Miss Martian, B05**
**Superboy, B04**
**Beast Boy, B19**

As they stepped off the Zeta Platform, Miss Martian, Superboy, and Beast Boy were greeted by the other team members.

“Hey guys. How’d the missi-” Miss Martian cut her words short. She turned her head towards the Bioship. Her eyes squinted in confusion. “What?”

“M’gann? What is it?” Dick asked.

She took a step towards her ship, brows furrowing, trying to decipher the psychic message she was trying to send her. She gasped. “There’s a stowaway on board!” The Team perked at her words. “The Bioship, she’s saying someone snuck inside.”

“Fish ’um out M’gann!” Dick ordered. “Everyone, get ready.” He took a defensive stance. Everyone followed suit as they gathered around the ship.

M’gann raised her hand, her eyes glowed as she ordered the ship to force the intruder out. It levitated a couple of feet, opening the floor of one of the storage cabinets. They heard a girlish screech as a small body fell, somersaulting towards them. She landed on her rump, groaning as she rubbed the fresh bump on her head.

It was Adalae. But she had abandoned her Apokolips weapons and wait staff uniform, now sporting an undershirt and gym shorts. Strands of her long disheveled red hair escaped from her ponytail and onto her face. She blew them out of her eyes. She gasped at the sight of The Team. She hunched her shoulders and turned her knees together as she let out a nervous chuckle. “Uh, hi.” She gave them a wary smile, not quite sure what to say. “Ummm...surprise?”

“She...she was there.” Karen informed, remembering that Adalae had offered her food. “She was with that group that tried to assassinate the mayor!”

“Nononono,” Adalae waved her hands in front of her in panic. “No I’m not with them I swear!” She stopped herself, twisting her lip as she tried to explain. “Well, I mean I was with them but not with them.”

Wonder Girl furrowed her brows in anger. “Sure looked like you were with them when you were
“shooting at us.”

Adalae shook her head with rapid motion. “No, no they made me.”

Jaime tried to interrupt, recalling her help with the battle just hours before. “Guys, she’s-”

La’gann growled. “She’s obviously sent by them to infiltrate our base. I say we take her out!” He took several steps towards her.

She shook. Her eyes went wide. “No wait-”

But she was cut off as La’gann let out a roar. His tattoos began to glow as his body bulked and expanded into it’s pufferfish form. He raised his fist into the air.

Adalae’s jaw dropped in horror. She screamed.

La’gann stopped himself as he watched her bring her face to her knees, wrapping her arms around her head for protection. She rocked. Tears filling her eyes as she waiting for the blue monster in front of her to strike her. La’gaan shrunk back down to normal size. He watched as the little girl in front of him shook, wrapping herself into a tiny ball to shield herself from him. He felt like a predator, not a protector.

M’gann approached her with swift strides. The look of horror that flashed across Adalae’s face made her stomach to drop. She brushed passed La’gaan. “Really La’gaan? Really?” She hissed at him. His mouth curled into a pout.

M’gann lowered herself on one knee in front of her. Adalae felt the heat of someone close to her. She lifted up her head, strands of hair sticking to her wet cheeks. She saw M’gann reaching her hand out towards hers. Adalae gasped, flinching away from her, bringing her hands to her chest.

“It’s alright, it’s alright,” M’gann tried to reassure her. Her voice was almost a whisper.

Adalae looked up at her with wide watery eyes. She darted her eyes all around her to see that no one else had moved. She spoke, seeing that all was still for a moment. “I-I was, I was just trying to run away from them.” She swallowed hard and licked her lips with uncertainty. Her voice shook and cracked. “I thought….I thought you were the good guys.”

M’gann felt a slight drop in her jaw. She could have sworn she felt her own heart break. “We are.” M’gann assured, giving small affirmative nods. She turned her head to La’gaan. Her eyes narrowed as she hissed again at him. “We are.” La’gaan threw his hands up in the air. He couldn’t seem to do anything right.

“I won’t hurt you. I promise.” M’gaan told her as she dropped down on both knees, tucking her legs underneath her. She placed her hands in her lap. “What’s your name?” She asked with a slight tilt of her head.

“Adalae.” She responded. Darting her eyes between everyone in the room, still uncertain of their actions.

“Guys, I was trying to tell you,” Jaime took a step forward, motioning towards Adalae. “She was the one that told me about the Talisman. At the mission today.”

“Really?” Dick asked.

“Yeah,” Jaime affirmed. “She’s basically the reason we won.”
M’gann turned her attention to Adalae once more. “Why did you help us?” Her tone was genuine.

The muscles in her body relaxed. She wiped away the teary residue from under her eyes with her hand. “I knew they wanted to kill him. I didn’t want anyone to get hurt.” She gave M’gann a small nervous smile. “Don’t you get my phone call?”

Dick raised his brows. “That was you.” Everyone turned their attention towards him. “I thought I recognized your voice. You were the one in the 911 call.”

“Mm-hmm.” Adalae hummed with a smile as she shook her head.

“Wait, okay.” Wonder Girl rubbed her temple. “So you help your ‘Pack’ attack us with Apokolips weapons and then expect us to believe you’re just...running away from them?” She addressed Nightwing. “How the heck do a bunch of kids get a hold of Apokolips weapons anyways?”

“Oh, La Dama gave them to us.” Adalae answered for her.

“La Dama?” Dick asked as he furrowed his brows. He was sure he had heard that name in the database before.

“Yes.” Adalae reaffirmed. “She’s a business lady in El Paso. Really pretty. But...really really scary.”

“I know of her.” Jaime chimed in. “She’s a low key crime boss. One of those higher ups who the authorities can’t seem to get any evidence on. Kind of like Lex.”

“How about we get you out of this cold basement?” She asked, giving her a small grin.

“Are you hungry?” Her voice raised in pitch. “Because I have been told I make some pretty awesome cookies.” M’gann winked at her. She watched as a smile of relief spread across her lips.

Adalae sat on one of the stools in the kitchen island. Her feet dangled in the air as she stuffed herself full of M’gann’s cookies. “Wow!” She managed through a mouthful. “These are good.”

M’gann chuckled. She found her adorable. “Told you.” She rubbed the top of Adalae’s head, smiling. “I’ll put in another batch just for you.”

Garfield gathered with the others in the living area. He watched with crossed arms. Jealousy fuming
off of him as M’gann was giving this new girl her full attention. Attention that she usually gave to
him.

“Those should be my cookies,” he mumbled.

Conner couldn’t help but laugh at the sour expression on Garfield’s face. “What’sa matter Gar?
Jealous you’re not getting all of M’gann’s attention?”

He huffed. His lower lip puckering into a disgruntled pout. “She never makes batches just for me
anymore.”

Kaldur gathered with the rest of The Team. They held quited discussion as they watched Adalae and
M’gann interact in the kitchen.

“You think we can trust anything she says?” Kaldur asked.

“Well, she seems to have M’gann’s approval,” Jaime answered with a smile, watching them. “And
she is the Telepath.” He turned towards Kaldur. “Plus, I’ve seen her with the other members of The
Pack. I mean, I can’t really describe it, but she definitely didn’t seem like she belonged with them.”

Kaldur hummed to his thoughts. He approached the kitchen island. “Ok so...uh...”

“Adalae,” she responded.

“Adalae. Right.” Kaldur repeated almost too slow. What kind of name was that anyways? He
continued. “So, we were talking about the Apokopil’s weapons. The ones La Dama gave to you?”

“Mmm-hum that’s right.” Adalae answered. “So uh, I guess..uh, I’ll just start from the beginning.”
The others moved in closer as she started her story. “So Jenny is the leader of The Pack. She lives on
the reservation and a few months ago she started having us steal medicine and food from stores. The
people on the reservation are really poor. That can’t really afford that stuff. So, Jenny went to get
some help from La Dama. She already had everything that happened today planned, but she needed
weapons, just in case.” She took another bite out of her cookie. “So La Dama said she’d give them to
us whenever we needed them, if we sold some drugs for her.”

“Drugs?” Nightwing repeated. He looked over at Rose who raised a brow at him.

“Yeah. I’d never heard of it before.” Adalae squinted in thought. “I think it was called...Spark?”

Nightwing’s eyes widened as an array of questions ran through his mind. “Do you happen to have
any with you?” He asked her.

Her mouth twisted in disappointment. “No. We hadn’t gotten our shipment yet. I think...I think that
was suppose to happen sometime in February.”

“Do you know what day? Or where you were supposed to pick it up?” Nightwing’s questions were
quick and urgent.

She looked up at him with large, sad eyes. “No, I don’t remember. M’sorry.”

Nightwing sighed. He should have known it wouldn’t have been that easy. “It’s alright,” he assured
her.

“So how did you did up being part of The Pack?” Kaldur asked.

Her gaze fell to the floor. Her voice was small. “I don’t remember.”
A skeptical look plastered across Cassie’s face. “You can’t use that answer for every question, you know.”

“No, really.” Adalae tried to assure. “I don’t-I don’t remember anything before July. I don’t remember anything about my life.” She made intricate circles on the counter with her pointer finger. Her eyes followed it. Sadness plagued her tone. “I mean, I remember how to read and write and, you know, life and stuff like that. But...I don’t remember where I’m from, my school, my parents.” She finally looked up at them, their stares weighed heavy upon her. “I don’t-I don’t even think Adalae is my real name. Jenny said that was the name I gave her when I woke up.”

Nightwing narrowed his eyes, tilting his head. “What do mean ‘when you woke up’?”

“I don’t-everything’s really blurry from then.” She let out an audible exhale, as if getting ready to repeat a story that she had told many times. “Jenny said that she and The Pack found me in the woods one night. They said that I was hurt real bad, and Jenny took me back to her house to get better.” She shrugged. “She kind of adopted me. She adopted all of us.”

“She found the other kids too?” Conner asked.

“Yeah, they were with her before she found me.” Adalae rubbed the edges of the ceramic plate with her fingers. “Sebastian, Nathan, and Summer said they escaped from some lab in New Mexico like a year ago. Jenny found them when they were crossing through El Paso.”

Rose perked her eyebrows. Everyone on the team seemed to look over at her. She tossed them a confident smile.

“A lab.” Kaldur repeated.

“Mm-humm, they said they got their powers ‘cause they were experimented on.” Adalae rubbed her temple. “Ah, what did they say it was called? Caaa..ca..Candus? Catus?” Her eyes went wide. “Cadmus! Cadmus. That’s what it was called.”

“Are you sure?” Dick questioned again.

“Yep,” she chirped.

A tight smile bunched Rose’s cheeks. Cockiness rolled off her in waves. “And you guys doubted me,” She chimed.

“They must have been some of the subjects your parents set free,” Nightwing deduced, rubbing his chin.

“Looks like that didn’t turn out well for us,” Cassie sassed.

“Oh, and then she met Tye and well,” Adalae shrugged. “You guys know the rest.”

Jaime crossed his arms. He muttered swears under his breath.

“Jaime?” Artemis addressed him. “Something on your mind?”

“I just can’t believe it,” Jaime wined, throwing a hand in the air. “Tye was my best friend. After years together you think you know someone.” He crossed his arms again. “Guess I was wrong.”

“You know Tye?” Adalae asked him with a slight tilt of her head.

“I thought I did,” Jaime answered.
Adalae hummed to herself as she bunched a corner of her lip. She looked back up at Jaime. “Well, I wouldn’t be too hard on him. He’s not…” She played with her fingers, looking for the right words to say. “He’s not in full control of his actions all the time.”

“What makes you say that?” Jaime asked.

“Jenny’s Talisman, it lets her manipulate people’s minds.” She answered. “I’ve seen her use it on him a lot, especially when they argue. She used it on the other kids too. Sometimes they’d lose control in their animal forms or disobey her. She’d have to use it to make them do what she said.” She scratched her arm in nervousness. “I didn’t want her to mess with my mind. So I just...I just did whatever she asked me.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “But I knew sooner or later she’d make me hurt someone...just like the other kids.”

M’gann placed a soft hand on her shoulder. “You don’t have to worry about anything like that now.”

“So Jenny has her Talisman,” Conner listed. “Tye has his astral projection thing, and the other kids have uh, animal, forms. Do you have any superpowers?”

“Uhhh...yeah kinda. I mean, I think so?” She sounded unsure.

“You think so?” He repeated, skeptical.

“Jenny said that my accident sparked my powers. But they only come out it like, small bursts. I can’t really control them yet,” she advised.

“Well, we do know that the Metagene tends to surface under extreme stress.” Nightwing informed. “So it would make sense that an accident would create your powers. So, what can you do?”

“Well, I heal pretty fast.” Adalae made a circle around her face with her pointer finger. “Like, I got these today and they’ll be gone by tomorrow. Um, I’m can be pretty strong. And...uh, well I….it’s hard to explain. Um, Sometimes when I touch something, I see things about in my head.” She scratched her neck, trying to think of the words. “Uh, how do i say it better? Like, if I concentrate really hard, and I touch an object, I can see its history. Like, important stuff that’s happened to it, or people who have handled it.”

“Oh. Psychometry.” Nightwing responded without hesitation. “That’s what that’s called. It’s like...object reading, like what some mystics can do.” Artemis looked over at him with a raised brow.

“What?” He shrugged with a smile. “I’ve picked up some paranormal lingo from Zataana.”

“Can you demonstrate for us?” M’gann asked.

“Uh, yeah, I can try,” she responded.

From out of the corner, Sphere rolled over towards them. She chirped with excitement as she rolled up next to Adalae.

Conner chuckled. “I think Sphere wants to volunteer.”

“Ookaaayyy.....” She replied slowly, eyes wide. She looked around at their casual faces, unsure as to why a giant, rolling, steel ball was normal for them. She cautiously placed her flat palms on Sphere. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She opened her eyes, a blue light engulfing them. She observed as snippets of Sphere’s past flashed in her mind. “She’s from...another planet.” She explained. “She was taken from there. Taken to a desert? You...you saved her from...from. Ick. Some gross white guy with a big head.”
Several amused chuckles emerged from the group. Dick smiled, “That would be Psimon.”

Adalae closed her eyes. They returned to normal when she opened them and took her hands off of Sphere.

“That’s pretty cool,” Superboy noted. “Looks like you’re not the only one around with psychic abilities M’gann.”

Adalae looked up at M’gann. “You’re psychic?” She asked.

“Sort of.” M’gann responded, taking the cookies out of the oven. “I’m a Martian. I’m telepathic and telekinetic. I can communicate with people through thought. I can read people’s minds, sift through their memories, stuff like that.”

“Cool.” She chimed. Her eyes went wide as a realization rose in her mind. “Wait wait you can go through people’s memories? Can-can you help people get back memories they lost?”

“I think so,” M’gann responded, remembering one of their very first missions in Bialya. “I’ve dabbled in it before.”

An excited smile grew on her lips. “Can you get me back my memories?! Oh please please please. I would be so grateful.” She gave M’gann’s shirt a light tug.

“I mean, I can try, but it’s a very invasive procedure.” M’gann explained to her. “A very...delicate process. You’d have to be ok with me going into the deepest parts of your mind.” The smile began to fade from her face. M’gann placed a hand on her shoulder as she leaned down towards her. “But you’ll be there right alongside me.”


“We’ll give you two some space.” Nightwing told them as he motioned for everyone to exit the kitchen. "I’m going to start the report for today’s mission.”

M’gann moved their dishes to the counter. She ushered Adalae to the other side of the island, where it was more open, more room. She sat her in a stool and placed herself in a stool in front of her.

“Alright. I just need you to relax and clear your thoughts.” M’gann told her. “You’ll see my physical form in your mind. You just have to remember that even if something you see is weird or scary, it’s not real ok? Nothing will hurt you unless you let it.”

“Okay,” She replied, nerves shaking her breath. “I’m ready.”

M’gann made the psychic connection between their minds. In her mind, Adalae looked around her and down at her body. Her limbs were all there. M’gann’s body appeared in front of her. They were surrounded by moving shapes of black and hues of yellow. It reminded her of a lava lamp. ‘Screens’ containing her memories played all around her.

“Woah. Kinda creepy in here,” she said, looking around

M’gann giggled. “It is weird isn’t it? Ok we’ll start with the Convention Center. Just think about the events from today and we’ll slowly work our way backwards. Alright?”

“Alright,” she nodded with a smile.

They watched as memories played all around them, as though they were traveling in a tunnel at
hyper speed. The girls watched as the scene from from earlier played in front of them. And then onto

The

Pack’s violent ‘sparring matches’, their interaction with Jaime at the reservation, the thefts of the
product, and their meeting with La Dama. M’gann helped her replay all of her memories with The
Pack, and then…

Darkness.

And in that darkness could be heard the sound of a steady heartbeat. Flashes of a ceiling of a dimly
lit room could be seen, as if M’gann and Adalae were looking through blinking eyes.

The area around them was engulfed in a dull flickering orange, as if being lit by candle light.

A voice that Adalae recognized as Sebastian’s hissed around them:

“She shouldn’t be here.”

A heartbeat thumped again.

“We should have just let her die.”

“Be quiet,” The next harsh voice belonged to Jenny.

Their silhouettes appeared out of the corners of her ‘eyes’.

“You’re making a mistake,” Summer chided.

Heartbeat.

“You don’t smell it on her? You don’t sense it?” Sebastian's contained a twinge of panic.

“I said quiet,” Jenny hissed at them again.

The area around them went dark again, but the voices were all too clear.

“It smells like death. Like Violence,” Summer’s voice shook.

“Tell me you don’t feel that darkness,” Sebastian’s tone dripped with spite.

“Do not question me.” Jenny scolded. “I will deal with it.” The eyes fully opened. “Worry about
yourself.”

“She’s awake,” Jivan pointed.

The room came fully into view as Adalae’s eyes rose up, as if she were sitting up in bed. The sheets
all around her were stained with blood. The bedroom that held them was lit with several candles.

Terror swept across the faces of Jenny, Jivan, Summer, and Sebastian. They shook as all but Jenny
cowered into a corner. Jenny took a step forward. Her brows furrowed. She spat as she spoke. Her

Slowly the eyes turned to the left, towards a dresser with a mirror. The girls gasped. Adalae almost
screeched as she saw her reflection in the mirror. She covered her mouth with her hands. This was
not a memory she recalled at all.
In the reflection of the mirror, she saw herself sitting, hunched over in a bed. She was shirtless, bloody bandages wrapped around her chest and arms. The whites of her eyes had gone pitch black. Irises of yellow and black, slit pupils rested in the center of them. Her lips curled into a demonic smile to reveal razored teeth. Drool dripped down her chin.

Jenny appeared out of the corner of the mirror as she approached the bed. She held out her hand. Her Talisman began to glow. “You will let. This child. Go.” Her demands were firm. The ‘Adalae’ that was reflected in the mirror turned towards her with a snarl. “If you will not leave then I will make you sleep.” Jenny’s eyes began to glow with more intensity. She held out both hands towards her. “YOU WILL SLEEP.”

Everything went back once more. Slow, shimmering moonlight grew from above. A nighttime forest appeared around them. M’gann look around her. They stood in a clearing, surrounded by desert-type foliage. The sandy soil shifted under her feet. The sound of whimpering caught her attention. She saw Adalae gaze all around her, her breathing hitched as she rubbed her arms.

“Adalae?” M’gann placed a hand on her back. She flinched at the contact.

“I don’t. I don’t like this place.” Adalae fidgeted in place. She shook, sweat forming on her brow. “I don’t like this place.” She looked around her once more. “This is where.....”

“Where what?” M’gann tried to get an answer from her. “What happened here? Your accident?”

“I don’t. I don’t rememb-”

She was cut off as a voice rang around them. It vibrated through their bodies. It spoke with a multitude of tones. A deep bassline ringing the loudest.

“You shouldn’t have come back here.”

They felt as though the air was ripped from their lungs.

"You shouldn’t have come back.”

“What was that?” M’gann asked, frantic. “Who was that?”

“I don’t-” Adalae tried to speak but she was cut off once more. A chilling cold surrounded them. About five meters in front of them, a figure began to emerge from the darkness of the woods. The sounds of chains clanked as it walked closer. The thump of its steps shook the ground below them. It was only able to take a few steps before its chains reached their end, metal screeching ringing through the chain links.

Adalae and M’gann froze in place as the moonlight revealed to them, a massive black wolf. Saliva poured off its fangs as its lips curled into a savage snarl. Its gaze of pure white eyes pierced right through their very souls. It stood high above them. Reaching twenty feet from the ground to the tips of his ears. They could feel its hot sticky breath as steam poured from its mouth with each exhale. Its clawed paws pulled on the chains that held it back.

M’gann’s jaw fell as her eyes went wide. She shook her head. “What the hell?” she managed to say, her words almost a whisper.

Its voice rang all around them again. “You shouldn’t have come back.”

M’gann’s attention was jolted behind her as Adalae screeched. Adalae trembled, her hands balled
into fists as her eyes darted in horror at the ground.

A pool of deep crimson blood formed around them. It seeped from the soil, shimmering in the moonlight. It only rose an inch above the ground. But it was enough to cause Adalae to whimper. She hunched her shoulders, shrinking back a few steps as she trembled.

M’gann shook her head, face contorted in fear and confusion. “This...This isn’t a memory.” She gawked. “This is...something else.”

The wolf’s voice erupted around them again. “Do not..come...back.”

Adalae let out an ear shattering scream. She arched her back in pain. Four long parallel gashes struck her back. M’gann whipped her head around to her, only to see four more gashes erupt from Adalae’s left shoulder to down her chest. Blood flowed from them. She clutched her chest, nearly crumbling to the ground.

“Adalae!” M’gann cried out to her and rushed to her side. She grasped her arms, catching her before she was able to fall.

“It hurts! It hurts!” Adalae cried. Her face twisted with pain as tears streamed down her face.

“Listen to me. This isn’t real.” M’gann tried to reason with her. “You’re not really hurting. You’re...” M’gann gasped as she placed a hand on the wound on Adalae’s chest. Her blood was hot. It was sticky. And M’gann felt her heartbeat through the wound.

It felt real.

It shouldn’t feel that real.

And M’gann began to doubt if she was in an illusion anymore.

M’gann trembled, feeling the gushing blood beneath her fingers. "It’s-it's warm."

The wolf spoke once more. “You will not interfere.”

Rabid clicks rose from behind M’gann as a chain shot out from the wood behind the wolf. It wrapped itself around her right wrist, pulling her towards it. She planted her feet firmly on the ground. She pulled back against the chain’s force.


A deep growl emerged from the wolf. “You will not come BACK.”

Another chain flew through the air. It tangled around M’gann’s other wrist. She slid across the ground inch by inch as she found herself struggling against their pull. It brought her closer and closer to the wolf’s bloodthirsty jowls.

“Let go! LET GO.” M’gann shouted.

Adalae screamed once more as more gashes emerged on her arms. She clutched them, trying to ease the pain. “It hurts.” She cried. “M’gann it hurts.”

“Adalae!” M’gann looked behind her as she cried out to her. But the chains on her own wrists dragged her closer to the wolf once more.

She grasped as the base of her hair as she screeched. “Get out. GET OUT!”

“Let me go!” M’gann yelled at the wolf, pulling back against the chains. “LET GO!”

“Looks like your story checks out Rose,” Nightwing informed. He leaned against the back of the couch as he waited for M’gann to finished. The rest of the team members lingered about, curious as to what M’gann would find.

A cocky smile formed on Rose’s lips. She leaned back into the recliner, propping her feet up on the coffee table. “Told ya.”

“I’m going to see if we can get an interview with the one they captured.” Kaldur informed. “He might remember his time in the lab. It could help our investigation.”

Superboy pointed his thumb over his shoulder to Adalae. “So what are we going to do about her?”

Dick chewed on the inside of his cheek in thought. “Well, first we’ll have to get her back to her parents. And if her story checks out while M’gann is in there, I don’t see why she can’t help our investigation. We might be able to use her to go undercover, if she wants. See if we can get her to find out when that shipment of Spark is coming in. We’d have to protect her from Black Bison though.”

“And what if it turns out her parents aren’t around anymore?” Rose interjected with a raised brow. “We’re not going to dump her on child services are we? She might catch the attention of some bad people if they find out she has powers.”

Dick’s jaw slackened. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

Artemis grinned as she crossed her arms. She sighed. “Strays always end up being our responsibility don’t they?”

Dick gave her a half smile. “I suppose so.”

As Garfield waited on the couch, something peaked his attention. He sniffed the air around him. There was something...odd. It filled his nostrils with a sour odor. It riled his predatorial senses. The stench was unmistakable:

Fear.

Garfield looked around him. He jumped onto the back of the couch, following his nose. He took a few leaps towards M’gann and Adalae. His eyes narrowed as he looked between them. Everyone else wouldn’t have noticed the small irregularities, but he did. He watched as the girls’ facial muscles gave sporadic twitches. The fingers scratched at their legs as they rested on their laps. He noticed a drop of sweat fall from M’gann’s brow.

“Guys.” Garfield’s voice was loud and stern. It halted the conversations from his team members around him. “Something’s wrong.” His eyes darted between them again as the twitching in the muscles increased. The team now had his full attention. They approached the kitchen.

“Garfield?” Concern sparked in Superboy’s voice. “What is it?”

Beast Boy shook his head. “Something’s not right.” He took a few steps towards M’gann. He reached a hand towards her with caution as he wet his lips. “M’gann?”
M’gann shot up out of her stool. Its wood smacked against the floor with a frightening bang. She gasped as she thrashed her arms about. Her feet planted firmly in place. Her eyes still glowed.

Adalae jumped from her stool as well, her eyes glowing. She screamed, clutching the base of her hair. “It hurts! It hurts!”

Everyone bolted from their seats and into the kitchen. Rose quickly approached Adalae, palms out in front of her. “Hey, hey! Short stuff, what’s goin on?”

Tears streamed down her face as she trembled, pulling at her hair. “Get out of my head. Get out! GET OUT!”

Conner turned towards M’gann. “M’gann what are you doing to her!!” But he found that M’gann as also struggling. Her arms still thrashing, he tried to reach out to her, only to be swatted away. He was certain she wasn’t even aware he was there.

“What the hell is happening?” Artemis squawked.

“I don’t know.” Conner replied, he was finally able to grab hold of one of M’gann’s arms, only to find that she wouldn’t budge. He noticed the whites of her knuckles emerging as her fists were clenched tight. She shook and held her arms up next to her head. “She’s like a statue. I can’t move her!” He faced her, holding her head in his hands, pleading. “M’gann come back!”

“Let me go! LET GO.” She shouted.

Conner nodded. He jumped out of his way. Virgil sent a bolt of lightening out of each of his hands. One landed on M’gann, the other on Adalae. They cried out in pain, but the shock was enough to break the psychic link.

M’gann groaned as the grasped the counter. She held a hand to her head.

“M’gann!” Conner grasped her arm, trying to keep her from falling. “M’gann are you alright? What happened? What-”

But M’gann waved him off. “M’fine. M’fine. Adalae-”

Adalae shook with terror, still unable to shake the events of the nightmare in her head. She hyperventilated. Her breathing pulsing in and out in uneven wheezes. She staggered backwards. Small whimpers and shrieks escaped her lips as Rose and Jaime tried to approach her to calm her. She darted from the movements, eyes wide with fear.

Rose held her arms out. “Kid! Kid! It’s alright, it’s ok.” She tried to reassure.
“M’gann what did you do?” Artemis spat at her.

M’gaan shook her head, eyes half lidded. “I didn’t-”

“Hey it’s us, it’s us!” Jaime tried to plead as he came close to Adalae. She still stumbled backwards, frantic and wheezing. Jaime tried to grab her but she lashed out at him, her hand hitting a glass cup on the counter. The shattering glass sliced open the side of her palm.

“Stop her!” Kaldur barked as he saw the blood smear on the counter.

She finally thumped against a wall. Her trembling worsened, her jaw slacked as she continued to gasp and choke. She slid down onto the ground, holding her cut hand to her chest.

“She can’t catch her breath!” Artemis noted as she approached her. The others filled in around her. Adalae’s wide eyes darted between all of them. Her breathing became even more shallow.

Garfield jumped onto the island, grabbing a hand towel from one of the drawers. He leapt in front of Adalae, facing his teammates. He held up his hands. “Stop it, stop! Just back off!” He snarled at them, an animalistic growl erupting from his throat. “Back off! Just give her some space.” Everyone took a few steps backwards, doing what they were told.

He turned to face Adalae, dropping down to one knee. Even though she was sitting flat against a wall, she still tried to push herself away from him. He reached out, grabbed her injured hand, and wrapped it in the towel with one swift motion. He held it in place, putting pressure on the wound. Adalae screeched at his contact and tried to pull away. But he held firm, grabbing her forearm with his free hand.

“Adalae. Adalae, listen to me.” His voice was stern. He made strong eye contact. “Listen to me. You’re just having an anxiety attack. Okay?” Her breathing still faltered, she tried to look behind him, but he held her arm tighter. “Look at me.” She did, eyes darting between the features of his boyish, green face. She shook in his hands. He continued. “What you’re feeling is scary but you’re not in danger, I promise. Okay?” He gave her a few slow nods. “I’m right here. And you’re here with me. You’re in the real world now, not your mind.” She squeezed her eyes tight and sobbed, shaking her head ‘no’. It felt as though her throat was closing. She opened her eyes, peering behind him, looking for an escape route, but he moved his head to draw her gaze back. “Don’t look at them, look at me. Look at me.” She reached out, grasping his wrist, trying to prove to herself that he really was there. She matched his gaze once more. And she found that began to find solace in his large, green eyes. He really was there. The nightmare was disappearing, but she couldn't stop the wheezing.

His words were soft. “Everything’s fine. You’re gonna be alright.”

Her tears slowed. Her shaking reduced to that of shivers. She swallowed hard. “A’can’t, breathe.” She managed to choke out.

“Yes you can.” He corrected. “It just feels like you can’t. You have to control it. Can you count in your head with me?” His brows raised as he ushered her. “Come on, breathe in.”

The others waited patiently as he counted for her over and over again. After a few minutes she finally regained her composure. A few moments of silence lingered about the room.

She wet her lips, gathering the courage to speak. She looked up at M’gann with glossy eyes. “What….what was that?” A tear fell down her cheek. “What’s inside my head?”
Sadness fell upon M’gann’s face. A lump grew in her throat. All she could do was shake her head. Her voice faltered.

“I don’t...I don’t know.”
M’gann sat on the worn sofa. Her head resting in her hands while she propped her elbows upon her knees. The quiet lull of the TV poured in the background. She was finally starting to come down from the shock of what had happened in Adalae’s mind. But she still found herself shivering, she knew there was no chance of sleep tonight. La’gaan, Rose, Dick, Artemis, Barbara, and Kaldur stood in the living room around her. Conner arrived from the kitchen, handing her a glass of water to cool her boiling blood. He took a seat next to her, rubbing his hand on her back. She looked over to him, smiled and took a drink from the glass. He always seemed to know how to make her feel better.

Nightwing was the first to break the silence. “What happened in there?”

M’gann shook her head, placing the glass on the coffee table in front of her. “I don’t really know.”

“You’re going to have to give us a little more than that,” Barbara informed.

“Hey, she’s asleep.” Beast Boy came around the corner, joining them in the living area. A tired look played upon his face. After bandaging up Adalae’s wound he saw that she made it to one of the spare bedrooms. Doing everything he could to make sure she remained calm. After a few hours, he was finally able to coax her to sleep. “Hopefully she won’t have any nightmares.” He rubbed the back of his neck as he looked up at M’gan. “M’gann, what did you guys see? It spooked her real bad.”

M’gann gave a loud exhale. “It—it wasn’t even a memory. I mean, there were memories. But…” She shook her head, still perplexed at what they saw. “We made it all the way until the time when her ‘accident’ was supposed to be. But, it was like her brain set up some sort of... safeguard. Like it didn’t want us to go any further. It created something out of a horror movie. Gods, there was so much blood anywhere. Something was attacking us. And it felt real. No matter how much I tried her...tired to tell myself.” She looked at her hands, remembering how warm the blood was against her skin. “We felt it….she felt it slice her skin.” She rubbed the side of her face with her hand, her voice reduced to a wavering whisper, “There was so much blood.”

“She did say that Black Bison girl’s Talisman gave her mind control powers,” Dick recalled. “You think she could have, I don’t know, done something to her mind? Made a trap or tweaked her memories or something?”

M’gann’s mouth twisted with uncertainty. “It’s possible. But...I don’t know if I can fix it.”

“That Bison chick was a real piece of work,” Rose chimed in. “I wouldn’t put it passed her, messing with her head. She did almost murder someone today.”

Kaldur’s head snapped over in her direction. His eyes narrowed. “Yes but I could say the same thing about you, Rose.” She gave him a harsh scowl as he took a step towards her. “With everything that happened to M’gann and Adalae, we did not have a chance to discuss your actions today.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She snipped.
“For one, how you deliberately disobeyed Artemis and did not stay with the ship like you were told,” Kaldur scold.

She jolted her pointer finger at him. “Hey, I saved your asses back there,” she hissed.

Kaldur’s voice remained stern. “Whether or not that is the case you still disobeyed orders, dragging La’gaan along with you.”

She sneered at La’gaan who looked away from her. Barging in on the battle had been her idea. He couldn’t leave her unattended or unsupervised so he had no choice but to follow.

“And second, your methods of take down leave me disturbed.” Kaldur closed the space between them. “That...Cheetah you fought, had to be hospitalized for his wounds. Wounds that you caused.” She crossed her arms, her bottom lip almost a pout. Kaldur continued. “And the way you handled Black Bison was less than desireable. You had no idea how strong her talisman was, yet you still chose to take attack it with your dagger as opposed to just pulling it off of her. What if your hand had slipped, or you had struck just a little to hard?” She looked away for a moment and then back up at him. “Rose, you could have stabbed her right in her chest.”

She scoffed. “Whatever. I wouldn’t have missed. I’m good with knives.” She scowled as she shrugged. “Besides, what does it matter anyways? She’s the bad guy here.”

“Ughhh I wouldn’t be so quick to say that,” La’gaan advised as he turned up the volume on the television. Their attention was drawn to it. Jenny had kept her promise, Mayor Fermin’s confession was all over the news. She had submitted her video to the GBS. Cat Grant, no doubt giving her broadcast of the year, providing commentary over the video. Charges had been reinstated against him in light of his crude, public confession.

Dick couldn’t stop his smirk. “Well, I’d say his career is over.”

“Huh,” Rose’s eyebrows perked as she watched the segment. “Well if that’s the case, then maybe I should have let her kill ‘im.”

Kaldur pursed his lips. “See,” he addressed her once more. “That is the kind of talk that disturbs me.”

“What?” She chimed. They all looked at her with concerned faces. She rolled her eyes. “Oh don’t even look at me like I’m some kind of monster. I’m just saying what everyone in this room is thinking. And you know it.”

Kaldur let out a low hum in his throat. “I believe M’gann is the mind reader here, not you.” He watched as her nose crinkled in irritation. “We do not kill or take methods that could lead to someone being killed. That is not how we do things.” His words were bold and unwavering. “And if that is not a concept that you can grasp very soon, then you will not have a spot on this team.”

A moment of silence passed between them. Rose shook her head. A disgusted scowl twisting her lips as she huffed. “You know what?” She waved her hands out in front of her. “I don’t have to take this.” She whipped out of the living room and marched towards her bedroom.

“Hey!” Dick called after her. “Rose, get back here.”

“Blow me,” she snapped over her shoulder. The slam of her bedroom door vibrated through the walls.

Conner’s upper lip curled in disgust. “What a brat.”
Dick went to charge after her. But Artemis placed a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t, just don’t.” She shook her head at him. “I’ll talk to her.” She made her way down the hall to Rose’s room.

Kaldur sighed. “Everything with Rose aside,” he looked back over to M’gann. “Do you think that you could work on...whatever it is that that’s in Adalae’s mind?”

M’gann felt a pang of guilt come over her. “To be honest, Kaldur.” It took her a moment before she could look up at him. “I don’t want to go back there.” Her voice was almost a whisper. “And I don’t think she will either.”

Dick sighed. “It’s alright, we’ll figure something out. Did everything else with her check out?”

“Yeah,” M’gann nodded. “Yeah she was telling the truth. She really is a good kid. I think she’s just a victim of circumstance.”

“I’ll discuss this with Black Canary and Batman.” Dick informed. “I just hope letting her stay with won’t come back to bite us.”

Down the hall, Artemis stood outside of Rose’s room. She stood there for a moment before giving her door a light knock. “Rose?”

“Fuck off.”

Artemis felt her jaw slack. Wow...she kind of was a brat. Artemis just sighed and continued to talk through the door. “It’s Artemis. Can I come in?”

There was a few seconds of quiet before a muffled, “It’s unlocked” came from the other side of the door. Artemis opened it with caution.

Rose was sitting cross-legged on her bed, her back towards the door. Artemis could feel the fumes of irritation coming off of her. Shriek grinding of metal filled her room as she took her anger out by sharpening her dagger. She slid it over the honing rod again and again. It had taken quite a beating against Black Bison today.

“What do you want?” Rose snipped without even looking at her.

Artemis shrugged as she closed the door. “I just wanna talk.”

Rose scoffed. “Cheyeah. Okay.” She rolled her eyes. “You come to tell me what an awful person I am too? And how much I suck at this superhero stuff?”

“No,” Artemis answered she looked around her room. Her eyes fell upon two swords mounted on the wall. Artemis wasn’t good at small talk, but skills in weaponry was something that they shared. “I wanted to check out your swords.” She picked up one of them up, pulling it out of the sheath. Rose tossed her a doubtful look before focusing her attention back to her sharpening.

“These are some quality blades,” Artemis commented.

“Duh,” Rose sassed. She was a firm believer that a warrior was only as good as the weapons they carried, if they chose to do so. So, when the infamous ‘Wayne Enterprises’ credit card was given to her, (something she had heard that all orphaned newbies received) she spared no expense in replacing the weapons she left behind in Des Moines. For what was a girl without her trusty blades? Vulnerable.
“A little heavy on the handle though,” Artemis noted, grasping the handle with both hands.

“That’s the way I like it.” Rose responded, blowing her bangs out her eyes. “Easier for me to swing.”

Artemis hummed in acknowledgement. “My Dad always liked to have me have them balanced.” Artemis cleared her throat, placing the sword back in it’s cover. “My Dad’s actually the one who taught me how to use a sword, use a bow.” Rose did not answer, she just continued sharpening. Artemis’s skin itched in the uncomfortable silence. She placed the sword back on the mantle and continued. “What about you? Dad teach you how to how to use these?”

There was a slight pause in Rose’s movements before she answered. “I guess you could say that.”

“Did John teach you how to fight too?” Artemis asked.

Rose looked over at her, eyes narrowing in confusion. “Who?”

Artemis rose one of her eyebrows. “Uh...John?...Your Dad?”

“Oh,” Rose cleared her throat, stumbling over her words. She had forgotten about John, her 'adoptive father’. “Oh-oh yeah. Yeah he did.” She cursed herself under her breath at her lack of memory.

“My Dad taught me to fight too.” Artemis added. She scratched at her cheek. “Has anyone told you about my Dad yet?”

Rose rolled her eyes once again and sighed. Here we go. She should have figured it would come soon enough. Artemis was going to try to bond with her, try to get her to open up, thinking they were the same.

“He’s Sportsmaster.”

Rose’s muscles froze. She felt her eyes widen. She turned her head towards Artemis.

Maybe they were the same.

“You know who he is right?” Artemis asked.

“Yeah.” Rose nodded. “He’s a bad guy. An assassin.”

“You know, I was a lot like you when I joined the Team.” Artemis’s gaze was soft and understanding. “Aggressive, relentless” She chuckled. “Snippy with my teammates.” She took a seat on the edge of Rose’s bed before continuing. “I did things different. Saw the world differently than they did.” She paused, an old sadness pushing at her chest, remembering her first six months on the team. “I doubted for a long time whether I could do the superhero thing.” She saw the tension ease out of Rose as she sat her dagger and rod down on the bed. “Doing things the ‘right’ way takes a long time to come to terms with.”

Rose’s face almost morphed into a pout, as if desperate for understanding. “But that Cheetah thing could have killed you guys!” She scratched at her neck. She sighed in irritation. “And, yeah, ok the comment I made about that mayor guy was brash.” She peered up at Artemis. “But you know it’s true.”

“You're right.” Artemis answered. Rose twinged at her response. She did not expect her to agree. “That guy, is an awful human being. And Black Bison and her...pets were putting people in danger.
And sometimes, that makes it hard to hold back.” Artemis scooted a little closer to her. “But the fact that we do, the fact that we restrain that dark part of us, that part that makes us want to kill those who deserve it. And let the law take care of them instead of letting our emotions take over...” She leaned in towards Rose. A pang of guilt spread across her face. Artemis continued. “That’s what makes us different than the bad guys. That’s what makes us heroes.”

Rose looked away from her, bringing her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. Artemis’s words were still soft and kind. “It’s hard. I know it’s hard.” There was a slight tremble in her voice. “It’s even harder after losing someone you love.” What had started as a comment on Rose’s parent’s turned into her last memory of Wally. She stared at the wall, feeling the sadness crush her lungs. “That temptation for vengeance is....suffocating.”

Rose chewed on the inside of her cheek, letting a quiet moment pass between them. “I heard.” Artemis turned towards her. “About your boyfriend. Wally? Everyone seemed real fond of him....I’m sorry.”

Artemis gave a small, sad shrug. “It’s no one’s fault but The Reach’s.” She cleared her throat, desperate to change the subject. “But, uh. I just wanted to say, I get it.” Artemis placed a bold hand on Rose’s shoulder. She flinched, but did not scowl or try to shrug it off. “And I know you’re not one for mushy stuff but,” Artemis gave her a lop-sided smile. “If you ever want to talk or, you know, need a sparring partner to punch it out with. I’m here.”

Rose smirked and replied with a genuine, “Thanks.”

Artemis nodded. She gave her shoulder a light squeeze before heading towards the door.

“Artemis?” Rose asked over her shoulder, just before Artemis left the threshold of the doorway. “When-when the team found out about your Dad...what did they do?”

Artemis shrugged. “Nothing, really. I had already established my place on the team and proved my loyalty.” She placed her hand on the doorknob. “Just give them time. If they can accept me, they’ll accept you too.”

Rose nodded and turned her head away. She heard the door close as Artemis left. Rose’s knuckles went white as she balled her hands into fists. She grit her teeth and felt a heat of rage rise from her belly. Her right fist collided with the plaster of her wall, causing it to crack.

Frustrated tears formed behind her lids. A normal life, a team, friends...family. Rose wanted it all. It was all that she wanted ever since she was very small. Accept her? No. There was no way they would accept her. Not once she found what she was looking for. Not once they found out the truth. She was kidding herself, actually believing her own ‘teammate’ act. Sure, Artemis had been a black sheep once and The Team accepted her. But that surely must have been after months or years of fighting beside them, earning her loyalty.

And Rose did not have that kind of time.

Because unbeknownst to all of them, she had already set her plan in motion.

Bludhaven - The Warehouse
December 30th, 2016
03:26 EST

Beast Boy ran his fingers through his hair. He rolled over on his bed, peering over at his alarm clock
next to him. He groaned. It was so late. He had gone to bed hours ago and could not fall asleep. He grunted in irritation, pulling the blanket up to his ears, thrashing about randomly until he eventually gave up. He tore the covers off of himself and headed out his bedroom door. Perhaps he just needed a glass of water.

He was surprised to find a flickering light coming from the end of the hall. It danced and changed color upon the shadows. As Beast Boy walked towards it, he found it had come from the television; the images from a nature documentary. Its audio he could barely hear. Upon the couch was Adalae. She was staring, mouth agape, intently at the screen. With legs curled up underneath her, she had wrapped herself in the puffiest blanket that Beast Boy had ever seen. The only part of her body showing was her face. He smiled at the sight, she reminded him of a caterpillar.

“What cha watch-” he started to ask her. Adalae screeched and jumped at his voice. She had not heard him come up behind the couch.

“Oh!” She breathed a sigh of relief. “Gosh you scared me. I didn’t hear you coming.” She raised her eyebrows, guilt swallowing her face. “Oh. Oh, I’m-I’m sorry, I didn’t wake you did I? I figured you had like, super animal hearing so I turned it down as much as I could.”

“No, you’re fine,” he told her. “I just couldn’t sleep.”

“Yeah,” she replied. Her lips formed a frown, eyes falling to the floor. “Me neither.”

Garfield’s face twisted with pity, “Nightmares?”

She looked at him with a sad pout, nodding her head.

He cleared his throat, feeling it best to change the conversation. “So uh...what are you watching?” He asked.

Her face lit up as she smiled, “‘Big Cats of Africa’. I love animals.”

Beast Boy chuckled. “Yeah, me too.” He motioned towards himself. “In case you couldn’t tell.”

She giggled. Then her eyes went wide with excitement. She let the blanket fall down past her shoulders. “Wait wait. Can you morph into any animal?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Even alien ones. I just have to see it in person or have seen a picture of it.”

She gasped, her words almost a whisper. “Can you do an elephant?” They were her favorite out of the entire animal kingdom.

He stifled a laugh. “Yeah, not a big one while we’re indoors but....” He morphed himself into a wrinkly, three foot tall, baby elephant. He let out a teeny tiny trumpet from his trunk; careful not to wake up Mal, La’gaan, or Rose. Especially not Rose.

Adalae cupped her hands over her mouth as she squealed, wiggling in her seat. “Ohmigoshohmigosh so cuuuute.”

He morphed back, grinning at her response. She brought her hands down from her face, a smile still on the lips of her heart-shaped face. A small dimple could be seen on her right cheek. He never noticed until that moment how green and innocent her eyes were. Her long red locks were tossed in front of her shoulder in a loose ponytail.

Holy hell was she pretty.
Garfield felt a heat rise in his cheeks. He cleared his throat as he felt a lump grow in it. He fidgeted. Why was he suddenly so uncomfortable?

Adalae looked away. Feeling a blush grow on her face as Garfield had smiled at her for just a little too long. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, wrapping herself in the blanket. “Um, so, uh,” she stammered and nodded towards the television. “Do you wanted to watch it with me? Y’know...since you can’t sleep.”

He shrugged, “Sure.” He placed himself on the opposite end of the couch with caution, still trying to get a full read on her.

After a minute of silence, Adalae began to fidget. She stole sideways glances at him until she mustered up some courage. “Um...Beast Boy?” He turned his head towards her. “I...um,” she bit her lip. “Thanks. You know, for earlier. Thank you for...helping me out. A-apparently that anxiety attack stuff is one of those things I don’t remember I do.” She let out a nervous chuckle.

“No problem,” he assured her. He pursed his lips with the slight turn of his head. “I uh...I used to get them ...when I was little. I learned that stuff from my mom. She did a great job at calming me down.”

Adalae’s eyes brightened, “Wow, that’s—that’s awesome. I bet you’re mom is really cool. She lets you stay here and be a superhero and stuff?”

Beast Boy swallowed the lump in his throat. He squirmed at her question, “My uh, my mom...died not too long ago. The Team took me in. That’s why I live here now.”

“Oh…” Adalae felt an ace in her chest at his response. She had no idea why she wouldn’t have realized it before. Why else would he stay at this place all by himself? All she could mumbled was, “I’m...I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah.” Beast Boy looked away from her. He was still not able to fully talk about the death of his mother without becoming bombarded with an array of emotions. He hoped that she would change the subject. He already felt his eyes start to water.

Adalae bit her lower lip. She was disappointed in her reaction, she knew she could have said something more comforting. An idea sparked in her mind.

“Well…” she started. “You know what I think Is pretty awesome?” He raised his eyebrows at her in curiosity. She continued, “I think that it’s awesome that you took something your mom used to help you, to help someone else. You took what she did you to make you feel better. And then you used it to make me feel better, and...and in the future,” She placed her hand on her chest. “I could use what you taught me to help someone out, ya know? And then they could use it to help someone else and so on. It’s kinda like...like you passed on a little piece of your mom. Like you gave the world a tiny piece of her that might go on forever.” She gave him a sweet smile. “And I think that’s pretty cool.”

Beast Boy stared at her. His jaw slacked in thought. “Yeah,” he responded, a soft smile forming on his lips. “I guess that is pretty cool.”

She grinned at him before turning her attention back to the T.V. Beast Boy looked at her for a moment, watching as the light danced upon her cheery face. He was amazed that despite the mental terror she went through today, she still ended her day with a smile and kindness.

A squeal spilled from the television as a gazelle began to sprint away from a hungry cheetah.

“Ooo! Ooo! This is my favorite part!” Adalae chimed. She turned her attention towards him. He looked so sad over on the other end by himself. She grabbed the corner of the blanket and reached
her arm out, opening up her fabric cocoon in welcoming invitation. “Ya want some blanket?”

Beast Boy chuckled, “Sure.” He made his way over to her, wrapping the other end of the blanket around him. They sat next to each other in their soft wrapping. They gawked at the vicious predators and chattered away with one another through the boring scenes.

She might have had a scary brain, she might have eaten all his cookies, and was certainly already one of M’gann’s favorites. But the longer he sat there Beast Boy couldn’t help but smile as he thought:

*You know, this girl’s not so bad.*

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**Palo Alto**  
**January 1st, 2017**  
**12:13 UTC**

Artemis sat on the edge of her living room couch. Her leg bounced up and down with fervor as she chewed on her nails. She glanced up at the clock. A sickness curled in her stomach as she realized the time. Zataana and M’gann would be there soon. They were coming to help pack away Wally’s things.

Artemis had made the decision a few months prior to take away his belongings, to put them out of sight. But as days went by, she kept finding excuses not to do it. Telling herself that she was too tired, too busy, too *insert excuse here*. But everything around her, everything that was his left a sting in her chest that she could no longer bare. She broke down, asking for Zataana and M’gann to help her pack. She knew that there would be no way she would do it on her own. She needed an outside push.

Artemis jumped from her seat at a knock at the door. She opened it, and Zataana and M’gann greeted her with hugs.

Artemis swallowed hard. This was really happening, “Thanks for coming guys.”

“It’s not a problem at all,” M’gann replied. Her eyes were soft and sullen. Artemis hated that look. M’gann, Zataana, everyone gave her that look since the day that Wally died. Pity.

And she hated it. She was hurt. She wasn’t broken. Why was it that the team treated her, look at her like she was some shattered, lost little girl? No more. She was strong. She knew she was, and it was time for The Team to see that too. And Artemis told herself that she was going to begin by putting away every bit of Wally left over in their—*her* apartment.

“Uhhh,” Artemis struggled on where to begin. “Lets just start in here.” She pointed to the corner of the room and picked up a piece of paper from the coffee table. “There’s boxes over there and this is a list of all the stuff his parents want.”

They nodded, taking a look at the list. The teamed up on the living room, packing away everything that left a stain on Artemis’s soul. Those annoying video games he’d spend hours on, those men’s health magazines that he’d get terrible sex tips from. Artemis laughed to herself at the memories, but if only to be swallowed in a sudden sadness. None of those things seemed terrible and annoying now.

In a few hours time, they finished the living room and kitchen. Boxed stacked high in the corners of the rooms. They powered into the bedroom. That was going to be the biggest battle of all.
As crazy as it sounded, Artemis felt a certain...violation as Zataana and M’gann tore through Wally’s dresser drawers. As though they were snooping through things that they had no right to touch. They were his things. She shook her head at the thought. She needed to expel that feeling from her. They weren’t his things anymore.

No matter how much she felt like he was still here.

She pulled his clothes off the hangers in the closet, folding them neatly into the boxes. She smiled. She had been so grateful when he grew out of his open-button-down-over-a-t-shirt-look and moved on to a solid t-shirts and sweaters. God, does he have awful style.

Did. He did have awful style.

Artemis growled to herself as she threw the last of his shirts in the box. She moved on to the worst of the tasks: his sneakers. His terrible, smelly sneakers. Wally went through shoes faster than anyone she ever knew. But why, dear God, why did he never throw them away? She held her breath as she dove into the pile of his shoes on the closet floor. Pair by pair, she tossed them into a trash bag until finally she came to the last pair. But something about one of the shoes caught her attention. It felt heavy. She shook it, something rattled inside. She looked inside it to see it was stuffed to the brim with socks. She took them out one by one, the noise still rattling inside. What on earth had he been hiding in there? At this point, she had caught the attention of M’gann and Zataana. They watched her pull out sock after sock until she pulled out a shiny white box, its lid taped shut.

Perplexed, Artemis turned it about in her hand as she sat on the edge of her bed.

“What is that?” Zataana asked.

“Not sure.” Artemis replied. “I’ve never seen it before.”

Using her nails, she sliced open the tap and removed the lid.

She was breathless.

Her heart stopped.

And the blood in her body chilled.

With shaky hands, she reached into it, pulling out a small, blue, velvet box. A hinge rested on the back and it’s opening was lined with a thin rim of gold.

“Oh no…” Zataana gasped under her breath. Only M’gann had heard her.

M’gann looked over to Zataana, establishing a psychic link between the two, ‘I hope that’s not what I think it is…”

Her hands were shaking. The velvet box trembled in Artemis’s palm. A lump rose in her throat as she knew in the back of her mind what was coming to pass. She should walk away. Give the box to M’gann and never give it another thought. But she didn’t. And Artemis opened the lid.

A small cry died in her windpipe as she covered her mouth with her hand. A struggling breath shook from her chest.

Inside the box was a ring. A vibrant, golden right. A sparkling white diamond shimmered on top of it. The gold band wrapped around it formed the shape of an arrow. The pointed tip rested at the top of the diamond, the etched feathered fetching sat at the bottom. Inside the lid was glued a small piece
of paper, that terrible chicken scratch she would recognize anywhere.

'Be my final souvenir?'

Artemis clutched her hand tight to her mouth as she choked back made a muffled, anguished squeal into her throat. She squeezed her eyes shut, pushing back the water in her eyes.

Time stood still in that room. None of them knowing what words to say. Artemis’s trembling intensified. The girls could see the muscles in her arms contract. The girls took a seat on each side of her. Artemis swallowed the lump in her throat, delicately pulling the ring from the box, letting th box fall to the floor. She looked at the ring for a moment and with slow movements and lifted up her left hand. She crept the ring closer and closer to her ring finger.

“Artemis...” Zataana placed a hand on her arm. Concern plastered her face. “I don’t-I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Her breaths waivered. It was still hard to breath. She managed to choke out, “I just...wanna see what it feels like.”

And when she placed the ring on her finger, she found that she could no longer hold back the ache in her soul. As that cold metal rested on her skin, she was overwhelmed by everything that might have been. The wedding she could have had. The tropical honeymoon that would never happen. The house they would have bought. The life they could have shared. The kids she could have....

She was reminded of *everything* that was stripped away from her.

And in the still bedroom is where Artemis broke once more. They were right, they were all right. She was shattered. A loud, unapologetic wail flowed from her as she dropped her face into her hands.

Shaking and choking, she felt the strong arms of her friends wrap around her as they embraced her. Hands patted her hair and rubbed her back. Cooes of their sweet sorrows fell on her deaf ears. The overwhelming sadness gnawed at her from the inside out, and this time she could no longer fight. This time, she didn’t want to fight. For the anguish was now the only thing that could give her comfort.

They didn’t know how long they sat there as Artemis sobbed. But, as all thing do, her wails and cried came to pass. She slowly lifted her hands from her face. The girls studied her red eyes and shiny cheeks. She wiped away the snot from under her nose. She gathered herself, gaining enough composure to finally speak.

“I..uh-” She cleared her throat, trying to open it up again. “I think I’m done for today.” Her heartbroken eyes fell onto her lap and then up at M’gann. “I can’t do anymore right now.”

M’gann gave her an understanding nod.

Zataana reached out for her left hand, “Artemis...I don’t think you should wear that.”

Artemis snapped her hand away from her grasp, “No!” She cried, holding her hand to her chest.

Concern rose in Zataana’s eyes but her words were stern. “Artemis. It’s not *healthy*.” She reached for the ring once more.

“No!” Artemis shouted. “It’s mine!” Her voice was childish, and tears fell from her eyes once more. “It’s mine,” her voice cracked. She trembled again, her voice now barely a whisper as she covered her left hand with her right, holding them to her chest. “It’s mine.”
Zataana shook her head, “Artemis…”

A sudden rage overcame Artemis. She felt her face flush as her grief evolved into unreasonable anger. She clenched her jaw, the muscles in her neck tightening. “Get out!” The wouldn’t understand. They will never understand how she feels. They have no right to tell her to do anything. She looked between M’gann and Zataana’s shocked faces. “Both of you, get out! I don’t want you here.” She screeched, jumping up from the bed and pointing at her door. “Get out!”

Zataana snarled at her childish tones and demands. “Artemis, you’re being a real bit-”

“No!” M’gann advised. She pulled Zee by her wrist. “Come on Zataana lets just go.”

“Wha-” Zee felt her body being dragged by M’gann’s grip.

M’gann knew that as irritating as she was acting, Artemis needed to, and had every right to be alone. “Let’s go,” she demanded. She looked over at Artemis once last time. “Just...call us if you need us, alright?”

And within a few moments, Artemis heard her front door close. She collapsed onto her-....no, their bed. She grasped at the blankets, her cries filling the room once more. And on those lonely covers, she allowed herself to drown. She engulfed herself in memories of once was, and in the fantasies that will never be. And as the ring held firm against her finger she found comfort in the knowledge of what he meant to her, the knowledge that she had been loved.

And that was something she was never going to let go of, no matter how much it tore her apart.

_Belle Reve Penitentiary_
_January 7th, 2017_
_07:37 CDT_

Officer Banks found himself dozing off in his chair at the lobby desk. He snapped his head up and reached for the mug of coffee. Sleep was a luxury for a security officer, more so for those at a metahuman prison. How much over time had he worked this week? Ten hours? Twenty hours? He groaned at the thought. His eyes strayed towards the security monitors. He sat up straight, blinking his eyes wide. Amanda Waller was making her way through the front doors.

A scowl rested on her face. Tired bags hanging under her sullen eyes. She trudged past him.

“Good mornin’ Miss Waller,” Officer Banks chimed.

Her nostrils flared in irritation. She looked back at him, “Never a good morning in this dump.” She slid her keycard in the key entry device by the door. It beeped and unlocked, granting her access to the prison. She vanished through the doorway.

Soon, the head guard, Officer Wilcox walked past the front desk as well.

Officer Banks smiled. “Heyyy Wilcox, thought you had today off?”

Wilcox scoffed, “That’s what I thought too. But OT’s a bitch.” He slid his keycard for entry.

“I heard that,” Banks replied, finishing off his mug of coffee.
Wilcox walked to the main security monitoring station. He slid his keycard and opened the door. Inside was officer Ripley, a mousy brunette female officer. She pushed the rim of her glasses up her nose as she observed the numerous monitors.

She greeted him, raising her cup of coffee. “Morning. Another day another dollar, eh?”

A wicked smile expanded across Wilcox’s lips. Officer Ripley felt her mug tremble in her hand as she watched his eyes start to glow white. The voice the fell from his lips was not his, “Oh, today is so much more.”

“Y-you’re not Wilcox,” Ripley stuttered as she looked him up and down. The tension in the air pressed heavy against her chest. She knew she had to act fast. Heart racing, she dropped her ceramic cup and reached for the gun on her hip. But just as she was about to pull it out of it’s holster, Wilcox raised his hand towards her. She gasped. Her entire body was frozen. Despite her struggling, there was not a muscle in her body she could move. Terror slithered up her spine.

The imposter posing as Wilcox smiled, “Humans are so stupid. This is going to be so easy.”

He grit his teeth, and Ripley let out a final cry before her mind went blank. Her limbs became limp as her eyes rolled into the back of her head. Drool slid down the corner of her mouth. ‘Wilcox’ chuckled. He levitated her body and threw her across the room. She would no longer be able to tell anyone of their encounter.

He had brain blasted her; ripped her consciousness from her mind.

The false Wilcox reached into his pocket. He pulled out a small, black, rectangular object. Its edges glew a vibrant red. At the end of the device rested a small cord. It expanded as he pulled, sticking one end into a USB drive in the main computer. He placed the rectangular piece on the desk. A red, holographic keyboard was projected from it. He smiled as he watched his Apokoliptian device hack the prison’s security system.

He grinned to himself, “Show time.”

On the other side of the prison, Professor Ivo sat on a bed in his cell. Trying to keep his mind occupied with a book he had already read fifteen times. The prison’s library selection was atrocious. He signed.

“Happy belated New Years, Professor.”

Ivo looked over to the bars of his cell. On the other side was Amanda Waller. He narrowed his eyes at her mischievous smile. “Vandal Savage sends his regards.” She crossed her arms, hips cocked to her side. “He wants to know if you’ve grown bored yet.”

There was a moment of silence between them. Ivo tilted his head at her. Something was off. Her body language, the tone of her voice. Waller was always so stoic. Her presence demanded compliance. Authority usually flowed off her in waves. But no, this was difference. She was casual, almost friendly even.

Ivo’s eyes went wide at his observation. He gasped, “You’re not Amanda Waller.”

She gave him a breathy chuckle, “Very observant. I should have expected as much from a ‘super genius’”

Ivo approached the bars with caution, “Then who exactly are you? And did I hear you say ‘Vandal Savage’?”
She hummed in amusement “Yes. But who I am is not important.” She grasped one of the bars. “Mr. Savage requests a favor from you, in exchange for….” She raised a brow. “Me lending a helping hand in liberating you from this prison.”

Ivo closed the space between them. He smiled, “He’ll scratch my back as long as I scratch his?”

“Precisely.”

“And what is this ‘favor’?”

“He is in need of your android expertise.” The imposter Waller explained. “Savage wishes to find a way to permanently attach robotic elements to human physiology.” She looked over her shoulder, making sure no one was walking the halls. She lowered her voice. “We are on a timeline. So, he would like to get it right the first time by recruiting someone experienced as opposed to wasting time on mediocre scientists.”

Ivo smiled and rolled his eyes, placing a hand on his chest. “Oh stop. Any more compliments and you’ll make me blush.”

Waller wet her lips, leaning closer into the bars. “So, what do you say?”

Ivo rubbed his chin. “Well, I haven’t tampered much with flesh before.” He smirked. “But I’d say this is an offer I can’t refuse.”

She gave him a toothy smile. “Excellent.” Her eyes began to glow. And in an instant her body was transforming. She grew in height, her clothes morphed into a bodysuit and cape. Her forehead protruded and her skin had changed from brown to green. Now, instead of Amanda Waller in front of him, was Martian Manhunter.

Ivo stumbled back in surprise. “W-What? Manhunter?” He couldn’t believe it. It had been Martian Manhunter all along? Why?

Low laughter rumbled in his chest, “Stand back Professor.”

Ivo did as he was told. He watched as Manhunter extend his arms. His eyes glowing as the tore the bars off his cell. “Lets go,” he held out a hand to Ivo. “We don’t have much time.”

Ivo trembled as he walked towards him. That voice. No. He had encountered Martian Manhunter before. That wasn’t his voice. He/she/it whatever the being was that was in front of him, was still wearing a disguise. And now Manhunter was its costume. Ivo smiled with intrigue.

At the front desk, officer Banks was jerked to attention as the sound of the front doors slamming open. Breathy, bruised, and bloody, the real Officer Wilcox and Amanda Waller stumbled through the doors.

Wide eyed, Officer banks jumped from his seat. “M-Miss-Miss Waller? But you…”

“Wilcox and I,” Waller’s face contorted with anger. Her breathing was staggered, “…jumped…in the parking lot.” She spat as she screeched. “Whoever is in here is not us! Initiate lockdown.”

Officer Banks scrambled for the panic button under his desk. He pressed it, sending an alarm throughout the building. Metal shields crept up over the doors and windows. Shaking, he pressed the speaker button his radio. “All officers, we have imposters posing as Miss Waller and Wilcox. I repeat, all officers, we have imposters posing as Miss Waller and Wilcox. Take them down immediately!”
At the sound of the alarm, the imposter Martian Manhunter used his psychic powers to levitate Ivo. He flew behind Manhunter in the air as they charged down the hallway. A guard stepped out in front of their path, to which Manhunter shoved them out of the way. They navigated through the halls, blasting doors off the hinges. Ivo realized that they were getting closer and closer to the back service door and then…. 

They stopped.

They stood, still, in the concrete back room. The shielded service door in front of them, calling out their names.

Ivo looked around them. His fingers twitched in nervousness. “W-what are you waiting for? The door is right there!”

The false Manhunter looked back at him and smiled. “Bare with me. The boss told me to put on a show.”

Officer Hauser, an overweight, pale guard burst into the room. He held up his rifle, it shook in his hands. “Don’t move!” He cried out.

Manhunter smiled. He took a step forward. “Go ahead.” He inched closer to Hauser, causing him to gasp. “Shoot me.”

Sweat fell from Hauser’s brow. He held his breath as he fired. The gunshot filled the concrete room. Their ears rang. Hauser trembled as the watched the bullet he had just fired float, spiraling in suspended air. The Manhunter’s eyes were glowing. He had stopped the bullet with his mind. He dropped it onto the ground. He charged at Hauser, knocking his gun upwards with his left hand and punching his face with his right. He yanked the gun out of the guards hand, and with one quick strike, swung it against the side of his face. Bones cracked beneath metal and Hauser fell to the floor with a sickening ‘thud’. Blood poured from his broken jaw and nose. Wheezes fell from his throat.

Shouts of ‘Don’t move! Get down on the ground!’ filled the room and Officer Riker and Cooper entered the room. Their rifles aimed at The Manhunter.

The alien smiled. He cocked his head in arrogance. Using his psychic powers, he ripped the guns from their hands. They levitated, and were then turned to aim at the officers. They trembled. A sickness rose in their bellies as the suspended rifles inched closer to their foreheads. The dark, hollow, barrels overtook their sight lines.

“P-please,” Officer Riker choked. “D-don’t do this.”

The Manhunter growled. “You really think that you humans could have stopped someone like me?” He scoffed at their cowardice. They were useless without their weapons. “You. Are. Nothing.”

Ivo struggled to find air as The Manhunter fired their weapons. The gunshots shook his very core as he watch blood and brain matter splatter the room. Their bodies dropped to the floor, contorting in grotesque positions. Their faces were no more.

A rush of bile shot up from Ivo’s stomach. He vomited onto the floor. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the false Manhunter give nod at the security camera.

Inside the security room, the false Wilcox gathered his Apokoliptian technology. That was his cue to leave. He morphed his skin and clothes, taking on a female form. His skin turned green and his hair faded into red until his appearance resembled that of Miss Martian. Before he unplugged his device, he hacked the system once more. Undoing the lockdown and turning off the inhibitor collars on the
inmates.

At the front of the prison, the real Amanda Waller felt panic crawl under her skin. She watch inmates breaking out of their cells from the security cameras. She bellowed on the radio, “All guards subdue the prisoners! Get to the control room and turn those collars back on!” She turned towards the quivering Officer Banks, jolting a finger at him. “And you, get me The Justice League on the phone, NOW!”

The back door rolled open and Ivo felt himself being levitated once more. “Time to go,” Manhunter announced and they flew through the door and up into the air. What looked like the docking bay of a spaceship opened up in the sky. And soon Ivo was inside a Martian spaceship. The Manhunter sat at the controls.

“My own personal shuttle?” Ivo asked with a cocked brow. “I feel like a celebrity.”

The Manhunter hummed in amusement. “Bare with me again. I am waiting on my partner. The ship’s camouflage will keep us hidden. And once we leave they will not be able to follow us.”

“Oh I’m not too worried about that,” Ivo remarked as he waved him off, taking one of the empty seats. He had more than proved to him that he was competent.

A hole in the floor of the ship opened, and what appeared to be Miss Martian floated into the ship.

“No we can leave,” Manhunter advised. He sped the ship off into the sky. “Did you take care of the guard in the control room?”

Ivo looked over to Miss Martain. He watched her bite her lip as she bore a wicked grin. What was she doing here? That couldn’t be the real Miss Martian. Could it?

She gave a chilling giggle, “Don’t got to worry ’bout her no more. I messed her brain up real good.”

Ivo twitched at her awful grammar. No, that wasn’t her. His eyes darted between them. “Uh, may I ask you two a question, if it’s alright?”

“Absolutely,” the Manhunter replied.

Ivo rubbed his chin. “Please, do humor me. If I’m getting this right, you two are running errands for Savage. And you both have all the powers of a Martian, but certainly are not the Manhunter or Miss Martian.” He crossed his legs, hands folded in his lap. “So, what are jolly green E.T.’s like yourselves doing working for The Light?”

The two aliens looked at one another and smiled. The false Miss Martian turned to Ivo, her voice falling low.

“Not all Martians are green, Professor.”
The chimes of the computer chipped away at the quiet of the main room as Kaldur studied the computer screen. He sifted through the extensive files. Tim stood beside him, eyes careful and meticulous. Kaldur grinned. Tim was always curious, asking questions. Maybe, a little too much for his own good. Kaldur was certain Batman made a remarkable choice in accepting Tim as his new protege.

“So’d you get any info from Cheetah, or what?” Rose asked as she approached him. She crossed her arms, impatiently waiting for the others to arrive.

Rose, however, Kaldur wasn’t so sure about. If he had to be honest with himself, her combat ferocity, at times, left him a hair short of terrified. Her attitude and actions weren’t particularly cohesive with the other members of the group. She was a jagged puzzle piece that had yet to find its place in their mural.

“I did not.” Kaldur replied with a sigh. After the attack on Mayor Fermin, Aqualad was able to get an interview with Cheetah while he was in lock up. The results were less than desireable.

“He knows just as much as Adalae does.” Kaldur explained. “I was not able to get the date of when they are supposed to meet La Dama for the Spark shipment. However…” He pulled up a mug shot of Cheetah in his human form on the computer, along with a diagram of a DNA strand. “I was able to get a DNA sample. And his name: Sebastian Ballesteros.”

“Let me guess,” Tim chimed in. “He’s a runaway?”

“Correct,” Kaldur answered. “Kidnapped by Cadmus. He said they had experimented on him for two years.”

“So how does the Cadmus that we discovered in D.C. not know about these branches of Cadmus? The ones still running experiments?” Tim questioned.

“From what my parents told me, not all the information is shared with every employee,” Rose explained. “A lot of times they are kept in the dark about the other branches until they’re transferred. It keeps them from getting compromised.”

“It makes our search for the rogue labs harder too,” Kaldur added. He shook his head, absorbed in the DNA diagram on the screen. “What is the strangest to me though is his DNA analysis.”

“Why? What’s wrong with it?” Tim asked.

Kaldur’s brows bunched with thought. “His DNA, is not fully….human.”

Rose tilted her head, “What’d you mean?”

“My initial thought was that Cadmus must have triggered his metagene via stress. Like what was done with Static,” Kaldur explained. “I assumed that the trigger caused his metagene to activate his power. Which, as we know, is a transfiguration resembling that of a cheetah.”
There was a pause. Tim raised his brows and leaned forward, impatiently waiting for the punchline, “Okay…and?”

Kaldur rubbed his hand against his jaw in disbelief, he zoomed in on the DNA analysis. “He...his body doesn’t just contain human DNA. There are trace amounts of dormant feline strands as well.” Kaldur racked his brain to find the right words. “What I mean is, according to the data he is part human and part, well, cheetah.” They narrowed their eyes at him in confusion. Kaldur shrugged in defeat. “The DNA analysis is telling me that he is part man and part animal. And the metagene is what causes him to take on a hybrid form by activating those dormant feline genes at will.”

Rose’s upper lip curled in disbelief. She and Tim exchanged glances of disorientation.

“Kaldur. Are you…” Tim bit his lip at the impossible thought. “Are you talking about something like….lycanthropy?”

“Lycanthropy?” Rose was taken aback by the word. She shook her head. “Wait, wait are you talkin’ like...werewolves and shit? Like, full-moon-shifting, allergic-to-silver werewolves? That’s...only in movies, Kal. It’s not real.”

“Yeah,” Tim chimed in once more. “It’s not scientifically possible. It doesn’t make any sense. Are you sure your sample isn’t tainted?”

Kaldur sighed again, closing out of the analysis on the screen, rubbing his eyes. “You’re probably right. I most likely ran the tests wrong. With all of the events recently, I have not been getting much sleep.”

The voice from the Zeta Platform echoed around them.

Recognized, Kid Flash, B23

Kaldur groaned internally. Bart’s arrival was his reminder that there was still more work to be done. Sleep could wait. At least until after their mission tonight.

Bart sped up to them. He stopped, looking around the room, “Hey,” his voice was quieter than usual. “Um, are uh, Jaime ‘n Virgil ‘n Cassie back yet?”

“No,” Tim answered. “Cassie texted me and said they’d be here shortly though.”

Kaldur perked at his answer, “All three of them? I told Jaime and Virgil not to worry about coming-”

His words were cut off as the Zeta Platform rang once more.

Recognized, Blue Beetle, B22
Static, B26
Wondergirl, B21

Their faces were sullen and forlorn. Their steps weighed heavy upon the ground as the three of them walked towards Kaldur. All black formal wear clung loose to their skin. Tim watched as Cassie squeezed Jaime’s hand. Tim read a quiet ‘I’ll be okay’ on Jaime’s lips as a sad smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. Cassie placed a quick arm around Virgil’s shoulder, to which he gave a squeeze around her waist. Tim heard a faint “Thanks for comin’ Cass” fall from Virgil as they pulled apart.

Kaldur turned his back to them, organizing and pulling up mission details. Bart took a few steps up to Jaime, concern plaguing his face.
“Hey bud,” He greeted him with a small voice, placing a light hand on his arm. “You alright?”

“Yeah,” Jaime lied. “I’m fine.”

The words left a bitter taste in Jaime’s mouth. He looked over at Virgil, his tired eyes stared at the ground. It was Virgil who Bart should be worried about, not him. For the funeral that he, Virgil, and Cassie had just come from still weighed heavy in Virgil’s mind. The sour pit in their stomachs bubbled in unrest, still grasping at the friend that was no longer with them.

Eduardo had overdosed. And The Team was certain that ‘Spark’ was to blame.

Five days ago, Nightwing called Virgil and Jaime. His words were heavy and slow as he told of Ed’s passing. The conversation felt like a dream to both of them. It was not more than seven months ago that they fought with Ed, working to stop The Reach’s eggs. Surely Nightwing was mistaken. But the report was true. They looked up the news article themselves. The Taos Times claimed him to be another victim of the ‘growing mysterious deaths’ of youths in the U.S. He had been at a party with classmates. And interviews with partygoers claimed to have seen him smoke something with a blue light.

Ten minutes later he collapsed onto the ground; still, quiet, and cold.

Virgil tried to reason that it couldn’t have been Ed. That narcotics would never be something that he would do. But how could he have been certain? It’s not as though he spent a lot of time with him after their liberation from The Reach.

According to Eduardo’s classmates, he was only there because he had a fight with his father. Partying out of youthful spite. And that, Virgil believed without hesitation. So when the day of the funeral came, it was no surprise to see Eduardo Sr. completely broken.

It was very rare for Virgil to cry from second hand sorrow. But seeing Eduardo Sr., Ed’s father, collapse at the podium in a fit of sobs. Unable to give his son a proper farewell speech, caused Virgil’s composure to shatter. His father’s feelings of guilt unabsolved by the assurances of family and friends.

The boys were certain that his father was not going to be alright for a very long time.

A vicious feeling of rage clawed at Jaime’s chest when he realized that Tye was absent from the funeral. His mother and Asami attended, but the bandana bearing boy was no where to be seen. His mother claimed he had been missing since the attack at the Convention Center. Unable to reach him by phone or social media. He had gone off the grid entirely. And Spark, the product that The Pack had partnered with La Dama to sell, killed one of their friends.

Jaime sat through the service infuriated. The least Tye could have done was shown up to the service, even if only for a moment to pay respects. He, Virgil, and Cassie would have been more than willing to turn a blind eye for the day in Ed’s honor. But his absence further proved where his loyalties truly lie. Despite Adalae insisting that Black Bison controlled most of his actions, Jaime couldn’t shake the chilling thought that Tye had changed for the worst.

They left the funeral in a drowning aura of worthlessness. Cassie, insisting on coming for moral support, did help ease their hurt. But it was not enough to subside their anguish. There was nothing they could have done, nothing they could do. It was over. Ed’s life was over.

Virgil clenched his fist in anger. He looked up at the sound of Kaldur clearing his throat. He faced them. His watchful eyes studied them with diligence.
“As you are all aware, I had a mission planned out for all of you tonight,” Kaldur began. He paused for a moment, gathering his words. “However, given the recent loss, I will understand if some of you would wish to sit this one out. There is absolutely no obligation.” His eyes went to Jaime, and then to Virgil. “I know that a few of you were close to Eduardo.”

“It’s fine.” Virgil’s words sounded numb. “I just, want something to take my mind off of it.”

“Yeah,” Jaime added with a small voice. “Same.”

Kaldur hummed in thought. “And that is why I feel you may not be up for this mission. It will do the opposite of ‘take your mind off of it’. He pulled up a map of Gotham on the screen. “Tonight, we will be in Gotham City, holding steakouts for Spark dealers.” It was at his final two words that everyone gave him their undivided attention. He continued. “Thanks to Rose’s intel, we were able to determine the target demographic and prime location for the narcotics. You will be looking out for any potential dealers, keeping eyes on them, and trailing if ordered.” He paused, his voice going soft. “So you can see why…”

“It’s fine.” Jaime interrupted. “Just, more motivation for me to…help get this stuff off the street.”

“I’m with Jaime,” Virgil nodded. His face hardened with certainty. “I wanna help.”

Kaldur nodded in response. “As long as you are certain.”

Their unwavering faces only confirmed their words.

“Very well.” Kaldur responded. “So before I hand out the mission details, I wanted to go over everything that we’ve learned about ‘Spark’ so far. Obviously, it is a narcotic. Created by Cadmus and is usually in the form of white and blue ‘crystals’ or ‘nuggets’. It creates blue ‘sparks’ in the user’s mouth when lit and inhaled. It contains a highly addictive aphrodisiac that only seems to activate with those going through, or a few years out of puberty.”

He pulled up a few images of the rogue metahumans that they apprehended while under the influence. “What makes this drug an interest to us is that somehow it’s formula can bring out a person’s metagene. But in their intoxicated state the user has no control and is often violent. According to Rose, it also contains a mitochondrial marker. So Cadmus and The Light could potentially track these metahumans down. And, as you are aware, Spark can be toxic to certain users and is easily overdosed on.”

Kaldur was sure to hurry on to his next point, not wanting to linger on the thought of ‘overdose’. He cleared his throat. “A few members of The League were to join us but they have been called into an emergency meeting. So today will be a strictly ‘observe and report’ mission.” He made sure to take the time to look at each one of them to assure his point had gone through. “The streets of Gotham are dangerous, and I do not wish to hear of anymore loss today.”

Virgil and Jaime cringed at his words.

“The positions will be as followed,” Kaldur began to list. “Alpha is currently on Mars for their bi-weekly mission. So, Robin and Blue Beetle, you will be Beta. Your observation post will be Gotham Academy.”

“Gotham Academy?” Jaime’s face twisted in perplexity. “That uppity private school? I thought only rich jerks went there?”

“Uhh…” Tim cleared his throat, raising his hand up to his face with small movements. “I...I go there.”
“Oh...sorry.” Jaime blushed with embarrassment. He rubbed the back of his neck. “I probably already knew, that didn’t I?”

Tim smiled, forgiving him. “Well uppity rich jerks or not, my school has been a hot bed for Spark. A lot of kids can afford the higher quality product. Since Rose told us about it a month ago, I’ve been asking around, listening in on conversations. Apparently there’s a dealer that hangs around the school yard every once in a while. He’s been scarce lately, but it’s worth a shot.”

“How exactly why it is a point of interest to us,” Kaldur added. “Continuing on. Wondergirl, Static, you will be Gamma. You will patrol by the lake at South City Park.” He turned to Rose and Bart. “Kid Flash, Rose you two are Delta, you have Harlow Park.”

“Heyheyhey!” Bart chittered, giving a tight squeeze around Rose’s shoulder. She growled at his contact. “Look at that, we got our first mission together buddy.”

She gave a quiet sigh and rolled her eyes. Great. She gets to spend all night with Kid Touchy-Talky. She wondered if Gotham had a tall bridge she could jump off of. She was in no mood to deal with his pep.

“You will notice there is a lot of younger members on this mission.” Kaldur pointed out. “This will be a great chance for you so show your leadership and initiative skills, without having to be in the shadow of an older teammate. I will set up our station at Gotham Park. My job will be less observation and more mediary between the three teams.” He glance around at their small, engaged faces. “We know that they are trying to spread this product West. They already have drop offs with La Dama planned. So what we do today will be vital in helping stop the spread of ‘Spark’.” They all responded with strong, reaffirming nods. “Good. Now, if everyone understands their assignments, begin prep. Street clothes and only self defense weaponry. Remember this is an observe and report mission, not hands on. We leave in 30 minutes.”

Gotham City - Harlow Park
January 7th, 2017
22:12 EST

This was it. This was how Rose was going to die. On a sticky park bench, in a shit hole park in Gotham, with the most annoying speedster that she had ever met. Well, he was the only speedster she’d ever met. But she was sure he’d win 1st place in Irritation. And before the night was over, she was going to find out if one can truly die of boredom.

She sunk down in her cold seat, groaning, overflowing with a desire to punch someone, anyone. Bart was sprawled next to her on the bench, his head tilted back as he dragged his hands down his face.

“Whyyyyyyyyyyy?!” He groaned in feigned pain.

“This. Is so. BORIIIIING.” Rose clutched at her hair. She huffed in anguish. If she did not get to hit something soon, she was certain she’d combust.

Bart slapped at his cheeks, trying to stay awake. “Tell me about it. Steakouts are the worst.”

Rose grunted, sitting up in her seat. She reached into her coat pocket, pulling out a pack of cigarettes. Bart watched as she placed one between her lips. The tiny flame of her lighter danced behind her hand as she tried to shield it from the wind. She took a few puffs, an orange light glowing at the end.
He watched her body fall into relaxation. She smiled, a content sigh escaping her as she exhaled. “Shit, that’s good.”

He chuckled. “Those things'll kill ya you know,” he teased.

“Yeah, well.” She mumbled, taking the cigarette out of her mouth. “So could this job. And yet,” She motioned around them. “Here we are.”

He hummed in amusement. He watched her smoke for a moment before speaking again. “So uh, you fittin’ in alright?”

She let out a small sarcastic laugh, “Is really that obvious I’m not?”

She was all too aware that she was not meshing well with most of the other members of The Team. There was a recurring pattern of ‘forgetting’ to invite her to team outings. Even while being in the same room, she would find herself unincluded in their conversations. It may not have been entirely intentional. But their lack of involvement spoke louder than any words.

But that didn’t mean she couldn’t hear what they said about her in whispered tones.


She brushed the words off her shoulders like the puny specks of dust they were. Yet they still left a sting behind. She grit her teeth at the thought. They just had no idea what a real warrior was like. The world is kill or be killed. You have to be hard. You have to be tough. They were superheroes, they should know that already.

Artemis had been the only one to go out of her way to include her, to talk to her. But she up and went on sabbatical out of the blue.

“I heard you got yelled out by Aqualad,” Bart stated. A small tone of teasing hanging on his words.

Oh. And this kid. He was also the only other person to take a real interest in her as well. Rose shook her head. No, that was an understatement. She couldn’t get him to leave her alone.

“Yeah,” Rose answered, taking another puff. “He just wanted to tell me how much I suck.”

“You don’t suck,” Bart reassured. “You’ll get the hang of everything....everyone will come around to you eventually.”

Rose huffed at his response, “Your teammates don’t seem to like me very much.”

“Our teammates,” Bart emphasized. “And don’t worry, they’ll get used to you, you know, kicking their butts.” He gave an awkward laugh. “Honestly, I think they’re just a little afraid of you.”

She chuckled, “Good.” She looked him up and down, eyes stopping at his cheery, wind burnt cheeks. “Why do care so much anyways?”

Bart flinched at her question, “Whadoyou mean?”

She shrugged. “I dunno. You’re always around, asking me questions.” She paused in thought. “It’s like you give a shit.”

“I do, actually.” The pep in Bart’s voice fell. “It’s just, uh...I know what’s it’s like, to come here alone. To be alone.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Not knowing anybody, not knowing if you’re actually doing good.” He gave her a friendly jab with his elbow. “I just don’t want you to feel that
way.” And in a rare moment, Bart was quiet. He stared at the ground, sadness pulling at his eyes and lips.

Rose couldn’t hold back her dramatic eyeroll. She groaned. “Alright. Spit it out.” Bart looked at her, his brows bunched in confusion. Rose twirled her hand, urging him on. “Come on. I know you want to get something off your chest, so just talk. That's why you're being all mysterious and broody.”

His face twitched at her observation. “What?”

She groan again. She was growing tired of this game. “I told you, you get one story a day.” She took a drag from her cigarette. “So tell me your story.”

Bart stumbled over his words. “Y-you already know. I’m from the future. Came back to stop Blue from starting the Apocalypse. That’s all.”

“Really?” Rose’s words dripped with doubt as she smiled. She shrugged. “So you can just...brush off the fact that you were living in a post-apocalyptic world?”

Bart felt bile rise in his throat. A flash of anger pounded at him, irritated at her observation. That was not a topic he wished to discuss. His life from before was something he did not discuss. He let the feeling simmer and pass.

“That’s all there is to me,” he reassured.

Rose hummed behind a closed-lip smile, “Yeeeah, I’m gonna call bullshit on that.”

“Why?” Bart snipped at her. A snarl flashed across his face. Their conversation was no longer amusing to him. He mentally pleaded for her to stop digging. To stop prying into his life. That wound had hardly scabbed over, and he’d be damned if he’d let her slice it open.

“Trust me,” Rose raised a brow at him. “I've been around long enough to know that in order for someone to keep a cover as annoying as yours…” His expression darkened as he clenched his jaw. Rose was amused to see that she had struck a nerve. She leaned into him, a sassy smile gracing her face as she continued. “...you gotta have a lot of dark secrets that you wanna keep buried.”

Bart’s glare felt like daggers against her skin. His body shook as a vein rose in his neck. But Rose was unphased. She pressed on, grinning. Her voice almost a whisper as she leaned in more, her face close to his. “....you gotta have a lot of dark secrets that you wanna keep buried.”

Bart’s glare felt like daggers against her skin. His body shook as a vein rose in his neck. But Rose was unphased. She pressed on, grinning. Her voice almost a whisper as she leaned in more, her face close to his. “I know all there to know about disguises.” She bit her lip at the tension radiating from him. “You might have everyone else fooled, Bart. But not me.”

His nostrils flared with rage, a loud exhale fogging the air between them. He hissed behind his clenched teeth as he shook, “How ’bout. You shut. The hell. Up.”

Bart gasped at his words, his eyes went wide. Rose’s jaw dropped as she smiled at his broken composure. There is was. A tear in his veil. A rip at the seam of his costume. A poked hole in the farcical character that is ‘Bart Allen’.

Bart snapped his head away, bouncing his foot on the pavement below. He chewed at the inside of his cheek, furious that he had lost his cool for a small moment.

Rose wet her lips in smugness. “Alright.” She replied, satisfied at what she’d accomplished. “I’ll shut up.”

The poor kid. That was enough for today. She didn’t want to break him too bad. Her eyes scanned the park. Confident and cocky, she was ready for some more manipulation. And this ’stakeout’ was
not going to cut it.

Her eyes fell on a middle aged man standing by the chain-link shrouded basketball courts. He wore a large winter coat with just a few too many pockets. He was constantly looking over his shoulder, observing the area around him, studying people as they walked by. According to her phone, he had been standing there for two hours. She’d was tired of this waiting game and it was freezing outside. It was time for action.

Rose pressed on her earpiece communicator as she flicked her cigarette onto the ground. Her voice filled everyone’s ears. “Hey Pops. Sooo are we really just going to sit here all night and waste our time? Are your little kindergarten cops even trained in spotting drug dealers?”

Bart looked over at her. An ornery grin played on her lips. What trouble was she trying to start now?

“Oh and you are?” Cassie’s annoyed words could be heard on the other end. Rose’s arrogance was something that instantly put her on edge. “I don’t think a rookie has any place talking smack. We’re the real heroes here. We’ve done stuff that-”

“Hey, Barbie,” Rose interrupted. She hated the pretentious tone in Cassie’s voice whenever she talked to her. “Why don’t you head home before you chip your nail polish? Don’t you have like, boy band magazines to read?”

“That is enough.” Kaldur beamed, sounding like an annoyed parent. A familiar tone that Rose found amusing, and earned him the nickname of ‘Pops’. “Rose, if you are so displeased with our tactics, then what do you suggest an alternative be?”

“Well, that’s easy.” They walked towards the man by the basketball courts. “If you want drugs, all you have to do is ask reeeeal nice like.”

They stopped, standing a couple yards on the man’s right. Rose had her back turned on him. Bart faced her.

“What?” Kaldur could be heard on the other end. “Rose do not engage.”

She smiled. It was clear to Bart that she was ignoring Kaldur. He studied her, unsure of what her next movement would be. She pulled out cigarette and handed it to Bart, to which he took with careful fingers.

She pulled out her lighter, whispering to him. “Smoke it.”

“What?” He had no idea what she was trying to do.

She rolled her eyes, grabbing his hand and putting the cigarette up to his mouth. He put it between his lips. Rose ignited the flame, he sheltered it with his hands. He inhaled, the taste of ash filling his mouth.

She whispered again, “Just do what I say. And don’t. Talk. Got it?”

He nodded at her with wide eyes. Rose lit her own cigarette. They stood there for a minute, smoking in silence. The man in the large winter coat stole glances at them.

“Rose…” Kaldur chimed on the communicator once more, waiting for her answer.

Rose tapped on the earpiece three times. A new setting that enabled them to record the user’s voice
as well as anyone close to them. Rose looked over her shoulder, tossing the man a flirtatious smile.

“Hey baby,” Her words were sultry, and peaked his interest. Her lips formed a small, playful pout. “You got somethin’ to help us have a good time tonight?”

Bart almost choked on his inhale. Was...was this guy a dealer? How did she know?

“Rose do not engage,” Kaldur’s demand rang in their ears. But she paid no mind to it.

“Rose...watch your step,” it was Tim who came across the communicator this time. He knew that Rose was going to do her own thing. It’s not like they could teleport across the city to stop her if they wanted to. The most he could do was keep her on her toes.

The man smiled. He rubbed his hand over his mouth. His voice was deep and raspy, “Depends on how hard the little lady wantsta party.”

Kaldur growled upon hearing the strange voice. Rose was on his last nerve.

Rose bit her lower lip, looking the man up and down with playful eyes. She held her cigarette carton up over her shoulder in offering, a few of the sticks protruding out of the top. “How ‘bout we have a little conversation then?”

The man looked around again and approached them. He pulled out one of her cigarettes, she lit it, letting him join their smoking circle. It finally clicked in Bart’s head. She was creating a cover for them. Making their interaction look less suspicious to any law enforcement that could pass by. She was making the dealer more comfortable.

He took a long drag before speaking again. “So what you looking for, beautiful?” He wiggled his brows at her. “You wanna chill? Or you wanna trip?”

“Mmmm,” she hummed with a tilt of her head. “Maybe something with a little a both?”

“Alrai,” he nodded. “I think I got some pills you might like.”

“Well...you see,” Rose began, taking a step next to Bart. He jumped at the feel of a hand sliding into his back pocket with...an unnecessarily firm grasp. Rose rested her head on his shoulder. His cheeks went red at her contact. He composed himself, wrapping an arm behind her, his hand resting on her hip. Purely to keep their cover, of course.

Rose continued, a pout played in her voice. “My boyfriend and I are here for the weekend from outta state and we’re looking for something a little more...local.”

“Ahhh, well,” He took a drag from his cigarette. They wanted something with a local strain? He smiled. It was nice to see out-of-towners support local business. “I certainly know a Molly, born and raised in Gotham.”

Rose groaned. She didn’t want Molly. She didn’t want pot. She couldn’t give two shits about pills. No. They were there to take down Spark. And the only way they were going to get there, was to find an in directly to the source.

"Naw baby,” she shook her head. “I want that new stuff. The stuff all the kids are talkin’ about.” She hit him with her seductive eyes, bringing up her hand to twirl a finger in Bart’s hair, her body leaning into him. Her voice a sultry whisper, “You know, that shit you can fuck real good on.”

His eyes widened. His jaw dropped as he wiggled a brow at Bart. He gave him an appreciative nod.
Bart could feel his blush spread his cheeks down to his shoulders.

The dealer laughed, “Little lady’s got good taste. I might have a bag on me you can afford.”

“Mmm, yeah but…” Rose interjected, pulling her wallet halfway out of her pocket so it could be seen. “I got enough cash to pay for the light show. Mommy and Daddy got big pockets.”

She prayed that her charade was working. If she made it clear that money was no issue, she’d have a better chance of buying a bag of higher quality.

“You cute,” He shook his head. “But boss doesn’t just pass that out to anybody.”

“Awww but,” Rose pulled out something from her wallet, folding it between her fingers. She discretely passed it over to him. “I’m sure Mr. Benjamin says I can be their somebody.”

Bart’s jaw dropped. She had the whole thing planned from the very beginning. He thought it was strange, seeing her pull a large sum of cash from an ATM at the start of the mission. But he wrote it off. She still had her Wayne Enterprises credit card, he assumed that she was taking it out for personal reasons. Now he knew better. And she was going to use that money to buy and bribe for narcotics.

Bruce was going to be pissed.

The dealer shook his head, smiling. “Oh, you’re good.” He reached into his wallet, pulling out a white business card. It was blank with a few lines of scribbled handwriting. Rose took it from him. He continued, “Go to this address on the other side of West Harlow. Knock three time.” He nodded upwards. “Tell ‘um Benny sent ya. I get a referral payment.”

A waive of triumph flushed through Rose. It took all the self control she could muster to keep her from dancing in place. She winked at him, “Thanks baby” and grabbed Bart by the hand, leading him down the street. She turned off the recorder.

“Ooooooo!” Virgil’s excited cry filled the communicator. “That was like somethin’ out of a cop drama. Girl that was so good!”

“I know I am,” Rose replied, turning her chin up in confidence.

“Yes, that is great.” Kaldur rubbed the bridge of his nose between his thumb and pointer finger. He had never had to deal with someone so disobedient before. “Now you two return to your post and-”

“Yeeah, no.” Rose interrupted. “We’re going to this address.”

Bart looked at her with wide eyes. No one ever talked to Aqualad like that.

“Excuse me?”

“Bart and I are going to this address to see if we can get a bag,” she replied with a matter-of-fact pep.

“Did you not hear what he just said?” Cassie asked, astonished at her disrespect.

“Look,” Rose huffed. “I know this mission isn’t supposed to be ‘hands on’ but in terms of this case, we have nothing.” She allowed for a pause of silence as they could not come up with a retort. “Bart and I have a chance to actually get a sample. A sample that we can analyze. And that guys said that this address will take us to his boss. We’ll have a chance to ID some higher ups. Didn’t you say this mission was our chance to ’show some initiative?”'
Kaldur signed, a headache growing behind his eyes. “Rose….”

“She does raise a good point.” Tim chimed in with caution. Although her issue with authority was a cause for alarm, everything that Rose said was true. They needed this lead. “Aqualad, this might be our shot to actually get some product in our hands and get us closer to finding where it’s being made.”

Kaldur gathered his thoughts for a moment. “Fine,” he chirped, disgruntled. “But the second there is a sign of trouble you will retreat, immediately.”

Rose flashed Bart a triumphant smile. She pressed on her communicator, “You got it boss.”

_Mars_  
_January 7th, 2016_  
_22:30 EDT_

M’gann found herself frozen, a stinging bolt of terror crystallizing her muscles. She managed to strain her neck to the side. She looked over at Conner, to see if he had heard the same thing that she did. Slack-jawed, all he could do was shake his head.

They sat at a small, round meeting table inside a White Martian Militia base. Across from them sat the High General of the White Martian Militia, Telok’telar. Scars showered his white, weathered face. An eye patch covered the left eye that he had lost in battle many years ago. To his left sat two of his lieutenants: A’monn and A’morr A’mokk. Husband and wife whose devotion to the battlefield nearly surpassed their devotion to one another.

The White Martian Militia was created long before M’gann was born. A sloppily run, almost underground organization. It was meant to govern the White Martians within their own communities. A response to the lack of aid, relief, and law enforcement they would ask from the government, who favored Green Martian needs above White.

But since the attacks first began in October, the White Martian Militia, or WMM, began to organize. They knew that they would receive little help from the Green Martians in finding out who was behind these terrorist attacks. So they whipped the WMM into a clean, organized structure. Gaining more soldiers as months progressed. Telok’telar was voted High General shortly after. And proved himself to be a valuable ally in M’gann’s investigations. Eager to help her solve her case, and created counter-terrorism units to help prevent more attacks.

But you can only strike a being so many times, before it decides to hit back. And after three months of losing thousands of White Martian lives, Telok’telar and his two Lieutenants had had enough.

M’gann arrived for their scheduled meeting, thinking all would be normal. Only to hear Telok’telar tell her that if the Green Martians did not find who was responsible by the end of the month, the WMM would declare war upon the Green Martians.

‘You can’t be serious,’ M’gann brought her hands up to her head. She was nearly at a loss of what to say. She couldn’t believe her ears. She shook her head, holding her hands out to her sides. ‘I cannot let you do this.’

‘This is beyond you M’gann,’ A’monn snipped.

‘But…think about what you’re saying,’ desperation dripped from her words through the telepathic link.

‘You speak to us as if we are children,’ A’morr snarled. ‘You think that we would do this on a whim? Without thinking of the consequence?’
M’gann shook her head. ‘No, I’m not saying you haven’t thought it through. But what you are talking about is civil war.’ She looked at them with pleading eyes. ‘There has to be something else we can do—’

‘I will do whatever I need to to keep my family safe!’ A’monn slammed her fist onto the table. Her body shook. Sorrow etched cracks into her words as she spoke. ‘I have lived for far too long under the tyranny of the Green Martians. I have seen my children die. From famine, starvation, racial violence.’ She took a moment to compose herself. ‘My oldest son was killed by Green Martian Guerrillas just two weeks ago. I have four of my babies left, and I will die a bloody and battered on the battlefield before I let anything happen to them.’ She peered at M’gann with violent intensity. ‘They are all that I have left.’

M’gann’s jaw slacked. ‘I…I am sorry for your loss,’ She softened her voice. ‘But there has to be another way. The Green Martians are just as scared—’

‘Why are you making excuses for them?!’ A’monn boomed, he bolted up from his chair. M’gann flinched at his movement. Connor growled. Jumping from his seat to shield her if need be. A’monn continued. ‘Have you spent so much time with J’onn that you’ve forgotten where you came from?’ He jolted a finger at M’gann. ‘You are a White Martian. You are all too aware of how poisonous their prejudice is.’ The tension in his muscles eased, there was almost a smile to his words, ‘And last I heard, the ‘Martian Manhunter’ was living up to his name on Earth.’

M’gann tilted her head in confusion. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘This is enough talk.’ A’morr interrupted. ‘We have made our decision. And I for one, am sick of hearing delegations from you.’ She peered at M’gann with unapologetic disgust. ‘You, who walks in denial of who she is. You who hides her skin as if it is a disease. How can you truly care what happens to us, when you live your life in constant denial that you are one of us?’ M’gann’s eyes fell to the floor, guilt rising from the pit of her belly. ‘As far as I’m concerned,’ M’gann finally brought her eyes up to A’morr’s. ‘You became a traitor the moment you shifted your skin green.’

‘That is enough A’morr,’ Telok’telar scolded. ‘Stand. Down.’ He turned towards M’gann. A sad sigh escaped him. ‘I know that you mean well for us M’gann. But there is no more delegation. We have made up our minds.’ He shook his head. ‘This is happening.’

A rush of anger snaked through M’gann’s veins. ‘You won’t win,’ She bit her lip, trying to hold back. ‘You will be sending your people out to slaughter. The Green Martian’s weapons are...superior.’ She narrowed her eyes, trying to hold back a wave of tears. How could she get them to understand? ‘They will annihilate us. Butcher every White Martian in their path until there is not enough left to fight them. You think the way we are treated now is bad?’ She held her hands in front of her, pleading. ‘Imagine what will happen to our people as POWs, or in indentured servitude afterwards. It will be far worse that what is happening now.

Telok’telar stood up tall. ‘Used to be,’ He said with cool, calm words. ‘Their weapons used to be superior.’ He stood from his seat, walking over to a locked weapon’s cabinet behind him. ‘But now we have the technology to cut down the Green majority...into minority status.’ He placed his hand on the scanner on the cabinet door. It unlocked. ‘So you can make it very clear to them, that we intended to fight. And we will win.’

Superboy and Miss Martain found themselves unable to breathe. As the cabinet door opened, a crushing feeling of dismay clutched their throats. Inside the cabinet hung an abundance of black and red Apokolips weapons.
‘Where the hell did you get those?’ Superboy hissed.

‘A donation,’ Telok’telar informed.

‘A donation?’ Conner snarled. ‘From who?’

Telok’telar narrowed his eyes, irritation twinged his upper lip. ‘That information I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to disclose;’

‘Are you out of your mind?!’ Superboy snapped. ‘Do you really think someone would give Apokolips weapons to you, for free? Without any strings attached?’

‘We are very aware that certain favors from us might be called upon.’ Telok’telar’s stood firm. ‘But they were the ones to reach out to us. They are the only ones who seem to care about our struggle.’ A desperate passion grew in his voice. ‘So when they offered their weaponry to us to give us a fighting chance, to save my people from massacre,’ He paused to compose himself, his speech on the verge of cracking. ‘Whatever money or service they may invoice from us, the price means nothing to me, as long as it means the survival of our people.’

Outside, Adalae and Beast Boy gallivanted through the dusty street of the White Martian town. They ogled at the outdoor shops. It was Adalae’s first mission, and her very first time on another planet. Instead of sitting through dull political discussion, M’gann thought it would be best for Adalae to experience some Martian culture first. A task that Beast Boy was more than willing to assist her with.

“This is the coolest thing ever!” Adalae’s wide eyes and exuberant smile had not left her face since they arrived. “Like, in the entire universe!”

Beast Boy laughed. “Wellllll I wouldn’t say the entire universe.” He smiled, remembering his first time off-world. “Raan definitely had more cool stuff too look at.”

“Wow,’ Her eyes darted. As if unsure what strange new building, being, or object to look at. The muscles in her face twitched. She rubbed her ear as a foreign, high pitched buzz stung her ear. “Ow!”

“What’s the matter?” Beast Boy asked.

You don’t hear that?” Adalae asked.

Her face bunched in confusion. She looked all around them. The noise growing louder. She looked up. Terror shot through her spine as a missile whirled closer to them from the sky.

“Look out!” She cried, pushing Garfield away. The missile landed where he had be standing, knocking both him and Adalae to the ground. They coughed at the upturned dirt and debris. They groaned, rising to their feet.

A scream rang around them. Out of the stinging dust charged a band of Green Martian Guerrilla soldiers. Armor coated their skin. The wielded laser guns and swords, striking down any white Martian they saw.

Adalae trembled, fear planting her feet to the ground. Terrified White Martians ran passed her, fleeing from the green attackers.

Garfield cried out to her, but found himself under attack. A Green Martian charged at him, his sword raised high into the air. Garfield curled his lips into a savage snarl. He shifted into a tiger and lunged at him.
The commotion caught the attention of M’gann, Superboy, Telok’telar, A’monn, and A’morr. Telok’telar and his two Lieutenants grabbed their Apokolips rifles. They charged outside. M’gann gasped, seeing Beast Boy engaged in battle with Green warrior. Telok’telar ordered his soldiers to attack.

The Martian threw Garfield off of him, knocking him against building. Beast Boy cried out in pain. Unable to retain his strength, he shifted back into his normal form. The world became dark and woozy as he struggled to keep his eyes open. Superboy rushed to Garfield’s side. He struck the Martian across it’s jaw, knocking it to the ground. He picked up Garfield in his arms.

“Kid, you alright?” He asked. “Where’s Adalae?”

Adalae’s attention was pulled to her left at the sounds of small screams. Two White Marian children, much smaller than herself, cowered onto the ground as three Green Martians surround them. Their blades raised.

A deep growl erupted in Adalae’s throat. A primal rage scratched at her skin as her body flooded with an urgency to protect. Her face creased with fury, fists balled so tight her nails pierced her skin.

Her instincts took over. She sprinted toward them as she snarled, “Get away from them!”

Her movement caught the attention of M’gann, Superboy, and Beast Boy. They cried out for her to stop. But her pounding of her heart beat resonated far louder that their words. She swerved beneath the feet of the Green Martians. She stood over the children. Her eyes glowing white as an unfamiliar warmth grew in her hands. She felt her energy spring from her chest to her fingertips.

She roared and placed her hands in front of her. A translucent blue blue shield, much like that of Rocket’s, circled around her and the White Martian Babies. It sparked against the Green Martian’s sword as he brought it down, knocking it out of his hand.

Adalae grit her teeth. “Go away!” She demanded, pulling back her elbows, then shoving her hands forward. The shield rushed onward as well, tossing the three Green soldiers into the air. She panted, sweat dripping from her brow as her eyes went wide with disbelief. She couldn’t believe what she had just done, it almost seemed like a dream. She turned towards the White Martian children. She scooped them up in her arms, running towards M’gann.

“Will they be safe in there?” Adalae asked.

M’gann’s jaw still hung loose from watching Adalae’s new power surface. “W-what?” She asked, gathering herself. “Y-Yes yes, here.” She opened the door to the base, letting the two children run inside.

‘Grab one of those weapons and meet me on the front lines,’ Telok’telar ordered.

‘What?’ M’gann’s lip curled in confusion. Screams and explosions rang around them.

Telok’telar ground his teeth in agitation. ‘You and your teammates grab an Apokolips weapon inside and help us fight.’

‘No!’ M’gann gasped. ‘We’re peace keepers. Garfield and Adalae are children. We-

Telok’telar brought his face uncomfortably close to hers. He snarled, ‘A’monn was right. You have forgotten who you are. Even in an unprovoked battle you still favor them.’

‘No I-’ M’gann struggled for words, a sickness growing in her stomach.
'Get out,' Telok’telar hissed. ‘Get out of my city.’ M’gann felt breathless as he stepped towards her. ‘You and your team are not welcome here anymore. If you are not willing for fight for your people. Then I consider you, a traitor.’

>A tear fell from M’gann’s eye. It took all she could to choke back a sob. It was happening again. Rejection. And now it was from her own people.


M’gann shook her head as she cried. A feeling of failure closing her throat. She levitated Adalae, Superboy, and Garfield in the air along with her. The flew towards their Zetatube home as the watched the battle continue on beneath him. Red flashes erupted from the White Martian’s new weaponry. The Greens began to fall back.

A troublesome silence fell between them as tears streamed down M’gann’s cheeks.

Gothen City - South City Park
January 7th, 2017
22:50 EST

“Ahhh! She just...makes me so mad!”

Cassie’s words trailed through the park. Virgil felt waves of anger roll off of her. They trudged down the sidewalk. Cassie’s hands flailed about as she spoke.

Virgil shook his head. “I don’t understand you two. She’s been with us, what, a month? And you’re already at each others’ throats.”

Her nostrils flared in irritation. Rose’s disrespect towards Kaldur left Cassie fuming. It was well known throughout The Team that the two of them didn’t mesh. They always seem to know just how to push the other’s buttons. “She just thinks she knows everything. She so bossy. And it’s so infuriating! Did you even hear how she talked to Kal-oop.”

In the midst of venting to Virgil, Cassie didn’t notice a man turning the corner. She bumped into him, nearly knocking herself over in the process. He placed a firm grasp on her arm to keep her from falling.

“Oh, I’m sorr-” Her words trailed off as she looked up at him. A smooth smile played on his lips as he looked her over. He was tall, toned, and wore a brown leather jacket. Black disheveled bangs rested on his forehead.

“S’alright.” His dark husky voice played in her ears. “You okay?”

Cassie’s cheeks turned pink, suddenly very aware of his eyes upon her. “Y-yeah...sure-yes.”

He chuckled and Cassie could have sworn she was running a fever. “Sure on that one?” He asked with a smile. His eyes darted between them. “What are you two doin’ out here? The parks are dangerous at night.”

“Just out for a walk,” Virgil replied with a shrug.

He raised a brow at them, mouth twisting in uncertainty. “Well be careful.” His jaw clenched, a snarl twitching his lip for a moment, as if remembering something dark. “A lot of freaks out there just waiting to snatch up kids.” He rose up his chin, looking past them. “Speaking of which.”
They heard heavy footsteps. A clink of metal snapped their head around. Another man in crept up behind them, a bandanna covering his mouth. He held out a gun. “Don’t move,”

He commanded. “Cough up your wallets.”

Cassie’s hands balled into fists. Virgil’s muscles tense, sparks fired in his hands.

“Get lost asshole,” the man in the leather jacket replied with a monotonous tone.

Cassie’s eyes went wide. What was he doing? He has a gun.

The man in the bandana narrowed his eyes, “Don’t gimme no lip or I’ll pop your ass.”

“I’m tellin you, just walk away,” A serious tone soaked his words that sent a chill down Cassie’s spine.

“Man shut the hel-” Before the gunman could finish his sentence, the man in the leather jacket charged at him. He grabbed his wrist, pushing the gun upwards. He brought back his fist and clocked the gunman in the nose. He pulled the gun from him, then punched him across the jaw. The once armed gunman fell to the ground clutching his face.

“Holy shit…” The words whispered out of Virgil. In awe of how fast he neutralized the situation.

“Now, I don’t feel like killin’ someone in front of kids.” The man in the leather jacket aimed his newly acquired firearm at the criminal. He looked down at him with a vicious glare.

“So I’m gonna give you the chance to get up. And get the hell out of my park.”

The man stumbled to his feet, blood gushing down his face. He did as he was ordered and disappeared behind the trees.

The other man tucked the gun in his waistline on the small of his back. Now calm and collected, he pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. He looked over his shoulder at Virgil and Cassie. “Like I said, you two better head home.” He began to walk away. “If you know what’s good for ya.”

Frozen in astonishment, they looked to one another with dropped jaws.

“Who the hell was that?” Virgil asked.

“I don’t-” Cassie was cut off as Rose chimed in on their communicators.

“Hey guys...we’re almost there.” She informed.

Sirens wailed. The stench of sewer ripened the deeper Rose and Bart traveled into West Harlow. Their senses teetered on edge as they powered through the maze of boarded buildings and and graffitied walls. Bart’s heart pounded in his chest, eyes wary of the decrepit street dwellers around them.

“Proceed with caution,” Aqualad advised. “Remember, retreat at the first sign of trouble.”

“Got it,” Rose answered. She looked at Bart with narrow eyes, her lips pressed into a fine line. “Just like before. Don’t. Talk. Alright? Let me handle everything.”
Bart rolled his eyes as he look away from her, a nasty habit that she infected him with. “Sheesh,” he scoffed. “It’s like you think the instant I open my mouth, I’ll blow our cover.”

“That’s because you will,” she stated. “You’re way too smiley and you babble when you’re nervous.”

They stopped at a rusty door. A large, covered peephole sat towards the top. The weathered, brick building gave Bart chills. Rose looked at the white card, verifying the address. Rose turned on her recorder. She brought the back of her hand up to the door and knocked three times.

After a moment of silence, the the cover of the peep hole slid to the side. A pair of eyes emerged from behind it, studying them with a cold intensity.

“May I help you?” A pitchy, adenoidal voice rose from behind the door.

Rose swallowed the lump in her throat. She pulled out the business card, holding it out in front of her. “Benny said you might have something for me?” She asked.

There was a humm of annoyance and the cover slammed shut. Bart and Rose jumped at the sound. There was a long creak as the door opened, revealing the smoky darkness inside.

Bart looked over at Rose, seeking solace to placate the growing pit of nervousness in his gut. But Rose provided no such thing. There was a visual shutter to her breath as she exhaled. She grabbed Bart’s hand, squeezing it to reassure herself that everything was alright. She nodded at him and led him inside.

The door slammed behind them. It rattled through their veins as they jumped. The cloudy air stung their eyes as they adjusted to the dim ceiling lights. In front of them stood a large, menacing man. He wore a pristine suit, barely big enough for his protruding stomach. Fat rolls circled under his chin, framing his bald head. Large teeth flashed behind his lips as he spoke, “Do you have sufficient funds?”

Rose pulled out her wallet from her back pocket, flashing him the bills inside.

He smiled, “Right this way then.”

He lead them deeper inside the building. It appeared to be some sort of abandoned apparel factory. Tables and bins overturned on the dusty floor. They arrived at a table, harsh shadows resting on its curves under the shrewd lighting. A man, almost identical to the one who answered the door, sat in a chair behind it. He counted the bills in a money box. A scale reseted to his left. And all the way on his right was their goal.

Spark. And lots of it. Several immense bags stacked on top of one another. One askew on the side, open. It looked as though he was dividing them into smaller bags. Even under the dim bulbs Rose could see the cool blue of the crystals’ edges. It was the real deal.

Rose felt a tight jab in her chest as she realized they were being watched. A few yards away, just past the table, two figures sat with daunting posture upon a couch. Their bodies and faces dense with shadows. All she could made out were a pair of shapely crossed legs, and the red end of the other’s cigar.

“First time buyers?”

Their attention was snapped back to the man at the table. He looked them up and down with curious eyes. Bart shuttered under the growing pressure. His eyes darted between all of the figures in the room. Rose cursed under her breath at Bart’s obvious nervousness. She plastered a false smile on her
face and squeezed his hand once more, reminding him that she was still there. He stilled.

“Yeah, we are.” Rose answered. She wet her lips as she chuckled, “We’re from outta state so...you might have to give us a tutorial.”

The man gave her a high pitched giggle as he placed the money in the box, writing numbers down in a notebook. “Of course,” he chimed, pulling out four different bags of various sizes. “Since you’re here, I’m going to assume you want the purer product? Sixty dollars for an eighth of an ounce, one hundred for a fourth, one fifty for a half, and two hundred for one ounce.” They approached the table, Rose ran her fingers over the bags. He continued. “You can get them flavorless, in strawberry mango, or peach. You can break the crystals apart and smoke it like marijuana. Grind it into a fine powder and snort it or mix it in your drink. Or heat the powder at a high temperature until it melts and inject it.” Rose looked up at him. The casual pep and enthusiasm of his voice mirroring that of an Apple salesman pushing a new product. A tight smile crawled across his lips, “Needles sold separately, of course.”

Rose tilted her head in feigned amusement, “Of course.” She leaned down onto the table, resting her elbows on the cold wood. She popped back her hips with a flirty curve. She twirled a strand of hair around her finger. Bart watched her with wary eyes.

She bit her lip with curiosity, giving him a coy smirk. She lowered her voice with a husky overtone, “So uh-who’s a girl gotta talk to...if she’s interested in selling?”

“Whad’ she say Dumfrey?”

Rose jumped upright as a new voice circled around them. Its feminine pitch rang with a Jersey flare. It had come from one of the figures on the couch. Dumfrey interlaced his fingers on the table, looking over at the shadowed figures. “I do believe the young miss said she is interested in selling.”

There was a moment of silence before the voice spoke again, “Send ‘um over Deever.”

Bart cringed at the feel of a stubby hand clamping his shoulder. The other man, whom Bart assumed to be ‘Deever’, did the same to Rose and lead them towards the couch. A love seat sat across from the shrouded figures, a coffee table in between them. The table supported a cinged ashtray, a few glasses, and a bottle of expensive whisky. Deever sat Bart and Rose down on the loveseat.

A slim, red-nailed hand reached for the glass of whiskey on the table. The voice accompanied it. “Jesus! Why the hell is it so dark in ‘eer?” It shreeked. “Dula, turn on that damned light ya creep!”

The other figure pulled the cigar from her mouth, “What’d we way about using names?” The tone was feminine and Rose watched the second figure reach for a lamp on her left.

“Nawwww quit being such a Pouty Patty.”

Rose and Bart squinted at the sudden light. The figure with a cigar, Rose didn’t recognize. A teenaged girl with short red hair. She wore a yellow corset and short purple skirt. But the other, made her emit a tiny gasp. The realization of danger they could be in, finally hit. The other woman was thin and pale. Blonde Pigtails with dyed red and black tips sat atop her head. She sported a red corset and her tiny black Spanks were nearly lost in the crease of her legs and pelvis.

"I know you," Rose's words were almost a whisper. She gained her composure. "You're...you're Harly Quinn."
An smile spread across Harley's red lips. She gave Dula a slap on the arm. "Seeee? I told ya I was famous."

Dula scoffed with a smirk, "Having 'Wanted' posters all around Gotham doesn't make you famous, Har."

"Sure it does," Harley corrected. "Any publicity is good publicity. That's what Mista Jay alway says." She took a swig of her drink.

Dula rolled her eyes and brought her attention towards them again. “So you're interested in sellin our goods huh? You got names?

“Emily,” Rose’s first instinct went for the names of her late parents. “This is my boyfriend John.”

Harley bunched her nose, tilting her head to get a better look at him. She smiled. “He's kinda cute for bein all scraggly like.”

Rose hummed in amusement, “It makes him easier to knock around.”

The girls laughed. “So what makes you think you can sell for us?” Dula asked.

“I'm persuasive, and I’ve dealt pot before," Rose answered.

Dula’s mouth twisted into a scowl. “But this isn't some common plant. This is an expensive product. We need to make sure we hire people who can't get caught. We make our own system of checks and balances.”

“What does that mean?” Rose asked, intrigued.

Dula grinned. “That means we gotta test our own people. If you can't cut it, you get taken out of the race. We got our own people taking out workers we hire that get sloppy.” She looked at her with unwavering intensity. “There is no second chances. We cut off our own loose ends.”

Rose nodded in understanding. That must have been why The Team hadn’t been able to find any dealers until now. They test their own employees. Eliminating those who get caught. They must be desperate to not be found out.

“Where'd you say you were from?” Harley’s voice snapped Rose’s focus back to her.

“New Mexico,” Rose wasn’t sure why that state popped into her head. Maybe it’s because It was the last place her adoptive parents worked.

Harley and Dula smiled at one another. “Well,” Dula raised a brow at them. “As it turns out, we’re gettin a shipment out in El Paso next month. Think you could meet up?”

"Definitely," Rose answered.

"Why you wanna sell for us anyways?" Harly asked.

Rose tossed her a playful smirk. "Let's just say I'm inspired by female business owners. Can't let the men think the run the world right?"

Dula hummed in amusement. "Well, how are you going to prove to us you're not a narc? You could be working for the GCPD. Or even The Batman."

"Oooo, The Batman." Rose mocked with feigned terror. Her lips twisted into a snarl. "Gotham's
'savior' who gets away with whatever he pleases. Batman, and his super friends who beat the shit out of kids whenever they want and the police do fuck all about it. You seen that shit in the news? Why do they get treated like Gods?" Rose leaned in towards them. Malice dripped from her words. "Fuck the GCPD. Fuck the Batman. And fuck the Justice League."

Harley's eyes went wide as she smiled. She wiggled in her seat with excitement. "Oohhh, now that's hate. I like it!" She wet her lips, her gaze meeting Rose's. "And I like you. You can sell our Spark. But first, you gotta sample it before you buy it."

"Absolutely," Rose answered as Deever placed a small bag of Sprak and a pipe on the table. Harley broke off a few crystals and placed them in the pipe. She handed it off to Rose with a lighter.

Rose looked over at Bart. This was about to be the most crucial part of their deal. And Bart was noticeably sweaty. His nerves getting the better of him. He was about to give them away.

Dula cocked her head in suspicion. "He don't talk much does he? Kinda odd for him to be a prude."

Rose let out a nervous chuckled. She had to find a way to settle him. "Small town boys. They're all nerves." She said. An idea sparked in her mind, a sultry smile pulled on her lips. "They just need some feminine persuasion."

Rose lit the Spark in the bowl, sucking on the pipe until a cool smoke whirled up the glass and into her mouth. She inhaled, letting the product fill her lungs as she set the pipe down.

Bart watched her with nervous curiously. He jumped at the feel of her cold fingertips on his cheeks. She pulled his face into hers, their lips meeting. Bart closed his eyes, and for a moment forgot where he was. Rose's lips placated the tension in his muscles. She kissed him, coaxing open his mouth as he took in her exhale.

Bart would learn later that his first 'kiss' was actually called 'shotgunning'.

A small whine escaped him as she pulled away with diligence. He thought the smoke would make him cough. But it felt almost...euphoric. Tumbling in his lungs with a soothing coolness. He opened his eyes, mind wobbly with a relaxing wooziness.

Eyes half lidded, "Woah," was all he could muster. Rose watched as the blue sparks danced in his mouth as he exhaled. Eyes lingering on his swollen lips. The same euphoria overcame her. A heat rose below her belly button. She licked her lips. It took all of the composure she had left to push away the desire the straddle Bart right then and there.

Yes. It definitely contained an aphrodisiac.

Rose snapped her head towards Harley and Dula. Blue sparks glowing off the white of her hair as she spoke. "That's good shit."

Harley smiled in content, "How much you want doll?"

"An ounce of this."

"Dunfrey, get'er a big bag of the peach and a fourth of somethin else." Harley winked at Rose. "For bein such a cutie."

They handed off the money and Rose placed the product in her pocket. Dula handed her a note card with information about the El Paso drop off. "This will have everything you need on it. Don't be late."
Rose nodded in affirmation. "I won't, thank you."

She grabbed Bart by the hand and lead him outside. The world around them exaggerated in beauty and clarity. She felt feather light, as if the wind could sweep her away at any moment. All of this after one puff? She couldn't imagine smoking a whole bowl.

She turned to Bart who had locked on to her arm for support. His head bobbed as a goofy smile crawled on his lips.

"You doin' alright there Motormouth?" She asked.

Bart's jaw dropped. He looked at her, eyes wide in near terror. His voice almost a whisper. "Oh my god. I. Am so. Hungry."

Rose boomed with laughter, her free arm clutching her stomach.

Oh no, what horror had she unleashed on the world?

She gave a speedster the munchies.

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*Mars*  
*January 7th, 2017*  
*22:50 EDT*

Quiet fogged the air between them as they arrived to their Zeta Platform. An awkward feeling coating their skin. M'gann’s cheeks stained with silent tears. She shivered with anger. Berating herself, choking on a stinging feeling of worthlessness. Mars was headed to civil war, and she couldn’t stop it in time. And now, she even faced banishment from her own people.

"I screwed up, didn't I?" Adalae’s soft words broke the silence as her eyes fell to the floor. Garfield snapped his head in her direction, watching her sad, watery eyes look up at M’gann. "I hit those Green Martians. I shouldn’t have done that..." She wrapped her arms around herself. "I screwed up my first mission"

Conner knelt down, placing a hand on her shoulder. "No, no. Don't say that." Reassurance filled his voice, “You did nothing wrong.”

Garfield leapt to her side, grabbing her arm. She fluttered under his touch. Cheeks flushing at his consoling smile, "Yeah Addy don't worry-"

"Yes. You're right." M’gann snipped, cutting Beast Boy off. Her brow creased with anger. “You probably made things worse Adalae.” She flinched at how harsh M’gann spat out her name. “You and Garfield should have just fell back."

"What?" Conner asked with a curled lip. He stood, eyes narrowing in confusion.

M’gann let out an agitated sign. She peered at Adalae with cold, abiding eyes. "I have spent months on this. And if the Council finds out we fought back or hurt Green Martians-" She growled, clasping her right hand into a fist. "We could be so royally screwed."

"What are so upset about M’gann?" Beast Boy asked, astonished at her tone. "Adalae did good. She even used a new power!"
M’gann groaned in irritation. She rubbed the bridge of her nose between her thumb and pointer finger. "Gar, you don't know what you're talking about. I told you, you don't understand-"

"Yes. I do understand." Beast Boy interrupted. "Those Green Marion soldiers tried to kill those White babies. And Adalae saved them." He shook his head. "I don't care who was doing it, killing innocent people is wrong."

M’gann grit her teeth. As much as she loved him, she was at the end of her rope. She was in no mood to have her little brother run his mouth about something he knew nothing about. Not while she had to deal with her new title of ‘traitor.’

A savage snarl creased her face. "Garfield, just stop talking-

"No! You don't get to tell me to stop talking!" He rose his voice, a growl rumbling in his chest as he spoke. M’gann’s eyes went wide. He bore his fangs as his face flushed with anger. He took a step in front of Adalae, as if to shield her from M’gann’s verbal assault.

"I'm not an idiot.” He continued after a quiet moment. “I'm not some dumb little kid that just follows you around and doesn't understand the world around him.” She let out a small gasp at his word. She always treated him like a child, treated him like he was a naive little boy who was ignorant of everything. He earned his place on the team a thousand times over. He put his life on the line for the sake of the mission, just as much as any of his other teammate had. He was tired of her patronizing and underestimation of his skills and intelligence. And now the steaming pot of his frustration was boiling over, and there was no stopping it.

"God M’gann. At least give me a little credit.” There was a small plea to his words. He shook his head. "I don't care what you say.” He would be damned if he let M’gann tear down Adalae’s self esteem because of her own personal demons.

He continued, jolting a finger back at Adalae. “Adalae did good. Adalae saved two innocent little Martian kids. You know why? Because she's a superhero now and that's what superheroes do.” Adalae’s eyes brightened at his words. “We protect innocent people, without prejudice.” He sneered up at M’gann. "Maybe you've forgotten that. But I haven't."

M’gann’s jaw dropped. Was he accusing her of favoritism as well? He continued, "I'm not going to let you tell Adalae she did wrong when she's the only one who actually acted like a hero today."

M’gann’s eyes watered again. Disgust crawled on her face as she took a breath to continue their argument.

"M’gann stop. Stop." Conner demanded, grabbing her by the arm and turning her away from Beast Boy. He lowered his voice, concern creasing his brow. M’gann trembled under his hands. She looked up at him with angry, pleading eyes. Conner lowered his voice. "I don't know what existential crisis you're going through right now, but you need to not take it out on them." M’gann huffed, chewing on her lower lip. Conner continued. "You know what Gar just said was true." He shrugged, smiling. "You know, a little brash, but true." He pulled her closer. "I know this whole thing has been hard for you-

She twisted out of his grasp, "No, you don't know. That's the problem." Her voice cracked as the marched towards the Zeta Platform.

He didn’t understand. He’ll never understand. To be an outcast your whole life based on the sole aspect of your skin. To renounced said skin, and change its color in order to pass. In order to be accepted, to be loved. That was all she ever wanted. To bid farewell to her lonely childhood by
doing what she had to to escape discrimination. And now her own people were disgusted by her. Appalled that she wouldn’t wear her white skin. They saw it as an act of disgust. And in a way...they were right. She did grow up disgusted at her reflection. She did grow up disgusted at her skin. Angry at the gods for giving her such a color that made her a worthless being in the eyes of so many Martians. All she ever wanted to do was pass and survive.

But now, she wasn’t even welcome by her own people. Now she was a traitor to those who shared the same skin. All because she couldn’t stand up against the Greens when the Whites needed her most. Telok’telar was right, she should have helped fight off those Green Guerilla soldiers. Though she couldn’t put herself in a situation that would make the Greens angry with her.

But Adalae had made that choice for her. And if the Martian Council found out that her team fought Greens, M’gann faced the threat of banishment from them too. And then there would be no place on Mars for her to be.

"Then tell me." Conner’s words snapped her out of her thoughts. He grabbed her arm again. "Tell me so I do know," he pleaded. "I want to know."

She writhed out of his grasp and punched the coordinates to The Watch Tower in the Zeta Platform. "Let's just go."

Garfield huffed in agitation. He nudged Adalae with his elbow. "Don't pay attention to M'gann. She gets moody sometimes." He grabbed her hand in reassurance. A fang peeked out from behind his smile. "I meant what I said. You did really good today Addy."

She felt her stomach flutter at his touch. She smiled, her eyes fell to the floor. "Thank you."

An odd sensation tickled Beast Boy’s skin as he watched her smile. He grew hot. He let go of her hand and looked away, shivering. Why did she always make him feel so weird?

Back at the Watch Tower, the computer announced their arrival.

Recoginized. Miss Martian, B05
Superboy, B04
Beast Boy, B19
Adalae, B28

They arrived to see Rose, Bart, Cassie, Virgil, Tim, Jaime, and Aqualad congregating in the Common Area.

"Hey guys,” Conner greeted. “How’d the mission go?"

Rose spun around, pointing at herself in triumph. Still lightheaded and wobbly. "Guess who scored two bags of Spark and found out the day of the El Paso shipment?"

"No way." Conner’s eyes went wide. "For real?"

Kaldur growled low in his throat. "Yes but in the process deliberately disobeyed orders, put yourself in extreme danger, and..." He threw up his arms, completely at loss. "Got high in the process."

"Look, we had to smoke it,” Rose reasoned. “It would have blown our cover of we didn't."

"Smoked what?” The sound of Batman’s voice startled them. He along with the other members of
The Justice League spilled out into the common area. They were just released from their emergency meeting.

"Rose and Bart obtained a sample of Spark for you to analyze." Kaldur informed him. He looked over at Bart and Rose, who were now sharing a family sized bag of Chicken Whizzies. "Seeing as they are under the influence, I suppose you could do a blood test to see how it affects the human body." He handed Batman both of the bags Rose acquired.

They went still, waiting for Batman to yell at or berate them.

"Well done," he said.

"What?" Kaldur gasped.

"Although your methods may be crude." He peered at Rose. "And the issue with authority will be address." His face softened. "You did good work today." He placed the bags in his utility belt. Bruce felt a strange sense of deja vu, bringing him back to Dick’s first few missions on The Team. They wouldn't be where they are now if they hadn't broken a few rules themselves.

"What. In the hell. Is that?" Superboy’s voice carried through the room. He pointed towards the television screen, his eyes wide. They all followed his gaze. Several gasps and hushed whispers coursed through the room. Panicked faces were shared among the League members.

On the screen was Gordon Godfrey’s television show. He played a video of what appeared to be Martian Manhunter tearing the bars off of Professor Ivo’s cell in Belle Reve.

Kaldur looked over to Bruce, slack jawed. Bruce peered at the screen with a silent ferocity. Kal rushed over to the screen, turning up the quiet volume.

"-you’ll see the officers he brutally assaults along the way." Godfrey’s voice emerged from the speakers. His voice was stern and overflowing with caution. The CCTV video footage cut to J’onn and Ivo in the concrete back room. He continued, “Again, we issue a warning to our viewers. This footage contains graphic violence.”

And as they stood their in awe and disbelief, they watched as 'Martian Manhunter' blew away the prison officers with their own guns. Terror slithered through them. J’onn felt their eyes upon him.

M’gann’s shuttered. Her words nearly died in her throat, “Uncle J’onn...what?”

"Hera," Wonder Woman interrupted, her gaze veering to J’onn. “They promised they wouldn’t.”

“Promised what?” Conner asked, a tinge of alarm in his voice.

“They said it wouldn’t get out,” Oliver hissed through his teeth, anger creasing his brow.

“What wouldn’t get out?” Cassie asked him, confused.

Their frustration peaked with a video call alarm chiming around them. The computer announced, ‘Call from, Warden Amanda Waller. Call from, Warden Amanda Waller.’

Batman rushed to the computer, picking up the call. Waller’s face appeared on the screen next to the news segment. “You had better start talking,” Batman boomed at her.

“I can assure you he did not get that video from me,” Amanda informed.

“The only people who had access to those tapes were your people Waller,” Irritation grew in Brue’s
voice. “We had a deal.”

“What is going on?” Conner interrupted them. He was greeted with silence. The League members glanced at one another nervously.

Black Canary signed, “We have to tell them.” She looked over at Bruce. “The cat’s out of the bag now.”

“Tell us what?” Conner was far beyond annoyed.

Batman huffed. He spoke as Godfrey droned on behind him. He motioned towards the video monitor. “The video you just witnessed was taken from Belle Reve early this morning.

A shapeshifter parading as J’onn and another guard, broke into the prison, murdered several guards, and broke Ivo out.” He paused, as if trying to decided exactly how he would continue. “The League met with the board members of the prison today and they agreed to keep it out of the media. So long as we agreed to make an investigation into the incident our top priority.” He turned his head towards Amanda’s video. “But we can see how that turned out.”

“You better drop that tone with me,” Waller chided. “I was going to tell you that our systems were hacked. The video footage was copied and uploaded. Godfrey’s been playing it for the past hour. After you left, we had our IT workers come in to check the computer room.”

“And why is that?” He asked.

The muscles in Amanda’s jaw tightened. “Because along with three dead men, and one injured. We also found one of my female officers in the main monitoring station, nearly brain dead. It’s as though someone blasted her mind of all conscious thought.”

There was an eerie stillness to the room as they waiting for Waller to continue. She let out a loud exhale, “Batman there is something more you need to see.” She positioned her camera to a different screen. It showed CCTV footage of the other shapeshifter, disguised as Officer Wilcox, entering the room and closing the door behind him. “What you just witnessed was the other impostor, entering the room, practically killing my guard, and, what I am assuming, hacking our system. Now, watch what happens…”

They waited, silent as they watched time pass on the screen. Finally the door opened and the false Wilcox turned to camera and morphed. M’gann felt a violent sickness in her gut as the shifter morphed into her. She found it hard to breath as now all eyes were on M’gann.

“I di-I didn’t...that’s not-” M’gann stuttered.

“I believe this is one of your covert operatives, is it not?” Amanda asked.

“That’s not me! That’s not me!” M’gann stormed towards the screen on the verge of tears. “It’s not I swear! You have to believe me.”

“Young lady,” Amanda replied in an overbearing tone, “I don’t know what to believe anymore. As far as I’m concerned, there is no way to fully prove guilt or innocence in this type of situation. But I can’t just let this slide. We-”

She was interrupted as the voice of Gordon Godfrey blasted across the room. “Lex Luthor everyone! I’ve just received word that we are getting an emergency message from Secretary General Lex Luthor.”
The video cut to Luthor in his office. His concerned eyes peered right through them. “My fellow Americans,” he addressed. “And anyone else who may be watching. By now I am sure you have seen the recent video that has just surfaced of Martian Manhunter.”

“These actions are a part of a disturbing pattern. As I am sure you are also aware of the incident with Wonder Woman in Chicago. Where her violent attack nearly killed two young men.” He further straightened his posture, throwing back his shoulders. “The Justice League has yet to fully explain these actions, saying that they are currently ‘under investigation’. I have just come out of an emergency meeting with the U.N. council.”

The Team and The League members exchanged frightened glances. Luthor cleared his throat. “We had determined that The Justice League will not be allowed to conduct investigations involving their own members. For there is too much conflict of interest. Therefor,” He paused. Kaldur could see the hint of a smirk on his face. “The members of the United Nations have decreed that until these investigations are cleared by third parties, Wonder Woman and The Martian Manhunter are barred from any and all Justice League activity.”

Speech erupted within the confines of The Watch Tower. The League and The Team expressed their desperate concerns.

“Blasphemy!” Diana barked. “They cannot do this!”

“Let it be known,” they quieted themselves as Luthor continued. “That defiance of our orders from either Wonder Woman are Martian Manhunter will result in serious consequences,. And will be met with force from local law enforcement.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Captain Marvel exclaimed. “They haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Furthermore,” Lex continued. “The incident with Debora Morgna involving Batman, his proteges, Red Arrow, and Arsenal still leaves someone to be held accountable. So, for the time being, Batman and Red Arrow are considered responsible and will also be barred from League activity. That is until they help the GCPD bring in Arsenal to face punishment for his violent attack on an innocent girl.”

“Oh hell no,” Red Arrow boomed, anger creased his face. “No one tells me what I can and can’t do. He's got some balls to-”

“That’s enough,” Diana scolded. She drew her attention back to the television.

“If The League is not satisfied with these terms then they must present their case to the United Nations,” Lex’s voice was strong and stern. “But as it stands, Martian Manhunter and Wonder Woman must bring themselves in for questioning.” His eyes narrowed. “The Justice League's actions from this day forward will no longer go unscrutinized or unchecked.”

Lex’s newscast cut off. They stood there in the quiet before Amanda finally broke the silence. “Well, it seems that Luthor has already answered everything for me.” She turned up her chin. “This investigation no longer lies only in your hands. And until this case has cleared. Martian Manhunter and Miss Martian are no longer welcome in this prison. Someone has to answer for these crimes, and it sure as hell won’t be me.”

Waller broke off her call. A chill ran through each and every one of them. Shocked at the broadcasts that they just witnessed.

“This can’t be happening,” Red Arrow said with a shake of his head, “They can’t-”

“Yes, they can,” Bruce interrupted. “As much as we might think otherwise, we are not above the
law.” He looked up at the newscast, reruns of Belle Reve engulfing the screen. A crawling anticipation twinged under his skin. He couldn't shake the now solid belief that something much larger, much more conniving, was headed their way.
The gust of air sent a chill down Barbara’s spine. She waited in uniform on the roof of the GCPD building. Her mind lost in thought as she stared at the snow covered Bat Signal.

“He’s not here yet?” Nightwing asked as he jumped onto the roof.

“Not yet.” Barbara answered, checking her phone for a missed call.

Her father, Police Commissioner Gordon, rang her fifteen minutes earlier. He demanded that she and her ‘co-workers’ meet him by the Bat Signal. She found it strange. Usually if the police needed them, he turned on the Bat Signal. But there it sat, cold and lifeless.

Nightwing groaned, “It hope it’s not more bad news. That’s the last thing we need.” He ran his hand down his face in irritation, trying to stave off his fatigue. “You know if it’s going to take long? I need to be out looking for Arsenal.”

Batgirl’s stomach twisted with guilt. She hadn’t told anyone about putting Arsenal in rehab. If she had to be honest with herself, she found it a private issue. Nobody needed to know about Arsenal’s battle unless he wanted them to know. It wasn’t her place to tell.

But when Luthor’s announcement aired, she had no choice but to tell of his whereabouts. Dick was furious that she had kept it from him. To make matters worse, when they went to pick him up from the center, they found that he checked himself out. Now he was out on the streets again.

“You’re still mad at me.” Barbara stated, a hint of sadness in her voice.

Dick sighed. “No,” he replied. His anger had subsided into irritation. Her heart was in the right place, and that, he couldn’t scold her for. It’s secrecy that bothers him. “I’m just...tired.” He closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head. “So tired of everything.” He gave his shoulders a slight shrug. “At least now we know Arsenal’s not this ‘Red’ character we keep hearing about. At least you can vouch for him on that.”

Barbara felt bile tingle in her throat. Dick was referring to the night she took Arsenal to rehab. The night where she saved him from ‘The Red’. The night where ‘The Red’ confessed to killing drug dealers. The night where he said…

“Nightwing there’s something I need to tell you,” Barbara looked at him with guilty eyes.

Dick’s jaw slack, “You’ve got to be kidding.” There’s more she’s hiding from him?

Barbara shook her head as she bit her lip. She took a deep breath before continuing on. “That night…where I met that ‘Red’ guy.” She rubbed the back of her neck, trying to find the right words. “I don’t know how he-I didn’t recognize his voi-”

“Just spit it out.” Nightwing demanded.

Barbara swallowed hard. She crossed her arms and looked away from him. “He...he called me ‘Babs’.”
Nightwing didn’t think his jaw could fall any further. His eyes went wide. “Are you serious?!”

“I—” Batgirl tried to explain.

“Why would you keep that from us?!” A panic rose in Dick’s voice. He grasped her arms. “That means he might know you! He might try to hurt you—”

“Stop!” Barbara yelled, pushing him off of her. “I didn’t want you to worry.” Her voice cracked, “You’re already overwhelmed and you didn’t need something else on your plate.”

“Nonononono,” Nightwing chided, waiving his hands in front of him. “This is your safety, we’re talking about. I’m not about to let you get hurt because you think I’m ‘busy’.”

Babs clenched her jaw. She was not in the mood to fight with him. She threw her hands up in the air. “You know what? Forget it. He probably didn’t even say it. I was just hearing things.” She wanted nothing more than the conversation to end.

A loud groan escaped him, “I hate it when you get like this! Sometimes you’re so—”

“Now I know you aren’t about to raise your voice at her.”

Their attention was drawn to the Bat Signal. Commissioner Gordon stood next to it, a scowl resting on his lips. He peered at Dick with narrow eyes.

Nightwing gave a strong exhale through his nose to cool his boiling blood. “No sir,” he responded. Gordon grunted in response. “Where is Batman?”

“Right here.”

Bruce’s voice swam around them. He emerged from the shadows, standing next to Dick.

“And Robin?” Gordon asked.

“Not on patrol tonight,” Bruce answered. “Exams tomorrow.” Bruce didn’t wait for his response. “A phone call isn’t the usual signal, Gordon. Is the Bat Signal out for repairs?”

Gordon paused before answering, his eyes fell to the floor before looking back up at them. “I won’t be using it for a while.”

“Why’s that?” Bruce asked.

He sighed. “It’s the reason I’ve called you tonight. As you can probably guess, I’ve been made aware of Luthor’s and the UN’s demand for your probation of Justice League activities.”


“Well, as it turns out, Luthor added some new fine print to that demand.” Gordon sighed again, and with a heavy heart continued on. “Batman, today my officers and I have been ordered to shoot you on sight.”

Dick and Barbara were physically jarred at his words. “What?” Was all they could muster in unison. Batman clenched his jaw “Why? On what grounds?”
Gordon shook his head. “We’ve been told that any form of vigilantism on your part is seen as League activity. Since you are a part of The League everything they do is reflected on you and subsequently the reverse. We have no way of knowing for sure if what you do in your own time is your work or The League’s. So anytime we see you in costume, we were told to consider you in violation of your probation.”

“That’s stupid. That’s too extreme!” Barbara spat, dumbfounded. “T-there’s no reason for this. They can’t do this. You can’t really follow these orders.”

A defeated look crept on Gordon’s face. “I’m afraid it’s over my head.” He looked between them, eyes heavy with sadness. “You do great work for this city. You all do great work for this city. That’s why I felt like you deserved to be informed about this. That I should tell you in person. And I will do everything I can on my end to get this repealed.”

“What does he have on you?” Batman asked. Gordon twinged at his question. But Batman did not waiver. “I know you wouldn’t let this slide by if he didn’t threaten you in some way.”

Gordon ground his teeth. He was right, as usual. “The Lexcor foundation threatened to take away some of our funding and our Inhibitor Collars if we didn’t comply.”

An idea sparked in Nightwing’s mind. “Batman!” He chirped. “This could be a response to us busting those Spark labs. They know we’re on to them. Maybe this is a tactic to get us to slow down while they move them.”

Bruce found the notion highly plausible. Since Rose and Bart’s undercover mission, they were able to send the GCPD to that warehouse. Harley Quinn and Dula (who Rose had fingered from The League’s villains database as Dula Dent) escaped the raid. But their henchmen, Dumfree and Deever Tweed, did not. Their interrogation led the police and Batman to three more labs around Gotham and Bludhaven. And now The Light was pulling out all the stops to get them off their trail.

“I’m afraid you might be right,” Bruce answered.

A shrill static rang through their ears. A familiar, hoarse voice rang through their communicators.

“Ay! Nightwing! Aasshole. You sstill on thiss channel?” The words dragged with a heavy slur, but Dick recognized it nonetheless.

“Arsenal?” he asked. Gordon perked at the sound of his name.

“You bet your ass.” Arsenal replied.

Dick groaned. He must have kept his communicator after all this time. “Where the hell are you?” He demanded, looking over the edge of the roof. “Are you drunk?”

A slight chuckled rose in his throat. “Alwayss the detective.”

“Just-” Dick pinched the bridge of his nose. “Are you alright? Where are you so we can come get you? We’ll make sure you’re safe.” He looked towards Barbara, her worried eyes never straying. Dick’s voice softened. “We just want you home.”

“Wow. Good detective and good liar.” Arsenal’s words dripped with spite.

“Arsenal you need help.” Dick emphasised. “We can get you help. Just tell us where you are.”

“You wanna know where I am?” There was a smile to his voice. “Sssure you can follow the noise.”
“What?” Dick’s eyes went wide.

A few blocks east, Arsenal stumbled through an outdoor shopping complex downtown. He paid no mind to the people brushing past him on the busy sidewalk.

He should have known better. He should have known better than to believe that he could get better, that he actually deserved to get better. He was kidding himself to think that he could actually commit to treatment. And now all law enforcement of Gotham was after him for what he did to Deborah. Now he had to redeem himself. He had to prove to the world that he wasn’t useless. No more kids would end up like him. And if The Justice League wasn’t going to get Spark off the streets, well, he sure as hell was.

“I’m ‘bout to do your job.” Arsenal sneered over the communicator. He stood in front of a cheap souvenir shop, windows covered with bars and a ‘Closed’ sign pressed against the door. The store was a front for the Spark lab in the basement. As it turns out, if you find a dealer and hit him hard enough, he’ll tell you everything you need to know. Even the location of the lab he got his supply from. “You’re not the only detective that can find Spark labs.”

“What?!” Dick’s voice screeched in his communicator. “Arsenal no! You’re in so state for a drug bust!”

“Too little,” Arsenal responded. He aimed his mechanical arm at the door, the red light of his reflecting off the glass. “Too late.”

Gotham City - Gotham Academy
January 20th, 2017
21:24 EDT

He shouldn’t be out here. He really shouldn’t. Bruce told him to study. Bruce told him to stay in, that he could handle patrol tonight. But if Tim had to read one more paragraph about the American Civil War, he was certain he would snap. It’s not like he hadn’t learned about it every year since seventh grade. How would this test be any different?

Tim decided that a couple hours on patrol would be good for his sanity. Knock a few bad guys around before bedtime and sleep like a baby. He jumped from the top of an apartment complex, using his grappling gun to pull him on top of the roof of his school. Tonight could be the night he’d nab the dealer that’s been slithering around the school yard after hours.

He peered over the edge of the roof. A skinny twig of a man, wrapped in a worn jacket and hoodie, stood in the courtyard. The hood of his hoodie masked his face in shadows as his sunken eyes scanned the area around him.

Bingo. He fit the description Tim received from his classmates. He just had to catch him in the act and they’d be good to go. Knock him out, cuff him, let the police know, and Tim would be tucked into bed before Batman would even know. Yeah right. Who was he kidding? Batman knew everything.

But his plan did not account for another vigilante. Out of the shadows, a figure emerged. He wore a brown leather jacket, black BDUs, and a red mask that covered his head. Tim recognized him from Barbara’s description of their encounter. ‘The Red’ was at it again.

A gasp of terror emerged from the dealer’s throat. He stumbled backwards, pleas falling from his
voice. "I-it's not...I'm not doin any-

“What did I tell you?” The masked man's words boomed across the courtyard. “What did I tell you, huh?”

The dealer tripped, falling in his rump. He looked up at The Red with tear-stained cheeks. “I'm-I'm just hang out, man-

"Really?” There was a feigned curiosity in the vigilante's voice. He pulled out a pistol from his waistband as he asked, “So if I search you I won't find any drugs, huh?”

The dealer's words died in this throat.

The red masked man aimed his pistol at him. “I told you, if I ever saw you around here again, I'd be the last day you lived.”

“No! Please,” the dealer cried. "Just gimme another chance-

“Already gave you a chance!” He boomed. "But you decided to keep selling that poison to minors.”

He placed his finger on the trigger. “And I have zero tolerance for scum like you who hurt kids.”

Before he could pull the trigger, Tim swung down from the rooftop on the chord of his grappling gun. Tim’s feet collided with the vigilante’s torso, knocking him to the ground. His pistol flew out of his hands, landing in the shadows.

He groaned, vision blurry as Tim’s voice rang in his ears.

“While I do agree that he is scum.” Tim said, putting his equipment back into his utility belt. “He does deserve a trial still.”

“Thank you. Thank you!” The dealer scrambled to his feet, breathing heavy. "That freak was gonna shoot me!”

“Oh, don’t thank me yet.” Tim grinned. He turned him around, swiftly placed him in handcuffs, and kicked at the back of his knees. They buckled underneath him, leaving him kneeling on the concrete. “You’re still going to jail,” a smile shined in Tim’s voice.

“What?” He shrieked.

The man in the red mask groaned. He pulled himself on his hands and knees, still seeing spots. “Who the hell...”

“You must be ‘The Red’.” Tim said with a smirk. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

He growled. Stupid. Awful. That was a horrible, stupid, idiotic name. He didn't know how it started, but it was time for Gotham to get it right. He pulled himself to his feet. “The name is Red. Hood-”

His lungs froze in place mid-breath. A trickle of sweat trailed down his face. The heat of his feverish skin suddenly unbearable. Was he seeing things? Perhaps his illness was playing tricks on his mind. Because right in front of him, in complicated stitching of red and black kevlar, stood Robin.

But he should be here. He shouldn’t exists. They’re shouldn't be any more Robins.

Tim scoffed, “Well, whatever your name is you are definitely also going to jail.”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing kid?!” Red Hood howled. Tim twinged at his sudden
outburst. Hood balled his gloved hands into fists, muscles shaking with growing rage. The yellow ‘R’ of Tim’s uniform mocking him, dancing on dark memories deep within his mind.

“Ummm…” Tim replied, confused. “Catching bad guys?”

Red Hood jolted a finger at him, a vein rising in his neck in fury. “The fuck do you have that uniform on for?!”

“What-” Tim could hardly get in a retort.

“You know how much danger you’re putting yourself in?!” Hood waved his hands in front of him. Hostility dripped off his words. “Pretending to be a Robin? There are all kinds of fucking freaks out here who would slaughter you just for wearing something like that!”

Tim grimaced. “Pretending?” He pointed a finger at his chest. “Uhhh...I am the real Robin.”

Hood’s eyes went wide. He felt a sickness rise in his belly. “Don’t you fucking lie to me!” He spat.

The slurred words of Arsenal rang in in Tim’s communicator. ‘Ay! Nightwing! Aaasshole. You stiill on thiss channel?’ What? What was he doing? Where was he?

Tim snapped himself back to attention at the situation in front of him.“What?” He asked, irritated. “Dude, why would I lie? I am the real Robin. You know, boy wonder, trained by Batman, Batman’s protege, all that jazz.”

“What?” He spat. “When!?”

“Um, for a year now.” Tim responded. Befuddled by the content of his questions.“Where have you been?”

‘Where the hell are you? Are you drunk?’ Nightwing came over Tim’s communicator. He groaned, not wanting to deal with this and Arsenal tonight. So much for an early bedtime.

“Six months?!” Red Hood yelped, shaking with fury. “He only waited six months?!”

Tim scratched at his head. “Uhh, are youooo gonna say anything coherent or…”

“You shouldn’t even be here!” Hood screamed as he took a step towards him, desperation falling from his throat. “Did he learn nothing?! Did I MEAN NOTHING?!”

‘I’m ‘bout to do your job.’ Arsenal’s voice came across the communicator again. Agitation crawled under Tim’s skin. Footsteps padded away from him. He jerked his head around to see the dealer running off, hands still cuffed behind him.

“Hey, woah, just-” Tim groaned, there was no point in arguing with him. He turned to go after the dealer. “He’s getting away-”

Red Hood roared, taking a swing at Tim. Emotion compromised his technique. Tim dodged his sloppy punch and reached for his electrified staff. He turned on the electric pulse and swung it, hitting Red Hood in the gut. He cried out as the shock ran through him. Tim kicked him in his chest, knocking him to the ground.

“What’s you’re problem?” Tim squawked.

“You!” Hood grunted as he rolled over on his side. “You are the problem!”
Too little, too late.’ Arsenal’s final words were accompanied by an explosion. Tim’s body jolted in attention. His ears perked at the sound of screams coming a few blocks East. He prayed that Arsenal hadn’t been the cause.

“I don’t have time for this.” Tim growled, reaching for his grappling gun. He aimed it at the rooftop of another building, turning his head towards Red Hood. “We’ll have to pick this up another time.” And sped off.

Hood growled, reaching for Robin. “Hey get back here!” But he was already gone, his dark figure jumping across rooftops. Hood aimed his own grappling gun into the air, ready to chase after him. Fury boiled in his veins.

“Stop this right now!” A stern masculine, voice shot through Red Hood’s own communicator.

“Six months.” Hood sneered. “SIX MONTHS.”

“Listen to me,” the voice rang again. “You need to calm yourself.”

A snarl erupted from Red. “I’ll be calm once I beat Batman’s ass!”

“Stop this instant!” The voice on the other end of his communicator chided him like a spoiled child. “You will follow Robin, but only because he will lead you to Arsenal. We need him alive, and you will not engage anymore with Batman or his proteges.”

“Fuck you, Luthor.” Hood growled.

Luthor chuckled, a smug tone dripping from his words. "Strong language for someone who isn’t feeling so strong.”

Red Hood huffed. Luthor was right. His fever had returned. Even in the dead of winter his uniform felt unbearably hot. His knees wobbled beneath him and bile rose in his throat. His illness was throwing him off his game. Robin shouldn’t have been able to take him down so easy. He reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out his empty orange medicine bottle.

“I do believe you are out of your medication.” Luthor paused, taking Hood's silence as affirmation. “You stray from the plan and you will be cut off.” His words were firm and unwavering. “How do you think you’ll settle your vendetta with Batman, humm? You’re barely strong enough to fight off Robin let alone him.” Hood growled in response. “And without your dosage, I doubt you’ll survive more than 48 hours.”

Red huffed through his nose as he grated his teeth. Luther was right, he was in no shape to fight, “Fine.”

Luthor hummed in amusement, “That’s my boy.”

A few blocks away, Arsenal shot down the shop door. The blast rang through the streets. He heard screams around him as he charged into the shop.

Gunshots filled the room as a two men open fired on him, no doubt hired guns put there to protect their supply. Arsenal dodged behind the countertop, bullets grazing his mechanical arm. She shielded himself behind the counter and fired back at them. The men fired again, their bullets shattering the store’s front windows. A mass of screams filled the street.
“Arsenal STOP!” Dick’s panicked voice boomed in his communicator. "There’s too many people-"

His voice was cut off by the sound of Arsenal's laser cannon. But as he brought down two gunman, seven more emerged from the back room of the shop. Panic sent his heart into a frenzy. He had been too brash. He was trapped, cornered. He needed to run. He sprang for the door, barely dodging bullets as he ran into the street. He fell, tripping over his own feet in inebriated panic.

Batman sprang down on one of the gunman, pinning him down onto the ground. Soon emerged Robin, Batgirl, and Nightwing. They disarmed the some of the gunman, knocking them out cold one by one. The people in the shopping complex ran about in panic. Their terrified cries filled the streets.

Arsenal pushed himself onto his knees. Out of the corner or his eyes, a final gunman raise his semi-automatic Uzi at him. Arsenal felt winded. Time slowed as the barrel raised closer to his head. He held out his arm, his red lasers firing at the gunman's chest. The man fell backwards, his finger pulling on the trigger in reflex, sending a line of bullets into the crowd before he fell.

A soul-wrenching scream shattered the air around them. Arsenal turned to the source. He swore he felt his heart stop.

A woman knelt on the slush covered sidewalk. Her screams of 'No. No. No.' tore away at Arsenal's insides. He shook, mouth agape in horror as the woman pulled the body of a little girl off the ground and into her lap. Her wide, lifeless eyes forever etched a nightmare into Arsenal's mind. Streams of crimson blood gushed from the bullet holes in her chest.

No. No that...that should have been him. Those bullets were meant for him.

But he was the one who drove the gunmen outside. He was the one who pulled them out into a crowded street.

A little girl was dead. And it was his fault.

An explosion shook the ground below him. Arsenal held his arm up to shield his eyes from the blinding light. The shop erupted into flames. The noise of sirens and yells pounded in his chest with an unforgiving rhythm. His feet took over before his mind had a chance to protest. And in mere moments, he was gone.

Arsenal wasn't sure how long he ran for. He wasn't sure where he was. All he knew was tonight, he got someone killed. A child's blood forever stained upon his soul.

He collapsed into a decrepit alley. Knees finally giving out on him. A sharp inhale filled his lungs and his loud sob echoed around him. He tore off his mask, tears streaming down his cheeks as he wailed. The image of the dead girl haunting his mind.

What had he done? Dear God, what had he done?

“Sloppy work."

Arsenal jumped, but he did not move up off the ground. He recognized the voice as Red Hood slithered out from the shadows. He stopped with a heavy 'clunk' of his boots. "I'm sure Ollie would be ashamed.” Arsenal twinged at Ollie's name. Hood continued, “You just couldn’t keep your nose clean.” He got down on one knee next to Arsenal. “Babs gave you a second chance. And you fucking blew it.” Hood grit his teeth. “You blew it and now there’s a little girl lying dead on the street because of you.”
“Just leave me alone,” Arsenal whined between his sobs.

“Why?” He asked, standing. "So you can just go crawl into the gutter? Overdose and die like the pathetic junkie you are?"

“It’s all I’m worth,” the heavy flow of tears cracked Arsenal's voice.

Red Hood huffed. “Well, not everything thinks that.” He pulled Arsenal up by his collar, pulling him into a kneeling position. He looked down at Arsenal with pitiful disbelief. “You must have some kind of fucking deity looking over you, because you’re about to get a third chance.”

“What?” Arsenal asked, wiping his nose.

“His offer still stands.” Hood told him. “And if I were you I’d take it, because right now, you don’t have many options.”

Arsenal sniffled, remembering the first time he met Red Hood. He told him of an offer from Lex Luthor, offering to give him a permanent mechanical arm. Surely that meant that Arsenal would have to give him something in return though.

But Hood was right. What choice did he have? No one would take him in after tonight. He was a coward, a cripple, a failure, an alcoholic, a junkie, and now a murderer. There was no other place to go, no other plans to fall back on. It was either go with Hood, or use his own weapon to send himself to Hell.

“Alright.” Arsenal choked out. "I'll do it.” A few more tears fell from his eyes. “I’ll do it. Just...just take me to him.”

“Good.” Red hood responded. “But first.” He brought his leg back, and kicked Arsenal across the jaw. He yelped and fell backwards, the taste cooper filling his mouth.

“Why?” He squeaked, spitting blood.

“I told you. I warned you.” Hood replied. Arsenal tried to pick himself up off the ground, and Hood kicked him in the gut. Winded, he toppled over onto his back. Hood continued. “I warned you that you were going to get sloppy, and that someone innocent was going to get caught in the crosshairs.” He plopped his heavy boot on Arsenal's diaphragm. “And I promised you if that happened, I was going to kick your ass.” Arsenal could have sworn he heard a smirk in his voice. “I always keep my promises.”

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**Bludhaven - The Warehouse**
**January 20th, 2017**
**21:41 EDT**

The sound of fevered scratching echoed in the kitchen. Beast Boy and Adalae took advantage of the rare quiet night in The Warehouse to tackle their schoolwork.

Adalae never thought about superheroes having homework. She figured they would be too busy saving the world for mundane human activities like homework. An argument she tried to use to convince M'gann that she didn't need lessons from Mr. Carr like Garfield did. An argument that she tried to use, and failed. She had been out of school for at least four months. Well, from what she could remember. And even though they were still working out details of her past, M'gann refused to let her fall behind.
So there she was, a kid with superpowers, getting frustrated over Algebraic equations just like any other normal teen. Not fair.

Garfield’s eyes strayed over to her. He watched the full curve of her lips move around the edge of her pen. Chewing on the cap, marking the plastic with frustrated nibbles. His eyes lingered a little longer than what would be considered polite. He snapped his head back over to his own paper. A strange heat rose on his skin. Queasiness rumbled his stomach. An odd sensation that usually only surfaced when they were alone. He felt weird. Maybe, sort of, kind of...icky? But...a good kind of icky? He wasn't sure. He just wished it would pass so he could focus on his homework.

"Dang it," Adalae whispered, scolding herself for making a mistake. She should have known better than to write in pen.

Adalae reached over in front of Beast Boy, grabbing the whiteout on the far side of him. Her body brushed against his arm. A warm flutter roared in his stomach. He jumped at her contact, leaning away from her as she leaned in.

“Hey, quit!” he snapped at her.

Adalae leaned back. Her face twisted in confusion. "What is wrong with you?” She chuckled. “You’ve been acting like such a weirdo towards me all day. What’s goin on?”

His words died in his throat. He fidgeted in his seat. "Nothin," his lower lip protruding into a pout.

Adalae was not convinced. Her lips bunched at the corner of her mouth in disbelief, “Aw come on Gar, you can tell me. I know something’s up.” Her voice softened, “Did I..was it something I did? Did I do something wrong?”

Beast Boy fidgeted in his seat again, his eyes avoided her gaze. “I don’t know..you just..” He grunted as he rubbed the back of his neck. The foreign feeling in his stomach twirled again. “You just...make me feel..weird.”

She squinted in confusion. “What?” she asked. He wasn’t making any sense to her. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t...I don’t know.” He fidgeted further, mouth curled in frustration for not being able to find the right words. “You just...well..." He huffed in frustration, brows furrowing. He growled. "First you just pop up in my life out of no where. And then... you just...you just start making me feel weird. Cuz like...” His eyes met hers for a moment before darting away again. He blushed. “You know...because you’re like really pretty, and strong, and smart, and funny and...I dunno...I’m just....green.”

Her eyes widened. A look of disappointment overcame Beast Boy’s face. His odd behavior had finally clicked. The way she's find him staring at her. How he would seem on edge and defensive when they were alone. But why had been comparing the two of them together? Why had he come up with the insane idea that she was far superior to him. She had to expel that absurd idea from his head.

“Are you kidding me!” She exclaimed. “You’re Beast Boy. You’re on a team of superheroes! You started...superhero-ing when you were just thirteen. You can transform into any animal in the entire universe! You have the power of every animal that ever existed. Your job is to help people. Do you know how awesome that is? You even helped me when I needed it most. You’re absolutely amazing.”
She could see his face light up a little bit. A small smile overcame his lips that she couldn’t help but stare at. It made her chest tingle. She nervously tucked her hair behind her right ear and continued, “Um...yeah. And besides...I think you look...really handsome in green.” A rapid blush overcame her cheeks. She let out a shaky chuckle as she saw the smile on his face get a little bigger.

“Um…” still red and smiling, Adalae tried her best to compose herself. She turned herself towards her homework, “We..we should get back to our assignments yeah?”

“Yeah..totally,” As he turned back to his assignment as well, Beast Boy’s face felt unbearably warm. Did she really think all of that of him? All of it? Even the ‘handsome’ part?

And between the stolen sideways glances and fluttering stomachs, neither of them got much work done.

Gotham City
January 20th, 2017
23:52 EDT

A gurgled cough fell from Arsenal’s throat as he collapsed onto the ground. Blood oozed from his split lip. He moaned, clutching his side. His vision faded behind his swelling black eye.

Red Hood wiped the blood off his gloves onto his pants. He huffed, towering over Arsenal "I think you've had enough."

It’s not that Arsenal had put up a fight to begin with. He took Red’s beating without so much as begging him to stop. The sad, disheartened look in his eyes made Red fell...gross. It was pathetic, like beating a paralyzed animal. Boring and unethical. Hood was hoping for some kind of satisfaction as he struck him. To make him pay for all that he had done, this night, and prior. But Arsenal had already broke his own spirit. So what was a few broken bones caused by someone else?

Red Hood huffed, the air in his mask felt stale in his lungs. His growing fever scratched at his patience. Cold sweat soaked his skin. "Get up." He growled. "I said get up. On your feet."

A whine fell from Arsenal’s lips. His eyes watered as he pulled himself up on his hands and knees. "M'sorry."

"Me too," Hood responded, a shrill coldness to his words. "I should have stopped you the first day I met you.” His fists clenched tight. "That little girl’s blood is on my hands too."

A sob escaped Arsenal. The event played all over again in his mind. Her lifeless face he could not shake.

"Knock it off." Red snipped. "It's not going to change anything." He pulled up Arsenal by his collar. He sat up on his knees, shoulders slumped in defeat. "I can't bring you to be boss looking like a sobbing mess."

Arsenal’s breathing wavered. He shook his head, his words almost a whisper. "Just do it."

Hood hummed in acknowledgement, grabbing onto Arsenal’s collar. He pulled a device from his utility belt and held it up to his face. "Father Box, to the Weapons Lab please."
The ground disappeared from underneath them, falling through the yellow vortex. In an instant, cold laminate floor smashed against Arsenal's knees. His eyes strained to focus in the white, blinding light.

"When I said we needed him alive, I assumed you wouldn't bring him back so....damaged," A shiver crawled up Arsenal's spine. He could only see the outline of his figure, but Lex Luthor's voice was unmistakable.

"When you assume you make an ass out of you and me," Hood snipped, undoing the clasps of his mask.

"Well would you take a gander at that." Arsenal snapped his head to the left, his vision coming back to him. The new voice belonged to professor Ivo. "I never realized I'd be working on one of The League's brats."

"What?" Arsenal asked in confusion. The room they occupied resembled that of a operating room. His breath hitched as two more men circled around him.

One of them Arsenal did not recognize. He was a muscular, sharp jawed man. He wore camo BDUs and white tank top. His auburn hair buzzed close to his skull. The other slid across the room with sophisticated strides. His green cloak trailed behind him. Ice chilled in Arsenal's veins. It was Ra's al Ghul.

Ra's peered at the auburn-haired man. His brow perked in question, "A tad dressed down for an army officer. Wouldn't you say, Lieutenant Griffith?"

Griffith smiled, an amused hum rumbled in his throat. "Dress blues are expensive to replace. Especially with all the shifting." He chuckled. "Besides, I'm not technically any army officer anymore."

Their conversation fell on Arsenal's deaf ears. He turned his attention to Red Hood how had removed his cowl. He shook his head, sweat shooting of his soaked strands of black hair.

"Are you serious!?” Arsenal choked out. "You're working for all of them? These guys are crazy!"

Red Hood turned to face Arsenal. The bags under his eyes highlighted his illness. But that did not stop his deranged rant. "Crazy?” His body shook with his words. “They're crazy? What about the grown adult 'superheroes' who use children as their lackies?” His voice rose. “Who put minors in danger all for the sake of intelligence?” Lightheadedness overcame him. He took a few deep breaths, fighting past the urge to black out. He bit his lower lip. "No, not as crazy. First me and then Tula? No, never again.” A snarl grew on his lips. "They are going to help me shut The League down."

"Jason that's enough,” Ra's chided.

"Don't call me that!” Jason boomed, turning to face him. He tried his best to control his shaking breath. "Jason Todd died years ago." He took a step towards him. "The name is Red Hood."

"Well..'Hood” Ra’s reached into his pocket, pulling out an orange medication bottle. “I think it's time for your dosage. You look feverish."

Jason snapped it out of his hands, opening the cap, and pulling out three blue and white pills.

"Are you crazy?!” Arsenal barked. “Don't take anything from them! You don't know what's in-“

Arsenal's words trailed off as a small prick pierced his neck. Lieutenant Griffith pulled a syringe
from one of the tables in the room, knocking him out with a potent anesthetic.

"He'll be alright," Ivo said with a smile. He looked over at Jason with mischievous eyes. "When he wakes up from his surgery, I'm sure he'll have a complete change of mind."

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_A The Watch Tower_  
_January 21st, 2017_  
_03:39 EST_

A heavy fatigue tugged under Zataana’s eyes. The smell of the coffee that rested in the mug in her hand was almost euphoric. A little over three hours and she and Rocket would be off their twelve hour monitor duty.

She leaned against the entryway to the common area. Her eyes fell over to the former boy wonder who, as always, was spending a late night with the Tower’s computers. Nightwing let his cases and investigations consume his body and mind. Sacrificing his health and social life without a second thought. Zataana learned a long time ago that he held his duty above all else. And that neither friends, personal life, nor romance would ever take priority.

“Graveyard shifts are the worst.” Rocket came up behind her, holding two mugs of coffee in her hands.

“Tell me about it,” Zataana huffed. “Pretty sure this is my 5th coffee.”

“Well, I brought you one for you, but looks like you’re good.”

“Yeah. Thanks though.”

Rocket nodded over towards Nightwing. His keyboard chimed furiously under his fingertips. “Think Mr. Insomnia over there could use it?” She asked.

“Probably,” Zee mumbled.

“That boy’s gonna give himself an aneurysm if he keeps stressin’ himself out like this.”

A quiet fell between them. Zataana words were soft, not wanting Nightwing to overhear. “They almost got Arsenal tonight.”

“They did?” Rocket’s eyes went wide. “What happened?”

“Arsenal went nuts.” Zee sighed. “Apparently he relapsed. Found a Spark Lab and ambushed it. Goons opened fired in a public place.” Her eyes fell to the floor. “A little girl got caught in the crossfire. She didn’t make it.” She looked back up at Rocket. “He’s working on the report now.”

“Holy shit.” Rocket replied, slack jawed. She shook her head. “You know he absolutely blames himself right?” Zee nodded in response. Dick always took responsibility for when things didn’t go well.

Raquel clicked her tongue in disappointment, “Well that’s just not gonna work.” She marched towards him. “Boy you keep pullin’ these all nighters you’re gonna collapse into a coma.”

“Um’fine,” Dick mumbled, dragging his hand down his face.
“Yeah, well, at least drink this.” Raquel recommended as she handed him the cup.

He thanked her, taking a sip before returning to his work.

“You...doin’ alright?” Zee asked with caution.

Nightwing’s eyes stayed glued to the screen as he spoke. “Finished my report from tonight. Just finishing up the analysis of the Spark sample we obtained.”

Not exactly the answer she was hoping for. But she decided it’d be best not to pry. “What’s it say so far?” She asked.

Dick groaned in irritation. “Just the same stuff we already know. But it’s much more addictive than we thought. Now I’m just trying to identify and label the rest of the unknown ingredients.”

The chime of Rocket’s cell phone rang around them. She looked at her screen, laughter booming from her chest. She motioned for Zataana to come closer and held out her phone. It was a picture message from her husband. A photo of him with deadpan eyes and a heavy frown filled the right corner of the screen. And their three-year-old, Amistad, filled the left. His bright eyes and smile complimented the wave he gave the camera. The text below it read:

‘Guess who just woke me up and asked it’s time for breakfast?’

Zataana laughed.

A smile formed on Rocket’s face. “You know,” she said with a shrug. “I should feel bad for him...but I don’t.”

“Poor Victor.” Zee shook her head as she grinned. “Amistad’s so friggin cute I can’t even handle it.”

“Little dude lucked out.” Raquel chimed, putting her phone back in her pocket. “He got the Stone and Ervin family good looks.”

“What?” The question spilled from Nightwing’s throat as he stared at the screen. His brows furrowed in confusion.

“What is it Dick?” Zee asked as she and Raquel moved closer towards him.

“I’m not sure.” He answered, zooming in on his analysis on the screen. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“What?” Rocket asked, impatient.

“The rest of the ingredients...” He began. “You know those darts Artemis uses?”

“Which ones?” Rocket asked. “The power nap ones? Or the ones that knock you out cold for like, weeks?”

“The last ones.” He answered. “From this analysis, the rest of the ingredients for ‘Spark’ match the formula of those darts.”

Zee hummed in thought. “Maybe it’s so the stimulant aspect of it can clash with depressant ingredients. You know, for like, a quick high and easy come down?” She shrugged. “Could be what makes those kids’ hearts stop when they take too much.” Her mouth twisted in uncertainty. “Seems a little extensive though. Couldn’t they have found an easier way to balance out the high and the low? Kinda weird...”
“Yeah,” Nightwing replied with a tilt of his head. A million questions traveled through his mind. “Weird...”
“Artemis! Get. Up.”

A voice boomed across Artemis’s bedroom. Her eyes bolted open in shock. She gasped, rolling over on her bed in haste to face the door. She gathered her breath, sitting up to see Zataana standing in the doorway. Her hands were on her hips and a firm scowl rested on her lips.

“Zee what-” Artemis mumbled, disoriented. Sleep pulled on her eyelids as her heart pounded in her chest.

“Get the hell. Up.” Zataana sneered. Her nostrils flared in agitation. She charged over to Artemis’s bed, ripping the the covers off of her.

Artemis screeched, attempting to cover herself up. It’s not as though Zee had never seen her sleep in a tank top and panties before. But a little heads up would have been nice. “Zataana what the fuck?”

“Get in the shower and get your ass ready.” She huffed, jolting her finger at Artemis and scolding her as though she were nine years old. She turned and trotted through the doorway. “I’ll make us breakfast,” she chimed over her shoulder.

Artemis’s jaw slacked in awed confusion. Blinking slow while her mind caught up with her. She jumped from the bed and made her way to the kitchen. Zataana had her sleeves rolled up, filling the sink with hot, sudsy water to tackled the grimy mountain of dishes.

Artemis stood there, staring at her for a moment. She held her hand out in front of her. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“Uh, washing these disgusting dishes so I can make us eggs.” Zataana answered with a slight roll of her eyes. As if that was the dumbest question anyone had ever asked her. She opened the refrigerator door. “Do you even have any food in here that’s not condiments?”

Artemis’s words died in her throat. Her confusion evolved into impatient agitation. What was Zataana even doing here?

“Uh, get the hell out?” Artemis told her. The slight uptalk at the end reminding Zataana that she shouldn’t even be here in the first place.

“Nope,” See answered with a small smile, bringing her attention back to the dishes.

“No?” Artemis asked with a raised brow. She looked over to her front door, the deadbolt firmly in place from how she left it last night. It was still locked. “How the hell did you even get in here?”

“Magic,” Zee answered with a high pitched chime.

Artemis groaned, rubbing her temple. Zataana could be so… irritating. She’s been known to be a little bratty when things didn’t go her way, but this was ridiculous. Was Zee mad at her? They were supposed to get lunch today until Artemis canceled on her. But she could do that. She’s allowed to do that. Zee was out of line to break into her home and bully her into going.
“Zataana,” Artemis chided. “I told you I have homework to do.”

A loud clank of metal reverberated through the kitchen as Zee slammed a pan back into the sink. A snarl flashed across her lips. “Wow. Now you’re actually lying to my face.” She turned towards Artemis, her brows furrowed in agitation. “You don’t have homework Artemis. I know for a fact from Dick that you’re on Bereavement Leave for another semester.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “So you’re out of excuses for cancelling on me, all the time.”

Artemis tucked her head down in guilt. She had canceled on her a lot recently, but there was no reason to make her feel bad about it. Was there? “Wow, Zee. Way to try and make me feel better-”

“I’m done trying to make you feel better, Artemis.” Artemis cringed as Zataana raised her voice. She huffed, taking a moment to let her emotions settle, “Okay? I’m done. I have been so supportive of you, and doing things your way, because I wanted you to get better on your own terms.” She swallowed hard, shaking her head. “But I can’t do that anymore.” Her voice cracked. “Okay? It’s time for me to be the bitch friend. The one that makes you get your life back into shape.”

“What?” Artemis questioned, perplexed. “What are you even talking about?”

“Artemis look at this place.” Zee bellowed, motioning to the area around her. Dirty dishes gathered mold on the counter, bags of garbage piled in the corner of the kitchen. “This is disgusting. Your apartment smells like ass.” She reached for the large stack of mail on the counter. Envelopes with stamped with daunting red letters of ‘Final Notice’ and ‘Urgent Reply’. “These bills are months overdue.”

“I’ve been busy,” Artemis mumbled, her words almost inaudible. Shame rose in her gut. She planned on cleaning. She planned on paying those. She thought about seeing her friends. She thought about getting out of bed most days. She really did. It’s not like she didn’t have her scholarship money. It’s not like she didn’t have time. She’d get around to it. She’s sure of it.

“No. No you haven’t.” Zee retorted, counting on her fingers. “You’re not going to school. You’re not going on missions. You don’t have a job. And no one ever sees or hears from you.” She eyed Artemis up and down. Dark bags rested under her sunken eye. Her cheek and collarbones jutting out a little more than they should have. Grease matted her blonde hair. “When’s the last time you even ate? Or showered?”

“Zee stop. Just stop.” Artemis waved her hands in front of her, irritation crawling under her skin. “You have no right to come in here, unannounced, and..and criticize me and my place.” She began to stumble over her words. “I-I know I’ve been MIA and slacking on-on household shit. But it’s-”

“Self-care doesn’t mean completely ignoring things that have to be done.” Zataana corrected. A pleading look formed on her face. “You can’t live like this. You can’t live in filth and isolation.” She pressed her lips into a fine line, shaking her head. “I love you too much let you stay like this.”

Artemis’s retort died in her throat. Zee approached her, taking her hands in hers. The sparkling engagement ring still wrapped firmly around Arty’s finger.

Zataana rubbed her thumb across the diamond. “You don’t have to let Wally go.”

A shallow breath hiss through Artemis’s teeth as the sound of Wally’s name. Her eyes fell to the floor. Zataana continued. “It’s only been eight months, no one is asking you to do that.” Artemis brought her eyes back up to her. “But holding onto him, doesn’t mean letting go of your own life.”
Zataana’s voice became soft and understanding. “I’m not going to pretend like I know what it’s like. I don’t know what it’s like to lose a boyfriend like him.” Water swelled in her eyes. “But I know what it’s like to have someone you love throw their life away.” Her voice began to give way. “To have it taken away.” A few tears fell down her cheek. “And not be able to talk to or see the person that they once were.” She tightened her grip on Artemis’s hands. A shaky breath rumbled through her chest. “And I’ll be damned if I let your grief take you away from me.”

Artemis’s composure was no match for the sight of Zataana’s tears. The last thing she wanted was to hurt others while she herself was hurting. She refused to burden her friends with her sadness. But whisking herself away, barricading herself in her apartment had done more harm than what she realized.

Now there stood Zataana, offering to carry the burden on a silver platter. And the weight of Wally’s death was now far too heavy for Artemis to carry on her own. Time did not heal her wounds.

Time had poisoned her.

Isolation had poisoned her.

“I miss him so much.” Artemis croaked. Tears began to flood down her face. “It still hurts so bad.”

Zataana pulled her into her chest, embracing her with a tight hold. It did little to muffle her sobs. “It’s okay. I got you.” Zee cooed, rubbing her hand up Artemis’s back. “You’re gonna be okay.”

“I’m sorryyyyy.” Arty choked out, guilt pressing on her chest. “I’m sorry I-”

“It’s alright, it’s alright.” Zee interrupted with soft, rushed words. “I’m not mad.” She assured with a whisper. “I’m not mad.”

Zee wasn’t sure how long she held her for. But soon Artemis’s sobs died into harsh sniffles. A calm quiet filled the room.

“Listen,” Zee pulled herself away slightly, grasping onto Artemis’s forearms. “You go get a shower and put on some clothes. We’ll go out, I’ll buy us lunch. And then I’ll help you clean up around here, alright?” She smile. “You’ll feel a lot better, I promise.”

“Thanks Zee.” Artemis sniffled, a small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. She wiped her tears away with her palms and pulled Zee in for another embrace. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.” She mumbled against her shoulder.

Zee chuckled, the stench of Artemis’s unwashed skin wafting under her nose. “Probably still smell like B.O.”

Artemis chortled, swatting at Zataana’s backside. “You’re an asshole,” she said with a smile.

Zataana was right. She couldn’t hide away forever. She no longer could let her life drift away while she locked herself in her bedroom. And no matter how agonizing the pain in her heart may be, she had to press forward. She still had to live her own life.

Wally would have wanted it that way.

*The Watch Tower*
*February 1st, 2017*
Cassie panted, toweling the sweat away from her brow. She swung her gym bag over her shoulder, treading through the quiet halls of The Watch Tower. She breathed a sigh of relief. Nothing relieved stress quite like hand-to-hand combat training with Black Canary.

She halted her steps, peering over to the Grotto. A figure out of place caught her attention. A young man stood with his back to her. He stared upwards at Wally’s memorial.

A mischievous smile overcame her, eyes falling onto the young man’s backside. She’d recognized that rump anywhere.

That was boyfriend booty. The most important booty. And in that moment, she decided that it absolutely, most definitely, needed pinching.

A giggle escaped her, to which she quickly clasped her hand over her mouth to silence it. She quietly placed her bag on the ground. She steadied her breathing, and rose her body to float a couple inches off of the ground. She muffled her snicker, basking in how clever she was. She was so going to get him this time. This sneak was the perfect sneak. The teacher will become the master. She’ll deserve a medal after this stealth mission. He won’t even know what hit him. She’s so close. She’s like a freaking ghost! She’s a puma on the prowl. She’s like the wind. She’s-

“I know you’re behind me Cass,” Tim announced, still staring at Wally’s statue. There was a smile in his voice.

“Nawww,” Cassie whined, dropping down to the ground. She was only an inch away from him. A pout pulled on her lower lip as she wrapped her arms around Tim’s waist. “What gave me away?”

He chuckled. “Well for one, you’re not really a light stepper.” He turned his head to look at her, a smirk played on his lips. “And I heard you giggle.”

“Maaaan,” Cassie clicked her tongue in disappointment. She moved to stand next to him, their fingers lacing. “I thought I was getting better with my stealth.”

“You’re getting there,” he assured.

“Maybe someday I’ll be as good as you.”

His eyes went wide, “Yeeeeeah I wouldn’t get your hopes up.”

“You butt!” She chirped, hip checking him. “You’re so mean.”

He laughed, placing a soft kiss on her cheek. She winced with a smile, his contact tickling her neck. As he pulled away, her gaze fell to Wally’s memorial.

“You’ve been coming here a lot lately,” she noted.

The smile dissipated from Tim’s face. “Yeah,” His eyes fell to the floor. “I’ve just been feeling...overwhelmed, I guess.” He looked back up. “Coming here keeps me grounded.”

The memory of Arsenal’s failed drug bust replayed in his mind. When labeled a ‘superhero’ it’s hard for him not to blame himself when things go wrong. Sometimes, innocent people are caught in the middle, and try as he might, he can’t always save them all.

“Reminds me that I’m only human,” he let a quiet moment pass between them. “Reminds me of my
own mortality.” Tim shook his head, and cleared his throat, the air around them suddenly too heavy. He let out an awkward chuckle, “Kinda dark, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Cassie replied with a small shrug of her shoulder. “But I think it’s good to remind ourselves now and then. I think with superpowers it’s easy to forget.”

She watched as Tim’s eyes flashed to the memorial of the second Robin. His gaze lingered for a moment before falling to the floor. “Even without superpowers you can forget,” he said in a small voice.

Cassie let go of his hand, she took diligent steps towards the holographic memorial. “Tim,” she asked as she walked away. “What happened to him?”

“Who?”

Cassie stopped in front of the memorial. “You know who,” she chided, knowing Tim was playing dumb. She looked up. “Why does no one ever talk about him?”

She found her question greeted with silence. She snapped her head over to Tim. He tilted his head away, unable to meet her gaze.

“His name was Jason, right?” She asked. “Everyone always talks about the memories they had with Tula and Wally and even Ted.” She pointed at Jason’s hologram. “But, what about him? No one ever talks about him.” A hint of sadness peaked in her voice. “Why is he forgotten?”

“He’s not...forgotten.” Tim struggled to find the right words. “I think...his death just brings up too much guilt for a lot of people. Especially Nightwing...and Batman.”

“Why? What happened to him?”

“I don’t think I should....”

“Why?” Cassie asked, exasperated. “I don’t understand this...this desire to hide mistakes.” She shook her head. “How are we newbies supposed to learn from the past if they won’t teach it to us?”

“Cassie,” a serious tone plagued his words as he took a few steps towards her. “It’s not a story you want to hear.”

“Yes. Yes I do.” She nodded. “I want to know.” The existence of Jason she found that The Team always swept under the rug. Like he was some dirty little secret. She never met him, but by golly he fought for her team just like the rest of them, why wasn’t she allowed to know him? “I want to remember him too.”

Tim sighed. He knew by the look on Cassie’s face she would never let this conversation go. A stubborn ferocity rolled off her in waves. “Alright,” he agreed. “But you have to promise me you won’t tell Nightwing or Batman I told you. I didn’t even find out from them.” A sullen sadness overcame him. “Alfred was the one who told me.”

Cassie nodded, a reassuring smile pulling on her lips, “I promise.”

_Gotham City_

_June 14th, 2014_
“I don’t like this.” Jason peered over the edge of the roof, a scowl twisting his lips. Sweat trailed down his skin, the summer heat almost unbearable in his thick Robin costume. He, Nightwing, and Wally, set up post on top or a condemned apartment complex.

Nightwing groaned, rubbing the bridge of his nose. He considered himself to be an understanding person. But tonight, Robin was really trying his patience. “I know you don’t,” He responded. “You’ve told me that at least five times already tonight.”

“Well, I’ll tell you again. I don’t like it.” Jason snipped. “This is wrong.” His eyes fell onto the swingset of a park they overlooked.

Below, a dark-haired boy swayed upon a metal swing. The boy waited. The sour pit in his stomach unremedied by the knowledge that two of Batman’s proteges and Kid Flash were watching over him. He pushed away his fear into the back of his mind. He reminded himself that he could be crucial in helping Nightwing solve his case.

He reminded himself that Billy Batson has the courage of Billy Batson.

For what safer way is there to lure out a child killer, than using a superpowered child?

Over the course three months, thirty children between the ages of five and thirteen were reported missing to the GCPD. Most of them runaways, homeless youths, foster children, or part of homeless families. In any other circumstance, their absences would have been forgotten after a short amount of time.

But bodies began to surface.

Out of the missing thirty children, twenty bodies were discovered. Their lifeless figures found in the early hours of the morning. Tied to and posed on playgrounds, and schoolyards. Hand and feet nailed to swing sets, slides, and carousels. With eyelids removed and lips stapled into smiles, these deceased dolls of eternal childhood sliced terror through the citizens of Gotham.

When Nightwing stumbled upon the twentieth body, he knew that it was time to ask for help. No more children would be slaughtered in his city. No more waiting for another victim to find clues. Tonight, they would lure the perpetrator out.

And they would snuff him out.

So Nightwing set up a team. He organized steak outs at two observation points, The Bowery and The East End. Both underdeveloped areas of Gotham riddled with homeless and poor youths. The majority of missing children were last seen in parks in either location. So he, Robin, and Wally kept keen eyes on Billy in East End Park, waiting to see if he’d take the bait. While Batgirl and Artemis kept eyes on the homeless youths in The Bowery playground.

It was children their target was hunting. So what better way to coax him out, than with their own children?

But that tactic, Jason was not the least bit fond of. And he made sure to vocalize his displeasure.

“Nothing is going to happen, I promise.” Nightwing tried to assure him, again. “Billy might only be thirteen but he’s got the power of a god. And Artemis and Batgirl are more than capable of stepping in if they see any kids getting nabbed. Everything is going to be fine.”
“We should never use kids as bait,” Jason sneered. He turned his head away from Dick, keeping a close eye on Billy. His voice lowered, “That’s something the bad guys would do.”

“Billy is doing this of his own free will.” Dick assured him, again. “No one is going to get hurt.”

“You can’t make promises like that,” Jason snipped. “Anything can happen. You could be putting kids in at risk for no reason.”

“No, there is a reason and there is very little risk.”

“We should be following the tips we got.”

“No. That would be an unnecessary risk.” Nightwing snapped at him, irritation boiling under his skin. “Batman will handle the big guy when it comes it. We’re just here to get him out in the open. Besides we don’t know if those tips are...accurate.”

The GCPD opened a tip line in response to the public panic. Commissioner Gordon was more than willing to share the information they received with Batman. But, as with most tip lines, the information provided proved to be rather...useless. Most ‘tips’ being delusions of senile old people. Rants of racist middle age mothers against their brown neighbors. Or paranoid parents claiming someone “looked at their child too long that one time at that one place.”

It was all….tiring to say the least.

“Instead of wasting manpower chasing too many leads, we can have him come to us.” Dick tried to reason.

But the heavy scowl on Jason’s mouth did not budge. “Yeah,” He scoffed. “And while we sit on our asses he could be out snatching more kids.”

“JAS-” Nightwing quickly grasped for his composure. He shook as he let out a loud exhale through his nose. He learned very early in Jason’s career as ‘Robin’ that he did not respond well to being yelled at. Even if he was being unreasonable. “Robin, I don’t know what else to say to you. I feel like I’m just going in circles.” He softened his voice. “I know that the sitting and waiting part is hard. But what we do is just as important too.”

Jason huffed.

Waiting. That’s all they did. That’s all they ever did. Bruce promised him that joining The Team would be good for him. That it would help his development as ‘Robin’, help him develop patience and control. Jason rolled his eyes at the thought.

Joining the team was a form of **punishment**. Six **grueling** months of punishment.

Bruce praised his growing athleticism and detective skills. But it’s how Jason took down criminals that left Bruce agitated. The growing number of broken bones and brutal takedowns at the hands of Jason were too vicious to ignore. Bruce believed that some time with The Team would placate his anger, his ruthlessness.

But Jason saw right through Bruce’s plan to ‘calm’ him. And though he did form some strong friendships, The Team’s ‘recon’ nature only aggravated the itching under his skin. That need to punish the deserving. And give them the **punishment they deserved**. Why should they give the low lives of the world any pity? What was the point of sympathy for the scum of the earth? If you asked Jason; Batman, The League, The Team, all of them spent far too much energy on mercy. They spent too much time on ‘recon’ and ‘waiting for the right moment’.
There were innocent lives at steak.
They should be doing more *doing* and less *waiting*.

“Whatever. I’m sick of this post.” Jason’s nose scrunched with a pout as he took out his grappling hook. “I’m partnering up with Artemis at the other post. And least she doesn’t shut down everything I say.” He fired his hook to the neighboring roof.

“ROB-” Nightwing yelped after him, but Jason was already gone. He growled, running a hand down his face. “I swear some days I just want to hog tie him.”

Wally let out a laugh he had been holding back since the beginning of their bickering. It was a sight that never really got old for him, like a terrible reality series he couldn’t stop watching. At least on a steak out, he’d have snacks to go along with his show.

“You should give him a little more time,” Wally mumbled, stuffing a handful of potato chips in his mouth. “He’ll come around.”

Nightwing grumbled under his breath. He narrowed his eyes at Wally, trying his hand in imitating the infamous ‘Bat Glare’. Though Wally seemed far too preoccupied with his food to notice.

“I should have just paired him up with Artemis in the first place.” Dick said as he shook his head, defeated. “He listens to her more than he does me.”

“He prolly just respects her more,” Wally chirped. Dick dropped his jaw, face riddled with astonished insult.

A cackle escaped Wally’s throat. God, Dick could be so...*uptight*. “Come on, you know what I mean dude. They just...have more in common.” He groped at the bottom of the chip bag for crumbs. “You know, poor family, surrounded by crime, untrusting, all that jazz.” He crumpled up the bag, tossing it aside. “It’s hard going from ‘side kick’ to ‘team player’ *let alone* being the black sheep too. And, well, Artemis knows what that’s like.”

Wally approached him, resting his elbow on Dick’s shoulder. “And although I might not have any siblings of my *own*.” He flashed Dick a warm grin. “I hear that little brothers are *supposed* to get on your nerves now and again.”

Dick chuckled under his breath, the first smile of the night pulling on his lips. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Jason paused on one of the rooftops, making sure he was just out of Nightwing’s sight. He wiped the sweat from his brow, struggling to catch his breath. He clenched his jaw, anger shooting through him.

Four more hours. Four more hours they had their steak out set for. Four more hours of sitting around, of waiting, hoping. Jason had had enough. Kids were being mutilated. Kids whose only crime was being birthed into poverty. Kids who he had run into while living on the streets himself.

“Fuck it.” He whispered, pressing a button on his wrist computer. It sent a signal to his Robin Cycle, sending it to his location. He jumped from the roof, hearing the squeal of his cycle’s wheels as it rounded the corner. He landed on it, twisting his wrist on the gas. The roaring motor echoed through the streets as he sped off. Jason wasn’t waiting idly by any longer. He was off to chase his own leads.
When the first few ‘dolls’ showed up in the city, Jason read all the open child murder cases in Gotham he could dig up. Though none matched enough to the current murders to link them. Not even old cold case files could provide him with any solace.

That is, until he began poking around closed case files. Elderly cases lost in the transition from the paper era to the digital age. Cases only remembered in yellow newspaper clippings. Clippings buried in the moldy, forgotten basement of the Gotham Library. That is, until Jason dug them up.

Just sixty miles outside of Gotham lay the small, now abandoned town of Ichabod. In early 1945, Matilda Mathis, heiress of the family funeral home fortune, was the social elite of the once-thriving town. However, with WWII in full swing, she was left alone with her infant son Barton, while her husband Wesley went off to serve his country. Wesley became a POW shortly after, leaving Matilda with no means of communication.

Stricken with grief at the potential loss of her husband, Matilda succumbed to madness. In her twisted state of mind she became obsessed with the idea of perfecting ‘preservation’.

Over the course of three months, Matilda kidnapped three street youths. Using the resources available at her family’s business, she emptied the childrens' torsos, filled them with cotton, embalmed their skin, and set them up on display in her backyard garden. She basked in the creation of her “Forever Children”, as she called them.

In September of that year her husband returned from war, discovering the horror that his wife created. When asked to explain herself she responded to him with a smile, “They were for practice. It’s for you and our son, dear. Now I can keep you both forever. I’ll never have to worry about you dying again.”

Wesley immediately contacted the authorities. Matilda died by her own hand before they could arrest.

Knowing that the name ‘Mathis’ was forever tainted, Wesley adopted his mother’s maiden name of ‘Schott’. And closed his late wife’s funeral business. He used her fortune to open up a toy factory in Ichabod, naming it ‘Schott’s Toys’ in the hopes that he could somehow reconcile everything his wife had done.

Barton went on to take over the factory at age 21 after the death of his father. But after a decade the toy business struggled in the surrounding economy. Barton found himself teetering on the edge of poverty. In 1979 his wife gave birth to twin boys. To keep his business afloat and provide for his family, Barton picked up a part-time gig in the organ trading business.

Taking up his mother’s talents of kidnapping, Barton plucked prostitutes and junkies off of the street. He caged them in the basement of the factory, brought them to the peak of health, and slaughtered them for their organs. A task that his toddlers routinely witnessed as a ‘bonding activity’. At least, that’s what Barton would claim in the police report later on.

In 1984 Barton’s wife found out about his extracurriculars. She gave him an ultimatum, to either stop or she would leave him. Neither of which Barton could support. Terrified by the thought of poverty and losing his wife, Barton created his own solution.

He killed her, harvested her organs, chopped up the rest of the usable meat, and fed her to himself and their sons. Barton explained in the report, “So she could never leave us. So she could be a part of us forever.”

Barton was discovered for the sociopath he was once authorities investigated the stench coming from the factory’s furnace. The smell of the burning bodies of the what was left over from the organ
harvestees, became too strong to be ignored.

Barton was indicted and sentenced to death in 1985. His two 6-year-old boys were separated, given new names and new lives, and lost forever in the vast expanse of witness protection. Burying them and the public away from their sick family history, giving them a fresh start.

Although Barton and Matilda had long since passed, Jason couldn’t shake the eerie feeling of connectedness between them and the current child murders in Gotham. When the first few bodies appeared around the city, some had their insides hacked to bits. Later, as more surfaced, the cuts became cleaner and organs began to disappear. But the latest body, the one that struck Jason the most, had her entire torso emptied, filled with cotton, and stitched shut.

The killer was perfecting his craft.

It was a coincidence that Jason couldn’t ignore. But he couldn’t tell Batman or Nightwing. No, they would just shut him down. They never approved of anything he did lately. So, following his hunch, Jason set out to investigate on his own. He needed to start where it all began, in Ichabod. The Mathis mansion had long since been torn down, but the decaying Scott’s Toys factory still stood.

Jason flew down the highway on his cycle. The rushing wind felt good on his hot skin. If he hurried, he could make it there in under and hour, take some time to look around, and ride back before Nightwing even noticed. Luckily, his communicator stayed silent for the whole trip. The Team hadn’t noticed his disappearance yet.

He finally made it to the old factory. Creaks and rattles of the jagged windows created a cold turning in his stomach. The history within its walls still haunted the air around it. A building constructed for redemption, now forever stained by the hands of tainted family blood.

Jason shook the uneasy feeling from his limbs. He quietly lifted open one of the windows and jumped inside. He clicked on his flashlight, assessing the area around him.

His steps echoed in the quiet. Shelves and machinery loomed around him. As he looked about only cobwebs and scurrying rats greeted him. Unsettled dust irritated his nose. The first floor seemed like a lost cause. He searched for a door to the basement.

His head snapped to his left as a small whimper tip toed in his ear. He approached the sound with cautious steps. He swallowed hard, hair rising on the back of his neck.

That is, until his flashlight fell onto a series of small cages in the corner of the room. Their bars closed shut with individual padlocks. He knelt, shining his light into one of them.

“Oh my god,” the words fell from his lips without warning. His jaw dropped. Jason had found the missing children. They clung to their ragged clothing, shaking and crying as they cowered in the corner of their cages.

“Holy shit.” He darted his flashlight into each one, counting. Ten, the number of reported children still missing. He gathered himself, searching for signs of blood or torture. “Are you all ok?”

"Who-is that?" A quiet voice came from his right. A little girl in one of the cages clung to her bars. She squinted at his bright light, her long black hair falling into her face. When her eyes adjusted, she saw the masked face of a teenage boy, the yellow ‘R’ on his chest shooting a flicker of hope through her veins. "Robin?" She asked.

"Shhh," he told her putting a finger up to his mouth. "Yeah," he answered with a whisper. "Everything's gonna be ok." He smiled, trying to ease her. "What's your name?"
Her body shook as she answered, "H-Harper."

Jason placed the flashlight between his neck and scrunched shoulder, aiming it at the lock. He pulled out an electronic lock pick from his utility belt. "Everything's gonna be alright Harper," he assured her. "I'm gonna get you out of here I promise." He rose his hand to place his finger on his earpiece communicator. It was far past the time to contact The Team.

Harper gasped, jolting to the back of her cage. "LOOK OUT!" She shrieked.

But before Jason could turn his head, something hard and metal struck the side of his skull. An unbearable pain shot through his head before his vision faded. And his consciousness faded into darkness.

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A groan fell from Jason's lips. His head pounded with pain. Clicks of metal rang in his ears. He tried to open his eyes, vision greeted with a bright, blinding light from the ceiling.

Jason gasped, remembering the moments before losing consciousness. He tried to move his limbs, they wouldn't budge. His vision came to.

A numbing cold covered him as he found himself lying on a steel table, clad only in his underwear. His wrists and ankles were chained down tight to the table with no slack to give. A leather strap pressed tight against his forehead, holding his head firm in place.

Jason strained to turn as much as he could. In his peripheral vision, he found his robin costume hanging on the wall.

"I was hoping you'd wake up soon."

Terror chilled the blood in his veins. Jason's eyes darted around him in a frantic motion, trying to find the source of the voice. The sound of heavy boots moved towards him.

"Who are you? Show yourself!" Jason shouted, panic rising in his voice.

His question was greeted by a low giggle. A body of a burly man in overalls emerged from the shadows. Crazed auburn hair ran a muck on his head. He wore a pale, shiny mask that only covered a portion of his round face. With openings for his mouth, nose, and eyes, the finishing glaze did little to hide that his 'mask' came from another human's face.

Jason felt the air rip from his lungs. Terror shook his very core as he tried to catch his breath.

"Who-who are you?" Jason choked out, his throat closing in on him.

"I, am The Dollmaker." He answered with a shrug. "It runs in the family."

He ran a cold, calloused finger across Jason's cheek. Jason's breathing hitched, suddenly all too aware of his vulnerability. He trembled.

"Y-You're the one," Jason did all he could to stall. Silently praying that his absence would be noticed soon. "You're the one who's been kidnapping those kids."

"What can I say?" The Dollmaker responded with a shrug. "It runs in the family."
A realization sparked in Jason’s mind. “You’re one of Barton’s sons.”

His slow smile sent a chill down Jason’s spine. “Look at you, the boy detective.” He reached for something out of Jason’s sight line. “The name is Anton Schott, to be precise.”

A shrill creak erupted in the room as Anton pulled a small metal table towards them. It held a small amount of medical instruments, scalpels, and tools. Each crusted and stained with blood from prior victims.

Bile rose in Jason’s throat. The bubbling in his stomach rising to his chest in escalating panic. No matter how hard he pulled, the restraints wouldn’t budge.

Stall. All he could do was stall. They would notice he was missing soon, right?

They’ll find him.

Bruce will find him.

“H-how did you know?” Jason asked, cold sweat trickling down his face. “You were taken by child services.”

Anton hummed in amusement. “Yes they had hoped that I would forget in therapy. But the sweet sound of those people’s screams? Oh, they never left me.” He sorted through the instruments on his cart. “It didn’t take long to track down my family history. And when I read everything my grandmother and father had done, well...I just couldn’t deny my calling any longer.” He finally decided on a hammer. He grasped it in his hands and turned towards Jason. Yellow teeth emerged from behind his crack-lipped smile. “Tainted blood is tainted blood.”

“But they’re children!” Jason hissed, pulling on his restraints. “They’re alive! You can’t do this.”

“But I am saving them.” There was a disturbing tone of kindness in his voice. “Turning them into dolls for all eternity. I keep their innocence safe and preserved. I’m helping them.”

Jason’s jaw dropped in horror. Anton was far beyond mental help. Genuinely believing himself to be some kind of savior. “You’re psychotic,” he gaped.

A giddy chuckle ran through Anton, as if he had just received a compliment. He placed a firm hand on Jason’s jaw. ‘Now it is your turn to sing my little bird.” Jason winced as his grip tightened. “You will be the first doll of my sidekick collection.” Jason’s eyes went wide. Anton motioned to the the room around them. “Imagine, a whole room chalked full sidekick dolls. Perfect, beautiful, colorful, superhero children to mount on my wall!”

Anton brought himself back from his fantasy, grasping Jason’s jaw once more. He brought face in close. “But first, I need to know their names so I can find them.” A cocky grin pulled on his lips. “You will tell them to me.”

Jason spat in his face. His muscles shook, anger swallowing his terror. Anton jerked away in disgust.

The Dollmaker planned to claim his friends for his sick fantasies. Jason would die before he let that happen.

Jason jerked on his restraints, images of slaughtering Anton flashing in his mind.

“Fuck you!” Jason spat out, face red with fury. “You won’t get shit from me!”
Anton growled. He grasped Jason’s thigh, his jagged nails digging into his skin. “I’ll get you to speak you stupid brat! Even if it takes all night!”

He rose his hammer into the air. A gush of air fill Jason’s lungs as he watched it hurl downwards. The vile clatter of his kneecap shattering echoed around the room. And for a moment, Jason couldn’t make a sound. The profound pain shooting through his nerves, stunned all concept of speech.

And then, a moment later, when he finally found his wind, a horrific wail bolted from his chest. His screams of agony unable to be placated by any training or reasoning.

This wasn’t supposed to happen.

They should have been here by now.

They always arrived just in time.

Where was his team?

Where was Nightwing?

Where was Batman?

The Batcave
June 14th, 2014
02:39 EDT

“Master Bruce?” Alfred Pennyworth stopped at the end of the staircase. Surprised to see Bruce in part of his Batman uniform, his cowl draped over the back of his computer chair. Bruce studied the computer screen with glaring concentration.

“I thought you would be out on patrol.” Alfred added, approaching him. “I do believe tonight is Master Dick’s…trap, is it not?”

Bruce’s eyes never strayed from the screen. He opened case files, pouring over gruesome crime scene photos. “It is. Dick’s heart is in the right place…” His voice trailed off as he sifted through the photos.

Alfred raised a brow, finishing his sentence for him. “Ah, but you do not believe he will find anything?”

“No,” Bruce answered, rubbing his chin in thought. “The person we’re looking for has been too good. Too careful. No one has reported even seeing the children being taken. I doubt he’d be careless enough to let himself get caught. He most likely suspects we’re onto him by now.”

Alfred grimaced at the crime scene photos on the screen. “And you believe that you’d be more productive with…research.”

“There has to be something we’re missing.” Bruce racked his brain in thought. “Ever since the start of this case I keep thinking of a scary bedtime story from my childhood. Something my father once told me.” He turned towards Alfred. “I can’t recall the details of it, I just remember it had children being kidnapped and turned into dolls.”
Alfred’s jaw dropped in sudden remembrance. “Ahhh yes I do recall that.” A small smile pulled on the corner of his lips. “That story gave you nightmares for weeks.” He chuckled. “You mother was very cross with your father for telling it to you.” Alfred noticed Bruce’s unwavering glare. Impatiently waiting for him to continue. Alfred cleared his throat. “I believe it was called ‘The Tale of Madhouse Mathis’.”

“Madhouse Mathis?” Bruce repeated, turning towards his computer and clacking away at the keyboard.

“Yes sir,” Alfred confirmed. “Just some urban legend to frighten children into behaving. I believe the tale involved something along the lines of a woman called ‘Madhouse Mathis’ snatching up naughty children in the middle of night. And turning them into dolls for her child to play with.” He shivered. “Quite disturbing if you ask me.”

Bruce opened several articles, descriptions of old urban legends and their origins. “It looks like Madhouse Mavis may have been based on a real person,” he added. He read a vague, horrifying claim that ‘Madhouse Mavis’ was once a child mutilator years ago from the town of Ichabod, Connecticut.

“Ichabod?” Alfred narrowed his eyes in thought. “I-I believe I heard Master Jason grumbling on about Ichabod the other night.”

He walked over to a small filing cabinet at the end of the desk. Jason and Dick kept their own files for individual work. Bruce encouraged them to pick up cases independently to hone their detective skills on their own. Alfred sifted through Jason’s drawer. “He’s been working this case on his own as well. Rather obsessively I might add. Ah, here it is.”

Alfred pulled out a hefty manila folder, careful not to let any of its contents fall to the floor. Bruce took it from him, spreading the photocopied news articles and notes over his desk. His eyes widened as he poured over the information, clippings and police reports of the Mathis/Schott family. The furious scribbling of Jason’s notes marking their similarities.

This was….good. This information was a brilliant lead that they should check out. Bruce twinged in irritation. Why had Jason not told him about this? Why was he leaving this information out? Bruce worried that keeping a strict hand with Jason may have caused him to doubt his detective skills.

He made a mental note to himself that when Jason returned tonight they would explore his lead together.

“Alright guys, it’s 3am, let’s bring it in for the night.” Nightwing’s voice chirped over computer speakers. Their communicators connected to Bruce’s computer, assuring no communication was lost.

Bruce sighed. Just as he thought, Dick’s ‘trap’ ended fruitless.

On the other side of Gotham, fatigue and disappointment pulled at Nightwing’s body. He stood on the rooftop with Wally, waiting for the others to join him so they could debrief.

Dick cocked an eyebrow as Billy, Batgirl, and Artemis climbed onto the roof. But Jason had not arrived with them.


She bunched her brows in confusion. “How am I supposed to know?”

Dick sighed, “He said he was going to your checkpoint.”
Artemis’s eyes widened. She held out her hand and motioned around them in annoyed obviousness. “Well, he didn’t…”

Nightwing groaned and shook his head. “I swear.” He pressed onto his earpiece, anger palting his tone. “Robin. Where are you?” He waited for a moment, tapping his foot, only to be greeted by silence.

He growled, “Robin. Come in, now. What is your location?”

Silence fell again, until a voice none of them recognized slithered into their ears.

“I’m afraid Robin is a little…tied up at the moment.”

The foreign voice of a man rang from the communicators. The eerie calm of his tone constricting their chests.

A twinge of terror shot down Nightwing’s spine. “Who is this?” He snarled. “How did you get on this channel?”

“Oh, I have your little boy wonder’s communicator right here,” Anton answered. “Would you like to speak with him?”

“Nightwing!” Jason’s voice rang in the background. His words were panicked, rushed, and hoarse. As if he had been screaming. “Kids! Cages! On the first floor you have to get them out! You have to-”

They jumped as Jason’s words were cut short by a gurgled cry. Anton’s swift punch to his gut ceased Jason’s informative yelps.

“Ah-a children who talk too much will be punished,” Anton chided with a smile.

“Let him go,” A dark hiss from Batman filled the communicator. A terrifying tone that none of them had heard from him before. An unfamiliar rage coursed through Bruce’s veins, a paternal anger that shook his bones.

“Oooo that would be Batman I presume? Don’t you worry your little head.” Anton picked up a stained scalpel from the steel table. Shallow breaths ran through Jason’s lungs as he jerked his limbs against the chains. Desperation flailed through him the more The Dollmaker approached him.

Anton continued, “When I am done, he will be one of my best creations. The perfect doll. Forever a child. Forever innocent.”

A sharp inhale ran down Bruce’s throat with unbridled fury. “You touch him,” he growled. “And not even God will be able to save you.”

“But it’s him I’m saving. Preserving his innocence for alllll time.” Anton responded in a sing song voice. “But first we have to get rid of those pesky organs.”

Dick, Wally, Billy, Artemis, and Barbara looked around at one another in horror. Shaking, fidgeting at their own helplessness. Minds running mad at not knowing what to do.

“Tell me,” Anton spoke again. “How much do you think a ‘Robin’ liver will sell on the black market? After all, making dolls is can get quite expensive.” He placed the cold tip of the scalpel just below Jason’s sternum. Jason mewled, tears streaming down his face. Frantic as he tried to pull on his restraints in a futile attempt at escape. But it was no use. The Dollmaker had already shattered every joint in his arms and legs during his ‘interrogation’.
Anton smiled at Jason’s tears. He continued, “How many of his insides can I remove before he stops breathing?”

A sickening scream erupted from Jason’s throat as The Dollmaker ran the scalpel, with slow precision, down his stomach. Anton’s laughter nearly drowning out Jason’s cries.

Panic spiked within The Team, feeling helpless against Jason’s disembodied wails. Their eyes watered with rage and horror, shivering under their uniforms. A sickness rose in Artemis’s belly as she covered his mouth. Barbara clawed at her wristwatch computer in desperation, searching for something to find him with.

A carnal rage pounded in Dick’s chest. A type of hate that not even the murder of his parent’s had brought about in him. A fire bubbled under his skin. The uncharacteristic, unfiltered, threat hiss from his lips before he could stop himself.

“Touch him and I will kill you!” Dick didn’t recognize his own voice.

“Oh…” A smile slathered Anton’s words. “But I’m afraid…” Jason let out a sharp cry as Anton placed his hands into Jason's stomach's incision. “You’re a little…” Another sob escaped him as he pulled back on the flaps of skin, widening the incision. “Too…” The pain grew as Anton pulled even harder, Jason’s skin straining under the force. “Late…” Jason howled as a wet tear filled the room. The thin cover of skin over his stomach nearly torn off of him. Blood ran from his exposed stomach cavity, pooling around him.

Jason thought he would never stop screaming.

“We have to find him!” Wally screeched, hands shaking in panic.

“Here! Here!” Barbara stumbled over her words, frantically pressing the buttons on her wrist computer. “This is the GPS coordinates from his Robin Cycle.” She held up the screen for them all to see. “He’s in some place called Ichabod!”

Wally ran his eyes over the screen at superspeed, memorizing the coordinates. “I’ll get him.” His words cracked with panic, heart racing. His eyes met Dick’s with a frantic promise. “I’ll get him!” In an instant he rushed away at superspeed. The quickness of his pace dissolved the water in his eyes. A sickness rose in his belly, Jason’s screams pushing his muscles to their peak performance.

In the Batcave, Alfred finally found his words, vocal chords still numb at the horrid sound of Jason’s torture. “F-find him Master Bruce.” Alfred snapped his head towards Batman, desperation clinging to his voice. The tightness in his chest unbearable. His eyes filled to the brim with tears. “Find him!”

Alfred’s pleas hadn’t finished before Bruce slung on his cowl. He jumped inside of his Batplane, taking off towards the coordinates Batgirl sent him.

As Batman’s plane disappeared into the night, Alfred fell to his knees. A hand grasping onto the edge of the desk for support, the other covering his mouth. Jason’s petrified and tortured wails echoed through the cave with relentless ferocity. Alfred clenched his eyes tight as tears flowed down his cheeks. Suffocating, drowning under the sound Jason’s pain. Pain he was helpless to stop.

He prayed. For the first time in a long time he prayed to a god that he was no longer sure existed or not. But it was all he could do. God damnit, it was all he could do.

Please don’t take him from us. Not tonight. Not like this.

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Wally heaved from the lack of air in his lungs. He pushed back his pain, desperation clinging to his movements. There was no world around him, only his task at hand. The only thing that existed in that moment was saving Robin. Saving Jason. Saving Dick’s brother.

The rusted ‘Welcome to Ichabod’ sign flew past him. Batman shouted something about ‘Schott Toys’ over the communicator, as well as some warning of danger. Some demand of caution. Some demand of waiting for backup. Wally didn’t recall. The only sound that mattered were Jason’s screams. He was the only one that mattered, not himself. They haven’t lost a team member yet. And Wally’d be damned if he let it happen today.

He burst through decaying doors of the factory. A sharp pain setting fire in his shoulder where he had hit. Moonlight filled the room.

“Robin!” Panic rushed through Wally as he called out for his teammate. Hysteria clouding his judgement. Training told him never to barge into unknown areas or situations. But Jason’s quieting wails blocked all concerns of rational thought. “WHERE ARE YOU?!” Wally howled, turning on the night vision in his goggles.

“Help! Help us!” A tiny cry emerged from the corner of the room. Wally ran over to it, breathless at the sight of children in cages. He heard them mumble his uniformed name with hope.

“Get us out please.” One of the children sobbed.

A panicked groan escaped him. Torn between the children’s immediate freedom and the thought of his tortured teammate.

No, Jason would have taken care of the children first.

Wally growled, looking around for a metal object. He grabbed a cast iron rod from the floor. He slammed it against one of the padlocks until it broke off. He opened the door to the cage and pointed to the open front door. “Go! Run to the edge of the the clearing while I get everyone else out. The cops are on their way.” The child nodded, his little feet scrambling underneath him as he bolted away. Wally continued onto the other cages, breaking them open and freeing the children one by one.

The sound of Batman’s plane grew louder.

Desperation flowed through Wally as he broke open the final cage. A little girl with long black hair reached out for his hand as she cried. “He’s got him in the basement! The bad man has Robin in the basement.” She swallowed hard as a tear ran down her cheek “I-I heard him screaming.”

“It’s alright, I’ll get him.” Wally assured, pointing at the door. “Just run to safety.” Just as he was about to take off, her words caught his attention

“I can’t!” She answered with a wince, trying her best to limp out of the cage. “My ankle’s broken.”

“I gotcha.” He assure with a smile, picking her up. He ran her outside, placing her with the other children.

Batman’s plane flew overhead. Bruce ejected himself from the cockpit, breaking through a glass window on the roof.

“He’s in the basement!” Wally cried out over the communicator.

“Stay with with kids!” Bruce demanded. His heart pounded in his chest as he landed on the concrete
floor. His muscles burned as he tore through the warehouse, throwing open the steel door to the basement stairway.

He cried out for Robin as he reached the end of the stairs. His breathing halted, lungs frozen in place at the sight of Anton. His heavy, greasy body loomed over Jason, a knife pressed snug to Jason’s throat. Anton looked up at Batman, jaw clenched with fury.

“Don't move!” Bruce commanded, his diligent hand slowly reaching towards his utility belt. He wanted nothing more than to tear him off of Jason, to hear Anton scream in agony. But one wrong move, one slip of the wrist, and Jason’s throat would be cut wide open.

“I heard him!” Anton spat, eyes watering. “I heard one of your brats taking away my toys upstairs!” The tone of a spoiled child fell from the man’s lips. “It's not fair. It's not fair!”

“Anton, don’t do this.” Bruce tried to reason, desperate for a solution as Jason’s quiet whines echoed in the background.

“They're my dolls! Mine!” Anton screeched, desperation shaking his body. The knife began to break Jason’s skin.

“Put. The knife. Down!” Bruce boomed.

Anton growled with unbridled disdain. His roar tore through the room. “If I can't have my dolls, then no one can!”

In an instant, before Bruce could throw the Batarang in his hand, a flash of red filled the space between them. Bile rose in his throat as specks of blood trickled against his face.

Bruce cried out to Jason. He ran, his boots heavy, time around him still, as if he were caught in the slow heaviness of a dream. Batman checked his shoulder against The Dollmaker’s chest, shooting him across the room.

But not before the knife had cleared across Jason’s throat.

He bolted to the table, hands pressing around Jason’s throat in an effort to stop the bleeding. An effort he knew was futile.

“No. No. Nononono.” Bruce’s entire composed demeanor became engulfed with desperation. “Stay with me.” His voice cracked, the sound of gurgling in Jason's chest unbearable.

Bruce clawed at the leather strap on Jason’s head, as if sitting him up could save him from drowning in his own blood.

Jason stared at him with wide, terrified eyes. His body on fire with pain and shock. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't speak. Bruce's hand did nothing, could do nothing, to pinch the artery.

Jason knew he was going to die. The moment the knife hacked through his neck he knew these would be his final moments.

“Stay with me.” Bruce’s pleas fell into quiet as Jason’s senses faded.

Jason tried so hard to form words. He tried so hard to tell him how he was sorry. He tried so hard to tell him he was sorry for being dumb and going out on his own. Sorry for letting him down. Sorry for letting Dick down. And Barbara. And the Team.
He wanted to tell him, he was sorry he wasn't a better Robin.

Bruce’s blood ran cold as silence placated Jason. The twitching of his neck muscles froze under Bruce’s palms. No more gurgling. No more motion. No more sound.

He watched in heart wrenching sadness as the light faded from Jason’s eyes. A slow release of life that he could do nothing to stop. A fading of a human soul, a scene that watching the death of his parents had made him far too familiar of.

“No,” was all he could muster as he coked back a sob. “No. Jason…” He placed a hand on his cheek, wishing that he had had a few more moments to say that he was sorry.

Sorry that he was so hard on him. Sorry he made him feel like he couldn't trust him. Sorry he wasn't a better Batman to him.

Sorry that he couldn't save him.

Save him.

Saved him.

Could have saved him.

Should have saved him why couldn't he save him?

Oh god why couldn't he fucking save him Jason oh god Jason no why wasn't he faster he could have Jason savedhimhecouldhavefuckedwhyheshouldhavesaved-

Anton’s groan filled the background as he rose to his feet. Bruce was torn from his crumbling composure as a primal rage overcame him. He tore away from Jason, leaping at Anton. He roared, fist pounding into Anton’s face.

Anton stumbled backwards and Bruce pushed him against the concrete wall. He grabbed him by the collar, and struck.

Over. And over. And over. And over.

The muscles in Bruce’s arms burned as Anton’s cheek and jawbone crushed beneath his fist. Blood fell to the floor as Batman lost count of his punches. No, he wasn't even counting at all. Even when Anton lost consciousness, he couldn't stop. He wanted him to pay. He wanted him to feel the pain slicing through his heart. He wanted him to feel the terror Jason had.

Jason. Oh god, Jason. He wanted Anton to die. He needed to fucking die. Die. Die just like Jas-

Bruce stopped. He pulled back his hands and Anton’s body fell to the floor. Wheezing breaths escaped from his throat.

No. No, a monster like The Dollmaker did not deserve the release of death. He did not deserve to longer feel pain. He did not deserve the memory and fame death would bring. He did not deserve release from his judicial punishment for his atrocious crimes.

Bruce walked over the Jason’s body. Jason had suffered far too much, more than any child ever should. He deserved peace. He deserved to be put to rest. Bruce ran his fingertips over Jason’s eyelids, closing them. He undid the restraints. He took off his cape and wrapped it around Jason’s tiny, broken body.
He was so small. Why did he never realize he was so small?

Bruce carried Jason's wrapped body in his arms as he trudged up the staircase and towards the front door. Moonlight spilled around him. Wails of police sirens closed in from a distance.

As Batman stepped outside, eyes weighed heavy upon him. Captain Marvel, Artemis, Nightwing, and Batgirl arrived just moments prior. They watched him, hearts breaking more with each step he took.

Small whispers fell from the rescued children. They knew all too well who the body in Batman's arms belonged to. They knew all too well what he looked like, what he sounded like. And for the rest of their lives, would remember how he saved theirs.

Dick couldn't breathe. His jaw shook with a terrified anticipation.

“No,” His whispered cry filled the silence around them. Slow shakes of his head tried to rectify the scene before him. As if to negate the reality of who was wrapped in Bruce’s cape. His hands trembled, blood running cold knowing that he was too late.

“No,” Dick’s voice cracked as he placed himself in front of Batman. Bruce stopped, sullen eyes falling to the body in his arms. He couldn’t look at Dick. What was he to do? What was he to say?

“Let-let me see him.” Bruce twinged at the feel of Dick pulling on the wrapped cape. I foreign look of desperation placated his eyes. “I need to know it’s him.”

“Dick…” Bruce responded as he squeezed his eyes shut, holding tighter onto Jason’s body. Holding Robin as he died and watching Nightwing crumble before him was far too much to handle.

“Just let me see him.” Dick pleaded with cracking words, still pulling at the cape. This desperate, foreign, stupidity he could not shake. Rising sorrow swallowed his reasoning.

“No-” Bruce answered him in a small voice.

“Let me see him!” Nightwing finally snapped.

“DICK!” Batman’s voice boomed around them, knocking Nightwing back a few paces. He looked up at Bruce with wide, watery eyes. Bruce took a slow breath, shaking with an infectious feeling of failure.

“I’m sorry,” was all that Bruce could muster. The sound of the Batplane loomed in the air, it landed in the clearing. Bruce brushed past Dick with a slow pace, walking towards the Batplane. He needed to take Jason away from this place. He needed to take him where he belonged.

Home.

“No,” Dick shook his head, choking on his own spit, his throat closing in on him. “No.” Dick’s voice finally gave way as tears poured down his cheeks. He went to run after Batman, but Wally stepped in front of him, placing his hands on Dick’s shoulders.

“Don’t,” Wally pleaded with him in a quiet voice, knowing that Dick was not of sound mind. If Batman took Jason away without letting him see the body, he knew there was a good reason for it.

“Nononononono.” Dick shook with denial. “He’s not dead.”

Wally cringed at Dick’s words, holding him back as he tried to run after the departing Batplane. “He
can’t be dead.” Dick sobbed. “He’s not dead!” He screeched.

“Dick!” Wally yelled, holding Nightwing’s head between his hands. Tears finally fell from his eyes, knowing he was going to have to be the one to snap Dick back to reality. He swallowed hard, “He is.” Wally’s voice cracked, biting his lip as he gave Dick a sad nod. “He is.”

A sob fell from Dick’s throat. Wally placed his forehead on his, holding onto Dick’s hair. Composure finally falling along with his best friend’s. Dick pulled at Wally’s uniform, face falling onto his shoulder as he wailed.

Dick’s legs buckled underneath him, and Wally glided him onto the ground, never letting go. Wally shook with a furious disappointment at himself. Angry that Dick’s sobs left him unable to form any words. All he wanted to do was apologize. He wished he could apologize. He couldn’t save him. Why couldn’t he save him?

He was the fastest kid alive.

The fastest kid alive….what a joke.

Not when it mattered most.

*Jason…*

*Dick…*

*I'm so sorry.*

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*The Watch Tower*  
*February 1st, 2017*  
*19:30 EST*

“It was a closed casket funeral. A week later The Grotto was forever dedicated to be a memorial for the fallen, in his honor.” Tim’s voice echoed in the silence, eyes wandering to the holograms around them. “No one’s ever really said it out loud, but…I think his death and Tula’s are why Wally and Artemis went into retirement.”

*Hera,* Cassie whispered, her hand lingering lightly over her mouth. Her wide, watery eyes fell to the floor in thought. “But…how did-how did Alfred know?” She asked. “Did Dick tell him?”

A sad scowl pulled on Tim’s lips. “No,” He said with a small shake of his head. “Dick’s never talked about it with anyone. There’s a communicator in the Batcave.” Tim paused. “Alfred heard everything.”

Cassie’s jaw fell in disbelief. “Holy shit,” she swore.

“I told you you wouldn’t want to hear it.” Tim responded, wondering if the story may have been too much for her to handle

“No,” She added quickly. “No I’m glad you did tell me.” She looked up at Jason’s hologram with solemn eyes. A moment of quiet fell between them. “He knew that man was going to hurt him.” She looked over at Tim. “He knew that man was going to hurt him, but he still told Nightwing to save those little kids.” She recalled Tim’s description of Jason’s torture. “Even the face of death, he still chose selflessness.” She looked up at his hologram once more. “That is a real hero.”
Cassie remembered the countless times she’d seen her teammates and members of The League in The Grotto. Remembering the moments she stumbled upon them whispering to the holograms. Whispers of updates of the events in the lives, reminding the fallen how much they are missed, wishes of wanting them alive once more, or apologies of all the things they never got to say or do with them while they were alive.

Sometimes gravestones were not enough. Although it was never, and would never be said out loud, The Grotto provided a face for their teammates, friends, lovers to see. A face to talk to to make their words seem less futile. A face to reassure themselves that they haven’t forgotten what their teammates died for.

And in a way, Cassie liked to believe that their words gave their fallen some sort of peace.

But Cassie never recalled hearing whispers to Jason in The Grotto. Only sad stares from those who once knew him ever graced his hologram. Nobody ever talked about Jason, so Cassie bet that nobody talked to him either.

“I am so sorry all that happened to you.” Cassie’s sympathetic words filled the room. Determination filled her eyes and she pressed her lips into a fine line, making a promise to herself and him. “I will never forget your sacrifice.”

Cassie stopped herself from reaching out. An instinct that she almost didn’t take notice of. She wished more than anything to be able to touch his hand. To somehow, maybe, assure him from beyond the grave that she meant wholeheartedly what she said.

And as she looked upon his face, she couldn’t help but find him familiar. The angles of his cheeks, the sharpness of his chin, the tufts of his shaggy black bangs. An idea ran through her mind that she had met him before. That she saw him, not too long ago, in an encounter tucked away in her mind.

She shook her head of the thought. That was a crazy notion. She must me losing her mind, there is no way they could have met.

People can’t come back from the dead.
"Thanks for going with me to the mall, Mal."

A light flurry of snowflakes fell, leaving their cold, wet kisses against Adalae’s cheeks. A clan of busy shoppers bustled past her in downtown Bludhaven. Mal and Karen trailed, hand in hand, right behind her.

"No problem munchkin," Mal replied with a chuckle.

Adalae gave into the pull of her reflection of each window she passed. If it wasn’t for seeing that same image in the bathroom mirror each morning, she would have found herself unrecognizable. After nearly eight months of having her powers, her figure had transformed just as much as her life had.

"I just can't believe how much my body's changing." She shook her head as she passed another window. "I think...I think I've always been kinda chubby, and now I got these super sweet muscles!" She smiled, holding up one of her arms as she flexed. She needed a better fitting wardrobe already.

"Nightwing said that's probably a side effect of one of your powers." Malcolm explained. "Increased healing means increased metabolism which means you can eat more now without gaining weight."

"Plus, Nightwing's training routines always kick everyone's butt." Karen added.

Adalae stole another glance. She hummed to herself in doubt. Although her memories of her life before Black Bison and The Team were lost to her, she distinctly remembered her appearance as...nothing special. Even when she was first rescued by The Pack she would have described herself as ‘homely’.

But as her powers progressed, so did her body. Not just including dropping fat and gaining muscle, or even her senses heightening. Small things surfaced that Adalae couldn’t explain. Her hair grew redder, her nails sharper. But there was something else that Adalae couldn’t explain; something that scared her.

Over the past two weeks, a roaring hunger grew within her that she could not shake. She nearly obliterated the pantry at The Warehouse. But nothing could satisfy her stomach’s incessant roar.

Until late one night, the quiet of The Warehouse left her unable to ignore her ravenous hunger. Hunger...or maybe...maybe, it was thirst? It was a craving she couldn’t describe. But there, in the cold, bright refrigerator, sat a raw steak that left her salivating. And in a moment of unbridled, animalistic desire she tore it out of the packaging. She woofed it down like a famished dog, unstoppable as she slurped the blood from the bottom of the foam tray.

Adalae didn’t remember eating it, but when she wiped the blood from her chin, a blot of terrified disbelief slithered through her. She buried the packaging at the bottom of the trash can, hiding the evidence. Tears slid down her cheeks as she quickly placed herself under the shower, letting the hot water wash away her red shame.

Her chest tightened at the memory. Something had to be wrong with her. That wasn’t a normal thing
for a person to do, even with powers. Why did she lose control at the sight of raw meat? At the sight of blood?

After that incident however, her obscure hunger was finally placated. No matter how much she tried to convince herself it wasn’t.

"Feels weird though," Adalae shook her head, trying to shake away the memory. A sudden sadness overcame her. "It’s like I'm not really me anymore."

“No sorry, I can’t help you.” A middle aged woman threw her half-hearted apology over her shoulder as she brushed past Adalae. Her full shopping bags nearly knocked her over. Adalae tossed her a dirty look.

"Have you seen this girl?"

Adalae turned her head toward the voice. It came from a young black man in a high school letterman’s jacket.

A panicked look and broken voice overcame him as he shoved his phone in stranger’s faces. "Have you seen the girl?! Have you seen this girl?!" Mal caught the young man’s eye. He rushed over to him, holding his phone up to him. The screen showed a photo of a dark-hair Asian teenager. "Hey! Hey man, have you seen this girl have you seen her?"

"Woah-woah slow down," Mal held his hands out in front of him. "What's the matter now?" He took the phone out of the young man’s hand, trying to get a closer look at the photo.

"Is your friend missing?"

"Yeah, yeah my girlfriend yeah." Tears swelled in his eyes, his words raced out of his mouth. "She's been gone for a couple hours. I tracked her iPhone here but it died this is the last place it was at Have you seen—"

"We can help you look for her." Adalae interrupted him, trying calm him. She could hear his heart race in his chest.

"Really!?" He chimed with desperation.

"Hold on now," Karen interjected. She pursed her lips in doubt.

Sweat dripped from the teen’s brow. His hands shook as he looked up at her with dilated pupils. She felt skeptic about his story. Did he really have a friend missing? Or was he just tripping?

"I think you should call the police first,” she advised. “They can—"

He shook his head with a fearful ferocity. "Nonono cops no!" He held out his hand, pleading. "Don't please, please she's not-” His words began to crack. “She's not sober. I don't, I don't want her to get in trouble."

"It's alright." Malcolm placed a strong, steady hand on his shoulder. “We’ll help you."

A scream from across the street grabbed their attention. They saw the same teenage girl from the photo. She stood, hunched, backing away in fear from a collapsed body on the sidewalk. The people around her moved out of her way in confusion and concern.

"I-I-I'm sorry. I didn’t mean" She croaked, tears fell from her bloodshot eyes. She clutched at her
"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Gehenna!" The boy called out to her, but she did not hear his cries.

The body on the ground did not move. Anxious stares and cries from the people around her filled the air.

"Shut up!" She yelled, grabbing her hair tighter. "Shut up! Shut up please! Stop!"

Before Mal could stop him, the boy ran towards her. "Gehenna!" he yelled.

Her eyes filled with fear as she saw him close in on her.

"N-no, Ronnie, don't!" She yelled. "Stay away from me." She held her palm out towards him. "Stay away from me!" A glow of white filled her eyes and Ronnie was knocked off his feet. He flew a few yards backwards, rolling onto the snow covered ground.

Adalae lost her breath. She had only seen telekinetic powers like that from M’gann.

Screams filled the air as the pedestrians tried to run. Their panicked stampede only worsened Gehenna’s guilt.

"Ronnie," she bawled. "Ronnie baby I’m so sorry." She ran, tears streaming down her face.

"I'm on 'er," Karen informed as she turned down an alleyway to shrink into her Bumblebee form.

"Me too!" Adalae added, running after Gehenna.

Malcolm diligently picked Ronnie off of the ground. Ronnie moaned, rubbing his head.

"You alright kid?" Mal asked.

"Yeah," he groaned.

"You said she's not sober." Malcolm addressed him, holding his shoulders. A feeling swelled inside him that he hoped wasn’t true. “Did she take Spark?”

Ronnie shook as he tried to swallow down his sob. Guilt placated his face. "It was..just a little,” He squeaked. “We just did a little.”

Malcolm shook his head. "Stay here. We'll get her back. I promise"

A few blocks over, Gehenna found herself at a dead end. The vast array of shops swarmed her in a retail cul-du-sac. A hysteric pounding of anxiety course through her veins. She felt breathless. Waves of hot and cold flashed over her.

A flustered man on his cell phone bumped into her. She gasped, their eyes met. And in an instant, the man collapsed onto the ground, unconscious.

"Oh no," she cried. It happened again. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry." She was hurting people. In a way she couldn’t understand, in a way she couldn’t stop. As her composure faded, more people around her collapsed.

"Nononono," she rambled, seeing the vast array of stares that were now all on her.
"Get away from me!" She shouted. "Get away!" And with another blast of telekinesis, every person within a few yards of her were tossed backwards.

Bumblebee appeared in front of her. She held out her palm, her yellow energy blasts glowing in her hand. "You need to calm. Down." She barked.

Gehenna grasped the base of her hair once more. The pain pounding in her skull was unbearable. She sobbed under the pressure.

"Can't. control." Gehenna shook her head, backing away.

"Oooh no. You're not going anywhere," Karen ordered, closing the space between.

Gehenna gasped. Terror flowing through her, she was losing control again. "Stay away!" She bellowed, her powers knocking Karen backwards, skidding her against the asphalt.

"No," She croaked, wishing it would all stop.

"Gehenna!" She turned her head at the sound of her name. Adalae stood a couple meters from her. A soft expression rested on her face.

"Gehenna. That's your name, right?" Adalae said in a calm, pitchy voice.

She swallowed hard. "Get away from me," She pleaded. Her red, dilated eyes almost out of tears. She didn’t want to see anyone else injured because of her. "I'll hurt you too."

Adalae bit her lip, choosing her words and tone very carefully. "I know you didn't mean to," she informed, tilting her head in understanding. "I know you didn’t mean to hurt those people. I know you're not in control."

Gehenna’s breathing wavered. She scratched at her head in desperation. As if she could claw the pain out. "It's so loud," she clenched her eyes shut. "There's so many voices."

Adalae realized she wasn’t just talking about the people gathered around them. For their voices had been reduced to concerned whispers. No, Gehenna was hearing voices that not many other people could hear. She was hearing the voices in their heads. She wasn’t just telekinetic, she was telepathic too.

"Then tune them out. Listen to me," Adalae tried to hone her focus. She had to get her to calm down. She pointed to herself. "My voice is the only one that's important right now. Just focus on me."

Tension released in Gehenna’s muscles. It was working. The more she focused on the girl in front of her, the quieter the other voices became. "What's wrong with me?" She asked.

"You have powers," Adalae explained. She gave her a small smile. "You're psychic." She took a small step towards her. "That's how you knocked those people out. That's how you can hear voices. They're people's thoughts."

Gehenna shook her head, hands still clutching at the base of her hair. "I don't want them."

"Hey, it's ok, it's ok," Adalae cooed. "Just focus on me, ok? Just one thing at a time. "It'll be okay I promise."

A voice jumped inside of Gehenna’s mind. It sounded like Adalae’s, but her lips weren’t moving.

‘She's so scared. I hope they don't take her to jail. It's not her fault she can't control her powers.’
"I don't want to go to jail!" Gehenna shrieked.

"What?" Adalae asked, confused.

"Y-you said it in your mind!"

“No!” Terror flashed through Adalae, she backed away. "No, stay out of my brain!" Memories of the night that M’gann reached inside her mind washed over her.


"Stop yelling at me!" Gehenna screamed.

Adalae yelped, feeling a pressure in her head. Gehenna’s powers unintentionally pried into her mind. "No!” Adalae shrieked as her vision faded. “Don't go in there! Please!"

"Can't...stop-" Gehenna stuttered as her eyes went white.

The world around them faded.

She felt herself fall, much like that in a dream. Gehenna hit the ground with a painful bounce. She groaned, slowly opening her eyes.

A dark forest surrounded them. Stars faded in and out in the night sky. She pulled herself to her feet, brushing the dirt off her jeans. Adalae stood with her back to her. She wrapped her arms around herself, shaking.

“Nonononono,” she whispered.

“Where...are we?” Gehenna asked.

Adalae turned towards her, crying. Her look of terror caused Gehenna to stumble backwards.

Adalae knew this forest. It was the same one that her and M’gann stumbled upon over a month ago. It was still in her mind. And if it was still here, then that meant...

"You shouldn't have come here."

A multi toned voice rumbled around them. Chains clanked, and out of the darkness it emerged. The wolf that dwelled in the dark corners of Adalae’s dreams.

"What?" Gehenna pushed out, breathless.

"You shouldn't have come here," it’s words replayed.

“What the hell?” Gehenna tried to convince herself she was in a nightmare. But the cool night air and the wolf’s rancid stench nullified her self-assuring fantasy.

Adalae screamed. Gehenna snapped her head towards her. Just like the first time, four thick gashes slashed down Adalae’s back.

“Hey-what, what’s wron-” Gehenna cut herself off as she an inch of blood seeped upwards once again from the soil.

Adalae screamed as more gashes erupted down her chest. "Get out! Get out please!" Adalae begged, clutching at the wounds on her chest. She trembled in unbearable pain. Unable to bear the agony, she fell to the ground, blood soaking her.
Gehenna shook, overwhelmed with confusion and a feeling of uselessness.

The wolf growled, chains clanked as he screamed. “You shouldn’t have come back!”

Gehenna screeched as a chain flew towards her. Her eyes turned white. She held out her arm, her powers knocking the chains away from her. A growl rumbled around them as a barrage of chains charged after her, trying to grab at her wrists. Gehenna’s fear boiled into rage. Her teeth clenched as her powered pulsed through her veins. She found her focus, using her abilities to halt the chains in mid air. She yelled, her psychic powers shattered the chains apart. The wolf yelped as she knocked it to the ground.

"You...have...freed me." The wolf whimpered, crawling to his feet. Astonishment dripped from his words. The ground rumbled. A course sound of tearing shook through the air. A bright stream of light cracked through the night sky.

“Look what you’ve done.” The wolf scolded as he turned his head to Gehenna. “Look what you’ve done.” It’s words were exasperated. “You’ve broken the barrier.” His voice began to fall. “She’ll...remember.”

The world around Gehenna became engulfed in a blinding white light. She felt breathless as her eyes rolled in the back of her head. Her limp body fell on to the blood-soaked ground below.

Adalae woke on the cold sidewalk. She gasped, the harsh sunlight causing spots in her eyes. Mal and Karen knelt next her, concern placated their faces. Her racing heart finally slowed as she realized she was no longer in her mind. Out of the corner of her eye, she witnessed a Bludhaven police officer pull Gehenna off the ground. An inhibitor color clung on the neck of her limp, unconscious body.

Malcom slid his hand behind her neck, helping her sit up. "Adalae? You okay?" He asked, his eyes studied her face, hoping that Gehenna had not brain blasted her. "You all in there?"

"Yeah, I-" Adalae’s words trailed off as an overwhelming wave of images flushed over her. A sudden heat flushed in her chest. "I remember!" She screeched, smiling. "Everything! Everything, I remember, she-" Adalae stumbled over her words.

"What?" Karen asked, perplexed. Girl you're not making any sense."

Adalae grasped her arms, excitement coursing through her. "She opened it. She found them. My memories, she found them!"

Adalae wasn’t sure how Gehenna did it, but her powers had ripped a hole through her amnesia. "I remember everything!" She squeaked. "I remember who I am!"
She scrambled to her feet, a wave of hope rushing over her.

"My name is Emily Briggs. And I know where my parents are."

*New Mexico - Seguro City Limits*
*February 4th, 2017 14:15 MST*

The Bioship sped over the hot desert sands. As signs of civilization appeared, Emily recanted the entirety of her life’s story to Rose, Garfield, and M’gann. Once mundane details had grown a new vibrancy. It took losing her memories for her to fully appreciate them. The promise of a reunion with her parents grew as they encroached on her newly-remembered hometown of Seguro, New Mexico.
M’gann was more than happy to take her home. Grateful, yet silently disappointed that Gehenna helped her in a way that she couldn’t. She sat quiet, a polite smile rested on her face, tuned in to Emily’s words as she piloted the ship.

Garfield listened her stories with utmost enthusiasm. He fed off of her positive energy, a wide grin pulling on his lips. As of late, he had practically become her shadow. And to miss a moment like a reunion with her family, Garfield wouldn’t have even considered the idea. Even if he did have to hide in animal form once on the ground.

Rose however, stared out the window with a stoic silence. A heavy feeling swirled in her stomach as Emily clattered on. She did her best to keep a smile, but suspicion and uneasiness kept pulling down the corners of her lips. She tucked her doubts away from Emily’s radar. As the Bioship flew closer to Seguro, more questions ran through her mind. Everything seemed all too convenient. Too coincidental. And the fact that Emily was expecting to return home and everything be normal...broke Rose’s heart just a little. Well, what little of a heart she had left anyways.

Rose chewed on her numb nail, thoughts flying through her mind in a garbled mess. She wondered the extent of M’gann’s telepathy. How far M’gann could pry into someone’s mind without them noticing.

For this was not the first time she’d ever been to Seguro. In fact, Seguro was home to the very last lab her adoptive parents work at. The very same lab they set ablaze before running off with her into hiding.

‘What is it Rose?’ M’gann’s voice rang inside of Rose’s head. M’gann could feel something was off.

‘Nothing,’ Rose responded quickly. She paused, taking a moment to decide if she should voice her past. ‘It just...makes me nervous that their numbers were disconnected.’

‘Yeah,’ M’gann’s voice on the psychic link softened. ‘Me too.’

Emily had tried to call her parents the moment her memories came back to her, only to find that they were no longer in service. A red flag waved in M’gann’s mind. Her parents had no working contacts. And there were no missing children’s report for the name of ‘Emily Briggs’.

M’gann pushed back the uneasy feeling that something wasn’t right.

But what left her more disturbed and confused was that, despite having a lifetime of memories come back to her, Emily still could not fully remember the night she was found by Jenny and The Pack. Emily still could not recall the details of her ‘accident’. The one that caused her to gain her powers.

That memory of Emily’s still haunted M’gann. Nightmares of the day she dove into Emily’s mind gnawed at her dreams. The ghoulish face reflected in the mirror, the blood soaked ground, and the massive wolf left her waking in a cold sweat.

Was it possible that Emily really still didn’t remember? Had that memory had yet to surface? Or maybe, perhaps maybe, she was hiding the truth from her?

But that answer, M’gann knew better than to seek out. After all, M’gann kept her true Martian form from The Team for a long time before feeling comfortable enough to show them. If Emily was keeping a secret, M’gann trusted her to reveal it when she was ready.

“Here it is! We’re finally here!” Emily’s voice rang throughout the Bioship as she pressed against the window.
Quaint western buildings made up a large part of Downtown Seguro. The small town citizens carried on with the lives, unaware of the camouflaged alien spaceship above them. M’gann slowed the Bioship, waiting for Emily to give her directions to her home.

Emily however, overcome with excitement, found the need to explain every one of the buildings they passed.

“Oh man, that’s my favorite ice cream shop! And that place has the best pizza in town. And that—” Emily cut herself off as they reached the end of the block.

Scorched wooden wreckage sat with lonely confinement on the corner. Chain link fencing wrapped around the wreckage. Signs warning of “Danger” and “Restricted Access” were clipped around the wiring.

“Oh...I forgot,” Emily’s voice dwindled. “I forgot that burnt down.”

Anticipation itched at Rose’s chest. She stared down at the wreckage. The question, whose answers she already knew, fell from her lips. “What was it?”

Emily’s pouted in disappointment. “My doctor’s office...”

Her answer rang in Rose’s ear, the question springing from her mouth. “How often did you go there?”

M’gann shot her a confused expression. She squinted, wondering at Rose’s sudden interest.

Emily, also perplexed, stumbled to find her words. “Once—once a month usually.” She looked out the window at the wreckage. “Dad’s side of the family has all kinds of illnesses. He had them run all kinds of tests all the time.”

Before Rose could ask another question, Emily’s gasped. Her eyes went wide. “Dad! What am I doing?” She shook her head, astonished at herself. “I can’t believe I’m wasting time. M’gann turn down this street.” She pointed with a smile, directing her towards her home.

They landed the bioship quietly in the backyard. M’gann turned off the ship’s camouflage and opened door. Emily rushed out, nearly tripping over her own feet. She pounded her fists excitedly on the back door.

Garfield followed her. Rose and M’gann filled behind him, soaking in the details around them. The sandy backyard was overrun with brush and cacti. The discolored pool had not been tended to for quite some time.

“Hello?” Emily called out, trying to peer into the blinded windows. “Mom? Dad?”

She ran around to the front. Gar, M’gann, and Rose trailed behind her. Decorative gravel crunched beneath their feet. As Emily pounded on the front door, M’gann felt Rose nudge her elbow into her side. Rose nodded towards the mailbox. Letters and manila envelopes overflowed inside.

They flashed each other the same concerned looks. It didn’t take M’gann’s telepathy for them to know what the other was thinking.

No one was home. And no one had been home for a long time.

“I don’t understand,” Emily signed with a huff. She tried wiggling the doorknob again, only to find it was still locked. She looked over to the garage, furrowing her brows at the two vehicles that sat in
the front of it. “Their cars are here...I don’t understand why they wouldn’t be home.”

The silent stillness of the house left Garfield with a sudden uneasiness. His ears twitched as he strained to hear even the tiniest noise inside. But he couldn’t. No movement nor human smells came from inside the house. Only stale air crept from it’s cracks.

Emily hummed to herself. She tried her best not to let disappointment soil her hopeful excitement. “Maybe...they’re on vacation?” She looked across the street, the middle school she once attended held a handful of cars and bicycles in the parking lot. An idea sparked in her mind. If all was normal in Seguro after she disappeared, her friends would be getting out of tennis practice any minute.

“Let’s stop by the school,” she suggested with a smile. “My friends will know where they are!”

“Ad-Emily, maybe you should-” M’gann tried to interject, but Emily had already charged across the street. M’gann tossed Rose a worried look. She wasn’t sure just ‘popping by’ was the best way to reveal to her friends that she wasn’t dead. Garfield morphed into a tiny lizard and climbed onto M’gann’s shoulder. The three of them followed in behind her.

Emily gasped as she rounded the corner of school. There, on picnic table by the tennis courts, stood her two best friends: Rodney Gaynor and Marissa Dillon. They chatted as they gathered their equipment into their gym bags.

A sudden sadness shot through Emily. She wondered how many laughs they shared while she was gone? How many new memories with them had she missed out on? Enough time was wasted already. There really wasn’t any other way to break the news to them, she decided it best to break it to them fast and hard.

Emily approached them. And before she could say a word, Rodney met her eye contact.

Time froze between them. His face turned as white as a ghost he believed he was seeing. Rodney grasped at the table to hold himself up. It took the last bit of the air in his lungs for him to speak. “Holy shit…”

Marissa turned around to see what had caught his attention. Her eyes fell upon Emily. She screeched, backing her body against Rodney. She clutched her hand to her face, body shaking as her blood ran cold.

“Hey guys…” Emily broke the silence with a small voice. She planned all night for this reunion. She mapped out the words to say. But now, every moment she had prepared, suddenly escaped her. “Um-” She found it hard to meet the gaze. “I’m...alive.”

A shaky breath fell from Marissa’s lips. The girl in front of her may have looked a little different. The friend in front of her might have been pronounced dead months ago. But that voice, dear god that voice was unmistakable.

“Emily?” She croaked out.

Emily gave her a small nod. She prayed that they would be able to forgive her. “It’s me.”

Marissa twitched at the sound of her voice again. She swallowed hard, taking a few careful steps towards her. She reached out her hand, fingertips gliding with a light touch over her cheeks. A wobbled, almost hysterical chuckle escaped her. Her eyes filled with tears at the affirmation that, no she wasn’t going crazy. No, she wasn’t seeing a ghost. Emily was alive. Her best friend was alive.
Rose, M’gann, and a transformed Garfield watched from a few feet away. They jumped as Marissa clutched her arms around Emily’s shoulders. A wail fell from her throat as her tears dripped against Emily’s skin.

“You’re...really...here,” Marissa choked between sobs.

Emily nearly fell off her feet and Rodney bear hugged the both of them. He pressed his forehead against Emily’s, his own tears staining his cheeks.

“I can’t believe it,” he chirped. “It really is you.”

Emily could no longer keep herself from crying. She embraced them back with a severe desperation. Terrified that this newly found feeling of belonging would be ripped from her arms. Her life was back. The ones she loved were finally coming back to her. And this time she would never let anything take that away from her again.

A smile crept upon M’gann’s lips. She had forgotten that her time with The Team had left her jaded. It was nice to finally see some good in the world. For nothing usually ended well for kids like them.

Rose turned her head away. Their gentle coos and welcomes turned her stomach sour. She rolled her eyes, their private moment grinding at her nerves. She couldn’t tell if her irritation with them stemmed from her impatience or…..jealousy.

“What-what happened to you?” Marissa, finally able to construct a full sentence, pulled away. She wiped the tears from her cheeks.

Emily sighed as Rodney let her go. She gave a sad shake of her head. “I don’t know.” She bit at her lower lip. “I was hoping you guys could tell me.”

Marissa looked over at Rodney, her jaw falling open. “You don’t...remember?” She asked.

Emily rubbed the back of her neck. “I remember being in a park.” She glanced over at M’gann, her eyes falling to the ground. “And I think, I remember...blood.” Images of the events in her brain, the slashes down her back, prodded at her. “And some pain. But I,” She shut them out. “That’s it.” She looked over at M’gann. “They rescued me.” She decided they didn’t need to know about her powers and The Pack just yet. “My memories didn’t come back until yesterday.”

Marissa shook her head in affirmation. “Yeah we-we were on a class trip. Almost everyone in our class went on a camping trip to the Franklin Mountains State Park. You know, the one by El Paso?”

M’gann let out a small gasp. That must have been how The Pack found her.

Marissa continued, scratching at her arm, as if trying to offset the pain of the memory. “You went out on a trail on your own to take some pictures. You wanted to take pictures of the sunset.”

The memory of that trail finally popped into Emily’s mind. She remembered finding the perfect spot and waiting. Waiting for the sun to place itself in the just right place. She sat on the sand, leaning against a large rock. The hike was so tiring, the sun had been so hot. She dozed off with the cooling air.

“The sun was down for hours and nobody could find you.” Marissa’s voice shook. “They had search parties everywhere. No one-no one found your body but....” Marissa began to cry again. “There was this spot in just a little ways off the trail.” She choked. “There was so much blood all over the ground.”
Emily shook at her memory of darkness. That distinct sting as something clawed at her back.

“They found your camera, your phone, parts of your clothes.” Marissa shook her head, as if she almost didn’t believe what she saw. “And paw prints. Big pawprints.”

Emily’s chest tightened. She remember the red eyes in the dark, and the chilling growl that had rumbled the ground below her.

“The police said you were attacked and-and eaten by a wolf, a mountain lion, something.” Marissa’s composure began to fade. “We all went to your funeral.” She rallied against her sadness, pushing out small smile. “But you’re alive.”

Emily smiled back and nodded. “I’m alive.” She grasped Marissa’s hand in affirmation. She swallowed hard, not wanting to break the moment. But they were not the only people she travel across the U.S. to see.

“Have you seen my parents?” Emily asked. “Their cars are still in the yard, but they didn't answer.”

Marissa gasped, letting go of Emily’s hand. She looked over at Rodney, the inner corners of his brows turned upwards in pity.

“You don't...you don't know.” Marissa shook her head, mouth agape. “Are we the first people you've talked to?”

Emily squinted in confusion. “Yeah, why?” She grew impatient at their silence. “Guys, where are my parents?”

Rodney cleared his throat, taking a moment to gather his thoughts. “We don't...we don't really know where your Dad is. A few months after you...died...he skipped town. No one’s heard from him.”

“What?” Emily gasped. “That doesn't...that doesn't sound like him at all.” She paused in disbelief. “You mean...you mean he just...how could he just abandon my mom that?”

“No...” Rodney answered, slow. “She...she left him.”

Emily twitched at his answer. “What do you mean? They got a divorce?”

“No...Emily,” Marissa took both of her hand in her’s. She took a deep breath, trying to muster her words. “You-you have to understand...there was a lot of blood at the crime scene. And-and even though they couldn't find your body...that much blood...they didn't think...nobody thought you could have survived. Everyone thought you were dead.” She bit her lower lip, not wanting to continue.

“Your parents took it rough.” She shook her head with a slow sympathy. “You can't imagine how hard it was for them. Your mom,” Tears swelled in her eyes, remembering the state of Emily’s mother. “I’ve never seen anyone so just utterly broken with grief.” She squeezed Emily’s hands, her voice cracking. “She loved you so much.”

“What are talking about?” Emily beamed, now impatient and irritated.

“Emily…” Marissa croaked. “Your mom killed herself.”

For Emily, in that moment, the world stopped turning. The entirety of space and time thrown into an unbearable, sickening, screeching halt. The words grated in Emily’s ear, their sting freezing the air in her lungs. She couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t think, she couldn't feel the warmth of Marissa’s skin in her hands.
Rose and M’gann looked at one another in surprised horror. Unable to think, to respond, to move. The answer to their suspicions, far worse than they could have imagined.

A breathless silence poisoned their air around them. Emily’s jaw trembled as her eyes darted around Marissa’s face. Her chest tightened and limbs shook.

“How?” The coarse, stern words shot from the back of Emily’s throat. A masochistic, stupid, unchecked curiosity seeped in her mind. As if she were no longer a part of the world around her, as if she were now only hearing a sad story.

Marissa swallowed hard, her soft, broken voice slow to answer. “About a month after your funeral—” She stopped her sentence short, her jaw tightened. Unabashedly and truthfully, Rodney answered for her. “She slit her wrists in the bathtub.”

“Rodney!” Marissa hissed, her words pushed through her clenched teeth.

“What?” He asked, brows furrowed. “She deserves the right to know.”

“Not that much detail you dumbass.” Marissa scolded.

Heart pounding, M’gann’s eyes fell on Emily. Her hand trembled, contemplating on if she should reach out to her.

“Emily?” Marissa asked as M’gann came closer. Emily only stared at her with a slacked jaw. “Emily? Say something, please.”

M’gann placed a hand on Emily’s shoulder. The feel of her hand snapped Emily back into her dark, painful reality. M’gann’s touch made her realized that she was here, this was real.

She tried to catch her breath as her chest became unbearably tight. Her breathing short, shallow and raspy. An all too familiar feeling of panic creeped up her spine. So she did the only thing she could. She ran.

Emily spun out of M’gann’s grasp. She bolted away from the tennis courts. The ground gliding below her as her feet carried her faster than any other time before. They took her to the place she traveled so far to see. They took her to the place she had daydreamed, and fantasized, and reminisced about for hours.

They took her home.

They were wrong.

Marissa was wrong.

Everything was fine.

It was fine.

It had to be fine.

Emily smashed against the locked front door. Something savage and desperate clawed beneath her skin. It was fine.

Everything behind that door, was fine.
Her mother,

Her father,

They would be there.

Emily’s eyes began to glow as she growled, tears falling down her cheeks. And she, with the use of her newly formed metahuman strength, kicked in open the door and charged inside.

“Emily!” M’gann’s voice filled the front yard as she bolted up the walkway. Garfield leaped from her shoulder, morphing into his regular form. Rose followed right behind her them.

“Em-” M’gann’s words drowned in her mouth as they stepped foot in the house.

A chilling quiet seeped around them. The dust coated furnishings sat silent, untouched. Their presence, monuments of memories long gone. Resting in this dissident mausoleum that was once called ‘home’. Eerie eyes of family photographs and childhood memories stared at them from the walls, dust fogging their glass coating.

Emily stood, unmoving and silent next to the dining room table. It’s cold, glazed mahogany rested under her palm.

“Emily?” M’gann’s words were slow and nearly silent. “Are you okay?”

A moment of silence filled the room.

“I sat here,” Emily answered, placing her hand on one of the end chairs. “No, I sit here.” Her words were quiet but steady. “And Dad sis there.” She motioned to the chair on her right and one to the left. “And mom sit there.”

She took slow steps into the kitchen. Rotting fruit sat in a bowl on the counter, tiny fruit flies buzzing over it.

“That’s weird,” Emily stated, a chilling numbness to her words. “Mom usually throws out stuff before it goes bad.”

Rose’s jaw slacked open. She looked at M’gann with a worried look of pity, concerned at Emily’s use of the present tense. Neither of them noticed that Garfield had began to shake.

Emily walked past them, making her way to the other side of the house. They followed her with cautious movements. She walked into the bedroom on the right side of the hall. Rose, Garfield, and M’gann stood close to the doorway.

“This is my room.” Emily informed, eyes glazing over all of her trinkets. She placed her hand on the mirrored dresser. This is my vanity. My mom taught me how to do my makeup here.” She picked up a framed photo it shelved. A picture of her and her mother, smiled, dressed in their very best, holding Playbills titled ‘Guys and Dolls’.

A small smile appeared and dissipated from Emily’s lips. “I think know where I got the name Adalae from, now.” She looked up at them and then back down at the photo in her hands. “It’s close to this character’s name, Adelaide, from the first show we ever say together. She took me to see it, and I fell so in love with theatre.” The smiled stayed this time.

“After the show I told her I wanted to act, and model, and sing, and dance.” A small laugh escaped her, she looked up at them with watery eyes. “So you know what she did? She called up every talent
agency in New Mexico to get me an audition.” She placed the photo back down, sadness flowing through her veins. A dreary chuckled escaped her. “Yeah, I remember. She used to call me her ‘Little Adelaide’.”

She walked towards the door, her eyes never meeting theirs’. “She'd sing it to me too.” Emily’s hand glided across the wallpaper as she walked down the end of the hall. Her soft, somber serenade echoing around them.

“Sooo sue me, sue me,”

‘I can't do this,’ Rose’s words jarred on the psychic link. M’gann snapped her head in her direction. Rose’s lip trembled with a strange anger. ‘I can't watch her do this to herself.’

“Shoot bullets through me.”

‘She needs this. She needs to do this,’ M’gann responded, trying to placate Rose’s worry. ‘She needs this to say goodbye.’

“I loooove y-”

Emily’s singing ceased as she stood in the doorway of the other bedroom. She held her breath as she walked into it. The others followed in behind her.

“This was their room.” She looked over that the dresser, shining badges hung in display cases. “Those are all of Dad’s military medals.” She inhaled through her nose, trying one last time to remember her father’s cologne, her mother’s incense. “It still smells like….smells like…”

Her words trailed off as she turned her head towards a closed door. Her heart pounded in her chest. The stern heartbeat ringing in her ear. Emily stared at the white door, a chill flowing through her veins. She knew what was behind that door.

Thier bathroom. Their bathtub. The same place where...where….

What was that smell?....It was coming from behind that door.

Garfield’s claws dug into the matted carpet. His shaking breaths rumbled in his lungs. Anxiety knawed in his throat. News of Emily’s mother’s passing...brought about memories of his own mother.

Marie Logan. Murdered by Queen Bee.

He tried to shake his sullen feelings away. But something kept pulling him back in. Something dug them up as fast as he buried them. Something….a smell. What was it? Beast Boy inhaled the air around him. A faint sting of metallic air wafting in his nose. A dull, hazy stench of copper.

No.

Oh no oh no oh no oh no.

A bolt of panic leaped in his chest as Emily took a step towards the bathroom door.

“Emily-” His words garbled in this closing throat. “Emily don't!”

She rush for the door. Her hand turning the knob before Garfield could finish his warning.
She screamed.

The white tile of the bathroom floor, crusted with a sickening web of long evaporated blood. Red stains cascaded down the side of the tub. The crime scene markers still lay firmly in place. No one had bothered to wash away the leftovers of her mother’s sorrow. No one had remembered to erase her last moment of desperate despair.

And for the first time since hearing the news, her mother’s death finally became real.

Emily continued to scream as she collapsed onto her hands and knees.

Garfield clawed at his chest, unable to breathe. His mind playing sick hallucinations before his eyes. The tub overflowed with a wave of crimson. Jungle sprouted around him. The tub flooded into a lake around him. His mother’s overturned car morphing before him.

He had to get out.

He had to get the *fuck* out.

Garfield yelped as he cried. He raced out of the bedroom, his ribs digging into his lungs.

M’gann called after him, overwhelmed by the sights and sounds around her.

“Go after him!” Rose yelled at her, looking back as she tried to pick an inconsolable, shrieking Emily up off of the floor. “I got her. Go after him!”

M’gann nodded without a second thought. She zoomed through the house, crashing through the backdoor.

Garfield sat hunched over the in the sandy backyard. He grasped at his head, scratching away at the memories inside. He sobbed, tears dripping down his chin.

M’gann knelt in front of him, lightly putting his head between her palms.

‘Garfield, what is it?’ Her voice rang in head head. ‘Show me.’

His mind brought her back to a familiar scene. The waterfall roared as his mother’s overturned car swathed in the shallow water.

But a new chapter of that memory, played for her for the very first time. A ten year old Garfield Logan, with a trembling lip and tear stained cheeks, jumped into the water. Somehow drunk on fruitless hope. Delusional on the notion that maybe, somehow, she survived. That he could pull her out.

He called out to her as he trudged through the water, its waves crashing against his chest.

And then it appeared, like a swarm of crimson locus, a steady flow of blood trailed from the car. The crashing waves of the waterfall racing it towards him.

That smell. That metallic smell of his mother’s blood. His growing senses picking up the stench more efficiently than anytime before.

That was when he knew. That was the moment of slaughtered hope. The downfall of his delusion that he still had a mother.

M’gann pulled out of his mind, and pulled him to her chest. She held him tight against her, his sobs muffled against her clothing. Tears poured down her cheeks as guilt suffocated her.
What had she done? What had she done by bringing them here?

Inside the house, Emily’s screams shattered through the walls. The cries and shrieks grated against Rose’s ears. She fought back as Rose tried to pull her away. She waved her arms twisted out of her grasp.

Irritation crawled under Rose’s skin. Emily’s uncooperative behavior and loudness tried her patience. She couldn’t stay there. She didn’t need to see the aftermath. She had to have known it was going to hurt her. So why did she choose to open that door?

Rose grabbed Emily by the waist. She scratched at the floors and counters as Rose tried to pull her away.

“Noooo!” Emily’s hoarse wails bellowed from deep inside her. Her sobbing reminiscent of a toddler. “Mamaaa!”

A shiver snaked up Rose’s spine. A cold, desperate feeling of guilt overcame her. For this wasn’t just her teammate she held in her arms. This wasn’t just a metahuman she was struggling against. Emily was a child. A child who just came face-to-face, with her mother’s self inflicted passing.

“Mommy!” Emily clenched her eyes tight as her squeal blared against the bathroom tiles.

Rose’s breathing waived. Her eyes watered with the growing tingle in her nose. Desperation ate at her.

She had to get Emily out. She had to take her away from...that place.

With swift motions, Rose yanked Emily out of the bathroom. Though she fought Rose every step of the way, she dragged her out. Emily’s nails tore at the wallpaper as Rose carried her down the hall.

Rose pulled Emily into her old bedroom. She collapsed onto the floor, bringing Rose down with her. Rose placed Emily’s head between her hands. She grasped onto Rose’s arms, her sharpening nails digging into her skin.

Emily’s sobs began to choke her. Her breathing shallow, breaths caught in her throat.

A tinge of panic shot through Rose.


Emily shook in Rose’s hands. Her choking only strengthening her flow of tears. Fear spiraled in her stomach. A strange warmth tore at her chest.

Rose’s jaw fell open as Emily’s eyes turned yellow. Her teeth slowly became fine points. Emily’s panic was talking hold. Morphing her powers into something no one had ever seen. But this was not the right time. She was in no state to lose control. Rose had to tear down Emily’s adrenaline, make her gain control again, and fast.

“Fuck,” Rose whispered to herself. “How the fuck did Gar do this?”

And then she remember.

“Count!” Rose blurted in desperation. “Breathe, kid. Count with me.”

Rose counted upwards and downwards in steps of three. Inhaling and exhaling with each set.
Emily slowly gained control of her breathing. Her facial features morphing to their normal shape and color. She looked at Rose with large, broken eyes. Her lip quivered, shaking under the chilling cold of the truth.

Emily crawled into Rose’s lap. Her soft cries muffled as she pressed her head softly on Rose’s chest.

“Why did she leave?” Emily sniffled. “Why did she leave me? Why did she go?” Her soft, fractured, squeaking voice nearly inaudible. She grabbed Rose’s shirt as she nuzzled against it. Tears falling with her painful, desperate questions. “Why?”

Rose’s chest heaved as an all too familiar feeling of loss roared inside her. Unable to stop herself as a tear fell down her own cheek. Rose shook her head, angry at how helpless she was to help her.

She held Emily tight, unable to give the answer she so desperately sought.

Bludhaven - The Warehouse
February 5th, 2017
02:10 EDT

Garfield sat against the wall, the ajar basement door next to him. His arms resting on his knees as the lull of sleep pulled on his eyes. His ears twitched as he listened intently to the voices of M’gann and Nightwing from behind the door. Today had drained him of the will and energy to face his sister or teammates. But he still wanted to hear the next steps of their plan for Emily. A bothersome concoction of anger, disappointment and sadness festered inside him as he eavesdropped.

“Well?” M’gann’s tiny voice echoed in the basement of The Warehouse.

Nightwing sighed. His fingers diligently tapped on the floating computer screens. He looked over at M’gann, shaking his head.

“It’s true.” He answered. “She was pronounced dead in June of last year.”

M’gann approached the computer screen. Her eyes scanned the digital copy of Emily’s death certificate and the heartwarming obituary in the Seguro paper. Nightwing even managed to find the police report of her ‘accident’.

M’gann squeezed her eyes shut, gritting her teeth in anger at herself. “I can’t believe I only searched missing children’s reports. I don’t know why I didn’t think to look for obituaries.”

Dick tilted his head in understanding. “I think you just got caught up in her excitement.”

M’gann siffled and wiped away her angry tears.

“Heyheyhey,” Nightwing interrupted her. He placed his hands on her shoulder to calm her. Her staggered breathing and tear-stained cheeks gave him clues to her overwhelmed state. “Everything is going to be fine.” He said in a slow, soft voice. “You’re doing everything you can to the best of your
ability.” When she looked away, he moved his head to meet her eye contact. “I know that whatever you’re doing, you’re doing it to help. Not to hurt. Ba’arzz knows that. Emily knows that. Garfield knows that.”

Nightwing perked at saying Garfield’s name. His hands slid off of M’gann’s shoulders. “What um, what did happen to Gar today?”

M’gann shook her head in disappointment. She looked up at Nightwing with tired, sad eyes. “He had another one of his episodes today.”

Beast Boy let out a small growl. He scratched at the skin on his arms. M’gann had promised that she wouldn’t tell anyone about his ‘episodes’. About his ‘triggers’. About his ‘Post Traumatic Stress’ as Black Canary called it. He scoffed at the thought. The only this it was to him was….embarrassing. How was he supposed to be a superhero, when a single object could leave him in a frozen or hysteric state of mind? A waterfall, a color, a smell…

Now even more people knew about his fragility. Emily saw it. Rose saw it. And apparently, even Nightwing knew.

“I’ll schedule him more sessions with Dinah.”

Garfield scoffed at Nightwing’s statement. He jumped to his feet. He grew tired of eavesdropping. He dreaded talking about his feelings. Not just because the idea of another person knowing his dark thoughts was, terrifying. But because no matter how much he talked about, how sad or angry he may be…it wouldn’t bring back his mother. It wouldn’t save her from Queen Bee. It wouldn’t placate his guilt. It wouldn’t change the past. It wouldn't make him be there to save her, be there for her.

Just like how he wasn't there for Emily.

Beast Boy growled as he made his way towards his bedroom. Berating himself for not being able to say something, anything, to Emily when she needed it most. He sighed, bags pulled under his eyes. His mind and emotions were drained, he could feel the call of his bed from down the hall.

He paused in the dark hallway. His ear twitched as he heard the tiniest noise. Just a squeak of the floorboards maybe?

He found himself outside of Emily’s room. He stood there for a moment as the noise pinged in his ear again. Although this time, he recognized it as a muffled sob.

It must have been Emily. She must have been crying.

He heard another tiny sob from the other side of her door. He could tell from their hushed tones that she was trying her best to stay as quiet as she could. As soon as they arrived back to The Warehouse, she locked herself in her bedroom.

He felt his heart breaking.

There she was in her room alone, alone and hurting. A child grieving the loss of a mother she loved so much, with no one around to help pick up the pieces. He knew all too well what that felt like.

Beast boy turned and lightly knocked on her door.

“Hey, Emily?” He said softly. “Um. It’s me.”
He would be damned if he let her hurt by herself.

Beast Boy could hear a soft sniffle and a ruffling of feet across carpet. Emily took a moment to gather herself before opening the door. Beast Boy watched the light from the hallway spill onto her face as she opened it. She kept her face tucked down slightly, her gaze almost always on the floor. He could see the sticky shine upon her cheeks of the tears that she had wiped away. Her eyes contained the faintest hint of red.

Silence fell between them. Beast Boy knew that she was not going to be the one to speak first. But what could he say?

’I’m sorry your mom’s dead? I’m sorry for your loss? Everything gets better in time? You’ll be ok?’

He couldn’t bear the thought of uttering something so cliche. He knew better than anyone exactly how little those sentiments meant or helped.

“Hey,” was all that he could muster.

“Hey,” she responded, without eye contact, wrapping an arm around herself.

Beast Boy felt incredibly awkward. As if he were trying too hard. But he just wanted to help her. He knew more than anyone the sting of the wound of losing one’s mother.

He suddenly knew what to ask. Something that he wished would have been asked to him when his mom died. Something that would have made it easier to crawl out of the pit of of unbearable loneliness.

“Um,” His eyes darted back and forth trying to pick the perfect way to say it. He took a deep breath before looking at her, “Do you want some company?”

Beast Boy could see the rush of water in her eyes. A grimace formed on her mouth; as she held back a rush of tears. She gave a few rapid nods of her head ‘yes’. As Beast Boy walked into her room and shut the door behind him, Emily walked back to her bed and laid back down on top of it. She did not care where Beast Boy went while he was in there, just his presence was enough. But she didn’t want to leave the security of her bed. She laid there, wanting so badly to cry but was not yet ready to do so in front of him again.

Hesitant, Beast Boy followed her. He stopped at the end of her bed. His animal senses bombarded him with the scent and feel of her sadness. It made him sick to know that anyone else would ever feel that same way that he once did. He diligently climbed upon her bed, laid next to her, and carefully slid an arm underneath her. He wrapped the other around to middle of her back and pulled her in close. Her soft breaths patted against his chest as he placed his chin on the top of her head.

After a moment of silence, Beast Boy cleared his throat. His voice trembled, “When… when my mom died almost a year ago. She…she drove herself off a cliff. And-and I wasn’t there.” He paused, starting to feel his own tears form. “I wasn’t there to save her.” He could feel Emily stir slightly.

He clenched his eyes at the painful memory. The sight of his mother’s car flipped over, swathing in the base of a waterfall would be something that he knew would haunt him for a long time.

“What I want to say Emily is…” he shook his head, telling her the words he wished he would have heard.

“What I want to say is that whatever it is you’re feeling…you’re allowed to feel it. You’re allowed to feel sad. You’re allowed to feel angry. You’re allowed to feel scared. You’re allowed to feel
disappointed. You’re allowed to feel whatever it is that comes across you. But...but just don’t forget that you have us now. You still have a family. So...whatever it is that you are feeling Emily...you don’t have to feel it alone.”

Beast Boy felt her press her face firmly against his chest. She wrapped her arm around him and pulled them tighter together. He heard her sharp inhale just before she let everything go. Her loud sobs filling the room as she, in the warm embrace of this wonderful boy, finally felt safe enough to fall apart again.

Beast Boy held her even tighter as she cried. He nuzzled his face into her hair as his own tears began to slide down his cheeks.

“You’ll never be alone again, I promise.”
Virgil's head *pounded* with the creaking of an opening screen door. When he was asked to join the team no one saying *anything* about early morning - *Saturday* morning - training sessions with Black Lightning. With his mentor and The Team eating up his free time, he was grateful when Frieda offered to help tutor him.

"Frieda? Mr. and Mrs. Goren?" Virgil called as he stepped into the house. He heard footsteps above him and followed the noise upstairs. Only silence greeted him. Faint mumbling fell from behind Frieda's bedroom door. He knocked.

"Come in!" Frieda's high pitched voice bellowed through the cracks of her bedroom door.

Virgil opened it as he spoke, "Hey, just stoppin' by for that chemistry home...work…"

His voice trailed off as his brows bunched in confusion. His eyes darted about the room. Squeaks and squeals roared in the air. Ten mouse cages sprinkled Frieda's room; covering her floor and dressers. Each with a clipboard attached to its' side. Glass beakers, microscopes, and other slightly terrifying scientific instruments sat askew on her desk. A small flame burned under a test tube as light blue liquid gently boiled inside it.

Crazed frizz of red hair slowly escaped the bun on her head. She wore a white lab coat, goggles, and latex gloves. She scribbled furiously on a clipboard, cursing under her breath.

She turned towards him, her eyes widening in excitement. "Oh! Virgil! I'm glad you're here. Do me a favor and put on those gardening gloves." She pointed to her desk before reaching into one of the cages.

"Umm...why?" He asked, perplexed and slightly afraid.

She groaned and rolled her eyes. "Just do it," she called over her shoulder.

Virgil shook his head, begrudgingly putting on the gloves.

"Hold this please." She skurried over to him, carrying a tiny white mouse in her hand. She handed it off to Virgil and reached for a syringe on her desk. "This part's *sooo* much easier if I don't have to hold them myself." She placed the needle into the boiling blue liquid and sucked up a tiny amount into the syringe. She moved over to Virgil, grabbing his gloved hand to tighten his grip on the mouse. "You're not squeamish right?" She asked.

"Wha-" Virgil wasn't given enough time to process her question.

"Hold him tight," She instructed, holding the tiny needle up to the scruff of the mouse's neck. "You move and I could prick you."

The closer the needle moved, the more the mouse writed in Virgil's hand. It squealed as Frieda injected it with the blue liquid. Virgil's stomach curdled as the poor thing was helpless under his grip.
"Ohhh God," He looked away. It also didn't help that needles gave him a mild case of the willies. "I'm gonna be sick."

Frieda smiled and shook her head."You're such a baby." She took the now limp mouse from his hand and placed it back in it's cage. She pulled out a clipboard, jotting down notes and numbers. "Oh, the homework's in my backpack under the desk, yellow folder," she called over her shoulder.

Virgil waited for a moment, pausing to see if she would explain herself. "Uh, Frieda...what are you doing? What did I just help you do?" He motioned around the room. "The hell are all these mice for?"

Frieda sucked on her teeth, she looked at him with a worried expression. "Okay...don't be mad at me."

Virgil's lips bunched into the corner of his mouth. He raised an eyebrow at her in suspicion. "What are you doing that would make me mad at you?"

She scratched at her neck. "Welll I miiiight be...sorta...kinda….running an elaborate experiment with Spark."

"What?" His jaw dropped in disbelief. He pointed to her desk. "Is that-Is that what's boiling in there? Is that what you injected that mouse with?"

"Yeah-oh shoot!" She turned towards the mouse cage, fumbling for the stopwatch in her lab coat pocket. "I'm supposed to record how long it takes for a visible reaction!" She growled and shook her head. "Dammit, I'll just have to run this test again."

"You're running a drug lab...in your bedroom?!" Virgil exclaimed. "This cannot be legal."

"Okay first of all, rude." She cocked her hip, holding up a finger at him. "I'm a scientist, not an addict. I'm running a controlled experiment with drugs not making them." She held up another finger. "Second of all, pretty much your team and the JLA are the only ones who know of Spark so, it's technically not illegal...yet."

He place his hand over his mouth, staring at her wide-eyed with disbelief. "You do realize you're a crazy person, right?"

She smirked. "Crazy and genius border the same line,"

"A very fine line," Virgil replied with an eyeroll.

"Hey, I'm doing this for you guys," she retorted. "You're the ones out saving the world and I wanna help. If I can crack the code on this thing, figure out what makes it tick, maybe we can fully understand it. Even make an anecdote." She smiled wide, staring off in wonder. "That would so get me first place in the District Science Fair."

Virgil's jaw slacked in disbelief.

Science...science fair? Oh dear God this crazy white girl was going to be the death of him.

"How did you even get a hold of some?" He asked.

She squinted, sporting a nervous grin. "Don't be mad at me?"

He sighed, closing his eyes. "Frieda..." He had a feeling he wasn't going to like this story.
"Sooo when Francis threw that party and he was freaking out and you told me to get everyone outside," She bit her lower lip. "Well I kinda, sorta saw that there was a half a bag left on the coffee table...so I took it."

"You stole evidence from a crime scene!??" He yelped.

"For science!" she retorted.

"Oh my God," Virgil replied, rubbing his fingers on his his temple. "Now that was definitely illegal."

"Oh come on," She said with a shrug. "It's not like I just took it and didn't help the police. I was the only one sober so I had to tell the police what happened, walk him through his house…" Her voice trailed off as her eyes fell to the floor. "His room."

Worry placated Virgil's face. His irritation evolving into guilt. With all that had been going on with The Team, it was easy for him to shake off what had happened that day at Francis's house. But that moment still had yet to leave Frieda. She still woke some nights, drenched in tears and a cold sweat. Nightmares of the assault that could have been haunted her dreams.

His unwanted touch in her slumber felt as violating as it was in real life.

"I shoulda been there for you afterwards," Virgil broke the silence with his quiet voice. He took her hands in his. Guilt still plagued him. He had to flee from the police to keep his secret identity from being compromised. But near-trauma can be just as haunting as trauma itself. He should have been there for support. "You shouldn't have been alone."

"I wasn't alone, my mom came." She said, a lull of sadness in her tone. She squeezed his hands in reassurance. "I'm a minor so they had to call her anyways."

"You still pressing charges?"

"Yeah," She shrugged. "I don't know if anything will come of it. One of those he-said she-said type of things are hard to prosecute."

"Not if you had a witness to testify,"

"Stop," She knew where he was going. She couldn't let him testify, the police still had no idea he was there. "I told you, you can't. I don't want you to take a chance of compromising your secret identity." A sad smile pulled at her lips, remembering how he had saved her."You did more than enough for me." She cleared her throat, dissipating the awkward aura of the room. "But, anyyyways. I might have a teeeeney tiny favor to ask of you."

"What?" He asked, crossing his arms.

"So...you're still on the roster for that bust in El Paso today, right?"

"Yeah…." He answered hesitantly. Why did he tell her everything that went on with the team? Oh, right, because she's incredulously nosy.

She paused, giving him a nervous grin. "I need you to steal some for me."

"Oh H-h-helllllll naw," he answered in a sing-song voice.
"Virgil -"

He held his hand out in front of him to stop her. "You must me outta yo' damn mind."

"Please! I'm so close to a breakthrough and I'm almost out!"

"You realize how much trouble I could get into?"

"Yes but-" She growled with a small stamp of her food. "Virgil I know I can do this. I know I can figure this out. I wanna help too." She paused, gathering her words. "I'm not-I'm not strong like you. But I have this big brain and, God, you know, you know I am so annoyingly relentless." She looked up at him, fists curling in determination. "I know that I can do good with this. That I might be able to save people. Please. Please just help me do this."

She looked at him with soft, watery eyes. Eyes that carried a sad, adorable pleading that Virgil found himself sucked into the longer he stared. The longer they held his attention, the bigger they appeared, and the weaker Virgil's resistance to them became.

How? How are girls so good at that?

"Fine," He growled with a roll of his eyes. What the hell was she getting him into? "Since it's, technically not illegal yet."

She squealed with excitement, wrapping him in a tight hug. "Thankyouthankyouthankyou."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Oh, also." Frieda pulled herself out of her celebration. She skurried over to her desk. She picked up two new syringes. She turned towards Virgil, snapping on a new latex glove. "I need a couple vials of your blood."

"What!?"

Bludhaven - The Warehouse
February 11th, 2017
16:30 EDT

A foreign quiet crept through the walls. Only the sounds of a sizzling pan graced the air. Rose stood in front of the stove. A light smell of cumin wafted around her as she poured the contents in the pan onto a plate.

She took a deep breath. Taking a moment to listen.

A gentle flow of water from the bathroom sink ceased. Emily opened the bathroom door, darting for her room.

But in a swift motion, with plate in hand, Rose glided towards her. Rose's foot stopped the door before Emily could close it. She jump at Rose's sudden presence.

"Oh, sorry." Rose responded with an awkward inflection. "Didn't mean to scare you."

"It's fine," Emily mumbled with a roll of her eyes. She turned her back on Rose, making her way to her bed. She sat, pretending to be interested in the cartoon that flashed upon her television.
Heavy, dark bags rested under her eyes. Mental and physical exhaustion dripped off of her. It had been the same routine over and over every day the entire week. She would leave her room for a brief moment, or someone would knock on her door. Her teammates would express their apologies, mutter some cliche about how "everything will get better", or lecture the importance of taking care of herself.

She would nod her head at their sentiments. Let their words flow unregistered as she wallowed in her sadness. Her despair. Her guilt. Drowning for so long in her anguish that she...no longer felt anything at all.

Nothing but self destructive numbness.

"So uh, how you doin kiddo?" Rose regretted the words as soon as they left her lips.

Emily merely glanced at her with cold, empty eyes before taking them back to the television.

Rose groaned at herself. "Yeahhh...that was stupid." She cleared her throat, holding out the dish of food in her hand. "I made dinner. Your favorite."

Steak; rare, lightly seared & bloody.

Rose's cringed at the sight of it. She set it down on Emily's dresser. Her plate from breakfast sat there, untouched.

Rose paused, looking over at Emily. Rose was certain she had not consumed anything since...that day.

"Ya gotta eat, ya know."

Emily made no noise nor gesture. She merely waited for Rose to leave.

Rose growled in irritation, scratching at her forehead. She turned to leave but paused. She bit her lip, preparing her words before hand. She wasn't good at socializing in general. Let alone talking about...feelings.

"Hey, uh..." She turning towards Emily, reaching for her back pocket. "Here. I, I brought this for you." She pulled out a small framed photo. Rose's words were soft as her gaze fell to the floor.

Emily looked at Rose with cautious eyes before reaching out her hand.

Rose continued, her voice unsteady. "It's that picture you liked, from your room."

Emily let out a shaky gasp as she pulled the photo in close to her. The photo of she and her mother, with smiles on their faces, and Playbills in their hands. Rose had taken it from her old home. Water swelled in Emily's eyes until quiet tears fell down her cheeks.

Rose took a seat next to her on her bed. She scratched at her palm, racking her brain for the right words.

"I know, it might be hard to look at now." Her words were strangely soft. "But I know," her breathing hitched. "I know...I'd give anything to have a picture of my mom. So I knew you would too."

Emily turned towards her. Her glossy, curious eyes studied Rose's face.

Rose's white locks fell in her face as an old sadness pulled at her lips. Her mind drifted to memories
of a nearly forgotten time. Small, bitter sweet images of a life long ago. Of a place far away. Of a woman who had long since passed. Choppy pieces of an innocent life that Rose held on to with a desperate grip.

Memories of a time when she was once human.

Before she was turned into a monster.

A foreign, omniscient feeling...no...voice flowed through Emily's mind as she, in a bizarre way, felt closer to Rose than she ever had before. As though she could drink in her feelings, as though she could read what was on her mind.

And Emily was struck with the overwhelming notion that Rose was not referring to her adoptive mother.

"You're talking about your birth mom, aren't you?"

Rose shook with a violent twitch at her question. A flutter of panic rose in her stomach. Rose stared at her with disbelief. An angry curiosity scratched at her skin.

How did she know?

How did Emily see that layer Rose worked so hard to bury?

"Yeah," Rose answered, her eyes falling to the floor. All notions of sound judgement screamed at her. Begged her to keep quiet.

But Rose wanted more than anything to connect with another person again. To feel like person again.

And God damnit, she was so tired of lying.

"Did you know her?" Emily asked in a quiet voice.

Rose nodded, swallowing hard. "Til I was 12."

Emily tilted her head in inquiry. An innocent curiosity lighting up her eyes. "What was she like?

A small chuckle escaped Rose. She rubbed away the sniffle in her nose. "Uh, well. She had black hair, brown eyes."

Rose paused, images of long ago playing in her mind. She smiled, her childhood home suddenly vivid, as if her mother were really there with her.

"She was Cambodian," Rose continued. A gentle smile curled on her lips. "Beautiful. Strong. Kickass." Rose chuckled, shaking her head. "She was pretty firey."

"That's where you got it from," Emily smiled, giving a small nod. "I bet you're just like your mom."

A trembling breath rumbled in Rose's chest. She touched her cheek, terrified at the tears that fell without warning. "Yeah, yeah I guess so." She sniffled, using her sleeve to wipe them away.

An understanding look fell upon Emily. Her head tilted in further curiosity. "And your dad?"

Rose shuddered in anxious fear. She bolted upright. Her voice cracking as she mumbled. "I-I gotta go'llseeyalater."
She slammed Emily's door shut, furiously wiping away her tears. Panic crawling up her chest as she could not seem to get them to stop.

The sound of the front door opening rang through the halls. A gust a wind brushed passed her, as Bart Allen super sped up to her.

*Shit.* It was time for their pre-mission prep. Why is it that the fastest people alive always arrived at the worst moments?

"Hey Rose were gonna be late-" Bart cut himself off. Concern plagued him as he caught sight of Rose's red eyes and damp cheeks. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She snipped, brushing past him.

"Are you sure?" Bart asked, catching up to her.

"Yes."

"But I've never seen you cry-

"Just leave me the *fuck* alone ok?!" Rose's enraged voice sent Bart stumbling back. The fire in her tone scaring him.

Guilt curdled her stomach at the sight of his fearful expression, only made her tears fuller.

She bolted for the girl's locker room. Slamming the door behind her. She yelled, her fist clashing with the tile wall. It shattered beneath her skin. A stinging, sorrowful anger coursing through her veins.

Her mother…

What would she say?...

If she saw her now?

Saw her as this monster her father made her become.

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*Bludhaven - The Warehouse*  
*February 11th, 2017*  
*17:15 EDT*

A chill scurried down Artemis's spine. A biting cold lingered in the basement of The Warehouse. The air's cripness stealing her attention away from Nightwing's words. Her eyes drifting to the corner as her mind wandered with sullen thoughts.

"Are you even listening to me?"

Dick's words snapped her head in his direction. An annoyed pout pulled at his lips.

"*Yes, I was.*" Artemis scowled. A familiar sass dripped from her tone. She tried to cover the fact that she really wasn't listening, grasping for the keywords that she did catch.

"You were telling me to make sure the mission doesn't turn violent." She reiterated. "The other team members are supposed to watch over Rose and Bart while they make the drug deal and I'll put a
tracker on whatever truck they bring the product on. You've gone over this with me before."

Dick's face twisted with doubt and annoyance. Today was the date that Harley Quinn, one of
Gotham's Spark suppliers, arranged for Bart and Rose to pick up product. Her impression being that
Rose was interested in dealing for them. The address given to them belonged to an abandoned
packing plant on the outskirts of town.

Since superheroes were currently under negative spotlight, Dick found it best not to engage. The
plan was to accept the drugs, place a tracking device on whatever vehicle they delivered it in, and tip
off the local authorities to their location. La'gaan, Jaime, and Virgil would be nearby to provide
backup.

With Kaldur in Atlantis, M'gann and Superboy on Mars, and him spending time chasing leads after
Red Hood this weekend, Artemis was the only senior member left to lead. And with Rose being the
key player for this mission, Artemis, the only person on The Team Rose seemed to respect, made her
the ideal candidate.

But doubt tingled in Nightwing's nerves. He couldn't leave the younger members' safety in the hands
of someone not at peak concentration. Artemis showed up with no notice out of her sabbatical,
demanding to be placed on missions again. While her help was more than appreciated, her urgency
left him on edge. Her taking time on and off could tarnish her focus during missions.

"I just need to make sure you're all here," Nightwing reassured in a calm voice. "We can't risk this
mission being unsuccessful."

"You think I'm gonna screw it up?" Artemis snipped at him. A sneer scrunching her face.

"No..." Dick answered, bunching his brows in confusion. "I'm just saying there's other people's
safety to worry about."

"You think I don't care about them?" Artemis snipped at him again, a twitch pulling on her lip.

"You're putting words in my mouth, and you know it." Nightwing responded in a stern voice.

"That's why I go on sabbatical."

"Look," Dick took a moment, trying to break Artemis's tension. "I know you'll be able to
concentrate. All of us have stayed on The Team after Wally's death and did well....We've been able
to do it."

A snarl pulled on Artemis's lips.

Did he really just....did Nightwing really have the nerve? To brag how Wally's death hadn't
interfered with everyone else's superhero careers? How no one else needed to take time off? Had the
"luxury" to take time off?

"Well **lucky** you." Her words dropped with disdain.

Nightwing's jaw slacked open, realizing she had misunderstood him. "I didn't mean it like-"

"I know exactly what you mean." Artemis cuff him off with a sharp tone. Anger shook her limbs as
all of her insecurities spilled from her throat. "You think I'm broken, weak,
pathetic. Poor Arty can't function without her dead boyfriend." She took a from step towards him,
closing the space between them. "I went on sabbatical because I needed it to get better." She stabbed his chest with her pointer finger, water sweeping in her eyes "You have no idea how hard it's been!"

"I have no idea!? Are you serious?" A foreign loudness caked his words as he swatted her hand away. "You think you're the only one who loved him!? Cared about him!?" He berated her, blood boiling, fist shaking and voice cracking. He took a step closer with each sentence "You think you're the only one who's cried over him? Who thinks of him every day? Who blames himself every day!?"

His face now inches from hers. Nightwing's face creased with rare anger that made Artemis lose her breath. His vicious spatial encroachment nearly caused her to stumble backwards.

His broken breathing barely subdued the water in his eyes. Nightwing hissed through his teeth. "What makes you think you're so special, that you're the only one who hurts?"

"You put a hand on her, and we're gonna have a problem."

Artemis and Dick turned their heads to the bottom of the basement staircase. Amidst their arguing they had not heard Rose enter the room. She stood, unamused, with crossed arms and a cocked hip. She peered at Dick with a dark intensity.

"He wouldn't do that." Artemis reassured in a cold voice. She turned her attention back to Nightwing. "And he was just leaving."

Nightwing let out a final huff of frustration. He took a moment to compose himself before addressing Artemis in a near whisper, "Just don't put their safety in jeopardy."

Before Artemis could answer, Nightwing slipped away, brushing past Rose as he hustled out of The Warehouse.

Rose followed him with a piercing gaze as he left the room. "What was that drama all about?" She asked

"Nothing." Artemis sighed. "Where's everyone else?"

As if on cue, La'gaan made his way down the stairs and the Zeta Tube's voice rang around them.

*Recognized, Static B26*

*Blue Beetle, B22*

Artemis looked around her, realizing one of her teammates was still unaccounted for. "Where's Bart?" She asked.

Rose groaned, rolling her eyes. "Motormouth!" She called upstairs. "Speed it up!"

Bart peaked through the crack in the door. A blush could be heard in his voice. "I'm not coming down. I look ridiculous!"

"Bart, get your butt down here!" Artemis scolded. "We're on a schedule."

A surrendering groan fell from Bart's throat. He super sped up to Rose, a bright red tint staining his cheeks.

Virgil's jaw dropped as a wide smile pulled on his lips. "Whaaaat?"

To give Bart a little credit, Rose also looked equally as ridiculous. She was nearly unrecognizable
under layers of makeup. Her hair, usually free flowing, now laced in a tight braid with a red bandanna wrapped around her head. Large silver hoop earring rested on her earlobes.

Bart stood with a violent blush, a firm pout rested on his lips. A thick scarf engulfed his entire shoulders along with his neck. He wore dark sunglasses. And at the top of his head, his hair was pulled back into a tight, precisely messy, bun.

Jaime couldn't stifle his cackle any longer. "Nice man-bun dude," he managed to stammer out.

La'gaan chuckled, picking at his scarf. "I've heard of the surface world's 'hipsters', but I've never seen one in person."

Bart grew redder, tucking his chin down into his scarf. "I hate everyone."

"Enough." Artemis scolded. A small smile escaped her. "Leave Bart and his man bun alone."

Bart growled with embarrassment. "Why do I have to wear this stupid get up anyway?"

"I told you." Rose chided. "We have to look unrecognizable in case The Pack shows up."

"Why?" Bart questioned. "There's no way they'd chance coming out into the open. Not now that they're wanted criminals."

"It's still a safety precaution we have to take." Artemis answered. "People in general are bad at remembering faces, especially those they've only seen once or twice, like you two. You change your hair, your clothing, and block your faces a little and no one will recognise you in passing." She tried her best to sound reassuring.

"But there is a small chance that they'll show up," Jaime added. A tingle of anticipation scratched at his skin. He had still not forgiven Tye for not showing up to Eduardo's funeral. And to sell the very same drug that killed their friend? Well, for the sake of Tye's physical well being, Jaime prayed he wouldn't show. He wasn't sure if he could keep is simmering anger in check.

"Let's hope that doesn't happen Jaime." Artemis added. "Alright," She pulled up the mission debrief details up on the computer screen. "Everyone knows why they're here today right?"

Rose snickered, the red tint in her eyes now completely gone. "Yeah," She answered with a smile. Excitement clawed at her. "We're gonna score some drugs."

El Paso - City Limits
February 11th 2017
14:00 MDT

The abandoned packing plant sat just off the sightlines of the highway. The sun beamed down with unyielding relentlessness in the clear, blue sky. Meeting out in the open in the daylight meant their suppliers could see everything, less likely to be taken by surprise in ambush.

This proved to be a challenge for The Team in finding places to hide that weren't obvious. Artemis and Blue Beetle chose the roof of the factory while La'gaan and Static waiting inside the barn. The decaying wood still held the stench of cattle.

Rose and Bart sat on the concrete factory stoop. The sweltering heat pulled on the air around them.
Rose wiped the sweat from her brow. Her gaze peeked at the over to her right, keeping an eye for any approaching vehicles.

"Fuck me, it's so hot." Rose complained. She huffed, resting her arms on her knees. "I hate the desert."

Bart looked at her with wary eyes. Their interaction from earlier replayed in his mind. Still in shock at seeing Rose...cry. He didn't think she could cry. He wondered as to what could have broken her so. What could chip away at The Team's frigid Ice Queen? Maybe she wasn't so cold after all...

"Hey," Bart cleared the nervousness from his throat. "So about earlier-"

"Don't." Rose snipped. Her eyes clenched shut as she shook her head, dreading the conversation he was trying to arouse.

"I'm just wanna make sure you're okay-"

"Bart." She looked at him with a snarl. "Drop it."

All looks of concern faded from Bart's face. Irritation twitched his lip. "Funny," he began. "You can berate me, and dig things out of me. But I can't do the same to you?"

She growled, jumping up from her seat. "I don't need your fuckin' attitude right now." She turned away from him, crossing her arms.

Bart was intrigued by her sudden anger. As if her extreme mood swings were masks she could wear and discard as she pleased. "Like you said, everyone's got disguises."

Her nostrils flared in irritation. She turned around, jolting a finger at him. "I'm gonna sock you in the jaw if you don't shut the fuck up."

He squinted as he glowered at her. He had seen first hand just what happened when her anger came out. How little thought she had for her enemies and her teammates. Bart had seen so many shades of Rose that he wasn't sure which one was the real one. Was the short-fused Ice Queen Rose's true color? Or just another mask?

Bart wanted to see how far he could take it.

"Just don't let your anger mess up the mission," he scolded.

Rose grit her teeth. She approached Bart with a quick steps. He gasped as she pulled him up by his collar. Water swelled in her eyes as she shook.

"And no one gets to order me around anymore." She pulled him in close, her grip tightening on his clothes. "Not my father. And NOT YOU."

A moment of silence fell between them. Rose gasped as she realized what words she had let slip to him. She released his collar, her hand clasping around her mouth. She turned away from him. Eyes swelling with angry tears.

What was wrong with her? Why did she say that? Why was she slipping? She worked so hard to keep her past under wraps. Worked too hard to get what she wanted from them. Now her instability was getting the best of her.
She was about to blow her own plans. She needed to keep it together.

"Careful." Bart chided with a smile. Looks like he could dig things out of her after all. "You almost dropped your 'mysterious, heartless' Rose costume."

Rose almost lashed out at him, but Artemis's voice rang in their communicators.

"Look alive guys." She advised, eyes fixed to her binoculars. "Someone's headed this way."

Rose and Bart stood at attention. Dust whirled in the air as a semi and two armored trucks made their way towards them. Bart's foot bounced furiously as the diesel engine roared.

The craddle of the wheels came to a quiet as they braked. The semi sat, idling. A small pup trailer attached behind it.

The driver's side doors and backdoors of the vans swung open. Eight men and women clad in black body armor poured out. Rose kept a cold face as they marched towards the two of them.

Bart's breathing hitched with nervousness.

"Put your arms up," Rose ordered him. She placed her hands behind her head.

Bart looked at her with curious gaze before doing the same. He suddenly felt a gunman's hands upon him. Feeling up and down his sides and down his legs. Another did the same to Rose.

The gunman looked back towards one of the armored trucks. He gave it a thumbs up. "No weapons. They're good."

Out from the passenger's side door, stepped Dula Dent. She slammed the door shut. A smirk played upon her lips as she approached them. "You're actually here? Wasn't sure you'd show."

Rose nodded, unamused. "You got the goods?"

Dula nodded towards the semi. "Come see for yourself."

Bart and Rose followed her cautiously towards the back of the trailer. They felt the distant eyes of their teammates watching their every move.

Dula put the combination in the lock and swung the doors open.

Stacks of wooden crates piled high in the trailer. She snapped her fingers at one of the gunman. He jumped inside and pulled a package out from one of the crates, tossing it towards Dula. The packaged contained three decorative pillows, wrapped together in seran wrap. She tore off the wrapping, and unzipped one of the pillows. She tore away at the cotton interior until it revealed to her a large brick of white power in a clear plastic packaging. The light blue tints of the Spark danced under the sunlight.

"Each pillow contains half a kilo. You get two flavors and an unfavored."

Bart's eyes went wide. "You're giving us a kilo and a half!?"

Rose shot him a dirty look.

Dula laughed. "Seems like a lot, yeah. But trust me, it'll sell."
Rose took the brick from her, inspecting it. "What's the minimum you want us to sell it for? And what's our percentage?"

Dula opened her mouth to speak. But the sound of crunching gravel stole her attention. Her armed guards stood on edge, their weapons aimed as an old station wagon raced towards them.

The vehicle stopped.

And with cautious steps, Jenny, Tye, Summer, and Jivan made their way out.

"Shit," Artemis whispered to herself. She didn't expect them to show. Now the risk factor was even greater. She pressed down on her earpiece communicator. "Stay calm you two. Just get the stuff and don't draw attention to yourselves."

"Oh no," Bart whispered. "They're gonna know-"

"Chill." Rose snipped, her voice barely audible. "Don't talk. We'll be fine."

"Well would you look at that." Dula sneered. She motioned for the gunmen to lower their weapons. "I really didn't think you mutts were gonna show up."

Jenny stood with a scowl. She crossed her arms. Her newly repaired talisman sat firmly around her neck. She nodded towards Rose and Bart. "Who are they?"

"Other sellers." Dula informed. "Don't worry, they won't be on dealing on your turf."

A snarl flashed across Jenny's lips. "We were under the impression that this was a private meeting."

"Well, it's not." Dula growled with impatience. "And you don't get to cock an attitude with us. Especially since that sloppy work with the Mayor." She jolted a finger at them. "You know I have every right to cancel this little agreement? Not sure if I want kids who are so...inept, with my product."

"La Dama would not be pleased with that." Jenny informed.

"La Dama is nothing." Dula snarled.

"La Dama paid off the police so we wouldn't be interrupted today." Jenny sassed. "So I believe a little respect and gratitude is due."

One of the gunman tapped Dula on the shoulder. "Miss Dent, we're running out of time."

Dula groaned, giving up on their argument. "Alright, fine. All of you listen and listen good. I'm only going to go over this once."

As Dula went over the details of their selling arrangement, Rose could feel the heaviness of someone's gaze. She peeked out of her peripheral, eyes catching sight of Jivan who stared her down with a cold curiousness.

He sniffed the air, a familiar stench prodding at his memories. He nudged Summer with his elbow. "Do you smell that?"

Rose tried to ignore his glare. Until finally, Jivan marched up to her, nearly knocking down Dula in the process.
Rose jumped backwards as he sniffed her with unbearable closeness.

"You got a problem?" She sneered.

Jivan bunched his brows, a tingling with engrossed curiosity. "Why do you smell so familiar?"

Bart felt breathless. They didn't take into account their...*smell*. Jivan and summer were practically *animals*. Of course they could recognize them by smell. He and Rose were both there the day The Pack attacked the Mayor at the Convention Center.

Rose sneered. "And why do you smell like wet dog?" She snipped.

Jivan growled, insulted. "Why you-" He reached out for Rose's collar.

A rush of panic jolted through her veins. She grasped at Jivan's wrist. He yelped as Rose twisted his arm.

"Touch me again," She snarled. "And I'll rip that shoulder right outta your socket."

Bart's eyes went wide. "H-hey stop!" He placed a hand on Rose's shoulder. Nervousness dripped from his words. "Come on, what are you *doing*?"

Jivan growled, pulling his arm out of Rose's grip. He flailed his arm away, unintentionally striking Bart, knocking his sunglasses off his face and loosening his hair.

"Bart?"

Breathlessness overcame them as Tye's voice called out Bart's name. They looked at one another with wide eyes, panic coursing through them.

"He's-he's one of those heroes!" Jenny screeched at Dula, jolting a finger at them. "He's a sidekick who works for The League!"

It was over. The cover was shot.

Rose snarled as she pulled back, taking a defensive stance.

Dula backed away, yelling at her guards. "Take them out! Kill them!"

"MOVE!" Artemis's voice shot across the communicator.

La'gaan and Static burst through the doors of the old barn. Blue Beetle assisted Tigress with jumped from the top of the factory.

Bart supersped between eight guards. With astounding quickness, he collected all their guns, gathering them in his arms and dropping them on the other side of the plant.

Panic thumped in Dula's chest as she raced towards the semi. She shifted the gears with trembling hands. Desperate to get the product out of harm's way.

Cackled roars filled the air as Jivan and Summer morphed into their Hyena hybrid forms. Saliva dripped from their snarling snouts. They charged at Rose, claws aimed for her throat. Static knocked them away from her with his lightning bolts.

Tigress, La'gaan and Rose engauged the weaponless henchmen, their fighting capabilities sub-par without their guns.
Blue Beetle took a charge at Jenny. Blood boiling at the sight of her.

Jenny gasped at his encroachment. "Tye!" She screeched.

He whipped his head towards her. A feeling of breathlessness ripping at his chest as he met Jenny's gaze.

"Protect me!" She ordered, her eyes and talisman glowing.

Tye snarled. His glazed, mind-controlled eyes closing as his Longshadow grew around him.

His elongated arm took a swing at Jaime, knocking him to the ground.

Jaime groaned, picking himself up on his hands and knees. He cried out in pain as Tye brought his giant fist crashing down on his back.

Static snapped his Jenny's direction. Her glowing eyes and vicious scowl grating at his patience.

She jumped as he sent a bolt of lightning at her feet.

"Let the big man go," he warned "Or I'll zap that freaky trinket right off of you."

Jenny's lips curled into a cocky smile, the glow in her eyes intensifying. A crack of thunder roared in the air. The beating sun suddenly darken as a black clouds swirled in the sky.

The eye of the cloud dancing above Jenny.

She smiled, raising her hands in the air. Another crack of thunder vibrated the air.

"You are not the only master of lightning here," she sneered. And with a snarled roar, she sent a barrage of lightning all around them.

Members of The Team jumped out of the way. Tiny shards of glass decorated the cinged ground.

Rain cascaded from her dark cloud. The sudden rush of water pounded to the ground, impairing their vision.

Artemis felt a small gust of wind beside her. She knew that feeling better than anyone.

"Bart!" She called out.

He jump, surprised she knew he had just arrived.

Artemis squinted, losing sight of the escaping semi truck. "I need you to stop that truck," she ordered. "Can you see it?"

Bart smirked, saving his remark about having the 'Allen Family Eyes' for a later time. "'Course I can."

And with a rush of super speed he charged towards the truck. Dula sat in the driver's seat, screeching as her door suddenly swung open. Bart's smiling face greeted her as he clung to the doorframe of the moving truck.

"I'm gonna need you to pull over ma'am." He teased, trying his comedic best to imitate a police officer.
Dula growled, flailing her left leg at his pelvis.

Bart yipped, eyes wide as moved away from her kick. He lost his grip on the doorframe, hand flailing in reflex for something to grab onto. He grasped at the steering wheel, the sudden force jerking it to the the left. Dula nearly flew out of her seat as the engine roared. They both felt gravity overcome them as the quick turn the semi caused it to tip over on it's side. Product bounced from the back of the trailer, spilling over the ground.

The crash of the trailer rumbled the ground underneath Jaime. He picked himself up off the sand. Blood dripped from his split lip. His eyes fell to Jenny, the glow of her eyes shimmering amongst the raindrops.

"Tye!" He called out. "What are you still doing with her?"

Jaime dodge another one of the Longshadow's swings. Jaime grit his teeth. He had to find a way to reach Tye. There had to be some part of him in there that could hear him.

"You don't have to do this! You only think you do!"

Tye took another swing at him.

"She's controlling you dude. Can't you see that?"

Tye paused at the sound of Jaime's words. They reached out for him in depths of his clouded mind. A twinge of hope twitched through Jaime. He could tell he was getting through to him. He just had to push harder, faster.

"Her talisman has mind control!" A desperate explanation fell from his throat his hands outstretched. "She's using you."

Tye's eyes began to flutter as his Longshadow shrunk several feet.

Jenny growled, anger creasing her face. "Don't listen to him!"

"Everything with Mayor Fermin, that wasn't you." Jaime pleaded. "Why else would you almost kill someone? Why else would you deal drugs? After what it did to Ed?" Jaime felt a tingle rise in his nose. "You didn't even go to his funeral!"

Tye's Longshadow dissipated. He opened his eyes, a stinging sadness stabbing his chest.

"What?" Tye's words were shaking and stunned. "Eduardo's...dead?"

Jaime's jaw fell agape, his brow bunching in pitted sadness. "You didn't know?" A sudden wetness filled his eyes, overcome with the realization that Jenny was the one who held him back. Who kept in in the dark about Eduardo. "He overdosed on this shit dude." Jaime motioned towards the overturned semi. "This Spark that you're trying to sell."

"W-when?" Tye stuttered.

Jenny growled, her irritated roar breaking their conversation. "I grow tired of you you pestilent little cockroach," she snarled.

With a vicious crack, she sent a bolt of lightning down upon Jaime. He screamed. A burning pain jolting through every inch of his being. He collapsed to the ground.
Tye called out for him. A foreign anger tore through him. He released his Longshadow once more, and with a swift swing of his arm, knocked Jenny through the air. He sent her crashing against the steel trailer, knocking the wind out of her. The cloud in the sky disappeared. And with the sudden clarity, The Team was able to begin tying up the henchmen and collar the Hyenas with an effective quickness.

Tye reeled in his Longshadow, sinking back down to the ground. He turned at the sound of Jaime's groan. He raced towards him, helping him sit up.

"Jaime?" He asked cautiously. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," Jaime grunted, pushing through the pain. "Now I know what an outlet feels like."

Tye chuckled, helping him to his feet. A quiet fell between swallowed the lump in his throat.

"I'm so sorry," He apologized, a sullen sadness filling his eyes. "I didn't realize what I was getting into."

The corner of Jaime's mouth pulled into a sympathetic smile. "It's alright." He placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'm just glad you're back."

"Make sure everyone is restrained." Artemis began barking orders. "Make sure the Inhibitor Collars are turned on. Where's Dula?"

"Here!" Bart called out. He carried Dula out of the trailer cab. She had her arm around his shoulder. Her left leg dragging behind her as she moaned with pain. Blood trailed behind her as small hits of bone poked from underneath the skin of her ankle.

She cried out as Bart tried to set her down gently against the trailer.

"She got hurt real bad when the truck turned over," guilt plagued his words. He looked up at Artemis with worried eyes. "I'm so sorry."

Tigress sighed. If it wasn't their kids getting hurt, it was someone else's. Just like Nightwing cautioned her about.

"It's alright." She answered, kneeling down to tie Dula's hands behind her back. "We're going to get you some help." Artemis informed her with a warm tone.

Dula snarled with pain, spitting in her face. "Bite me bitch!"

Tigress jumped up. She grit her teeth as wiped the spit from her face. "Let's pick it up!" She ordered. She was over this mission already. She looked over at the mess of Spark bricks on the ground. "I need someone to count how much product was in this shipment for our report. And to pick up the rest-"

"I got it!" Virgil chimed, charging towards the trailer.

"Me too!" Bart called out, gathering the spilled product.

Virgil stepped inside the overturned semi trailer. He whistled, his eyes wide. "That's a lot of drugs."

He peered over his shoulder, making certain none of his teammates could see him. Virgil crouched over one of the bags that had spilled open. He pulled three zip lock bags from his pockets, and with a frenzied haste, stuffed them to the brim with the iridescent blue powerd. A tingle of bile rose in his
throat as he stuffed them in his pockets.

"You count yet?"

Virgil yelled at Bart's sudden presence. His heart nearly bouncing out of his ribcage.

"Damn dude," he heaved, clutching his chest. "I hate it when you do that. You're as bad as the bat kids."

Bart cackled. "Come on, help me open these crates so we can get the numbers for Tigress."

Virgil could still hear his heartbeat pounding in his ear. Guilt already itched away at his insides.

Frieda so owed him one.

La'gaan, Rose, and Blue Beetle drug the battered and restrained henchmen into a circle on the sand. They brushed themselves off, already exchanging cocky complimentary about their victory.

Artemis approached them, snapping her cell phone shut. "Cops from El Paso might not come," she smirked. "But a tip to the bordering PD about illegal weapons and drugs this close to Mexico should get the them here fast." She peered over to Dula who sat against the trailer, her hands tied tight behind her back. She knew they were going to have to interrogate fast if they wanted anything to come of this mess. "We don't have much time if we want answers."

La'gaan nodded. He placed himself in front of Dula, puffing out his chest. An intimidating tone painted his words. "Where else were you taking the drugs? Where were your other stops planned?"

Dula looked up at him through her sweat-matted bangs. "Fuck you." She growled. Her nose scrunch with disdain

La'gaan huffed. "You seriously expect us to believe this was all for El Paso?"

"Fuck off." She snarled.

La'gaan pouted, turning towards them. "I don't think she's gonna talk."

Rose let out a loud groan as she rolled her eyes.

"Oh Jesus Christ." She hissed. "Who the hell taught you guys how to interrogate?" She marched towards Dula, shoulder checking La'gaan along the way. Rose knelt in front her, their faces merely inches away.

"I believe he asked you a question." Rose reiterated, tilting her head in irritation.

"Go to hell," Dula snipped.

Rose's upper lip twitched. Her blood boiled with Dula's uncooperativeness. It was hot. She was tired. And more importantly, she had her own mission to move along. A mission that couldn't move forward without Dula's answer.

And that answer, Rose was going to obtain. Whether Dula told it to her, or screamed it to her.

"Wrong answer," Rose hissed through her teeth. And in the swift, solid motion, she slammed her hand down against Dula's broken ankle. Clicks and cracks radiated with the gush of blood.

She screamed. The other team members cringed at Rose's action. Their jaws dropped and their pleas
for her to cease fell on her deaf ears.

Rose placed her other hand around Dula's throat, pressing her head against the trailer. "You gonna tell me what I need to know?" She asked, anger creasing her face. "Or you wanna squeal like a little bitch again?"

"Fuck y-"

Rose growled with impatience. She released the hand from her throat and pressed her hand down on her ankle, deeper, harder. Dula's scream shattered the air around them.

"Rose!" Artemis called out.

"Okay!" Dula squeaked."Okay okay! I'll tell you. I'll tell you!"

Rose lifted some of the pressure off Dula's ankle.

"Answer the question." Rose demanded "Why do you have so much product? Was El Paso your only stop?"

"N-no. No," Dula muttered. "We had multiple stops on our way. They want it spread west."

"We know that, idiot." Rose chided. "Tell us something useful. Like where?"

"Just drop offs for civilian pushers, and then the lab-" Dula cut herself short. Her eyes went wide as she realized she had let too much information slip.

Rose tilted her head in curiosity. "A lab?"

Dula sat quiet, biting her lip in nervousness.

"What. Lab?" Rose demanded.

Dula grit her teeth, shaking her head. Her lips curled into a snarl. "Eat a di-"

Her sickening scream filled the air again as Rose pressed and squeezed down on her ankle with an intense pressure. She twisted it with a grinding force.

Dula fell quiet as her eyes rolled into the back of her head. Her consciousness succumbing to her pain.

"Uh uh, nope," Rose tapped her palm against Dula's cheeks. "You come right back. You don't get to pass out until I say so."

Rose let go of Dula's ankle. She reached into her shoe, pulling out her concealed switchblade. She pressed it firmly against Dula's throat. She trembled under Rose touch.

Artemis lost her breath, a twinge of terror tingling down her spine. She had let this go for far too long.

"Rose that's enough!" Artemis yelled, afraid Rose's hand would slip if she pulled her away.

But Rose paid no mind to Artemis's orders. "What! Lab?!" She screeched again.

"The weapons lab!" Dula gasped. Water swelling in her eyes. "They have a lab in mountains just outside of Salt Lake City. By the Bingham Copper Mine. It's-It's where they test weapons." She
shuddered furiously with pain and dread. A real threat of death, pressing against her neck. "That's-that's all I know, alright? All I know is that they were on our list for a shipment of Spark. I don't know why. I just know they needed it." Tears fell down her cheeks as she looked at Rose with a desperate pleading. "That's all I know okay? Please, just-just let me go."

Rose still held the knife firm against Dula's throat. The air shook in Rose's lungs. Her muscles straining to still with her rising of slashing the knife across Dula's throat beckoned for creation.

"Rose," A snarl dripped from Artemis's tone. Her face held a dark scowl that jolted the other team members. Artemis had given her the benefit of the doubt since day one. Vouched for her when no one else would.

But now she was really testing her patience.

"We have what we need," Her words were bold and dominant. "Let her go. Now."

Rose shook, pushing back against the gnawing, bloodthirsty voice in the back of her mind. She grit her teeth, watching the tiniest added pressure placed a small cut on Dula's neck.

Rose pushed herself close to her. Her hot breath whispering into Dula's ear. "You're lucky she's here to save you."

Dula whimpered as Rose pulled away. A dark pout pulled on Rose's lip. Disappointed at the lack of bloodshed. She turned around, cautious, awed eyes of her teammates' fell upon her.

She huffed, brushing past Artemis. A condescending tone caked her words. "You're welcome." She snarled.

Jaime watched Rose head towards the Bioship. His eyes followed her with wary disbelief. He could no longer lie to himself.

He was terrified of her.

"What's all that noise out here?" Bart peeked his head out from behind the trailer.

"Nothing just finish up!" Artemis snipped, frustration eating at her composure.

Jaime snapped to attention, letting his mind fall to the task at hand. He moved over to Tye, holding out the wrist restraints. They felt unbearably heavy in his hands.

"We can't just let you go," Jaime's eyes carried a hint of sorry.

Tye nodded, his eyes falling to the ground in acceptance. "I know." He turned around, placing the back of his hands on his lower back.

Jaime tied his wrists together, "I'll try to help out as much as I can."

Tye shook his head. "I deserve what's coming."

"I'll help you get a good lawyer," Jaime assured. Not wanting Tye to give up hope. He turned him around to face him. A sullen softness filled his tone. "I know you weren't completely yourself."

Tye gave him a sad shrug. "I still did a lot of my own free will. The stealing, the looting. Besides," He looked over at Jenny. She sat, cross-legged and head drooped. Her arm's tied behind her back and talisman tore from her neck. Tye peered at her with a merciless glare. "Jail will get me away from her. And her mind control magic."
"Pretty girls," Jaime chuckled, trying to break the tension. "They make you crazy."

Tye turned towards him, mouth twitching at the disappointment within himself. "They're not worth it if they make you lose your best friend."

Jaime let out a small smile, shaking his head. "That would never happen."

Tye smiled back at him, suddenly filled with the ignited hope that all was not lost for their friendship. Despite all the horrible things he had done, the horrible things that Jenny made him do.

Tye nearly toppled over as Jaime snatched him up in an embrace. A ferocious feeling of relief coursing through his veins. He squeezed him tighter, almost in disbelief that his best friend had finally come back to him.

Jaime felt Tye's head press against his shoulder as he did his best to embrace him back.

"I'll visit you as soon as I can," Jaime promised. Assuring him he was not going to leave him in jail. Let alone leave him there alone.

"I don't doubt it," Tye answered as he pulled away.

Jaime help Tye sit down onto the ground. He gave him one last small, reassuring smile before heading back towards the rest of the team members.

"Jaime."

He rolled his eyes at the sound of Jenny's voice.

"Jaime please," She begged for his attention. A small whine filled her voice.

He groaned, walking towards her. "I really don't have time for your excuses right now-"

"Please," Jenny interrupted him. "Just-just tell me if you have Adalae."

Jaime twinged at her unexpected question. He had nearly forgotten that Emily was once with The Pack. And that she was known to them as 'Adalae' still.

"Do you have her?" Jenny asked again, her voice on the edge of panic. "Did she escape with you?"

"Yeah," Jaime answered, intrigued. "She's in our care now."

Jenny's breathing wavered. Her eyes went wide as she nearly choked on her own spit. "You have to get away from her. Get as far away from her as you possibly can."

"What?" Jaime asked, perplexed. "What are you talking about?"

"There is a great darkness inside her." Jenny's expression darkened. "I kept her power contained. I kept her power locked away. I kept that-" She shuddered, almost unable to find her words again. "That beast subdued."

Jaime's jaw slacked, unable to comprehend Jenny's warnings.

"I'm not there to use my magic to keep that...that evil inside her contained." Her voice lowered. "You have to destroy her." A panicked dread swept across her. "She could kill all of you."

Jaime found himself at a loss for words. His throat dry of all response. His eyes drank in the details
of Jenny's face. His Blue Beetle suit felt piping hot as he came to grasp her genuine terror.

He found himself overcome with the notion, that maybe Rose wasn't the teammate he should be terrified of after all.

_Bludhaven - The Warehouse_
_February 14th, 2017_
_16:56 EDT_

"BART! You. Little. Shit."

Bart smirked to himself as he heard Rose's cursing. Her feet pounded the floor as she marched up the hallway towards the living area. There was nothing he enjoyed more (well, more than food that is) than finding as many ways as possible to irritate her. She was almost as territorial over food as Wally once was.

Bart chuckled at her impending footsteps. He sat upon an armchair in the living area, nonchalantly flipping through the channels on the television. His other hand groped at the bottom of the bag of his forbidden snack.

Emily, who finally gathered the composure to leave her room, seemed to take no notice of the outburst. She stared intently at the television from the sofa.

Rose finally reached the living room. She menacingly stood in front of Bart, holding up a shiny foil bag.

"Hey asshole, YOU ate my dark chocolate coated blueberries, didn't you?" She placed her other hand on her cocked hip. "My door was locked! You phased into my room, didn't you?"

Her accusing expression bunched up her facial features. Bart stifled a chuckle as best he could. As weird as it sounded it reminded him of a frustrated puppy. How could he take any of her threats seriously when being irritated just made her look..cute?

Bart feigned a gasp, "Why on Earth would you accuse me of such an evil deed?"

She squinted at him, placing both hands on her hips and leaning forward, "Because you're you, fatass." She watched him shove a large handful of food in his mouth. Her gaze fell to the container next to him in which he grabbed from.

"Is that my other bag!?" She shouted.

Bart held the bag in his hand. Faintly acting as though he has never seen it before. "Oohhh whaaa?!" He teased. "How did those get there?"

"Fucker." She snatched the bag from him, shaking it, finding that it was empty. "These are $7 a bag!"

Bart raised his eyebrows. "Wow, really? Those tiny things? Who knew I could eat $14 in three minutes?"

Rose gave him the most terrifying death glare he had ever seen.

He chuckled nervously, giving her a pleading half-smile."You're... You're going to stab me now,
aren't you?"

But, what made Bart even more nervous, was that instead of lashing out like he had thought she would, Rose eased her face with a closed-lip smiled.

"Nope," She answered. "I can think of one thing worse…." She snatched the remote control from his hands, holding it up over her head. "Having to get up to change the channel! Muwahahahaha!"

Bart jumped from his seat and reached for the remote. "Noooo give it back!"

Rose twisted her body away at each one of Bart's attempts to retrieve it. A smug smile rested on her face, their struggle resulting in the channel changing. Rose noticed that it landed on one of Grace Godfrey's talk shows. Her soothing voice filled the room.

"-happy to announce The Godfrey Orphanage and Halfway Homes for Meta Youth. Our young, gifted, citizens can now find refuge in a the safe, nurturing, guidelined path. Thanks in part to a generous donation by Lex-"

"Haaaaaaaa." Rose shrilly teased. "Now you're stuck with the boring news or cursed to get up to change it."

Bart attempted to reach over. He tried his best not to smile as he demanded, "Give it!"

"Nope," Rose responded as she shimmied away from his pursuit. She sported an ornery grin. Torturing him in his manor she found incredibly pleasing.

However, unbeknownst to her, Bart was rather enthralled by their escapade. He could have used his super speed to take the remote back as soon as she grabbed it. But he decided to let her play her game. He found himself enjoying play fighting with her. He wondered if this 'Playful Rose' rarity was a genuine part of her, or just another mask.

Either way, as she teased him, he found a strange fluttering growing inside his stomach. Especially when he had to get incredibly close to grab at the remote.

In their struggle they eventually found themselves in the kitchen.

Rose grabbed the remote with both hands and put it behind her. She pressed her back up against the refrigerator. "You're not getting this back Bart." She confidently sassed. "I've got a death grip on it."

"Oh yeah?" he asked, mockingly.

"Yeah."

"Not if I find a way to distract you."

She squinted. "Psh. Please, there's nothing you could do to make me let go of this."

He raised one of his eyebrows. "You sure about that?" He asked, arrogantly getting in her face.

"Yeah."

The flutter inside his stomach surfaced at a rapid pace, as their sudden closeness made him all too aware of Rose's body heat.

And then Bart was struck with an idea. An idea he wished he would have thought more about before acting upon it.
However, being a Speedster, 'thinking first' is usually not standard protocol.

Before he even fully realized what he was doing, Bart found his lips upon Rose's. He placed his right hand above her waistline, his thumb just under her breast. His other found itself on her left hip, fingertips grazing the small of her back.

Rose jumped at his contact. Before she could protest, her body decided for her to kiss him back. Her muscles relaxed and her eyelids drooped. When her lips parted, Bart used the opportunity to slide his tongue into her mouth. Her tiny, involuntary moan caused his arms to pull her closer into him. In doing so, he felt his fingers brush against the buttons of the remote in her hands.

He suddenly remembered the reasoning for his actions.

He swiftly pulled away from her, holding the remote up to next to his face. "Haha! I win!" he mocked. In a blur, he super sped back into the living room.

Rose attempted to gather her bearings, realizing the trick he just played on her. She grunted as she trotted after him. She stammered, "D-Dammit Bart you cheated!"

She found him standing in front of the television. He placed his free hand on his hip as he shook the remote in the air, trying to taunt her.

Rose decided to try another tactic. She threw her hands in the air as she shook her head. "No. No. Nope. No. You know what? I don't even want it," she sassed.

"Really?" he replied as he smiled skeptically.

"Yep," she stated matter-of-factly as she sat down on the corner of the couch. "I'm just gonna sit here and hang out with my REAL FRIEND Emily because she's cool and not snack stealing skank like y- ."

As she talked, Bart's gaze shifted to his right. He lowered his hand down to his side. His smile disappeared.

"Rose…" he calmly interrupted her.

"What?" she snapped.

Bart nodded his head to his right. Her eyes squinted in confusion as she looked over to where he nodded.

Emily had been so quiet all day that both of them nearly forgot that she was there. She sat on the cushion next to Rose, her knees brought up to her chest. Her arms wrapped around the tops of her knees, the bridge of her nose pressed against the slit between them. Her wrapped arms hid her face. Rose could see her chest rise and fall sporadically with her sharp, tiny inhales.

Rose looked back at Bart with a worried expression. As he placed the remote down on the coffee table, giving Rose a small nod in understanding.

It was time to be adults for a little while. It was time to be adults, for someone else, for a little while.

Bart quietly walked over to the open cushion on the other side of Emily. He crossed his legs in front of him and faced her, leaning in.

"Emily?" Rose asked in a quiet voice. "Y'okay?"
Emily made no noise. She merely shook her head 'no' while her face remained buried in her knees.

Orphanages and orphans: that was part of what Grace Godfrey's news segment had been about.

Orphan.

That's what she was now.

Well, as far as she knew.

It's what she felt like she was.

As soon as the word jarred from the speakers, she choked on the realization.

She became angry. Angry at the situation for where it left her. Angry at all the time lost that she could have had with the ones she loved. Angry for whoever attacked her for losing her memory.

Angry at her mother for leaving her.

...

Angry at herself for blaming her.

Angry at herself for being the reason she was gone.

Angry that it was all her fault.

She was disappointed at her failure. She had been doing so well for a while. She had been feeling so much better. And then she heard the word. Just one word: orphan. That's all it took to send her spiraling back down. It overwhelmed her with dark, suffocating emotions.

She hated herself for letting them see. She hated herself for not being able to regain her composure fast enough. Rose and Bart. The Warrior and The Jokester. It was not that she didn't care for them. In some ways, she even looked to Rose as a big sister figure. But she saw no point in troubling them with her grief, as she did not see them as the type of people who could help her cope anyways.

She berated herself. It was bad enough that she confided in Beast Boy about her sadness, burdened him with her pain. She made a strenuous effort not to allow others to feel it as well. But at this moment, her efforts were futile.

Rose tilted her head. "Is it your mom?" She asked.

Again, Emily remained quiet. Her muscles tensed at the question and she held herself tighter, as she tried her best to hold back her leaking tears. She answered by nodding her head 'yes' into her knees.

Bart looked over to Rose with sympathetic eyes. His mouth twisted in a frustrated grimace. He wanted to comfort Emily but had no idea what words to start with, he desperately hoped that Rose would. She looked back at him, understanding his plea. A few moments of silence passed when she let out a quiet sigh.

Rose placed her left leg into the crevice between the cushions and the back of the couch. She placed her right foot on the floor. She held out her arms in front of her.


"Mm'fine," Emily mumbled.
And then Rose did something that Bart did not expect at all.

She leaned forward and gently wrapped her left arm around Emily's waist and slid her other hand under Emily's knees.

"No, you're not," She stated sympathetically, pulling her into her lap and wrapping her in an embrace.

Rose felt small spots pat against her chest as Emily's tears soaked into the fabric of her shirt. Tiny sniffles escaped her as she buried her face into Rose's sternum, still trying her best to hide herself. But she had to admit, being held did make her feel a great deal better.

Emily wrapped an arm around Rose's torso as she mumbled, "Mmm' sorry," into her.

They were having such a good time with one another until she broke down, and ruined it.

"Hey, no apologizing." Rose scorned with a quiet, playful tone. "Being the tough guy is my job on the team, alright?"

A moment of quiet fell between them, only the sound of Emily's sobs filled the room. Rose ran her hand through her hair, mind lost in unsaid words. Her mind's rationalization begged her to stay silent, fingers twitching at the notion of connection.

But as Emily's sobs faded, Rose's desire to connect, to feel, to be human, roared inside of her.

"Her name was Lillian." Rose's quiet words tip toed through the tense quiet. Her eyes fell to the floor. "My mom, the real one I told you about."

But Emily's eyes snapped over to Rose. Mind lingering on her tender words.

"Her name was Lillian." Rose repeated. And old, cold sadness numbed her tone. Eyes towards the ground, lost in a sullen memory. "And she was taken from me too."

Emily managed to stifle her sniffles. The bold, steady thump of Rose's heartbeat tapped against her as she lay on her chest. A quiet calm overcame Emily as she listened to her speak, wrapping tightly around Rose. As if her lap were the only safe place left on Earth.

"It's doesn't...go away." Rose's eyes narrowed. "The memory of that day, it doesn't fade away."

Her breathing hitched for a small moment. Bart watched a sudden rush of water fill her eyes. She looked upwards, swallowing hard.

She squeezed her eyes shut. "I think about it, all the time."

A prickly discomfort itched at Bart's seat. As though he saw something he shouldn't have seen. As though he was an unintentional eavesdropper on their private moment. On something that was theirs.

He became overwhelmed by the drowning notion that he shouldn't have been there.

"And that hurt, doesn't get better." Rose continued. Her words caked with a soft, brutal honesty. "It doesn't stop." She brought her gaze down to Emily "But we can take it, and make it into something good."

"Instead of letting it drag us down. We can use it, use their memory to inspire us." Rose closed her eyes, mind lost in a feeling nearly forgotten. "Inspire us to do good. To be good to other people," Her lip trembled. "The way they would have wanted it." She opened her eyes, a tiny tear trailing
down the corner. "How we remember them by."

She laid her cheek on the top of Emily's head. "You can hurt," Rose gave a small shake of her head. "But you don't have to do it alone."

An tiresome heartache seeped through her, a foreign feeling of envy and helplessness. Rose realized that the most important possession that Emily had, she never will.

"You have too many people here that care about you for that to happen."

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*The Watch Tower*

*February 16th, 2017 02:00 EST*

Anticipation lingered in the air of The Watch Tower. Kaldur's furrowed brow studied the computer monitor with a hardened concentration. Around him stood Superboy, Artemis, Nightwing, M'gann, and Beast Boy. Their pre-mission nerves finally arousing at the impending action.

Using Dula's intel about the Cadmus's weapon's laboratory, Batman set up satellite surveillance on all suspicious facilities close to the Bingham Copper Mine, just south west of Salt Lake City. His investigation finally narrowed on an unregistered facility buried within the surrounding mountains.

Robin and Kid Flash's footsteps echoed around the room as they joined them in the common area.

Kaldur huffed, looking at the clock. Impatience scratched at his skin. He crossed his arms as he sighed, *"Where is Rose?"*

"I don't go by 'Rose' on missions anymore."

They turned their heads towards the sound of Rose's voice.

She stood, hands on her hips with a cocky upturn of her chin. Clasped tight around her skin, was her very own uniform. Tight, black spandex covered her from foot to neck, her arms bare. A black kevlar chest plate sat tight around her torso and black boots sat heavy on her feet. She bore dull orange shin, wrist, and knee guards. The same color utility belt wrapped around her waist. A dagger sat strapped to the outside of her left thigh, and two swords latched to the kevlar on her back. A black mask pulled upwards from the back of her neck, down to the bridge of her nose. A ravenous, untamed pony tail of white hair stuck out from the back of her skull.

"You can call me," She informed with a smirk. *"Ravager."*

"Oooo catchy!" Bart exclaimed, a sudden smile pulling on his lips.

Kaldur's brows perked as the The Zeta Tube announced an unexpected arrival.

Recognized, Emily B28

Emily felt all eyes upon her as she stepped out of the Zeta Tube. Her gaze fell to the floor as she walked towards them. She bore a new costume as well. M'gann had made her pink and white form-fitting uniform modeled after Beast Boy's. It felt stuffy against her hot skin. She was suddenly all too aware of the suit's tightness.

She wrapped her arms around her waist in self-consciousness. She prayed no one would take notice
of her. That she could be allowed to continue on with her life without being asked if she undoubtedly wanted to do so.

"E-Emily..."

No such luck.

Emily brought her gaze up towards Kaldur's voice.

He looked over at M'gann, exchanging worried looks. "Uh," He cleared his throat, softening his voice. "Please do not take this the wrong way. But, what are you doing here?"

"I'm here for the mission," Emily responded in a light but stern voice.

"Oh," Kaldur responded in surprise. "I...did not have you on the roster for today."

Emily's eyes swept across the room. Her teammate's pitiful looks creating a sour pit in her gut. "I'm ready to come back. If that's alright?"

Kaldur tilted his head with uncertainty. "We're more than happy to have you." He placed a hand on her shoulder, making eye contact. "I just want you to be sure."

She looked at him pleading eyes. "Better out on a mission than being in the dark alone."

Kaldur nodded in understanding. "Alright."

He turned his attention back to the computer. Garfield hopped over to her side, lightly squeezing her hand.

"You're back," He cooed with a soft smile.

A small smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "Yeah," She answered.

Although she wasn't quite healed. All though she wasn't quite all there. She now knew that no matter how much pain invaded her world, she didn't have to go through it alone. And there was no reason to let that hurt stop her from living her life

After all, she had already been pulled down to rock bottom. As the risk of sounding cliche, 'it was all downhill from there'. There wasn't much else the world could throw at her...was there?

"Thank you," Her soft, grateful words loud enough for only his ears. "For everything." She placed a quick kiss on his cheek.

As he smiled, Garfield suddenly found the room to be unbearably hot.

While the other's greeted Emily's arrival, Bart quietly slipped away. His footsteps silently landing him in the space next to Rose. A feverish flush filled his chest. A hopeful and strange curiosity itched at the back of his mind. He tried to swallow the dry nervousness in his throat.

"Hey, Rose?" His quiet voice faded with each word. "So, about the other day..."

Rose twinged, her eyes growing wide for a brief moment. She dreaded the impending conversation. She had hoped he would have left that particular moment alone.

"What about it?" She snipped
"Just, uh, you know." Bart stumbled, his throat closing in on him. He rubbed the back of his neck. "How we...kissed?"

"Yeah?" Rose snapped at him, impatient. She stared straight ahead. "And?"

Bart's palm felt clammy against his skin. He fidgeted with a shrug. "Well I just was-" His eyes finally looked up at her. "Wondering what it meant-"

"Don't make it weird Bart." Rose interrupted him. Her cold words slicing through his struggle.

"What?" Bart questioned, confused.

"We were dicking around. We made out. It was fun." She looked over at him, her icy eyes winded him. "That's all it was. Nothing more." She turned away. "Don't make it weird."

"Oh..." Bart's eyes fell to the ground. A dour disappointment sat sticky in his stomach.

Rose grit her teeth. A searing self-hatred burned under her skin. She knew what she was doing to him. She knew all along what her playful jabs and stolen kisses would do to his mind, to his emotions.

Rose knew what it would do to her. She tried so damn hard to stop herself.

But...God. Acting like a normal teenager? Flirting like a normal teenager; playful teasing and poached kisses? Fuck, it was all apart of what Rose wanted for her life, to have a normal life.

But she couldn't. She never will have. And she had let her slip ups go too far.

She allowed Bart to catch feelings.

And to be with her, to fall for a wolf in ill-fitted sheep's skin? He must have been more of a masochist than she thought.

But to find out who she really was? To find the monster under the wolf's hide:

It would undoubtedly shatter him.

And she couldn't bear to see that happen.

"Are we ready for mission assignments?"

Rose breathed a sigh of relief at Kaldur's voice.

"As you are all aware, we have been informed to the location of Cadmus's secret weapons laboratory." He pulled up a satellite image of the facility. It had a large rectangular center with a minor wing on each side. Smoke stacks sat atop the center. A large firing range lay in the back.

"Our mission today is to investigate this building, hack their computer systems, and collect any samples, weapons, or raw materials you can obtain without suspicion."

A firm intensity grew on his face. "I need to stress to you that this mission is strictly reconnaissance. There is to be no contact whatsoever with the enemy unless it is unavoidable. We do not want them knowing we are on their trail. Is that understood?"

The Team gave him reaffirming, though some hesitant, nods.
"Good," he replied. "Tigress, Robin, you both are Alpha." He zoomed in on the image of the facility on the computer, focusing on the north end of the center of the building. "Our electrical scans show this area to be the main computer hub. Tigress will provide cover for Robin while he hacks and downloads files from the main frame."

He turned towards Nightwing and Superboy. "You two will be Beta, your mission is to investigate the East Wing. Scans also read a high electrical reading. I will need you two to investigate and report your findings, hack and copy from any computer you find."

His eyes fell onto Emily, pausing to think for a moment. "Emily, you will be with Beast Boy and Miss Martian in Gamma. You will be exploring the main section of the building. Our readings indicate some metal working. If possible, without getting spotted, I will ask you try to obtain samples of whatever it is they are building."

Finally, he shifted his attention towards Rose and Bart. "Kid Flash and...Ravager, you two are Delta. You will be investigating the West Wing. It is only one story and our thermal scans report little to no activity from it today. So I do not foresee you have any issues. Your mission will be in investigate and report your findings."

Rose huffed, rolling her eyes. She was far too skilled to be wasting her time on reconnaissance. Kaldur flashed her an unamused look. An itching anxiety crept under his skin, his instincts screaming at him to keep Rose under lock and key.

"I will be here," Kaldur opened himself to everyone. "Monitoring from above." A stern scowl flashed upon his face, questioning his own decisions. "Be ready to leave in 10 minutes."

_Nelson Peak - Utah
February 16th, 2017
00:30 MDT_

A chilling air swept across the desert sky. Moonlight danced upon the sand as M'gann lowered the bioship onto the roof of the weapons lab. At the feel of their silent landing, The Team dispersed from the ship to their appropriate positions.

Nightwing and Superboy zipped towards the East Wing roof. A small moment of stillness shook through them all as Dick clacked away at his wrist computer, hacking the frequency of the facility's security cameras.

After what felt like an eternity, his command boomed over the psychic link.

'Camera's are overridden, everyone begin mission assignments.'

Conner pointed towards the unlocked roof access door. Nightwing opened it with caution. Conner following him inside, conscious of the clanking of his boots on the steel steps. It lead them to a quiet, dim hallway. Disgruntled voices grew louder and footsteps rang in the halls.

Superboy and Nightwing spun around into the nearest open door, waiting for the scientists to walk by as they stood just around the corner, undetected. Conner heard a metal door slam as the scientists left.

Nightwing signaled for Superboy to follow. They stepped into a large white room. Blueprints and mechanical drawings cluttered on the corkboards on the wall. Desktop computers sat snug against
them, design programs lulling on their screens.

Conner flinched. On the tables to the left, sat three Apokoliptian weapons. Their partially dismantled frames sat disheveled. Furiously scribbled notes accompanied them on the table.

They approached another large table in the middle of the room. Rulers, pens, papers sat sprawled upon it with blue prints stacked askew on top of one another.

They rummaged through them, jaws falling agape.

“What are they...trying to make here?” Conner asked, perplexed.

Nightwing grit his teeth, nearly crumbling the papers in his hand. The papers contain drawings of human prosthetics, made from Apokoliptian materials. They showed procedures for implantation and nerve connection.

Dick froze for a moment, their rummaging finally led them to the bottom drawing. The design appeared to be for a helmet. The black and red armor sat sung against the wearer's skull rounding behind the ears and diving off into a point just down the back of the wearer's neck. Tiny needle-like appendages protruded from the point, hauntingly labeled: 'Brain Stem Connection'

A briny turning graced their stomachs. Dick unclipped the bundle of papers to reveal another design of the helmet. Using clear influence of Scarab and Reach technology, the helmet expanded it's armor down the the wearer's chest and back. The helmet would expand across the user's face. Giving them the appearance of glowing red eyes, pointed ears, and fanged jowls.

On the top sat in thick, bold letters. 'WARHOUND'

'I don't like the sound of that.' Conner whispered.

Dick pushed past his growing anxiety. He held out his wristwatch computer, taking scans of the drawings. He grit his teeth, a clawing feeling in his chest telling them, screaming for them to run.

'Camera's are overridden, everyone begin mission assignments.'

M'gaan, Beast Boy, and Emily dashed around the smoke stacks. They discovered a skylight opening on the roof. M'gaan phased through it, opening the latch for Beast Boy and Emily to hop through. She carried them to the metal maintenance catwalk along the edge of the ceiling.

'Emily,' M'gann addressed her on the psychic link. 'I need you to stay up here for now, be our lookout.'

Emily nodded in understanding, though disappointment sank in her stomach. She should have known that her team still believed she couldn't handle missions yet. She wondered if M'gann was still upset with her for her actions on Mars.

M'gann shifted to her invisible form and floated towards the ground. Beast Boy chose the form of a sparrow and followed.

Their eyes scoured the area. Overexhaused workers zipped around them. Sweat dripped from their brows as they poured molten metal into casts. Two metal vats, standing two stories high sat close to the east wall: orange, molten metal bubbled inside. Wooden crates stacked high against wall behind them. Garfield flew over to them. Under the guise of shadows, he morphed back, quietly opening
one of the crates. Large blocks of unrefined black metal rested inside them.

M'gann made her way to the west wall. Two lines of weathered, apprehensive laborers worked at folding tables with a frenzied speed. Tools shook in their sweaty hands. Shrieks of metal rang from the tables as they focused on their tasks.

M'gann watched them with wary eyes. Red and black 'helmets' formed in their hands as they worked. A nervous shiver shot down her spine. The glowing red lights giving her chilling notions of Apokolips.

Nightwing signaled the 'all clear' over the psychic link. Ravager peered over the ledge, her eyes falling on an open window. She quickly climbed down, Kid Flash falling right in line behind her. They climbed through the window with silence. Bart turned on the night vision in his goggles. Rose grabbed a pair from her utility belt.

Their eyes scanned the room. Containers stacked high on top of one another. Medical supplies filled the boxes to the brim. They looked at each other, confusion twisting their faces.

Rose opened the door with a quiet 'click' of the door knob.

They walked towards the end of the hallway. Only the hash blue tones of still computers filled the space with light. A long hallway stretched in front of them with three rooms on their left and two on their right. Glass walls connected each of them.

Each room: a fully equipped and fully functional surgery room.

They yelped as a scorching white light filled their goggles. Rose tore her's off, blinking through the spots.

A mousy man in a lab coat stared at them with a dropped jaw, his left pointer finger on the light switch. He gripped tight at the clipboard in his other hand.

"I-in-INTRUDERS!" His stumbled screech filled the air. He turned to run.

Rose growled, sprinting after him. She placed him in a headlock, her other hand grasping over his mouth and nose. He struggled, in vain, beneath her vigorous grip.

"It's naptime for you." She whispered as the helpless doctor finally lost consciousness.

As she laid him down on the ground, her eyes fell to the door in front of her. The 'Restricted Access' in bold, white letters intrigued her curiosity. She patted down the unconscious doctor, hand stopping on the key card badge clipped to his front pocket. She tore it off him, gliding towards the door.

"Ravager," Bart whispered. His eyes following her movement. "What are you doing?"

Rose looked back at him, smiling. "Let's see how far these badges go." She placed it up against the card reader by the door. A beep rang from the reader as it blinked green. They heard a small 'click' as the door unlocked.

"That's not our mission assignment," Bart chided.

Rose rolled her eyes. "Fine, I'll go alone." She opened the door and continued through it.

Bart groaned in nervousness. He super sped behind her just before the door closed.
They snaked through the crudely lit staircase, their footsteps hardly making a sound. The fluorescent lights flickered above them.

A hallway materialized at the end of the staircase. Fogged windows emerged to their left, light barely poking through the cloudy touched from floor to ceiling. A door sat in the wall, the same card reader blinking by the door knob. The print on the door, turning their stomachs with a sickening uneasiness:

'HUMAN TESTING - RECOVERY WARD'

Bart swallowed hard, hair standing on the back of his neck. They looked at one another with a nervous tension before their gazes fell back to the door. Rose's fingers curled tight around the her dagger. She hiss through her teeth as her jaw clenched tight. She pressed the badge against the reader, swinging open the door.

They stepped through the doorway, gasps falling from their throats. Rose's mouth fell agape with winded surprise.

Six hospital beds pressed against the wall. Their dingy mattresses stained and streaked with damp blood and the auburn aftermath. Moans and groans filled the room. Six men lay upon the beds. Their pain-stricken bodies chained to the side bars.

Bart's studied them with a horrified intensity. The inner corners of his eyebrows turning upwards as his jaw fell open.

The patients lay half naked, IVs next to them. A light blue liquid dripped from tubes to the needles in their necks. Some had missing limbs. Stubs of where there once was an elbow or knee, were wrapped in bloodied gauze.

Bart took a step closer, his horrified eyes jumping from bed to bed.

While some had missing limbs, others had body parts recreated with android-like prosthetics. The crude, sloppy replacements undoubtedly being rejected by the hosts' bodies.

Rose walked over to one of the men on the beds. A red and black cybernetic clunk of metal latched over his left eyes. Red, and yellow sores throbbed the skin around it. A black metallic 'hand' was cauterized over his left wrist. The skin on his wrist blackened and cracked. The growing infection crawled up his arm. The unmistakably stench of gangrene rolled off of him.

"Jesus," Rose gaped, breathless. "What the fuck are they doing here?"

"Oh my God. These poor people." Bart shook his head, astonished. He turned his attention towards the closest bed. A man lay there, his breathing hoarse and shallow. A rectangular chunk of metal sat embedded in the center of his chest. Tender, splitting skin circled around it. In the center of the embedded metal, a circular vent opened and closed with each strained breath, a dull red light glowing inside it.

"Hey," Bart asked with shaky composure. He reached out his hand. "Are you alright?"

"Bart..." Rose's tone pleaded caution.

The man turned his head towards Bart. Eyes wide and wet with agony.

"It's gonna be ok." Bart assured, nodding.

"Bart…” Rose's eyes grazed across them. A pitied sickness rotting in her gut. A shook her head, the
quiet acceptance of death soaking the room. "They're too far gone."

Bart jumped as the man snatched his hand at the front of his uniform. Using the last of his dying strength, he pulling Bart close to him. His body trembled mercilessly.

"Kill, me."

The man's strained plea struck the air right out of Bart's lungs. He took another loud, constricted breath, head shaking ask his neck began to give out strength. Appeals of mercy dripped from his eyes.

"Kill. Me."

The man lost his grip on Bart's uniform. Bart stumbled backwards as his body trembled. He couldn't stop the frenzied shaking in his hands.

Rose had seen enough. She knew that Cadmus had human subjects. But this was far worse than she could have imagined.

'Guys,' She chimed in on the psychic link. 'We have a situation,'

'What is it?' Nightwing asked.

Tremors tore up and down Bart's body. The man's pleas for death echoing in his head. The muscles in his chest clung tight around his lungs.

And with a sudden swiftness, the room around him went dark.

And his mind took him back.

Back to a world, back to a place in time he had worked so hard to bury. Memories he tried so hard to suffocate.

'Kill me….Kill me'

The voice echoed inside his mind as he found himself surrounded by his old life. His life in the future. Ashy snowflakes of nuclear winter fell from the sky above him as his mind took him back to an old memory.

Back to his work camp. Back to his enslavement.

'Kill me….Kill me'

The screaming phrase rang in his ear as it did a year ago.

The work camp's officers materialized in front of him. Their presence, real enough that Bart was truly convinced that they were there. That he was back.

A splatter of blood tore across the air. Horrid screams filling in around him as his camp's officers tortured his fellow slaves. Their searing daggers and hammers slicing through skin and bone. Sadistic pleasure running through them as they collected intel on The Resistance. Secrets spilling from the slave's mouths as their composure crumbled with pain. Their pleas for death echoed across the camp.

A chilling, bitter cold ran through Bart's blood. He looked down at his hands, his black fingerless gloves wrapped snug around them. His green jacket just as tight against his arms as he remembered.
He brought his gaze back up. Stomach turning with a violent intensity as one of the officers stared at him. A small moment passed between them as the officer removed his helmet.

Bart saw his own face staring back at him.

A wicked, barbarus smile pulled on the officer's lips. A face just like his own, creased with a violent, cruel grin. Blonde hair ran amuck on his head, just as Bart remembered.

Bart's own voice fell from the officer's lips.

"Watch yourself, or you'll be next." He snarled. "You filthy slave scum."

'He- Bart's unintentional voice rose on the psychic link. His mind still playing in the past. 'He tortured them.' His breathing wavered. 'He tore them apart.'

Rose's face twisted with cautious uncertainty. She watched Bart shudder with a fervorous shake. His intense gaze staring far beyond the present moment.

She knew that look. Rose recognized that lucid glare.

That was the look of the triggered.

The look of someone pulled to another time.

…..Where had his mind taken him?

'Bart?' She asked, mentally calling for his attention. This was no time, no place for him to have a moment. 'Bart pull it together!'

'What's going on?' Nightwing asked.

"Kill, me."

It was Rose who now heard the patient's pleas. She watched as tears fell down his cheeks, his prayers for eternal solace. His hand trembled as he reached out her her.

Rose's twinged at his desperate cries 'Fuck, what are they doing to them?'

'Bart! Rose! Answer me!' Nightwing demanded, concerned.

They didn't hear the door open behind them.

A bruising pain struck against Bart's back as he was body checked into the wall. The force of the blow, blacking out his consciousness. He collapsed onto the floor.

Rose barely had time to register what happened before she felt the cold press of a pistol against the left side of her skull.

"Don't. Move." A man's stern, husky voice bellowed the command.

Rose quietly, and cautiously rose her hands up into the air. She peered at him through her peripheral vision.

The man's sharp jaw flexed as he grit his teeth. His auburn hair was buzzed close to his head. A black shirt clung tight to his muscles on his chest. Camo BDUs rested on his hips. He pressed against his earpiece communicator, sneering at Kid Flash's uniform. "League Intruders spotted. Initiate code
red."

Rose's eyes moved about the room as an alarm sounded. It appeared as though their mission was now over. She had to get the information she needed, and fast.

"Come to pay rescuer for these poor test subjects?" The man mocked, still pressing the gun against her head.

Rose's gaze fell back to the gunman. Her eyes narrowing. "They're not who I'm looking for."

The man tilted his head in inquiry.

Rose turned her head towards him, the barrel of his gun sliding across her skin, landing on the middle of her forehead.

"Where is Project J?" She asked with a cold demand. "Just tell me if it's here."

The man's eyes widened with astonishment. His nostrils flared in agitation. He narrowed his gaze. "Wrong facility." He snipped. "And just how do you know about that? That's classified information."

His mind raced, studying her every detail. "Unless..." His eyes fell from her snow white hair.

He gasped. "It's you. You're his other brat."

Rose tensed at his words, anger shaking her limbs. A snarl pulled on her upper lip. She glared at him with a cold, violent intensity.

"So this is where you've been hiding? With heroes?" The man chuckled low in his throat. "Ohh, I can't wait to see the look on his face when I bring you to him."

What little composure Rose had compiled, crumbled beneath her.

"Not if I kill you first," she hissed.

With a swift, smooth swing, she grabbed the man's wrist, pushing the gun away from her head. He fired, the bullet charged towards the wall behind her. She brought her right fist upon his nose. The power from her hips, causing his nose to shatter beneath her fingers.

He smashed against the wall, clutching his face. Blood gushed from behind his hands.

A savage growl fell from his throat. "You bitch!" He roared as he lunged towards her.

Rose reached for the sword on her back. A sharp breath filled her lung, as her muscles froze with terror. Eyes growing wide at the sight in front of her.

Within a matter of seconds, the man...became a monster. His clothing shredded from his growing limbs. Thick, brown fur surfaced from every pore of his body. His ears pointed and jaw pulled into a snarling snout. His humanoid arms reached for her, claws sprouting from his nail beds. His clawed hands gripped her shoulders.

And Rose found herself tackled by a monstrous wolf...no...a werewolf.

Rose composed herself just in time. As he pushed her towards the ground, she kicked her feet upwards against his torso. Using his own momentum to somersault him off of her.
Rose scrambled to her feet. She grabbed her sword, holding it out in front of her, ready to strike.

The beast roared, charging at her. She lashed her sword at him, but he was far too fast.

He avoided her strike. His clawed hand grasping at her wrist. She screeched at her wrist popped beneath his crushing grip. Her sword tumbled to the ground. He pressed her against the wall. Terror spiked down her spine as his hands gripped around her throat.

She croaked. Her eyes grew wide as panic cinged her nerves. Her windpipe closed around this crushing grasp.

He watched her face tint blue. His lips pulled back into a smile. "You're not even going to cry for me, little girl?" He chuckled, his hot, rancid breath patting against her skin. "At least the last one cried when I killed her."

A primal rage tore through Rose. She grit her teeth with a fervid furiosity. With the last of her oxygen, she shot her her knee upwards, bashing it against his groin. He released his grip, a loud gasp filling his throat.

She shoved him off of her. Rose fell to her hands and knees. She coughed with desperation, trying to fill her lungs with air.

The wolf-man groaned, growling between his moans of pain and his slowly picked himself up off the floor.

Rose scanned the room in a desperate attempt to find a way to defend herself. She reached out her uninjured arm towards the one of the beds. Clawing at the metal stool that stood next to it. And just as the man pull himself up to his hands and knees, Rose swung the stool across this skull, knocking him unconscious. His body morphed back into his human form.

But Rose's heart still pounded in her chest. Sweat dripped from her brow her blood boiled beneath her skin. A barbaric snarl creased her face. A cold, seductive call of bloodlust screaming for her.

Bart groaned. His body ached with a throbbing intensity. He slowly blinked open his eyes, two blurry figures gradually coming into focus.

Rose stood over an unconscious man. Her chest heaved as she stared him down with grim distain. A foreign anger creased her face, veins rising in her neck. She let out a loud inhale as she raised her other sword above him, the tip pointing downward.

Bart's blood ran cold. Time slowed as he watched her bring the sword down. The air escaped his lungs, a spark of electricity running through his muscles. He charged at her at superspeed, just before the sword could slice the man's skin. She smashed against the wall.

"What are you doing?!" He squaked. Jaw slacked in confounded surprise.

Rose groaned. She grasped at her head. "What?" She asked, coming to. Her eyes fell upon his terrified face. Her heartbeat slowed, her adrenaline dissipating. Her eyes fell to the sword lying on the floor.

What….what happened?

She remembered being choked, kicking him in the groin and then….this.

Oh no.
No.

Fuck….it was happening again.

Her blackouts….they were back.

"You almost killed him." Astonishment filled Bart's tone. Her ghastly expression flashing in his mind.

Rose looked up at him with pleading eyes. "No...No I didn't mean-" She stood up, a dizzy sensation swirling in her head.

Bart backed away from her.

"Bart I-" She tried to explain, her voice cracking as she shuddered. "I don't remember."

Robin and Tigress made their way towards the main computer room. It sat one story high. The wide windows overlooked the main metalworking station.

Robin hacked the badge reader on the side of the door with silent swiftness.

A young man sat at one of the computers. His cheek lay against his fist in boredom. He appeared to be watching a lab lecture. The badge reader flashed from red to green and Robin gave Tigress an 'all clear' signal.

Tigress swung open the door, her blow dart shooting a tranquilizer dart in the technician's neck. Tim sneaked in behind her, rushing towards the computer. He pulled the the young man's hard drive from the computer, the lecture video ceasing.

Robin smirked, "You think he'd be mad if I stole his homework?"

Tigress rolled her keys. "Come on Kid Wonder, get to hacking."

Tim chuckled, placing the hard drive in one of the compartments on his belt. He pulled a wire from his wrist computer, plugging it into the mainframe. He tapped away on the holographic keys.

Several quiet minutes went by. Tigress kept an a lookout through the door window.

"I've almost got it," Tim informed her.

Tigress breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe, for once, one of their missions would go smoothly.

'Guys, we have a situation,'

Oh Jesus Christ what now? Can't once, can't for once they just pop in and pop out and she can actually go home without a bruise?

'He tortured them. He tore them apart.'

Tim looked back at Tigress with concern. He had never heard that tone from Bart before.

'Fuck, what are they doing to them?'

"Keep going. Go!" Artemis ordered. Her fingers twitched as she had a gut churning feeling their
mission was bout to take a turn for the worst.

'Bart. Rose. Answer me!'  

A shrill alarm rang around them. Red lights flashed in the corner of the room. Blinding spotlights clicked on from the ceilings. Artemis raced towards the overlook window. With terrifying clarity she could spot Beast Boy and Emily. Their eyes went wide, like deer in the headlights.

Their cover had been blown.  

Son of a *bitch*….she hated being right.

'Emily and Beast Boy are exposed!' She shrieked, calling for backup for them.

The small blast of an explosion filled the computer room. Robin and Tigress brought their forearms up to their eyes, shielding themselves. Smoke sizzled from door as it swung open wide, barely hanging on by it's hinges.

Robin lowered his arm. His jaw dropped bewilderment. His mind raced with questions, never tearing his eyes away from the figure in the doorway.

He held a gun in his hand, the barrel aimed in their direction. A red helmet clasped around his head. His leather jacket further tattered than the last encounter.

"Red Hood?" Robin questioned aloud.

Jason cringed at the sound of Tim's voice. A simmering anger heated his blood. "You?" He sneered, gritting his teeth behind his mask. His nostrils flared with a stinging realization. "He's still sending kids to do his dirty work."

'Keep hacking, I got him.' Tigress's psychic words blasted through Tim's mind.

Tigress placed a swift kick across Red Hood's wrist, knocking the gun out of his hand. She took advantaged of his surprised state, placing a punch against his jaw. He stumbled backwards, colliding with one of the computer desks. She swung her staff down at his skull. Jason dodge it, grabbing it, and pulled her in close in a split second motion.

Artemis's eyes went wide, Red Hood's elbow charging at her face. A stinging taste of copper filled her mouth as his jab shot up underneath her chin. His jacket caught on the underside of her mask, tearing it over her head.

Tigress tumbled backwards. She grasped at her mouth. Eyes clenched as a cold, searing pain jolted through her jaw.

Red Hood reached for his gun, aiming the barrel in her direction. "End of the line."

Tigress released her mouth, reaching for the dagger on her hip.

A numbing wave flushed over Jason. Air ripped from his lungs as his eyes beamed at the woman in front of him. Tigress's eyes gazed at him. Their stare, carrying a nostalgic intensity that left him in a moment of delusion.

It was...*her*.

How could he have forgotten about *her*?
"Artemis?" Jason's gun nearly slipped out of his hand. His breath froze in his chest, his jaw falling agape.

Tim turned his attention towards Hood, astonished at his knowledge of Tigress's civilian name.

Artemis's heart raced in her chest. It pounded against her ribs.

"I...I can't believe it's you."

He lowered his gun to his side. His breath shook in his throat as her golden hair fell into her face. Her bright, russet eyes staring through him with a stern intensity.

A childhood crush, a childhood hero from a life long before.

From a life nearly forgotten.

She was still as beautiful as he remembered.

Even with the blood that trailed down her lip.

Guilt twisted Jason's gut. "Oh my God I'm so sorry." He tried to apologize, holding out his hand and taking a step towards her.

Panic filled Artemis's chest. She jumped to her feet, pulling the dagger from her hip. The sharp blade now inches from Jason's face.

Her breathing wavered. "How the hell do you know my name?" She hissed. "Who are you?"

Jason snapped himself back to concentration. A hardened sadness filled his eyes.

That's right.

There was no friendship between them. There was no 'Artemis and Jason'. No more 'Artemis and Robin'. No more teammates.

For that life, was locked away.

A past he could no longer return to.

"No one anymore." He answered, a hint of sadness glazing his tone.

A voice emerged from the speaker of the radio on his hip.

"Red Hood, report, what is the status of the Computer Room?"

Artemis looked at him with large, nervous eyes. A pause of silence filled the room.

"Red Hood?" The radio chimed again.

He allowed for another pause. Artemis gripped tight around the handle of her dagger.

Jason pressed on the radio's receiver. "All clear, there's no one here."

Artemis's jaw fell agape. Her brows bunched with confusion.

"The final protocol for a League security breach," Red Hood's tone was formal and informative. "Is to self destruct." He looked over at Tim. "You'll have 10 minutes. Finish fast."

"Why?" The word fell from Artemis's mouth. "Why are you helping us?"
Who the hell was behind that mask?

A small sigh fell from Jason, a nostalgic longing pulling on his mind.

"Quit The Team while you can Arty," His advice teetered on the edge of begging. "I don't want to see you get hurt." A darkness filled his tone. "Not with what's coming."

Jason reached for his back pocket. A Fatherbox rested firmly in his hand. And in a swift motion, a golden portal opened below him. Red Hood disappeared as fast as he arrived.

Artemis's eyes went wide. It took her a moment to regain herself. She boomed across the psychic link, 'Everyone, we need to finish up and retreat! This facility is set to self destruct in 10 minutes. It's gonna blow!'

Down below, panicked cries of the line workers rumbled under the sound of the alarm. They rushed out the exists as wave of security guards filled the room. Apokolips weapons lay in their arms. They fired towards the maintenance catwalk.

Emily screeched as wave of red lasers barreled towards her. She put up her energy shield, struggling against the blasts. She screamed as the push back from the lasers knocked her off the edge of the tumbled downwards towards the concrete floor.

Garfield's heart raced in his chest. The tore after her, shifting into an elephant. He stood on his haunches, snatching her in the air with his trunk.

As soon as he broke her fall, he toppled over, the red blast of an Apokolips weapons searing his side.

M'gaard made herself visible. Using her telekinetic powers to knock the guard to the ground. She dodged the blasts, suddenly overwhelmed

'We need backup here!' She cried over the psychic link.

'Already on it!' Nightwing answered. Out of the entryways emerged the rest of the Team. Robin, Nightwing, Superboy, Ravager, and Kid Flash filed in. Their weapons unsheathed and battle ready.

The eerie clicking of the spotlights turning off thumbed in their chests. The alarm ceased as the flashing red lights carried on, illuminating spots of the room with a halting glow.

The guards pressed on their earpieces, listening to the transmission coming across. They dropped their weapons, bolting for the nearest exits.

A chilling anticipation ran down their spines.

"I should have known I'd be seeing all of you soon."

The pitchy voice echoed around them. Light footsteps tapped against the concrete floor.

Out of the shadows stepped Professor Ivo.

"You sidekicks are quite nosey indeed." He smirked.

"Ivo?" A perplexed tone fell from Nightwing's lips. His brows furrowed. Ivo's presence, suddenly filling tiny holes in his case file. "What are you making here?"

"Why tell you when I can just show you?" Ivo smiled. "I need to test my prototype anyways." He turned his head to his left. "Arsenal?"
A chilling quiet fell between them. The air frozen in their lungs as Arsenal stepped into the light.

The helmet Dick and Conner discovered blueprints for, sat atop of Arsenal's skull. He looked at them with dull, glazed eyes and a slacked expression that questioned his mental presence. Scarring crept up his right arm from his prosthetic limb. The back metal was untouched and unscathed. Glowing red lights filled the metal edges.

"A-Arsenal?" M'gann stumbled, unintentionally reaching out her hand.

"Protect your master, boy." Ivo ordered. He held a small, rectangular remote in his hand, pressing the red button top if it. "Destroy them!"

In an instant, veins grew in Arsenal's neck. His eyes growing wide, muscles contracting. A hoarse yell screamed from his throat. His prosthetic hand hinged upwards to reveal his arm cannon.

He fired a deathly red laser towards them. The team bolted out of the way. Arsenal screamed. A savage, primal rage coursing through him. He tore across the concrete floor, tackling Superboy to the ground. He straddled Superboy's chest. The lights on his mechanical arm grew, as he placed his cannon against Conner's neck. Conner's eyes widened in terror.

Nightwing sprinted towards them, tackling Arsenal off of Superboy. His arm shooting wildly against the wall

"Arsenal!" Nightwing yelled, struggling to keep him against the ground. "Arsenal what's wrong with you?"

Arsenal swung his arm, the metal crashing against Dick's cheek. He moaned with pain. M'gann used her telekinesis to pull Dick away from him.

A crazed snarl pulled on Arsenal's lips. His pupils dilated to fine points. He roared once more, firing his laser in a crazed, sloppy frenzy. The team dodged the lasers as best they could.

"Arsenal snap out of it!" M'gann commanded, her eyes glowing as she went to dive into Arsenal's mind. She gasped.

"I can't." M'gann's jaw fell open. "I can't read his mind." A pained horror pounding at her chest "I can't get into his mind." She screeched.

Bart super sped towards Arsenal, shoulder checking him. His lasers continued to fire as he flew through the air. Losing consciousness when he collided with the wall.

A boisterous creak of metal rumbled the air. One of Arsenal's stray lasers collided with the one of the legs of the metal vats containing molten metal. It cracked under the weakened support. It cascaded forward, molten metal spilling out of the top as it tilted further and further.

A monstrous terror bolted through M'gann as she looked below the tipping vat.

Garfield lay directly in it's path.

"BEAST BOY!" M'gann's horrific scream shattered the air around him.

Garfield turned his head towards a vivid orange glow on his right. He lost his breath, a petrified expression overcoming him as the molten metal poured down on top of him. Time seemed to slow. Horror coursing through his bones, terror freezing him in place. No matter how loud his mind screamed for him to run, his feet cemented to the ground.
Emily's jaw fell wide, a screaming dying in her throat. A bolt a raw, feral energy shot from the center of her mind to the tips of her fingers. Her eyes began to glow a brilliant light blue, her face creasing with a snarl. A primal protectiveness surging through her blood.

She bolted for Garfield, her feet carrying her faster than she ever deemed possible. The cries of her teammates fell on deaf ears. She slid in front of Gar, her eyes glowing with a fervid intensity.

She roared, holding out her hands out above her. A foreign electricity danced in her brain. She could feel a warm wave of power course through her every cell.

And all was quiet.

Not even a breath could be heard.

The falling vat stood still at an angle. The spilling, molten metal floated diligently in the air. The once cascading death trap, now defying the laws of gravity. A light blue aura simmered around the vat and lava.

Emily grunted. Sweat dripping down her brow as she grit her teeth. Her arms shook with a crazed trembling. Her muscles flexed, straining against the mental weight of cumbersome equipment.

"What?" Superboy's jaw dropped. Dumbfounded at the sight before him.

"She's..." M'gaan's breathed, amazed. "Telekinetic too?"

Ivo's eyes went wide. His lips twitched in a cold unamusement. "There's two of them now? Oh we are not prepared for this." He grabbed Arsenal by the back of his collar, pulling a Fatherbox out from his back pocket. "We'll be more prepared next time."

A bright golden vortex swirled underneath them. And in an instant, Ivo and Arsenal were gone.

'Everyone, get to the ship, GO!' M'gann barked across the psychic link, pointing at the open skylight window above them. They had only minutes before the facility was set to self destruct.

The Team obeyed. Conner grabbed one of the helmets from the workstation before jumping through the roof. Kid Flash ran to the top, and Rose and Tigress hitched a ride with Robin and Nightwing's grabbing guns.

M'gann levitated, taking Garfield and Emily along with her. They floated out of harm's way. The sudden movement broke Emily's concentration. The vat tumbled to the floor well below them.

Emily gasped, struggling to catch her breath. "What-what was that?" She felt like she had ran a marathon. "Did you see that?" She looked down at the floor, then back at them. Jaw dropping in awe. "I...I moved stuff....with my mind."

"Telekinesis!" Garfield blurted. An wide, ecstatic smile plastered on his face. "You have telekinesis! How cool is that?!"

The bioship opened for their arrival. M'gaan bolted for the controls. 'Hang on everyone!'

She had no time to wait for them to strap in. They charged through the air, a fiery explosion trailing just behind them.

The WatchTower
February 16th, 2017
04:50 EST

A bustle of noise erupted in The Watch Tower common area as The Team poured from the Zeta Tubes. Kaldur ordered them to take ten minutes to tend to their injuries and unload their equipment before gathering again for debrief.

Superboy and M'gann presented Kaldur with the equipment from the factory that they managed to salvage. Artemis tended to Rose's injured wrist. Robin placed the red and black hard drive he confiscated into his wrist computer. A large screen appearing in front of him. His fingers tapped away at the keyboard hologram.

Nightwing smirked, walking up next to Tim.

"Decoding already?" He asked

Tim nodded, "I'm still too pumped from battle." His eyes intently studied each file. "There's no way I'm going to be able to sleep today." He smirked. "Might as well get a head start."

Dick chuckled. He was the same way. The glowing aftermath of a successful mission always left him restless. "I'm right with ya on that."

The voices of his teammates echoed around Bart. He watched them disperse as they busied themselves.

An uneasy feeling twisted his stomach. The remnants of his flashback still left him jittery. His mind wandered to his memory of Rose. Her wild, unbridled bloodlust still left him shaken. If he hadn't tackled her...if he hadn't have been there...

He knew her unchecked rage could not be left unaccounted for any longer.

Her cared for her. He saw pieces of himself in her shattered, broken, lonely soul. The only one on the entire team who could see right through him. See him beyond his his disguise.

But Rose was getting out of hand.

Rose was losing control of her violent tendencies.

He couldn't keep it to himself any longer.

"Kaldur," Bart's words shook as he approached Aqualad.

Kaldur turned his attention towards him. "What is it Bart?"

"I have something I need to tell you. About something that happened on the mission today." He bit his lip, nervous for the chaos that was about to unfold. "Something about Rose."

Emily fidgeted nervously, her stomach bubbling. She lingered, waiting for Garfield to leave the common area.

Gar leapt past the other teammates, trudging towards The Watch Tower's cafeteria. His usual post-mission routine.

She followed him, hands shaking. She rounded the corner into the cafeteria, Garfield jumped at the sound of her footsteps.
"Oh, hey Em." A sudden heat flashed up on his cheeks. He wasn't sure why. He always felt so warm when she was around. He cleared his throat, realizing how alone they were. "Hey, uh, great job again today. By the way."

"Oh.." she replied, tucking her hair behind her ear. A bashful blush graced her cheeks. "It was nothin'."

Beast Boy felt his chest tingle at her shy smile. She was doing it again, making him feel...weird. Whenever she was around, she made it hard for him to focus.

It was then that Beast Boy came to a stinging realization.

"Aw maaaannn!" Beast Boy threw his hands up in the air in frustration, then brought them to his forehead.

"What is it?" Emily asked confused.

"I forgot to get a souvenir for the mission," he pouted.

Adalae bit her lower lip. "Um. Gar?" she said shyly. "I-I think, I might have a souvenir for you to remember today by."

"Really?" He asked excitedly, his face lighting up. His eyes darted around her in search of an object. "Where?"

Emily took a step towards him, closing the space between them. He gasped at her closeness, the warmth of her body making his heart jump.

Emily had experienced more loss in the past few months than she ever had in her entire lifetime. She would give anything, anything, to have her mother back for a moment. Just to tell her how much she meant to her. How she loved her endlessly. To thank her for all she had done to help her grow.

And today, Garfield nearly died in front of her very eyes. In a blink of an eye, she almost had another person in her life taken from her. Someone she had grown to care for. Someone who she's never told how much he means to her.

And she was no longer going to keep silent.

"This." Her tone was soft. A sweet sleepiness pulled on her lids. She placed her left hand on the side of his neck and brought the other one into her chest.

Beast Boy twinged. His eyes went wide at the brand new feeling of someone's lips upon his.

They were soft, and created a sensation in him, much more powerful than he ever thought they would. His muscles relaxed as he closed his eyes. He placed a hand on Emily's arm and one on her waist, pulling her into him. He pursed his lips forward to kiss her in return.

They had only kissed for a small moment before Emily pulled away. She looked up at him with soft, nervous eyes, waiting for a response.

Beast Boy struggled to form words. They tumbled from his mouth like a babbling fool. "Uh, I...I like that, that...souvenir."

Emily let out a small laugh. Garfield felt fuzzy, entranced. Hypnotized by glow of her face and her smile. Completely in awe that someone, someone so damn beautiful, would even want kiss him.
She pulled herself out of his arms; feeling overcome with a slight awkwardness.

"Um, so I'll-I'll see you back at The Warehouse, yeah?" She tucked her hair behind her ear again. Tossing him a flirty smile before making her way out of the room.

Beast Boy felt a smirk grow on his lips as he watched her walk away. Eventually his smile grew from ear to ear. He laughed in triumph and excitement

\textit{Best. Souvenir. EVER.}

Emily's heart raced in her chest and she sped down the hallway back to the common room. A smile stretched across her face that wouldn't dissipate.

She couldn't believe it. She couldn't believe that she actually had the courage to do it. To...\textit{kiss a boy.}

A foreign feeling of happiness surged through her veins. For weeks she was certain that the only thing she would ever feel ever again was sadness. The death of her mother, the absence of her father, still gouged at her in a way she knew would take years to heal from. But her teammates...her new family showed her a life beyond loss. How even a life with loved ones missing could still be full of happiness, love, joy, and light.

Showed her that hurt, would never last forever.

Garfield found himself staring, dumbfounded, at nothing. He brought his fingertips up to his lips, the feel of Emily still lingering. It finally made sense to him. The way he stomach fluttered when she was near. The way her smile warmed his chest. They was he couldn't stop smiling when she was around.

He liked her.

\textit{Holy shit} did he liked her.

And...she liked him? She liked him. She kissed him. And now….he was letting her...walk away?!

Garfield's jaw dropped. "I'm an idiot!" He berated himself. "Emily, wait!" He called out, tripping over himself as he ran down the hall. He found her in the main common area, watching Robin and Nightwing sift through the new intel.

Garfield smiled, taking confident strides towards her. He wasn't about to let her leave The Watch Tower without telling her how she made him feel. How happy she made him. How beautiful, wonderful, perfect she was to him.

He was not about to let her not step foot on Earth, before showing her how much he wanted to kiss her again.

He grasped at her arm, turning her towards him...

"\textit{Rose! This is unacceptable!}"

The strange, frightening sound of Kaldur's raised voice, jolted everyone in the room. They snapped their attention towards Kaldur. He towered over Rose, anger shaking his limbs. Rose looked at him with a stern scowl, her eyes like daggers.

Bart stood behind Kaldur, the inner corner of his eyebrows turned up in worry. He held his hands out in front of him, pleading for Kaldur to not make a scene.

"I've \textit{warned} you Rose," Kaldur hiss. "I've \textit{warned} you about getting carried away when facing the
enemy. And now I hear you almost killed someone today?"

Rose snarled, her eyes falling past Aqualad. She glared at Bart with a cold, stinging hatred. "Snitch," she jeered.

"Bart did not do anything wrong here." Kaldur scolded. "In fact if it wasn't for him, you would have blood on your hands right now."

"Who cares?!" Rose yelled "God. Who cares about some stupid, nameless henchmen. They're bad guys. Who gives a shit?"

Tim scoffed, just loud enough for Dick, Gar, and Emily to hear. They looked at him nervously.

But Tim paid them no mind. He rolled his eyes.

"Every. Single. Day." Tim whispered, annoyed. He directed his attention back to the computer. He continued sifting through the newly acclaimed files.

Gar and Emily watched him. And awkward tension caked the air as they tried to ignore the yelling and scolding that filled the room.

"I DO." Kaldur boomed at Rose. "I care. We do not kill our enemies. We leave justice, up to the justice system. We are neither judge, no jury and certainly not executioner!"

Kaldur huffed, realizing just how close his face was to Rose's. He let his anger simmer and subside. This is wanted she wanted. She wanted conflict. Rose lived for conflict. And Kaldur was not about to let her make him lose his composure; to fall to her level.

He straightened his back, no longer leaned into her personal space. "I will give you one last chance Rose." His nostrils flared with one final wave of tension. "If you lose your temper one more time, if you lose control of your anger one more time, you will be banished from this team."

Rose's jaw dropped.

Kaldur crossed his arms in stern determination. "And from here on out you are banished from using any deadly weapons."

"What?" She snarled.

"You heard me." Kaldur beamed. "No knives, no swords, no arrows. And no. Blades. Whatsoever."

"Oh you've gotta be shitting me!" Rose threw her hands up in the air. "You can't be serious. You expect me to just-"

"Stop!"

It was now Emily's voice that rang about the room. He shrill screech snapped everyone's attention.

"What-" Tim asked, jarred.

"Go back up!" She shrieked, pointing at the computer screen. "That-that file." Her heart pounded in her chest as her eyes went wide. "That file has my name on it."

Tim squinted, looking for her name amongst the list of files. His stomach sank as he finally found what she saw.
"Emily Briggs: Case File PM-Gen2" He read, the line, swallowing hard. "Failure." He looked over at Nightwing, a sick feeling crawling under his skin.

Nightwing's jaw fell agape, unsure what to do.

"Play it." Emily hissed at Tim. Her body shook with a violent, frightened curiosity.

Why was her name on a Cadmus computer file? Why was her name a part of a case file?

Why was she so scared?

Why could she not stop shaking?

Why was she suddenly so *fucking* terrified?

"Play it!" She spat.

Nightwing shook his head. Warning sirens wailed in his mind. That was not a good idea.

"I-I don't think-" Nightwing stammered.

"Then I'll pay it!" Emily growled, bolting to the computer screen.

"Em-" Nightwing tried to stop her. But her fingertips slashed across the screen before he had a chance to move.

A video spread across the screen. A sullen, weathered man in a lab coat stared at them with tired eyes. A thin, middle-aged brunette woman sat next to him. Glasses rested upon her face and a lab coat wrapped around her as well. One of her hands typed on a keyboard as the other navigated a mouse. The video was filmed from their computer's webcam.

An involuntarily loud gasp escaped Rose. Her eyes went wide as she clasped her hand over her mouth. Her shaky breath trapped in her throat as her eyes began to water.

The last time she saw that man and woman on the screen, they were being murdered right in front of her.

"Is it on?" The man on the video asked, leaning into the camera.

"Yes dear." The woman assured. "You can start when you're ready."

"That's-That's Doctor Madison." Emily explained, exasperated and confused. "He...He was my family doctor."

"Holy shit," Rose swore, breathy. She turned towards Kaldur. "Those are my adoptive parents."

Kaldur, M'gann, and Conner responded to her with wide eyes. A cold feeling of anticipation chilling their blood.

"Hello, we are Mr. and Mrs. Doctor Madison." The man introduced, his deep voice clawing their attention. "Chief scientists, researchers, and biological engineers at Cadmus Seguro." He cleared his throat. "If you are watching this, congratulations. You have been chosen as one of the newest recruits for Cadmus Labs." He picked up a red and white hard drive, just like the one Tim acquired.

"On this New Hire hard drive you will find reports of some closed Cadmus projects. As part of the New Hire onboarding, We've been instructed to do several seminars on the previous failed Cadmus
experiments." A deep scowl further creased the lines on his face. "Because, as you know as scientists...failures are just as important as our successes."

His pause brought a moment an unbearable, tense, nervous silence to the room.

"This video will cover Case File: PM-Gen2." The man continued. "The Subject for this experiment is a one Emily Briggs."

Emily's shaken breathing rumbled in her chest. A quivering bounced upon her lips as the screen played a recording of her. Doctor's visits of years past. Hidden cameras watching her every move for years. Years of unsuspect surveillance.

"Thirteen years old at the time of this recording." Dr. Madison's voice informed as it played over the video. Emily watched the recording play clips of her monthly 'tests'. Dr. Madison would scribble on a clipboard as she ran on a treadmill, wires glued to her skin to monitor her vitals and heart rate. Pushing and pulling weights, Dr. Madison would more and more until her muscles failed from exhaustion. Vials and vials of blood drawn from her veins.

Emily remember remembered those tests. She still had the scars from the needles on the inner pocket of her elbows. She remembered the tests growing in difficulty over the years, pushing her beyond her physical limits.

"Emily's growth and development has been heavily monitored since birth," Dr. Madison continued while the recordings continued. "With near monthly examinations on muscle growth and development as well as mental stamina. The Subject was never made aware of these recordings and was under the impression her examinations were routine."

The recordings ceased. Dr. Madison's cold, stern face graced the screen once more. "The Subject was the first offspring of laboratory-created Metahumans that Cadmus had ever seen survive."

A photo appeared upon the screen of a stern faced man with chiseled jawline. His auburn hair buzzed close to his head. Emily gasped, a sudden feeling a lightheadedness overcoming her as she recognized the man in the photo.

Recognized him as her father.

Dr. Madison continued. "The subject's biological father is Warren Griffith, a.k.a 'Wolfpack'."

Emily shook her head. No….Griffith? That….that wasn't their family name. Briggs, their name was Briggs.

Another photo appeared on the screen; a blonde woman with sharp cheekbones and a sad twinkle in her eye. Dr. Madison spoke again. "And her mother, Dr. Myrra Rhodes a.k.a. 'Medusa'."

Emily's chest tightened. Muscles contracting around her lungs in an unbearable tightness. Her limbs trembled as she stared at the photo in front of her.

"That's my..." Emily wheezed out, jaw agape. "My mom."

Rose found herself with her hand clasped around her mouth again. Her eyes wide as she stared at the photo of the man on the screen. Emily's father. Warren Griffith. Wolfpack.

His cold, ruthless, unnerving eyes stared right through her. Just like they did earlier today.

She recognized him from the lab. The bloodthirsty metahuman who had his hand around her throat.
The sting of his claws still lingered on her skin. The metahuman she almost killed today.

The man who became a wolf.

He was Emily's father.

He was alive.

He was working for Cadmus.

And he was a monster.

"Both Wolfpack and Medusa were created as part of one of Cadmus's earliest experiments, Project M." Dr. Madison explained. "And extensive breakdown of Project M can be found in this same drive."

"With Wolfpack having the super strength and lycanthropy. And Medusa having the power of telepathy, telekinesis and shapeshifting, Cadmus was sure the resulting copulation would result in The Subject having powers of her own."

Emily trembled. Her eyes watering as the Doctor's razored words echoed in her mind.

"Warren and Myrra were ordered to marry, to raise the child under their civilian home, and adopt the new Surname of 'Briggs'." Dr. Madison's story hung heavy in the air. "This would give The Subject a 'normal' environment to allow the researchers to see how the metagene surfaced in 'normal' children, but provided constant observation and research of The Subject."

Dr. Madison huff, massaging the bridge of his nose. "But after years of observation, Cadmus found no evidence of metahuman powers in The Subject. She had the genetic potential for the gene, but years of gradual increase in mental and physical stress to coax out the gene, proved to be fruitless."

He closed his eyes. A heavy burden weighing in his mind as he continued on. "With the invasion of The Reach, their strategy for finding potential metahumans and bringing out the metagene, proved to be much more efficient. A strategy that was soon adopted by our laboratories. As a result, Cadmus decided The Subject, whose metagene was declared null, was a waste of resources and too much of a liability."

The Doctor let out a shaky exhale. "The Subject," He cleared his throat. "Emily," He looked at the camera with a cold sadness "Is scheduled for termination."

Emily's knees nearly buckled underneath her. Her breathing short and shallow as his final sentence grated at her insides.

Termination. Her accident….the one that gave her her powers…. 

Someone tried to kill her.

Doctor Madison snarled. "Shut it off." He jumped from his seat.

"Sweetheart-" His wife tried to reason with him.

One of his fists curled tight around his lab coat as he tore it off. "I can't do this anymore, SHUT IT OFF!"

The recording ceased. A chilling silence coated the room. Every member of The Team still, soaking in everything they had heard.
Emily's short, wheezed breathing trickled in the silence. Her chest, collapsing in on itself. A flushed heat rising underneath her skin.

"Emily?" Garfield's voice broke stunned quiet. He watched her tremble, her wide eyes still staring at the blank computer screen.

Her mind tried to race back to the day of her accident. The day she hiked at the national park. The day she wandered away from her friends, falling asleep to the sun set.

She remembered darkness. She remembered a cold, chilling fear rising in her gut. She remembered a deep growl, a pair of glowing red eyes, and a barrage of savage teeth and claws.

And blood. So much blood.

And the cold, deep, savage voice the rang in her ear.

"You are such a disappointment."

"Emily!" Garfield's cry echoed about the common room as he rushed towards her.

Emily's legs give out underneath her. Darkness coated over her vision, losing consciousness as she collapsed to the floor.

_The WatchTower_  
_February 12th 2017_  
_06:00 EST_

A stiff quiet hung about the air. A cold lull of sadness pulled on Emily's eyelids. She pulled tighter on the blanket wrapped around her. Whoever had picked her up after she fainted, placed her on a sofa of one of The Watch Tower's lounge areas.

It was cool and quiet. Just quiet enough, for her heightened metahuman hearing to pick up on the conversation in the other room. The conversation, about her.

She had gained consciousness only after a few minutes of blacking out. She lay there, pretending to sleep, while the others picked apart the hard drive.

An overwhelming numbness crawled through her veins with each sentence she overheard. The Team scoured through the rest of the hard drive, learning everything they could about Emily's past.

They discovered how her father and her biological mother we a part of one of Cadmus's earliest experiments: "Project M".

Project Monster. A hodgepodge of of crude, almost science fiction level of science. Drawing inspiration from cinema and mythology as their basis for creation.

Cadmus discovered how to splice animal DNA with humans. Dr. Myrra Rhodes, Emily's mother, was actually one of the scientists in charge of this experiment. Her father was the main subject for the gene splicing. He was a military volunteer, putting his life on the line to become a man-made super soldier to help his country in times of war.

Myrra's powers surfaced as a result of a lab accident. And explosion of chemicals giving her the
power of telekinesis, telepathy, and shapeshifting. The ancient greek creature Medusa being her favorite form.

Myrra and Warren became intimately involved. And when Myrra discovered she was pregnant, Cadmus expanded their "Project M" for a second generation, curious to see to the Metagene passed on to offspring. Forcing Warren and Myrra to marry and raise Emily in a civilian lifestyle.

How had she never noticed her parent's powers before?
So she was just...some 'experiment' to them?
Did her mother...even want her? Or was we forced to take care of her?
Did she even actually love her? Or was she ordered to?
No.
She must have.
Emily was the reason she.....the reason she's gone.
It was all her fault.
"Emily?"
Emily's gaze drifted towards the doorway. Garfield stood there, his face plagued with worry.
"Can I come in?" He asked quietly.
Emily gave him a silent, sullen nod. She sat up, the blanket falling down her shoulders. Garfield stepped lightly into the room, taking a seat next to her.
"What are you thinking?" He asked, unsure of what else to say. It seemed that whenever Emily was built back up, something came along to tear her down.
He'd never seen anyone so broken. Fine shards of glass that could not be pulverized any further.
"I don't want to think anymore." Emily answered, her words unsteady. She looked up at him with dismal, gazed eyes. "It hurts too much."
Gar tilted his head in sympathy. A pain rising in his chest to see her damaged again.
He reached for her hand, their fingers intertwining. "I won't leave you." He promised with soft assurance, squeezing her hand. "I won't let you hurt alone anymore."
A small, disheartened smile flashed on the corner of Emily's lips. She squeezed his hand in return, her head falling onto his shoulder. A small, silent stream of tears fell down her cheek. Jarred with astonishment at how, amongst this boundless pit of darkness, there still shown a tiny, green light.
"Do you-" Gar mumbled, uncertain if he should voice his curiosity. "Did any of that, jog your memory?...Do you remember-"
"Garfield," Emily interrupted, a small crack in her voice. She raised her head, looking up at him with
pleading, tired eyes. "I don't want to remember anymore." She gave a small shake of her head. "At least, not right now. Not here." She was so...tired. "I don't want to think about the past. Or the future."

Tiny tears fell down her cheeks again. But her face carried a sullen stillness. As though she was too fatigued with misery to give any more emotion.

All she wanted, all she needed, was comfort. Something sweet, something soft, to take her away.

At least for a little while.

"All I want, right now." She continued with a quiet, eager reverberance. "It to be in this moment, right here," She pulled him in close, their lips inches apart. A wistful longing dancing on the tip of her tongue. "With you."

Garfield's stomach filled with butterflies at her closeness. Her wet cheeks glistened in the low light. Her look of desperate longing tugged at his heartstrings. He knew that what she wanted, what she needed, was a kind of comfort that no words could give.

"Alright," he whispered and brought his lips to hers.

And, at least a moment, in that quiet room, Emily found a way mask the darkness. Losing track of the passing time. Their soft, lingering kisses, numbing her emotional destitution.

Apokolips
February 29th 2017
05:45 UTC

Charred bricks crumbled beneath his boots as Vandal Savage took heavy steps on the surface of Apokolips. Sweat trailed from his brow as the trudged through the byzantium brick castle. He open the door to the back courtyard. Pools of lava flowed around them. The corners of his lips turned upwards in a closed smile. He arrived to the meeting just in time. He felt the eyes of Desaad and Gordon Godfrey fall upon him.

However, most important of all, just a few meters from them, stood the ruthless King of Apokolips: Darkseid.

He stood tall at Vandal's approach. Looking over him with the unyielding stare of his stern, red eyes.

"Vandal," Darkseid addressed, amusement in his voice. "It always pleases me to see you. You always bring good news."

It had been several months since their last meeting. Not since they day The Reach left Earth had Vandal made the trip in The War World to Apokolips. Darkseid greeted him with a firm, strong handshake, just as they did before.

It was business as usual.

Vandal hummed with amusement. "For the most part."

"Then let's get this meeting underway," Darkseid beamed, retracting his hand. "I expect you have full updates on all our projects?"
"Correct."

"Start with Mars." Darkseid commanded as he crossed his arms. He turned his back, looking over surrounding lake of lava as he listened intently. "I understand they accepted our offering?"

"Yes," Vandal answered. "The White Martian Militia accepted our offering of Apokolips weapons to initiate the uprising. Violent attacks have become routine there." A bit of teeth flashed in his smile. "Mars will soon fall into a state of chaos you require to take over."

"Good. And have the Whites made good on their favors we've ask?"

"Yes," Vandal answered again "We've had them pose as several members of the Justice League. Leaking media footage to tarnish their name. The UN has barred Wonder Woman, Martian Manhunter, Batman, and Red Arrow from League activity as a result."

"And my Suicide Drones?" Dessad inquired, rubbing his hands together. A look of excitement overcame him. The Drones were some of his prized work. Using crude, torturous science to turn Apokolips slaves and captives into loyal, disposable pons.

"Causing death and destruction as ordered." Vandal grinned. "Their self-destructive armor has proven quite lethal."

Godfrey cleared his throat. "All of which I can assure you, is being pinned on the inadequacy of the Justice League." A boastful flare decorated his voice. "I have the public's puny minds fooled into thinking that Earth's 'alien attacks' are the result of The League's ineptness. Their approval rating has plummeted even more so than during the time of The Reach's invasion."

Darkseid hummed low in his throat. He turned to face them, a stern scowl on his lips. "And how goes our overtaking of Tamaran?"

Vandal sighed in disappointment. "I regret to report the full invasion was unsuccessful. The Tamaranians proved to be unwavered by our public manipulation tactics. Even engaging them in all out war, their fight against us was unyielding." A snarl flashed upon his lip, thinking about his failure. "I had no choice but to terminate the planet."

Darkseid hummed to himself again. "Not what I desired." He huffed away the setback. "But sacrifices must be made upon road to victory. Were there any survivors?"

"A few ships did escape during the planet's implosion. Your soldiers are hunting them down as we speak."Vandal gave a heavy sigh. "And I just received word that The League's sidekicks, managed to infiltrate the weapons facility."

Darkseid perked at his words, looking at back him over his shoulder.

Vandal continued, "The facility was destroyed per your request. Luckily the majority of the helmets had been shipped. We only lost around two dozen."

Darkseid's eyes fell to the ground, lost in thought. For a moment, silence filled the air. He puffed out his chest, raising his chin as he looked forward. "Tell me, Vandal. Tell me what I taught you. How do you break a 'hero'?"

A dark smile curled upon Savage's lips. "First you set them up to fail. Then you tear them down from the inside out." An eager, elated snarl twitching his lip. "And then you take them out."
Darkseid's eyes narrowed in thought. "And It's time we took that first step with earth." He turned around towards Desaad, chin turned upwards in command. "Desaad, gather all Suicide Drones available. I want them all fully equipped in two days time."

And for a small, scarce moment, Darkseid smiled. A flash of triumph flickered in his eyes. "It's time to deliver the first crippling blow."
“Something is bothering you.”

Paula Crock’s voice filled the living room of Artemis’s childhood home. She looked at her mother from across the dining room table. Artemis sat, with her phone in one hand, and her head resting in the other. The food in front of her slowly losing temperature.

“It’s nothing.” Artemis replied, barely looking up from her screen. The still, silent text message history itched at Artemis the more she stared.

Her mind played her latest interaction with Dick at The Warehouse over and over again. Reliving through the terrible words they both shared. Neither had said anything to one another since then.

Guilt festered in Artemis’s gut. Before embarking on the Zeta Tube to Gotham, she pulled out her phone and pounded on the keyboard.

‘I’m sorry’

It was quick. It was short. It was cheap. And it only furthered her shame. Nightwing had never spoken to her like that before. She had hurt him deeper than she ever imagined she could, and all she could come up with was a two-worded text message?

An irritating heat scratched at her skin for ten minutes before he responded.

‘It’s fine.’

Yeah...he was still pissed.

“I doubt it’s ‘nothing’.” Paula remarked, pointing at Artemis’s plate with her chopsticks. “You’ve barely touched your Banh xeo. I thought it was your favorite?”

Artemis gave her a sullen shrug. “I just haven’t been hungry lately.”

“What are you alright?” Paula asked.

“I’m fine.”

“Artemis.” A soft concern plagued her tone as she reached for Artemis’s hand, looking her in the eye. Her words were soft and deliberate. “Are you alright?”

Artemis’s gaze fell to the floor. She knew her mother meant the question to it’s full capacity, not as a trivial filler.

And Artemis found she couldn’t answer. Because, in all honestly, she had forgotten what ‘alright’ felt like.

“You can always move back here you know.” Her mother gave her a small smile. “Give you some time to figure things out, be surrounded by love.” She squeezed her hand. “This will always be your home too. You know that right?”
“I do mom.” A hint of a smile pulled on the corner of Artemis’s lips as she squeezed back. “I’ll be alright. Zataana’s been really good at making sure I don’t lock myself in.” She grinned. “Plus I’m pretty sure we’d drive each other crazy. You’d be trying to run me over with your wheelchair by the end of the month.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Paula answered with a condescending chuckle. She turned her attention back to her food. “I wouldn’t try to run you over with my chair. I would succeed at running you over.”

Artemis laughed, shaking her head. “You’re the worst.”

Her laughter faded, and eventually her attention was brought back her her phone, opening and closing her messaging app.

“Expecting a text from someone?” Paula asked.

“Yeah.” Artemis huffed. “No.” She placed her phone face down on the table with a growl, rubbing her hands on her face in frustration. “I don’t know.”

“Is that what’s distracting you?”

“Yeah.” Artemis signed, finally picking at her place.

A silence filled the space between them as Paula quietly waited for a suitable answer that she knew she was going to have to pry out of her daughter. “You know I am going to get an answer out of you before you leave today, right?”

Artemis groaned, surrendering. “Nightwing’s mad at me.”

“And why is that?”

“I said something shitty to him.”

“Like what?”

Artemis grimaced at her own memory. “I told him he had no idea how hard losing Wally was.”

Paula looked at her with a stern, disappointed eyes. She knew the full extent of Wally and Dick’s childhood friendship. “Artemis that’s terrible.” She gave a small, exasperated shake of her head. “How could you say something like that?”

“Hey he said some pretty nasty things back!” Artemis tried to retort.

“Only because you were the one who provoked him.”

“Whatever.” Artemis slouched down in her chair, crossing her arms. “I texted him and said I was sorry.” Her face twisted in annoyance. “All he said was ‘it’s fine’. What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Artemis.” Paula placed her chopsticks on the table. “I know that you are still hurting.” She waiting for Artemis’s eye contact before continuing. “I know that this is hard for you. But you cannot allow your hurt to hurt other people.”

Her mother’s words struck a chord deep in her belly.

“Being in pain doesn’t give you the right to pass it to others.” Paula explained with a steely truth. “Especially people who love you. You need those people in your life to get better, Artemis.”
Artemis looked up at her with defeated eyes. A slight pout played on her lips. She knew what everything her mother said was true. “What should I do?”

“Well,” Paula answered with a shrug. “First you are going to eat all of this food that I spent all morning cooking for you. You are far too skinny for my liking.” She returned back to her own food. Her motherly tone sounding as though she were assigning chores. “And then you are going to go over to that boy’s house and apologize to him in person. Context is lost over phones you know.”

Artemis smirked, shaking her head. “You’re right.” She gave a defeated shrug. “You’re always right.”

Her mother hummed to herself in amusement. A smug smile played on her lips. “That is correct.”

Bludhaven
March 2nd, 2017
15:15 EDT

“I don’t get, what is it with girls and Froyo?” Tim questioned, watching with a slight horror as Cassie devoured her bowl.

He didn’t understand. He couldn’t comprehend how much she could pack away. Even more so, he couldn’t comprehend how she never got tired of it. Central City Froyo, Dakota City Yogurtland, Red Mango Metropolis, he had eaten it with her in nearly every single major metropolitan city in the U.S. in their eight months of dating.

And Tim should have known when he asked her on a date today, Bludhaven Froyoland, is where she wanted to go.

“Don’t look at me like I’m the weird one,” Cassie sassed with a smile. She pointed as his bowl with her spoon. “You literally get the same boring thing every time.”

Tim looked down at his bowl, slightly offended. Chocolate custard, caramel sauce, chocolate chips. Safe and simple.

“I know what I like.” He shrugged, eyes falling on Cassie’s bowl; a nauseatingly neon concoction of fruity flavors and sweet and sour candies.

Cassie rolled her eyes with a smile. “So what’s after this?” She asked.

“Um, I was thinking maybe the amusement park on the pier?” He cleared his throat, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. “But first we have to swing by The Warehouse.”

Cassie twisted her lip in irritation. “Let me guess, it’s for Team business.”

“Yes…” Tim’s defeated tone trailed off.

“Tim, you said you’d try harder at keeping our personal time and Team time separate.”

“I know, I know,” Tim answered, trying to subdue her annoyance. “But this is kind of a ‘really need to take care of it sooner rather than later kinda thing’.”

Cassie huffed. She noticed how the left corner of his lip twitched when he became nervous. His apprehensive, blue eyes peaked from the top of his glasses. An apology rested heavy in them.

She sighed, “Gods, I can’t stay mad at that cute face. You know how lucky you are, right?”
He laughed, reaching across the table for her hand. “Absolutely.”

They finished their yogurt on the go, making their way towards The Warehouse. The spring air crisp against their skin. They walked inside, Malcom greeted them from the kitchen. And resting on the couch with stiff, crossed arms was Rose. She looked over at the sound of their entry. A smug, ornery grin twitched on her lips.

Tim rolled his eyes, preparing for her inevitable smart remark.

“Oh would you look at that.” Rose snickered. “Barbie’s taking her pet Birdie out for a walk. How cute.”

Cassie grimaced. “Oh would you look at that.” She snipped back. “You’re still rude and annoying.”

“Oh would you look at that.” All looks of amusement drained from Rose’s face. “You’re still a condescending twat.”

“Excuse me!” Cassie retorted, aghast. She took a step towards her, fist clenched.

Rose jumped from her seat, muscles tense in preparation.

“Oh okay okay okay that’s enough.” Tim stepped in between them, arms outstretched. Suddenly not so sure if that was the most...intelligent choice for his safety. “I’m sure you two didn’t really mean what you said.” He felt like a father trying to placate quarreling siblings. “Please, can you two just, be around each other for longer than two seconds before being at each other’s throats?

“Doubt it,” Cassie answered with an honest sneer.

“Why are you two even here?” Rose huffed, crossing her arms.

“Oh, well, because.” Tim answer, taking off his backpack and setting it on the ground. “I actually have a present for you Rose.”

Her face twitched in uncertain surprise. “What?”

Cassie’s brows bunched in irritation. “Why do you have a present for her?”

Rose snickered at Cassie’s sudden irritation. “Wow Birdie, I thought we were gonna keep us on the down low.” She cupped her mouth, pretending to whisper. Her other thumb pointing in Cassie’s direction. “Especially with Blondie right there.”

“What?” Cassie’s face grew red with irritation.

“She’s kidding, Cass.” He assured, unamused. “Very funny Rose. I’m here because I came across something that can help you out.”

“Help me out?” She questioned.

Tim reached inside his backpack, pulling out a shiny, black, rectangular box. A steel clasp sat on the front and two hinges sat in the back, a ‘Wayne Enterprises’ logo was etched on the lid’s center.

Tim held out the box to her, opening the lid. “Here.”

Rose tilted her head in inquiry. On the inside, on red satin, rested two sword hilts. Oval hand guards circled around the handles. Their pristine steel, begging Rose to reach out for them.
“What are they?” She asked.

“Just pick them up.” He assured. “Trust me.”

She grabbed them with caution, pulling them out of the box.

“Now press the blue button on the top with your thumb, just under the handguards.” Tim instructed.

Tim took a few steps away from her. He nodded. Rose paused for a moment in caution before following his instructions.

She jumped as two bright, white beams emerged from the hilts. A constant stream of electricity pulsed through them.

“How.” Rose gawked, mouth agape. “What are these?”

“They’re called Energy Swords.” Tim explained. “They’re like, well, regular swords. But instead of the ‘blades’ being made of steel, they’re made up of controlled electrical energy.” He twirled his hand, thinking of an example. “Uhhhh, think like a lightsaber kinda deal, but non-lethal. They have all the cutting, damaging, and shielding capabilities of a regular sword but become non-lethal when they come in contact with skin tissue. The electric pulse simply shocks the opponent unconscious.” He shrugged, smirking. “So now you can let out allll the rage you want on the bad guys, and we don’t have to worry about you, well, killing someone.”

Rose looked up at him with soft eyes and a slacked jaw. She could not remember the last time she had been given a gift. A gift meant that someone had thought of her. Thought of her situation. Thought about how much trouble she’d been in. And thought of something to help her.

Help her stay on the team.

He…wanted her to stay on the team?

“I-I” Rose’s words nearly died in her throat. “I don’t know what to say.” She retracted the Energy Swords. A rare, genuine gratitude rested on her tone. “Thank you.”

Tim nodded his head, giving her a small smile. He could feel the boiling anger radiation off of Cassie.

He was never going to hear the end of this.

Bludhaven
March 2nd, 2017
15:00 EDT

A deep inhale and exhale expelled from Artemis’s lungs. She stood outside of Dick’s apartment door, trying to find the courage to actually knock. Her planned conversation played over and over again in her mind. She clanked her knuckles against the wooden door.

Dick swung the door open. His eyes widened for a moment in surprise. A awkward silence fell between them. Dick’s voice seemingly unsure of what to say. She was the last person he’d expect at his doorstep.

“Hey.” Any pre-scripted conversation Artemis had disappeared from her mind with a sudden swiftness. She just needed something, anything, to help dissipate the tension.
“Hey.” Dick responded.

“Um,” Artemis struggled. “Are you, uh, busy right now?”

Dick gave a small, reluctant shrug. “Not really.”

Artemis peered behind him, hoping he was alone. “Can I come in?”

Dick stared at her for a quiet moment. His unamused expression turning her stomach. “Sure.” He answered coldly, opening the door wider.

Dick stepped out of her way, making his way towards the kitchen sink to finish the dishes he’d started. Artemis trailed in behind him, closing the door.

The front door opened to kitchen and dining area. Beyond that could be found the living room and the door to Dick’s bedroom. Cat Grant’s news segment lulled in the background on the television. A small table with two chairs sat in the middle of the kitchen.

Artemis’s eyes ran over the table. Manilla folders overflowing with papers and photos sat on top of it. Along with a half empty bottle of red wine.

Artemis’s brows bunched in worry. “I thought you didn’t drink.”

“I don’t.” Dick answered, a slight annoyance hung on his words. “Barbara left it from last night when we were going over case files.”

“Oh,” Artemis answered, thrown off by his blatant irritation. “How’s that going? You guys... a thing yet?”

“No. But...we’re good.” Dick huffed in annoyance, wiping his hands dry with a hand towel and tossing it on the counter. “Did you really come all the way to Bludhaven to ask me about my relationships?”

“No I came here to visit my mom.” Artemis sneered. She paused, taking a moment to reel in her caddiness. “And I...” She exhaled audibly. God, what was this so hard? “Wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“I told you it was fine.”

“No. I wanted to tell you in person. I...” Artemis growled to herself. She threw her hands up in the air and brought them back down, shaking her head as she twisted her lip. Unsure of how else to say it. “I’m an asshole.” She nodded in self affirmation. “I’m an asshole.”

The sting of admittance, clawed at her insides.

She balled one of her hands into a fist, it bounced as she spoke. “I’m not over Wally’s death yet. I’m handling it, really shitily, and I took it out on you.”

Dick nearly had to take a step back to keep his balance. His eyes widened in surprise.

Artemis chewed on the inside of her cheek, self-anger rising as their fight replayed in her mind. “And I said something shitty to you that I can’t take back.” Water rose in her eyes. “I’ve been so caught up in myself that...I’d forgotten that I wasn’t the only one who loved Wally. I forgot how much he meant to everyone else.” Artemis swallowed the lump in her throat. “You were right, I’m not special.” She looked at him with defeated eyes. “I’m not the only one who hurts.”

Dick stared at her for a small moment. Her words taking time to sink in. He gave a weak chuckle, a
pang of guilt rising in his gut. He rubbed the back of his neck. “I guess we’re both assholes.” He took a few steps towards her. “I said some nasty things to you too.” He took her hand, his gaze falling to the floor. “You didn’t deserve that. I wish I could take them back.” He looked at her pleading eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

Dick was taken aback as she wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him into a tight embrace. Dick smiled.

“I just-” Artemis’s muffled voice bounced against Dick’s neck. “I just want to skip to the hugging so we can finally knock it off with all the ‘feelings,’ okay?” Dick laughed, hugging her back. He knew it was really because she didn’t want him to see her cry.

“Yes.” He responded with a chuckle. “Absolutely.”

She pulled away from him, wiping away the tears from her eyes. She cleared her throat and sniffled away the rest of the tingle in her nose. She turned her attention to the table, trying to find something to change the subject.

“So uh,” She cleared her throat again. “What—what’s all these for? A new case?” She placed her hands on one of the manila envelopes. “Can I see?”

“Sure,” Dick responded. “Yeah, it’s just material on one of the new villains that’s popped up in Gotham. I think we’ve told you about him? Red Ho—”

“Holy shit!” Artemis swore as she opened one of the folders. A snapshot of the red masked, leather-jacket-clad man stared back at her. “Holy shit I forgot.” She brought her hand up to her head. Her jaw dropped in exasperated disappointment. “I fucking forgot. I forgot to tell you! I didn’t tell you! Did Tim tell you?!”

Dick shook his hands out in front of him. “Woah whoah whoah slow down—”

Artemis grabbed the photo, holding it out towards him. “He knows my name.” She spat. “He knows who I am!”

“What?” I hint of panic spiked Dick’s words. “What do you mean? How do you know that?”

Artemis placed a hand over her face.

Dick was going to be so pissed at her.

“At the weapons factory.” Artemis explained, bringing her hand back down “I guess—I guess with all the shit that went down with Emily I just...pushed it back.” She shook her head, flabbergasted. “Tim didn’t tell you?”

“No,” Dick sneered, thinking of the strong words he was going to have with Tim later. “So you need to tell me.”

“At the weapons factory,” Artemis explained again. “He attacked us when the alarms went off. My—my mask got ripped off and...he knew me.” She clutched her chest as it all came crashing back to her. “He called me Artemis. He called me...Arty.” Her jaw fell, eyes wide in remembrance.

Arty. A nickname that only a few people in her life had permission to address her by. Only those astonishingly close to her.

“And then—and then he told us about the self destruct.” She shook her head, confusion plaguing her
as it did then. “He...he saved our lives.” She itched at the unbearable hot skin on her chest. “But...only because...he saw me? Recognized me?”


“In uniform.” His eyes ran across the floor, trying to piece together the puzzle in his head. “She was-patrolling in uniform. And her called her...Babs.”

Artemis’s jaw fell agape, her eyes racing across the floor in thought. “So...what, are we...” She looked back up at him. “Talking about a double agent maybe? Another mole?” Dick sighed. “I don’t know, this changes a lot of things.” He ran his hand through his hair. “I thought-I thought it was just her but now...”

Artemis’s gaze fell past him. A stiff tension surged through her veins as the television grabbed her attention. “Dick-” She tried to interrupt. “Now it could be the whole Team, the whole League even-”

“Dick shut up look!” Artemis chided, brushing past him. She stormed the living room, grabbing the remote off the sofa and blasted the volume.

“Again we’ve just received reports of simultaneous alien attacks in Metropolis, New York City, Washington DC, Central City, Dakota City, and Fawcett City.” Cat Grant’s words stiffened the air in their lungs. “Our news crews are saying they appear to be the same aliens that attacked New Orleans and Bludhaven just last year.”

Live video feed played in the corners of the screen. Petrified civilians bolting away from their homes. The aliens clawing and mauling anything, anyone in their path. Explosions filled the streets.

“The President has declared a state of emergency.” A twinge of panic could be found in even Cat’s voice. “All available military reserve personnel have been dispatched. Citizens who live in these cities are ordered to evacuate immediately. We are still awaiting an official response from The League.”

Dick’s wrist communicator rang. He answered it, knowing all too well who it was.

“Where do you want us to go?” Dick answered, the communicator projected a video of Batman.

“New York City. Zeta there.” Batman ordered. “Guardian is already on his way. I will meet you there in the Bat Plane.”

“What about Robin?” Dick inquired.

“I have ordered him, Wonder Girl and Ravager to assist Wonder Woman in D.C.”

“But I thought she was barred from League activity?” Dick questioned nervously.

Batman’s eyes narrowed. “We’ll worry about politics when lives aren’t at stake.” A striking firmness caked his voice. “Both of you listen to me. We need to take these aliens out fast without agitating their armor. Disable them as quickly as possible.”

A flash of apprehension twisted Bruce’s lip. “We cannot let them self-destruct.”
The droning voice of Bart’s science teacher filled in around him. Bart slouched forward onto his desk, laying his head down on his arms. The teacher lectured on and on. Probably something about plate tectonics? Well, at least that’s what he caught snippets of. That’s what the assigned chapter Bart speed read five minutes before class was on.

The scribbling of his classmate’s pencils consumed him in white noise. His eyelids hung low. His leg bounced furiously in his chair, counting down the minutes for the day to be done.

Bart was too preoccupied to notice or care for the lecture. A sullen disappointment pushed on his chest as he remembered:

‘Don’t make it weird.’

Rose’s words still played in his mind. It irritated him to no end how he couldn’t just let them go. How he couldn’t shake their jarring mental presence.

It was a curious, new type of disappointment. One that sunk his mood to a pitiful tenderness. Made him feel wounded and vulnerable.

He hated it. And what irked him even more, was that the reason his wounded feelings hadn’t healed, was because Rose made him feel like he wasn’t alone.

Rose didn’t pity him. Rose didn’t go easy on him. Rose didn’t see his past as something that broke him, but rather, something that made him. She saw past his ecstatic charade. Saw parts of him that no one had ever been able to, ever cared, to dig out.

Yet she wanted nothing to do with him.

And that stung.

Bart snapped his head up. His pathetic brooding cut short by the wail of sirens.

Bart and his classmates exchanged nervous glances about the room and out the window. Central City had two community sirens. One for tornadoes. And the other for metahuman and alien attacks.

The alarm for the latter clattered through the walls of the school. Bart’s fingers twitched in nervous anticipation, just begging to throw on the uniform in his locker.

The teacher’s phone desk rang. He grabbed it, listening with a firm intensity to the orders of the principal on the other line. He nodded, hanging up the phone.

“Okay everyone listen up,” The teacher addressed the class. “There is no need to panic. Please form an orderly line and we will proceed to the nearest shelter.”

Screams filled the room as an explosion erupted from the buildings across the street. A carnal roar rang in their ears as five aliens exposed themselves from the alleyways.

Bart gasped. They looked nearly identical to the ones that had attacked Louisiana months prior. Towering creatures, with humanoid forms, nearly seven feet tall. Their scarred, calloused skin cerulean in color. They sported batlike wings and ears. Their short snouts protruded with razored
teeth. Red, glowing, lidless eyes stared with a petrifying gaze.

Red and black Apokoliptian armor covered their torso, thighs, and forearms. Wretched growls fell from their throats as they charged towards the school.

Ear splitting screams scorched the air. His horrified classmates bolted towards the exits. Panic clawing at their primal need for escape.

Bart suppersped to his locker, tossing on his uniform. He wasn’t about to let these monsters take away his peers.

He wasn’t going to let Central City down.

He wasn’t going to fail.

He wasn't going to let Barry down.

Not again.

Not today.

Dakota City
March 2nd, 2017
13:00 CDT

Car horns wailed against the cracked asphalt. Impatient drivers sat bumper to bumper on the Dakota City highway. Noise of the bustling city around them accentuated the shrill clamor.

In one of the idling cars sat a muscular, young black man. A cell phone pressed up to his ear. His college textbooks rested on on the passenger seat. An empty car seat sat snugly in the the back. His football equipment poked out of his athletic bag. On the back of his jersey, in bold lettering, was the name ‘STONE’.

“I’m sorry you have to pick up Amistad baby.” He apologized to his wife on the phone, looking out the window at the stand still traffic. “I have no idea where all this traffic came from.”

“It’s all good Victor, no worries.” On the other line, Raquel Irving (No, Raquel Stone. She so was not used to that yet) answered him with a reassuring tone.

She walked down the stairs of their apartment complex. The sound of her closing car door echoed around her as she hopped inside. It looked like she was going to be the one to pick up their child from daycare today. She’d be damned if she’d let that place squeeze another damn dollar out of her for a late pickup fee.

“I needed to run some errands anyways,” she added.

Victor chuckled at the sound of her car door. “You could just fly him around you know.”

“Uh, and have his little toddler mouth blab about my superpowers to his class?” Raquel scoffed, putting on her seat belt. “No way. He’s not finding out mommy is ‘Rocket’ for a very long time.”

Victor smiled as he shrugged. “I don’t know, you squealed to me about it pretty quick.”

Raquel snorted. “Yeah, that’s because I was sixteen and pregnant and distraught.” She twisted her lip
in a sassy fashion. “Something you did to me by the way.”

Victor laughed. She shook his head, and ornery grin pulling on his lips. “Well, you didn’t seem so distraught about the baby making process.”

Raquel smiled as she rolled her eyes. “Alright, okay horndog, put that dirty mind away.” She smirked. “Save it for later tonight.”

“Ooo,” He cooed, a huskiness dripping from his tone. “You are so…”

Raquel waited for him to continue. A silence fell between them. “Baby?” She asked. “You still there?” Distant shouts filled the background of the other line. “What’s wrong?”

Victor’s eyes narrowed as he peered out his windshield. Off in the distance, he observed people abandoning their cars. Panicked looks overcame their distant faces as they sprinted in his direction, charging between cars. “People...runin’ away from somethin’.” He blurted out into the phone, mind racing.

A shrill sound boomed in the around him. The bright, golden vortex of a Boom Tube swirled in the air just meters feet from him. Out of it dropped a snarling, screeching ailen. The hood of another car crumpled under it’s weight.

Victor’s jaw dropped. He recognized it from the news videos of the alien attacks in Bludhaven and New Orleans.

The creature spotted him. It roared, taking charged at his vehicle.

Victor’s lungs nearly froze in place. He felt winded and is grasped in desperation at his door handle, his phone falling to the floor. “Holy shit!” Was all he could utter as he stumbled out the door, the alien closing in on him.

“Victor?!” Raquel screeched. Her eyes widening in horror at the haunting sounds on the other end. Her lip trembled with terror. “VICTOR?!?”

Dakota City High School
March 2nd, 2017
13:00 CDT

“I can’t believe I’m letting you do this.” Virgil squeezed his eyes tight as Frieda pricked his pointer finger, squeezing a small amount of blood into a tiny eye dropper. He looked around the school science lab. Quiet seeped in around them as they were the one ones to occupy it. “I can’t believe Mr. Mason just lets you have run of the lab on your free period.”

Frieda smiled, placing a drop of his blood between two glass slides, putting it under a microscope. “It pays to be a suckup.” A smug look overcame her, a hint of cockiness in her tone. “Being an Honor’s Student throws off suspicion.”

Virgil smiled as he rolled his eyes. “Oh you’re a real badass alright.”

“Shut up.” She jested with a playful sneer, peering into the microscope.

“Why do you need my blood anyways?” Virgil asked. “What are you looking for?”
Frieda pulled away, tying her hair into a bun. “I have a theory.” She began, pulling up DNA diagrams on the laptop next to her. “There’s not much research on the Metagene.” She paused. “Well, not a lot of public research anyways. But from what I have read, some scientists believe that it’s the next step in our evolution as humans. With the growing extraterrestrial threats, the harsh environmental change, hundreds of years of constant war, world hunger yadda yadda yadda; some scientists theorize that it’s our bodies’ new self preservation attribute finally surfacing.” She looked over at Virgil. His blank, bored expressing telling her to hurry along. She clanked away at her keyboard. “Anyways, one scientist...God what was his name? Dr. Adam Strange I think? Anywho he has a theory that the metagene could be dormant in every species.”

“Wait…” Virgil asked, a perplexed expression scrunching his face. “So are you saying like, all those mice that you got held up in your room could end up being...super mice?”

“Nononono,” Frieda corrected with a laugh. “See the theory says that other animal species can possess the metagene, but they are no way evolved enough, like humans, for it to become active.” She placed the slide of Virgil’s blood into a slide box. “I just want to compare your blood to some of the mice to see if I could potentially find the ones with a dormant, under evolved metagene to help narrow my research.”

Virgil stared at her. In awe of just how much her research had consumed her. Dear God, how could she spend so much time on something so...boring?

“Frieda, am I your only friend?” He teased.

She squished her face at him, a sassy pout pushing on her lips. “Shut up.”

She dropped her eyes at him, a thin smile pulling on her lips. “Yeah right. Even so you wouldn’t want me as an arch nemesis. You wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Virgil opened his mouth to make a witty remark. His jaw snapped shut as a jarring explosion rattled the windows. Off in the distance, a large trail of black smoke rose towards the sky. Virgil pressed himself against the glass, realizing the explosion came from the highway that ran through the city. He looked over at Frieda. She nodded in understanding. “Go, I’ll cover for you,” she assured.

Virgil tore his uniform from his backpack, throwing it on with haste. He opened the window, pushing out the screen. He pulled the retractable metal disk from his bag, throwing it underneath him as he charged towards the fire.

He approached the highway. Terrified civilians sprinted from their cars. Five vehicles were set ablaze, the explosion overturning and crushing the vehicles next to them. Virgil gasped as a loud screech filled the air. The aliens appeared through the smoke, clawing at cars and civilians. Two carried Apokoliptian lazer guns, aiming them at the fleeing crowd. They fired, more cars were set ablaze upon the laser’s’ impact. Screams filled the air.

Virgil charged, flying past them, using his electricity to snatch their guns out of their hands. A twinge of panic overcame him as he heard tiny cries for help; people trapped inside of their overturned and crushed cars.
“Static!”

Virgil snapped his head to his left. A tall, broad black man approached him. Virgil's eyes went wide. He recognized him as Victor Stone; Star Athlete; Raquel’s husband. He had watched them wed only months before.

“You take care of the aliens,” He demanded. “I’ll get the people out.”

“W-what?” Virgil stammered. “No you can’t-”

“Just do it!” He boomed, running towards one of the overturned cars.

“And I thought Frieda was bossy.” Virgil said under his breath. He pressed on his earpiece communicator. “Static to Watchtower we have hostile aliens in-”

“We know.” Green Arrow’s voice filled his ear. “They’re attacking several cities. Black Lightning and Rocket are on their way. Hold your position.”

“What?” Virgil snipped back, flabbergasted.

“Static, listen to me.” Greeen Arrow’s voice was stern. “Do not engage them, it could set off their self-destruct. Wait for backup and then find a way to lure them away from civilians.”

One of the aliens roared. It grasped at a car, lifting it up over his head. He tossed it into the air, nearly crushing a group of petrified pedestrians as they ran.

Virgil growled, shaking his head. “I can’t wait that long! These people will die!”

Green Arrow’s retorts fell upon deaf ears as he charged at one of the aliens. He struck a punch at it, clocking it in the jaw.

A few yards away, Victor Stone scoured through the mess of vehicles. Tiny hands pounded against the glass of a van. Two children screamed as they cried out for help, tears running down their face as the dented doors locked them inside.

Victor picked up a stray piece of metal, smashing it against the back window. It shattered.

“I got you,” he assured them. Pulling them out. “It’s gonna be alright.”

Virgil roared as he clocked the alien again, sending him falling to the ground. The other three took notice of Virgil, panicked screeches falling from their throats.

Virgil’s eyes went. His blood ran cold as the aliens pressed the red button on the center of the chest armor. The lights began to blink, the horrifying timer already set in motion.

Panic overcame Virgil. His mind raced. If he couldn’t stop the aliens from exploding, he could at least get them away.

Virgil squeezed his eyes shut. His right arm reaching out behind him. Sparks jumped from the surrounding car batteries, and into his palm. He grit his teeth with a fervid ferocity as he held out his left arm. Three bolts of electricity latched onto each of the aliens, magnetizing their armor.

Virgil roar. Sweat trailed from his brow as he used his borrowed electric power to lift the aliens up into the air. His muscles twitched, a burning resistance coursing through them.

If he could just get them high enough. If he could just lift them up far enough into the air. He could get them just far enough away, everyone would be safe. Just a little further, just a little faster…

Virgil gasped as his muscles gave out on him. They jerked as his electric current ceased. The weight
of the aliens being too much for Static’s green powers to bear.

The aliens tumbled to the ground. And in an instinctive attempt at survival, Vigil held out his hands in front of him. An electric shield circled over him.

The force of the blast pounded the wind from Virgil’s lungs. His vision went dark as he felt his body tossed through the air. He bounced against the ground, his skin scraping on the asphalt.

He lay on the ground, a deafening ringing filled his ears. He groaned, blinking his eyes open. They stung against the smoke. He could only make out dark clouds and fire through his blurred vision.

He felt his body shake with the force of another person. With half lidded eyes he rolled his head over to the other side. Black Lightning looked at him with terrified eyes, his mouth moved but Virgil could only make out the steady ringing.

His vision came back into focus as he lay there. His gaze fell past Black Lightning. Raquel knelt onto the ground. Tears flooded down her cheeks as she tended to another body. The body of another young black man. Blood poured from the wounds of his barely attached limbs and singed skin.

Wails and screams fell from Raquel’s lips but all Virgil could hear, was ringing. Constant, dizzying ringing.

“No..Victor…” Virgil couldn’t even hear his own words before his consciousness fell into darkness.

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Central City - Keystone High School  
March 2nd, 2017  
14:15 CST

The rabid thump of Bart’s heartbeat pounded viciously in his chest. “Over here over here!” He bellowed, trying his best to distract the aliens away from his school. Away from his screaming classmates.

They turned, their red eyes glowing at him with a bloodthirsty glow. A stiffness cemented Bart’s lungs, recalling his first encounter with the creatures. He had nearly gotten himself killed, his sloppy underestimation, tripping on of the alien’s self destruct buttons.

He dove past them, landing a punch here and there. Enough to grab their attention away from the fleeing high schoolers. Bart found himself at a loss for the next step, fear overpowering him. Afraid he might trigger another explosion, getting innocent civilians caught in the crosshairs.

He had tried to call for Barry, though his hands were tied across town. Another fleet of aliens terrorized the other side of the city. He had to try his best to subdue them on his own, disabling them from hitting their triggers.

An alien’s roar tumbled into the sky as he was tossed backwards. A sizable blue ‘staple’ crashed into his torso, pinning it to the ground.

Bart snapped his head to the left, he’d know that shade of blue anywhere.

Blue Beetle soared in the air, his cannon arm shooting more staples, securing the alien’s arms to the ground.

Kid Flash yelped with welcomed excitement. Perhaps he wouldn’t have to take them all on himself
They made quick work with the remaining three aliens. Bart created a distraction while Jaime stapled the snarling creatures to the ground.

Jaime landed on the ground. Bart raced up to him, “Dude!” He exclaimed, greeting him with a fist bump. “Perfect timing! How did you know?”

“Batman ordered me to come here.” Blue explained. “His divvying up the whole Team and the League across the country.”

“What?” Bart asked, confused.

Jaime slacked his jaw at him, “You don’t know?”

Bart shook his head warily. “No I was just in class.”

Blue Beetle’s armor projected a screen in front of them. A map of the United States floated in front of them. Ominous red dots sat on the locations of Metropolis, New York City, Washington DC, Central City, Dakota City, and Fawcett City. “We’re being invaded dude!” Jaime exclaimed. “Reports are coming in with alien attacks in all of these cities. We’ve gotta go help Flash and subdue them before they kill more people!”

But Kid Flash made no sound. His eyes lingered on the map. He studied it intently, his gaze lingering on the location of the red dots….and where there were none.

“Come on dude we gotta go!” Blue attempted to fly away, shutting down the screen.

“Wait a minute!” Bart interjected. His hand grasping where the map had shown.

“What?” Jaime snipped. “Bart we can’t wait we have to go help!”

“Blue,” Bart commanded his attention with a stern tone. “Show me that map again.”

Jaime raised an eyebrow in uncertainty. He pulled up the screen again.

Bart studied it with a firm intensity. His eyes scouring the screen. His mind ticking with a nervous realization. “Do you see that?” He asked, pointing at the map.

Bart tilted his head in confusion.

Bart’s eyes darted back and forth, his jaw slacking as the wheels turned in his head. A single question chewed on the inside of his mind. “Why…” He began, trailing off to find the right words. “If we’re being ‘invaded’ all across the country.” He looked at him with fearfully curious eyes. “Then, why are all these attacks only in the Midwest and East Coast?”

A silence fell between them. Jaime bunched his brows as his eyes flashed upon the screen, soaking in Bart’s question. Bart glanced over at Jaime and Jaime glanced back. A frightened, desperate question lingered in Bart’s eyes. We shifted his finger towards the west coast of the United States. “Why is there nothing here?”

Jaime perked at his question. His eyes squinted and his head twitched to the left, just like it always did when he listened to The Scarab.


“What?” Bart questioned, on edge. “What?”
“Scarab thinks it could be a distraction.” Jaime explained. “He’s scanning for anything abnormal—” His eyes widened as his jaw slacked. “What?”

“What’s going on?” Bart snipped, irritated at his deafness towards The Scarab.

Jaime’s armor zoomed the holographic map down onto California, a rapid ripple of circular waves radiating off a spot on the coast.

“Scarab’s reading a 5.4 magnitude earthquake in San Diego.” Blue explained. “It’s been going on for...15 minutes?” His mouth twinged in confusion, shaking his head. “That’s—that’s not right.” He looked at Bart. “Earthquakes don’t last that long. Not naturally.”

Not naturally...

The words radiated in Bart’s mind like a over-studied test answer begging to be remembered. They snarled and clawed to be released, but what was the correct question?

A rashy tingle of needles prickled in Bart’s chest as he pieced his facts and gut feelings together.

Why all the alien attacks so far from California?

Was it a distraction?

…..For an earthquake?

Could aliens even make an earthquake? How...

The answers slammed against Bart’s skull. His memories fell to the first time he laid eyes on the aliens. To their very first interaction in Louisiana. The aliens brought with them a black and red cylindrical device.

Tim’s words replayed in his head.

‘So Aliens are invading earth...to make earthquakes?’

Jaime’s collided with them.

‘Earthquakes don’t last that long. Not naturally’

…

Not naturally…

…

Holy shit.

Jamie felt a blast of wind crash against his side. In the blink of an eye, Bart disappeared. Jaime twisted his torso behind him as he watched the flickering trail of yellow lightning fade off in the distance.

“Bart where are you going!?” He exclaimed. “Bart?!”

But Bart had not heard Jaime’s confounded cries. He was already miles away, his feet tearing away at the sound barrier. His rapid breaths scorched his lungs, a heated stitch stabbing at his sides.

He prayed on the entire path to San Diego that his suspicions would be wrong.
But prayers, he deduced long ago, were either only silent words spoken to a spirit non existent.

Or futile pleas to god who cooed at the sight of suffering.

Desert sand splashed against Bart’s uniform as he tore across the West. Arizona trailed behind him as sweat trailed from his brow. His muscles burned with a searing fire with each step he took among the mountains.

So close. He was so close to San Diego. Just a little further, just a little faster.

Bart’s gaze snapped behind him as he caught a glimpse of something in passing. He took a sharp turn to trail back, nearly tripping himself.

At the foothills of the mountains, just outside of La Presa, a thin, middle aged woman stared intently at a black cylinder. Three glowing red rings wrapped around it. Four appendages protruded from the bottom, spiking it in place in the soil. The soil around the bottom glew red with heat. It was nearly identical to the one they had discovered in Louisiana. Though this model stood nearly four feet tall and two feet in diameter. Batman had pointedly labeled them as ‘Seismic Disruptors,’ capable of causing earthquakes by disintegrating soil, disrupting tectonic plates.. The woman pounded furiously at the screen on top of the device.

Bart let out a small roar as he charged towards the woman. She screeched as Bart’s shoulder collided with her side, sending her tumbling across the ground.

Bart’s jagged, exasperated breathing filled the air as he fell to one knee. His lungs ignited like fire in his chest. Fatigue plagued him as he struggled to keep his balance. The ground shook underneath him.

He turned towards the Seismic Disruptor. A shrill, pulsating sounds rang from it. He charged at it, reaching for the keypad on top. A jolt of electricity shot through him, sending him staggering backwards. His heart jumped into his throat.

The Disruptor’s force field was already active. He couldn’t touch it. He couldn't stop it.

“Nonononono,” panicked words dripped from his lips. He snapped his head in the direction of the woman. “Shut it off!” He commanded.

The woman groaned, turning herself onto her side. She began to pick herself up, hand pressed against the side of her skull. Her lips twisted with pain.

Bart’s brows bunched in confusion as he watched something flicker upon her head. A thin, black headband rested around her skull. It sported a tiny black headplate with a glowing red circle that sat snugly against her forehead. It faded in and out of sight. Dancing from visibility to invisibility. Sparks shot of its side, injuring its wearer. Whatever it was, Bart had damaged it with his ruthless contact.

The woman growled, tearing the headband from herself and tossing it onto the ground. “You broke it!” She snarled, barely able to stand.

“What?” Bart questioned, trying to keep his balance on the shaking ground.

“It doesn’t matter.” She snickered with a vicious flash of her teeth. “It’s too late now.”

“Shut it off!” Bart demanded, panic cracking his voice. “Do you know what this could do!?”
“Oh yes.” The woman cackled. In fact, that particular device, is the final one in the sequence.”

Bart’s stomach turned with a sick intensity.

The woman’s face creased and crinkled as a pleased snarl pulled on her features. She knew it was too late to stop them. Even if she told him everything. It was too late.

Give them all the information they want. Let the heroes try to stop it. Let them fail.

Those were her orders.

“Seven disruptors on the outskirts. Four downtown and five off the shore lines.” Her twisted smile, now savage, nearly inhuman. “Your precious San Diego will fall to the depths of the ocean.” She paused, an unyielding loyalty flowing through her. “It will fall for Darkseid.”

“Turn it off.” Bart hissed, unamused, desperate, and savage. “There’s nowhere for you to run.”

She laughed. It boomed across the air with a disturbing and cocky tone. “Oh yes, nowhere to run.” She snickered. “But so much room to fly.” Her eyes emitted a white glow. The ground left her as she levitated into the air.

Bart gasped, craning his neck to see her.

“Oh, and one last thing.” The woman added.

Bart’s eyes grew wide as the woman’s clothing shredded around her extending limbs. Her eyes turned red. Her skin: a pale winter’s snowstorm. Her jaw pulled and protruded with razored teeth.

Floating before him, was a White Martian.

Bart failed to swallow the lump in his throat.

The once-human Martian tilted her head, teeth grating with anger. Her telepathic voice rang in his mind.

‘Tell that traitor M’gann she chose the wrong side.’

And just like that, she vanished. Her Martian powers taking her somewhere far away, undetected.

Bart was torn from his confusion as the ground jerked underneath him. The earthquake grew stronger.

“Fuck.” He swore, panic rising in his nerves. “Fuck.” His hands trembled. “Fuckfuck.” His eyes raced all around him. The fell on the discarded headband, its sparking now subsided. He picked it up, grasping it tight in his hand. “No.” His voice cracked. The headband shrank with added pressure. He clasped it around his wrist, knowing that he was going to need something to help prove the bizarre scene he’d witnessed. “Nonononono.”

Kid Flash tore from the scene, scouring the outskirts of San Diego. The White Martian was right. There were six other Seismic disruptors on the outskirts. They looped all the way from National City, to La Presa, to Santee, to Rancho Bernardo, to Solana Beach.

Bart skidded to a stop on the sandy soil. His heartbeat rang in his ears as he quickly came to grasp the horrific severity of the White Martian’s plan. The ground rumbled beneath his feet, he struggled to stay standing. Panic clawed at his lungs.

His words nearly collapsed in his throat. “H-help!” His shaking hands struggled to press on his
“Kid Flash what is going-” Barry’s concerned voice came across the intercom. Bart’s panicked cries cut him off.

“Everyone! Everyone! It’s gonna kill everyone!” His voice cracked with frenzied dismay.

“The seismic disruptors! They put them all around San Diego.” He screeched, his volume raising with each sentence. “The earthquakes will tear it apart! It’s gonna sink. It’s gonna sink. I couldn’t stop them. I can’t stop them!” His voice finally gave way, a tear rolling down his cheek.

He hadn’t been fast enough.

Up in the Watch Tower, Green Arrow pulled up the satellite imagery over Bart’s position. His jaw dropped as he peered over them, shock coating his words. “Kid Flash is right.” He chimed in over the communicator. “It just had a 5.4 magnitude earthquake for the past 20 minutes.”

Back in California, the ground roared from deep within. Bart fell to the ground, the vicious shaking rendering him helpless. He couldn’t gain balance to move. To get away.

Oliver’s eyes widened as the seismic waves increased to an unheard of level. “Now it jumped to a level 8 magnitude earthquake. And it’s only getting stronger! Kid Flash is right in the middle of it!”

“I’ll get him!” The Flash’s voice boomed across the communicator. He charged towards California as Oliver gave him Bart’s coordinates. In the distance Bart finally appeared, the yellow and red speck stuck to the ground. The vivacious shaking below Barry’s feet nearly tore him down with every step.

“Oh my god.” Barry’s words whispered from his throat as he watched the nightmare unfold.

For a silent, eerie moment, the vibrations stopped.

A earthy, carnal roar thundered deep within the ground. One more massive, savage shake pulsed through the earth, nearly shoving The Flash off his footing.

A deep, foreboding crack shot across the top of the soil. It dove in a circular direction, following the path the seismic disruptors created. The soil collapsed inwards towards the massive opening, creating an ever-growing cavern.

Barry pushed himself faster, his arm reaching out for Bart. He needed to get him on his feet.

Before the growing cavern swallowed him whole.

The other side, the chuck of earth the held San Diego, slowly plummeted beneath his eyesight.

He grabbed Bart by the back of his uniform, pulling him up. Bart finally caught his footing, following Barry as they tore away from the scene.

There was nothing they could do.

It was too late.

“He’s right!” The Flash exclaimed. “Batman he’s right the city is sinking!”

After a series of a panicked and concerned banter, Batman was finally able to assess the severity of the conditions on the west coast.

Time was not their ally.
Time was running out.

While Oliver and Black Canary tried to catch the federal government up to speed to request their immediate aid, Batman barked his orders.

Team and League members with no flight capabilities were ordered to assist with rescue missions in the Midwest and East Coast. Taking care of the aftermath the aliens had left the other cities in. Their crises could not be left un acknowledged.

However, every other superpowered Team and League members with flight were commanded to initiate emergency civilian extraction.

Ordered to try to save as many lives as they could.

Earth’s three Green Lanterns were the first on the scene. Their power rings made more useful than another other League member could hope to be. They scoured through the the most populated parts of San Diego. Using their power rings to swoop individuals up from the ground. They morphed their green energy into large green holding pens, picking up terrified citizens and holding them in the air until the Air Force arrived with carrier planes. They would fly by and The Lanterns would drop off the civilians inside them mid-flight.

The Lanterns were assured that the military would come to their aid within thirty minutes.

It took the Army one hour and fifteen minutes to arrive with the right aerial equipment.

All the while Hal Jordan, John Stewart, and Guy Gardner floated in the sky until near exhaustion. The weight of nearly 1,000 of civilian pressing heavily upon each of their power rings’ energy. Their muscles shook furiously. Their stomachs wretched as the pleas from the civilians on the ground grated across their ears. Their cries for help and salvation drowned The Lanterns’ in a sea of helplessness. Their Power Rings already exhausted with the weight of holding other of civilians in the air, away from the rising tide. Time: their foe, as they waited for the Air Force to relieve them of their first batch of rescues.

John Stewart had to look away from the ground below him. He couldn’t add any visuals to the sounds that he knew would forever haunt him. Tears welled in his eyes as he could not do anything to alleviate their panicked screams for rescue.

League members with spaceships were the second to arrive. Hawkman and Hawkwoman lowered their ship to the ground, packing in as many civilians as their ship could carry. Martian Manhunter’s ship was the next to arrive. M’gann rode in his with him. It was already at Star Labs Taos for maintenance, making it a quick flight. M’gann Zeta’d to Taos with him. Taking her own ship all the way from Bludhaven would have been fruitless.

It would have taken too long. It would have been too late.

J’onn’s spaceship landed two meters above the ground. Civilians below crying out, their hands extended, begging for salvation. The back door of the ship opened. M’gann stood in the back opening trying her best to make herself heard over the terrified voices. Three inches of water already coated the ground.

“If you’ll form a single line we’ll-ooph!” M’gann was nearly winded as a wave of people charged up the ramp and into the ship. Their instincts for survival never questioning the ship itself of its pilots.

They just had to get out. They had to get away.
'It's too full, we have to go! The ship can’t carry more!’ Martian Manhunter’s voice rang in her head.

Desperate pleas fell from her mind as the ship began to rise higher, the ramp retreating back into the ship.

M’gann’s lip trembled as her eyes fell upon the faces left behind. Terror, disgust, hopelessness, anger filled every one of their hearts and they grasped at the ship. Begging, screaming, pleading for just one more.

Just one more.

Just one fucking more.

Tears rolled down M’gann’s cheek as she realized she was helpless to do anything more. The ship was full.

“Take him!”

The feminine scream rang far louder than the other desolate voices.

M’gann’s eyes fell to a young mother. Her face creased with desperation. Eyes filled with tears. Her arms outstretched as high as she could. They trembled as she held up her infant child. His tiny cooed cries lost within the panic

“Take him, please!” Her words were coarse and broken. Nearly lost to her trail of tears.

M’gann sobbed. A nodd shaking her head as in the last moment, she snatch the baby from the young mothers hand. She pulled back into the ship. And in the final moments before the back door closed, she swore a final, small, somber, heartbroken smile flash across his mother’s lips.

M’gaan screamed a loud sob as the door clamped shut. She pulled the baby in close to her, her cries unsuccessfully muffled against his tiny velvet head.
She held him tight. She held him and she prayed. Prayed for the rising water to slow. Prayed for the ship to fly faster. Prayed that the League could save more people. Prayed to have more time. Prayed for the growing lives lost. Prayed for the dying children. Prayed for the other dying mothers.

Prayed that somehow, someway, his tiny, infant mind would remember his mother’s sacrifice.

Though deep down, she knew he never would. But M’gann would never forget.

That face, that broken smiled would never leave her.

M’gaan had heard a few times that, because of their superpowers, some people labeled them as ‘gods’.

It this what is was to be one?

To be a god?

To hold the choice of who lives and who dies at the palm of one’s hand?

It was a burden that M’gann wouldn’t have wished upon her worst enemies.

The rest of flight-enabled superpowered League and Team members arrived last. Overwhelmed and overcome by the disaster at hand. For now it was not just San Diego falling to the merciless clutches
of the ocean. Immediate flooding plagued the coast of California and Mexico. As the city fell, the water rose. Tidal waves decimating the neighboring shorelines.

The League and The Team were helpless as to a course of action. Their manpower already stretched thin. Their efforts already straining with salvaging as many lives in San Diego as they could.

It was too much. It was too much for so little aid. Too much with so little time. And too much for so little warning.

Within the span of three hours, the city was completely consumed by the sea. The seismic disruptors, disintegrating the miles of soil required to keep it afloat. From their ships, from their helicopters, from the television sets; the world watched in sickening helplessness as San Diego fell to savage darkness of the Pacific Ocean. The lives left behind, swallowed and extinguished before their very eyes.
Virgil found himself sinking into an overstuffed armchair. He sat with his right leg folded in front of him. His left thigh pulled into his chest. He rested his left elbow on his elevated knee. The pointer finger and thumb of his right hand pinched together and apart. Together and apart. A miniscule line of lightning spiraled in the space between them. His eyes focused on the tiny white light.

Virgil could barely hear the buzz of the tiny bolt over the decorative fountain. The room reeked of popere and pinesol. The laminate floors, supposedly to give it a ‘homey’ feel, did nothing but make Virgil wish he was home. The older members of The Team said the room was modeled after the one in The Cave before it was destroyed. He was told to count his blessings that he wasn’t summoned there often. Because when you were called into that room by Black Canary, it meant that everything had gone to shit. And you had caught the brunt of it.

“Virgil?” Dinah’s voice echoed across the quiet room. She leaned forward, sitting on the matching sofa directly across from him.

Virgil clasped his hand shut, snuffing out the spark. He closed his eyes, wishing he could just be far. Away.

“Sorry, what’d you ask?” Virgil didn’t move, nor did he veer his gaze to meet her’s.

“I said,” She repeated in a calm voice. “What have been your main feelings this week?”

Virgil huffed in instant irritation. He ran his palm down his face. He unfolded himself into a normal seated position. Suddenly too hot. Too itchy. Too uncomfortable.

“I don’t know,” He tried to brush off.

Dinah narrowed her eyes, watching Virgil’s obvious signs of annoyance. “I doubt that,” she responded. She gave a small tilt of her head as her expression softened. “Not with what you saw in person, in the news. Not with everything that’s going on.”

Virgil finally struck his gaze to meet her’s. He was an idiot to think that she was going to let him just scrape by his ‘mandatory counseling session’. Not without digging through the events of the past eight days. Days that Virgil felt could only be described as: Hell.

After the sink of San Diego. The week that followed left the The Justice League, The United States, the entire world, in a state of crushing mourning. There was no sleep for America, let alone for The Justice League or The Team. There was no school, no work.

Draining, desperate, fruitless rescue attempts were all that existed.

The federal government had yet to give an exact body count. Even if they tried, hundreds more bloated corpses would wash upon the coasts of Mexico the next day. However, they were able to give a shaky estimate.

One and a half million.
That was the projected casualty toll given by experts. The number of citizens who perished under the rage of the ocean and relentless earthquakes. The death toll bled from the heart of San Diego and branched down Baja California, and all the way up past Los Angeles.

It wasn’t enough that Metropolis, New York City, Washington DC, Central City, Dakota City, and Fawcett City all had their own post-alien attack damage control needs. It wasn’t enough that the earthquakes nearly decimated the western states. But the mass of the sunken city left the coastlines flooded. Thousands of homes destroyed. Thousands of lives still being whisked away. The death toll climbing higher and higher.

Day by day, regardless of their relentless rescue attempts, the body count ascended.

A heavy tiredness seeped deep into Virgil’s bones. It sank into each member of The Team and The League. It seemed as though they found more corpses than they did survivors.

Virgil felt a crushing sense of pity for Aquaman, Aqualad, and La’gaan. For their assignment all week was to patrol the sea for survivors, people floating adrift on water. It should have been obvious from the start. All they would fish out were half-devoured remnants of the drowned.

Virgil gaged. The more he thought about, the more his stomach turned. He closed his eyes, swallowing the lump in his throat.

“I don’t know,” He answered, turning his head away. “Sadness, depression, confusion.” He shrugged, naming off everything to he could to speed up his process of leaving. Saying everything he thought she wanted to hear.

But Dinah had a keen eye for those teenaged tricks.

“Virgil,” her voice became stern, she leaned forward, her forearms on her thighs. “The sooner you tell me the truth, the sooner we talk about it, and the sooner you can go.”

Virgil’s nostrils flared in irritation. A twitch flicked across his lip. He was not cross with Black Canary, no. Although her relentless pursuit were annoying. He was more upset with himself.

Upset that everything to do with San Diego...didn’t bother him as much as he thought it should.

No, what bothered him most, was that his mind festered on the memory of the alien attack in Dakota City. His nightmares lingered on the scenes of the highway.

“Black Lightning says you’ve been irritable.” Dinah added, hoping to get him to answer. “He says you’ve been short with him, snapped at him a lot this week.”

Virgil gave a small roll of his eyes. He shrugged his shoulder, holding a hand out in front of him.

“What? I’m a teenager. I’m moody.”

Dinah pursed her lips and hummed to herself. It seemed that Virgil wasn’t going to respond to her normal motherly tactics. She would have to bring out something courser.

Pressure.
Pressure.
Crack.

“Why are you moody?” She snipped.
“I don’t kno-” he huffed.

“Why don’t you know?” Dina barely gave him time to answer. Her words stern and forceful. His irritation growing with each one of her interruptions.

“Because I’m annoyed-”

“Why? Why are you annoyed?”

“Because you won’t leave me alon-”

“Why do you want to be alone?”

“BECAUSE I’M ANGRY!”

Virgil’s voice rattled through the glass doors. His outburst, jolting heat through Dina’s chest. He clenched his fists. He pressed them tight against his thigh as his limbs shook with a furious twitch. He looked up at her with cold, watery eyes.

“Okay?” He hissed through his teeth. “Is that what you wanted to hear? I’m ANGRY!”

“At what?” Dina asked in softer tone. “The aliens?”

“At ME.” Virgil’s voice cracked on the last word. His eyes met Dinah’s pitied expression for a brief moment. At the feel of water in his eyes, he clenched his lids shut. He tilted his face downwards, holding his head between his hands. He didn't want to be there. He didn't want her to hear.

“Virgil,” Black Canary’s pitch shaky with pity. She looked at him with a sad pull of her lips. “You don’t need to be angry at yourself. You couldn’t be expected to save all those people-”

“No.” Virgil tore his head out of his hands. He found he couldn't meet her gaze. “You don't— you don't understand. I'm not—I’m not upset about that.” His nostrils flared as he grimaced. Pushing back the water in his eyes. “That’s what’s so messed up. It’s like-It’s like I don’t even care about that.” He scrunched his face with disdain. Ashamed to reveal his unacceptable thoughts. “All I can think about is Victor.”

Black Canary twinged at his unexpected answer.

After a moment of silence, his gaze finally met her’s. “All I can think about is how he’s in that hospital, practically dead, because of ME.”

Dinah allowed a short quiet between them. Her eyes falling on Virgil’s trembling lip. A shaky consumption of fear and confusion coursing through him.

“Virgil,” Her voice was barely audible. She leaned in towards him, thinking of whatever she could to ease his mind. “The doctors said there’s a chance he could wake up-”


Dinah found herself at a loss for words. He was right. An inconsolable Raquel had spent the majority of the week at Dakota City General Hospital, latched to the bedside of her husband, Victor Stone. The explosion from the alien attack and left him in a coma; grasping for a hold on the earthly plane via life support. The doctors were unable to save his shredded limbs.

All because Virgil wasn’t strong enough.
A darkness overcame his expression. His words were deep and unaltering. “For his sake, I hope he dies in that bed.”

“Virgil,” Dinah scorned, aghast. “How could you say something like that?”

“BECAUSE IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN ME!” Virgil yelled, his voice hoarse with disdain. They echoed around the room. Disgust twisting his face. “OKAY? It should have been ME. I should have been hit by the explosion. I should be the one with no arms in legs. I should be the one dying.”

Finally the stream of tears Virgil worked so hard to bury, pushed through to the surface. They flowed down his cheeks with a stinging honesty.

“If he wakes up, what the fuck am I gonna do?” His words cracked as they tumbled from his throat. “How the fuck am I supposed to live with myself?”

Dinah tried to retort, but was not quick enough.

“He had a family.” Virgil gasped, tears creating a squeakiness in his voice. “He had a little boy, and a wife, and a college scholarship, and chance for a future.”

“But you know who survived? Me.” He snarled as he grit his teeth. “Some no-name loser who barely has control of his powers.”

“Virgil.” Dina’s words were cut short.

“Some worthless shit bag who couldn’t even save one person.”

“You can’t-”

“And you know what the worst part is?” Virgil let out a small laugh in feigned amusement. Astonished at the cruelty of fate. “I spent the rest of the day in bed,” he recalled “After that explosion knocked me out, I spend the rest of the day unconscious and cared for while millions of people died.”

Virgil clenched his fist, squeezing his eyes shut. “What good was I? What good am I? I didn’t do anything. I didn’t save anyone.” He wiped away his tears on his sleeve. “Victor?” He siffled. “He saved a lot of people. He’s the one who should be alive.”

“He’s not dead,” Dinah corrected.

“Not yet,” Virgil further corrected, his voice quiet and gruff. “Not like I should be.” His eyes fell to the floor as he gathered his thoughts. He shook his head, grabbing for his backpack on the floor as he stood up. “I don’t wanna be here.” He charged for the glass doors, swinging his backpack over one shoulder.

Dinah did not move from her seat as she called after him. “Aside from the fact that Victor’s accident wasn’t your fault-” Virgil stopped short of the doors, he turned to protest her words but Dinah talked over him. “Victor chose to stay there. Victor chose to help people. Aside from that fact, you honestly mean to tell me the world would be better off with you dead? That the future would be brighter if you took Victor’s place?”

Virgil let out a scoff, one that worked to hide a rising sob, he turned towards the door once more.

“Virgil, just do me one thing.” Dinah’s voice stopped him again. Her words held of tone of truthful challenge. “If you can honestly tell me that the world, that your team, that your family would be
better off if you were the one that died last week...you can leave."

Virgil gave a glance at her over his shoulder.

Dina continued. “If you can tell me that you truly believe there’s no way you could do any good in you future, you can go. If you really believe there’s no possibility you would be able to save any lives in disasters and missions to come, then you can walk out that door.”

Virgil stood there for a moment. His minding lingering on her words and what answer he could truthfully give.

He turned around, tossing his backpack onto the ground as he slumped back into his chair.

“I’m still angry,” he told.

“You will be,” Dinah nodded, a small smile of relief pulling on her lips. “For a while.”

*Infinity Island*
*March 11th 2017*
*23:30 ECT*

Arsenal found himself waking from an achy slumber. A distant hum grew in his ear. His eyelids and limbs still heavy. He twitched his fingers with slow movements. His consciousness finally giving him the realization he was lying on his back. A stiff mattress lay underneath him. His limbs could finally feel the air around him, but felt heavy as concrete.

Voices trailed around him.

“I’d have much more room to work with someone hadn’t blown up my lab.” A voice rang high in someone’s nasal cavity. Arsenal tried his best to place it.

“Hey, nerd. You alway bitch this much?” The husky words of another person vibrated the air.

“N-....nerd? Do you even realized how many degrees in the field of science I hold? How much my research has influenced the field of robotics?”

“Yeah. Like I said, nerd.”

An involuntary groan fell from Arsenal’s lips as he finally gained more control of his body. The banter around him stopped. His eyes fluttered open, easing the sting of the lights from the ceiling. His vision came into focus as he saw Professor Ivo and Red Hood staring back at him.

His body and mind felt heavy. As if each thought and each movement took ten times as long to accomplish.

“Where...am I?” Arsenal asked, slow and forced. The room around him decorated with dark and foreign draperies and furniture. A vast array of medical equipment sat next to him on his hospital-esque bed.

His body and mind felt heavy. As if each thought and each movement took ten times as long to accomplish.

“Where...am I?” Arsenal asked, slow and forced. The room around him decorated with dark and foreign draperies and furniture. A vast array of medical equipment sat next to him on his hospital-esque bed.

His body and mind felt heavy. As if each thought and each movement took ten times as long to accomplish.

“Home sweet home.” Red Hood greeted sarcastically.

“Red...red.” Arsenal began breathy, his mind trying to regain speed. Jason did not have his helmet on. But Arsenal still recognized him. Recognized him from the foggy two months of his post-surgery training with The League of Shadows.
Arsenal remembered that night in Gotham. The night where his careless actions killed a little girl. Red Hood approached him with a chance at redemption. A chance to relieve him of his liability. For he was nothing. Well, still is nothing. But at least by selling his soul to Luthor he could prove to be useful as opposed to a worthless junkie.

Wait...Luthor? Or maybe...The League of Shadows? Ra’s al Ghul? The Light? Arsenal couldn’t quite pinpoint who exactly it was he worked for now. He couldn’t remember. His memories were frosted over. As though he were trying to drive in winter with a poorly scraped winter windshield.

He knew what he was doing...what they had him doing was wrong but….he kept coming back.

Why did he keep coming back to them?


“I think we can finally undo these.” Ivo chimed. He reached for Arsenal’s wrists, unfastening the restraints.

“Ivo?” Arsenal questioned, eyelids heavy, body full of static. “Everything’s...foggy.”

“That’s the muscle relaxer.” Red Hood informed. “To make sure you don’t freak the fuck out again.” He crossed his arms, leaning against the wall. “You got some real anger issues.”

“And I would say you, Jason, are not one to talk.” Ivo chided, taking the IV out of Arsenal’s fully human arm.

A razored anger sliced down Jason’s spine. An instant irritation flared up in his veins, as if he were the brunt of a joke that had gone on for far too long. He hissed through his teeth.

“I told you. Don’t call me that.”

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**The Watch Tower**

*March 10th, 2017*  
*14:00 EST*

Footsteps echoed through the quiet of The Watch Tower. The sound of the Zeta Tube faded in the background. Barry walked alongside of Bart, a firm hand gripping on his shoulder. Prepared for the moment that Bart could dash away.

He had already blown off two of his counseling appointments with Black Canary. Now it was time for Barry to escort him to it.

“I don’t understand why I need to be here.” Bart’s words were cold and firm. He looked straight ahead, never making eye contact.

“Yes you do.” Barry answered, knowing deep down, Bart was not alright.

All week long Bart’s bizarre actions (or maybe...lackthereof?) left Barry with a chilling feeling of concern. Although it was not the happiest of times, no smile could be found upon Bart’s lips. No puns, to laughs, barely any words at all fell from Bart’s throat.

All he did, was cry.

Not the healing kind that releases around the loved ones. Not the kind that stampedes through shaky
words when the audience around leasts expects it.

The kind the festers and poisons when one is alone, when one believes no one else can hear. The kind the numbs the heart while others are around.

Jay and Joan told Barry they could hear Bart’s tiny sobs late at night in his room. Only if they pressed closed to his door; stood close in silence. When awake he hardly talked….he barely ate. Well, for his standards anyways.

But what disturbed Barry the most, was that since San Diego, Bart spent all his spare time with the twins. He could hardly be torn away from Don and Dawn. Bart would sit in their nursery, rocking them in silence for hours as he held them.

A day ago Barry tip toed quietly up the staircase to the twin’s room. He peeked into the room to see Bart cradling Don. Bart’s quiet sobs brushed against Don’s head as he whispered:

‘I screwed up dad. It’s all my fault. It’s all my fault.’

“I don’t wanna be here,” Bart complained, a chilling cold coated his words.

His voice reeled in Barry’s attention. “I don’t care,” he chided. Bart was going to do this whether he liked it or not. “I’ll be in the common area when you’re done.” Barry advised as he walked Bart up to the glass doors.

Begrudgingly, Bart walked inside.

“Hello Bart.” Dinah greeted him as she motioned to the empty armchair in front of her.

“Hi.” Bart snipped, plopping himself onto the chair.

“You know why you’re here?” She asked.

“Bad stuff happened, we saw it.” Bart said with a shrug, crossing his arms. “Now we gotta talk to you.”

“That’s right.” Dinah found his cold demeanor bizarre. “You saw it happen first hand. That’s something I’d imagine would be hard to cope with. How have you felt this week?”

“I dunno.”

“Bart,” Dinah addressed him as she studied his face. Dark bags rested under his eyes. His slightly sunken cheeks accented his poking collarbone. He looked exasperated, defeated, withering. “When’s the last time you ate?”

“I don’t remember.” Bart answered quietly, looking away.

“That’s..pretty dangerous for a speedster.” Dinah warned. “Your powers are tied to your metabolism-”

“I know. I know.” Bart interrupted. “I just-”

He found himself unable to complete his thought. It wasn’t until she mentioned eating that he noticed the hunger pain in his gut.

Even if he could describe it to her, she wouldn’t understand. All week his thoughts festered in the back of his mind. Guilt and anxiety ate away at him until they overtook every other need. Buried any
need for survival.

Punishment. That was the word he was looking for. It wasn’t as though he forgot to address his hunger as best he should. It was that he felt like he didn’t deserve to eat.

Not now, since it was all his fault.

“Jay and Joan say you hardly sleep. They barely see you eat.” Black Canary’s concerned tone grabbed his attention. “They said that, everytime they see you, you look like you’ve just finished crying.”

A quivering lip jumped on Bart’s mouth. Water filled his eyes as he felt his composure slip out of his grip.

“Bart, please. Just tell me how you feel.” She pleaded, leaning forward to place and hand on his knee. “You don’t have to hide here. You can tell me anything.”

A quiet moment passed.

“I feel like…” Bart croaked out, he looked up at her with desperate, broken eyes. “Like a failure.”

His voice cracked. There was no going back now.

“I was supposed to save Blue and- and everything would be ok.” His breath rumbled in his chest. A wave of tears fell down his cheeks. “This shouldn't have happened.”

He sobbed. It shouldn’t have happened. The tragic sink of San Diego. It was an event that no history book ever held in his time.

No, history was altering. And Bart has been the only changing variable.

It was all his fault.

“I fucked up.” Bart squeaked as his tired to talk between sobs. “I fucked up Dinah I-”

He could almost run as fast as the speed of light.

But it still wasn’t good enough.

“I wasn’t fast enough.” Bart snarled at himself. If only he had been there a minute before. A minute faster. He could have stopped that White Martian from setting off the final seismic disruptor. “All those people.” They all died because of him. “I wasn’t fast enough.”

Bart’s lungs heaved in his chest. Panic rose inside of him as he was almost unable to catch his breath. “I couldn’t change it.” His wails coated each sentence. “I fucked it up. I fucked it up. It’s all myfaultIt’sallmyfault.”

“Bart no it-” Black Canary tried to calm him, but found her words falling flat as Bart pull something from his jacket pocket.

Bart felt his civvies were suffocating him. The contents of his jacket burning a fiery hole through his composure. He reached for his pocket, knowing all too well he could no longer hide what lay inside it.

“What is that?” Dinah’s eyes loomed over the contents in his hand. A chilling cold filled her belly. It looked like small black crown. It’s eerie shape and angles reminded her of...
“I can’t.” Bart croaked. “I can’t hide it. I gotta-I gotta.”

Dinah’s hair engulfed her face as Bart whisks himself away. “Bart wait!” She called out but Bart had superspeed out of earshot.

“Grandpa-I” Bart came to a screeching halt in to common area. He struggled to regain his breath through his crying. He gasped, seeing that Barry was no longer the only other person in the room.

There, giving their post mission details to Batman, stood Garfield, Emily, Conner, and M’gaan.

M’gaan...what would happen? What would happen once they knew? He tried to convince himself all week not to tell. For what would happen to her people if he told?

What would happen to M’gaan’s place on The Team? Would it mean war? Hadn’t he caused enough bloodshed already by tampering with the past?

No. He had to. He had to come clean. He had to bear his soul, to relieve himself of his poisonous secret.

“I have- I have to tell.” Bart felt all eyes on him as his panicked cries filled the room. “I have,” He swallowed the lump in his throat as his gaze met M’gann’s for a small moment. “I have to telleveryone. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I-”

“Bart slow down, breathe.” Barry ordered as Dinah came running into the room.

“I can’t I can’t.” Bart couldn’t stop his tears and his broken words. “I’m sorry I kept it from you. I’m sorry it took so long. I didn’t want to believe it. I keep-” He held out the black crown in his hand. It shook with Bart’s trembling wrist. “I keep fucking everything up.”

Barry’s eyes fell to the crown and back up to Bart. “Bart, what is it?”

“Bart, what is that?”

“Bart,” Barry’s tone was much more serious. “What is that?”

Bart pulled the crown in towards his stomach. He shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut. “I know who attacked San Diego.” He took a moment to steady his shaking breath and looked back up at Barry. “I know who set up the Seismic Disruptors and destroyed the city.”

The others glanced at one another in confusion.

“We all do...” Barry answered, perplexed. “They were aliens.”

Bart swallowed the lump in his throat. “More than one type of alien.” He let out a long breath, one he didn’t know he’d been holding.

“It was a White Martian.” He stated, voice finally void of all broken tones. He swallowed hard. “I saw a White Martian set off the disruptors.”

Silence filled the room. Thoughts buzzing at Bart’s absurd statement. There was less belief in their minds and more concerns for Bart’s mental stability.
“What did you say?” M’gann was the first to break the quiet.

Bart exhaled through his nose. The slight furrow of his brow throwing away any doubts. “I saw a White Martian set the disruptors that destroyed San Diego.” His face softened as he turned towards Miss Martian. “She had a message for you.” She looked at him with worried curiosity. “She said, ‘Tell that traitor M’gann she chose the wrong side’.”

M’gann’s lips curled into a snarl as her muscles tensed. “What did you say?” She hissed between her teeth. “What did you say to me?”

That was not the first time she had been called a traitor.

“What is that?” Barry’s voice lowered as he asked the question for a fourth time.

Bart was taken aback by his tone. “I don’t—I don’t know. It fell off of her head before she flew away.”

“I can find out.” Emily’s voice rang around them. She approached Bart, gingerly taking the crown from his hand.

Bart watched as she held it close to her chest. Her eyes glew a warm light blue. He had completely forgotten about one of Emily’s psychic powers.

A loud gasp escaped her as she yanked herself from her trance. She snapped her head over to M’gann, eyes wide with disbelief.

“You’ve gotta see this.”

Mars
March 10th, 2017
13:15 EST

A quiet hum lulled in the chamber of the Martian Council. Slight movements amplified by lack of verbal speech. An enthralling telepathic conversation rang in the minds of the Martian Councilmen. They sat at their round meeting table. Bodies tense and expressive as they argued amongst one another. Their red and white ceremonial robes draped loosely around their bodies. Traditional garments that carried historical tradition, much like those wore by The Supreme Court.

A telekinetic burst slammed open the heavy chamber doors. The ringing metal jerked everyone from their seats. Before they had a chance to turn their heads to see who had interrupted their meeting, M’gann’s enraged voice screamed in their heads.

‘J’ornell!’

The glow in M’gann eyes died but the fury in them did not. She grit her teeth with a savage pressure. Her fists shook with a tight curl.

‘M’gann what is the meaning-’ B’arzz O’oomm began. He had a seat right next to Supreme Councilman Da’len, just as usual.

‘No more games.’ M’gann cut him off, her fierce eyes looking past him. ‘No more lies.’

‘M’gann,’ The Supreme stood tall, aghast at her violent interruption. ‘What is going on?’
M’gann charged towards the round meeting table. Emily, Gar, and Conner fell in behind her.

M’gann struck a finger at Councilman J’ornell, who stood at at the opposite end. She stared at him with cold, furious eyes.

‘Councilman J’ornell,’ She began, tone livid. ‘Has been working with two White Martian Militia Generals to fake attacks on White Martians, in order to initiate a civil war on Mars.’

Her astounding accusation weighed heavy in the room. Eyes fell to J’ornell as his face creased with a fuming irritation.

There was a small moment of quiet.

‘What proof do you have?’ The Supreme asked.

‘This.’ It was Emily whose voice struck the link. She slammed the black crown onto the table, challenging eyes never veering from J’ornell’s stare. She crossed her arms, her relentless gaze shooting bullets through him.

‘And what is that?’ Supreme Councilman Da’len asked, patiently.

‘This’ Emily began. She pointed her chin towards J’ornell. ‘Is what he called, a ‘brain wave disruptor’.’

If there were a way for a Martian to turn pale, J’ornell would have found it.

She continued, ‘It’s a headband made from Apokoliptian technology that can camouflage against the wearer’s skin and their cause brain waves to go out of synch. Making the wearer’s mind unreadable.’

Emily’s nostrils flared in anger and irritation. Her cold scowl never faltered away from J’ornell as she spoke. Her voice was stern and factual. ‘You see, one of my powers is called ‘Psycometry’. It’s a type of telepathic power that lets me view an object’s history and see who’s come in contact with it, just by touching it.’ She tilted her head, eyes narrowing. ‘But the most interesting part, it turns out, is if the object is made for telepaths, and used by telepaths, I can see and hear it’s history with much more clarity than I can with anything else.’

Then Emily proceeded to tell a story; a grueling and terrible tale babbled out to her from the mangled black crown. Mouth loose knowing it was forever torn from his throne.

It wove her a tale of it’s creation. Of a planet born of darkness and fire. Where the only light shown were the savage yellows and reds of flame that nearly swallowed the surface. The crown, the Brain Wave Disruptor, spilled tale of it’s birth. Crafted from molten metal and bloodied hands of weathered slaves. Delivered then with a vast array of weapons to Mars by Intergang.

A delivery, prepared for J’ornell.

A delivery, presented by Vandal Savage.

The crown whispered lines of their meeting. Of Vandal Savage and his assurances. Of his promises of ‘new world order’. Of his promises of power, and a throne as long as J’ornell threw Mars nervous chaos, inciting a civil war. Vandal bellowed his sweet guarantees until a greedy and power hungry J’ornell was putty in his hands. He took the crown and the weapons. In exchange he sold himself to Vandal for any favors required.
The first of which, was using Martians and their shape shifting abilities to pose as Justice League members; inciting violence and therefore pegging their public approval and trust.

For this, J’ornell hired A’monn and A’morr A’mok: two vicious White Martian Militia generals. As he, a Martian politician quite outspoken about his Martian racism, would be less likely to be tied to them if they got caught. He promised the military couple a seat of power in his new world order. Promises of riches and safety for their children. Of no more death for their broken family.

So A’monn and A’morr made good on their end. Enlisting their children to help them pose as Wonder Woman, Martian Manhunter, and Miss Martian to harm civilians in the Chicago mall and kill Belle Reve prison guards. Damaging The League’s Credibility as per Savage’s request.

That was why M’gaan could not read ‘Wonder Woman’s’ mind at the mall. A’morr had posed as her, wearing the Brain Wave Disruptor. Giving off nothing but the sound of static.

A’morr wore it when J’ornell barked orders for her to place and set off the Seismic Disruptors that destroyed San Diego. An order given to J’ornell by Savage. An order J’ornell gave to A’morr in exchange for more Apokolips weapons. In exchange for more assurances of a new world order.

A tense air filled the room as Emily’s tale came to a close. A story so vivid and alive with detail, it carried a sickening weight of truth.

The sound of every eye moving on J’ornell was both inaudible and unbearable.

They could hear him shudder.

‘Such a large imagination, for so someone so small.’ J’ornell sneered, chiming in his last effort of a retort.

‘It’s over,’ M’gann spat. A raging fire filled her belly that she would not allow to be extinguished. Her hands shook with a raw rage that prodded just beneath her skin. ‘You’re not getting away with this. All she has to do is read that object while any of us are in her mind and we’ll see it too. I know. I’ve already done it.’

Tiny mumbles filled the room. J’ornell’s eyes darted amongst his fellow councilmen. A bubbling panic clenched his throat.

M’gann darted her finger at him in one final accusation. There was nowhere for him to go. No where for him to hide. There would be no more lies. Though he may not have committed any of the heinous acts himself, his background work still sealed his guilt. For a poisoned apple shares its toxin from the tree it grows from.

‘You got these from Apokolips, delivered by Intergang. You received weapons in exchange for your services on Earth. You received the means to start a civil war. To fake an uprising. To fake violence. To incite fear.’ M’gann’s voice began to crack. The water in her eyes at risk of overflowing with her trembling body. ‘There was no violent attacks on Whites citie by Greens or by other Whites. YOU set those bombs. YOU set those bombs to kill MY PEOPLE.’

The last of her words, nearly a scream. Tears flooded down her face, filled with a sense of failure and confusion.

‘Why?’ Her voice now nearly a whisper, the anger expelled with her tears, leaving her only with confusion.
‘For what?’ She choked.

J’ornell looked around the room. The Martian councilmen all stood. Their conscious minds silent, but their subconscious minds whispering belief and appalled betrayal.

His breath shook in his lungs. This body trembled with a knowing of failure. A sickness filled his stomach, as though his belly filled with blood. A rash of fear bumped his skin.

It was over.

Dear gods why did it have to end like this?

In a swift motion, J’ornell pulled away the front of his robe.

M’gaan gasped as sparks flew in her mind. She reached her hand out to use to telekinesis to try to keep him from touching his chest.

Under his robe, a black chest piece clutched around him. The red light in the center of the armor was unmistakable. M’gaan had seen that alien suicide armor far too much.

‘FOR DARKSEID!’ J’ornell screamed.

She was too slow.

The last thing M’gann saw was Emily’s blue energy shield. Just before the room was coated with fire and light. Before a smoky darkness poured around them.

Before the explosion and screams in her ears were devoured by ringing.

Ringing.

Ringing.

Infinity Island
March 11th 2017
23:45 ECT

Ra’s al Ghul sat at his ancient oak desk. His mind lost in dark patterns of the wood. His eyes flickered to up to the security monitor to his left. He watched as Ivo diligently worked on Arsenal’s arm. Red Hood watching them both from the other side of the room.

The computer on his right rang in a deep tone. A video call waiting for him on the other line.

Ra’s answered it. Vandal’s face filled his monitor.

“What is it?” Ra’s asked him.

Vandal gave a huff through his nose. “I’m afraid I’ve received an update we didn’t expect to happen so soon.”

“Yes?”

“It seems The League is well aware of the White Martians’ involvement.” Darkness flickered in Vandal’s eyes. “Our key players are exposed.”
Ra’s tilted back in his chair, a brow perked in curiosity. “But isn’t that what we wanted?”

“Yes.” Vandal answered. “But we may still need them in the future. We may need to direct some of the attention away from them.”

Ra’s transcribed his coded words. “So what you are saying is...it’s time for another distraction?”

Vandal smiled. “Precisely.”

Ra’s nodded, disconnecting the call. His eyes fell to the security monitor, eyes lingering on his red-masked creation. He pressed a finger on his earpiece communicator.

“Jason, can I see you in my study?”

The Watch Tower
March 10th, 2017
17:00 EST

“I'm scared, Dinah.”

As she listened intently to Cassie’s voice, Dinah found herself afraid too.

She had an inkling that Cassie’s counseling session wouldn’t prove troublesome. She had a notion that Wonder Girl would come out and say everything that was troubling her. Dinah never worried that she would have to poke and pry her like she did the others. For Cassie had always been boisterous.

But this Cassie. This Cassie terrified her. A sort of terror felt for the sake of another’s well being. The sort of terror she could never let seize her composure.

This Cassie. This...empty shell of a usually-spunky teen sat in the armchair, her knees brought into her chest. She wrapped her arms around her legs, chin resting between her knees as she stared at nothing. Her words were absurdly quiet. Her presence, usually confident and demanding, now shrank far away from the world. There was a certain deadness to her eyes, as though something had dragged the once-profound sparkle and tossed it in a grave. Her lips plastered a concrete frown.

Cassie had been on the front lines. Whisked away from her post in Washington D.C. to the crumbling San Diego. She watched in horror with the members as the city succumbed to the ocean. She was helpless. Useless. The fraction of lives she did save seemed moot compared to the million she couldn’t.


“Scared of what?” Dina asked, her voice calm and curious.

Cassie did not look up at her. She merely gave a small furrow of her brows as she wrapped her arms tighter around her legs. “Of me...my thoughts.”

Black Canary stirred, uneasy. “What thoughts are you afraid of?”

Cassie’s eyes finally looked up at Dinah. They beamed with a desperate pleading. “You swear you won’t tell Diana?”
“Everything stays here in this room.” Black Canary assured.

Cassie found her gaze falling once more. Her words were cold and callous. “I fantasize about killing them.” She looked up at Dinah, her eyes ferocious and steady. “I want to slaughter all of those alien monsters.”

Dinah tried her best not to visibly twinge at Cassie’s response. Her stomach sank with the knowledge that White Martians had been involved. Knowledge that Cassie was not aware of...yet. She was on the same page as the majority of the world, believing that the fault lay on the mysterious intruders.

What would she do with the knowledge of White Martian involvement?

Dear gods, what would she do to M’gaan?

“How have you been dealing with these feelings?” Black Canary asked quickly, searching her brain for healthier coping mechanisms to relay.

“I haven’t.” Cassie admitted, nuzzling her face into her thighs.

Black Canary let a moment of quiet pass. She remembered one of the concerns Wonder Woman had that initiated Cassie’s counseling session.

“Diana says you’ve refused to join her for Temple services.” Dinah stated.

An all too noticeable twitch jarred Cassie’s body. She grit her teeth. Dinah was right. Normally Cassie was active in her ancient religion. Though the past week, she had downright refused to joined Diana in prayer. Refused make a trip to Themyscria with her to conduct the Mourning Ritual on the holiest of grounds. A ritual performed in Temple after major disasters. A ritual that asked the gods to give departed souls safe passage to Elysium. And begged to spare the souls of those barely clinging onto life.

“Stupid.” Cassie spat quietly.

“What?” Dinah asked with tilt of her head.

“I said it’s stupid.” Cassie snipped. She bit her lower lip, shaking her head. “They are no gods.”

“But...you’re proof of that.” Dina furrowed her brow in confusion. “You are the half-human child of Zeus. Diana’s lasso is made magic by your gods.”

It became clear to Cassie that Dinah thought she said ‘There are’ instead of ‘They are’

“I said they are no gods.” Cassie corrected. She still held herself tight. Her face creased intensely.

“The Team, The League...we are the Gods.”

Dina was taken aback by her statement. “What makes you say that?” She asked.

Cassie looked up at her with cold eyes. “You weren’t there. You didn’t see them die.” She shook her head, her voice cracking, lip trembling. “You didn’t hear them. You didn’t hear them cry. You didn’t hear their prayers.” Cassie’s breath shook as she held back the water in her eyes. “We were the only ones who answered.”

Dinah realized who she was referring to. The desperate civilians of San Diego. The ones who begged for salvation. And the ones they couldn’t help in time.

“What kinds of gods would let that happen?” Cassie’s words shook in her throat. There was
something childish about her voice. “What kinds of gods would hear them, and do nothing?” Tears glistened in her eyes but did not fall. “What kinds of gods would let that happen?”

Dinah let out a small sigh through her nose. Eyes filled with pity as she watched a little girl lose hold of everything she once believed in.

“The world is not always run by supernatural forces.” Dina explained. “Sometimes individuals, human or alien, make the choice to harm others. That is a consequence of free will whether we like it or not. But the gods can’t and shouldn’t control everything. We are given a choice.”

“Like how we chose to help. And they didn’t.” Cassie snarled, spite dripping from her tone.

Cassie buried her face into her thighs. Her will finally giving up on her blasphemous rhetoric. Arguments of religions were tedious, tiring, and pointless. A shaky sob rumbled in her chest. She looked up at Dina with a wave of tears.

“I can’t sleep.” She croaked, finally admitting her more pressing and concerning issue. Her sobs rang around the room with a broken tone. “I close my eyes, and I see them die again.” Her composure crumbled beneath her. Fatigue finally forcing her cry for help. “I hear them scream over and over. The nightmares won’t stop.”

Dina rushed towards her in comfort, placing her hands on her arms as she knelt in front of her.

Tears continued to roll down Cassie’s cheek as she whispered. “I just wanna sleep.”

Infinity Island
March 11th 2017
23:35 ECT

“Yes?”

Jason bellowed his arrival as he shut the office door behind him. Ra’s stood with his back towards him, hands clasped behind his back. He peered out the wide windows to the vast ocean landscape. Moonlight danced on the waves below.

“Jason,” Ra’s spoke after a moment of quiet passed for too long. A tactic he used too often. A tactic he was too good at. Jason had an inkling he did it on purpose. When one controlled the tension of the room, one held the power of the conversation.

Ra’s continued without looking away from the window. “Have you ever wondered why I brought you to my Pit?”

Jason lost his voice, jarred by his question. A small noise of astonishment escaped his throat.

Rare was the conversation of Jason’s resurrection. There had been no need. Jason didn’t want to fathom Ra’s’s reasoning. He didn’t want to know what sick rationale The Demon’s Head had for bringing the murdered sidekick of his enemy to his Lazarus Pit; his mystic fountain of youth and resurrection. All Jason cared about was that he now hand the freedom to fight crime the way he wanted to.

He didn’t want to the truth.
“Not really.” Jason answered, monotone. “I don’t really wanna know.”
Ra’s turned towards him. And Jason felt his stomach turn and bile rise in his throat as he had an a
feeling he was going to get it anyway.

“I felt sorry for you.”

The truth was far worse than he could have imagined.

Jason couldn’t stop the snarl before it pulled on his lip. His brows knitted with anger.

Pity?

God dammit, any reason would have been better than pity.

“How you grew up. How you were treated.” Ra’s elaborated. He paused, eye flickering from the
floor and back up to Jason. “How you died.” He watched Jason’s teeth clatter behind his scowl. He
continued, voice dripping with feigned softness. “That was something no child should ever have to
go through.”

Memories flooded Jason before he could toss his mental sandbags. Finger twitching as heat rose in
his chest in remembrance of a life long ago.

It was hard to remember his mother and father now. Without tiring concentration their faces and
voices were muffled sights and sounds; distorted. Their features a bad cable connection. Perhaps it
was because he hadn’t much he wanted to remember about them. There wasn’t much happiness
coated in their memories.

Jason couldn’t remember a time in his childhood without pain. Physical, emotional. Between an
alcoholic father and heroin addict mother there wasn’t much room for both their chemical muses and
their accidental son. Well, his father beat both him and his mother, at least that gave them something
to bond over.

No, he wasn’t being fair. His father was a low life, but at least his mother tried. She tried so hard to
love Jason, but her call for the needle stole away her heart and head more than she wanted. She tried
so hard to love him. And she did. At times...when she could stand. When she was sober enough to
form sentences.

He knew she wished she was stronger. He knew she wished she was strong enough to hug her little
boy goodnight, every night, without the sting of fresh track marks as she wrapped her arms around
him.

But Jason couldn’t blame her for using. Not with the life they had. Not with the man she married.

Jason remembered the slew of thugs that would come in and out of their decrepit apartment above
Crime Alley. His father had been involved in some shady things with some terrible characters. Drug
dealing maybe? Perhaps that’s where his mother got her supply.
All Jason remembered was that it got his father killed. He assumed his father was skimming off the
top of the profits.

They murdered him.

Jason found his father’s body crumpled at the end of the stairwell to their apartment. A bullet hole
carved it’s way through his heart.

….Huh, looks like his father had one after all.
In that moment, he remembered breathing an unabashed sigh of relief.

Jason didn’t cry.

But the death of his father set aflame the further downward spiral of his mother’s weak sobriety. He watched her cling to the needle more and more as the piling bills and debt collector phone calls suffocated her sanity.

Jason did what he had to do to ensure their survival. He stole wallets, robbed homes, robbed hospitals, jacked cars. Anything he could to keep food in their bellies and a roof over their heads.

Late one night, after an evening of taxing looting, Jason opened the door to find the living room empty. His mother would usually turn her head from the television. Looking at him with glazed eyes and an inebriated smile. A lighter and a needle beside her feet. An entry he made every night that she never remembered.

But that night had no glossy greeting from the couch. He closed the door, searching to see if she went to bed early.

“Mom?” His tiny voice had called down the hall. There was no sign of her in her room or his. His eyes fell on the closed bathroom door.

“Mom?” He asked as he knocked softly.

No answer, he turned the knob.

It opened with an ominous creak. Jason’s breath rattled in his chest.

His mother sat on the bathroom floor, her back against the wall. Unmoving eyes staring at the toilet in front of her.

There was no movement.
There was no sound.

Just a quiet coldness.

Jason remembered finding it hard to swallow. His lip trembled with a rising sob.

“Mom?” His youth shown through with his cracking composure. He fell to his knees, hand trembling as he reached out to touch her.

Jason would never forget that icy, stiff feeling of death. His mother’s sullen expression in her exact moment of overdose, forever etched on her face.

Jason cried.

After an hour, he left the apartment and never went back.

It was a month later that the 13-year-old Jason Todd discovered a parked Batmobile buried deep in a dark alleyway. A sly grin slid on his lips as he thought how much money he could make by pawning Batman’s rims and catalytic converter. His stomach had rumbled in anticipation. He would finally be able to afford to eat for the first time that day.

Despite the speed that came with his skill, it wasn’t long Batman and Nightwing caught him in the act.
Jason shook his head of the memory. He pulled himself back into the present, Ra’s ever watchful eyes beating upon him.

“Yeah, well.” Jason answered, clearing his throat. “Probably a mistake on your part. Not sure why I’d be worth a second chance.”

But Ra’s ignored his answer. He paused, as if to knit together his next question with diligence. “Do you remember how you died?”

A hard exhale escaped Jason’s nose as another snarl flashed upon his upper lip. He pulled it down, sliding his anger down to his clenched fists.

“You know that I know.” He answered in a low voice.

Jason found himself pulled under the blacked waves of his memories once more. Their sting fillings his lungs with an acidic nostalgia.

He could still feel the weight of his old Robin uniform. The flexible kevlar suctioned to his hot summer sweat.

He remembered the case. The missing children, their taxidermied bodies strewn across Gotham. He could still recall the chill of the wind on his face as he sped in his motorcycle to Ichabod.

He’d never forget the sounds of his own screams. How his bones shattered beneath the metal tools of The Dollmaker.

He’d never forget the sting of the rusted knife across his throat.

Bruce’s desperate, broken, pleading expression as Jason drowned in his own blood.

That foul taste of copper sat tattooed upon his tongue.

“Good.” Ra’s interrupted him, bringing his attention back to the present. “Sometimes the Lazarus Pit makes the memories fade.”

Ra’s pulled a remote from a pocket in his cloak. He pointed it to the large computer screen behind his desk. With a click of a button, the screen came alive with a live video feed.

Jason perked his chin in interest. The live recording caught the night time movements of a large, dreary mansion. The iron gates snapped shut around its yard. Barbed wire atop to keep its residents inside as opposed to keeping people outside.

For no one would ever step foot in the place willingly, unless they were patient or staff.

Or unless you used to be Batman’s protege.

“Do you know this place?” Ra’s asked.

Jason twisted his lip in agitation. “Enough with the 20 questions what the hell do you want?” Ra’s shot him a cold look. Jason pulled in his anger, berating himself for his sudden burst of disrespect. “Yes, of course I do.” He looked back up at the video. Even if he’d never been there, it’s name sat casted in an iron arch above the front gate. “Arkham Asylum.”

“Do you know who I discovered resides there at this very moment?” Ra’s turned to look at him, a cold scowl pulled on his face. “Who’s lived there for three years?” He clicked a button on the remote, the live feed switched from the front gate to a hallway within the Asylum. “Patient 256.
Or…” He clicked another button, the cameras switching to the inside of one of the cells.

“Anton Schott. The Dollmaker.”

Ra’s wouldn’t needn't said his name. Jason recognized those rabid, carnal eyes as they swept across the camera.

It was as though a sword of barbed wire tore across his insides. Whatever calm composure Jason built inside of him, crumbled with a primal rage.

Jason shook with a fury that rattled his bones. His jaw clenched so tight he nearly snapped teeth. Exhales of shaken breaths did little to ease his trembling muscles.

“He let him live.” Ra’s stated the obvious truth, eyes falling on the rising vein in Jason’s neck. He walk over behind him, his lowered voice nearly a whisper in his ear, mocking. “He let him live the rest of his life in a padded cell, while you bled dry.”

Ra’s slipped a new medication bottle in the pocket of Jason’s jacket. Jason's eyes never faltered from the screen.

Ra’s whispered in his ear, his own eyes shoot up at Anton. “What are you going to do?”

A low growl rumbled in Jason’s throat as he answered. Rage and malice dropped from the jagged edges of his words. He hissed through his teeth.

“I’m gonna kill them both.”

The Watch Tower
March 10th, 2017
18:30 EST

“Have you seen this crap!?”

Dinah jumped in her seat. La’gaan’s yell jarred her from her notes as he burst through the door.

“What?” She stumbled out, unsure of his anger.

“The news!?” La’gaan spat, as if her ignorance to his vague sentences were unacceptable. He talked with movements as boisterous as his words. “That-That piece of fishshit G. Gordon Godfrey!?”

Dinah blinked at him, astonished as she looked at him with a blank expression from her armchair. La’gaan hardly ever swore. Well, at least never in English. She wondered if Rose was rubbing off on him.

“No I-haven’t seen-” She began.

La’gaan growled in frustration, cutting her off. He waved his hand in front of him, bringing up the room’s floating computer. He clacked away on the virtual keyboard until he brought up a recording of Godfrey’s talk show segment from just an hour before.

The aura of the segment fell at a drastic difference than his prior shows. The dull lighting cast an array of shadows behind him. A spotlight shone on him as he sat in an armchair just left of center
It is a dark time in America folks.” Godfrey opened his eyes, looking out at the camera and the live studio audience. Dinah expected him to raise his voice. To scream and shout is opinions through the screen. But to her surprise, his tone never faltered. His voice sullen, strong, and subtle. “It is a dark, and sad, and frightened place. One week ago today within the span of an afternoon nearly two million of our people were lost. Taken away from us. Murdered in cold blood. By an alien threat to which we know hardly anything about.”

He stood, his arms resting behind his back. He tipped his head down, voice calm and reassuring. “I understand you are confused, and scared, and angry. But we should not take these feelings out on one another, no. Our blame has a proper place.”

All calm demeanor washed from his face. His nose crinkled with a snarl. “The Justice League.”

A picture of the JLA plastered across the screen behind him. Hate rained with his words, his hands became active as he spoke. “The group of superpowered individuals who swore to protect our earth and it’s people from catastrophic events like this one.” Now a montage of the devastating events during and after San Diego’s sink played on the screen. “The aliens that attacked our cities to provided a distraction for San Diego? They have been attacking us for seven months! And The League in all that time couldn’t find a lead. They had so much time to prevent this from happening! They assured us they were on the case, they assured us that they were looking into it. While we sat twiddling our thumbs based upon their assurance, aliens plotted decimating an entire city!”

Gordon retreated from his shouting. His lips pressed into a fine line as he shook in his suit. His furious eyes never looked away from the camera. “All the while their members attack our citizens.” He closed his eyes for a moment and opened them with a loud exhale. “I think it’s time to say what everyone is thinking about. I think it’s time to say that for the sake of America’s future, for the sake of the world’s future, we need to put an end to The League’s violence and incompetencies”

The volume in his voice escalated as he raised his fist in unity. “It is time for us to dismantle The Justice League.”

It was not his words that disturbed Dinah the most. It was the audience’s reaction. Their screams of approval seeped in around him, blasting from the speakers. They stood, hands clapping in standing ovation, battling with their shouts of agreement.

La’gaan snapped his hand at the screen, pausing the video. “Dismantle the Justice League?! Is he serious?!“ La’gaan tore himself around to face Dinah. His claws poked holes in his palms as he clenched his fists with a savage grip. A hoarse snarl dripped off his words. “After everything we did! After everyone we tried to help! THIS IS HOW THEY THANK US?!”


“No! No I won’t calm down!” La’gaan spat with a savage shake of his head. His body trembled with rage. His fist bounced as he spoke. “We put our lives on the line every single day. We try so hard every single day. And all they do is spout bullshit like that!” His voice began to crack. “We tried so hard to save those people. We tried so hard to save them. And they want to dismantle us? Discredit us?”

An eerie and sudden quiet filled the room. A trembling breath filled La’gaan’s throat. His jaw shook,
exasperated with anger and grief. His eyes glossed over as tears rose, on the verge of falling free.

“We worked endlessly to save survivors in the water.” La’gaan’s voice changed. Now much quieter, nearly a whisper. As though speaking his sorrows meant he had to come to terms with them. “We searched tirelessly night after night. Even when they told us to stop. Even when they said it’d been too long. We kept going.”

There was another moment of quiet.

A small sob escaped La’gaan’s throat. Tears finally fell down his cheeks. His voice was broken and boyish, “Because all we wanted was to just see someone alive.”

It took all the composure Dinah had in her to not cry along with him. She realized now his heated intrusion. His emotional explosion upon entering the room. He had kept so much pack away for so long.

He had to stay strong all week to fulfill his ‘hero’ role.

But now, in that quiet room. La’gaan could finally grieve. La’gaan could finally break.

Memories flooded him as fast as San Diego had. Images of his, Kaldur’s, and Aquaman’s post-sink damage control played over and over in his mind.

“I have done nothing but pull up dead bodies for the past four days, just so their families could have something to bury.” Sobs escaped La’gaan as he tried to push out his words.

He cried as he placed his face in his wounded palms. His knees buckled underneath of him. He fell to all fours, tears cascading down his face. The weight of his memories, now too much to carry. “I just wanted to find someone alive. I just wanted to find someone alive.”

Dinah jumped from her seat. She never recalled a time when she moved so fast. She grabbed him as she knelt onto the floor, pulling him into her chest. She clung to him tight, his sobs bashing against the base of her throat.

The League had no idea of the consequence when they called for The Team’s help in San Diego. They had no idea of the beastly brutality of death and hopelessness that would coat their rescue attempts during and after The Sink.

It was so much to ask. It was so much so fast. It was so much to ask of beings so young.

They had forgotten that despite their powers, despite their experiences, they were still children.

Children watching other children die.

“I don’t want to go back out there.” La’gaan’s voice muffled against her. “I can’t go back out there.” He shook his face against her skin. “I can’t see another dead body.”

“You don’t have to.” Dinah reassured, squeezing him tight.

“Aquaman and Aqualad are going to be so disappointed.”

“No, they will not.” Dinah’s voice was firm, she pulled back from La’gaan a bit. She curled a finger under his chin, forcing him to look up at her. Her glossy eyes and slight tremble of her lip exposed the danger of her cracking composure. “You have been asked to do, and done so much more than anyone should have. You did everything you could, no matter what anyone else says. Do you hear
me?” She waited until La’gaan nodded, then pulled him back into her. “Aquaman and Aqualad will understand.”

Dinah looked up at the screen. Stomach twisting in sickening, uncertain foresight as she looked up at G. Gordon Godfrey’s cheering audience. A small tone of doubt lingered on her words.

“And they will too.”
A chill of anticipation ran through A'monn's spine as he listened to the broadcast on his military radio. He sat patiently in the walls of the safehouse, head twitching towards every sound. His wife was suppose to arrive at any moment, her final military mission ending hours ago.

Then, just as he thought he couldn't bear the apprehension any longer, the rooftop hatch swung open. A'morr floated down into the room with haste. A'monn greeted her with a loving embrace.

'Have you heard?' He asked, gesturing towards the radio. The announcer spouted announcements of Councilman J'ornell's betrayal, his suicide bombing on The Martian Council, and the deaths that followed.

A'morr chided him a mental tsk, her words caked with a smile. 'Who hasn't?' She unhooked the Apokoliptian laser gun around her shoulder, setting it on the table.

'I can't believe he actually did it.' A'monn remarked.

'You know Lord Darkseid's rules.' A'morr reminded, grabbing a rag off the table to clean her gun. 'Fail him, and you must take yourself out. Or he'll take you out.'

She chuckled to herself, remembering Bart's startled face as she revealed herself to him on the outskirts of San Diego. She smiled thinking of his panic as she powered up the final Seismic Disruptor the caused the city to fall prey to the ocean's claws.

'I'm just surprise it took a whole week for that human to squeal after our little chat.' She added.

A'monn gasped, his surprise turning into a laugh. 'You set J'ornell up. You knew that speedster runt would tell M'gann and she'd figure it out.'

A'morr growled. 'I always hated that bastard. Only an idiot would think that Vandal would hand pick him for a 'new world order'.'

A'monn approached her from behind, wrapping his arms around her. He nuzzled against the back of her neck, ever more in love with her savageness than the first day they met. 'So what do we do now?' He asked.

She listened intently to the radio. The announcer calling for the surrender for J'ornell's allies and a reward for any Martain who helped bring them in. 'We lie low.' She answered. 'Until Vandal makes good on the other part of our deal.'
lab, but they were still able to get a batch of narcotics off the street. And that was enough of a win for them for the night.

A final groan filled the room as Robin took down the final armed guard. He tied his arms behind his back. "Not bad for a Saturday night." He chirped, brushing off his hands.

Nightwing seemed amused. "That's when we get our biggest scores." A smirk rested on his face as he tied up the last of the ragged 'scientists'.

Tim's lips pulled into a smile. It warmed him to be on a patrol with just the four of them again. It seemed that every terrible turn of fate had piled high upon their shoulders. Everything from Arsenal, to the alien attacks, to San Diego laid into them one after the other. Little room to breathe. Little room to be.

But now, in their dark informs with Gotham's three symbols of hope on their chest, Robin finally felt at ease for a small moment. It was good to finally spend time with family.

Nightwing twitched. A course static ran through the speaker on his communicator. A sporadic buzzing filled their ears. They winced under the sound.

"Is something wrong with the com link?" Robin asked with a doleful tone, already knowing the answer. Bruce's equipment was the finest a billionaire could buy. It wasn't the hardware that was at fault. Someone was hacking their frequency. Someone who knew how to find their frequency.

"Hello Bats." A dark voice snaked their way into their ears. "It's been a while."

They looked between one another, trying to pinpoint the familiarity of the tone.

"Who are you?" Batman asked, eyes narrowing. "How did you get access to this connection?"

"Look at you." The man on the other side ignored his questions. "With Nightwing, Batgirl, and a shiny new Robin." A newly found savageness dripped from his words. "A cult leader always replaces his sheep."

"What do you want?" Batman snarled.

"Arkham Asylum." The man stated without pause. "You have 15 minutes to meet me here. Or I start slaughtering every one of these psychos in here."

"Who is this?" Bruce snarled.

"You warn the staff, I kill them too." He added.

"What do you want with me?" Bruce questioned, voice raised.

"Tick tock, tick tock." The man mocked. "See you soon Bats."

**Gotham - Arkham Asylum**

*March 12th 2017*

*03:45 ECT*

Jason Todd stood in the eerily spotless security room inside Arkham Asylum. His knuckles grazed across the computer keyboard. His eyes flashed around the multiple security camera monitors. He pressed a radio close to the mouth of his helmet. His lips formed a hit of a snarl as they flickered:

"Tick tock, tick tock. See you soon Bats." He clipped the radio into his hip, lost to his newly found
Arkham's bare boned graveyard staff lay piled on the ground of the spacious security room: one doctor, two nurses, and four internal security guards. Groans fell from the unconscious bodies, their limbs tied together. He had already knocked out the two outside security officers and tossed them in the backyard shed.

Out of his pocket he pulled out a small rectangular device, no bigger than a USB drive. The edges glowed a daunting red. He placed the Apokoliptan technology next to the computer's hard drive. Its tiny appendages expanded and snaked their way through the hardware. The monitors flashed and fuzzed before illuminating with a dull red glow of their own. A virtual control pad flashed up from the back end of the alien "USB drive". Red Hood tapped away at it, flashing between cameras, tirelessly search for his target.

A shaken breath tumbled from his lips. The numbers on the label on the windowless door pounding against his retinas:

*Patient 256*

With clench of his jaw and a flick of his finger on the panel, he opened the cell door.

Arkam's security system had advanced alarmingly since his last run there in his old, caped costume. Each and every hallway, door, and doorway could be immediately sealed by the control panel. A setup designed by Batman himself to keep any escaped patients contained.

But for Red Hood, it made for an excellent mouse trap to mold beneath his fingers.

He sealed the hallway in Patient 256’s wing. Then, with jolt through his spine, flicked open the patient's door.

There was a small moment of stillness. Jason's breath boomed in his helmet as he beamed at the monitors. Then, with heavy, cautious movements, a body emerged from behind the opened door. Rage slithered through Jason's blood like a toxic oil spill. His heart pounded against his breastbone as every pain, every smell, every chill, every acidic taste of blood from the moment he died squeezed around his senses. For a quick, unknowing moment, Jason's eyes met Anton's through the camera. He could still see those eyes behind the skin mask. The cruel, monstrous delight they bore branded a fiery grip in Jason's memory.

He tapped on the control panel, opening the door at the other end of the hall. Confused, and heavily drugged, Anton followed through the open door like a mouse in a maze. Jason slowly and patiently flicked open one door after another until Anton found his way into the massive game room in the middle of the asylum. His medically inebriated mind pulled to attention by a glowing TV inside the room.

A smirk flashed upon Red Hood's lip. His eyes were drawn into the subtle movements on the screen. A tiny flash of darkness. A swoop of something black in the corner of the screen. Maybe one of the security guards would have shrugged it off. But not Jason, he knew all too well what those nearly-unnoticeable moments meant. They were here. Batman and his pawns were here.

Jason pressed his radio up to his mouth again. Waiting until the precise moment that he knew they were inside.

"Follow the maze Bats," he taunted. "Come and find me."
He tossed the radio to the ground and pressed another button on the panel. An alarm sounded as every cell in Anton's wing flung open. The power cut off to only the emergency lights. The manic patients slithered from their cells, their hysteric freedom pulled shouts of excitement from their throats. Jason watched as they spilled from the wide corridor, Batman and his proteges already fighting the crowd head on.

Jason raised on of his gun towards the top of the wall, shooting off an air vent. He jumped onto the counter and climbed up inside. The creaking metal of the building’s ventilation system swarmed around him as he worked his way inside it.

He crawled through the shafts, elbows working with furious determination. A map flashed in his head of the long ago remember layout of the ventilation system. His lungs breathed viciously as he powered through the vents. The loose patients would buy him just enough time. Just enough time to get to Anton. Just enough time to beat him to the brink of death. Just enough time for Batman stumble upon him.

Just enough time, for him to end it.

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Their panting breaths echoed down the hallway in countertime with their sprinting footsteps. Batman, Robin, Nightwing, and Batgirl finally subdued the escaped patients. Against their better judgement, the followed the path Hood gave them. Although they knew they were stumbling into a trap, their determination tore through them with desire to finally put a stop to Hood's violence.

Their final footsteps echoed around them as they halted inside their destination.

A savage bolt of lightning tore across the sky, it's shining blaze leaving a haunting chill across the dully lit room. The glass roof leaving no room to hide under its illuminating path.

The "game room" sat in the very heart of Arkham Asylum. The walls standing four stories high before reaching the glass ceiling. Back in its civilian time, perhaps it could have been a ballroom, or maybe just a lavish guest room for an owner with big pockets and easily-bored friends.

But now the room sat lined with couches and a few televisions caged to the wall. Numerous tables and armchairs sat firm in the innards; askew and lonely in the darkness.

But in the back of the room, elevated slightly above the floor, rested a stage. A shallow "staircase" of three shallow steps wrapped around it. A place for desperate entertainers or bored inmates to amuse the patients.

Now, with the soft fill of emergency lights around him, Red Hood stood in the center of it. His daunting figure stood tall.

Anton Schott sat on his knees in front of him, his back to Red Hood. His hands tied behind his back. Blood trailed from his nose as quiet sobs dripped from his busted lip. Tears flowed over his black, swollen eyes. His tilted his to the side, wincing from Hood's gun pressed against his temple. Jason gripped Anton's receding hair with his other hand.

Red Hood made no movement as they quietly stepped into their room, filling around him. A sense of urgency danced in the toes.

"Put. The gun. Down." Bruce's firm but calm voice echoed around the room. He held his hand on his utility belt in warning.
A shaky breath filled Red Hood's throat. "Why?" He spat, pressing the gun harder against Anton's skull. "So I can just let him live the rest of his twisted life in a cozy, padded cell?"

"Don't. Move." Nightwing warned.

Jason made no acknowledgement of Dick. His eyes never strayed from Bruce. His rising emotion cracked his voice. "You let him live." He hissed through his teeth. "It's not fair." A childish tone snuck into his voice. "Why does he get to live and I get to suffer?!"

The final word echoed across the laminate floor. His limbs trembled under his boiling anger. Nightwing, Robin, Batgirl, and Batman encroached with cautious steps.

"I don't know what he did to you." Bruce continued with calm words, holding a hand out towards him. "But I can promise it's not worth making yourself a killer over."

Jason's eyes went wide. What started off as a cackle, grew into a manic laugh.

Dick, Barbara, and Tim exchanged nervous glances.

"Oh.-Oh. Oh that's rich. That's rich." Jason cackled. He released the hand on Anton's hair for a moment, pretending to wipe a tear from an eyehole of his mask. "I think you might be a little late on that."

"I know that you have some good in you." Bruce said, catching Hood off guard. He continued, "You gathered all the hospital staff and took them to safety before releasing the inmates. That's nothing any criminal that I've fought would have done."

Red Hood beamed at him with cold, relentless eyes.

"I don't know what he did to you," Batman added with a small shake of his head. "But don't make yourself like him. That's not who you want to be."

Red let out an agitated exhale through his nose. "You don't know what I am anymore."

They only greeted him with silence. The lack of sound grated against Jason's nerves. Anton yelped as he pressed the gun harder against his head. He snapped at Bruce, "Do you even know who this monster is?! Do you know what he did to me?!" A shaken breath rumbled from Jason's chest. "How do you not remember?"

"This guy's lost it." Robin chirped. Jason was grateful Bruce couldn't see him fighting the water rising in his eyes. "He took me away from you." He snarled, throwing his arm in a sweeping motion. "He took me away from all of you. And you didn't even have the balls to take him out?!"

Bruce narrowed his eyes, a frighten curiosity stirring in his mind. "Who are you?"

"He slices open a kid's throat and all you did WAS THROW HIM BEHIND BARS!" Jason's voice was nearly manic.

A small noise of shock fell from Bruce's throat. Fearful intrigue filled his gut, unsure of how Red Hood knew of Anton's final kill. "How did you know?"

There was a small, sarcastic smirk behind Red Hood's mask. "Then again, you always did have a twisted sense of 'justice', didn't you?"
He let out a loud exhale, then bellowed across the room:

"Bruce. WAYNE."

A collective gasp fell from their throats. Their skin crawling with aghast disbelief at the sound of Batman's civilian's name.

"And you poisoned them." Red Hood hissed, beaming between Nightwing and Batgirl. "You poisoned Dick and Barbara with it too!"

"Who-" Nightwing began, eyes wide.

"How do you know-" Batgirl stumbled, mouth agape.

"WHO ARE YOU?" Tim's words were the only ones that stood strong against Hood. He gripped his hand tight around his staff, unshaken.

A quiet moment flooded between the walls around them. Only Anton's pitiful wines shattered the silence. With smooth movements, Red Hood raised his gunless hand up to his mask.

*Click. Click.*

The tiny snaps on the sides loosed with gutting loudness. And with a firm grasp under his chin, he tossed the helmet off of his head. It bounced and spun against the floor with a lonely vigor.

A crash of thunder rattled the glass above them. Unsure if the vibrations or the face in front of the was the source of their rattling bones. Their skeptics of his shadowed face annihilated as another bolt of lightning illuminated the room.

A screech burst from Barbara's throat. The sight of the ghost before her pushing her a step backwards. Her ankles shook under the weight of the impossibility. She clasped her hand around her mouth, her small cries of disbelief barely muffled by her shaking hand.

Dick's knees nearly buckled underneath him. A hand clutched at his chest, a foreign pounding ripped through his heart. His jaw dropped as he brought fingertips up to his lips. A tingle rose in his nose at the memories of a brother departed. Of a brother whose face he thought he would never- never should see again. Exasperated claims of disbelief fell from his lips.

Tim, alert and alarmed, beamed at Barbara and Dick with concern. The foreign look on their faces shot a panic through him. He turned back to Red Hood, clawing at his brain, desperate for memories or hints as to who might be standing before them. A cold pit rose in Tim's stomach as his gaze turned towards Bruce.

Bruce's stoic scowl crumbled into dust. His wide eyes, watery and unbelieving beneath his mask. A light tremble rested on the bottom lip of his slackened jaw.

"Jason..." The word fell from his throat with such unbelieving desperation. Bruce's haunting, alien tone so shatteringly broken that Tim had to fight the rising tear in his eye.

An audible shudder crawled from Jason's chest. At the sound of his name from someone from long ago. From a voice from long ago. From a love, from a father from long ago.

"Jason is dead." Jason spat with anguish. He sucked in a shaky breath, his pistol trembling in his grip. "You let him die." He cocked his gun, killing every final inkling of doubt. "The name is Red. Hood!"
A gunshot rang across the laminate floors. Their cries and shrieks useless as Anton's blood and brains showered the space before them.

Ringing. Ringing. Ringing filled their ears as Anton's lifeless body fell to the floor. For Bruce, Barbara, and Dick time swooned to a near halt. Their bodies and reactions slowed by the ghost of tragedies past.

But Tim had no chains of memories upon him. And as Jason raised his pistol towards Bruce, Tim snapped his hand on his utility belt. His Bird-a-rang cascaded towards Jason's hand. In the final moment before he pulled the trigger, his Bird-a-rang hit, knocking the gun out of Jason's hand. The bullet fired towards the ceiling.

Jason staggered back, gripping his hand in pain. Tim raced towards him, his staff raised and ready for battle. Jason caught his movement, pulled another gun from his waistline, and fired at Tim.

Batman, Barbara, and Dick were snapped from their trance by the growing sound of gunfire. They charged at Jason. And Jason found himself under attack by a barrage of Bat-a-rangs. The other pistol was quickly knocked from his hand as well.

It was possible that Bruce, Dick, and Barbra were trying to talk to him while they fought. But the heated rage in his ears only damped their words. He met their hand-to-hand combat with such ferocity and such familiarity that Jason found himself landing in more punches than he ever deemed possible. The sound of Bruce's groans beneath his knuckles fueled his desperate rage.

Then, out of the vast pit of his stomach, bubbled a well known sickness. Jason gasped as his chest heaved.

No. No. No. Not now.

His fists trembled with each punch as his movements slowed. A fine fever grew beneath his skin, sweat trickled from his brow.

When Ra's al Ghul brought Jason's cold, lifeless body to his Lazarus Pit, the side effects were beyond unknown. The beings would could survive the pit and remain whole, physically and mentally, were a rarity.

And unfortunately for Jason, The Pit's side effects included chronic sickness. Fever, shaking, vomiting, weak muscles; all side effects of his body trying to reject The Pit's gift. Side effects that had to be maintain with medication given to him by Ra's. Medication Jason thought he had taken enough of.

But as he stood surrounded by Gotham's finest, he quickly found his energy and his fighting skills deteriorating. His skin became sticky with the sweat of his fever. Promise of punishment and revenge quickly slipped from Jason's grip.

Tim took full advantage of Jason's distracted state. He ran up behind him, grabbing the bottom of his jacket as he lept overtop of him.

Jason found himself momentarily immobilized as his jacket and his arms were swung over his head. His muffled swears beat against the inside of the lining. He twisted out of the brown leather jacket, stumbling backwards. A fist landed in his face, taking advantage of his stumbling momentum.

Jason growled, he reached for his utility belt. His fingers fumbled for one of the grenades on the small of his back. He tossed it in the air. Cries of 'move' and 'look out' filled around him as they bolted away. The grenade fell just between the entrance of the room and the hallway before setting
The blast deafened them for a few moments as smoke filled their lungs. A flame, vast and massive quickly shot up the old, flaky wallpaper and long velvet curtains. It quickly snaked through the wall of the game room and down the hall towards the inmates.

Bruce coughed. The heat of the growing flame nearly unbearable under his thick kevlar. His eyes flashed upon the ever-expanding fire. He thought of the trapped inmates and tied up staff in the security room.

"Better go save the them before they burn up!"

Bruce turned towards Jason's voice.

Jason gripped his side in pain, his teeth clenched and bloody. He didn't need to be a Martian to read Bruce's mind. Jason reached into his pocket, pulling out his Fatherbox. A rage of disappointment shifted through his bones. The knot of a losing battle was a hard pill to swallow. But with his skills dulled with sickness, there was no possibility of getting the bloody revenge against Bruce that Jason so desperately craved.

"Don't worry Bruce." Jason hissed with a cold glare. "We'll meet again," he assured. "We'll meet again."

Bruce watched as Jason was swallowed by a vortex of black and yellow. Just as quickly as he was taken from him the first time, Jason slipped from Bruce's grasp.

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The Watchtower
March 13th, 2017
22:30 EST

Conner paced himself up and down the grand window of The Watchtower's common area. He ran his hands through his hair, unable to subside his nerves. The only sound to distract him was the clacking from inside the middle Zeta Tube.

Adam Strange grumbled as he worked inside the Tube. Malfunctioning since morning, he struggled to fix the uncooperative machinery.

Conner headed down one of the walkways, looking for something to distract his weary mind.

Nerves jumbled in his stomach. For being on the team for 6 years, this would be his few times leading a covert team on his own. They were due to arrive at any moment.

"Well heya' Conner!" Captain Marvel jolted Superboy from thought. He floated towards him, cape trailing just behind. "What's up?"

"B-Billy, hey. Nothing." Conner mumbled. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh just letting Rose into the Armory." He answered nonchalantly, pointing behind him with his thumb. "Oh, I'm headed to the cafeteria, you want-"

"What?" Conner interrupted him, aghast.

The Armory was a room in The Watchtower filled with The League and The Team's spare and
confiscated weapons. Everything from ancient daggers to alien lasers. Only League and senior Team members were granted access. Access Billy just gave Rose full reign to.

"What are you doing letting her in there!?” He scolded.

Conner sprinted towards The Armory, fearful of what Rose might try to take. As Conner peel through the doorway, Captain Marvel laid a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Relax.” He said. "Don't be so quick to judge. See?” He nodded towards Rose.

Conner turned his head to see her knives, daggers, and swords laid out on a table. She diligently placed them on the shelving along the wall. Conner took a few steps inside, his footsteps gaining her attention.

She finished placing her weapons on the shelving and worked her long ponytail through the back of her mask. She pulled it down over her eyes, readying herself for the mission.

"Kaldur said no blades.” She said, turning towards him. "He doesn't trust me. So I put them where I can't get them.”

Conner's jaw fell agape. "Wow, that's...responsible of you.” He gave her a small smile "I'm really proud of you Rose.”

"Thanks.” She responded and allowed an awkward quiet to pass between them. "Sooo are we done? I gotta get ready.”

"Yeah, go on.” Conner answered.

Rose slipped by him, heading towards the common area.

Her heart pounded against her breastbone. A cool, vile turning danced in her stomach. A fire ignited in her steps as the LexCorp Detonation Cord she stole from the room sat heavy in her utility belt.

*The Warehouse*
*March 13th, 2017
23:30 EDT*

A quiet hum filled the air as Beast Boy and Emily made their way out of the rooms. Their uniforms sat snug against their skin. Garfield watched as she placed her communicator in her ear, her eyes drawn to the floor in sullen silence.

"Are you sure you-” Garfield began, wanting to make sure, yet again, that Emily was alright to do another mission.

It seem that each one she accompanied, found away to shatter her spirit more.

"Yes Garfield *I'm fine.*” She snipped, annoyed, pulling her hair up into a ponytail.

"I just-” She added with a slight tilt of his head. He placed a soft hand on her elbow.

*I said *I'm fine!*" She snapped at him, her lips curling into a snarl.

His eyes went wide as he jerked back his hand. She glared at him for a moment before relaxing her face, realizing her outburst. She found herself like that alot. Irritable and overreacting to everything with violent words and tones.
Her lips pushed into a sad pout, her lidded eyes and sunken gaze flashing Gar the phrase 'I'm sorry.' She couldn't bring herself to say it, finding herself in a loop of outbursts and apologies. Outbursts Garfield always found himself the brunt of.

"I don't like it when you're not yourself." Beast Boy added in a soft, concerned voice. A boyish tone danced on his words.

Emily knew what he meant. Knew that he had as much distaste for this hostile, savage, morose Emily as she did.

"You need to talk to someone." His voice was calm and quiet. He tested her space, advancing when she didn't flinch. He cupped his hand on her cheek, trying to grab her eye contact. "Why don't you talk to me?"

She shrugged, finally meeting his gaze. "We hang out and talk all the time Gar."

He dropped his hand, giving her an annoyed look. "We don't talk. We just make out all the time."

She scoffed, turning away. "You're probably the first boy in history to complain of that."

He wasn't wrong though. Quiet days and late nights left Emily alone with her thoughts. Thoughts of her father and her mother and of her wretched uselessness drenched her in a aching sadness. Often culturing a panic in her nerves, a sob in her chest. It was all too easy to slip down the hall or to the couch to find Garfield unaware and unprepared. It was all too easy to lose herself in his arms and the warm skin of his lips. It was all too easy to use his wanting and physical adoration to dispel the poisonous thoughts from her head, at least for a moment.

"You know what I mean." He grasped her hand, pulling her attention back to him. "How can I help you if I don't know what you're going through? If you don't talk to me, how can I-"

His lecture fell into background noise as her eyes slid down his throat. Her attention drawn the light twitch of a vein just underneath this skin. She counted in time with the rhythm, swearing that she could hear each pump of blood. Mouth watering at the nostalgic whiff of iron.

She discovered herself in this peculiar daze far often than not. Those who were unfortunate enough to place themselves too close to her, found themselves under her watchful eyes. Her gaze transfixed on whatever prominent vein prodded at her skin. She swore she could hear the wave of blood as it burst from their hearts to the ends of their fingertips.

It was a strange fixation that left her teammates shooting her perplexed and uncomfortable looks. A fixation she easily brushed off with an apology. They assumed her bizarre stares were some kind for reaction to her pitiful, newly-found family history.

But what alarmed her the most, was the growing bloodlust. A lust that could no longer be satisfied by rare steaks and raw ground beef.

Every mission that resulted in broken skin, she had to immediately excuse herself from. She would see her teammate's split lips and broken noses and have to physically lock herself away in a room. The hunger. The hunger that overcame her at the smell of blood frightened her to her very core.

She wanted nothing more than to taste their crimson nectar on her tongue.

"I don't need help Gar." She snipped, interrupting him, turning towards the Zeta Tube.

The bloodlust. No, the bloodlust was not something she could ever let them know about. It was not
something she could waive off as a 'newly heightened metahuman sense'.

She just needed to ignore it. To suppress it. To make it go away.

For what would they say if she told them?

They'd see her as a monster, just like her father.

She punched the coordinates to The WatchTower in the Zeta tube. Her lips pressed into a fine line as she shoved away her rising tears. "I just need to be left alone."

The Watchtower  
March 13th, 2017  
23:00 EST

"Is everyone ready?"

Conner turned away from his virtual computer to greet his team. Static, Blue Beetle, Kid Flash, Ravager, Beast Boy, and Emily all stood around him. They silenced their mumbled conversations when he spoke, nodding their heads in affirmation.

He pulled up a satellite image of two story building, squeezed into a middle of a big city block.

Rose's fist clenched in anticipation. She found it doubtful that the building's 'Candle Co.' sign in front was truthful to its order of business.

"From the information sifted through from the weapons lab," Conner continued. "We were able to find the location of yet another Cadmus lab in the south side of Chicago, just 5 blocks east of our Zeta tube. From the info we've gathered, this is a small, minimum security lab. Mainly for lab and bloodwork."

Ravager felt her chest clench with anxiousness. There were so few labs left. There were only a couple more labs to infiltrate. He just had to be in this one.

He had to. She could feel it.

"Our mission today," Conner went on, facing them with his hands on his hips. He tried desperately to radiate the confidence that Dick had when he gave the pre-mission breakdown. "Is to sneak into the lab, copy information from their computers, and report any findings."

Superboy felt overcome with an awkward feeling. The atmosphere before missions was usually caked with excitement and nerves. But as he looked around at them, all he saw were tired faces and broken spirits. Their eyes either fell to the floor or to nothing in particular. Only shuffling feet and the occasional cough filled the quiet air.

It had been two week since the fall of San Diego. It had been two weeks since the country was brought to its bloodied knees at the hands of extraterrestrial terrorists. No matter the number of counseling sessions, guilt still weighed a heavy burden in their hearts. It seemed that The League and The Team were the only support they could turn to. For public opinion of all masked heroes had taken a steep downfall. They couldn't tune into a radio, television, blog, or even streetside conversation without hearing blame being placed on their 'negligence' and 'incompetence'. Several of them even experience violence from civilians while in uniform. Everything from stray bullets to tossed fruit.
It was not a heartfelt time to be a hero.

"Look, I know moral is low and..." Conner rubbed the back of his neck, his lip twisting in thought. "Everyone had been through alot lately. And this isn't a...'normal' mission grouping." He held out his hands to them in reassurance. "But you wouldn't be on this team I put together if I didn't believe in your skills."

"Yeah right," Virgil sneered, clacking his tongue against his teeth in disbelief. "You mean we're here because everyone else is too messed up in the head to work, and we're all that's left over."

Conner felt their wary eyes upon him. Virgil hadn't been completely wrong. They were the only Team members who weren't on PTSD leave or caught up in rebuilding their own cities.

"Times have been hard on everyone Virgil. I need you guys focused and working together." Conner ordered in a quiet voice. "No one wants to see anymore loss."

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Chicago
March 14th, 2017
03:30 UTC

Noise of bustling the city filled the streets around them. The chilly Chicago air still held on to last remnants of winter. The Team dispersed, shaking the shivers off their spies and placed themselves on top and around the Candle Co. building. Their quiet steps and stealth uniforms, rendered them unnoticed.

Superboy jumped quietly onto the roof. He placed his finger on his communicator. "Alright Bule, you're up."

Blue Beetle flew high above the building. His armor blending with the night sky. He outstretched his arm, ordering The Scarab to scan the building.

"There's...six people inside. Looks like some lab techs and a janitor." Blue began. He squinted, trying to focus on the thermal reading. He confirmed Superboy's suspicions. "You're right about the sub-level. The scanner is picking up a hidden floor. Way underground. But I can't see how many bodies below. Too much heat from the water lines and equipment."

"Alright then, Static, your move."

Virgil stood patiently behind the building. He placed his hands on the outdoor fuse box. He fired a current from his fingertips through the building's wiring. Lights and computers hissed and hummed before flashing into darkness.

After the building went black, the remaining staff wandered outside, unable to work without illumination. The Team had no worries that the sub-level would be left without power. The hidden labs usually in housed their own power source.

Beast Boy, Emily, Ravager, and Kid Flash took the first floor. Static, Superboy, and Blue Beetle took the second. With the aid of their superhuman sense or night vision goggles, they swiftly explored the above-ground lab.

In their utility belts and pockets they carried a new device, courtesy of Robin's ingenuity. Red metallic discs that Robin introduced as 'Remote Hackers' could, well, remotely hack any computer hard drive by being placed on top of it. Using any nearby wifi signal they could hack a computer,
hijack the nearest server, copy the data to one of Bruce's satellites, then finally to The WatchTower's computer.

It was a device that, despite his best efforts, Bart had no useful aid in naming. Being set on the terms 'Bat Hacks' or 'Robbin' Robins' to which Tim did not find as amusing as he.

When Superboy, Blue Beetle, and Static finished they joined the rest of The Team on the first floor by the elevator. Conner pried open the door, happy to find the elevator had stopped on the second. They quietly flew and grappled their way down the elevator shaft. It wasn't until they traveled 40 feet below ground that they finally reached the end of the shaft. Blue used his scanner to make sure no workers were close and Static used his powers to quietly open the doors.

In the sub-level, the elevator opened into a corner a hallway intersection. Four separate directions laid out in front of them. The term 'hallway' Conner found generous, if inaccurate. It wasn't so much a fully constructed lab, like the one he was created in. It was more like a crudely excavated cavern hastily created to resemble a working space. Metal beams and arches kept the ceiling from falling in. Lab equipment and workstations sat on and in the cave-like walls. They could tell that each of the four hallways had rooms on either sides of them. But the jagged stone walls and moist air gave it an alarmingly makeshift feel. Dimmed floodlights illuminated the floors in sporadic bursts. The angle of their placements left the high ceilings shrouded in darkness.

They split off down the four hallways. Superboy braved one on his own, Beast Boy and Emily in one, Ravager and Kid Flash in another, and Static and Blue Beetle down the other.

Virgil and Jaime glided down the shadowed hallway. The rooms they found were mainly empty aside from lab equipment and humming computers. They pocket several seal tubes of liquid and blueprints.

Virgil stepped back into the hallway, a faint yelp grabbed his attention to a door at the end of the hall. "Do you hear that?" He whispered to Blue.

They flinched, the sound of the screams growing in volume and severity.

Without hesitation they tore down the hallway. The Scarab's voice of reason fell on Jaime's deaf ears as he blasted open the door. Static pushed past him.

A bolt of panic jolted down Virgil's chest. Along the walls sat four podil cages. Two young men and two young women stood behind the glass coverings. Their wrists clasped beside their heads in metal restraints. Metal appendages sat inside the pods, their ends pressing needles and electrical currents into the prisoners' skin.

The air ripped from Virgil's lungs as his eyes went wide. His mind trailed back to his time with The Reach. To his days spent trapped in a tight pod prison, under the mercy of their electrical torture. The scientist in the room startled at the sounds of the blasting door. It only took a moment for Virgil to see the teens in cages before he flushed with rage. He sent a bolt of lightning towards the scientist, knocking him unconscious. He slumped to the ground, this clipboard clacking beside him.

Blue and Static dashed towards the pods, pried open the doors, and tore the robotic arms off their hinges.

"Hey! Hey are you okay?" Blue cupped one of the girl's cheeks, trying to wake her up after the bolts left her unconscious.

"What are they doing in here?" Virgil asked, shaken. He worked on the young men's restraints.
The young, brown haired girl groggily gained consciousness. She squealed under Jaime's hand.

"It's alright, it's alright." He cooed. "We're not here to hurt you. We're gonna get you out of here okay?" He tackled the task of undoing her restraints.

"Help us, please." She begged in a hoarse voice.

"We will." He whispered, looking over his shoulder for a brief moment. "You gotta stay quiet okay?"

Virgil helped one of the young men out and lowered him onto the ground. He worked on freeing the other teenager. His brows knit together as he asked Jaime through grit teeth, "What does this look like to you?"

Blue's eyes flashed over to Virgil before helping the other girl. He let out an unsteady breath, "I know." The uncanny resemblance of the prisoners' pods and The Reach's left Jaime with an unshakable chill. "They're using their technology."

They helped the last two prisoners onto the floor, allowing them to gain their bearings. The brown-haired girl grasped Jaime's arm, she glanced at the clock on the wall. Her words were gruff and breathless. "Shift change...fifteen minutes." She took a moment to gather her wind. "Staff doubles....more people."

Jaime nodded, his voice boldly chiming in on the comlink. "Blue Beetle to Superboy. Static and I found four hostages." He flashed his eyes over to Virgil, he nodded. "We're getting them out." There was no questioning influx in his statement.

"Affirmative," Superboy answered. "Do so quietly."

"I think we need to move fast." Jaime added, taking the other girl's arm around the back of his neck as he helped her up. "One of the hostages said shift change is in fifteen minutes. They'll be a lot more people here soon."

He and Static lead the prisoners out of the room and quietly headed down the hallway towards the elevator.

"Affirmative." Conner answered. "Everyone clear? We have five minute to gather and get out."

In the opposite hall, Ravager's coarse swears filled one of the empty labs. She hammered away on computer's keyboard

"Fuck. Five minutes?" She snipped, panicked. "That's not enough time." She growled, desperately searching through the computer's files. "That's not enough time."

"What are you doing?" Kid Flash questioned, annoyed.

"Just give me a fucking minute." Rose hissed back.

"We don't have a minute Ravager." His voice teetered with anxiousness, trying to rush her. He came up behind her, looking over her shoulder. "What are you looking for?"

An answer swelled in Rose's throat. She snapped her jaw shut as the door to the room slid open. An unaware scientist made a few good strides into the room before she lifted her eyes from her clipboard.
But by then, Ravager already had a hand around her neck.

With daunting swiftness, she pushed the lab-coated woman against the wall. Her screeching died in her throat as Rose pulled out her Energy Sword and placed it under her chin. The pulsing electricity sent tiny shocks across her skin.

Bart had never felt himself think with such sluggish thoughts. Even he had to take a moment to register Rose's movements; to register what she was doing.

He felt like an imbecile when the word "Stop!" finally croaked out of him.

But Rose paid no mind to Bart's protest. Her cold, hateful eyes beamed at the woman in her grasp. She pressed her Energy Sword closer to the underside of her chin.

"Scream and I slit your fucking throat," Rose snarled.

The Cadmus pawn wouldn't know that the sword wouldn't kill her. But it made for an effective bluff on Rose's part.

"Where is Project J?" Ravager hissed, a fury bubbling inside her. Her limbs trembled as she felt the end of her rope creeping up on her. "Where is Project J?!"

The scientist only flinched and squealed at her words. Terror shooting through her at the sight of Rose's desperate, bloodthirsty eyes.

Rose tightened the grip around her throat and pressed the Energy Sword closer against her neck. The woman choked, tilting her head higher upwards in response.

Ravager trembled with furious limbs. "I swear I will fucking kill you." She hissed.

"I'll take you I'll take you!" The woman gurgled, struggling to catch her breath. "P-please. Please don't kill me." Tears flowed down her cheeks. "I'll take you to him, whatever you want!" She pleaded.

Rose released the woman. She shook, rummaging for her fallen glasses and metal clipboard. She felt Rose's sharp glare as she promptly stood. She squealed as Rose turned her around, placing a firm hand on her shoulder.

"Start moving," Ravager demanded, pointing her sword into her back. "Don't even think of running."

The woman nodded and lead them out of the room.

"What the hell are you doing?" Bart asked, aghast.

Rose paid no mind to him as the scientist lead her down the hall, the tip of Rose's sword between her shoulderblades.

Bart growled, running up beside them. "You're going to get us in trouble-"

"Shut up!" She snapped at him, making him stumble. "You don't understand." She hissed through gritted teeth. Her shaken breath rumbled in her chest. The rage in her eyes shimmered into pleading. "Just let me do this."

Bart opened his mouth to speak, then decided quietly against it. He nodded, the desperation in her words causing him to give her the benefit of the doubt.
The mousey scientist lead them to a room at the end of the hall. She opened it. The large room was lined with a computer and lab station against one wall, hazmat suits and safety goggles lined the other.

The sound of the door shutting behind them echoed up the tall, dark, damp walls. Bart placed himself next to Rose. He shuddered as his eyes crept up the ceiling into the haunting darkness above him.

Rose shivered, her uneven breathing filling the air around them. Her eyes fell on the chrome wall in front of them. The sliding doors locked at the center, a keypad sat to the side. Across the wall in daunting letters of yellow black read:

**WARNING:**
**METAHUMAN TESTING**
**EYEWEAR MUST BE WORN AT ALL TIMES**

"Is he-" Rose finally found her voice. Her grip loosened off the woman shoulder. "Is he there? Is he behind there?" Her tone high with a hope.

A soft chuckle fell from the woman's throat. "Did you really think it would be that easy?" Her course, darkened tone shot a chill down Rose's spine.

She stayed still as another snicker escaped her. A smile could be heard in her words. "Did you really think he wouldn't know you were coming?"

Rose's lungs filled with a gasp at the haunting realization of her words. Before she had time to blink a flash of metal danced in the corner of her eye. A sickening clank of metal filled her ear as the scientist spun around, striking her metal clipboard against the side of Rose's face. Rose cried out at the sudden pain, falling to the ground.

"Rav-" Bart began to call out for her. His words cut short at the feel of the woman's hand around his shoulder, pulling him forward. Dropping the clipboard, she pulled an Inhibitor Collar from inner pocket of her lab coat, snapping it around Bart's neck.

Bart squealed as the woman grabbed him by shoulders, tossing him against the computer.

The noise jerked Rose's attention. She jumped to her feet, her Energy Sword firing up in her hand. "Keep your hands off him!" She yelled, taking a swing at the alleged 'scientist'.

The woman dodge Rose's advantages, her moves poised and limber. She made a skilled backhandspring away from Rose, tearing off her lab coat. A tight black bodysuit and utility belt wrapped around her. A warrior in sheep's clothing.

"We're under attack!" Bart beamed into his communicator. He rolled over on the ground with a groan.

Bart charged at the woman, her Sword tight in her grip. She swung her electric blade, her sword slicing closer and closer to the woman's skin.

Bart's head pounded as their fight loomed in the background. He moaned, using the metal desk to pull himself up. Superboy's questioning jumped in his ear but the ringing inside it was overpowering.

He pressed on his communicator, guessing at his inquiry, "Some kind of ninja and-"

Bart's throat squeezed around the air in his lungs. His jaw dropped as a figure strode out of the shadows into the corner of the room. Planting himself firmly in front of the chrome door.
A scream filled the room as Rose's sword finally landed on the ninja woman. She fell unconscious on the ground. Ravager winced, rubbing the spots out of her eyes from the sword's intense contact flash.

"My, isn't a treat."

A wheezy inhale filled Rose's throat as she gasped. Her belly soured as she heard a deep voice ring around her. It had been so long since she'd heard it. And although she'd never show it, that voice still terrified her.

Bart whimpered, swallowing hard as he clawed at the dying words in his throat. A towering figure of black and yellow slithered from the shadows. Bart's finger trembled against his communicator as he finished, "Deathstroke."

***********

Down the other hall, Bart's cries on the communicator went unanswered by Emily and Beast Boy as they too found themselves under attack. Two more of Deathstroke's ninja's cascaded down from the shadowed ceiling.

Garfield's ears twitched, hearing the ninja plummet towards him with a moment to spare. Beast Boy leapt out of the way, the Inhibitor Collar in the ninja's hand snapping centimeters away from his skin. He roared, morphing into a gorilla. He swung his heavy paws, his blows nearly landing on his attacker.

Emily screeched with surprise. She lifted up her arms, her energy shield falling around her just as the ninja brought down his blade. She yelled, pushing forward, heaving her attacker off of her. He tumbled to the ground, his sword flying down the end of the fall. The ninja sprang to his feet, his quick footwork catching Emily off guard. Her heart jumped in her throat as the attacker barraged her with an array of kicks and punches, inching closer and closer until a hit finally landed across her jaw. A flash of blood sprang from Emily's split lip and onto her tongue.

A lupine growl rumbled in Emily's throat. A shiver of rage danced down her skin, putting her hair on end. A sudden savageness clawed at her chest, the sting of the wound on her lip lighting a fire in her veins.

She snapped her head towards the ninja. Her vision blurring for a moment as her pupils pulled into fine lines. Her canines morphed into fine points.

A heat ran down the top of her spine to the tips of her fingers. A build up of energy released by her fury, struck through her. She snapped her open hand towards the attacker. He groaned. Emily's telekinetic powers halted his movements, pressing on every inch of his skin.

She roared, and with a swipe of her hand crashed the would-be assassin against the wall. She cried out again, bringing up her other hand. As she pulled her hand back, the ninja floated away from the wall. She groan, crashing him against the wall again.

She smashed him against the rock wall over and over. Each time the ninja's cries dulled, quieting. Each spurt of blood from his head enticed a snarl of thirst from her lips. A ravenous smile pulled on the corner of her mouth, eyes mulling over the crimson flecks.

Garfield finally knocked his opponent unconscious. A bolt of horror shot through him as he turned to see her savage attack. "EMILY!" He boomed, but his cry went unanswered.

A trial of saliva dribbled from her lip as the iron aroma seduced her hunger.
"EMILY! STOP!" Garfield shouted. He yanked on her arm with a firm hand, jerking her attention. The assassin fell to the ground, body limp.

A savage snarl spread across Emily's lips. A horrendous growl burst from her throat at the feel Beast Boy's pull. Her free hand swiped at him. A sting erupted down her fingers as her nails morphed into claws.

In her furious haze, a flash of green and red played before her. An anguished cry erupted from Garfield. He clutched his face, turning as he staggered into the opposite wall.

Emily gasped. The sound of Beast Boy's scream jolting her from her bestial rage. She shook her head, blinking away her blurred vision as her eyes morphed from slit-pupilled yellow, to green.

She held her hand up to her face. Watching with trembling limbs as her claws shrank back to nails. The ends of her fingers coated in the sticky film of blood.

An unsteady breath rumbled in her chest. She looked over at Garfield. He grimace as he clutched his hand over his face, blinking away the tears in his eyes. It wasn't so much the pain the made his eyes water, but the relentless sting that sliced across his face.

He pulled his hand away with a wince and assessed the lines of blood on his palm. Four of her claws left shallow lines of red, barely missing his eyes.

"Gar I-" She whimpered. A remorseful squeak to her voice rose with her watering eyes. "I-I'm sorry. I'm sorry I-" Her hands shook with a panicked trembling.

"It's alright. It's alright." He reassured, wincing again. He took his hand away, face twitching. "It's my fault. You didn't mean it."

Emily's shaky breath rumbled in throat. Garfield looked at her with sad, worried eyes as he saw her teeter on the edge of tears.

Emily felt the walls inside her crumble. Realizing the control she so desperate craved slipped further and further from her grasp. Day by day, bit by bit she had been feeling herself slip away. A dormant monster clawing beneath her skin.

And Garfield, Garfield, stood before her with raw wounds, taking the blame. The blood had yet to dry beneath her fingernails before he spouted an apology. Forgiveness for her savage outbursts, a pardon for her unchecked instability.

She clutched her hands to her chest. Her eyes falling from Beast Boy to the limp body beside her. The assassin's face spilled with blood. The only solace she found was in his rising chest. Her knees buckled underneath her, a sob spilling from her throat.

What was happening to her?

What was this monster growing inside her?

***************

"I was wondering when you'd finally show up."

Rose chilled to her core. Her lips pulled into a firm scowl as she tried to keep her composure. Unsure if she should scream with terror, or with rage.
There, standing tall in his back and orange uniform was Deathstroke. He leaned, cocking his hip with a care-free causality. A black pistol rested in his left hand, atop his crossed arms.

"Imagine my surprise when a little doggie told me my own flesh-and-blood traitor was still alive."

Rose narrowed her eyes at him. Was he referring to Wolfpack? Emily's father? She paid no mind of his recognition of her at the weapons factory. She thought he'd perished in the explosion. Apparently she was wrong.

A flicker of a snarl flashed on her lips. "Sorry to disappoint."

Deathstroke pulled himself to a firmer stance. He aimed his pistol towards Ravager, barrel lined with her forehead. "Hello Rose," he greeted.

"Hi Daddy," she responded, words dripping with disdain.

A gasp choked in Bart's throat. His eyes shot between them. A stinging realization rising in his mind. Every time Rose lashed out, every memory he had of her hitting a little too hard, fighting a little too ruthlessly, all came hurling towards him.

The resemblance was uncanny now.

"You're here for the brat, aren't you?" Deathstroke asked.

"He's not your plaything." Rose snarled, taking a step towards him. "He's not your science freak." She pulled out her Energy Sword, the electric blade tilted down towards the ground. She stopped in front of him. Her head inches away from the barrel of the pistol. "I won't let you do to him what you did to me."

Deathstroke gave a small huff, raising an eyebrow under his mask. "Strong words coming from someone using a sword against a gun."

But Rose did not respond. She merely gazed up at him with cold, determined eyes.

Deathstroke couldn't tell if she was brave, or stupid.

He cocked his gun.

"Say goodbye Rose." He advised.

"Goodbye Daddy." She responded.

The blast of the gunfire echoed around the stone walls with a deafening reverberance. Bart gaped, astonished, as Rose managed to dodge the gunfire. She dashed to the side, swinging her sword towards his outstretched arm. Deathstroke cried out, the pistol clanking as it fell to the ground.

His injured arm went limp at his side. Rose swiped at him again, to which he dodge. He reached for his own sword with his good arm, engaging Rose in a searing battle of steel and electricity.

Bart used the distraction to place a Remote Hacker on the computer. A gutted cry snapped his attention towards the fight. Rose lay on the ground, clenching her stomach. Deathstroke approached her with a prudent stride. He stood before her, bringing his sword high in the air.

Before he could bring down his blade, a heavy crash boomed from the entryway.

No longer burdened by his own ninja attackers, Superboy raced to Rose and Bart's aid.
He leapt at Deathstroke, crashing him into the chrome doors. The impact morphing open the seal with a small opening, snippets of the other room danced on the other side.

Rose's heart jumped in her throat. She grabbed Deathstroke discarded gun, waiting for he and Superboy's battle to stumble them away from the door. Rose took her opportunity and bolted to for the damaged entrance.

Her heartbeat rang in her ears. A steady pulse of anger and fright pumped through her veins.

Inside the lab, aside from computers and equipment, rested another pod. A tiny, weathered body of a young blonde boy stood inside it. Wires and needles and tubes protruded from his skin, sending readings to the computer on the left wall. Restraints held his wrists and ankles against the back wall of the pod. A thick metal cap protruded from the back of the pod as well, covering the top of his skull to the bridge of his nose. He struggled to move his head in the contraption, the noise from outside grabbing his attention. He trembled on his shackles.

"Who are you!?

Rose turned her head towards a feminine voice. A brunette Cadmus scientist gawked at her with a stern tone. "You can't be in-

Her words were cut short as Rose raised the gun to her, closing the space between them. Her strides were urgent and fierce. "Open the pod!" Rose shrieked, the pistol trembling in her hand.

The woman shook with fright, frozen by the sight of the pistol. Rose growled. She grabbed the woman by the collar and tossed her towards the computer and control panel. The woman yelped as Rose clutched the back of her neck, pushing her towards the computer screen.

On the other side of the chrome wall, an injured Deathstroke was fighting a losing battle with Superboy. He managed to gain function of his right arm again, but his sword was no match for Conner's Kryptonian skin. A voice rang in Deathstroke's communicator.

"Let them go." Lex Luthor's tone was short and simple.

"What?" Deathstroke beamed back.

"Let them have the boy." Deathstroke tried to protest, but Lex continued.

"We will get him back in due time, it's time to plant the final seed."

Deathstroke smiled. And with a final groan brought his sword down upon Conner, to which he caught in the air with his bare hands. His muscles twitched as Deathstroke pressed down harder on his sword. He brought his face in close.

"Looks like we'll have to finished this another time," He smirked. "Do give my daughter Rose my warmest regards."

Conner flinched, taken aback. "D-daughter?" Conner stumbled.

"Aww she didn't tell you?" He mocked with feigned ignorance. "Lies and deceit. Looks like the apple didn't fall far after all."

Deathstroke twisted his sword, knocking Superboy's hands to the side. He kicked him in the chest,
sending him tumbling backwards. Before Conner could scramble to his feet, Deathstroke pulled out his Fatherbox, and he was gone.

Conner and Bart snapped their heads towards one another, only needing a small moment to know what was on the other's mind. They bolted through the chrome door.

They weren't sure what startled them most. The small boy trapped in a podia torture chamber. Or Rose, shaking with rage. One hand gripping the back of a woman's neck and the other with a pistol to her skull as they haunched over a computer.

"Open the goddamn pod!" She spat with fury. The scientist whimpered as Rose tightened the grip on her neck. The click of the gun cocking drummed in her ear. "Open. The fucking. Pod." Her voice a hoarse whisper.

The woman reached for the keys in her pocket. Placing it in a keyhole on the control panel. A small plastic cover flipped backwards, revealing a red button. She pushed it.

The pod sprang open, the boy falling to the floor as his restraints released. The needles snapped from his skin, small drips of blood ran down his skin.

The boy pulled himself up onto his hands and knees. With a slow movement of his head he looked up at them with large, terrified, green eyes. Dark bags rested underneath them. A bloodied chapping sat on his trembling lip. His think, ragged blonde curls fell down to just below his chin.

"Kid, are you alright?" Conner asked. Bart and he approached him with cautious steps, their arms open.

The boy gasped, flinching backwards at their advance. He fell backwards onto his rump trying to scramble away. A panic filled his frenzied gaze.

Conner's cooing reassurances fell on his deaf ears as his wide eyes darted all around him. They fell to the table on his left. Glass instruments sat on top of it. He reached for one of the glass beakers, smashing it against the edge. Desperate and terrified, he swiped the now-jagged neck of the beaker at Superboy.

Conner retreated, jumped away from his crude weapon. "Woah woah easy easy!" He took a step back. The boy fell back a few steps, but still swiped with madcap movements.

"We're here to help!" Bart tried to reason."What's wrong with him?"

"Stop! Stop it! He's mute, he can't talk!" Rose howled behind them, racing towards them. She yanked Superboy him back by the back of his shirt. "Leave him alone! He doesn't know what he's doing!" She hastily shoved Bart to the side.

Rose placed herself in front of them. "Back off, back the fuck off!" She yelled as they flinched back. She gave them a snarl before turning towards the boy.

He shriek at the sight of her, taking another step backwards. He stared at her with wide, terrified eyes. The broken beaker trembled in his hand.

"Hey," she cooed. "Heyheyhey it's alright it's ok. It's ok." She brought herself down on one knee.

The boy swung the glass at her advance. She shook her head, holding out an open palm in pacificity. "Look look! It's me." She tapped her other hand on her chest. He lashed out again. "It's me!" She cried, tearing the mask off her face.
The boy froze, air chilling in his lungs.

Rose’s breathing hitched, her hoarse voice nearly a whisper. "It's Rose. It's me." She swallowed hard, desperation rising the with pleas in her voice. "Please remember me. Please, please remember me." She hoped she wasn’t too late. She prayed desperately that whatever they had done to him hadn’t destroyed his mind.

As his eyes soaked in her face, there was a moment of still quiet.

"Joey." Rose's voice cracked. The blonde boy twitched at the sound of his name.

Rose grasped for her composure, fighting against her rising fears. She tapped on her chest once again. "It's Rose. It's your sister. Do you remember me?"

It felt like an eternity before the boy, before Joey, breathed an audible inhale. His eyes widened in sudden realization. The beaker shattered against the ground as he let go, feet sprinting on the dirt floor as he charged towards Rose.

She nearly fell backwards as he jumped into her arms. His pining, desperate fingers grasped at her uniform. Arms clutched tight around her. His face creased with relentless, unrepentant sobs. No cries could fall from his throat, but the ghosts of the wails that should have been held a heavy grip about the room.

Rose grasped her fingers around his back and in his hair. Tears fell down her cheeks as she fell down onto both knees, crushing him closer into her. "I've got you. I've got you." She reassured with a shattered voice. "I got you now." She held him tighter, pressing a sob into his hair. "They can't hurt you anymore."

Conner and Bart stood with slacked jaws. Their eyes fixated on the scene in front of them.

Rose finally pulled out of her embrace with Joey. She lightly brushed the hair out of his face, examining his pale skin for wounds and bruises. Her soft voice asking if his was alright.

"He's your…" Bart tried. "You have a…"

"You knew he was here, didn't you?" Conner's voice grabbed their attention. He stared at Rose, nearly unbelieving. "You've been looking for him this whole time."

Rose stood in solidarity. Joey's hand slipped into hers. She stared back at Conner with a dark expression.

"He goes back with us to The Watchtower." Her voice was firm and unyielding.

"What?" Conner breathed.

Her face creased with further demand. "He's going back with us to The Watchtower."

Bart's wide eyes turned to Conner.

Conner held Rose's gaze. "I'm not letting some strange kid into a top secret-"

His lecture was cut short as small click flicked through the air. Rose swiftly undid one of the snaps on her utility belt. She reached inside, grabbing hold of the stolen LexCorp Detonation Rope and tossed it through the air. The same one that Arsenal had threatened Lex with not too long ago. It wrapped around Bart's leg, red lights shining with grim activation.
Bart's breathing hitched as he realized what had clutched itself around his leg. He flashed his wide eyes up at Rose. A cold, savage, desperation dripped off of her. She beamed at Conner with an unwavering glare. A tiny, daunting deadman's switch trembled in her right fist as she held it out between them.

"Joey goes back with us to The Watch Tower." She repeated, struggling to keep her composure as her words cracked. Her eyes watered with anger. "Or I blow his fucking leg off."

Conner's words died in his throat as he stared at the switch.

"Tell everyone else to retreat." Rose ordered, making sure no one could come to Bart's rescue. "Tell them to Zeta to The Watchtower and we'll be right behind them." Her limbs trembled as Conner made no sound. The only answer he gave her words was an aghast, gaping jaw.

"DO IT!" Rose boomed. Joey started at the sound, gripping her tighter, pressing his face into her back.

Conner's eyes flicked from her to Bart's terrified face. Bart's hands trembled beside him, eyes glued to his leg. He craved more than anything to phase out of the Cord, to ensure the survival of his limb. But the collar around his neck left him at the mercy of Rose's brash instability.

Conner's nostrils flared with anger. He swallowed his pride, knowing what must be done for the well-being of his teammates.

He placed his finger up to his earpiece communicator. "Everyone, retreat. Now!"

Rose's eyes widened in surprise, taken aback my Conner's quick cooperativeness.

Their Teammates' concerns and questions chimed in on the link. Conner's voice overpowered them as he belted his order. "I said retreat. All of you! Get to The Watchtower. NOW!"

Conner waited for all their affirmations, bringing his arm down to his side. A disappointed scowl pulled on his lips. "You know it's over for you right?" He asked. "There's no way Kaldur is going to forgive this." His eyes flicked over to Bart then back to Rose.

Her lip twisted in a disapproving manner. She shook her head, water rising in her eyes. "I don't care, it was worth it." Her lip trembled with her shaky breaths. Her hand gripped tighter around Joey's. "He was worth it."

Conner watched with wide eyes she carefully hoisted Joey into both of her arms. He wrapped his arms around her neck, feeling weightless in her strong arms. His small size giving his age an air of ambiguity. She kept a knuckle whitening grip on the Detonator in her hands.

The sound of closing voices caught Superboy's attention. More armed guards were headed their way. "Let's get out of here." He said, cold.

Rose nodded. She turned towards Bart. Her sudden closeness making him jump. "Leave my sightlines and you lose your fucking leg." She warned with a snarl.

Bart swallowed the lump in his throat.

Rose snapped her head back towards Conner. "Now let's get the fuck out of here."

The Watchtower
March 14th, 2017
A light tapping filled the common area of The Watch Tower as Nightwing rapped his thumb against the kevlar on his chest. He gazed out the massive windows, eyes flickering at Batgirl's and Robin's troubled reflections.

They stood in nervous anxiety. Their eyes on the floor or in the vast emptiness of the air. They waited, possible deliveries of their inevitable conversation racing in their minds.

The man at Arkham Asylum, now without a shadow of a doubt, had been Jason Todd.

Dick stared at the results of the DNA test for a good fifteen minutes before his hands subsided their shaking. The events of that night left him all spooked, shattered. And left Bruce, utterly and completely mad.

Bruce said no words to them that night as tore back Wayne Manor. The singed rubber of the Batmobile's tires leaving a crazed trail behind him. He wasted no time in digging up Jason's grave and flinging open the lid. Only to find an empty coffin.

Dick tried to steady the wobble in his knees. A sickness grew in his belly as he waited for the rest of the original team to arrive.

Jason had been apart of their team. Jason had been a part of their family. Dick knew they would never forgive him if he kept this from them.

The Zeta Tube sprang to life.

Recognized Miss Martian, B05
Zatanna, 25
Aqualad B02

Dick's stomach fell to a bottomless pit. He, Barbara, and Tim watched with wary eyes as Z, Kaldur, and Miss M walked towards them. Adam Strange took no notice of them. Hands and mind still diligently working on the middle Zeta Tube.

"What's up?" M'gann asked, taking a place amongst them. "What's this meeting about?"

"We have to wait for Conner." Dick answered. "He should be back from their mission soon. Where's Artemis?"

A small smile crept on Zataana's face as she answered. "Couldn't make it. She's going to the Registrar's office in the morning. She's enrolling back in school."

Dick let out a frustrated sigh. He felt Zataana's eyes on him like daggers. "Are you serious?" He knew he should have handled the announcement with a little more excitement. The fact that Artemis was taking strides on living a normal life again showed that she was improving.

But the flashes of Jason's face in his mind only boiled the frustration in his blood.

"Yeah.." Zataana answered, skeptical. "Why what's up?"

The Zeta Tubes announced more arrivals. Dick found his attention drawn towards them, head cocked in inquiry.

Conner's teammates stumbled with boisterous concern and confusion into the common area. Bursts
of 'what happened', 'is everyone ok' and 'what's going on' rang about the room. The rest: an incoherent jumble of flustered conversation. Voices tumbling over one another.

Dick raised his brows with concern. Something was wrong. Something went wrong.

They joined the rest of the distressed team, trying to make sense of their worried states.

Superboy finally materialized on the Zeta Platform. He charged off of it, quickly snapping around to face the Tubes. A cold stiffness ran through him as his muscles flexed. Arms hard with boiling anger.

His gaze held firm until the Zeta announced the incoming of the final three arrivals.

Conner's fist clenched tighter at the sound of the Zeta Tube's voice. Enough anger pumped through his veins that not even the bright light could make him flinch.

All three of them arrived. Rose materialized with a firm scowl, face determined and intense. The tiny blonde in her arms buried his face in the crook of her neck as she hoisted him onto her hip. His arms and legs gripped tight around her. The Detonator sat firm in her hand still.

In the other hand, Rose pulled back on Bart's collar. He shuddered and choked. His back arched under her strength, hands desperately gripping on his neck. His small pleas were lost in his throat.

Her eyes met Conner's.

"Let him go." His voice rose. The rest of the voices went quiet. His commanding timbre grabbing every eye in the room.

Conner's did not stray from the Zeta Tube. His face tilted downward, a heavy darkness crept in his eyes. "I kept my bargain now you keep yours."

Rose's nostrils flared with a snarl. She shoved Bart forward, releasing him from her grasp.

Gasps and small exclamations filled the room as Bart stumbled forwards. He tripped over the two stairs that lead down from the Zeta platform. He slammed onto his elbows and knees with a chilling 'thud'. He whimpered, pushing through the jolting pain in his joints to turn his head towards Rose.

She never graced him with a sorrowful look. Her fierce eyes still transfixed on Conner's livid gaze. She shuffled Joey to her other side. His face burrowing as quickly into the left side of her neck as it had the right.

Eyes unwavering, she held up her hand in front of her. The debtonator shaking in her grasp.

She tossed it at Conner's chest. His eyes followed it from the point of impact between his breasts to it's small 'clink' on the floor.

His eyes flicked back up to her. Her other arm wrapped around Joey as she tilted her head down in a small, sullen moment. A tiny scowl pulled on her lips.

Conner's jaw fell agape. Agasp at her bluff. The bomb was inactive. He was unsure if he was more disappointed in Rose's actions. Or at himself, for actually believing her.

But for Bart, despite her bluff, everything felt real. Every blood pump of terror and every cold sweat bead of anxiety still rapped against his skin.

"Jesus Christ!" He shrieked, arms tearing at the rope as soon as the trigger left Rose's palm. He sat on the cold tile floor, desperately clawing at the rope and tossing it to the side. He shuddered, breaths
course and shallow as he folded his legs in front of him, his face falling into his palms as he rocked himself. The sticky smooth sting of terror still clawing at his skin. An image of his leg blown to bits ran a loop in his head.

Jaime called out to him, running to his side. "Are you okay?" He asked, kneeling beside him. His palms gentle on his shoulders. "What's on your neck?"

"Who is that?" Kaldur's sharp voice vibrated off the floor. He took a few steps to stand close behind Conner, his eyes soaking up the scene before him.

Rose took a few brave steps forward. Her soles now a foot in front of the base of the stairs. She looked small without a perch.

"That….is Joey." Conner stated, still staring at Rose. "He was one of the test subjects at the lab." He turned his head to his left, a side eye gazing back at the rest of the team. "He's...Rose's little brother."

There was a breathtaking silence.

Their stares felt like a wild stampede across Rose's battered skin.

A soft step echoed around the room as Kaldur's bare feet walked towards her. She stood stoic until Kaldur took a step past Conner, making him the closest person to her in the room.

Depending on whose opinion you asked, one of the most notable, noble, and stupid things Rose was known for, was never backing down. Not from an enemy, not from an ally, not from an encroaching challenge.

Even when that challenge was a skilled, muscular Atlantian man who held a foot over her in height.

So when Kaldur stepped towards her, his brows perked in surprise as she took a step back. He expected her to close in the space. To tilt her face up to meet his in a readied brawl.

But this Rose. Whoever this Rose was that stood in front of him, recoiled. Her foot fell back behind her as she turned Joey way from him. His advance greeted by only her exposed side and fierce face.

He challenged her again. But his step forward, was only greeted by yet another one of her retreating steps.

"You have an explanation to give." Kaldur beamed, ceasing his advances.

Rose bit her lip, suddenly all too aware of Joey's trembling limbs. "Can I get him an IV first?" She asked.

But this wasn't a time for compromise. This wasn't a time for kindness.

All she was answered with was piercing gazes, confused tilts of heads, and firm scowls. The wheels of her teammate's heads turned as they finally pieced everything together.

It was over.

_Fuck it was finally over._

"What do you want me to say?" She snipped, a shuddered breath rattling in her lungs. "You're all smart. You can probably already guess."

But Kaldur's eyes did not falter. He knew. _Everyone_ now knew. But he wanted _her_ to say it.
"I used you." Her words began to crinkle as she struggled to keep her composure. "I used all of you. Used the team to get what I wanted." She steadied her breathing, arms wrapping tighter around her brother. She looked back at him, her face full of his golden curls before she turned back towards Kaldur, her face impenent.

"You want an apology?" She snarled, a glossiness of rising water filled her eyes. "You're not gonna get one. I'm not sorry."

A sudden coolness graced the skin on her neck as Joey raised his head. With slow, small movements he daringly peeked out from the shelter of Rose's collar to see his surrounding.

His frightened, vibrant green eyes bolted between every body in the room. His tear-stained cheeks shined under the fluorescent lights. He was a cold, broken, withered pile of a boy. A tiny pale vessel of sunken cheeks and sickening ribs that slid just below scarred and bruised skin.

Wind fell from The Team's lungs as the scene finally cultivated a daunting realness.

Rose turned her head to meet Joey's. His eyes fell onto her. A flush filled his chest as, in the quiet calm, everything became real. This place, this place that wasn't that horrific lab was real. Rose was real. His rescue was real. The end of his scientific enslavement was real.

His chin erupted with dimples as a quiet sob fell from his throat. A choking breath escaped him as fat, shameless tears ran down his cheeks.

Rose rested her free hand against the back of his head and Joey's desperate grasp clung to her forearm. As their foreheads touched, brazen squeaks and gurgles escaped his throat. As much sound as a sobbing mute could make, he did, unapologetically.

Rose's composure crumbled at the sight of him. At the feel of him. At the reality of him finally, finally, safe in her arms. Her own sobs falling along with them.

And Kaldur became overwhelmed with a notion that he was a blasphemous onlooker in their private prayer of gratitude.

Joey finally retreated his head back into the crook of Rose's neck. His shoulders bobbed and shook with his silent bawling.

Rose's uneven breathing escaped her louder than she intended. She turned her head towards Kaldur, tears still trickling down her face. Her fierce eyes nullified by the tremble of her lip.

An apology rested light years away.

"I'm not sorry." She repeated, shaking her head, a dare resting in her timbre.

Adam Strange peered out from behind the broken Zeta Tube. His attention pulled into tense scene.

But then a tiny noise caught his attention. A buzz from a shorting wire? He swept his gaze above and around him. His eyes following the subtle sparks flashing in the Zeta Tube.

Confusion overcame him as he backed away from the inside of the entrance. He watched, head tilting as the darkness in the middle Zeta Tube flickered with tiny sparks. They faded quickly, nearly going unnoticed. Slight turns of the inner metal spirals inched at a snail's pace.
Adam's brows furrowed. The sparks quicken in pace, a steady hum of electricity now unmistakable.

A thunderous, crackling roar of electricity flashed in the tube. The blast knocked him backwards and sent him crashing onto the floor. The Team snapped their attention towards the noise, shielded their eyes. Adam back away with a frenzied, fumbling crawl, as electrical bolts zapped in a wild tango the Tube. Bolts crept out of the entryway. The spiraling gears whirled at a savage rate. The metal rattling and grinding under the intense movement.

The Zeta Tube's feminine voice boomed its repetitive warning through the room:


"What's going on!" Nightwing called out. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Adam climb to his feet, pulling up the virtual Zeta Control Panel.

"It's-it's as though there's a-a foreign frequency trying to Zeta in." Adam answered, one hand rattling away at the panel while the other shielded his eyes from the intense light.

"What?" Dick called out, voice barely heard over the sound of the Zeta's voice. He closed the space between them "What does that mean?!"

"I-I don't know, I mean-" Adam's overwhelmed mind had him at a loss for words. He shook his head in perplexity at the readings on the panel.

The Zeta's voice roared again.


Adam turned his head towards Dick, voice cracking over the collective noises belting from the tube. "I think-I think someone's trying to hack the Zeta Tube." He answered, pointing towards the reading.

"That's what it looks like."

"Where?!" Dick yelled, as he approached the panel. He brought his elbow up towards his eyes to shield them from the light of the relentless bolts of electricity. "Where's it coming from?"

"What?" Strange's jaw dropped. "That doesn't-it doesn't." He rose his voice to be heard, turning towards Dick again. "It says it's being hacked from this location."

Nightwing looked at him with furrowed brows, unable to comprehend his words.

"Somehow the entry and exit Zeta points are the same." He tried to explain. "But it-it's still trying to transport." He pointed towards the Zeta Tube. "That's why it's short circuiting."

"Then shut it down!"

"I'm trying!" He snipped back as he clacked furiously at the virtual keypad.

A massive white light filled the entire common area of The Watch Tower. Bright enough to paint the insides of their eyelids white. The Zeta Tube roared with energy. Bolts of lightning desperately grasped for grounding points.

The light snapped away as an explosion burst through the center of the Zeta Tube. They were all knocked off their feet from the aftershock. Coughing filled the air as smoke circled around them. Their hacking lungs now the only noise in the room.

They tried fiercely to blink the vision back into their eyes. Furious spots of white danced in their...
pupils.

Tim expelled the dust from his lungs. Through the lashes of his squinted eyes, he made out a figure in the smoke. Movement staggered from inside the Zeta Tube.

A cold drop of his stomach chilled his insides. "Who's there?!" Tim called, his hand reaching for his staff.

Heavy breathing poured from the intruder's mouth. His lungs grasped for air with furious claws.

Out of the smoke, a shaking, weathered hand gripped the rim of the Zeta Tube. Knuckles raw and scarred.

Second by second, the smoke cleared. And face emerged behind the cloudy haze.

"Dios Mio." Jaime wheezed. His ribs clutching tight around his lungs. Eyes wide at the sight of the ghost before him.

"There's no way." Garfield's voice cracked. His forehead creasing with fearful astonishment. He took a trembling step backwards.

"Is that..." Tim's soft words fell from his lips. His head brows furrowed in disbelief.

Dick's jaw fell open. His head shook. His voice of reason telling him that his eyes were deceiving him.

Bright against the faded dust in the air, a distinctive shade of red hair, seized every eye in the room. Lip trembling, Dick's voice curled around a name he never thought he'd be able to call out for again:

"Wally?"

The voice of the Zeta Tube echoed around them, pushing to regain normal functioning.

R-R-R-Recognizzed, Kid Flash. B03.
A swift and consuming silence fell upon them. As the final echo of the Zeta Tube's voice dissipated, a small trembling rattled in limbs.

His panting boomed in the humming quiet. The smoke finally cleared. With its dissipation, rose an anxious tension. With no more smoke to shroud him, his daunting, familiar features brought about a ghost that once was.

But his nostalgic features carried a glaze of subtle, peculiar change. A lean thinness spread through his body. A red, battered, torn bodysuit covered his trembling torso and limbs. His face held a tired, weathered look. Bags rested under eyes; eyes that stared as though they had seen the world fall to pieces. A short, tattered, red beard circled his jaw.

He stood in the entryway of the Zeta Tube, his body slumped. He held one arm up to hold himself up, his hand gripped tight to the rim of the Zeta Tube. The other arm fell limp at his side. His knees wobbled with exhausted uncertainty.

As the man's panting filled the room, a drumming of their pounding heartbeats rang in The Team's ears.

Nightwing found his throat caked with a sudden dryness. He couldn't push any wind from his lungs. He tried so desperately to speak. But the intruder in The Zeta Tube found his voice first.

"Where. Is she?"

A small noise fell from Dick's lips. After almost a year, a nearly forgotten voice finally slithered across his ears once more.

Unmistakable. Unimaginable. Impossible.

The red-bearded man with Wally's voice heaved another tired breath. "Where. Is she?"

A nervous chill shivered between The Team. With tense limbs, their eyes darted from one another, to Wally, to Nightwing. Afraid, nervous, confused; their faces wore pleas for guidance.

Nightwing swallowed hard, his words forced; praying the man was who he looked like. "Y-You mean, Artem-

"Where is Looker?" The bearded man interrupted with a more forceful tone. He continued panting, as though he had ran for years.

They looked at one another once more with anxious uncertainty.

The man growled at their silence. "Lia?" He grit through his teeth. "What about...Emily?" He panted. "Is there...an, Emily Briggs...on the team?"

He was answered with their wide eyes.

Another shot of anger coursed through him. "IS THERE AN EMILY BRIGGS, ON THE
TEAM!?” He belted.

Whispers tiptoed in the air. Movement stirred in their once-still bodies. After a few tense moments of nervous quiet, a small voice finally broke through.

"Yeah."

They all looked behind them as Emily spoke up. Silent, they watched her as she took a nervous step forward. She held her arms to her chest, her hands trembling. Mind and body weary of man who appeared from nowhere, calling her a name from long ago.

"Yeah that-" Her voice stumbled. She finally stood in front of the crowd. "That's me."

A course breath zipped through the man's lungs.

A jolt of fear burst through her belly. She saw the moment fury filled his eyes, before his body bolted towards her in burr of red.

Wind ripped from Emily's lungs. With a pain on the back of her skull, and a crushing pressure against her throat, she found herself pressed against the wall. Her feet dangled below her, eyes level with the red-bearded man who hoisted her up by her throat. She squealed under the crushing pressure of his grip.

Her eyes watered in an instant as she found her air supply cut. She grasped at his hands, tears falling down her cheeks. His eyes beat down upon her with a fiery fury. She felt her moment of death creep close as something monstrous overtook his expression.

It took the team a moment to register his movements, to register where he went, to recognized the sounds of suffocation.

It was Jaime whose words finally found him first. "What are you **doing?!**"

Blue hues danced on Emily's lips, and the team no longer found their feet cemented to the ground. They raced towards him.

"Wally! Stop!" Nightwing yelled, his hand outstretched.

A daunting blackness crept in the corners of Emily's vision. Her eyes muddled with tears. She wanted to much to scream, to fight. But under his quick, suffocating assault, her body succumbed to paralyzing fear.

Despite her fading vision, she could see her team as they charged towards her. A dozen hands gripped on the bearded man. But she doubted he could feel them at all. He hardly budged under their frenzied grasps.

For that look, that look in his eyes showed that he had only one thing on his mind. His twisted, raged expression radiated toxic fumes of bloodlust.

"**Get off of her!**" Conner's bold voice boomed throughout the room. In a few quick strides he came up behind the bearded man. Conner reached around his shoulders, placing a firm, crushing grasp on the attacker's wrists. With a groan, he tore the man's hands off of Emily's throat.

Emily crumpled to the floor and Conner spun, tossing her attacker to the side. The man bounced upon the ground, rolling away from them.
The red-bearded man finally caught himself, propping himself up on his elbows. He snapped his head towards them. Beads of sweat flung from his hair. He grit his teeth, brows furrowed with rage. He pushed against the floor, pushing himself into a crouch as he reached his hand into his boot.

Garfield's eyes went wide. It seemed as though time had slowed. His breathing hitched as a tiny shine of metal flashed in his vision. He watched with predatorial concentration as the bearded man pulled a knife from his boot.

The man was much slower than before, but still fast enough to make a nightmare come to life. He sprinted towards Emily. A savage snarl pulled on his lips, the knife clutched tight in his hands.

A massive, carnal roar radiated about the room as Garfield took his favored gorilla form. With fangs bared, his primal scream shook the ground below them. As his call unleashed, he swung his heavy arm at the unsuspecting assailant. A thud filled the air as Garfield thrashed a back-handed arm against him. The man flew through the air and tumbled to the ground once more.

He groaned, eyes squinting in pain. He turned to Garfield's direction, pushing himself up on his hands and knees. He watched as the green gorilla stood stiff on his knuckles. Heavy breaths pushed from his flared nostrils as Garfield stared him down with a dangerous gaze. A red, running line slid down his right forearm where Beast Boy caught the knife's bite. Emily lay on the floor underneath him. Eyes looking up at him in awe as he stood over her.

"No," The bearded man winced. His limbs trembled beneath him. And encroaching darkness seeped into his vision. "You don't...understa-..."

His eyelids closed, and with a final groan he collapsed onto the floor, unconscious.

"Wally!" The words escaped Nightwing before he had a chance to think on them.

They flocked to his still body, overcome with curiousness of his identity and concern over his unmoving form.

Zataana reached him first, rolling him onto his back.

Kaldur knelt down next to her. "He needs to be taken to the medical bay, now."

Zataana shuddered, hovering her hand over his mouth. "Oh my god, he's not breathing."

Connor leaned his ear towards him, filling the air with words he never wanted to utter again. "I can't hear a heartbeat."

A sudden heat burst into Virgil's chest. His breathing hitched as he looked down at his hand. Sparks danced across his fingertips. He shook as images of Victor played in his head. His still body bloodied and bruised on the charred asphalt.

Not again. He wouldn't fail again.

Virgil charged towards the collapsed man. "Get back." His voice cracked as he struggled to build confidence. He pushed passed Connor. "Get back!"

Virgil knelt next to the man. A rip lay in his bodysuit across his chest, Virgil placed his hands in it, tearing it open.

"Virgil..." Kaldur commented with a weary tone.
"I can do this." Virgil said with clenched eyes. He hardly had any belief in himself, he didn't need anyone else's doubt. He looked up at Kaldur, eyes shaky, but tone confident. "I can do this."

Kaldur nodded. He ordered for everyone to back away.

Virgil placed a palm over the man's right breast and placed the other hand just below his left armpit. Virgil took a deep breath before shouting, "Clear!"

The man twitched as Virgil sent a current through his chest, working to jumpstart his heart. He took his hands off so Kaldur could assist him with the second step as he began CPR.

After 30 seconds, Virgil tried again. "Clear!"

Virgil lost count of how many times they tried. Two minutes felt like two days as the creeping threat of death rested heavy in his heart.

Water rose in his eyes. He placed his hands on the man's chest. Kaldur placed a firm grip on his wrists. He looked at Virgil with sad, solemn eyes as he shook his head.

Virgil shuddered, a tear streaming down his cheek. He looked at Kaldur with a fierce scowl. He wasn't going to fail again. We was never going to be useless again. He was not giving up. He would not be a failure again.

"Let go of me unless you want to get shocked." He warned.

Kaldur nodded and released him.

With a shaky breath, Virgil bellowed with a broken voice. "Clear!"

His eyes stayed shut, but the man heaved a course breath. He coughed as life and movement filled his chest once more.

"He's got it!" Connor exclaimed. "He has a pulse!"

"Help me carry him." Kaldur ordered to Connor as he scooped one of the bearded man's arms over his shoulder.

In an instant Kaldur, Dick, Conner, Zataana, and M'gann we gone. Rushing to the medical bay with their familiar stranger.

Clatter rose amongst the younger group. Flabbergasted and stunned looks crept on their faces as they tried to dissect what had happened.

Garfield morphed back into his normal form. He picked up Emily off the floor. Her tear-stain cheeks glistened under the lights as he tilted her chin up to assess her neck. He grit his teeth at the ghastly purple handprint around her throat. He wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tight.

"Who, who was that?" She stuttered, crying once more.

Garfield squeezed his eyes shut, not knowing what to tell her. Hoping that the man wasn't who he appeared to be. Even though his scent was unmistakable. "Someone...who would never do this."

Two hours crept by and it did not take long for word to spread amongst The Team. Soon the common area found itself filled with every member. Worried whispers filled their mouths as they shared the encounter. Voices announcing their concern, disbelief, and hope.
The only ones not among them were Rose, Joey, Garfield, and Emily. Kaldur pulled Emily and Garfield into a lounge room, trying to get any information he could. Desperate to discover why the man would want Emily dead, and how he knew her by her real name. But all Emily could do was tell him what she knew; nothing.

Rose stayed by Joey's side in the medical bay. Her hand clasped tight around his as he slept on the cot. And IV dripped into his veins. She flashed her gaze across the room, eyes weary as the bearded man lay unconscious on another bed. An IV, bandages, and monitors attached to his skin. Kaldur, Dick, Zataana, M'gaan, and Conner circled around a virtual monitor next to him.

Zataana gasped as the computer pinged. Harsh, flustered whispers fell from their lips. Rose's gaze fell from them to the man in the bed. A handcuff wrapped around his right wrist and latched to the bed's sidebar. She eyed around his sunken face, wondering just what it was that drove him to almost become a child killer.

"I'll tell The Team," Zataana whispered. M'gaan followed behind her as they left the room.

Their footsteps brought a sudden quiet to the common room. They weren't surprised to see all of them there. Word traveled fast amongst their members. Zataana felt the heaviness of their eyes upon her and M'gaan.

Zataana let out an exhausted breath. "It's him," She nodded, her voice quiet. "It's Wally."

A silence slithered through the air. An array of agape jaws and wide eyes appeared before them.

It was La'gaan who broke the quiet. "How?" He asked, flabbergasted. "How is that-how is that possible?"

"Are we sure he's not a clone?" Tim, ever the wiser, interjected. His arms crossed on his chest. "We won't know that for sure until he wakes up and we talk to him." M'gaan answered. "But his DNA matches." She added, tone carrying her own dumbfoundedness.

"Guys?" Cassie's wary voice rose above them. She found all eyes upon her, arms wrapping nervously around herself. She looked up at them with a long, nervous gaze before speaking again. "Who's gonna tell Artemis?"

The question made Zataana flinch. She looked to find that Artemis was the only one from The Team not at The Watchtower. Everyone else was far too smart to let her know without absolute confirmation. But now, now Nighwing's test had proven so.

Wallace Rudolph West lay recovering in that medical bay. And they had no sort of knowledge to explain why.

"I will," Zee answered. She met M'gaan's worried gaze and nodded. "I will."

Back in the medical bay, Nightwing sat on a chair next to Wally's cot. Connor and Kaldur stood behind him. Kaldur tapped away on the computer while Connor leaned against the wall. Their voices quiet but minds screaming with rampant questions.

Nightwing leaned over in his chair. He placed his hands over his mouth in thought. A shakiness trickled into his fingers. What a peculiar sensation it was to see someone you love rise from the death.

Twice, in a matter of days.
A tiny groan came from Wally's throat. Nightwing lifted his brows. And with an icy chill in his stomach, he watched as Wally's eyes fluttered open.

Nightwing lept from his seat. Kaldur and Conner followed his sudden movement.

"Wally?" He asked, his throat suddenly dry. "Can you hear me?"

Wally turned his head in his direction. He looked at him with tired, half lidded eyes. "Dick-"

Nightwing let out a sudden gasp of relief. "Yeah," he croaked with a broken voice. He nodded. "Yeah." He placed a shaky hand on Wally's chest. Still not certain if he was real or if maybe, he had fallen into some twisted, cruel dream.

"Jesus how…' Trailed off, mind still in awe. "How?"

Wally let out a tired sign. "So much...running." He looked around him in a daze. "Where…" His eyes fell back to Nightwing, mind suddenly all to aware of what he came there for. A sudden rage creased his face. "Where!? Where is she?"

Wally tore the covers off his lap. He hoised his legs over the side of the bed. "Lay down!" Dick ordered, pushing on his chest. "You're too weak to-"

"Where-" Wally began again. He cut himself off as he felt the tug of the handcuff on his wrist. Enraged, he screamed at Nightwing. "Get this off me! Get this off me!"

Kaldur and Conner joined Nightwings side in an attempt to subdue their hysterical friend.

"I'll kill her!" He yelled, pushing them back. "I'll kill that traitor!"

"Wally snap out of it!" Conner barked.

Wally finally made it to his feet as he shoved them away. "You can't keep me here!"

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_Palo Alto_
_March 17th, 2017_  
_00:15 PST_

To say she was annoyed, wouldn't be quite accurate. For if Artemis had to describe her natural state 'annoyed' would most certainly be the word she'd use. But today, today she could describe her status as dangerously irritated.

Of course she would re-enroll in classes at the end of winter quarter. Of course she would miss the initial sign up for classes and have to take the late enrollment window. Of course, _of course_ the website would go down for days. Of course IT wouldn't know know what the issue. So, _of course_ her and hundreds of other students would have to wait in line at the Registrar's Office late at night to sign up in person.

Of course. _OF COURSE._

Artemis growled internally at crowds of tiny Freshmen. She held her directory of classes in her hand with a tight grip. All she wanted was to sign up for her damn classes and _leave_. Trying to figure out a decent class schedule yourself was already hell, let alone doing it on paper.
Her phone vibrated in her pocket. She groaned, pulling it out. She glanced at the Caller ID before answering. "What, Zee?" She snipped unintentionally, holding the phone between her ear and her shoulder; trying to balance the giant directory and her notepad as she wrote. "I'm kinda busy right n-"

"Artemis." Zataana's words hung soft in the background. "He's back."

"What are you talking about? Hey!" She yelled as she jumped back, should knocked by another another student as they ran past. She shook her head in irritation, giving her attention back to the phone. "Who's back?"

There was a moment of quiet before she answered. "Wally's here."

An icy, stinging chill grasped Artemis's lungs still. A tiny panic slipped down her spine as she found she couldn't breathe. Did she hear her right?

"What?" Artemis managed to push out with hoarse breath.

Zataana let in and out a long breath before continuing in her quiet, steady voice. "Wally's in the medical bay at the Watch Tower."

A tremble grew on on Artemis's lip. Her eyes watered and face creased with an aghast anger. "Zataana," she hissed into the phone. "This better not be your idea of a joke because it is not fucking funny."

"Artemis." Zee shuddered. Her quiet, genuine tone suddenly became the loudest thing in Artemis's proximity. "He's alive. Wally's alive."

Artemis lowered the phone from her ear. She heard Zataana say her name over and over on the speaker but she couldn't bring herself to form any sort of sound. Zataana's words repeated in her mind like a damaged record. Over and over the sound of his name rattled against her chest.

Wally.

Wally.

Wally.

Alive?

Artemis dropped her book and notebook to the ground. Her feet glided her out of line faster than any time she was chased by an enemy. She may have pushed one or two or three people but in all honesty she couldn't recall.

Where was she running? Where was she going?

The Watchtower.

Familiar streets and alleyways filled in around her. A natural sort of autopilot weaved her through the city. She noticed the stitch in her side, the fire in her thighs and the tightness of her chest. But she couldn't stop. She couldn't slow. She couldn't stop running.

Artemis slid into the back alley phone booth. Her shoulder crashed against the inside wall. She hardly registered the Zeta Tube's voice.

*Recognized, Tigress B07*
She didn't recall who stood in the common area. She didn't recall how many eyes were upon her, or how many hands reached for her as she sprinted past them, or who it was that shouted "Artemis wait!" as she tore down the hallway.

"Wally snap out of it!" Nightwing's shouts filled the air.

"You can't keep me here!"

That voice.

"You can't keep me away from-"

A loud crash echoed across the laminate. She couldn't bare the thought of waiting for the medical bay's automatic door to slide on its own. So, she shoved it open with haggard force.

In the wake of the noise, every gaze snapped at her direction in the doorway; Rose's, Kaldur's, Conner's, Dick's and...

"Artemis..." The words fell from Wally's lip with a tender longing. Tone dipped with a light glaze of guilt at the thought that he had forgotten of her even for just a moment. The tension in his face melted away.

Artemis heaved with a heavy rise and fall of her chest. She stood still in the doorway, hands against the opening to hold herself up. She panted; a trail of sweat running down her forehead.

She couldn't decide if she was awake, or maybe she was dreaming some sick, twisted fantasy. Because right there, in the middle of the room, stood Wally. The man she loved for years, the man who knew her inside out, the man who she shared a life with, a man who had evaporated in chrysalis energy, stood just feet from her.

In the tense quietness, the cool touch of the doorway danced on Artemis's fingertips. The ache in her ankles throbbed, the sweat on her brow cooled. In that overwhelming sensation of touch, she came to grips with the reality that she wasn't dreaming. She wasn't dreaming.

It's real.

It's real.

He's here.

Artemis unleash and sharp cry. Her pants growing with intensity as her harsh breaths turned into sobs. Her face turned from a tense exhaustion to an overwhelming burst of sorrowful, surprised relief.

She ran.

She sprinted from the doorway and into his arms. The moment her arms wrapped around his shoulders, the moment her skin touched his, she yelped an unabashed sob. Her loud cries barely muffled as she wept against his forehead.

"Kcolnu," Zataana whispered as she pointed to Wally's handcuff. It unlocked and flew to the floor as Wally's arms snatched up around Artemis's waist.

He held her like he never wanted to let go. Like he never would let go again. He pressed his face against her hair and breathed in that scent of lilac and lavender that he never thought he would smell
again. He whispered soft, gentle reassurances in her ear as she cried like no one in the world would hear.

Zataana felt a tingle rise in her nose. Her chest flooded with a notion that she shouldn't be there. That none of them should be there, for their moment.

"Out," Zee snapped with a quiet hiss. She pulled on the boys' uniforms. "Out. Everybody out. Now." Her face filled to the brim with intensity. An intensity that neither Kaldur, Nightwing, nor Superboy wanted to challenge. However, still quietly begrudged, they exit the room.

Zataana looked over to Rose, Joey still lay fast asleep. Rose looked at Artemis and Wally with a startled curiosity, finally realizing who the bearded man was.

"You too," Zataana hissed at Rose. "He's fine. Out:"

She was referring to the now quietly-snoring Joey. Rose looked at him then looked at Artemis again. She saw the same face of pained relief, the same eyes that Joey gave her when she brought him to The Tower.

She nodded, cautious, but understanding that now, was their moment.

Rose looked back at them one last time before slipping out of the room behind Zee.

Wally held Artemis tightly in his arms. His hands caressed her cheek as he turned her face towards his. A longing held their lips together as they kissed like they never thought they ever would again. Their tear stained cheeks rubbed against another. Their hands grasping as though they could not get close enough.

With a gasped breath, Artemis released them. Her sobbing reduced to quiet hiccups as she placed her head on his chest. Her stomach fluttered at the warmth of his bare chest on her skin, the pounding of his heartbeat in her ear.

A wobble started in Wally's knees. Dick had been right about him still being too weak. So with a soft kiss and gentle tug of her arms he lowered her onto the cot with him. She buried her face into his chest again as she basked in the warm notion that she could lay with him once more.

She cried quietly, her hand gliding up to his cheek. "I can't-" She looked at him, a rush of water filling her eyes. "I can't believe-"

"It's okay babe," He cooed in reassurance, kissing her forehead. "I know."

"Where did you go?" She shuddered.

He bit his lip and answered with a sad look in his eyes, "Away." He wrapped his arm around her waist, a sad smile tugging on his lips. "But I'm back." He nodded, "For good."

Artemis looked at him with pleading eyes.

He cleared his throat, trying to change the subject, "So, uh, you like the beard?"

"No," She answered with a small laugh, running her fingers through it. "God it's so gross." She smiled. "But you're here." Her voice cracked. "You're here."

He gave her a small smile back. He brought his hand to the side of her face, rubbing his thumb against her damp cheek. He closed his eyes, listening to the sound of her breathing, the rise of her
"Babe," She began. He opened his eyes. Artemis looked at him with a cautious, pleading gaze. "Where did you go?"

Wally let out a strong breath through his nose as he closed his eyes for a moment. He looked at her. A tired, defeated, sorrowful look grew on his face as he answered:

"The future."

A steady clicking of Zataana's boots tapped on the floor. Rose followed along behind her. The entryway to the common area drew close. The sound of voices grew; jumbled brew of questions and flabbergasted statements. She heard the word "Wally" peak a few times but her name spiked from the mixed mess.

Rose's suspicions were confirmed the moment she stepped into the common area. Conversations slowly quieted upon her arrival. Heads turned in her direction. Their stares felt heavy, she realized that every person on the team was there. Either she had done something that infuriated them, or that "Wally" person was quite important to them.

Well, maybe both.

"Do not think we have forgotten."

With a scowl and a hard swallow Rose turned to see Kaldur approached her.

"You owe us all an explanation Rose." Kaldur's voice was strong and unrelenting. The restless gaze of the other team members shot past him. Rose felt their heavy stares on every inch of her skin.

"I don't owe you shit." She clipped back. But the sentence rested heavy in her gut, for she knew it wasn't true. After everything she had put them through, for as long as she used them for, an explanation was the very least she could give. She looked down the hallway for a moment. "I got my him back, I'm not sorry for anything."

She turned to see they still stared her down. She knew that the fight was over. She tilted her head down, defeated. "I don't know where to start."

"The beginning," Connor commanded. "Tell them everything. Or I will." He crossed his arms as a means of solidifying his threat.

Rose looked up at him with a nasty glare.

"Tell us what?" Aqualad asked, eyes suspicious and unyielding.

Rose let out a loud exhale, eyes closing for a moment before she began her self-indictment.

"My father is Slade Wilson," she began. "I am the daughter of Deathstroke."

Chilling, muffled gasps sprinkled in the air. Her teammate's minds slowly connecting a puzzle with the missing pieces now unearthed.

"I guess it starts with him." She continued.

Rose told a story of her father. How Slade, an assassin, a bounty hunter, traveled the world for years
killing people for whoever offered the highest price. In his travels he would spend his victorious afterglow with a slew of a lot of women along the way. It was how Rose and Joey came to be made.

Four years ago, Deathstroke was offered another job Cambodia. He paid his favorite brothel another visit, most likely to buy another round with his favorite worker, Lillian Worth, Rose's mother. Upon his arrival he discovered a 12-year-old Rose playing on the back alleyway with the other bastard children. He knew right away that she was his child. Rose didn't know what it was he saw in her, but he wanted to take her away. He boasted how he would make her his 'little soldier'. And when Lillian tried to stop him from taking Rose, he killed her.

After that Slade revisited every past lover that he could remember and find. To see if he had any other children out in the world that he could kidnap and train. That is when he found Joey.

Rose also told them of a serum called the Mirikuru. It was a serum created by Japanese scientists during World War II. It gave the injectees heightened senses, increased strength, and stamina. The effects started off temporary in the test subjects but eventually ended up permanent. Fortunately for America and its allies, Japan wasn't able to mass produce the serum before Hiroshima. After Japan's surrender into landed into the hands of American scientists. Scientists that would become the grandfathers of Cadmus.

Twenty five years ago, Slade Wilson joined the United States Army. When the opportunity was presented to him, he volunteered to become a test subject for the Mirikuru. After a long, grueling trial period, it gave him his abilities but also made him aggressive; made him a killer. And essentially was the reason he was dishonorably discharged from the Army. That is when Slade began his assassin career.

"When Slade found us," Rose continued. "When he took us," she corrected. "He brought Joey and me to Cadmus and had them experiment on us with the Mirikuru." She clenched her fists, as though the memories physically pained her. "Joey was too weak for the serum, his immune system couldn't take it. But it worked on me." Her last sentence dripped with spite. "It let him control me, it made me violent, made me do things I didn't want to do. Made me hurt people I didn't want to hurt."

Rose had to stop herself for a moment, to subdue the water in her eyes, to stifle the sniffle in her nose.

"I don't believe her for a second."

Rose snapped her head up at the sound of Cassie's voice. She turned her nose up in defiance as she looked down at Rose with a doubtful gaze. "I vote we have M'gaan read her mind to make sure she's not lying."

"You can try," Rose snipped back. "But that serum really fucked with my mind. I blacked out almost every time. There's a lot of the past few years that I don't remember."

Cassie flashed her a condescending snarl. "Oh, well how convenient."

Rose snarled right back. "Fuck. You."

A light tapping rattled beside them. They turned their heads to find Joey. His tiny fist rapped his knuckles along the metal on the entry way. His body swam in a spare t-shirt, light bags still rested under his eyes. His wild blonde hair sat on his shoulders. But, unseen before, a tiny, closed-lipped smile pulled on the corners of his mouth.

And with diligent movements Joey began to sign.
The Team looked at one another with confused gazes.

"Ummm," Jamie began. "Does anyone speak sign language?"

"Yeah," Rose answered. "I do. He's trying to tell you that I'm telling the truth."

Cassie snorted with disbelief, "Yeah, also convenient."

But before Rose could respond with a nasty remark, Joey snapped his fingers with rapidity, trying to get their attention. He pointed at M'gaan and then tapped his finger on his forehead. He signed once more.

Rose translated for him. "If you want the truth then read my mind. Let me show you my memories. I couldn't use the serum. My memories aren't broken."

M'gaan turned to Kaldur for support, the past few hours leaving her wary and on edge of everything. She turned back to Joey and asked, "Are you sure?"

He nodded with a smile. M'gaan connected every one of them.

Joey winced under the psychic connection.

'Alright Joey,' she said on the link. 'Just say what you're thinking and we'll hear it.'

He rubbed his head, 'Ow, that hurt-'

Joey gasped, stopping himself. He swallowed hard, 'Oh my god.' He brought his hand up to his throat, rubbing the massive scar that rested across it. 'It's been so long since, since I heard my own voice.'

He let out a shaky breath as he worked to compose himself. M'gaan's powers allowed the memory of his voice to radiate in his mind. Allowed the memory of what he sounded like to surface. Allowed him to speak to other beings.

He had forgotten what that felt like. To speak to other people so freely and so quickly without having to write it down or struggle with an elaborate display of charades.

He had forgotten what vocal freedom felt like.

'Joey,' M'gaan began. A sudden, brash curiosity overcame her. A question rose that she felt she already knew the answer to. 'Why is it you can't speak?'

Joey looked up at her tense eyes as he answered, 'Slade.' A frown pulled on his lip. 'He did this to me.' He looked over at Rose for a moment before he gave his attention back to The Team. 'You don't believe Rose when she said Slade took us away. So I'll show you.'

In an instant, their minds became black. Joey's voice rang in their heads. 'I wasn't there for Rose's kidnapping, but I'll show you mine.'

A woman's voice scream in the darkness, "Get out of my house!"

A room appeared before them. A vast and lavish foyer meant for the social elite. A woman, sharply dressed in a designer skirt and blouse stood in the middle. Gold jewelry sat on her ears and neck. Her sharp, dangerous face was framed with poignant brunette curls.

'That's my mother,' Joseph choked out.
She stood with an outstretched arm, a switchblade held firm in her hand. Behind her protective
stance, cowered a tiny eight-year-old Joseph Wilson.

In front of them, in full uniform, stood Deathstroke. His hands balled into fists at his side.

"He's my son," He snarled. "He's coming with me." Deathstroke inched towards her with bold steps.

Her savage facade slowly faded with each of his strides. She turned her body, taking a few steps
back, pushing Joey away from him.

Deathstroke snatched her wrist, the knife trembled in her hand. "Now we both know you're not
going to use that." Slade taunted. "So let me take the boy and no one has to get hurt."

A tense moment passed between them. Then the woman brought her knee to his groin. She shoved
Joey away. Deathstroke released her with a groan. Then with a fierce screech, she brought the knife
down on his right eye.

Slade screamed.

She turned towards Joseph with a frantic cry, "RUN JOEY! RUN!"

The tiny Joey stumbled to his feet. Desperate to pick up speed as he ran towards the back door.

His movements halted as a gurgled cry filled rang in the air. With a shuddered breath, Joey turned to
find Deathstroke with a sunken, bloodied eye. Slade's hand gripped around a handle of a dagger
plunged into his mother's stomach.

She coughed, blood flickering across her lips.

Enraged, Slade pulled the dagger out of her and plunged it inside her. Over and over and over.

Joey screamed, calling out for his mother. He raced towards Deathstroke, pulling on his arm. Out of
reflex, Slade pulled the blade out and swiped it at Joey.

His mother toppled to the floor, a crimson wave pouring from her torso and onto the white fur rug.

Joey's eyes went wide. He tried to cry out from the sting in his throat but found no sound could be
made. He clutched his hand to his neck. Blood streamed between his fingers as he fell to the floor
next to his mother.

Slade growled, hoisting Joey up as he trudged them out the door.

"Look what you've done to yourself you stupid boy," he hissed.

The space in The Team's mind went black but Joey's psychic voice filled their minds. *The only thing
I remember next was Cadmus.*

A surgical room appeared around them. Frantic and frazzled doctors buzzed about the room as Joey
lay on a cot. His neck soiled his pillow red.

Slade stood in the corner, his destroyed eye being bandaged by another doctor.

A young Rose slipped into the room. She gasped at the sight of Joey, charging towards his bed. She
snapped her head over to Slade. "Who is he?" She snarled. "What did you do to him?"

Slade shooed the doctor away just after he bandaged up his eye. "He's your brother." He informed.
"And he did this to himself." He glided out the door with a cool disregard.

The young Rose turned towards Joey. Her eyes still held a certain innocence that long since had disintegrated. She grabbed Joey's hand and placed the other on his forehead. "It's gonna be okay," she cooed. "You're gonna be alright."

The operation room dissipated and The Watchtower appeared as Joey took them out of his mind. He opened his watery eyes, cheeks stained with tears.

'We didn't want to be with him, he took us away. ' Joey jumped on the psychic link. 'He took our mothers away from us.'

The rest of The Team found themselves silent. Most of their heads turned down or away in thought.

Joey flashed another look over at Rose before addressing The Team again. 'You didn't believe Rose when she says she didn't want to fight for Slade. You didn't believe her when she said she didn't want to kill for him.' His brows furrowed with anger at their doubt. 'I can show you something what will change your mind.'

'Joey,' Rose's voice growled across the link. She looked at Joey with vicious desperation. 'Don't,' she pleaded.

'They don't believe you,' he said with a shake of his head. He turned towards The Team, 'I'll make them believe.'

Joey opened his mind to them once more.

A setting from another time morphed around them. They could hear the ocean's waves crash against the ship as the deck of a massive yacht appeared. Whatever important persons the yacht unloaded, carried enough to importance to be protected by armed guards.

The sickening slick sound of a sword running through a body filled the air, followed by a masculine cry.

A man collapsed onto the wood deck. The life draining from his eyes as fast as the blood ran from his gut. Rose stood with a red-stain sword to her side. She wore all black with a utility belt around her waist and a holster on her back. Her wild hair fell from her pony tail.

She panted, a snarl curled tight on her lips. A feral savageness creased her face, matching her fine-pointed pupils.

On the deck lay seven figures. Two guards, the captain, two crew members, and two socialites. Their bodies landed askew. Crimson puddles pooled around them as their wounds poured relentlessly.

The younger Joey lay on his side, arm pushing himself up. He wiped away the blood trailing off his lip. He too wore all black, his sword fallen beside him.

A clapping echoed across the boat. Deathstroke stood in his uniform, his hands praising the bloodbath before them.

"Good girl." He said. He turned his gaze to Joey, chastising. "You see Joseph? Now that is how you fight." He looked up at a clock on the wall, "Just in time too Rose, your serum should be wearing off soon." He began to sift through the guards' arsenal, confiscating what he could through his own use before throwing the bodies overboard.
Rose stood, her chest heaving as she panted. She shook with gritted teeth. Her nearly-pupilless eyes stared out into the sea.

After a few moments, her breathing slowed. Her ravenous expression loosened into a more familiar face. The black of her eyes expanded to normal proportion. She was coming down from the Mirikuru's hold.

"What?" She whimpered, her breath shuddered in her chest. She trembled, looking at the bodies around her. "What did I do?" She whispered. With slow, fearful movements, she brought her hands up in front of her.

She yelped at the sight of blood upon them. The thick red oozed between the lines on her fingertips and palms. She stared at them, shaking. Water rose in her eyes. Her brows creased, a sob falling from her throat. She snapped her head up at Slade as she screamed. "What did you make me DO?!"

"Nothing you didn't really want to sweetheart." Deathstroke answered.

Wide eyed and trembling, Rose stared at the bodies. Her chest tightened, finding it hard to breathe. "I killed them," she shuddered. Tears fell down her cheeks. "I killed them."

"Yes dear and Daddy is very proud of you." Slade answered in a near-mocking tone. He unclipped a holster on his utility belt. He pulled out a pre-filled syringe, pulling off the plastic cap. "Now it's time for your second dosage, we have another mission to get to."

"No!" Rose snapped her head up at him. "I'm not-I'm not-" The words choked in her throat as she cried. "I'm not a killer, I'm not a killer." She stumbled backwards as Slade crept forward.

Rose snapped a dagger from the holster on her waist. She turned it towards her gut. It shook in her hand. "I'll kill myself before I hurt anyone for you again," she threatened.

Slade snapped at her wrist, pushing the blade in her hand closer. "Do it." He challenged in a tense voice. She winced at his intense, towering form.

Slade continued. "You have the gall to make the threat now follow through. DO IT." He yelled. He brought his face close to hers. "But do be warned Rose, if you gut yourself with this knife, I will put the same one through your brother, do you understand me?"

Rose swallowed hard. Her lip trembled as her eyes fell past him to Joey. He stared at them with a wide eyes and a slacked jaw, fearful for the knife against Rose's skin.

Defeated, Rose dropped the dagger to the ground. She lowered her head in submissive understanding.

"That's what I thought," Slade said. He snatched a hand around Rose's throat. She squealed under his grasp. "Listen here you ungrateful child." He hissed, slamming her against the wall.

"Nononono." Rose squeaked, trying to wiggle out of his grasp. She cried 'no' over and over as Slade brought the needled closer to her. She grasped at his hands, shaking her head as she cried.

Slade brought his face in close to hers. "Daddy does this because he loves you. He wants you to grow up strong." He jabbed the needle into her neck. "You want to make Daddy proud, don't you?"

Rose gasped, paralyzed as the rush of adrenaline blasted through her veins. He released her, dropping her to the ground.
He turned, picking up her sword and wiping it on his pants. "Pick yourself up Rose, it's time to go."

Rose did as she was told. A cold, dead expression flooded her as she looked at him. Her pin-point eyes nearly lost behind her blazing white hair.

"Yes Daddy," she answered.

With a rush a lightheadedness, Joey cut them all out of his mind. The confines of The Watchtower came back around them.

A silence fell across the room. Joey looked at M'gaan with tired, pleading eyes. She turned to Rose, who had turned her back on them at some point during the story. She stared out into stars, her body shaking with anger.

'Holy shit' Virgil's confounded, unintentional remark chimed in on the psychic link. Jaime shot him a look, reminding him they were still connected. A small, embarrassed sound, rose in Virgil's throat as he tucked his head down. 'Sorry.'

Uncomfortable, unsure eye contact was made between teammates. Jaime, was the first to voice the question. 'So what do we do now?'

Another beat came and went before Bart answered. 'We forgive her.'

Heads turned in Bart's direction. Rose let out a small, surprised gasp before turning towards him as well. A genuinely surprised expression morphed on her face.

Bart met her gaze with a calm coolness. A soft expression crept across his face and an unshakable determination filled his eyes.

'What?' Cassie snipped.

Bart held out his hand, as if his answer weren't obvious. 'I mean, unless you didn't see the same thing I just saw.'

'Yeah but,' Jaime tried to reason. 'Dude she...she nearly blew off your leg today.'

'Yeah,' Bart nodded. 'But and she never activated the bomb.'

'Dude she lied to us this whole time.' Jaime added, aghast. 'This whole time she was just using us.'

Bart stepped close to him, his eyes never straying from his. 'You mean to tell me if you were in her shoes, you wouldn't do the same for Milagro?'

Jamie clenched his jaw. His eyes fell to the floor. An irritation bubbled under his skin at the fact that Bart used his little sister to win an argument. But Jaime found himself silent because Bart was right.

He would have done the exact same for Milagro.

'All intentions aside, she's dangerous.' Cassie snipped. 'You saw what she did when she was on the Mirikuru. You've seen how she fights in battle. You've see how violent she gets even with us. It's obvious it's left a mark on her.'

Cassie was tired, fed up, and outright pissed that Rose was about to get away with her behavior once again. 'She's violent, she's dangerous. She's not. Sane.'

"Don't talk about me like I'm NOT EVEN HERE!" Rose verbally bellowed towards her. Her words
echoed across the room and jolted them where they stood. An angry crease folded between her brows. Fists clenched so hard she thought her fingers would break.

She was tired of not being treated like her own person. She was tired not being able to make her own decisions. She was tired of being forced to do things. She was tired of being told what she was. She was tired of being controlled by Slade, by The Team, by everyone. She was tired of not having her own autonomy.

"Glad to see some things never change."

A new voice filled their space. They turned to the entryway, bones turned to ice at the sight of phantom before them.

Wally stood there, an arm around Artemis's shoulders as he leaned against her. Dark bags still hung under his eyes but his face was now beardless. He wore a spare T-shirt and gym shorts. Water lightly soaked his collar. Water dripped from his bangs.

Artemis placed an arm around his waist, helping him stand like she helped him shower. Wally was still too weak to walk on his own for long. But he felt it time to clean up and face his team.

"Still fighting over the psychic link? That never gets old." He chimed in. His familiar, toothy smile flashed behind his lips. He cleared his throat, trying to clear the tension of the stares all over him. "Hey guys. So…what's up?"

"Wally?" Bart asked, hands shaking. "Is-is it really you?

"Yeah," He answered quietly with a small nod "It's me."

With a gust of wind, Bart superspeed up to him. Wally let out a hefty 'oomph' as Bart smashed into him, wrapping a firm hung around his ribs.

Wally winced under Bart's crushing embrace. He wrapped his free arm around Bart, laughing. "Bart, glad to see you haven't changed buddy." He rubbed his hand over his crazed mop of hair.

A cluster of noise broke out amongst them. They came closer to him, some with cautious steps, others with carefree sprints. It wasn't long before Wally found himself surrounded and pulled in every direction. Turns taken to hug their arms around him or pat a hand on his back.

Only four beings in that room did not move closer towards him: Joey, Rose, Garfield, and Emily. Garfield stood in front of Emily. He bent is knees in an animalistic crouch, ready to pounce at a moment's notice. "Stay behind me," he told her.

M'gaan, the last to greet him, pulled out of Wally's embrace. She placed a hand on his cheek. She looked at him with tense, watery eyes. "What happened?"

The Team quieted at M'gaan's question. They too, curious for an answer.

"Where did you go?" She added, bringing her hand away.

Wally looked over at Artemis. She nodded her head in reassurance.

Wally let out a sigh before answering. Unsure if he were tired because it knew how many times he was going to have to tell the story. Or tired, because he wasn't sure how hard he was going to have to work to get them to believe him.
"The chrysalis energy, transported me into the future." He answered. "Fifteen years into the future."

Bart felt a few glances head his way. He shook his head, unknowing of any story like this one. Knowing for certain he never heard of any tales of his cousin heading into the future.

"What was it like?" Cassie asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

Wally snapped his gaze towards her. He went to answer, then found his attention drawn past her. His eyes narrowed at the sight of Emily. Garfield twitched under his gaze.

"Terrible." Wally snarled in a low voice. He took his arm off of Artemis. The crowd parted before him as he took a few wobbly strides forward. He shortened the gap between him and Emily.

Emily whimpered at his closeness and Garfield hunched his shoulders, fangs poking from behind his lips.

"How long has she been here?" Wally asked in a dark tone, turning his head towards The Team.

M'gaan flashed Nightwing a nervous glance before answering. "About three months."

Wally turned towards Emily and Garfield once more. A scowl pulled on his lips and a cold, haunting darkness rested in his eyes as he stared her down.

It was silent.

"Wally?" Nightwing asked.

But Wally paid no mind to him as he placed another foot forward.

Garfield unleashed his claws. "Don't you take another step." He warned.

Wally perked a brow at his threat, "She has you wrapped around her finger already, doesn't she?"

Garfield stayed as quiet as his hands were steady.

"She is a traitor." Wally turned towards The Team, a finger jolted at Emily. "She grows up to join The Light and single-handedly takes down The Team." He watched them all flash doubtful stares.

"She already knows about her parents, doesn't she? The Creature Commandos? Her killer genes?"

It was at those remarks that they fully listened.

Wally turned towards Emily again. "You already have a craving for blood don't you?"

She gasped, placing a hand over her mouth.

His face creased with anger. "You have. I bet you already find yourself losing control when you fight too."

Emily looked up at him with large, glistening eyes. A tingle already rising in her nose. Garfield looked back at her with a concerned expression, already knowing that everything Wally was saying was true. But Gar had been the only person who knew.

Until now.

"She betrays us." Wally informed, snapping his head back to The Team. "She takes out innocent
people and destroys lives while becoming a pawn to The Light."

"No!" Emily screeched, her voice booming across the room. "No I-I wouldn't do that." She pleaded with them, eyes on the verge of tears. She looked at Garfield, her voice begging for his belief. "I would never do that."

Gar nodded. "I believe you Emily," he answered in a quiet voice.

"Of course," Wally scoffed.

"I believe you too Wally." Garfield answered as he turned towards him, his tone genuine. "So you say that in the future Emily turns evil. Ok, sure, fine. But that's not who she is now. That doesn't mean that we should treat her like a criminal right now."

Gar motioned towards Blue and continued. "When Bart came from the future, he said the same thing about Jaime right? And you know what? Bart could have taken Jaime out right away if he wanted too. We could have just killed Jaime." Beast Boy pointed at Jaime, "But we didn't. We gave Jaime a chance. We helped change his fate. Because he wasn't a monster yet." He nodded. "We can do the same thing for Emily. We can help fix her. Figure out what turns her and prevent it."

"You don't understand Gar." Wally protested darkley. The bags under his eyes now carrying an ominous tone. "This...this is too big for me to just sit and wait..."

"And Blue possibly starting the Apocalypse wasn't big?" Gar snipped, irritated. "We've 'sat around and waited' before. Emily deserves that same chance-"

"I won't stand by and watch her kill you again!" Wally yelled at him.

The room went quiet. A soiled turning rose in Garfield's gut as the word 'again' rang in his ears.

Wally's breathing shoot with a rising fury. "Or Robin. Or Blue. Or hundreds of other innocent lives."

"No," Emily squeaked. The bubbled word almost dying in her throat. A fat tear fell down her cheek. "I wouldn't. I would never kill anyone."

"You say that like you know you're so sure. But I've seen it." Wally hissed, unapologetic. "You kill people you say you care about, you kill people close to you."

"No."

"Wally stop." M'gaan chided, seeing Emily's crumbling state.

"You're lying," Emily cried back. Her eyes gushed with tears as Wally's words cinged her skin like a rabid blaze.

"I've watched you."

"Stop it!" She sobbed, bringing her hands into her hair. Her head pounding. Pounding with thoughts. Thoughts of doubt and accusal. Thoughts that didn't sound like her own.

"I watched you laugh as you stabbed Blue!"

"Shut up!" She screamed, her sobs choking her.

No. No, it couldn't be true. She loved them. She loved all of them. But even now as the scent of Wally's drying blood danced on her senses, she couldn't help but let the stinging poison of doubt
seep inside her. After how she nearly killed that ninja in the lab, after she nearly clawed out Beast Boy's eyes, she couldn't help but think his accusations bore some truth.

Their deaths, the future. *Their* futures. Would it be all her fault?

All her fault.

All her fault.

Just like everything in her life was her *fault*.

It was her fault her powers didn't bloom on time and her father was order to kill her. It was her fault she was alone on that park after dark in the first place. It was her fault her mother thought she was dead. It was her fault that her mother killed herself.

All her fault.

All her fault.

Now the deaths of her teammates were going to be all her fault.

Her growing heartbeat pounded in her ears as the world closed in on her. Her chest tightened. She wheezed, finding it hard to breath as a pressure crushed her lungs.

"Wally *stop,*" Nightwing boomed.

"*No.*" He beamed back, turning towards them. "No I won't stop. She needs to hear this. She needs to hear about how she betrayed people who trusted her. You all need to hear about her betrayal." He pointed back at Emily. "She needs to be taken out now, before she kills most of the people in this room."

"No, *please.*" Emily pleaded. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because you killed ARTEMIS!" He screamed at her.

Another silence filled the room. Artemis stifled her gasp with her hand as he eyes went wide. She found many eyes upon her.

"*Wally, stop.*" Nightwing demanded in a calm tone. "We can talk about this later."

"*No,*" Wally snipped. "You don't wanna talk about this now?" His dark expression stared right through Emily's soul. "Then I'll *deal* with this now."

Wally took a firm step towards Emily.

From across the room, Rose watched the hate contorted his face into a savage snarl. She caught a glimpse of something in his eye. It flickered and sparked until its flame constricted his pupils into fine points. It was something that she had contact far too much in the time she was a minion for her father.

It was the sight of bloodlust.

And when Wally tried to move forward, a look of desperate terror flashed upon Emily's face.

Rose and had enough. With clenched fists and white knuckles, she tore across the room. Wally felt winded as in an instant Rose stood only inches away from him. Her hot breath tingled against his
skin as her wicked glare pierced right through him.

She placed and firm hand on his chest, "And you need to take about five steps," and shoved him. "BACK!"

Her final word rang through the air like a shattering piece of fine china against a tile floor.

Wally, aghast, stared at her with a slacked jaw as he stumbled to maintain his footing.

But Rose did not falter. She looked up at Wally with an icy and vile grimace. Her words were just as firm and dangerous as her stance.

"I don't give a shit who you say you are." She spat in the silence. "I don't give a shit who they say you are. I don't give a shit what time you say you're from, or what things you say you saw, or what terrible things you say she does." She pointed back at Emily. "All I care about is my teammate. My teammate whose throat you-" she poked him on his chest. "Had your hands around. So right now, that makes you the bad guy."

Rose brought her hands up to her waist. She pulled out her energy sword and unleashed. The energy pulse echoed a warning across the room. She held the sword down at her side, a dark snarl pulling on her lips. "You don't wanna know what I do to bad guys."

"Don't listen to her Wally." Cassie's snide voice rose in the tension. "Her opinion of right and wrong doesn't have value here." She turned her nose up at Rose in condescension. "She's nothing but Deathstroke's daughter."

Wally gave a small gasp of disbelief. "Death-Deathstrokes daughter?" He looked back at Nightwing in disappointed awe. "And you guys serious? You let the daughter of a psychopath on the team!?"

"Oh my god!" Rose chimed in, irritation rolling off of her. "Yes! I am so tired of this already. Yes, I lied this whole time. I lied to you all. I am Deathstroke's daughter." She pointed her sword at The Team, head tilted in a cocky manner. "But what does that say about you? Huh? What does it say about all of you when Deathstroke's daughter is only one of the two people in this whole fucking room protecting a little girl."

She brought her sword to her side as she looked Wally up and down with a snarl, "From a grown ass man?"

Cassie twitched under Rose's words. She looked around to realized that Rose was right. Encroaching on Emily's space with dangerous ferocity, was Wally. And they all stood behind him, while only Gar and Rose stood between him and Emily. She was reminded of something that Artemis had taught her not long ago.

"Girls must protect other girls."

"I am not afraid of you." Rose warned with a firm tone. "And I am not afraid to stand up to you."

"You better think about those threats newbie," Wally growled. "I've been in this game far longer than you have."

"Fucking fight me I dare you," Rose hissed.

"You have no idea what you are getting yourself into by letting her live. That girl-"

"You touch her again. And as Deathstroke's daughter, I will have no qualms with stabbing you in the
"THAT IS ENOUGH." Kaldur's voice boomed across the room. They jerked under his jarring interruption.

Kaldur placed himself between Rose and Wally, they backed away under his presence. "I think that tensions are very high right now," He commented, looking between them. "And I do not think that it would be appropriate time to act on that tension. Rose, I think that you should take Emily back to The Warehouse. She needs to be in a calm place right now. And Wally you should stay here, so you can have a safe place to be heard." He looked at Wally. "Alright?" Then looked at Rose. "Alright?"

Rose only held his stare for a small moment, knowing all too well that his request was actually a command. And knew all too well that he was right.

"Come on kid." Rose held her hand back towards Emily, motioning towards herself. But her eyes never left Wally. "Let's get you outta here. You too Joey."

With quick steps, Rose, Emily, Joey, and Garfield headed towards the Zeta Tube.

"Kaldur are you serious?" Wally gaped. He took a step towards them. "I can't just let her-"

"Wally West." Kaldur stepped in front of him, placing a hand on his chest. "You run after that girl. And I will be the take you down."

Wally stared at him with cold, unrelenting eyes.

"Now, Tigress, Miss Martian, Superboy, Nightwing, will you please stay we can discuss this manner further?" He commanded. "Everyone else on my team, go home. NOW."

Without another word the other team members did what they were told. They were all far to seasoned to challenge that particular tone of Aqualad's.

"I can't believe you don't trust me." Wally commented, hurt.

"I do trust you Wally." Kaldur nodded. "I trust you like the good friend and teammate that I have grown up with. But I need you to trust me as well. I need you to trust me, and my ability to recognize when one of my good friends is about to act on impulse instead of reason. I need you to trust in my ability to know when one of my friends cares so much for me and his team, that he sometimes acts with too much passion. I need you to trust that I will hear him out without any judgement. Can you trust me on that?"

It took a few seconds. But the tension on Wally's face finally eased. He looked down for a moment before meeting Kaldur's gaze. "Glad to know the same level-headed Kaldur is here to keep me from doing something dumb." A small smile pulled on his lips. A smile that carried nostalgia of a Wally West long before. "Hope you brought snacks. It's gonna be one hell of a story."
An eager aura filled The Watchtower. Wally, Artemis, Dick, Kaldur, Conner, and M'gaan gathered in the lounge. The sound of Wally's crunching hammered away as the did his part in devouring whatever snacks they placed in front of him. Color inched back into his face, his body finally perked with energy.

Batman, Adam Strange, and Black Canary stood off to the side, enthralled in her own conversation.

It was Kaldur who suggested, before Wally begin his story, that they alert two of the head members of The League. He found himself itching with guilt that Barry had yet to be made aware of Wally's reappearance. But he had to make certain Wally really was the real Wally. He wanted Batman to perform his own tests and interrogation first to cover all of their bases. For Kaldur did not know if he could survive giving Barry the heartbreak of false hope.

And Adam, well, seeing an impossible feat of science first hand, decided he should make himself part of the meeting as well.

The door to the lounge opened as Batgirl made her way inside. Hal Jordan graciously offered to take her Watchtower Duty shift last minute. She had been a part of their team for longer than any of the others, she'd be damned if she missed out on Wally's interview.

With Barbara's entrance, Batman and Black Canary finally joined the rest of The Team. Black Canary and Adam Strange took a seat on one of the chairs while Batman chose to stand. She placed a tape recorded on the table in front of them.

"We're ready whenever you are," She advised.

Wally sat up on the couch, the fingers of his right hand intertwined in Artemis's left. He closed his eyes for a moment and sighed, as though the pending conversation were to be a long, perilous journey.

"I guess everything started the day I disappeared." He began. "As Flash, Impulse and I ran around chrysalis energy, I kept getting 'zapped' by it." He rubbed his free hand on his face. "I don't...I don't know how to explain it well. But the blasts from the chrysalis energy broke down my molecules. I guess you could say it made me a part of the energy vortex itself. I didn't know it at the time, but that vortex teleported me into the future."

"How?" Adam Strange asked, exacerbated. His eyes fell to the floor for a moment. He shook his head with a slacked jaw. "The chrysalis energy. I mean, it works in theory but I never knew it could be done."

"It did." Wally affirmed with a solemn nodd. "And it took me 15 years into the future.

After a moment of quiet, M'gaan asked what was on everyone's mind.

"And what did you see?" Her voice was quiet.

Wally's brows knit together. A small twinge flashed on his upper lip. His face, uncertain if it would
be on the verge of tears or rage.

"War," he replied coldly.

They looked between one another with nervous tension as Wally tilted his gaze to the floor. "Sometime between now and 15 years from now, The Justice League is dismantled." Wally brought his eyes up to Black Canary. "Public opinion plunges so hard The League is forced to resign."

"Why?" She asked.

"I don't know."

"Who-" Kaldur began, his thumb rubbed against lower lip in thought. "Who protects the public then? With The League gone who protects people from Metahuman and alien threats?"

"Around the time The League's dismantle," Wally answered. "World governments began to make their own Metahuman police forces. Metahuman volunteers who worked under government rules, regulations, and surveillance."

"I guess, that's not so bad..." M'gann added nervously.

"It wouldn't be."

"But the Meta Police Forces are controlled by The Light. They use them to control the public to rule non-Metas. Creating work camps for those who didn't abide by the laws." Wally cringed, face crinkled in disappointment. He shook his head. "No matter how hard the remaining members of The League and The Team fought to destroy The Light's hold on a country's government we always failed."

"Were there really that many metahumans in these police forces?" Batman asked.

"It wasn't the number."

"It was the fact that The Light had an inside agent on The Team to sabotage any of our attempts and slowly kill us off."

"Emily." Wally snarled. They fidgeted with discomfort as Wally continued. "In the future she goes by 'Looker'. She's a model by day and was supposedly a 'trusted' member of the team for a long time."

Wally shook his head, eyes staring at nothing. Eyes lost in a memory he'd never known. "You should have seen her." He whispered. "They way she looked. It was like," he licked his lips, searching for the right words. "She had no humanity left in her. She was wild, savage. Bloodthirsty. Like an animal almost."

A cold quiet consumed him as mind fled to a scene far away for them but not too long ago for him:

A chilling mist had caked the frigid night air. An older Superboy, ordered the retreat. The surviving Team and League members too battered and fatigued to continue their grueling battle. They had already lost too many heroes in the 74 hours stand off to keep Boston in their territory. But like much of the country's other cities, it inevitably fell prey to The Light's bloody, dictatorial claws.

Wally remembered pulling himself to his feet, knees cracking below him as his battered body prepped every last strand of energy he had to run.

He remembered hearing a cry. A grotesque, watery cry. As though someone's mouth had filled with liquid while they screamed.
He remembered snapping his head up, eyes wide, and muscles frozen with fear.

An adult Emily Briggs knelt on the ground a few yards from him. She held a limp, lifeless body of a woman in her arms. Her jaws clenched tight around the dead woman's emaciated neck. Blood spilled on the ground around them.

Wally found some focus to come back to the present. "She couldn't, she couldn't satisfy her need for blood." He added.

Dick tilted his head in thought, "So you mean like...a vampire?"

"No. I don't know." She shook his head, mind trailing off again. "I don't know what she is."

Wally remembered the sick, sticky sounds that came from Emily as he gulped at the murdered woman's neck. Emily's claws gripped tight on her newly-dead flesh.

"It's not like she needed to survive to do it it's-" Wally shook his head. "She enjoyed killing. She couldn't get enough of it. You guys had just found out about her betrayal right before I got there. In the two years I spent in the future I watched her kill three Team members."

He remembered the moment the starving monster, Emily - Looker - realized he was there watching her. He'll never forget the blood saturated on her teeth, mouth, and cheeks. The way her fangs shown as she curled her lips at him. "She smiled while she did it." He added, voice broken with the ghost of horror. He remembered the look of bestial delight on her expression as she stared at him with red, slit-pupiled eyes.

And then he remembered the body in her arms. How every fiber of sanity and stability shattered inside him when he realized. How his heart crumbled the moment he recognized the orange-suited, blonde-haired, lifeless heroine in Emily's arms.

He turned, a tear trailing down his cheek as he shifted his gaze to Artemis. "I watched her kill you."

A small gasp fell from her throat as she covered her hand over her mouth. It wasn't his story that shocked her, it was his expression of broken, hopeless despair.

Wally cringed the memory in his head away. "I knew I had to stop her. I was-I was hysteric. I couldn't let her get away with it, I couldn't let that be the future." Wally knew that it was selfish when he meant 'that' as being Artemis's death, and not The Light's overtaking. But he didn't care. "I knew I had to come back. To stop all of that from happening."

Artemis felt a squeeze on her palm. She looked up at Wally, a small sad smile pulled on his lips as he looked at her.

"To keep from losing you," he added.

"How did you end up coming back?" Adam Strange asked, obliviously breaking their moment. "In all my research I...I'd say we're decades away from time travel."

"Actually," Wally answered with a grin. "You're the one who got me here Dr. Strange."

"What? Me?" He gasped.

"You really shouldn't doubt that big brain of yours." Wally advised. "The first thing we needed was a Zeta Tube. Which was hard, because The Light had all the Zeta Tubes destroyed. A method for
keeping The Justice League from moving too fast or congregate easily. So, we had to find one from the crash site."

"The crash site?" Kaldur asked.

Wally's lip twisted into a grimace. "From where The Watchtower fell to Earth."

He signed, not wanting to give this part of the story either. "Sometime before I showed up, a wave of aliens attacked The Watchtower. In battle it lost most of its power and was caught by Earth's gravitational pull. Green Lantern, John, was able to put a forcefield around it while it crashed, trying to save the equipment on board." He paused for a moment. "But most of it fell apart. And he died in the collision."

After noticing no interruption, he continued. "The crash site is where Dr. Strange and I looked for a Zeta Tube that was on board The Watchtower. Or, well, the remains of one. It actually wasn't damaged too bad. We fixed it up and that's when you started to work your magic."

"How did I do it?" Adam ask with a curious and excited tone.

Wally chuckled. "It was all a little too advanced, even for me. But you combined the Zeta's energy and the inner workings of a Reach pod left over from the invasion. It turned the entire Zeta Tube into a time machine."

Adam rubbed his chin. "I suppose that could work, but you'd need a tremendous force to power it."

"That's where I came in." Wally smirked. "You attached something inside it for me to run on. To use my speed to power it. You called it 'The Cosmic Treadmill'."

"Oh my god!" Adam exclaimed as his jaw fell. "That's a terrible name!"

"I know," Wally laughed. "But it allowed the Zeta Tube to fire up. Theoretically it would transport the entire vessel to where that Zeta Tube was at any given period of time. You tried so hard to calculate the exact amount of energy I'd need to get back on the same day I disappeared."

He looked over at Artemis with a tilt of his head. A smirk on his lips, but a genuine apology in his tone. "Looks like I was a little late. I'm sorry."

Artemis huffed in sad amusement as she smiled. "I guess I can overlook it."

"Wally," Batman's tone grabbed everyone's attention. "What aliens attacked The Watchtower?"

Wally's nostrils flared with agitation. "They're from a planet called 'Apokolips'."

"Why did they attack us?" Bruce asked.

"Because they were ordered to."

"By who? The Light?"

Wally shook his head. "Someone controlling The Light." He wet his lips before answering. "He's called 'Darkseid'."

Quiet filled the space around them. But M'gann's psychic link didn't have to be created for them to read each other's minds. It didn't take but a few looks for them all to remember the word every alien shouted before their final attack.
"I don't know what he looks like." Wally continued. "You guys had only just learned about him when I got there. But he wants Earth for his own. And in 15 years, he's winning."

Wally could feel the heft of the tension of the room on his skin. He cleared his throat, trying the ease them with humor. He smiled, "Sorry I couldn't come back from the dead to give you good news."

His final words struck a chord with Barbra. Dick felt it too, his eyes snapped over to her to find she was already staring back at him.

**Back from the dead.**

"It can't be a coincidence," she said.

"What's a coincidence?" Kaldur asked.

Nightwing jumped at his words, realizing that he and Barbara now held the attention of the room.

"Nothing," he tried to play off.

"Nightwing," Batman addressed him with a stern tone. He held his gaze for a moment before continuing. "They need to know."

Dick sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Wally's not the only person to come back from the death recently." He addressed to the group. "It's why I had you all here in the first place."

He pulled up the room's virtual computer screen. He typed in a passcode, bringing up a security footage feed of the game room at Arkham.

"Arkham Asylum was attacked a few days ago." He began.

"Red Hood," Artemis added. Her eyes fixated on his bright mask.

"Yeah," Dick said quietly. "And we found out who's behind the mask." He took a deep breath before pausing, zooming the video in on Red Hood's head. He relived the scene again as Jason tore off his mask.

Gasps filled their throats, followed by quiet remarks of disbelief.

Wally was not the only ghost to occupy that room.

Artemis covered her open jaw with her hand. Her wide eyes stared at the computer.

"Are you sure?" She asked, her watery eyes unsteady as she shifted her gaze to Nightwing.

"Robin confiscated his jacket." Nightwing answered with a nod. "I ran multiple DNA tests on hair I found on it. It matches what I have on record."

"Couldn't he just be a clone?" Conner asked. "Maybe it's The Light trying to mess with our heads."

"He knew our names." Barbara answered, her eyes fixated on the the image of Jason on the screen.

"He's called me by my name too." Artemis added after a beat. She elaborated when she noticed their collective gazes. "My mask fell off when I fought him. He called me by my name. He called me Arty."

"How?" M'gaan asked, exasperated, running a hand through her hair.
"Ra's al Guhl." Batman answered. "There's no other explanation I can think of."

Dick saw the same cool, statuesque expression on Bruce's face as everyone else did. But he knew better than anyone how hot the blood beneath his skin was boiling.

"Ra's al Guhl is over six centuries old." Batman explained. "He's able to stay alive for so long because of something called The Lazarus Pit. I suppose you can call it a 'fountain of youth'."

"I've heard of it." Zataana added. "It's a legend in the magical community. It's supposed to prolong life and rejuvenate the dying or aging flesh of anyone who submerges themselves in it." She shook her head in disbelief. "But...I had no idea it actually existed."

"It does. I've seen it." Bruce said. "After this encounter I dug up Jason's body to see for myself."

There was a moment of quiet between them. With cool disconnect, Bruce continued. "There was nothing there. His casket was empty. Ra's is the only person I know of who has the means of doing this. With no doubt the purpose of distracting or breaking me."

A shrill alarm rang throughout the room, jarring them from their tense states. They looked around at one another in questioning.

"What is that?" Nightwing asked before heading out the door into the common area. The others followed him.

"GL, what's going on?" Nightwing asked as he approached Hal Jordan.

Hal frantically tried to placate the flashing virtual monitor. "We have an alien ship headed our way, fast." He informed. He zoomed in on the screen. The outside security cameras caught a massive purple spaceship in in their feed.

"It's huge too. Looks like it's bringing reinforcements." Hal watched the feed as as two smaller ships surrounded the larger one. Green lasers shot from their barrels and onto the purple ship's sides.

"Oh," he added, realizing the ships' mid-space battle. "Maybe not."

A red banner came across the screen with the words "Emergency Transmission" on the screen. Hal pressed on it. A feminine voice played around them. The alien language was indistinguishable but the stress in her tone was clear. The transmission faded in and out with static.

"What is that?" Nightwing asked as he came up being Hal. The rest filled in around them.

"A distress beacon." Hal informed, noting the ships' impending closeness. "It doesn't look like they're after us. I think the ships are firing at each other?"

"Wally, do you recognize any of them?" Bruce asked as he turned to him. "Are these Apokolips aliens?"

"Yeah," Wally answered with a nodd then pointed towards the purple ship. "Except for that one."

Another warning chirped on the computer. Hal read it with wide eyes, "It's set to crash right on Earth!"

"Lantern, can you project where it might land?" Batman asked.

Hal clacked away on the virtual screen. "Computers predicting the Indian Ocean. It looks like they just might hit Madagascar."
"Let's take the ships and get out there." Batman shot towards them. "I don't know what kind of aliens are on those ships or what they're fighting over but we can't let civilians get caught in the crossfire."

With swift movements, Batman made his way to the Batship he stored in The Watch Tower's loading bay. Lucky for The Team the Bioship was there as well for maintenance. Wally and Artemis stayed behind, monitoring their movements on-screen with Hal. M'gaan, Superboy, Nightwing, Batgirl, Aqualad, and Zataana all rushed inside the ship.

As soon as her bay door closed, the Bioship shot away from The Watch Tower with a rapid jerk. A furious shaking overcame them as they jetted from The Tower and entered Earth's atmosphere.

The Apokolips vessels seemed to take no notice of The Bioship and The Batship as they charged towards Earth, their lasers continuing to rain down on the large purple ship. M'gann and Batman did what they could to avoid their crossfire.

The vibrant blue of the Indian Ocean erupted in their sights. Madagascar's green jungles came closer as they charged towards its mountains. A laser from one of the Apokolips ships collided with one the purple ship's engines. The explosion rang around them. Smoke bellowed from the massive ship as it swerved, crashing into the mountain's foothills.

A monstrous cloud of dirt and dust rose around the fallen ship and it's path. The Apokolips ships landed just out of it's range. The Bioship and Batship did the same.

Batman gave them orders to move out with caution. The exited their ships. With a cringing, ear shattering screech, the Apokolips soldiers burst from their ships. Five of them greeted Batman and The Team with savage snarls. Their wide, glowing red eyes pierced right through them. Their bat-like ears and wings stood stiff at attention. Armor rested thick on their cerulean skin. They held their signatured red and black weaponry.

Before either party could make the first move, a furious, chest-rumbling shout bellowed from behind the dust. They snapped their heads to the sound.

A vibrant green light charged from the dust cloud. One of the Apokolips soldiers screamed as the green bolt collided with it, sending it tumbling across the ground. Before the other soldiers could ready their weapons, something charged from the dust.

In a blur of purple and orange, something, someone, flew towards another soldier. It screamed as the purple and orange being grabbed it by its chest and carried it up into the air. The orange alien flew high with the solider in its grasp. It stopped, and with a few spins to gain momentum, the purple and orange alien tossed the soldier to the side. With a shout, green bolts shot from it's hands towards the soldier. It perished as the bolts triggered its self destructive armor, eviscerating it.

M'gaan held her arm over her eyes, shielding it from the explosion. As the light died, she brought it down. Air pulled from her lungs as she looked up as the floating orange and purple being. The light from the beaming sun behind it clouded its defining features but the pulsing glow of green energy around it's hands did not dampen the assurance of its power.

A strong, humanoid, feminine silhouette levitated before them. It's massive hair flew in the wind as it held its clenched, glowing fists to its side.

The soldiers took advantage of the orange alien's pause to fire their weapons. She cried out again, charging towards her attackers. Paying no mind to the few shots that collided with her armor.

She tackled one of the monsters to the ground. She grasped her hands around it's neck. It screeched
as her hands glistened again with a fiery green heat. With a massive burst of light and sudden silence, she incinerated the Apokolips alien's head off of his body.

She grabbed its lasered bayonet. She turned and charged towards another monster. With mighty leap and cry, she struck the laser blade through the base of its neck. It fell to the ground with a sickening gurgle.

The final monster, maybe just slightly smarter than its comrades, turned to sprint towards its ship.

The orange warrior flew towards him. She came up behind him. Her right hand reached in front of his chest and grabbed it's right shoulder. Her left hand clutched the creature's face. With a swift and sickening 'snap', the orange alien broke the creature's neck. It fell to the ground, lifeless.

The orange alien stood there, arms to her side. She panted, hands still glowing.

Nightwing looked at Batman with a nervous gaze. Bruce's eyes trailed the still bodies on the grass.

Nightwing turned his attention to the orange alien with purple armor. He swallowed hard as he took a step forward.

"Who are you?" He asked, dumbly and loudly. Unsure of how to overcome the dryness in his throat.

The alien flinched. She snapped around towards them. Her glow on her hands intensified as she took a defensive stance.

She shouted. Bold, unknown words shooting from her throat.

Batgirl took a step forward, holding her palms out in front of her in pacificity. She spoke with a cool slowness. "We don't understand what you're saying."

The alien's eyes went wide.

"X'hal!" she proclaimed. The green glow from her hands faded in an instant. She jolted a strong finger at Batgirl. Shouts of her course language jolted from her throat.

Batgirl jerked under fierce address. "What?" She held her arms out then looked down at her chest, realizing what the alien was pointing at.

The alien's frustrated shouts continued.

"The Bat Symbol?" Barbara lifted her gaze, confused. "What?"

The air rushed from Batgirl's lungs as she realized the alien had levitated towards her. Barbara hardly had a moment to breathe before the orange woman placed a hand on the back of her head and crashed her lips down onto her's.

The rest of The Team froze around them. They were ready to pounce at the alien's sudden rush towards Barbara. Now they found themselves jerked to a halt at the scene before them.

"Uhhh…." Superboy fumbled as his gaze vered to Nightwing, looking for direction on how to react.

"Hey..." Nightwing mumbled, unsure of what to say or what it was he was supposed to be feeling. "Stop?"

It was Barbara, wide eyed and bewildered who finally took any action. The alien held her in a tight, frigid, well..kiss. After a moment, when her bearings finally came to her, she snaked her hands
between their chests and shoved the alien woman off of her.

He alien heaved a few heavy breaths. Her shoulders slumped, as if the ferocity of the battle finally caught up to her. Wondrously, recognizable words fell from her lips.

"N-Name," She took a few breaths, as if we were piecing a puzzle in her head. "Name, Star..fire. Need help. Need…” She pointed at Batgirl again, however this time with far less intensity. "Justice League."

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*The Warehouse*
*March 14th, 2017
05:30 EDT*

Jaime stood on the roof of The Warehouse. His hands sat in his hoodie pocket as he gazed over the edge. A pink, inviting line on the horizon signaled the impending arrival of dawn.

"I thought you said he was dead." Jaime spoke aloud, alone. But a voice responded in his mind.

*I said that he would 'cease',* Scarab answered. *I did not say that he would die. Cease, from time.*

Jaime closed his eyes as he huffed, shaking his head. "Yeah well, maybe next time you decide to be cryptic, explain yourself a little more."

A familiar rush of wind tickled the back of his neck. Jaime turned to find that Bart has supersped onto the roof. Out of the sky, Cassie and Virgil flew to join them. Then the service door creaked as Garfield emerged behind it.

They walked towards the center of the roof, congregating in a circle. They flashed wary looks at one another.

"Does anyone know what this is about?" Cassie asked. She pulled out her phone, making sure she had read the text right. The latest message in her Inbox was sent as a group message from Tim:

*Warehouse roof. ASAP. Do NOT tell anyone else.*

Bart tapped his foot. A nervousness set in his eyes as he rubbed the chill from his arms. He looked left then right. "I feel like we're doing something wrong. Like we're sneaking around."

"That's because we are sneaking around."

They jumped as Tim emerged from the shadows. Even in the fading darkness, he still wore his heavy sunglasses. He continued as he joined their circle, "And we aren't telling any other Team or League members about this meeting."

"Why?" Cassie asked. "Why are we here?"

Tim tilted his head in thought, tiptoeing with caution around his words. "I'm worried."

Bart and Jaime flashed each other troubled looks.

Tim rubbed his hand over his mouth, he sighed. "We got hit with a massive emotional blow today. And Batman and the original Team got hit with another last week."

He told them everything about Jason Todd and his seemingly impossible resurrection.
"I have this feeling," Tim continued. "I know things are going to get more complicated and more intense." He ran a hand through his hair. "Batman is losing his mind over Jason and I know the Original Team will be too once Nightwing tells them today. And now with Wally…" He shook his head. "They are all going to be distracted. They are all going to be off their game, and miss things, and be not all there, and we need to be the ones to help them keep focus."

"Why us?" Virgil asked.

Tim looked away for a moment as he bit his lip. "It sounds cruel but, none of us really were that close to Jason and Wally if we even knew them at all."

Bart twinged under his words. A sudden anger rose in his blood but as his thoughts raced his temper cooled. And his anger redirected inward. Although Wally was his cousin, Tim was right. Wally was blood, he loved him, he would do anything for him, but he never did become close with Wally as the Original Team was in the short time the spent together. And he certainly did not know Jason at all.

"It's shocking, yeah, but we don't have that bond with them like the older members do."

"They're going to keep things from us," He warned. "Batman is already shutting me down when I ask questions. We need to look out for each other, to help each other find answers, to help keep focus." He began to move his hands as he spoke in frustration. "They're going to lose sight of the things we already need answers to, like the alien attacks, The Light building Apokolips armor, Lexcor's involvement with police forces, Joey, Emily. Heck, even Rose."

"Speaking of which, where is she?" Cassie asked with a venomous sneer, a normal look that crept on her face whenever that name turned up in conversation. "They just completely forgot about what happened today." Her jaw dropped slightly in disbelief, memories from earlier replaying in her head. "Robin's right, they were so distracted by Wally that they just let her go."

"Rose is in Emily's room," Garfield finally spoke. His voice was quiet, gaze on his feet. "She refused to let her sleep by herself." His eyes flashed up at him. "Not with what Wally after her today."

There was a tense quiet.

"We need to talk about that too," Jaime broke it. He put a hand on his chest. "I don't know about you guys but my heart's still racing from that." Emily's blue face had plagued his mind for hours and he doubted it would disappear anytime soon.

He continued, "Are they just going to dismiss that whole thing? I think this is the first time I've ever said this but, Rose's right. He attacked a little girl, unprovoked. He would have killed her."

He shrugged, crossing his arms. "And, you know, I think Robin's right, they're going to be blinded by their relationship with him and excuse it or let their guard down. What if he tries to do it again?"

Garfield's eyes had fallen to the gravel rooftop below them. That cold, seeping, sickness had yet to leave his belly. "I've never seen him like that."

"The way he looked at her when he had his hands around her throat." A snarl flickered on his lips as he brought his gaze back up. "They're just going to forget that he almost killed her."

Cassie rubbed the back of her neck. She tried to put her words as delicately as she could. "He said that Emily kills some of us, that she kills Artemis." Her voice was soft, understanding, and conservative. "People tend to...lash out at people who hurt someone they love."

A small growl grew and died in Garfield's throat. "Allegedly kill us. In the future. In his future." He snarled, his voice raising. "He had no right to do that to her now, to who she is right now."
Cassie was tired of babying his feelings. Her words were stern, "You mean to tell me if Queen Bee was standing right here in front of you, you'd be able to stop yourself from putting hands on her?"

She knew it was a low blow, the look on Beast Boy's face confirmed it. But in what other way could she make him understand?

Garfield looked at her with tense, hurt, angry eyes. His teeth clenched behind his lips.

She wasn't wrong. He would be a liar if he said he had not fantasized about the opportunity; had never imagined himself in a room alone with Queen Bee as she lay before him helpless and vulnerable. He would be lying if he said he was sure that he could stop himself from slashing his claws across her neck. He would be lying if he said, given the opportunity, he would never reap revenge on the woman who killed his mother.

Beast Boy snarled a lupine snarl. He turned and marched towards the service door. It creaked as he opened it. He stopped for a moment after it quieted. "I don't care what you say." He turned to look behind him. "That's not my Wally. And he shouldn't be yours either."

He slammed the door behind him.

_The Watch Tower_  
_March 14th, 2017_  
_04:45 EST_

"My name is Koriand'r"

Her bold and light words trailed across the room. She stood before them in the common area. A brilliant array of stars shown in the windows behind her. Curious, those stars always seemed the same no matter how many times they looked out those windows.

But behind her, behind this towering, beautiful, terrifying alien newcomer, the stars seemed to have a new meaning. They seemed now to carry a reminder of life, of sonder.

She stood before Artemis, Wally, Dick, M'gaan, Conner, Zataana, Kaldur, Barbra, Bruce, Hal, Black Canary, and Adam.

"In your tongue, it translates to...Starfire," she added.

Her solid green eyes held steady as she spoke. Her orange skin clashed lovingly with her intricate purple armor. In her stillness, they could see the strangeness of her hair. Not only made up of red, orange, and yellow hues; it also moved. Even with the absence of wind it still contained a slight flicker and wave, as if it were _alive._

"I am from a planet called Tamaran." Her eyes fell to the floor as a small sadness flicked across her expression. "Was from a planet called Tamaran." She looked up at them with a stiff gaze. "I come here with a warning."

Nervous eyes slid from one team member to another.

Batman's voice followed, "What kind of warning?"

"A warning that your planet is danger of conquer." She answered.
Apprehension filled the room.

"By who?" Batman asked.

Koriand'r answered with a snarl in her voice. "His name, is Darkseid." He noted how their attention perked as she said his name, how their gazes to one another spoke a silent conversation of remembrance.

"You've heard his drones shout his name, have you not?" She continued. "It is their suicide cry."

"Who is he?" Nightwing asked.

"He is a monster," She spat. "He is a King and a God on his planet. He is the ruler of Apokolips." She was greeted with silence but their twinges spoke volumes of their knowledge.

"You know of it?" Starfire asked. "Those monsters today, they are not the first?" She nodded. "They are part of his plan."

"What are they?" Nightwing asked.

"They are his soldiers," She explained. "They were slaves. Captives tortured and turned into monsters by Desaad, his scientist."

Batman's mind lingered on her previous words. "What do you mean by 'part of his plan'?"

Starfire bit her lip in thought. She hummed to herself, deducing on where to begin. "Let me begin with my story. Then you will understand."

"I can help you." M'gaan offered. "If you'll allow me, with my telepathic abilities I can connect our minds. We'll see everything you remember."

Kori nodded. With a wince, she felt M'gaan's psychic connection.

M'gaan's voice rang in their heads, 'Whenever you're ready Starfire.'

'My planet was once a peaceful place with strong people.' Kori began.

A memory of Tamaran filled their minds; a tropical planet with strange foliage and wildlife. The memory shifted to a tall building surrounded by Tamaranian guards.

'That was my home. The Castle.' Starfire explained. 'Tamaran has always been ruled by a royal family. I was the princess of Tamaran, and next in line to take the throne.'

Starfire gave them the story, the memory, of her family and of her younger sister Blackfire. As Princess of Tamaran, Starfire was next in line to receive the throne and always had an inkling that Blackfire resented her in some way for it. Blackfire would never had the throne unless Starfire died.

Starfire, being the skilled warrior that she is, is not easy to kill. In the event of her murder, Blackfire would be first suspect. So her sister took a different approach.

On her family's royal council, Blackfire was in charge of intergalactic peacekeeping. Starfire explained how two years ago her sister began to work with diplomats from earth.

'I assume you are not aware of this?' Kori asked.

Silence greeted her until finally Hal spoke up. 'If there were any planetary relations being built by
Earth, it would have been done by the Earth's Green Lanterns. But I don't think either me or John or Guy have heard of Tamaran.'

Their vision went dark and Starfire's memory transitioned.

'This diplomat's name,' she informed. 'Was Vandal Savage.'

An image of Vandal's towering form filled their heads. He gave a firm handshake to Blackfire.

'I knew by his looks he was not a kind being,' Kori continued. 'But I had faith in my sister. I should not have.'

Starfire continued to explain how things changed on Tamaran once Vandal arrived. Her planet was attacked by strange creatures. Creatures that they recognized from the attacks on Earth. Tamaran had found itself under siege by Apokolips monsters.

'Darkseid's first step in overtaking a planet is destroying trust between a planet's people and their leaders.' Kori explained. 'To make the people feel as though their leaders cannot protect them. He does this by sending in his suicide soldiers. They appear without warning and kill with their exploding armor.'

The images of the alien attacks on Tamaran eerily mirrored the ones on Earth. The aliens' self destructing armor laid waste to her people's towns and villages.

'There was nothing we could do,' sadness pulled at her words. 'We lost every time.'

'The second step, is that this broken trust creates an opportunity for a leader,' She continued. 'A new leader, under Vandal's control, to rise to power. This person was my sister. He promised her the throne in his new Tamaran.'

'How did you find all of this out?' Nightwing asked.

Starfire explain how Vandal arrived at Tamaran once more. But this time he brought a planet with him, The War World.

She elaborated that Blackfire used her partnership with Vandal to promise their people that she could protect them; by using the War World to destroy the Apokolips aliens. Her scheme worked, since Vandal and Darkseid were the ones controlling them. Blackfire used the War World to gain favor and trust of their people.

After a year, Blackfire created a plan to make Starfire disappear, to make it look like she had abandoned her people in time of hardship. She tried to tarnish Starfire's image and loyalty to their people.'

'But I did not abandon my people.' Starfire's voice beamed. 'She kidnapped me, sent me to the War World, and traded me as a slave for Darkside, for Vandal.' A darkness rose in her tone. 'And for Desaad.'

The images in their minds switched to scenes that twirled their stomachs.

Starfire showed them how, while on as a slave on The War World, she became Desaad's newest experiment. He tortured her for information on our military, injected her with drugs, and used her to test some sort of armor. It was a painful, mind controlling device that turned the wearer into what Desaad called a 'Warhound'.
A sourness curled in the pit of Nightwing's belly. The word 'Warhound' chimed his memory of the blueprints he and Conner found at the weapon's factory in Utah.

'But the will and strength of a Tamaranian is far too strong for their technology and drugs. They could never find the right combination.' Starfire boasted. 'They were not able to control me.'

Starfire explained how her sister is not as careful as she is traitorous. Her father sent spies to follow Blackfire who were able to find the truth and share it with their people. Though some of her people listened to Blackfire's lies and the lies of her outspoken followers, many of her people remained loyal. She, her father, and her mother, ruled firm but ruled fair. They loved their people, and their people knew it. The Tamaranian's loyalty showed once Blackfire was exposed as a traitor.

The Tamaranians revolted against Vandal. Soldiers were sent to rescue Starfire from The War World. In doing so they lost their lives. They sacrificed themselves for her.

The Tamaranian's put up one final battle. One final stand against Vandal. But Tamaran could not handle the power of the War World and its regenerating drones. It was destroyed.

The image of the surface of Tamaran succumbing to a missile-driven, fiery assault played in their minds before M'gaan pulled them out.

Quiet fell before them. Starfire's body was still as her eyes fell to the floor.

"While I was on the War World I heard everything," Starfire finally spoke. "I heard Vandal his partners giving Blackfire and her followers direction on how to manipulate public opinion. They spoke a lot of Earth, and showed them images broadcasts of your battles and meetings with your people."

She pointed to Batgirls chest. She continued, "That is where I saw that symbol. That is where I heard of 'The Justice League.' When my planet was destroyed knew I had to find you, to warn you. Darkseids monsters fought me on my journey here. I am so sorry for any damage I may have caused today."

A small smile flashed on her lips as she addressed Barbara. "My apologies to you as well." She chuckled to herself. "For our kiss earlier. It is how my people learn another language; through skin contact."

Batgirl's cheeks turned red under her mask. She crossed her arms as she avoided her eyes contact. "Yeah well next time just give a girl a little warning first."

"Oh my God, I'm so mad I missed that." Wally pouted, hardly above a whisper.

A comment to which Artemis responded by firmly elbowing him in the ribs.

"Why are you helping us?" Batman finally brought the focus back. "Why travel all this way and risk so much just to tell us this?"

Starfire clenched her fist. Her gaze fell with a sad pull of her eye.

"Darkseid took everything away from me, because me and my people would not bow before him," she answered. "I watched my entire planet die in front of me." She brought her gaze up, a glossiness coating her solid-green eyes. "I lost my entire family, my friends, everything I knew was gone in an instant. When I heard of his plans for Earth I-

She pushed back the tears in her eyes, standing tall. "I will not let that happen. I will not stand by
while he destroys another planet. Because any planet that Darkseid is willing to destroy, has good people." She gestured towards all of them. "Has beings with heart. I will not let what happen to Tamaran happen here. I will help you destroy Darkseid. For my people and for yours. There is only one thing I ask in return."

A sudden darkness crept into her voice and expression. "I want Darkseid's head. I want his blood on my hands."

"Starfire," Black Canary answered cautiously. "This is a lot of information for us to digest. We'll have to share this with the rest of The League and discuss."

The tension in Starfire's limbs faded, "I understand."

"Would you be able to share your story again once we've arranged a meeting with The League?" Black Canary asked.

Starfire nodded. Black Canary led to her to the infirmary to stitch her wounds and rest.

"I'll reach out the any Lanterns in Tamaran's sector,’ Hal informed them. "I'll see if they can back her story."

_Central City_
_March 14th_
_08:30 CST_

"It's good to have you, Artemis." Rudy, Wally's father said. He and his wife Mary sat on the couch in their living room. "You're like a daughter to us you know. Your visits always make us so happy."

Artemis bit her lip. Her right hand nervously fidgeted in the other palm as she stood in the doorway from the living room to the kitchen.

"What is it you needed us to sit down for?" Mary asked. "What do you have to tell us dear?"

"Um, just, wait here." Artemis advised as she walked to the front door.

Rudy and Mary looked at each other, puzzled. Artemis appeared in the doorway again.

"Rudy? Mary?" She said. "There's someone here to see you." She reached a hand out to someone unseen behind the dividing wall.

A shatter of ceramic filled the air as Rudy's coffee mug fell from his hand to the floor.

Mary had to reminder herself to breath. A trembling filled her limbs as she gazed at the ghost before her.

For in front of her stood her son. The only child she ever carried and they only child she ever lost.

"Hi Mom." Wally spoke with soft words. "Hi Dad."

Mary jumped from her seat. Her jaw trembled as she stood just inches from him. "Wally?" She pipped. "Wally is that really you?" Her voice cracked as she reached out to touch him. Tears fell down her face. "Is that my Wallace West? My little boy?"

A tiny smile pulled on his lips. "As real as the 'Everything' Breakfast you'd make on my Birthdays,"
he reassured.

Mary held him in a tight, sobbing embrace. And Rudy soon joined them. Artemis took a step back to give them space. To give them room to love, to hurt, to heal. To give them room to welcome back that part of their lives that was ripped away.

Time was lost to them in that house. After a sea of tears, and explanations and prayers of gratitude, Wally and Artemis left sometime after sundown. Although Mary's sobbing, forceful hug nearly held Wally there forever, Rudy finally placated his wife's worries. He assured her of Wally's visit the next day, and it was time for Artemis and Wally to trudge through their own reunion.

So Wally and Artemis took a Zeta Tube back to Palo Alto. They headed back to their second story flat like they had so many times before.

A chilling quiet filled the space between them as they walked up the steel stairs to Artemis's- to their - apartment.

A tightness filled Wally's chest at Artemis's sudden quiet. Her hand released his as she unlocked the door. He followed behind her. The only sound was the tiny click of the doorknob.

Artemis took a few strides into the apartment before she stopped. She turned towards him, lip trembling.

"Wally." Her voice cracked. A tick in the back of her mind told her this couldn't be real. He couldn't be here.

God dammit, she hoped it was all real.

"Wally,"

Wally's heart shattered at her broken expression. "It's ok babe." He moved to her, wrapping his arms around her and she wrapped hers around his neck. "I'm here," he cooed as she buried her face in the crook of his neck."I'm right here."

Artemis's light touch on his cheek turned his face towards her. She kissed him. By God did she kiss him. Her fingers clenched at the the hairs on the back of his neck in a familiar fashion that she thought she would never experience again.

Their kiss broke for a moment as she sobbed. Tears fell down her cheeks as the compounded feeling of loneliness in her heart clashed with rabid claws against her newly acclaimed feeling of relief and disbelief.

She kissed him harder, deeper. A rabid desperation that Wally was all too willing to crumble before. Their desperate hands slid from their cheeks, to waist, to chest, to hair. Hands grasping at a love they had lost and never wanted to let go.

"I need you." Artemis shuddered. Tears flooded down her face as her lip trembled. "I need you," she sobbed.

Wally brought his lips back down to her's. His own breathing wavered at the sound of her broken voice.

They were hands. They were heart. They were cold fingertips and body heat. They grasped for a body, for a soul so painfully torn from them. Not everyone has the chance to say goodbye but when, when, does anyone ever have the chance to say 'hello' again?
Their hearts soon fluttered in rhythm. And in a moment Artemis found her bare back against the cold floor.

They were hands. They were heart. They were rabid pulls of sweaters and jeans. They were desperation. Christ, were they desperation. To have the one who holds your heart to just be close, close, close. To love and to make love with someone whose future you had with was once dissipated.

They were hands. They were heart. They were damped skin. They were motions and grinds. They were pleasure and pain. They were hot breaths of loving reassurances in ears.

They were reality. They were confirmations of miracles that they didn't think they deserved.

They were happiness.

They were the promise of healing.

And they were finally whole.

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*The Watch Tower*

March 16th, 2017

19:00 EST

A clicking filled the common area as Tim clacked away on one of the virtual computers. The Zeta Tube's voice announced the arrival of his girlfriend.

**Recognized, Wondergirl, B21**

Tim groaned as she sped towards him and hugged him from behind, knocking the wind out of him.

"Someone's in a good mood today," he managed to breathe out

"Might have saved an old lady from a burning building, again." Cassie boasted. She released him and joined him at his side.

"Ah, run-of-the-mill superheroing has returned to D.C. I take it?"

"Yeah, no alien attacks in a while, but we know we can't catch a break for long."

"Tell me about it," Tim replied with a roll of his eyes.

"What are you doing?" Cassie asked, looking at the chemical analysis running on the screen. Another screen next to it played the news.

"When we fought Red Hood, I managed to grab his jacket. He had this in this pocket." Tim held up a small orange bottle with a white cap.

"A prescription?" Cassie asked.

"There's nothing on the bottle, I wanted to test the drugs inside to see what they were giving him."

"Wouldn't it be easier to do this in The Batcave?"

Tim's mouth curled into a grimace. Batman was already driving himself sick by working night and
day to find Jason. The last thing he needed was to know was what drugs The Light or Ra's could be giving him. So Tim deduced, that outer space was the furtherest away he could get away from Bruce and still work on the case.

"Bruce has been-hasn't really been himself since he found out." Tim advised. "I'm trying to avoid him being reminded of it."

The analysis finally finished. Tim gasped at the results on the screen.

"What?" Cassie asked. "What is it?"

"The only thing that's in these pills, are low doses of Spark," Tim answered.

"What? Why?"

"I, I don't know."

"If he took low doses over and over what would it do?"

"Make him addicted I guess. That much over time would give him a hell of a withdrawal if he ever tried to stop."

"Why would he do that to himself?"

A grating voice tiptoed in Tim's ear. He looked over at the broadcast paying on the other screen; a segment with Grace and Gordon Godfrey played.


Footsteps tapped on floor as Hal Jordan, Guy Gardner, and John Stewart walked with Starfire towards the Zeta Tubes.

"We can't thank you enough for all the information you've given us." Hal thanked graciously.

"As I said in our first meeting," She answered. "I will do everything I can to help you."

"I checked with some other Lanterns in your section of the galaxy." John mentioned. "I've informed The League and The Team that your story checks out about Tamaran." He placed a hand on his chest. His eyes filled with a genuine sorrow. "I am, so sorry for your loss."

"Why would you say that?" Starfire asked with a tilt of her head, confused by his words. "You are not the one who..."

Her breathing hitched. A voice filled her ear that she would never soon forget. Her eyes went wide as she snapped her head towards it.

Her eyes fell to the screen with Gordon and Grace's broadcast. She bellowed a raging, alien curse. Her hands lit with a green flame. With a shout, she tossed two bolts at the screen.

Tim and Cassie barely moved in time. The floor charred beneath the impact of the bolts.

"What the hell?!" Tim exclaimed.

Starfire screamed as she pointed to the screen, "MONSTERS! DEMONS! WITCHES!"

"It's just a projection Starfire, they're not real!" Tim advised, swiping his hand through the virtual
"They're just people."

"Those are not people!" She screeched. "These two are monsters. I have seen them, on The War World."

Her words caught their attention.

She continued to point at them as she desperately addressed The Lanterns, Cassie, and Robin. "They are shapeshifters, from Apokolips, that is not their true forms. On The War World they taught Blackfire's followers on how to manipulate public opinion, just like they do for Earth."

Tim's jaw fell. He looked at Cassie who greeted him with the same expression. Pieces of an infeasible puzzle clicked in their minds.

"They speak the loudest against The Justice League. Am I correct?" Starfire asked.

"Oh no." Cassie gasped. She placed her hand over her mouth for a moment as her eyes flashed to the image of Grace. Her voice reiterated on the success of her newly found 'schools'.

"Those new metahuman kids that have been showing up..." Cassie explained as she turned towards The Lanterns. "She's made these schools, using them as a place for kids with powers to be sent to." Her eyes finally met Tim's. "She's collecting them."

"I would find them, Earthlings. And save them." Starfire stared at Grace and Gordon with a daunting intensity. A slight glow still rested on her hands. "If your...metahumans, these young soldiers, are in the hands of those two..."

She turned to Cassie and Tim, her words holding a dark veracity.

"Then they are in the hands of Darkseid."
"Did you get everything?" Nightwing's voice filled the concrete room of the loading bay. Artemis, Wally, Conner, Kaldur and Joey stood around him.

Rose winced at the sharp pain in her head. Her vision came to to find M'gaan sitting in front of her.

"Yeah," M'gaan said with a quiet voice. Pity and shock dripped off her tone. She had no doubt the things she saw in Rose's mind would take some time to leave her. "No stone left unturned."

It took many meetings with the top members of The Team and The League to decide the fate of Rose and Joey. And to much to Cassie's distaste, they chose a path of empathy.

It was clear that Rose and Joey would not escape Deathstroke for long. Falling into his grasp again would either mean death or they would be turned against The Team. Since they all lived through Rose's brain-washed drugged memory, both scenarios certainly seemed to be likely.

The trade off, to Rose's disdain, was her and Joey's complete mental surrender to M'gaan. Without any fuss or resistance, The League required from each of them an extensive sit-down with M'gaan to verify and report every aspect of their lives and time with Cadmus. A history that M'gaan would report and make available for The League.

Joey's mind and memories were hard enough to sit through. She was not prepared for Rose's.

M'gaan felt the soft, sad pull of lips as she stared at Rose with sympathetic eyes. A look that she knew Rose would not tolerate, but a reaction she could not stop nonetheless.

A heavy feeling of guilt rested in her gut at the thoughts she had of Rose before. She regretted all the horrid names she wanted to call her. If she had been made to do what Rose had, been treated the way she had been treated; M'gaan knew she wouldn't have much kindness left in her either.

"Are we done yet?" Rose snipped as she glared at M'gaan.

M'gaan sat up and turned around. She walked away, holding herself. A small wobble shook her knees.

"You alright?" Conner asked, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Yeah," M'gaan lied. "I'm fine. Just tired."

"There's still one thing we haven't gone over yet." Nightwing stated, rubbing his chin. A curious look sat in his eyes. He shrugged. "Joey's power. We haven't seen it yet."

Joey shot a worried look over to Rose. The last people to take interest in his powers were not so kind to him.

Nightwing walked up to him and gently placed a hand on his shoulder. "We'd need to see it to figure out a training program for you." Joey looked at him with wide eyes as Nightwing continued.
"Figured you'd need it, if you earn yourself a spot on The Team. Would you mind showing us?"

A smile spread across Joey's lips. He nodded furiously. He backed away from Nightwing, signing, pulling on the chest of his shirt with his thumb and pointer finger.

"He needs a volunteer." Rose said, translating. She looked at their nervous faces. "It won't hurt, I promise."

Superboy stepped forward.

Rose shook her head. "Has to be human."

Conner looked over to M'gaan to verify. She nodded, she had already seen Joey's power when she read his mind.

Dick stepped forward instead. Joey signed to him, Rose translated.

"Just, stay still no matter what. Don't freak out. Okay?" She spoke on Joey's behalf. "I won't hurt you."

Dick nodded.

Joey gave him a small smile and backed up further.

A quiet sat between them as Joey closed his eyes. His breathing became slow and deep.

Joey opened his eyes. A sharp inhale filled their throats. Joey's eyes, a part from his green irises, became black.

A shiver climbed up Nightwing's spine. He found himself unable to breathe as he couldn't shake his gaze away from Joey's. He was ensnared; his body paralyzed. Like a cobra under the snare of a charmer, he was caught in his enigmatic trance.

Contact.

Joey sprinted towards Nightwing. In the span of seconds, Joey's body dissipated into a translucent purple haze. And the once-solid figure of Joseph Wilson, jumped inside of Dick Grayson.

Exclamations and swears fell from the rest of the members of the room, but Rose remained composed.

She took a step forward, holding an arm out to her side; trying to placate the other members' voices.

"Joey?" She asked. "You in there?"

'Dick' hunched over in discomfort. He groaned as he straightened himself out. He held up his hand, giving Rose the 'okay' sign. There was foreign expression of youth and brightness to his face.

"Yeah, I'm good. Gosh, it's been so long since I talked!" It became very clear by the change in his influx and tone, that the voice, was no longer Nightwing's. "So, this is what it's like to be tall?" He chimed, examining his limbs.

"Can you let Nightwing out?" Rose asked.

"Uh, yeah one sec-"
Dick winced. In a moment, his normal expression washed over his face. His tone, slightly panicked, returned. "What is going on? I can't- I'm not moving my arms!"

"Joey is," Rose answered. She addressed the rest of The Team. "Joey is a body jumper. He can, well, jump into it her people's bodies and take control of them. He can control their movement. And if he concentrates hard enough, he can control their speech too. Sometimes he's the body. Sometimes he's the mind and the body."

"Does this work on everyone?" Kaldur asked.

Nightwing groaned again. He winced as his expression change. "Oops sorry Nightwing." Joey spoke from within him. "It only works on people who aren't prepared, if someone trains themselves mentally for me, then I have a hard time taking them over. The person has to be conscious and can't have anything blocking their eyes. Not even glasses."

He looked over to Superboy. Guilt filled his eyes as they fell to the floor. "When my father first discovered my powers, their plan was to train me to one day take over Superman's body. They were disappointed to find out my powers only work on humans."

An intensity filled the air as their minds whirled at the notion of just how far The Light was working to destroy The League.

"You can get out now Joey," Kaldur advised.

The translucent purple outline of Joey fell from Dick's torso and onto the floor. His body morphed to his normal mass and color. Rose helped him to his feet.

Nightwing shivered as he rubbed his arms, "Man talk about the heebie-jeebies."

Kaldur smiled. He addressed Joey, "I'll get with M'gaan sometime this week to set up a training plan for you Joey. Maybe we can help you hone your powers." He pointed towards the computer monitors where Wally and Artemis stood. "For now, I want you to stay here with Artemis to help monitor the mission today. It'll give you a good behind-the-scenes look at what we do."

Wally was all too ready to voice his disdain as he whispered in Artemis's ear, "That kid creeps me out."

She elbowed him in the ribs. "Be Nice."

Kaldur began his pre-mission ordering. "Rose, get into uniform. And check on Emily to make sure she's ready too."

With much suppressed sass, Rose did what she was told.

Kaldur nodded towards Nightwing. Dick grabbed a small, black box from the table next to him.

"M'gaan," Dick said. "We need you to try this on before the mission today to make sure they work alright."

He opened the box. Inside sat a satin glove and two round containers. M'gaan put on the glove and opened one of the containers. Inside, nearly invisible, was a single contact lense.

"What is this?" She asked.

"The latest in Wayne industries technology," Dick explained. "Video contacts. The lense shouldn't
be any bigger than your iris and the wiring should blend in with your eye color. They contain the smallest, thinnest video recorder to date. They can be turned on remotely. Whatever you see today, Wally and Artemis will see on those monitors."

Her jaw fell agape, "My gods these must cost...millions."

"Uh, well, 1.2 billion total for two," He chuckled. "So handle yourself delicately."

Wally laughed, putting a hand on her shoulder. "So try not get hit in the face today, is what he's saying."

Footsteps came from the stairs as Ravager, Beast Boy, and Emily made their way down in uniform.

Kaldur turned towards Wally. "You don't have to be here today Wally. Artemis is more than capable of training Joey. You should still be resting."

Wally took a step closer, he nodded towards the staircase. "If she's here than I'm here."

Emily looked over at Wally with wary eyes, no doubt overhearing his hardly-hushed tone.

Wally leaned in closer to Kaldur, his voice lowering. "I'm going to be here for when she finally slips up."

Wally had not forgotten nor forgiven in the few weeks that he'd been back. He was not going to put Artemis's life at stake on The Team's word. Their promises of 'fixing her' were not enough. He knew they weren't going to be enough.

He spent many late nights going through the files recovered from the old Cadmus labs. He replayed Emily's case file of her parents and The Creature Commandos over and over again; hoping to find any sort of weakness.

A daughter of shapeshifters. A daughter of a psychic. A daughter of a man-beast. Emily was bred to be a killer. It escaped him just how much the rest of The Team couldn't see that.

From across the room, Rose stared Wally down with a daggered gaze. Always tense, always ready. Rose boisterously voiced her demand on joining Emily wherever she went, particularly if Wally was around. She soaked in his crazed look. His look gave way to just how much he wanted to watch Emily bleed.

Why couldn't they see just how much of a killer Wally could be?

And as Kaldur began his mission assignments, her eyes never strayed from him.

She wished wholeheartedly for a knife in her palm.

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*Gothen City Limits*

*April 1st 2017*

*21:00 EDT*

Emily sat in the back of the police cruiser, her hands cuffed behind her back. She wore a holy tank top and tattered shorts. Her eyes fell to the floor, sight lingering on her worn sneakers. Nerves pricked under her skin.
"It's going to be alright."

A voice came from the seat next to her. Emily turned to see a pudgy blonde girl in pigtails, not much taller than she. Although the girl certainly did not look or sound like M'gaard; she was. M'gaard hand shifted into a character from 'Hello Megan' to disguise herself.

"We'll have plenty of backup." M'gaard reassured. "We just have to get the information we need to take them down and then we'll leave."

Her words did little to soothe Emily's pounding heart. It was not the idea of someone hurting her that distressed her. It was the possibility of her harming someone else. Garfield had not told anyone about her nearly killing the ninja in the lab in Chicago. He had not confided in anyone about her growing aggression.

M'gaard's training over the past few weeks had honed her telekinetic abilities but did nothing to subside her expanding anger.

She couldn't quite understand what it was that made M'gaard insist she join the mission today. Perhaps it was M'gaard's fervent drive to have Emily redeem herself in some way; to have her make up for actions that she had not yet committed. Since Wally's allegations against her, M'gaard felt the need to make example of Emily's usefulness, her competence, and her humanity even. The weight of the future and the pressure of the present chipped away at Emily's already cracked self-control.

But Emily had a notion that the main reason she was on the mission today, was because of her training with M'gaard. Emily's telekinetic powers, in general, were far more than she ever dreamt she'd be capable of. And it became clear within a short timespan of training that, with their powers, M'gaard and Emily were two of the most powerful members on The Team.

And that terrified her.

The police cruiser came to a halt. Emily and M'gaard turned their heads. A dull brick building lie before them, just on the outskirts of the city. The road leading up to it required drivers to be let in through a metal gate. The brick arch surrounding it held a sign written in eloquent letters:

**Gotham Home for Metahuman Youths**

It took a couple weeks for The Team to get a mission greenlit from The League to investigate Grace Godfrey's halfway homes for young metahumans. They had to proceed with the utmost caution since the main source of information had come from Starfire: an alien stranger. And if anything went wrong they took a chance of tarnishing The League's image more if Godfrey found a way to put their failure on television.

In the driver's seat of the cruiser sat Dick Grayson. A thick pair of black sunglasses rested on his face. It took all the convincing Barbara had in her to get her father, Commissioner Gordon, to lend him a police uniform and cruiser for the day. He drove M'gaard and Emily up to the gate.

Dick eyed the guard at the gate. He was a thin man, tan, with a bad goatee and a wide smile. He wore a grey BDUs, a black polo and a traffic vest with 'GHMY Security' embroidered on the back. Dick's eyes fell to the man's utility belt. It carried a radio, flashlight, and mace. To the untrained eye, no one would notice the slight outline of a hidden handgun under the reflective vest.

"Hello there," the guard greeted boisterously. "How can I help you today?" He leaned in towards the driver's side window.

"Have orders from the Captain to drop these two off." Dick replied in a macho tone. "Metahumans,
street kids, don't have any family that we know of. We were informed that you're equipped to handle them?"

The man looked in the back seat of the squad car. He smiled and gave Dick a nodd. "Yes, we'll take good care of them. I'll open the gate just pull up to the front and someone'll greet ya."

Dick tipped his cap to him and quickly drove through the open gate.

M'gaan turned to look out the rear window. The gated brick archway stood cold and daunting. Black iron fencing spread from the archway and all around the perimeter of the property.

M'gaan turned towards the front to soak in the layout of the halfway home. The building was once an old mental health hospital for patients with wealthy families. Built in the late 1960s, it did not stay in business for long after the deinstitutionalization movement. Dick and Tim's research found that many of Grace Godfrey's halfway homes were repurposed hospitals, schools, and even an old mall. Slowly and quietly they gave life to buildings that no one noticed anymore. Slowly and quietly they housed their collection of metateens.

Gravel crunched under the tires of the car and Dick drove them closer.

Above the building, The Bioship quiety lowered itself onto the roof. Inside Superboy, Kaldur, Ravager, and Beast Boy looked through the windshield. With silent movements, Superboy and Beast Boy disbursed among the roof. Superboy waiting patiently, ordered to only move if absolutely needed.

Beast Boy grabbed his satchel of Tim's Remote Hackers and climbed through the roof vent. He was to navigate through the building, unnoticed, and placed them where he saw fit.

Kaldur and Rose stayed behind in The Bioship. They monitored the video playback on two tablets; one for M'gaan's video contact and one for Emily's.

Below, Nightwing pulled the cruiser up the front doors. He stopped the car and walked around to the passenger side.

Heels clicked down the stone front steps. A woman in blouse and pencil skirt made their way towards them with a clipboard in hand and a radio clipped on her hip. A guard stood next to her, his muscles struggled to stay behind his tight polo.

The woman smiled with bright red lips. She pushed up up glasses and asked Dick, "My now, what bright new minds do we have today?"

Dick opened the back door, letting them out. "Street freaks," he answered crudely. "Figured you could take them off my hands. Would save me a hellava lot of of paperwork." He handed her the remote for their Inhibitor Collars.

"Indeed officer, we will gladly take them in and ensure they're properly cared for." She assured glancing over to the girls. "Now, I don't see the reason for those cuffs anymore do you?" She smiled at them. "After all, it's not a crime to be born different."

Dick grumbled in agreement and uncuffed them. "I'll send someone from first shift to pick up the Collars."

"Thank you officer. We'll be happy to take anymore that come your way. Do give The Commissioner my regards." She waved him farewell as he hopped back into the cruiser and pulled away from the building.
'Good luck Team,' Dick said on the psychic link. He had to return the cruiser before the department noticed. 'Stay safe.'

The woman watched Dick drive away then turned towards M'gann and Emily. "Oh, where are my manners? Welcome to the Gotham Home for Meta Youths." She motioned towards the front door. "Let's get you both settled in and something to eat."

She lead them into the building, her heels clacking away on the laminate floor. The guard walked behind them.

The front doors slammed shut. There was a certain stiffness to the building as they walked through the lobby. Sounds of life tip-toed through the air but no people could be found yet.

She lead them into a dull office and barked orders at the guard to retrieve something elsewhere. The only things that occupied the room were a desk, two chairs, and filing cabinets. The woman reached into one of the cabinets, pulling out two black tank tops and black athletic shorts. The guard returned with two small, brown paper packages.

"Let's get you changed into uniform as I'm sure you'll be here a long time," The woman said with another smile. She handed them the black clothes and brown packages. They opened them to find a sandwich inside.

The woman left for a moment to give them time to change and eat, locking the door behind her. She returned later and took a seat at the desk. The girls took a seat on the chairs on the other side.

"Okay now." The woman began, writing on the clipboard. "Names and powers please."

M'gann acted quickly; supplying her with false names and powers that they could easily fake with their telekinesis.

"Super strength?" She repeated. "Well, I believe we have just the program for you." She stood and motioned for them to follow her out the door. "Come along, we'll give a quick tour first."

The woman lead them to the west wing of the building. This wing contained the 'dorms' in which the children slept and spent some of their leisure time. They saw handful of child through the open doors as they walked past but non paid them any mind nor even looked at them.

The woman turned them around and lead them to the other side of the building. "Let's move on," she said. "With super strength, you'll be sure to enjoy the east wing."

She lead them to a wall, sealed by a large sliding door. She tapped her badge against the electronic reader next to it. The light on it flashed green as it opened.

It opened to a laboratory. Two scientists scribbled on their notepads and twirled a green liquid in in a beaker. The sucked the liquid into syringes and placed them on a table, capping them.

On the other side of the lab sat a small training arena. It was enclosed from top to bottom with metal bars, reminding M'gaan of a birdcage.

Inside it, a girl with pixied red hair threw her crude kickboxing techniques at a row of punching bags.

"This is our sparring and training arena where you will be hone your powers through combat and challenging training." The woman advised, she pointed towards the girl in the cage. "Charlotte here
is helping us test the before and after affects of our serum. In this lab we are working on a syrum that will boost your abilities if needed."

One of the scientists walked over to the cage. He ordered the girl to place her arm through a certain slot in the cage. He shot the serum in a vein in the crook of her elbow.

The girl brought her arms into her chest. She screeched, panting. Her muscles flexed as she shot her gaze back up at them. Her pupils dilated into fine points.

She yelled, turning her attention back to the punching bags. It cascaded to the ground as she punched it; its chain snapping in half.

She roared and screamed as her body shook. She jumped at another bag, grabbing it by the top seam and ripping it open.

The scientists watched in awe and wrote in their notes as the girl continued her destructive rampage.

The woman tried to break M'gaan and Emily's engaged gazes as she ushered them to another door. "As you can see it still requires further testing."

Up in The Bioship, Rose's heart galloped in her chest. Her jaw fell agape as memories flooded through her mind.

'Mirikuru,' She stated on the psychic link. She turned her head from her tablet to Kaldur. 'That's Mirikuru.'

'Are you sure?' Kaldur asked.

Rose nodded firmly. 'I know that color and those side effects. They're testing Mirikuru on kids who already have super strength?'

Down below, the woman continued on with her tour. "Not only with our program will you learn to fight. But we will help you learn to survive."

She lead them to another sliding door on the other side of the room. She placed her badge on the reader. "Now over here is where you'll test out latest technology."

The next room contained another cage, this one resembling a large "glass" cube. Inside the cube stood another teenaged girl. On her head sat a black helmet. The top pulled into two ear-like tips. The front of the helmet covered her eyes with red lenses. The helmet expanded down her neck to shoulders, chest, back, and arms. It reminded M'gaan of Blue Beetle's armor.

Fire erupted from her hands, shooting a beam of flames at a metal target in the cage.

On the other side of the room, one scientist monitored the girl while the other sat fixated on a large screen. It contained a real-time diagram of the girl's stats on her movement and biology.

The woman motioned towards the cube. "Here you will be testing what we like to call our 'Warhound Armor'. The Warhound Armor helps give the user focus and allows our team of scientists to monitor your vitals to see what it is that makes your powers tick." A smiled pulled across her lips. "To help you learn to control them of course."

"Why all the focus on battle and training?" M'gaan asked. "Is that all we'll be doing is fighting?"

The woman sighed as she shook her head. She leaned down, placing a hand on M'gaan's shoulder.
"Unfortunately my dear, you will be fighting for the rest of your life. As metahumans the rest of the world will find it hard to accept you." She straightened herself. Empathetic look sat in her eye. "There will be people who will try to hurt you and it is our mission here to help you control your powers and learn to defend yourself without harming someone else...without intention."

A frustrated roar boomed from the cubed cage. The girl flew her flames in disarray, angered at her inability to melt the target. The girl growled, clawing at her helmet and tossing the armor to the floor.

M'gaan recognized her as Deborah Morgna. The volatile, flame-wielding girl that Arsenal nearly killed months before. They knew that GCPD took her away, it made sense that they'd eventually drop her off here.

Deborah's face creased with rage. Her hair tussled with sweat, "What the hell!? You promised I'd get stronger!"

"Deborah we told you this takes time," the woman scolded.

"I'm tired of this fucking place!" She screeched. "I'm done being your fucking lab rat-"

Deborah cut herself off as the woman pulled the remote to her Inhibitor Collar out of her pocket. "Now young lady, I'm sure you're tired of the shocks aren't you? I'm sure the rest of the children are as well." The woman turned to M'gaan and Emily. "All of the collars here are linked. Any time you force us to punish you, the rest of the children are punished as well. Unity. You will learn to be one here." She turned back to the girl. "Isn't that right Debbie dear?"

Deborah snarled. She roared as she snapped back towards the target, shooting her flames at it once more.

The woman motioned for one of the scientists to come closer. She leaned close to him, "Up her daily dosage. She's still too aggressive."

Emily's attention was pulled to the other wall. It held another sliding door. Emily felt a strange pull; a curious pulse of energy that beckoned her to the other side.

"What is that?" Emily asked her, staring at the door.

The woman paused for a moment before answering. "That is Lab 3: The Psychic laboratory. That is for children with telepathic and telekinetic powers." She tapped her pointer finger against her chin in thought. "I suppose we can take you in there, I promised a tour after all."

The woman lead them to the door, opening it with her badge.

In the middle of the room, on a wheeled stool, sat a girl. Her back faced them. Wires emerged from the electrodes taped to her head. They ran from her head to a box that sat on a table in front of her. A scientist monitors her actions.

On the table sat an array of toddler toys. Bright bulky pegs with matching holes, stacking rings, and shoes with undone laces. With only her mind, the girl slowly placed the toys in the correct holes and worked on knotting the shoes.

"She came to us a couple months ago," The woman informed. "We're mapping her brainwaves with each small task. Hopefully we'll help her better control her powers by understanding them first."

M'gaan walked around to get a better view of her face. "She looks drugged."
"Unfortunately for now she has to stay mildly sedated for her safety and the safety of the people around her," the woman said. "She was brought to us under extreme mental distress. Through therapy we can help calm her and eventually she'll be stable enough for us to allow full sobriety."

With a slight turn of her head, the girl brought her sluggish gaze to M'gaan.

Emily's stomach chilled.

"Gehenna?" The woman questioned. "Would you like to meet your new classmates?"

With a slow squeak of her chair, Gehenna turned all the way around. Her glossy eyes met Emily's. And Emily prayed to whatever god was listening that Gehenna didn't recognize her.

"You." A small voice fell from Gehenna's lips. Her eyes went wide. "You." A snarl crawled on her lips. "YOU."

"Gehenna, calm yourself." The woman chided.

An intense hum rang front the electrode reader. Gehenna shook as her muscles clenched, fighting back against the drugs. Finally she screamed, remembering. "You're the reason I'm in here!"

"Turn up her collar now!" The woman demanded to the scientist.

The electrode meter blew under Gehenna's telekinetic stress, knocking the scientist off his feet. Like a domino effect, every electronic in the room sparked and shorted; even her Inhibitor Collar.

"Monster!" Gehenna screeched, nearly in tears, remembering her time in Emily's head. "Monster!"

With Gehenna's growing unbridled powers, the light fixtures above them flickered and buzzed with a too much electrical current.

With a storm of sparks, the light fixture above Emily burst in a storm of glass. The blast knocked it off its hinges, sending it tumbling down towards her.

Emily screeched, placing her hands above her. With her mind, she stopped the fixture just in time and tossed it to the side.

The woman's jaw fell agape. It seems her two new pupils had more abilities that she knew of. And with Gehenna now free of her collar, she feared for the lives of everyone in the building. She ran to the left wall as she yelled into the radio. "I need backup in lab three! Code Red, send The Commander!"

'Shit,' Emily swore.

An alarm rang throughout the building. A voice over the intercom commanded all security personnel to Lab 3.

'Our cover is blown!' M'gaan boomed over the link. 'They're coming for us.'

'I'm sorry I'm -' Emily tried to apologize.

Her words were cut short as every muscle and every neuron in her body tensed with an agonizing sting.

She threw her head back, fingers clawed in pain. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw M'gaan and the woman in the same state. Gehenna locked them in her mental grasp.
'I'm in here because of you.' Gehenna's shrill voice rang in their minds. 'It's all your fault!' 

'Get out of my head!' Emily begged. 

'Now you're going to feel what I've felt all these months!' Gehenna's voice grew louder in all their minds. 

M'gaan and Emily screamed under her growing intensity. The building hummed as it trembled. Like a tidal wave, Gehenna's telekinetic pulse stormed through the building. Computers smoked and turned black. The bulbs on the ceiling lights burst. Dull emergency lights emerged as the main electrical breaker blew. 

'MOVE!' Kaldur boomed in their heads. 

Rose, Aqualad, and Superboy rappelled down the building, bursting through the windows of the lobby. 

Rose landed hard on her feet, shards of glass spraying around her. Superboy, Kaldur, landed about the room with her. Beast Boy fell in from one of the vent. Shouts and rubber bullets filled the air as the guards fired upon them. They stood no match against The Team's powers. 

They charged towards the east wing. But before they could get to the sliding door, they were knocked to their feet. An explosion behind the doors cascaded them through the air. The fire alarm screeched and filled the room with bright flashing lights. 

A fired roared behind the doorway of the first lab. Smoke billowed around the room, stinging their eyes. 

A silhouette glided from the flames and smoke. Unharmed by fire, Deborah emerged before them. A savage smile rested on her mouth and flames wrapped around her hands. With no Inhibitor Collar or electrified cage, her carnal desires were left unchecked. 

The fire in the lab behind her grew. Conner used his ex-ray vision to scan it. Faint, one heart beat still remained. He looked next to him, already sensing Kaldur's fatigue under the massive heat of the room. 

He looked at Kaldur. 'You and Beast Boy get the kids out of the west wing. There's still someone alive in the lab.' 

'But, Emily!' Beast Boy protested. 

'I got it,' Rose assured as she sprinted towards the smokey doorway. 'Conner, keep her distracted.' 

The flames grew in Deborah's palms as she growled at Rose's encroachment. Before she could fire, Rose tossed a flash grenade she held in her utility belt. 

With Deborah blinded, Rose slipped passed her and through the doorway. She hissed as she brought her arm up to her face. The thick smoke and intense heat stung her eyes. Sweat already poured from her brow as she called out, blindly searching for a survivor. 

She groaned as her hip hit the corner of a table. She swore, placing her hand on it. Rose shuddered at the feel of vials under her fingertips. She looked down, her pulse climbing. 

Underneath her hand lay five syringes of Mirikuru. Her eyes trailed the bright green liquid as her heart pounded in her chest. Desire crept beneath her skin, and she suddenly remembered what
feeling it was she had been missing for the longest time.

Power.

Without thought, Rose curled the syringes in her hand and placed them in her utility belt.

A coughing brought her attention back to the room. Rose jumped, snapping her head at the sound. She marched towards it, nearly running into the metal cage as it hid behind the smoke. She squinted. A body of a girl lay in the middle of the cage.

Rose shook the metal cage as she growled, unable to shake the door open. Her eye fell to her utility belt. With shaky hands she pulled one of the syringes out.

Her breath rattled in her chest. But was it from fear...or anticipation?

"Just half," she told herself. "That's all I need."

In Lab 3, smoke leaked from under the door and M'gaan and Emily wailed under Gehenna's psychic grasp.

Tears fell down Emily's cheeks.'Get out!' She pleaded.

But Gehenna remained ruthless and relentless.

Emily crumbled to the floor, Gehenna's mind crushing her. 'Get out!' she pleaded again.

Emily clenched her teeth. The pain coursing through her riled something carnal from deep in her throat. Her chest heaved, shoving air in and out of her lungs. Claws pulled from her nail beds and scraped the floor. Gehenna's unrelentless mental onslaught snapped her final shred of composure.

"GET. OUT!" She screamed.

M'gaan fell to the floor. The intense pressure suddenly lifted from her mind. She clenched her eyes and rubbed her forehead. An ache lingered inside her head. She coughed as the growing smoke danced on the floor.

A roar rumbled through the room. M'gaan lifted snapped her head up at the sound.

Gehenna lay on the floor, her eyes round with fear.

In front of her stood Emily. A growl rumbled in her chest. Fangs spiked from her clenched teeth. She stood, shoulders hunched, claws rested on her curled fingers. Her eyes, yellow and slit-pupiled, stared at Gehenna with a predatory gaze.

"Emily?" M'gaan asked, her breath shuddered.

Emily roar, paying no mind to M'gaan. Gehenna screamed as Emily pounced on her. Emily's sharp jaws clamped down on Gehenna's neckline; right wear the neck and shoulder meet. Gehenna's scream rattled M'gaan's chest. The more she tried to fight off Emily the more Emily clawed at her arms and chest. Blood cascaded down Gehenna's back as Emily tore her with each pulling bite.

"EMILY!" M'gaan screamed louder than she ever had before; a hoarseness already clasping her chords.

Emily released Gehenna, snapping her gaze up at M'gaan.
M'gaan's jaw fell open. Her eyes watered with fear as she saw no shred of humanity in the body of that little girl she'd grown to love.

A snarl fell from Emily's throat. Blood fell from her lips and fangs. She stared at M'gaan with a carnivorous glare and monstrous eyes. She let Gehenna fall to the floor and Emily stood over her on all fours.

M'gaan no longer saw a girl, but a monster. A monster, who looked at her like she wanted to eat her alive.

A crash burst through the air as the emergency exit in the corner of the room burst open.

Smoke and darkness shrouded the figure who charged through, but the red laser scope from his rifle was more than easy to identify.

Emily growled, getting back up on two legs.

Heavy boots thudded against the floor. Emily growled louder with each impending step.

Out of the shadows emerged a tall, muscular man. He sported a tanktop and camo BDUs. His hair buzzed close to his head.

The man stopped abruptly; his laser placed right in the middle of Emily's forehead. She snarled at him.

The man lowered his weapon, his face now fully uncovered.

His square jaw fell agape. "Emily?" He paused before continuing. "You're alive?"

Emily let in a sharp inhale. His voice pulling at the buried bit of humanity in her mind. The snarl vanished from her lips. She went quiet, looking over his features.

"Dad?" She asked in a small voice. Her eyes morphed back to their normal state.

"You're...alive." He repeated, a strange sort of excitement sat in his voice.

He looked down at Gehenna. Blood pooled around her.

"You're a shifter," he remarked. His gaze went back up to her. A serpentine smile caked his lips, "And you take after me."

Emily shuddered. She looked down at blood on her hands."No," she whispered. She trembled, backing away from Gehenna's still body. The reality of what she had done, finally seeped in. "No," her voice cracked.

Warren chuckled to himself, suddenly at ease. He put his rifle down to at his side. "Looks like you're not a disappointment after all."

Emily's breath ripped from her lungs. His words chimed over and over in her head. Her heart jumped, pounding against her chest.

He took a step towards her.

Disappointment.

"No," Emily snipped. Her hands trembled as his voice played over again.
"Get away from me." She demanded as she back away from his advance.

You are such a disappointment.

Emily growled, her eyes turning yellow. "Get away from mee!" She roared through bared fangs.

Blinded by the unbridled monster inside her, she pounced at her father. Her unsheathed claws slashed at his face and chest. Her fangs snapped at his neck.

He swore, struggling to get a good grasp on her. He finally got a grip on her and tossed her off of him. She slammed against the wall and fell, unmoving.

M'gaan called out to Emily. She grit her teeth in anger. Recovered, she reached her hand out towards Warren. He froze under M'gaan's telepathic grasp. After a small moment, his mind finally lost consciousness to her attack. She tossed him out the door he came in.

M'gaan pulled herself up off the ground. She coughed, the smoke now fully engulfing the room. She stumbled over to Emily: the normal Emily.

Emily slowly regained consciousness as well, a heavy cough plaguing her throat. M'gaan helped her up, raised Gehenna and the woman up in the air with her mind and lead the three of them outside.

'Is everyone alright?' She asked on the psychic link. 'I have Emily. We need to get out of here now.'

Out in the back yard she saw Rose carrying Charlotte; the red headed girl from the cage. Rose set her down with a rough disregard. She panted, shaking as she struggled to stand. She tried to muffle her cries as pain and adrenaline coursed through her.

Further down the yard, she saw Kaldur and Beast Boy run out with the other children.

Superboy burst through the back window with an unconscious Deborah in his arms. They all coughed and struggled to keep their eyes open as smoke and flames lapped up through the doors and broken windows. The building was losing the battle to the massive fire.

Amidst the commotion, Superboy heard sirens just down the road. 'Fire and police are on their way, we have to go before they see us.'

M'gaan called for The Bioship. It flew down from the roof. They stumbled inside and flew off.

The Warehouse

April 1st 2017

22:00 EDT

The Bioship entered The Warehouse though the underwater dock. It brought them inside. They exited with wobbly knees. Heat exhaustion and dehydration coursed through them. After an informative call from Artemis, Nightwing arrived moments prior to make sure they were alright. He handed them waters and inquired as to what happened.

M'gaan's heart still raced in her chest. Her and Emily tumbled out from the The Bioship. She guided Emily, half blinded by smoke, out into the room. Emily wheezed a strained breath as a struggled against the smoke in her lungs.
M'gaan coughed into the crook of her elbow, her eyes still stinging.

She blinked away the rest of the blurriness. She looked up with a gasp as her gaze fell across the room.

At the monitors Wally stood stiff, his hands clenched to fists at his sides. Her eyes fell behind him, the livestream of her contact still played on the monitor.

She shuddered with realization. Wally saw everything.

"Wally." A plea filled M'gaan's tone as she placed herself in front of Emily. "Wally..."

"Don't." Wally cut her off, jolting a finger at her. His limbs shook with a boiling rage. "Don't." He took a step forward.

"Wally...Wally you can't." She held out her hand with an open palm, trying to placate him. Her voice faltered. "Wally she didn't mean it."

"Didn't mean it?!" He bellowed. "M'gaan you saw! You saw with your own eyes!"

"Saw what?!" Nightwing beamed.

Wally's faced tinted pink as his anger elevated. He stared at M'gaan with a cold, stabbing glare. "You want me to play it, the recording?" He motioned around him as he shouted, "I'll show everyone what she did!"

Garfield hopped to Emily's side. He gaped at the red stains on her face and hands. "Are you hurt?"

"It's not her blood," Wally snarled.

"What. Happened?" Nightwing boomed, tired of being ignored.

Wally grit his teeth behind pressed lips. He turned to Artemis who still stood by the monitors.

"Play it," he demanded.

Artemis looked at him with watery eyes. Her sorrowful gaze fell from M'gaan then to Emily.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly and rewound the recording.

The room watched in utter quiet and jarred stiffness.

Artemis stopped the recording on an image of Gehenna, body still on the ground with a red halo of blood.

Wally's bloodshot gaze tore through M'gaan.

"We can talk about this." She tried to reason.

"I did talk about it!" He screamed, a vein rising in his neck. "I told you! And no one did anything!"

"I'm sorry-" Emily blubbered. Fat tears streamed down her cheeks. She couldn't believe the terror she wrought, the blood she spilled from that poor girl. She couldn't believe how ugly of a creature lived inside her.
"Not you're not," Wally snarled.

'What the hell is she?' Conner's voice screamed in Emily's head. She wheezed as her breathes grew in shallowness.

'Could Wally be right?' Nightwing shouted in her mind.

"No! He's not!" Emily shouted at Nightwing. Her face flushed with heat as her chest tightened.

Nightwing looked at her with a curious tilt of his head. "I didn't...say anything."

It felt as though the air in the room pressed against Emily's skin with an unbearable pressure. She wheezed.

"Wally, we'll deal with this later." M'gaan demanded.

'She's a fucking monster, she's going to kill everyone.' Wally's voice rang between Emily's ears.

"Don't call me that!" She spat at him, her eyes wide. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears.

"Emily who are you talking to?" M'gaan asked.

"Everyone!" She screeched. "Everyone is talking about me in their head!"

M'gaan furrowed her brows in confusion. "How...what?" She narrowed her eyes. "Emily I don't...I don't have a link established."

The room spun around her. Emily wheezed over and over, air failing to fill her lungs. Panic shook her limbs as their voices stampeded through her mind.

"Shut up!" She screamed, sobbing. "Everyone!"

Wally had seen enough.

"We won't deal with with later," he barked. "Because I'm doing to deal with this now."

Out of the corner of her eye, Emily saw him running towards her. Her breath caught in her throat as a shine of a switch blade flashed in his hand. With wide eyes and stinging lungs, she was finally able to let out one final scream.

The room faded to blackness.

A chill shivered up Wally's limbs. He groaned, his head throbbing. He struggled to open his eyes. His body lay stiff on a cold, uneven, sandy soil.

He pushed himself up to his hands and knees. His vision blinked into focus. The others lay around him, pushing themselves up as well. A panic struck through him as he called out Artemis's name.

"I'm here."

He turned towards her voice behind him. She was already standing. She reached out her hand to help him up, eyes still focused in front of her.

Wally used her has a crutch to pull himself up. He looked around him to find Artemis, Nightwing, Conner, M'gaan, Dick, Joey, and Rose. But Emily was nowhere to be found.
Another shiver shot through his limbs as he found himself curiously cold. Yet no fog fell from his breath. They were surrounded by sand and desert foliage. Jagged rocks peaked from the ground as rising cliffs and mountains sat behind them; color and hues lost to the cold clutches of night.

"Where are we?" Wally asked.

A shaking rose in M'gaan’s hands. Her jaw trembled at the fierce cold and the setting around her. Only in her nightmares did she ever think she’d see it again.

"We're inside Emily's mind," she answered.

M'gaan's memory slipped to the first time she entered Emily's mind. From their journey to Seguro, she knew now they stood inside of Franklin Mountain State Park. This was where Emily went on a trip with her classmates. This is where she went missing.

"Well, can you get us out?" Wally snipped, panicked.

M'gaan didn't need to be told twice. Her face twisted with effort as she tried to pry them out.

She gasped.

"What's wrong?" Kaldur asked.

"I-can't-" She stumbled, eyes wide. "I can't get us out."

Thunder rose somewhere in the blackened sky. Crimson lightning flashed and faded behind charcoal clouds. Another roar of thunder pounded through them, shaking the ground. The red lightning continued to flash above them.

"This is… different," M'gaan noted. The rocks seemed to crumble slowly the longer she stared. The cacti and shrubs wilted and painted the air with a moldy stench.

Everything was dying. Everything was decaying.

"What is that noise?" Garfield chirped as his head snapped to the side.

The others stood at attention, following his gaze. The sound of shifting sand and crunching plants edged closer to them. The ground shook in time with footsteps. Red eyes emerged before them.

M'gaan staggered backwards. It was the creature she hoped she'd never have to face again. The wolf emerged from the darkness once more. It stood tall as it looked down upon. Drool fell from his snarling jowls.

The rest of The Team tensed with fear. Gasps and exclamations fell from their throats.

The wolf ceased his snarl as his sight landed on M'gaan. "You. I remember you." It's multi-tonal voice struck around them even as his mouth clenched shut.

"What do you want?" M'gaan asked in a shaken voice.

"Truth." The wolf replied. He took a step forward, tiny clanks of metal chimed with his step. M'gaan noticed that the chains that once bound his ankles, were now severed.

"Now that my chains are broken, there is nothing holding it back." The wolf replied. He looked up and around as thunder roared in the sky. More crimson lightning tumbled above them.
"Things are changing in here," It continued. "Soon she will know the truth. She will see the truth." With a slow movement of his head it brought its gaze to M'gaan. "Would you like to see?" It's voice lowered. "You cannot stop it."

The setting around them erupted with the bright hues of daylight.

A memory unraveled before them.

The high pitch of laughter erupted in the air as they watched past Emily trudged through the sand and rocks. Another girl powered alongside her. After a moment, M'gaan recognized her as Marissa, her friend they met in Seguro.

A youthful smile spread across Emily's lips. It was an expression that they had not seen in a long time: a general state of happiness.

Emily stopped along the mountain side trail, pulling a camera out of her backpack.

"Come on, I'm getting hungry. Let's go!" Marissa whined.

"I'll meet you back at camp," Emily said. "I want to get a picture of the sunset."

"But we're not supposed to leave our hiking buddies!"

"I'll be fine, I promise. Save me some food."

Warily, Marissa went down along the rest of the trail without her.

Emily pulled her camera from her backpack, taking shots of the desert flowers down below. Dust crept closer in the skyline.

Emily sat down against one of the rocks, wiping the sweat from her brow. She closed her eyes, in waiting for the perfect moment for a photo, she fell asleep. Soon the entire mountainside was shrouded in darkness.

With a sudden gasp, Emily's eyes shot open. She scrambled to her feet, shaken by the sudden onslaught of night. She cursed under her breath, gathering her backpack.

The sound of footsteps emerged from behind a row of boulders. Emily gasped as she jumped to attention.

"Who's there?" She asked.

Footsteps crunched from behind the rocks as a man emerged from the darkness.

"Dad?" Emily asked, recognizing him. Confusion furrowed her brow. "I-I was only asleep for a few hours. They called you already?"

But her father, Warren Griffin a.k.a 'Wolfpack', paid no mind to her question.

His lip curled with a snarl. "You, wasted so much of my time."

"What?" Emily asked, a layer of fear in her voice.

He took another step towards her. "They had me spend years of my life on you. And you turned out to be a dud."
"What are you talking about?" She asked, afraid, taking a step backwards.

His eyes turned yellow. His voice was more growl than speech. "You are such a disappointment."

A roar erupted from her father's throat. His teeth pulled into fangs. Hair shot from every follicle on his being. His humanoid limbs were the only aspect that resembled 'man' in his now lupine form.

Emily eyes and jaw went wide with terror. She turned to run, but her short legs were no match for the beast as he chased after her. He reached out a clawed hand and slashed it down her back.

Emily's scream rattled in their chests. M'gaan called out to her and reached out to her hand. Conner pulled her back, reminding her that it was only a memory.

Emily crumpled with pain. She wailed as she fell to her hands and knees.

The wolf thrashed his heavy arm against her side, knocking her onto her back. Before Emily could put her hands up to protect herself, he slashed his claws from her shoulder and down through her chest. Her wails died in her throat as she struggled for air under shock.

Her father clutched his clawed hand over her face and shoved her head to the side, exposing her neck. His jaws clamped against her throat.

Another roar emerged from the darkness. Wolfpack was shoved off of Emily aa cheetah-like beast pounced upon him. Snarls and fangs and claws ripped at one another.

Screeching cackles emerged as two humanoid hyena-beasts joined the savage fight. Injured, Wolfpack ran off into the night. The three other beasts stood tense, growling as he faded from sight.

M'gaan recognized the beasts as part of The Pack; Sebastian, Summer, and Jivan in their animal forms.

"Oh my god." Another voice cried out. With quick steps, Jenny Ravenhair joined the scene. Tye Longshadow followed right behind her.

Jenny's jaw dropped. Her eyes watering at the sight of Emily. Blood poured around her from the wounds on her back, chest, and neck. Emily's hoarse, wheezing breath shrugged against shock and fear. Tears poured down her cheeks.

"It's alright. It's alright." Jenny cooed as she knelt down beside her, struggling to keep composure. She tore off her jacket and pressed it against the claw marks on Emily's chest.

She snapped her head towards Tye and barked, "Pull up the car, now!"

Tye did what he was told and Jenny brought her attention back to Emily.

Her breathing shuddered as she grabbed Emily's other hand. "It's going to be alright," She reassured. "You're going to be alright."

The memory died as their figures dissipated. Once more they were left with only themselves and the massive wolf.

"The native witch built a psychic wall in her mind around this memory." The wolf explained. "A wall that Gehenna destroyed, chains that she shattered."

Another massive roar of thunder shook through them.
"Now she will remember it all." The wolf said, unshaken. "Will she survive it?" He lowered his head, his voice deep. "Will you all survive it?" His jaw fell open. "You all won't survive in here!"

Impossibly, wolf's jaw pulled and stretched from ground to sky. Inside him stormed the bolts of crimson lightning. His jaws encased around them, swallowing them whole.

Then then they found themselves engulfed in darkness. The ground disappeared beneath them.

Wally groaned. He lay face down on the stiff, cold earth. He pulled himself to his feet once more, finding the others still with him.

"Alright this falling thing is gettin' old real quick." He complained, rubbing the back of his neck.

This time they found themselves in a forest. Darkness still shrouded them as thunder and red lightning stormed in the sky above. The stench of rotting plants caked the air.

"So, what now?" Wally asked as they stood there, dumbfounded.

The sound of broken twigs emerged from the distance. Crunching leaves beneath footsteps came closer and closer.

They stood in defensive stances, ready for whatever her mind could throw at them next.

In the dull lighting, Emily stood before them. Her hair was wild and unkempt. Her body was scarcely covered in a grey fur tunic, held together by a rope wrapped around her waist.

She stood still, looking at them through the crazed hair that fell into her face. Her eyes were yellow with slit pupils.

"Look what you've done." She said with amusement. "You made her remember. You set me free."

"Emily?" M'gaan asked, warily.

She smiled. Her lips pulled back to reveal a row of sharp fangs. "Not quite," she answered.

She charged at them with uncanny speed. She shoulder checked M'gaan knocking her to the ground and into Joey and Rose.

Claws shot from her nails. She growled as she jumped at Conner, her claws slashing his face. He clutched his face in pain. She grabbed him by his chest and hip. With unbelievable strength she tossed him against Wally, Kaldur, Dick, and Artemis. Even Wally had no time to run before bodies collided with his.

The only one left standing was Garfield. His eyes met the Emily imposter. She tilted her head in inquiry, sizing him up.

"You must be Garfield." She said, curiously. She took soft steps towards him. A sultry look sat in her eyes. "You must be Emily's...little...love...interest." She said with a sing song voice.

Garfield's heart raced in his chest. He stepped backwards, tripping over an unearthed root. He landed on his rump, his back against a tree trunk.

The girl looked down at him with gluttonous eyes. Diligently, her fingers worked at the rope around her waist. Her words were soft and heated. "How lucky you must feel to be liked by such a pretty girl."
She stood in front of him, and with soft movements, slid the tiny tunic to the ground.

Garfield shuddered. He swallowed the lump in his throat, unable to breath as Emily - something that looked like Emily - stood naked before him, only an arm's reach away.

His heart pounded in his chest. Ears unable to hear the warnings from his teammates as his heartbeat beat on his eardrums. He looked up at her with a raw blend of confusion, terror, and desire. He knew that this wasn't her, but dear god...he wished it was.

The Emily imposter straddled him, thighs on each side of his hip. Her yellow, half-lidded eyes looked at him with a heated wanting.

Garfield found himself unable to breathe at her warmth, at her closeness. He wanted to badly to touch her, but her animalistic eyes shot terror through his limbs.

She placed a hand on his cheek and grazed her lips across his, her hot breath filling his mouth.

She drug her lips to his ear and whispered. "We will tear you apart."

With her last word she pressed her fingers against his skull, they pressed deep inside his head. Just like when M'gaan phases through walls.

Garfield's eyes went wide. He screamed as an unbearable pain shot in his head. He clawed at her, trying to push her off. The Emily imposter cackled at his agony.

"Garfield!" M'gaan shrieked reaching out to him. Somehow her powers didn't work in Emily's mind.

The Emily imposter jumped off of Beast Boy, grabbing her tunic. She sprinted a few yards away to safety. She held out her hand, a black circular portal opened in the air in front of her.

A vicious smile curled onto her lips. "Everyone has a beast inside," she stated. She disappeared into the portal.

Garfield wailed and shrieked and screamed. He clutched his head, shaking, tossing himself from side to side as he struggled to stand.

"Gar what's wrong?" Nightwing asked, approaching him with caution.

He couldn't answer. He screamed, clutching at the base of his hair as the pain stabbed through his head and down his spine. The agony constricted his pupils to fine points.

They gathered around him, their voices lost to him as he crumbled to the ground on all fours.

He roared, the sound rumbling in their chests. His eyes filled white as his humanity fell to something bestial. His body morphed into an animal-into a creature; huge and daunting. He was deadly mix of gorilla, wolf, and lion. A feral combination of teeth, claws, muscle, and hunger.

He roared, swiping his claws at them.

"Garfield stop!" M'gaan tried to plead. "It's us."

But there was no more Garfield Logan. There was only beast. Only a savage, unbridled urge to kill.

Gar leaped towards her, drool hanging from his snout. Conner jumped to her defense. His fist collided with Beast Boy’s jaw, knocking him over. He scrambled to his feet, Conner met him head on. The others stood out of the way, useless and powerless.
Garfield bit down on Conner's shoulder, shaking him. He tossed him into the trees as if he weighed nothing.

He snarled, turning his attention back to others. He stepped towards them, limbs ready to pounce.

Footsteps emerged from the darkness at quick pace. Garfield jerked back with a snarl as a new body jumped in front of him.

She looked like Emily. Her hair was tied into a tight ponytail. Her body sported brown leather; like a warrior from an ancient time. A knife clasped firmly in her right hand. She reach out her free hand towards Garfield.

"Beast Boy. Come back." She said firmly. Her eyes began to glow a light blue. "Come back to us."

The growl in Beast Boy's throat died; entranced by the light in her eyes.

"Come back." She commanded, softly. She closed the space between them.

Beast Boy's eyes slowly bloomed back with color. He shrank, his body constricting into his normal form.

She placed a hand on his cheek and cut the psychic connection between them. Her eyes returned to normal.

Garfield's eyes watered; unable to remember what he had done but left with the sickening residue of carnage.

"You'll be alright," She assured.

She turned her attention towards the rest of The Team.

"Is everyone alright?" She asked.

"Yeah." Conner emerged from the trees, picking leaves from his hair. "But I'm going to take a wild guess and say that you're not Emily, are you?"

"No, but I am here to help you. I will help you find Emily." The girl answered. He looked over at the portal before bringing her gaze back to them. "You must find her, before she does."

"Who are you?" Artemis asked. "Who are. both of you?"

"She is known as The Savage. I am called The Sound." The girl answered in a calm, cold demeanor. "We are the two large parts of Emily's mind." She motioned between herself and the portal in the distance. "I am man, she is animal. I am reason, she is instinct. I am calm, she is violence."

Lightning scattered across the sky once more. A thunder roared and was followed by shrill sound that mimicked shattering glass.

"What is going on?" M'gaan asked, looking up.

"She's remembering," The Sound answered, eyes flashing up at the sky. "She is remembering her father and how he tried to kill her." Her cold eyes fell to Wally. "The moment you raised that blade at her, the final missing piece came back to her. She relived the feeling of terror. That feeling that she was going to die."

Wally stared at her with an icy intensity. He would not apologize for what he did. If anything, this
would only better prove her instability.

"When Black Bison rescued her, Jenny used her own psychic powers to build a mental barrier in her mind around that memory." The Sound explained. "Because it was the only way to keep The Savage part of Emily from unleashing."

M'gaan's mind wandered to the first time she entered Emily's mind. How Emily lay in a bed in Jenny's home. She remembered the Emily's demonic eyes and how Jenny subdued her with her own psychic powers.

"In doing so she imprisoned The Savage," The Sound continued. "That wolf - that monster you saw when you first entered, it was meant to keep prying psychic eyes away. But Gehenna unknowingly broke those chains and tore down those walls when she wandered into Emily's mind."

They jumped as another roar of thunder rumbled through them.

"You have to find the real Emily in here before The Savage does." The Sound warned.

"Why?" Garfield asked.

"Because all of you die." She answered in a stern tone. "If The Savage takes full control of Emily then her beast will be unleashed. She will gain her full shapeshifting ability and take her beast form. And while your psyches are trapped here in her mind, out there, she will disembowel all of you while you lay helpless."

There was a moment of quiet.

"Emily wouldn't do that, would she?" Conner asked.

"She might," Garfield answered in a quiet voice as he looked to the ground.

"You've seen it first hand. And so have you." The Sound remarked, pointing to Gar then M'gaan. "You've seen moments of The Savage come out, haven't you?"

M'gaan shivered as she remember their mission from earlier. The way Emily looked at her with bared, bloodied fangs sent a cold chill to the pit of her belly.

"Why? Why is she losing control like this?" M'gaan asked.

"Look at this place." The Sound motioned around them, her brows knit together. "This is self hate. This is guilt. And loneliness. And grief. And anger. This is what happens when psychics build walls and let emotions fester instead of letting them run their course. This is what happens when you keep The Beast caged and festering with pain instead of letting it out when it needs to scream." Her eyes flashed over to M'gaan. "Too many cooks in the kitchen. Too many psychics in one one psychic mind."

"Emily's psychic?" M'gaan asked.

"How else do you think you arrived heer?" The Sound answered.

A howl rose in the distance.

"What is that?" Rose asked, more annoyed than alarmed.

"Wolves." The Sound answered, clenching her knife tighter. "Think of them as psychic antibodies." Her attention jumped at the sound of paws running towards them. "You have to go. I'll hold them
off." She pointed towards the portal. "Go through that portal. There is one more after that if you can survive what's beyond the first one."

They stood, dumbfound and confused.

"Go! Quickly!" She snapped.

They did what they were told and headed towards the portal.

Garfield jumped at the feel of someone grabbing his arm. He turned to find The Sound's face just inches from his.

"You have to kill it." She whispered. "You have to kill The Guilt before it kills her. Before it kills the part of her you love."

She released him. Gar stumbled away from her as her words rang in his mind. M'gaan called for him to hurry.

He turned his head at the sound of a snarl. A pack of wolves jumped at The Sound's slashing blade. Their jaws snapped at her.

Garfield turned and jumped through the portal and found himself blinded once more by darkness.

They fell again. Their bodies collided with a cold, flat, black surface. They groaned as they pushed themselves to their feet. A bitter chill shot through them as as they rubbed their arms.

A solid, quiet, eerily matte blackness surrounded them. No visible end; only a daunting emptiness.

They only thing that shared their space in the blackness was a house. A still home with white vinyl. Its form: lit by an impossible, sourceless light.

Garfield's breathing shook with nerves as he eyed the home. His mind trailing him back to Seguro. It was Emily's childhood home.

"I guess we're supposed to go in it?" Artemis's echoless voice broke the silence.

They stood motionless for a moment, until Garfield made the first move. With shaking limbs he took a few steps on his feet and knuckles.

"Gar-" M'gaan chastised as she reached out for him.

Garfield looked over his shoulder at her. "We have to, it's the only way to find her."

M'gaan lead the way behind him. Her teeth clattered under the unbearable, cold, and horrid idea that she knew exactly what was behind those walls.

They reached the door. M'gaan placed a hand on Garfield's shoulder to usher him behind her. She reached her hand for the doorknob, her hand trembling with ferocity.

But the doorknob clicked before she could even touch it. It turned on its own. Bile rose in M'gaan's throat as the door opened with a blaring, sluggish creak.

A light flickered before them. And by a feat only possible in the psyche, the front walls pushed behind them.
No, there were no walls. In an instant there were no doors. In an instant…

A bathtub sat before them. It glew with soft, white, flickering light in the infinite darkness. The only sound was the tiny drips of droplets from the faucet. The water sat just below the rim.

Inside the tub, a still head leaned against the back of it. A round scalp of wet hair sat above the water; the face turned away from them.

"Emily?" A foreign, feminine voice emerged from the tub.

With a tiny splash, the face turned towards them. They jumped, startled.

"Jesus! Fuck!" Wally swore at the sudden movement.

The face of a woman lay against the rim of the tub. Long, soaked hair lay against her skin. Her glazed eyes stared at the floor with a eerie lifelessness.

Her eyes flicked up at them. "Emily?" She asked with a small movement of her mouth.

An arm emerged from under the water. She placed her hand at the rim of the tub. Another hand snaked up beside it. Shakily, the woman pushed herself onto her feet inside the tub. Her thin, soaked, red dress clutched tight around her body. Her long brown hair engulfed her face as she tucked her chin down.

Garfield's eyes fell to the water flowing over the rim. His heart raced once more as he noticed that the streams that fell down the side, were red.

The woman looked up at them, her hair falling away. Without obstruction, Beast Boy finally recognized her.

"That's her mother," Garfield told them. His jaw fell agape.

The woman looked back down, turning her palms outward. Crude, deep cuts slashed from her forearm, through her wrists, down to the bottom of her hand. Blood pumped ruthlessly from her wounds, down her palms, and dripped past her fingertips.

The woman looked up. Her brows furrowed with confustion and sadness. "Why did she do this to me?" She asked with a broken voice.

She began to cry, "It's all her fault."

Her face creased with a vicious snarl. She screamed, "It's all her FAAAAAAULT!"

The water shot up around her. Mimicking that of Kaldur's powers, tendrils of red, blood dense water hurled towards them.

"EMILYYYY!" The woman shrieked.

They shouted, trying to jump out of the way. But the tendrils were too fast. They snached each one of them by their legs, immobilizing them.

See sobbed, lifting them up into the air. "Why?" She cried. "I loved her."

The tendrils wrapped higher and higher around their bodies; crushing them like pythons.

"She killed me!" She shrieked. "She let me die!"
The Team's cries were silenced as the tendrils made their way to their throats, choking them.

"Murderer!" She screamed, tearing rushing down her face.

Garfield gasped for breath. The woman's words replayed in his mind. He was struck with the notion, with the reminder, that none of this was real. He was not actually choking. That woman was not actually Emily's mother.

A chill ran down his spine. They were in Emily's mind. Those words, they were not her mother's.

*Kill The Guilt.*

They were Emily's.

*Kill it before it kills the part of her you love.*

Garfield morphed himself into an elephant. The tendril around him burst under his sudden increase of mass. He morphed to his normal form, face creased with rage.

"STOP IT!" He bellowed at the top of his lungs. "Stop BLAMING HER!"

The woman snapped out of her own sorrow. Garfield's sudden words startled her.

"Quit blaming her for *your* choice!" Gar shouted.

The woman winced. The Team gasped as her tendrils lost their tight grip. They watched as Beast Boy confronted the woman with no shred of mercy.

Garfield jolted a finger at her. "Your blood is not in Emily's hands. Your blood is on your own!"

He growled, anger fueling the onslaught of water in his yes. "*You* dying is *not* Emily's fault."

"*Her* fault." The woman snapped back.

"*NO!*" Garfield shrieked, already a hoarseness in his voice. "*You chose* to kill yourself. *Not her!*"

A shrill scream erupted from the woman's throat. The tendrils dissipated and The Team fell to the ground.

She brought her hands to the side of her head, still screaming. Terror overcame her as a crack shot down her face. Cracks emerged all over her body. Like a windshield, cracking more and more with each pound of pressure.

She shattered into tiny pieces.

The tub fell to pieces and the bloodied water spilled around them. Shaking, the earth cracked beneath them. They fell.

"Seriously so done." Wally whined as Artemis helped him up off the ground. Wally gasped at the setting around them. Flashbacks of his time in the future rolled in his mind.

The sky dulled with a gray, polluted haze. Rubble and half-torn down buildings stood around them. It looked like a war zone.

"What is this place?" Rose asked, helping Joey up.
"This is Bludhaven." Wally answered.

"Is this...what she thinks the future will look like?" M'gaan said.

"It is what the future looks like." Wally answered. "Well, for the most part."

What he didn't recognize were all the billboards and fliers. The dirtied sheets of paper that only contained a photo of Emiy's face. Across them, in red capital letters, spelled the word 'Monster'.

Artemis screeched, looking over a pile of rubble. She clasped her hand over her mouth.

Wally ran over to her. "Artemis what-"

His words died in his throat. His eyes fell to where she had been looking and scanned over the horizon.

Bodies lay crushed, bloodied, dismembered, and decaying among the rubble. Faces of people he didn't know or maybe people he saw once. But the bodies he did recognize, were that of every member of The Team.

"Not real," Artemis tried to comfort herself. "Not real."

Garfield's ear perked at the sound of a scream in the distance. He recognized it. Without a second thought, he sprinted in its direction.

The rest of the members called out to him but he paid them no mind. He ran as fast as his feet and hands could carry him. Emily was there. Emily was so close. He had to find her. He had to get her out. He had to-

Garfield found himself in front of The Warehouse. Shattered windows and cracked walls laced its exterior. Another scream erupted from behind the door.

Garfield charged through. He followed the sound into the loading bay.

"Emily!" He called out as he burst through the door and jumped down the stairs.

Emily stood in the middle of the room. Her legs were shackled. Each of wrists were wrapped with a chain that anchored taught to the wall with no slack to give. A chain hung from the ceiling and wrapped around her neck.

The Savage stood next to her. She grabbed a handful of Emily's hair with her right hand, forcing her to look forward.

"Gar!" Emily cried back. "Get out of here!"

"Let her go!" Beast Boy commanded.

"It's too late." The Savage spat back with a smile. "You may have killed The Guilt but I will released The Beast."

"Wake up!" Emily began to cry. "You guys have to wake up!"

"SHUT UP!" The Savage snarled. Just like she did with Garfield. She shoved her fingers through her skull.

"Get out!" Emily screamed. "You have to GET OOUUT!"
And darkness fell once more.

Garfield groaned at the stinging pain in his skull. The cold concrete scraped against his skin.

"Oh my God."

Artemis's voice rang in his ear. Garfield opened his eyes. Breathless, it took him a moment to realize that they were no longer in Emily's mind. The scene in front of him was real.

Wally lay on the concrete floor. His body shook with terror.

A massive, auburn, humanoid wolf stood over him. Its clawed hand placed a stiff grip around his neck. Drool dripped onto his face as it snarled at him with a savage, fanged snout. Yellow slit-pupiled eyes stared into his. Its growl shook the room.

The corners of Wally's vision faded white as he struggled for air.

"EMILY!" Garfield's voice boomed across the room. The wolf snapped her head in his direction. Her red eyes glared him down with a furious fire. Drool slithered down from her snarling jaws.

The room seemed to freeze around him. His face softened as he held out his hand in front of him. "Emily, listen to me," he said in a stern but warm voice. "I know you're still in there." He took a daring step forward.

The wolf snapped her jaws at his advance. Her clawed hand gripped tighter around Wally's neck in warning as her hair stood up further on her neck.

Garfield licked his lips, searching for just the right words. "Myrna made her own choice. She chose to take her own life Em."

The intensity of the wolf's eyes faltered. He knew that behind that savage fur, Emily Briggs still existed. He just had to find a way to bring her back.

Garfield knew that he could do so, by telling her what she needed to hear.

"You didn't have anything to do with it. There wasn't anything you could do." He said, his voice wavy and eyes glossy. "She made that choice on her own."

Garfield let out a small shake of his head. His jaw fell agape, mind racing to just moments before they were pulled out of Emily's mind. After so many months of pain. After so many moments of her shutting herself away, after so many nights of crying herself to sleep, Garfield finally understood what demon it was that clawed its way in and festered inside her.

"Your mom's death wasn't your fault."

Guilt.

The wolf froze. An abrupt halt held its growl. Its snarl loosened. She released her hand from Wally's neck. He scrambled out from under her, taking a place next to Artemis. He rubbed the wounds on his neck.

A tremble overcame Garfield's lip. He sniffed his nose and swallowed hard. Before he knew it, a warm flow of tears fell down his cheeks. His chest twisted with a deep ache, that anyone, anyone, else would feel the same way as he. And he would be a hypocrite to not accept his advice for himself.
The words that fell from from his lips were boyish, grumbled, and broken. "Just like, my mom's wasn't my fault either."

M'gaan felt a sob rise in her chest. She covered her mouth with her hand as he eyes watered. She shared her gaze between Garfield and the wolf. What good was she as a telepath, if she couldn't even read what had plagued his heart for so long?

"It's not your fault." Beast Boy reiterated once more. His voice cracked as his lip trembled.

The wolf remained frozen, the snarl no longer on its snout.

Emily's small voice rang in their heads, 'Not...my fault. '

Garfield gasped. He swallowed hard, a tingle rising in the pit of his stomach.

He did it. He found her.

He brought her back.

"It's not your fault." He repeated, taking small steps towards her, his arms open.

The wolf began to lose its form. The fur retreated back into its follicles. The limbs and body inched their way to the tiny form they had taken for so long.

As soon as the snout regained resemblance of lips, Emily's tattered voice fell from her throat. "Not, my fault."

"It's not your fault." Beast Boy calmly made his way to her.

And the wolf became a girl. Her body shook and legs buckled. She knelt on her knees as she fell prey to fatigue. Her cold, vulnerable, naked body, surrounded by her shattered clothes. Her hand trembled ferociously as she brought it to her face.

She looked up at Garfield with wide eyes through her wild hair. Tears fell down her cheeks. That crushing weight lifted from her chest as someone finally broke what had been breaking her.

"Not...my. Fault-" She sobbed. Eyes clenched tight as she wailed without shame or guilt.

Garfield knelt in front of her. He pulled her into his chest with a firm embrace. His tears dripped in her hair as he nuzzled his face against her head.

A harsh wind zipped around them. With quick motions, Wally exited the room and arrived with a sheet in hand.

With another zip about the room, Wally stood behind Emily and Gar, holding the sheet out in front of him. Quietly, softly, he knelt down next to them.

Garfield gasped at Wally's scent as his eyes shot open.

But Wally paid no mind to his reaction. He draped the sheet around Emily's body, doing what he could to cover every part of her that she no longer needed to bare.

Garfield looked at him with wary, watery eyes. His arms released Emily only for a moment so Wally could wrap the sheet all the way around her.

Emily placed her head against Garfield's chest and turned her face towards Wally.
She saw something on his face she'd never seen before. There was no anger, no irritation, no hatred. Only a small, sad pull of his lips.

Wally reached out with a gentle hand to brush the hair from her face.

He had known for a long time that something dark turned Emily away from the path of righteousness. He knew that something dark would turn her into the cold, ruthless killer he knew in the future.

He thought he knew what it was. He thought it was her bad blood. He thought is was her power's instability. He thought it was the poisonous influence from Cadmus and The Light.

What he didn't know, what he couldn't see before; was the little girl before the monster. What he couldn't see before was her inability to have a choice in her genes. What he didn't know was of the ruthless betrayal of a father she thought would protect her.

What he didn't know, what he couldn't see; was how toxic the guilt of a mother's suicide could be to a young girl.

Maybe that all she need to not become a monster: was to be told that she wasn't one.

"It's gonna be alright," he assured with a small voice. "We're gonna get you the help you need."

He placed his palm on her cheek and gave her a small nod. He looked at her with a foreign expression of understanding that Emily never thought she'd received from him. "We're gonna help you get better."

Exhaustion finally overcame her. And her eyes lost to the heavy battle of sleep. But in the moments before she succumbed to slumber, Emily felt the tender hole in her chest; the hole where every last bit of guilt was torn out.

And now, that part of herself, could finally heal.

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**Himalaya Mountains - Nepal**

**April 2nd, 2017**

**13:00 NPT**

Vandal Savage sat patiently in the helicopter as it arrived towards one of the hidden loading bays in the mountains. Carved inside the mountain, with an intricate layout, was The Light's home base.

A false door opened and the helicopter cautiously landed inside.

Deathstroke greeted him as he walked out. He lead him down the corridor and into a brightly lit room.

Scientists worked tirelessly as the clacked away at their computers. Some stood at tables with either blowtorches or blueprints in hand. They worked on piecing together and repairing Apokolips weapons.

Against the wall sat a computer with a massive screen and intricate keyboard. A table sat next to it. On it sat large black helmet. Wires snaked from its interior to the computer's mainframe.

Professor Ivo sat on a stool in front of the computer. He made notes, watching over videos of
Arsenal's recent fights. He turned around at Vandal's entrance, greeting him.

But Vandal was not interested in pleasantries. "Give me an update on the trials with Arsenal." He asked.

"Trails have been successful." Ivo answered with a smug smile. "We've found the right dose of Spark to leave him docile enough for the Warhound armor to take control without impeding physical movement."

"And the mainframe?" Vandal asked as he turned towards the computer.

"Ready to connect with the Warhound Armor."

Vandal's eyes fell to the helmet. A scientist held a tiny tool in his hand, soldering the edges of the helmet.

"Darkseid's Master Helmet?" Vandal asked.

Ivo nodded, "In final phases of testing."

"Excellent," Vandal responded with a smile.

An alarm rang in the room. The hair on the back of Vandal's neck stood on edge as a charge filled the air. A white ball of energy twirled in the ceiling, zapping tiny bolts of lightning to the floor. Guards filled the room and pointed their rifles in the air.

A robotic voice blasted from the intercom in warning:


A massive blinding light burst from the ceiling. Vandal raised his arm to shield his eyes.

An array of tiny bolts of lightning zipped to the floor. The bright ball of swirling electricity hovered in the air for another moment before crashing to the ground.

Dust and smoke sizzled off the landing site.

Deathstroke ordered the guards to ready their weapons as they surrounded whatever it was that invaded their stronghold.

In the fading smoke, they could see what it was that apparated and crashed before them.

It was some sort of metal pod. Steam shot from the vents in its sides as it's gears clicked and whirred with exhaustion.

The door to the pod fell open.

The guards jumped at the sudden movement, their rifles shook in their hands.

"Hold steady!" Deathstroke commanded.

Behind the fading smoke, a green hand grasped the frame of the doorway. A flash of blond hair appeared behind the gray mist.

An adolescent, arinodal, cocky voice chirped from the pod. "If don't want your guards to die, Savage, then call them off."
Vandal's upper lip twitched in irritation. "And just who are you?"

"My name..." A smile rose in the stranger's voice. "Is Thaddeus Thawne."

The smoke and steam finally cleared. In the doorway of the pod stood a teenage boy. A thin green uniform clung tight against his lean body. Orange goggles sat over his eyes and ragged blond hair rested on his head.

"But I guess you you can call me...Inertia." He added with a sly grin, listening to the intercom warning.

Inertia took a step forward. "And I have a message for you, by you, from the future."

"Oh?" Vandal asked, intrigued. He couldn't shake this boy's uncanny resemblance to a certain rookie speedster. "And what is this message I have for myself?"

"It's about Darkseid's timeline for Earth." Inertia beamed. "You wanted to me tell you..."

A wicked smile pulled on his lips.

"Speed it up."
Himalaya Mountains - Nepal
April 4th 2017
09:00 NPT

A harsh glow danced around the room. Inertia sat on a chair. His eyes flickered between the four television sets in front of him. His eyes raced from screen to screen, ears capturing each unique set of dialogue.

He had sat there for ten hours.

Vandal Savage watched him through the two-way window to the left of the chair.

Upon Inertia's arrival, Vandal organized a meeting with the rest of The Light. Until then, Inertia only had two requests. One being food. And the other; video broadcasts of current culture, fictional media, and news to grow accustomed to the time.

Vandal watched his stillness, save for his ever-racing eyes. He had no doubt that Inertia really was consuming every bit of information; consuming it at superhuman speed.

Inertia found the broadcasts boring. He grew irritated, it seemed half the technology of his time, had yet to be invented.

He found children's cartoons to be the most entertaining. Not for himself, no, but the fact that simple shapes and bright colors were all that were needed to stimulate a tiny mind.

"Run, run, run, as fast as you can,"

His eyes finally stopped on the screen to his left.

"You can't catch me,"

A person-shaped cookie, sprinted down an animated road, escaping his captors.

"I'm the gingerbread man!"

"We're ready for you," Vandal's voice popped in on the room's intercom.

Inertia stood from the chair and made his way out of the room.

Vandal, along with Deathstroke, lead him down a corridor and into another dark room. The door closed behind them.

Six screens lit up in front of them. The faces of Queen Bee, The Brain, Lex Luthor, Ra's al Ghul, Klarion, and La Dama appeared on them.

"So," Queen Bee began. "This is the young time traveler."

"And a speedster as well," Ra's added.

"Vandal informs us that you've come to help us with our plan for Earth and the Justice League,"
Luthor said. "And what is it exactly that you think you know about us?"

"You're working to discredit The Justice League so you can get them shut down." Inertia answered. "You created Spark to find and control metahuman kids for your army." He smirked. "Your... Warhounds."

"So, he knows of ze plan?" The Brain commented in his thick French accent. "That does not mean he can be trusted. Or that he really is from the future."

Inertia waved him off with a flick of his wrist. "If you want me to spill each of your secrets to one another, I can." A cocky smile pulled on his lips. "Let's just say I always aced History."

Luthor rubbed his chin in thought. "How can we trust this child is from the future?"

"Fine." Inertia chimed. "If I wasn't from the future, then how would I know that you, Lex Luthor, without knowledge of the rest of The Light, used some of your own DNA to create Superboy. Hoping that one day you would have full control over him, with The Light having no knowledge, no say, and no power at all."

A quiet intensity filled the room. Luthor's eyes shot daggers at him.

"Or," Inertia continued, wagging his finger in the air. "How about how the cold, vicious, heartless Queen Bee you know," he mocked. "Actually fell in love with Marie Logan before she killed her?"

She gasped and stumbled over her words, trying to deny his accusations.

"Or Brain," Inertia turned towards him with a wicked grin. "How else would I know that your Misuer Malla," He mocked in a false French tone. "Is much more than just a 'friend.'" He held his arms up,cocking his head to the side as he smiled. "Can it be considered beasiality if you don't actually have a body?"

Ravenous cackles fell from Klarion's throat.

The Brain screamed. "Why you intolerable little INSECT! I will SLICE THAT SMILE OFF YOUR FACE!"

His words were nearly lost over Klarion's laughter.

"Silence!" Vandal roared. The room went quiet. "You have our attention Inertia," he continued. "What is it that you want?"

"Not just what I want." He answered with a shake of his head. "What you all want." He gave his attention back to the screens.

"You're taking too long," He sneered. "Two people have already come back in time to this era to change the future. The Reach was supposed to take over. Blue Beetle was never supposed to escape your control."

His upper lip twitched with a snarl. His voice rose into his sinuses. "But all of your dragging ass keeps changing the future. We're losing allies. We're losing battles. You're jeopardizing our victory."

"It's not as simple as 'dragging ass' as you call it." Luthor interjected. "A plan of this complexity, has taken years to execute. One slip up can topple everything we've built. We have to be cautious, observant."
"What you're being is pussies." Inertia barked.

They twinged and hollered at his disrespect and vulgarity.

But Inertia stood firm. "You need to break them." He hissed through his teeth. "It's time to take The Justice League and The Team and turn them against one another." His hands curled into fists. "It's time to shatter them and take away everything from them. To hit them hard, now. If you keep going at this pace you're going to cost us the world domination we worked so hard to build."

He put a hand to his chest. "I can help you. I can fix this."

He was greeted with silence.

Inertia held out his hand, holding up three fingers. "Just give me three moves." He said. "Three moves. That's all I need to bring them down and fix your future. Our future."

The members of The Light looked to one another in thought.

"What is it you'll need from us?" Luthor finally spoke up.

"Some disposable pawns, some cash," Inertia told. He flashed his gaze over to Ra's. "Oh, and that dead bird you brought back to life." He shrugged. "That's all I'll need to help you." His eyes tensed. "I only have one stipulation though."

"And what is that?" Vandal asked.

Inertia turned towards him. "The speedsters," he answered in a low voice. "Every one of them," He grit his teeth. "They're mine."

With a slow pull of his lips, Vandal answered him with a smile.

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Central City

April 5th 2017

12:30 CST

Sunlight filled the nursery with a warm, sleepy glow. Don and Dawn Allen lay in their cribs, eyelids drooping under the warm lull of sunlight.

Bart sat with his arm on the edge of the Don's crib, his chin resting on his forearm. His other arm dangled in Dawn's, her grip slowly loosening on his finger. He sang to them in a soft voice; a string of blended, uncertain nursery rhymes.

He looked down at his father; a tiny, cubby token of the man he once knew. Bart found it wondrous that someone so small could flourish into someone so impactful and complex; that this tiny being would one day create a child of his own.

A sinking feeling rose in Bart's stomach. He tried to push his thoughts away. Usually that room was the only place that could settle his troubled mind. In that room, with two people so tiny, his troubles didn't seem so big. In that room everything, for a moment, felt small.

As of late, his demons slithered behind him wherever he went. As his father's eyes closed and surrendered to sleep, Bart wondered about his future. He had saved Blue Beetle from the clutches of
The Reach. He had saved Jaime from becoming the torturous monster he had always known.

But if there was one thing he'd learn in his short, troublesome life, it was that no good deed ever went unpunished. Every action has consequences despite good intention. And as he looked at the tiny rise and fall of Don's chest, he wondered what impact his presence had on his future.

Millions of people in and around San Diego lost their lives because of Bart's ineptness, his slowness, his presence. The Sink of San Diego; an event he never once heard of or studied.

What if by changing Blue's fate, he destroyed the fate of so many others?

What if all the good he does, gets his father killed too?

....

Why is everything always his fault?

Why does he always fuck everything up?

Barry Allen stood at the entrance of the doorway to the twin's nursery. He crossed his arms, leaning against the doorframe in thought. Bart's delicate songs barely made it to his ears. A heavy feeling pressed in his chest.

A sound of a clearing throat came from the bottom of the stairs. Barry turned to find Iris standing there on first floor. With quiet movements he made his way down to her.

"How's he doing?" Iris asked, her eyes flicking up the stairs.

"Better I think," Barry answered with a breathy sigh. He walked towards the kitchen, trying his best to avoid her eye contact. Iris could always tell when he was lying.

"Should we let him be around them this much?" Iris followed him. Her voice was quiet and shaky. "You know, with the timeline and all? I'm not...quite sure how this time travel thing works."

Barry huffed as he shook his head. He closed his eyes, rubbing his forehead in thought. "I don't know."

With that, he was truthful. Barry had no idea how Bart being in his father's life would affect the timeline or if it would 'crash the mode', as Bart would say.

"The twins are the only things that make him smile lately Iris." Barry answered. He looked at her with a sadness in his eyes. "I can't take that away from him too." He turned away from her, looking out the kitchen window. "We asked too much of them. We should have never asked them to be be in the front lines. They're just kids."

"They knew what they signed up for," Iris tried to reason. "Bart knew what he signed up for too. And any of them can quit at any time."

"I know," Barry answered in a quiet voice.

Slender hands wrapped around his waist as Iris hugged him from behind. She rested her cheek between his shoulder blades. She hated seeing him with such a troubled mind.

"Did you...give it anymore thought?" She asked.

"I can't Iris," Barry asked with a begrudged sigh. "I can't leave him on his own."
"But Wally's back." Iris chirped back, her voice raising unintentionally. She let go of him, eyes watering. "He's coming to visit The Garricks later. Just-just please talk to him about it."

Barry turned towards her. It was a hushed argument they've had since the twins were born: The argument of Barry's retirement.

It was not as though Iris pushed the idea onto him. She would never pressure him to quit his career, just as he would never pressure her to quit hers.

It's was that Iris saw right through his facade; saw his desire to retire from The League and hang up his cowl. She saw his desire to watch his babies grow. She could tell before every mission, he was plagued with the possibility the twins would end the day with no father.

He wanted to grow with them, not have them grow without them.

Iris saw him clinging onto one last hurdle before he made that move. She saw him clutch to the excuse of 'Bart' with a bloodied grip.

"He's not ready," Barry answered. His voice rose from the cracking quiet of the room. Volume rising with exacerbation of the same argument over and over.

"And Wally…" Barry continued, flustered. He ran his hand through his hair. "I can't put that kind of pressure on him so soon. I can't just toss Bart on him after all he's been through."

Iris tried to retort, her voice cracking. But Barry interrupted her.

"I can't leave Bart on his own Iris." He said. Irritation caked his rising voice; not at her but at his situation. "He's too careless still, he's too unstable. He wouldn't survive on his own."

"You don't know anything about me." Bart's unexpected voice made them jump.

Barry's heart raced in his chest at the sight of Bart by the entryway.

"Bart," Barry's voice dripped with nerves. "How long were you there?"

"Long enough," he answered.

Bart looked at them with a deep scowl and furrowed brow. A heat clawed away inside him. He was so tired of being The League and The Team's misfortune. He was so sick of being coined the weakest link. At least now he knew Barry's real thoughts on him.

"The babies are napping in their cribs." He mentioned, coldly. "Since I'm such a burden, I guess I'll go."

"Bart-" Iris tried to console.

But Bart had enough of their lies and softened blows. "Don't," He barked back. He sniffled back the tingle in his nose. "Just-just stop." He looked at them with snarling eyes. "Stop acting like you don't think I'm a nuisance on your perfect lives. Okay?"

The final string of his composure began to stretch. Words finally fell from his mouth that he had been chewing for far too long. "I get it. I ruined everything for you."

"Bart you know that's not true." Barry retorted, unsure of where these accusations were coming from.
"We love you Bart." Iris interjected. "You're important to us too-

Bart interrupted her by throwing his hands up in irritation. Water rushed into his eyes as he ran his hands through his hair. Her words did not change Barry's thoughts on him.

"You think I'm unstable?" He sneered. "Why? Because I cry by myself? You two and Jay and Joan are the ones spying on me, when I want to be alone." His voice rose as he pointed a shaky finger at them. "You have no idea what I'm actually upset about."

"Then tell us," Barry begged. "How can we help you if you don't talk to us?"

"I don't need help! I was supposed to help!" Bart yelled.

"You don't know what it's like." His voice cracked. "I am what changed the past, and I don't know if I fixed it or made it worse. I can't let the future go back to the way it was!"

The sound of a baby crying erupted from upstairs. Bart's shouts disturbed their fragile sleep.

Bart took a deep breath and wiped away the water in his eyes. He looked up at Barry, a darkness resting in his eyes, memories plaguing him.

"Just so you know" Bart said. "I don't need you. I can do this by myself. I have survived plenty worse on my own, alone."

Bart sped to the front door and opened it. He stopped, his hand on the doorknob. Iris and Barry looked at him from the kitchen entryway. Bart turned to face them, his hand still on the door.

"If you're going to push back your retirement Grandpa," Bart began, his eyes to the ground. "Do it because we've been fighting off suicidal alien attackers. Do it because we've been fighting strung-out metahumans. Do it for literally any other reason." His eyes flashed up at them. "But don't push it back because of me, because you feel like I'm too immature to handle anything on my own. I don't need your pity, from you or anyone, anymore."

The door slammed behind him as he raced out of the house.

Bart stopped his superspeed halfway to The Garrick's. The faster he ran, the faster he had to face Jay and Joan. He was sure Barry already called them about his outburst. The last thing he wanted was anymore sorrowful looks or lectures. Why couldn't everyone just leave him alone?

He mulled, eyes on the ground until he finally reached the front yard. He jumped at the sight of a familiar friend.

"Jaime?" He asked. "What are you doing here?"

Jaime sat on the tiny stoop of Jay and Joan's home. He looked up at Bart with a smile

"Did you forget we had plans?"

Bart racked his brain, "We...didn't have plans."

"Oh that's right," Jaime stood, walking towards him "I'm making them right now." He grabbed his arm to turn him around. "Come on."

"What?" Bart questioned.
"Andele!" Jaime urged as he walked passed him, backwards. "We're burnin' daylight."

"I can't I-

"What? You have too much to do?" Jaime stopped. "I know for a fact you can do your homework at superspeed so I know you don't have any schoolwork. Come on, it's a beautiful day and we don't have a mission. Let's make the most of it."

Bart looked at him, annoyed. "Did Barry or Jay put you up to this?"

"What?" Jaime asked, confused.

"They want you to keep an eye on me because they think I'm unstable, is that it?" Bart snarled.

"Que?" Jaime said. "What are you talking about?"

Barts angry eyes fell to the ground, "Nothing."

"I mean," Jaime added cautiously. "I am worried about you."

"I don't need everyone to worry about me!" Bart snapped back. "I'm fine!"

Jaime waited for his steam to cool off. He approached him with cautious steps.

"You remember when you first came to this era?" Jaime asked. "The first thing you did was become my friend. You made it your mission to become my friend. And I don't know how you did it, but you knew how stressed out and lonely I was."

Bart fidgeted under Jaime's truthful words. Jaime continued. "I just needed someone to help me have a little fun." He placed his hands on Bart's shoulders, looking him in the eyes. "And you, are in a need of a lot of fun."

Jaime took his hands away and shrugged. "We could go blow up some boulder. Get into some trouble." He sported an ornery grin. "Just like old times?"

Bart looked at him for a moment. The longer he stared at Jaime's smile, the harder it became to hide his own. A feeling of calm that he had not felt in a long time, coursed through him.

Maybe a little bit of fun wouldn't be so bad.

Bart superspeed up to the house and opened the door. "Jay! Joan! I'm going out with Jaime for a bit. I'll see you guys later!" He yelled.

He sped back up to Jaime. "Hopefully the Terror Twins don't find us this time, right?"

Jaime answered him with a laugh.

Sunshine filled the kitchen. Joan Garrick brought her casserole out of the oven. She sat it next to the other hot dishes on the cooling racks. It already hard enough feeding two speedsters. With Wally's impending visit, it was going to be quite the effort to keep three satisfied for dinner.

The front door creaked open. Joan turned her gaze towards it. "Bart?" She asked confused, watching him walk through the doorway with a can of paint. He wore his hair tucked into a baseball cap. "I thought you were out with Jaime?"
"I was," he answered. He dropped the can of paint by the door and avoided her gaze. He made his way towards the living room where Jay was watching the news from the sofa.

Her head tilted in curiosity. She didn't remember Bart leaving with a backpack on. Didn't he have on different clothes?

She shook the thought out of her head. "We'll you're just in time, supper's almost done." Joan added.

Jay flashed his gaze behind him and over to Bart before bringing his attention back to the TV. He sat on the end of the sofa by the armrest. "Bart my boy, how was your day today?" He asked.

He came up next to Jay, smiling. "You know, it's about to get better."

"You sound like you have a cold son." Jay commented. He looked up at Bart, and his eyes stayed. It was like feeling that someone you didn't know had been in your home while you were away. Things were same, things were different. Things were right where they should be, and things were not where you left them. Not exactly.

Jay was struck with a feeling that even though Bart stood in front of him, he was not in that room. And when he took off his ballcap, a storm of blond hair fell from it.

"You're not Bart." Jay said, his eyes wide.

Jay watched Inertia form a wicked smile. And before Jay could move, his ears filled with the sound of an Inhibitor Collar snapping around his neck.

Jaime's seismic cannon rumbled the ground around them. The echo of Bart's laughter followed suit.

They decided on causing trouble at an old coal mine just a few miles out of Central City limits. The roadway spirals down and around the pit, gave Bart a running path for optimal speed. Bart had bet Jaime that he'd be too fast for Jaime to hit him with his cannon. And so, of course, Jaime had to prove him wrong.

Jaime hovered in his Blue Beetle armor just inside the pit. He smiled, firing his low-frequency cannon around him. But the yellow blur of 'Kid Flash' was just quick enough to escape his reach.

The Scarab calculated Kid Flash's next location. Blue hollered as he fired his cannon. It finally hit Bart. He yelped as he fell, tumbling down to the bottom of the pit.

Jaime gasped. He rushed towards Bart. "Are you okay?" He asked, landing next to him.

Bart answered him with a chuckle. It grew into boisterous laughter as he wrapped around his arms around stomach.

"That was awesome." He said with a smile, his face brushed with dirt.

Jaime smiled. Bart winced as he sat up.

"You alright?" Jaime asked, taking a seat next to him.

"Yeah," Bart answered in a quiet voice. "Thanks, I needed this." He looked up towards the sky, out of the mine.
"What else are amigos for?" Jaime chimed.

A quiet moment fell between them. A sadness pulled in Bart's eyes as he gazed around them. He lingered on the tiny openings of the mining tunnels throughout the mine.

"These caves are cool, huh?" Bart asked. "I bet you could stay in these and no one would ever find you. No aliens. No metateens. No Light." He picked up a dirt clod next to him and threw it. "Just you and a bunch of dirt n' rocks."

Jaime pursed his lip in thought. The addressed Bart with a cautious tone, "You don't have to talk about it, but..."

"Eventually I'll have to?" Bart interrupted him, feigning a chuckle. His gaze fell to the ground. "I kind of blew up at Grandpa today." He admitted. "It just..kind of came out. I'm not used to keeping things from him."

"It's hard to imagine you keeping your mouth shut about anything," Jaime tried to break the tension. "We can't even let you in on surprise parties."

"Hey!" Bart shouted at him with a smile.

Jaime laughed. He looked up and out the mine, letting silence settle before he spoke.

"When The Reach finally left. I spent so much time feeling guilty about everything I did." Jaime said. "I kept thinking 'what if I did this' or 'what if I'd done that differently'? I kept blaming myself." He looked over at Bart. "Until you berated me and annoyed the guilt out of me by never shutting up about how it wasn't my fault."

A smirk flashed on Bart's lips.

"I needed that." Jaime admitted. "And I want to be that for you too ,you know? You can always talk to me. I'm really not one to judge." He chuckled.

A sick feeling twirled in Bart's gut. His fingers fidgeted with nervousness. He craved more than anything to release the poisonous thoughts that filled his mind. But every nerve in his body screamed for him not to.

He couldn't look at Jaime as he spoke. "I just, feel like everything might be my fault." He confessed. "San Diego. That's not in the history books." He was finally able to meet Jaime's gaze. "What if me being here caused that? What if I made things worse?"

Jaime bit his lip in thought, weary of what answer he could give. "Well, I can't see into the future, so I can't give you a for sure answer." He shrugged. "But, you stopped a Reach takeover. It can't be that bad. And there's so many events in history that have been lost over time. It's possible it did happen, you just never heard of it." His expression twisted with confusion. "Plus now Wally's come back in time...from being in a time that he never was supposed to be in anyways..." He smirked. "Sooo he could actually be the one that messed everything up."

Bart chuckled, soaking in his words. He wrapped an arm around his shoulder. And for a moment, the burdens of the world didn't rest so heavily upon him.

"Thanks Jaime," He said.

"Anytime." Jaime answered, wrapping his arm around him in return.
Red Tornado's voice came in on their earpiece communicators. "Watchtower to Kid Flash."

Bart pressed on his communicator, "I'm here! What's up?"

"Central City is under attack by henchmen with Apokolips weapons," Red Tornado said. "The Flash is occupied by a group on the east side but there is another group attacking the City Center. Are you able to assist?"

"Blue Beetle's with me too. We're on it!" Bart chirped back. He smiled as he looked at Jaime, a normal cheer back in his demeanor. "First one to take out the most bad guys buys the other one dinner?"

Jaime smirked, "Deal." His armor shot him into the sky and towards the city.

It wasn't long before Kid Flash was far ahead of Blue Beetle. Jaime pressed forward at top speed. The giant Arch at the City Center grew as he came closer.

A scorching pain shot Blue as something wrapped around his ankle. An electrical charge surged through his nerves. He shot towards the ground, pulled from the air by whatever was wrapped around his ankle.

Jaime slapped onto the asphalt below, skidding across. His vision came to as he groaned. Jaime looked down at his ankle to find a red, pulsing cord around it. The cord ran from his foot to a henchman clad from head to toe in black. It seemed that the glowing weapon the man carried was some kind of Apokoliptian "whip".

Jaime yelled as the henchman sent another electrical current up the whip and through him. Jaime lay, frozen; his limbs constricting with the electrical aftermath.

Screams and cries for help rose around him. Sweat dripped from his brow as he desperately tried to look around.

Six henchmen terrorized the city around them. Their red Apokolips weapons fired into stores and into fleeing crowds. Fires erupted from the damaged buildings.

To his left, he heard Bart yell. He strained his head to look as his paralysis began to fade. Bart lay on the ground as well. Five red discs circles above him. Their red electrical current kept him pinned to the ground.

Another bolt of electricity shot through Jaime.

"Scarab!" He screamed. "Do something!"


The henchmen cried out as the whip's electricity turned on him. He fell to the ground.

Jaime pushed himself up and fired his cannon at the red discs hovering over Bart.

Now free, Bart scrambled to his feet. He charged at one of the henchmen, knocking him against the side of a building.

Bart laughed, turning towards Jaime. "Ha! One down already."

Jaime gasped, noticing another henchman had come up behind Bart. His red Apokolips cannon fired from his chest armor.
Before Jaime could warn him, Bart was swept to the side by a different blur of red. The Flash had swooped him up just in time for the blast to miss him.

Bart looked over at the cannon's fiery impact and swallowed hard. "Thanks." He said, looking over at Barry. His eyes fell for a moment. "I'm sorry." He said, apologizing for much more than his near-miss.

Barry smiled. "We're family. We look out for each other...even if sometimes we say things that can be taken the wrong way." He rubbed the back of his neck.

Bart answered him with a smile.

"Excuse me! A little help here!" Jaime complained.

Flash and Kid Flash looked to find Jaime under fire. They ran to his rescue.

Even with their Apokolips weapons, the unskilled henchmen were no match against three trained heroes.

The final henchman finally fell to the ground as Bart tied him up at superspeed. The man fell into a pile with the other incapacitated attackers.

Bart stood with his chest out, and hands on his hips, admiring their work. Flash and Blue Beetle came up on each side of him.

"That's three for me!" Bart chirped, side-eyeing Jaime with a raised brow. "Looks like you're buyin'."

"Nuh-uh that's totally not fair!" Jaime retorted. "Flash took out one of by guys."

Kid Flash answered him with a laugh. "A bet's a bet Blue-"

"BART! ALLEN!"

Bart's lungs inhaled with sharp speed. His eyes went wide as a voice from behind him screamed his name. Flash and Blue Blue Beetle snapped their head at the sound of Bart's name. But Bart couldn't find it within himself to turn around.

A tremble rose in his limbs. The echo of the voice rattled through his ears and through his memories. He never wanted to hear that voice again. He never thought he would hear that voice again.

The voice that poisoned his nightmares.

Bart turned, praying that maybe his ears were deceiving him. Maybe his mind was playing a sick joke.

But there, standing beneath the Arch at the City Center stood a monster he thought he'd left behind. He never thought his demons would follow him this far. He never thought they could.

But they had.

*He* had.

With crossed arms and a cocky tilt of his head Thaddeus Thawne, Inertia, stood just meters before him. His crazed blond hair shined against his tight green mask and uniform.
"Did you miss me?" He asked Bart with a smile.

"No-" Bart's words died in his throat. His eyes raced across around his features, scrambling for thoughts and reasons. "It should have changed." His breath shortened with rising panic. He looked back up to him. "Y-You shouldn't be here. I should have fixed this."

A cackle fell from Thad's lips as he answered, "Looks like you're a failure even in this decade."

Blue and The Flash stared at Inertia with a slackled jaws. His outline was the perfect cookie-cutter copy of Bart, save for his hair color, higher voice, and green costume.

"Bart, who is that?" Barry asked, slowly.

"Why does he look just like you?" Jaime asked, turning towards him, knowing that there was no answer he was going like.

Bart swallowed hard, eyes never veering from Inertia. "He's my clone."

"Oh, come on now. Be honest with them." The smiled faded from Inertia's face. "I am much more than that." He sneered. "I am much more than you." He tilted his chin up. "Oh, and I go by Inertia now. God I love having a code name, so retro."

Bart asked, dumbfounded. "How did you know where I was?"

"Did you really think your absence in the work camp would go unnoticed?" He answered. Thad took a step forward. Bart jumped at his movement.

Inertia smiled at his skittishness. He continued. "Okay all admit, you did have us stumped for a bit." He took another step forward. "All of a sudden The Reach just disappeared." He pointed at Jaime. "That Blue Bug went off mode. The nuclear winter just vanished from the sky. But the big kicker, is when Looker changed sides."

Inertia took another step forward and Bart took a step back. Barry looked at Kid Flash with curious eyes. Bart's fingers twitched behind his gloves. His jaw bounced with a tiny tremble. A foreign fear radiated off of him that Barry had never seen before.

Barry's gaze went from Bart to his blond copy cat. A sick feeling rose in his gut as he was overcome by the sudden notion that this boy was far more dangerous than he appeared.

Inertia continued. "And I thought to myself, who would be so stupid enough to go back in time and try to change history?" He bit his lower lip in annoyance. "And the first person I thought of, was you."

Bart held his gaze with stern eyes, dreading the rest of his story.

"So I paid your work camp a little visit." Thad informed with a flick if his wrist. "And I found Nathaniel. But Bart Allen was nowhere to be seen."

"Nathaniel," Bart's voice was raspy. He shook his head, pleading. "You didn't-"

"You'll have to give him some props," Inertia's smile went dark. "I had to torture him for 10 hours before he squealed. And your location was the last thing he ever said."

A tingle rose in Bart's sinus. "You're a monster," he sneered.

Thad answered with a condescending tone. He clicked his tongue behind his smile. "Aww, thank
"Okay, that's enough." Barry interjected. "I don't know who you are, but if you're behind this I'm bringing you in." He moved to take a step towards him.

Barry felt a sharp, tight grip on his arm, pulling him back. He looked to his left to find Bart grasping on to him. His arm shook as he looked up at Barry with desperate eyes.

"Don't." He begged, almost a whisper. "Don't."

"You should listen to him. He knows." Inertia's voice darkened as he glowered are them. "He knows that you should all be afraid of me."

Barry and Jaime flashed nervous looks to one another.

Thaddeus closed the space between them as he spoke. "Out of all the people he could have sent, Vandal picked me to go back in time and fix this mess you made."

"Vandal?" Barry perked. "Why are you working for him?"

But Bart asked the better question. "What did Vandal promise you in return?"

Inertia wet his smile-soaked lips. "He promised me that I'd get to kill all of you. I get to be the only speedster in my time and this time."

He counted on his fingers. "Jay, Barry, Bart, Wally." His gaze veered to the side and his mind trailed with thought. "But what about...What year?"

He gasped at a realization. A hungry, rabid smile formed on his face. "The babies." He hissed. "Finish off Don and Dawn before they even take their first steps."

A paternal roar pounded in Barry's chest. "You did not just threaten my children."

Inertia waved him off with a flick of his wrist. "Nah, that'd be too easy. Then I'd never get a chance to knock this kid around." He tossed a finger towards Bart as he took his final steps towards them. He stood only four feet from them. His close presence gave them an errie feeling that they were about to be preyed upon.

He turned his gaze towards Barry. "Besides, I don't think that'd hurt you enough." He cocked his head with a mocking smile. "So maybe I'll start...with that pretty little Iris of yours."

At the mention of Iris's name, a strange, alien bolt of rage struck through Barry. "You will not touch her," He growled. "Soon enough." Thad chirped. He shrugged his shoulders, holding his arms out to his arms out to his side. "But right now, I have somewhere else to be." He turned away from them, taking a few steps before turning around again, as if he'd forgotten something.

His cold, bag-ridden eyes pierced right through Bart. His lips curled with a snarl as he spoke. "It's important you remember this Bart."

He felt ill at the sound of his name.

"You will never escape me," Inertia spat. "You will never out run me." His face creased with anger. "I will always find you. I have always and will always destroy everyone you love." The anger fell from his face as he smiled once more. "And every home you make."
A turning struck Bart's gut. His words played over again in his head.

Inertia held up six fingers. Then he put one down and said, "One speedster down. Five to go."

Barry and Bart snapped their gazes at one another, minds racing as to what he could be referring too.

"It's all your fault, you know." Thad snipped at Bart. "I wouldn't have had to do it, if you'd just stayed in the future. You made me do it."

"One down?" Barry thought aloud.

"What happens when the fastest man alive, isn't fast enough?" Thad said to him with a serpentine smile.

A sudden weight pressed heavy in their chests.

Wally's panicked voice came over their communicators, "FLASH! FLASH CAN YOU HEAR ME?!"

Flash pressed on his earpiece, "I'm-I'm here. What's wrong?"

Thad perked with interest.

"Tell me The Garricks are with you. Are they with you!?" Wally screeched.

"No. They're not, why?" Barry asked.

"Their house!" Wally exclaimed. "It's on fire!"

Barry, Bart, and Jaime looked at one another with wide eyes. Bile rose in their throats.

"It's too late for the original speedster." Inertia's voice stole their attention. A wicked, unapologetic grin graced his lips. "But can you save the love of his life, before she burns alive?"

Barry shook with a dark, daunting realization. In a panicked blur of red, he was gone.

"What did you do to them!?" Bart screamed, eyes watering.

Inertia's smile widened. "Run, run, run as fast as you can," he mocked in a sing-song voice. A wild, unrelenting, unbridled laughter burst from him. It grew and grew into something vile and malevolent.

Bart managed to power through his trembling limbs enough to finally push off his feet. He superspeeded behind Barry.

Blue Beetle's armor extended to start his flight after them. Inertia's silence caught his attention. He looked at him. His smile never broke as he held up one finger and said, "Move number one."

And with a blur of green, he was gone.

A heavy pounding raced in Wally's chest. He watched as smoke and flame poured from every open crevice of The Garrick's home. He stood on the front yard with the growing crowd, sweat soaking his shirt with the consuming heat. Sirens trailed in closer.

Fear slithered down his spine as he was answered with silence on the other end of the communicator. The fire roared from the melted windows. It took all the training and will power within him to keep
him from running into the deadly flame head-on.

"Flash-" Wally started to yell over his communicator again. He was nearly knocked off his feet as a blur of red rushed past him.

Barry ran towards the house. He slammed his shoulder against the front door. He winced at the shooting pain and recoiled at the massive blast of heat. Without fear or reason, he placed his hand over his mouth and charged inside.

Wally ran in after him. He placed his hand over his mouth as well. His eyes squinted with the stinging smoke and heat. He coughed, lowering his stance as he tried to find cleaner air. His eyes watered as he tried desperately to keep his grasp on to Barry's arm.

Wally pulled his goggles from his pocket and placed them over his eyes. The goggles did what they could to scan for human forms within the smoke. The kitchen proved futile. He shouted at Barry to move towards the living room.

The fire, which engulfed the whole second story, snaked it's way down the stairs. The flames inched closer towards the living room. Barry and Wally crawled on their hands on knees, searching desperately through the lightest part of the smoke.

Wally gasped as his hand touched skin. He grasped as the body on the floor and Barry found another. They scooped them up in their arms, coughing as they hurried towards the front door.

The coughed and wheezed as they stumbled onto the front yard. They dropped the bodies on the ground and collapsed to their hands and knees. Soot fell from their mouths. Barry furiously rubbed away at his eyes. He reached out to the body on his right. His vision came to. This time is was not the smoke that left him breathless.

Bart stood in the middle of the yard. His jaw trembled as he tried to speak. A sickness curled and clawed inside him. The only sound he could hear, was his pulse in his ears.

His gaze fell in front of him. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. He couldn't move.

Jay and Joan Garrick laid on the grass stiff and motionless. Long-dried bloodstains painted their face, their clothes, their limbs. Their feet tied, and hands bound behind them.

Jay's head twisted in a grotesque, absurd angle. His open, motionless eyes stared into a vast nothingness. An expression of horror sat cemented on his face. All while Joan's stillness paired with her half lidded eyes. The duct taped wrapped around her mouth and jaw suctioned to her skin under the heat.

Paramedics shoved Wally and The Flash out of their way. Bart watched them as they stood still, chests barely moving. Their eyes did not falter from Jay and Joan. Bart did not have to be a mind reader to know what they both were thinking.

He did not have to be a mind reader to know that The Garrick's would never think again.

Finally Bart looked upwards. He swallowed back the bile in his throat. His breath shook in his chest. Painted in big, bold, red letters on the front of the house read the words:

**RUN, BART, RUN**

And he did. At superspeed Kid Flash ran through Central City. The tore through the streets towards the only home he could save. With desperation he sprinted towards the only family he had left. The
only family left that could be taken from him.

"Grandma?" Bart hollered as he crashed through the front door of Barry and Iris's home. He found Iris in the living room with the babies.

Iris jumped at his entrance. The noise sparked the twins' cries.

"Bart what?" Iris had no time to finish her sentence before Bart scooped them from her at superspeed.

Iris looked down to find the twins no longer in her arms. Her gaze flashed over to Bart who held them firmly against his chest.

"I have to take them." He said, a panic caked his trembling voice. He backed away from her. Sweat fell from his brow as he looked at Iris with wide fearful eyes. "I have to take them somewhere safe."

"Bart, put them down. You're scaring me." Iris said warily, holding her hand out as she took a step towards him.

"I can't! I have to take them where he can't find them!" He screamed and ran out the door at superspeed with Don and Dawn in his arms.

Over at The Garrick’s, Blue Beetle finally made it to the blazing scene.

"Dios mio." He said, placing a hand over his mouth.

Two paramedics worked on Joan's body. Desperate to get her heart started with CPR.

But Jaime knew from his training, that if it came down to CPR, it was most likely already too late.

With shaky eyes, he looked over to the sheet-covered body next to her.

Barry stared at the body, still and mute. Wally tried to talk to him, tried to get him to move, to speak, to do something.

Wally's phone rang and vibrated in his pocket. He looked at the caller ID to see it was Iris. His stomach sank at the impending conversation. He answered the call.

"Bart ran off with the twins!" Iris yelled before he could answer.

"What?" He boomed.

"Bart took the twins away! I don't know where they are!" Iris screeched on the other end.

"When?" Wally asked.

"Just now," Iris answered. "He screamed about taking them somewhere safe. Somewhere 'he' couldn't find them. Who's 'he'?" He voice wavered. "He looked-he looked crazy. Wally where did he take my babies!?"

"We'll find him, ok?" Wally reassured. "Just stay there." He hung up the phone.

Wally turned towards Blue Beetle. "Bart's run away with the twins."

"What?" Jaime asked.
"He told Iris he needed to 'take them somewhere safe'. Where 'he' couldn't find them."

Jaime went quiet for a moment as he thought. His brows perked with realization. "I think I know where he is."

Wally turned towards Barry. He still stared at The Garrick's bodies with a slacked jaw, unmoving. Wally stood in front of his gaze. He addressed him with a soft but firm voice. "Barry, go home."

Barry's state of shock was all too clear.

"The twins-" Flash finally muttered as Wally and Blue's conversation finally registered.

"Uncle Barry, we'll get them. I promise." He held Barry's face between his hands. "Go home," he said. "Go to Iris." Barry's gaze finally gave Wally his full attention. "Go to Iris," he said again.

Barry nodded, and in a flash he was gone.

Blue jumped up towards the sky and Wally chased after him. When he was clear of the crowd he picked up superspeed to keep pace with Jaime from below.

Soon Blue lead them to an old coal mine. The same one they ran around earlier. Jaime asked The Scarab to scan for signs of life. It found three heat signatures in a cave at the bottom of the mine.

With quiet steps, Blue and Wally stepped into the cave. Blue shined a light from his shoulder armor and aimed it around the cave walls. His light stopped as it found Kid Flash hunched in the corner, his back to them. The twin's tiny limbs could be seen squirming as he held them in his arms. Their cries of fear and discomfort echoed against the walls.

"Bart?" Jaime took a cautious step forward. "Bart? Are you alright?"

Bart did not reply. He nuzzled his face against the twins and he held them tight to him. They screeched, arms waving as they tried to push him off.

"Are the babies ok?" Jaime asked in a soft voice. "They're crying."

But Bart made no sound.

"Bart," Jaime urged. "Say something please." A sadness tightened his chest. "We're worried about you."

Bart slowly raised his head and turned towards them. His lip trembled. /his tear stain cheeks, shined against Jaime's bright light.

Bart let out a shaky breath, "He's back. He's here. It's all my fault."

"Who?" Wally asked.

Jaime's eyes narrowed, knowing exactly who Bart was referring to. "We're going to catch him," Jaime said sternly. "He's going to face justice for what he did."

Bart sobbed. The twins squealed in his tight embrace. He shook his head. "You can't catch him you can't catch him you can't catch him."

"Bart, we need to get you and the babies somewhere else ok?" Wally said, calm and cool. "It's not safe for them here."
"We can't hide anywhere." Bart screeched. "He'll find us. He'll find us, he always does!"

Bart's panicked cries scared Don. He yelped at Bart's raised voice.

"Bart, give me the babies." Jaime beamed.

"I can't let him kill my Dad again!" Bart screamed, his voice echoing throughout the cave. "I can't let him kill them again!"

Sobs pounded up and down Bart's chest. The twin's cries filled in around them. Bart looked up at them with glossy, desperate eyes. His lip trembled as he spoke.

"I can't let them die again Jaime." Bart pleaded, his voice broken and cracked. "It'll be all my fault."

Jaime looked at him for a moment. In the dim light and course darkness, Jaime saw not a sidekick, not a junior hero. But a boy, desperate to protect the ones he loves. A boy, who would do anything to keep his world from being snatched from his hands. A boy filled with desperation. A boy filled with fear.

"No one is going to take them." Jaime assured with a stern voice. "He is not going to take them." He promised. "They're going to go with us to The WatchTower okay?"

Wally looked over at Jaime, knowing that his promise was absurd and out of protocol. But by the look on Jaime's face, no one in the world could tell him 'no' to his decision.

"No one can get them there, not even him." Jaime assured again. The babies cried out again, their voices feeding off of one another.

"Listen to them, they're scared." Jaime said softly. "They need their mom, you can't keep them in a place like this. Look at me."

Bart did as he was told.

"I will not let anything happen to them." Jaime promised. He held out his hands "Give them to me, please."

Bart looked into Jaime's eyes. They pleaded with him; a silent conversation that held their friendship as collateral for his promise. An assurance that not even a threat of death could break.

Shaking, Bart took a step towards them and held out his arms a bit in front of him. Swifty and softly, Jaime scooped the twins from his arms.

Bart watched Jaime walk out of the cave. Bart looked over at Wally, unable to suppress the wave of tears any longer. Jay's twisted face and snapped neck strobed in his mind.

"M'sorry." He cried. "M'sorryyy." He placed his other hand over his face as well. "Jay's dead." Every last shred of composure dissipated. "Jay's dead."

Wally approached him. He wrapped his arms around him, pulling him into his chest. "It's alright. It's alright," He cooed, holding him tight.

"It's all my fault. All my fault." Bart cried into Wally's chest. His hands grasped at the back of his shirt as he squeezed him back. "They'll die." He muttered between sobs. "He'll kill them." He shook
his head against his chest.

Bart's cries eventually trailed off. His breathing struggled to regain normality as he sniffled. He turned his head to the side, still holding onto Wally. His eyes stared at nothing as the bloody horrors of his past, resurfaced in his mind.

"He'll kill everyone." He whispered, remembering.
Central City

April 10th, 2017

14:00 CDT

The death of a hero brings about a solemn lull to the activities of The League.

The murder of a hero, brings everything to a grinding halt.

The days after The Garricks' deaths flooded Bart with a sickness in the pit of his belly. But it was the silence that brought Bart's nerves to their knees. The silence the filled every room of The Warehouse. The silence that filled every room of The Watchtower. The silence that filled and bound their mouths.

And now, the silence that bellowed around the cemetery.

Bart gazed down at the weathered loafers. All was still within him. The sun beat down on his black slacks and button up. It's seemed cruel for the day to be so beautiful for a time so dark.

Sweat beaded down his neck and into his undershirt. His body heat collected dozens of other Team, League members, and civilians on the cemetery lawn.

Footsteps tapped around the herd as their trunk doors opened. Bart looked up to find Barry and Wally, their faces blank and bleak as they pulled Jay's coffin out of one of the herd. Red Tornado in his android form and Ted Grant, Wildcat, grabbed the other two handles on the coffin.

There was an eerie, breathless aura around their closeness. Their eyes never glossed over Bart as they passed him, carrying Jay's casket to the steel lowering device above his freshly dug grave. Perhaps it was Bart falling prey to his toxic thoughts, but he felt certain they couldn't find it within themselves look at him.

Bruce and Clark followed behind them, pulling Joan's casket out of the second herd. Dinah and Diana took the rear as Joan's final two pallbearers. They walked across the grass in silence, carrying the second casket next to Jay's.

Bart stood motionless, his hands to his side. His eyes fell the ground once more as he could not bare to look at the faces around him. He could not stomach to look at The Team's and the League's side-eye glances. He could not bear to hear their wondering whispers.

Iris reached out and held his hand, but how he wished for thorns on his palms; as to warn that he was poison.

Bart couldn't really hear the sermon or the goodbyes that spilled from people's lips as they approached the caskets. All he could hear, was the roar of the raging flame from days before.

His eyes never strayed from the two caskets in front of him. Even while they were lowered and buried. Side by side; just as they were in life.

He had known death all his youth. But The Garrick's were the first in a long time to strike him with a stinging numbness. They were the first deaths, in a long time, to soak his soul in guilt.
The silence followed Bart all the way into space. He sat quiet and still at the end of the massive table in the Conference Room. The pressure of every gaze sat upon his skin. He looked about the room. Every single member of The Team and The League sat and stood around the table.

It was a daunting sight. The World's most powerful beings on the planet, in the galaxy, gathered in one place. And they all wanted answers, from him.

It was not normal protocol. It was not how they usually acquired information from their younger members.

But this time was different. This time there was no gentle conversation. This time there was no one-on-one heart-to-hearts with Black Canary.

One of their own had been taken from them; mauled, mutilated. The coroner's report read signs of torture before The Garrick's were killed; as if the marks on their corpses were not indication enough. Horrid hands were placed upon Jay's neck before they snapped it at superhuman speed. Joan was left, alone and bleeding while the smoke slowly snuffed the life from her.

This time was different. This time The Garricks and Bart were intentional targets. And Inertia was the loaded gun.

A gun that knew their civilian names.

A gun who could find the ones they loved.

A gun who had already slaughtered one of their own.

A gun, from the future, who looked just like Bart.

And everyone wanted answers.

"There's no more secrets Bart." Dinah leaned into the table at the other end, her fingers laced in front of her. Her voice was stern but still had patience, as if she had no other duties in the world but to be in that room.

"We need to know everything." She gave him a small shake of her head. "You don't get to keep anything from us anymore."

Bart's teeth clattered behind his lips. He swallowed hard. "But-I mean, the timestream? What if I crash it with something I say?"

"Jay was murdered Bart, by someone from your time." Batman's voice sent a chill through him. Bruce continued. "The timestream has already changed."

Bart looked down, a bubbling erupted in his belly. It was a nightmare come true. He had hoped it could keep it from them all.

But the truth always finds a way.
Bart felt a soft hand on his elbow. He looked to his right to find Jaime's light grip. Jaime looked at him with soft, quiet eyes. A gentle nod bounced his head up and down with encouragement.

The look on Jaime's face said that he would always be there for him. But after Bart told his tale, Bart wasn't sure if that would hold true.

"The very beginning Bart," Dinah pressed again.

Bart closed his eyes, giving a silent sigh of defeat before he spoke. "I guess, it starts with Grandpa, actually." He floated his gaze up at Barry. "I came back the day the I did...I came back to February 28th 2016, because that was the day you were supposed to die."

Barry's eyes widened. Bart continued, "When we fought Neutron, you were supposed to die. In my timeline, you didn't make it out if the explosion in time."

A quiet stirring erupted from some of the members. Looks were exchanged and Bart fell ill; knowing this was just the edge of the rabbit hole.

"After you die, Grandma Iris has Dad and Aunt Dawn. And-and everyone takes really good care of them." He tried to soften the mood with a small smile. "They have superspeed too and they join The Team and then The League. And they become amazing superheroes."

Bart looked down at his lap. "But...there's a man in Central City. He's the pretty much the same age as Dad." His fingers fidgeted with nerves. "He's a nobody right now but soon, overtime, he becomes a politician. A corrupt politician. Every political position in Central City and in Missouri that he runs just completely destroys lives and gets people killed. Every one of his campaigns and offices are run by dirty money."

"Who is this man?" Dinah asked.

Bart went to open his mouth, but his words died there. He bit his lip. "I-I can't tell you."

"Bart," J'onn spoke. "There are other ways of retrieving information." He tapped on his head. "Please do not make us do it."

Bart let out a shaky breath. He accepted that there would be no way to hide it anymore.

"His name is Thaddeus Thawne," Bart answered. "Senior. Dad and Aunt Dawn spend their entire career trying to bust him for extortion, drug smuggling, human trafficking, everything. The twins spoil most of his plans and lose him a lot of money, but he always got away with it somehow. Somehow he always managed to find someone to be his scapegoat." He sighed. "And eventually, he gets elected as the President of the U.S."

Bart scoffed. "I guess 'elected' is bad joke because at that point in history almost everything was rigged. There's no politics in the world that The Reach and The Light don't have their corrupt hands in. With Thawne as President, under the Reach's advisement, he creates work camps for humans and Metahumans who don't belong or obey."

Bart's gaze stared, undirected and unfocused. His mind strayed as memories scratched at the back of his mind. "I guess 'work camps' doesn't really cut it. They're more like refugee camps...or torture camps."

"It's true," Wally interrupted.

Bart regained focus as he snapped his head up at Wally's voice.
Wally found all eyes fell to him. He looked around at them, nodding his head in confirmation. "He's
telling the truth. When I was transported to the future, they already had several camps up and
running."

Bart felt a sickness rise inside him. The camps weren't supposed to be set up that soon.

Bart cleared his throat and veered the story away from that path. "Thaddeus has a daughter, Meloni
Thawne. She'll be born in a few more years." A tiny, solemn smile flicked at the corner of his mouth.
His eyes fell to the ground as his voice got quiet.

"She falls in love with my Dad. She actually helps him try to take down Thaddeus." He swallowed
his nerves, looking up at them. "And um, one day she finds out she's pregnant...with me. She tried to
tell Thaddeus she didn't know who the father was. But shortly after I was born, he sees them together
one night. I guess he saw my Dad's face before he superspeed away."

A subtle darkness crept onto Bart's face. His features twitched with a suppressed expression of anger
and anguish.

"My mom said that he tried to kill me." Bart recalled his mother's stories. "But she managed to get
me away from him. That night she took me, and she and my dad ran away together."

Bart glossed over their intense faces. "I guess Thaddeus Senior got my DNA from a baby blanket, or
something. And he found a way to make his own speedster. He used my DNA and some of his own
to clone me." He huffed. "And that's how Thaddeus Thawne Senior, made Thaddeus Thawne
Junior."

Batman waved his hand in front of him, bringing up a virtual keyboard. He tapped on a few buttons.
Several screens floated around Bart. They displayed security camera images of Inertia when they
discovered him in Central City.

Even in just a photo, his serpentine smile and murderous eyes turned Bart's stomach.

"To clarify for everyone else," Batman added. "This is him, correct? Thaddeus Thawne Junior?"

Bart looked up at the images with a firm scowl. "Yeah," He answered in a quiet voice. "He said he
goes by the codename 'Inertia' now."

Bart turned back towards them. "Thad Junior was created with the sole purpose to
destroying everything there is to The Allens. Thad Senior blamed my dad for all of his losses in his
career and for taking his daughter away; for making her 'switch sides'. He raised, trained, and
brainwash Thad Jr. with nothing but blinding hate for me and my family."

Bart closed his eyes. His old memories of 'home' began to seep through the cracks of the door he had
kept them locked behind.

He finally spoke, opening his eyes. "When I was the the future, The Reach took over. Well, I guess
took over for The Light. It wasn't-it wasn't a good place. We always spent our time running. That's
most of what I remember; running."

"Mom, Dad, and Aunt Dawn were part of a band of people called 'The Resistance'. They were
secret civilian operatives who fought and did everything they could to help take down and expose
The Reach. We went from one operations spot to the next, constantly moving so The Reach and
Thad wouldn't find us."

There was a pause, as Bart reached the part of the story he never wanted to relive. "I had just turned
10 years old and I was getting to the age where I was understanding where we were, what 'The Resistance' was, and what we were doing."

It took him a few tries to push the next sentence out. His words were quiet and wounded. "A couple days after my birthday, the twins and my mother led a band of Resistance soldiers to free some of the slaves in one of Thad Senior's work camps."

Bart fell quiet again. That day came back to him in a crashing wave.

It had been so cold. He remembered the crunch of running footsteps on the snow. Far fewer footsteps than what had left that morning.

His younger self peered through the opening of a tent at their campsite. The sun rose on the horizon through a gray sky. Meloni trudged towards him, wounded and alone.

Bart came back to the present. His jaw trembled as his breath shook. He looked to his left, not daring to speak as the threat of a sob reseted in his throat. For a moment he stayed quiet. He squeezed his eyes shut as warm tears fell down his cheek. "Only my mom made it back."

His chest heaved as he remembered the sight of his mother. Her long auburn hair wild in it's ponytail. Her cheeks soiled with tears and grime and blood. She had looked at him with panic and desperation.

He knew in that moment he'd never see his father again.

Bart's broken, shaky voice pushed through. "Dad and Aunt Dawn were killed." His breath rumbled in his chest. "Mom said that Inertia killed them." His lip trembled looked up at them. "We had no idea Thaddeus had spent ten years making the ultimate killer."

Bart remembered how fast the day went. How his mother snatched him and whatever weapons and supplies they could carry and tore away in their armored jeep.

Bart pressed his lips into a fine line, repressing the tears building in his eyes. He talked slow through his shaky breaths. "Mom knew that Thaddeus would want me next. We couldn't be caught together." He wiped away the water in his eyes, remembering the last time he saw her. "So she had to me behind. Left me with an old ally, Nathaniel, while she continued fighting in they hopes that they would follow her and lose track of me."

"A couple years went by," Bart continued. "And eventually the reach found Nathaniel and me and put us in one of their work camps." His eyes went dark. "We were slaves," He said quietly. "Eventually Thaddeus Senior found me. But by then I had no idea if the Residence's whereabouts. So they kept me as leverage in case they ever found my mom."

"They found you, and didn't kill you?" Dinah asked perplexed.

A snarl flashed on Bart's lips. Bags darkened his eyes. "Not until they caught my mom. Thaddeus wouldn't kill me until they could do it in front of her."

"Why?" Dinah asked. "What would be the purpose of that?"

"Because that's the kind of future I lived in," Bart growled. "That's the kind of person Thaddeus is."

Bart took a moment to gather himself. He looked over at Jaime, "And I knew it all started with Blue." He addressed the room again. "So I scavenged together all the parts of a time machine and came back here."
A quiet lulled about the room as they digest his story.

Barry broke the silence. "Why didn't you tell us this before?" He asked, astonished. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Bart looked over at Barry's heartbroken face. Bart knew, that Barry knew, he couldn't have told him everything about the future when he first arrived. He could have crashed the timestream in doing so.

But this was about the life and death of his *children*.

Tightness built in Barry's chest knowing that within his lifetime they would be murdered. Murdered by someone he could soon run into on the street.

Someone that he could stop.

Bart's words were delicate. "Because I thought...because I knew that you'd try to find Thaddeus and kill him to keep this all from happening," He looked up at Barry with sad, glossy eyes. "But then I would never be born."

Barry sat quiet. He looked at Bart with a shaky gaze, mind flooding with uncertainty. A heat rose into his cheeks. Tightness filled his chest. It squeezed and squeezed around his lungs until he could not bear it, or the sight of Bart, or the closeness of that room anymore. He jumped up from his seat. The metal of his chair grated against the floor as he stood up headed out of the room.

Bart looked down, his heart broke in his chest. He never meant to cause such pain, he never meant for it to go down this path.

Inertia was right, it was all his fault.

Dinah broke the awkward aura of the room. "Inertia knows yours, Barry's, Wally's, and even Iris's name. Will he know our civilian names too?"

"Probably," Bart answered. "They're in the history books."

Dinah tilted her head in inquiry. "Why?" She asked. "Why and how are our civilian names documented?"

Bart knew they wouldn't like the answer. "Because most of you killed by the time I'm born," he said.

Whispers shot around the room. The uncomfortable tension grew as thick as a shoreline fog.

"Should we take precautions to protect our families from Inertia?" Captain Marvel asked.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Bart answered. "But unless you're a speedster, he doesn't care about any of you."

"And why is that?" Dinah asked.

"Because he was created in the image of Thaddeus's hate for the Allens." Bart explained with a snarl. "Hate for my family name has been bred into him before he even took his first breath. He only cares about hurting me in whatever way he can. I guess...like a genetic vendetta."

"It sounds like this boy has known nothing but hate and violence his whole life," J'onn remarked. "Understand I am by no means excusing his actions. But if he has spent his entire life brainwashed by this Thaddeus Thawne Senior, is there any way his mind can be saved? Can he be reconditioned?"
Bart twitched, nearly disgusted by J'onn's words. After all that, how could they still not see?

"You don't—you don't understand. Thad is a monster." Bart explained. "He is every bit as powerful, and smart, and fast as me." His breathing shook. "But he's not—he's not capable of remorse or pity or compassion or anything that makes a regular, functioning human being. That part of his brain is fried out a long time ago. When Thaddeus Sr. wanted someone taken out, when he wanted someone tortured for information, he sent him." Bart searched for the right words. "He's—he's a sociopath with my face he's—"

Bart cut himself off. He looked up at them with a nervous intensity. "He's all of the dark parts of myself, put into one person. He's that small darkness that we all have, brought to life."

Their silence sent a chill down his spine. He looked over at the video monitors, Inertia's face still plastered on them.

"But if he's here, then that means we're doing something right." He looked over at them. "If they sent him all the way back in time that means they're running out of options. That means we're winning."

A wobble rested in Barry's knees as the door to the conference room slid closed behind him. He sighed, running his hands through his hair in frustration. Anger twisted his gut. Bart's words rang in his head like an unrelenting bell.

He knew he shouldn't be upset with him. He knew that Bart couldn't have told them everything when he first time to their era. He knew that Bart's interference in their time was delicate.

But the twins; his aunt, his father. He had walked among them for a year knowing precisely how and when they'll be murdered.

And who was responsible.

A tightness clutched in Barry's chest.

'Then I would never be born.'

Bart had given him everything he needed to save his children. Bart had given him everything to stop Thaddeus, the baby Thaddeus Thawne Senior, from up and creating Inertia.

Without Bart, there would be no Inertia.

But without Inertia, there would be no Bart.

Barry found it hard to breathe. He gasped as water filled his eyes, hand grasping as the base of his skull.

What could he do? How could he make that choice? How could he make the right choice between his children or his grandchild, when he himself was only alive because of Bart?

'You were supposed to die.'

Those words pierced Barry right through his racing heart. He imagined Iris alone. Wally standing in the doorway, arms holding her as he tells of of his demise. How 'The Flash' incinerated in Neutron's blast.

He imagined her, alone and sobbing with a belly of growing babies who would never know their father. Who would never feel his nuzzles on their cheeks or their delicate hands in his palms.
He imagined them not even knowing what he looked like in person. He imagined them never knowing his love.

Barry wiped the water from his eyes and supersped to the infirmary.

After Inertia murdered Jay and Joan, The League made special exception for Iris and the twins to stay at The Watchtower until Inertia's threat could be evaluated. He knew all The Flash family's civilian names. If he had found out where The Garrick's lived, there's no reason why he couldn't find the Allen's home.

The door slid open as Barry approached it. Although she was not injured, The Infirmary was the only room that held spare beds. Iris's eyes fluttered open at the sound of his entry. She hoisted herself up in a sitting position, the blankets sliding off of her.

"M'Baby?" She said sleepily. "How did it go?"

Barry signed as he took a seat next to her on the bed. "It went."

"What did Bart say?" She asked.

Barry closed his eyes, giving a small shake of his head. "Can I tell you later?"

"Sure." Iris answered, laying her head on his shoulder. He wrapped an arm around her waist.

Iris allowed for a small moment of quiet before he curiosity became too much. "Could you at least tell me what they decided to do next?" She asked in a soft voice.

"I don't know," Barry signed. "They're still in there." He turned his head towards hers on his shoulder. He breath danced on her bangs. "But I can tell you what I've decided."

Iris watched as he slid his Flash Ring off his finger. Iris lifted her head from his shoulder, looking at him with wide eyes.

Barry clenched his fist tight around the ring in his palm. "I'm done," he said as he looked down at his fist. "I'm done being The Flash."

"Honey, are you sure?" Iris asked. "After everything the other day-"

"It's because of everything the other day Iris." Barry answered, putting the ring in his pocket. "I saw Jay and Joan laying there and-" He cut himself off to swallow the sob in his throat. He looked at Iris with desperate, watery eyes. "All I saw was you. That monster threatened you and the twins and I can't-"

Iris swiftly pulled him into her with a tight embrace. She wrapped her arms around him as he held her back, crying into the crook of her neck.

"I can't let him take you too." His broken, muffled words bounced on her skin. "I have to be around for all of you."

He pulled himself away from her neck. His embrace loosened but his hands still sat firmly on her waist. "I can't be running around anymore."

"You can't-" Iris give a small shake of her head. She wanted him to retire, but out of choice, not desperation. "You can't stay cooped up in the house with us 24/7."

"Like hell I can't," Barry snipped. "He won't take you three from me. I won't let him get close."
Barry peered over to the other side of the bed. The paypen that was supposed to hold Don and Dawn, sat empty.

"Iris, where are the twins?" Barry asked with wide eyes.

"Oh, Kori has them." She answered. "She wanted to watch them so I could get some sleep."

"Kori?" Barry though aloud. "Starfire? That alien-" Barry jumped from the bed, astounded. "Iris! You can't just let some stranger take off with the kids!"

Tiny giggles and squeals filled the room as the door slid open once more. Barry snapped his head over to the doorway to find Starfire walking through the threshold. Don and Dawn sat in her arms. Smiles plastered on their toothless mouths as they reached up and grasped at Starfire's ever-flowing hair.

"I thought I heard voices." Starfire remarked. "Did you get enough sleep, Iris?"

"I did, thank you." Iris answered. "I hope they weren't too much trouble this time."

"Not at all. They are happy babies." She said with a smile. She walked up to Barry. "Would you like to hold them now?"

"Oh," Barry answered with slow thought. Aside from family, he had never seen the twins so happy in someone else's arms. "Yeah."

With diligent movements Starfire handed them off to him. But their wide eyes never strayed from Kori's hair and bright skin.

"Do not worry," She said to him. "They may be small now, but soon, they will be useful."

"Um...yeah." Barry answered with a raised brow, still not used to her use english. "Thank you?"

"Starfire has been helping me alot the past couple days," Iris informed. "With Jay and Joan..." A sadness filled her voice as he trailed off. "It's been hard just getting out of bed sometimes."

Kori had been spending copious time at The WatchTower with the Earth's four Lanterns. She had been leading numerous discussions with them about Darkseid, informing them of his army's capabilities and battle strategies.

Between meetings she spotted the twins in The Watchtower a few days before and, well, Starfire couldn't quite say that she "loved" them. But their tiny smiles and bright faces did help fill an emptiness in her heart that the destruction of Tamaran left tender. On her homeworld, children stood as a symbol of growth and hope. A symbol of new life and a new future.

My how much did she miss children.

"Grief has no place around a child," Starfire informed. "They may not understand words, but they can tell when something is wrong." She smiled at Iris. "You take your time to heal, they will still be around when you're better."

Kori turned towards Barry. She looked at him with tender eyes and a sad tilt of her heard. "I am very sorry to hear about your loved ones. I heard Jay was a great hero on your planet."

Barry found himself breathless. He had not spent much time around Starfire since her arrival. In fact, he now realized he had never been this close to her.
She was beautiful. Hauntingly strange and beautiful. A type of beauty that warned not to be underestimated. A type of beauty that pulsed with power just below the surface. And for a moment, Barry too found himself lost in her curious strangeness. And her height. He looked up at her solid green eyes as her hair shifted about her frame with silken movements.

But whatever strength she held, no longer mattered. He was going to be there for them now. Barry shook his mind back into focus. "Well, I'll have more time to help her with that." He informed her. "I'm retiring as The Flash."

"Ah, your masked character." Starfire added. "Will you be returning to your home then?"

Iris answered with a 'yes' while Barry answered with a simultaneous 'no'. They looked over at one another.

"Where else would we go Barry?" Iris asked with a knitted brow.

"We're staying here." He answered.

"What?"

"This isn't up for negotiation. This is the only place I know where that sociopath can't reach you."

"Nonononono I am not staying here another night." Iris beamed. "It's creepy, and I'm bored."

"Doesn't matter-"

"Barry we have been through and seen a lot of supervillian crap in our days." She jolted a finger out at him. "I am not giving up my career, my home, my life because of some child."

"He's not just some child!" Barry retorted.

Iris's expression softened. "I know he took people away we loved, Barry." She gave a small shake of her head, pursing her lips. "But I'm not scared of him like you are. I'm not going to let myself be scared."

"But-" Barry tired to fire back. But his words died in his throat. She looked up at him with firm, steady eyes. He knew better than anyone that look as the end of the line for their argument.

"Well-" He stumbled back into the conversation, compromising. "Well we'll have to put some kind of anti speedster security around the house. But, someone has to stay home with the kids. We have to have someone with powers to watch them while we're at work, just in case."

Without hesitation, Kori answered. "I will," she said. She watched as they snapped their gazes up at her. "I will watch the small ones, if you will have me. Iris is right. This 'Inertia' took someone important to you. He was successful as making you afraid of him? Correct?"

Barry's lip twisted shame. "Yeah," He looked down as he answered in a small voice. "Especially when he threatened Iris and the twins to my face." He shook his head at her idea. "But I don't know…"

"In Tamaranian," Kori interrupted. "The closest word we have for someone like him translates to….terrorist. On my planet, it is not how many people they kill that cause them to win. They win when you let them take away your daily life, when you change and hide yourself away because you are afraid of them. You let them win when you let them change the things that makes you happy."
Barry took a moment to soak in her words. But he still held firm on his earlier decision. "I'm still retiring. My family is what makes me happy. I've been wanting to do it for a long time."

"Oh?" Starfire asked, curious. "And what else do you do? What else do you do that makes you happy?"

Barry took a moment to think. "My job." He smirked, thinking about his role at the CCPD as a forensic investigator. "I love my job." He looked down at the babies in his arms. "I love spending time with the twins. Taking Iris to dinner. Going on vacation."

He pushed away his pleasant thoughts. Grimacing as he shook his head. "But I can't just leave them alone all the time. I have to stay home, I have to watch them."

"So you will let Inertia win then?" Kori snipped "You will let him change your life and take away the things that make you happy?" She looked at him with soft eyes. "Retirement aside, what will hurt him most, is to not change your life at all."

"It's not that simple," Barry retorted. "Until Inertia is caught someone has to stay with the twins at all times."

"I could watch them," she reiterated again. "I helped with the servant's children in the castle on Tamaran for most of my life." She chuckled, "I can't imagine human children would be much different. Well, no fear of getting hit with a stray starbolt at least." She looked down at them. She held out her hand in front of the twins. The stared in wonder at the vibrant green light in her palm. She smiled, "And it is a amusing by how much they are entertained by me."

"Barry..." Iris looked over at him, placing a soft hand on his shoulder. "I really like that idea."

"Seriously?" He asked.

"She's good with them. The twins like her. Look at them," She motioned towards Don and Dawn. They smiled and squealed with delight as they reached their pudgy hands towards Starfire's light. "They've barely even paid attention to you while she's been here."

Barry mulled at her words. It wasn't right. They were his children. How could he just hand them off to someone else? He was their father. He should be the one looking after them.

Iris placed a soft hand on his chin, turning his gaze towards her. "She's right," she said. "The moment we change our lives around, we let him win."

The sound of the door opening broke their conversation. Barry looked over to see Wally stepping into the room.

"We're finished," Wally announced cautiously. "Just making sure you guys are alright."

"We're fine Wally." Iris answered. "We were just talking about-"

"Iris," Barry interrupted, handing the babies to her. "Will you take the twins with you to the Zeta platform? I'll meet you there."

"We're leaving?" She asked, doe-eyed.

He answered with a small, tired smile. "Yeah."

Light and warmth lifted Iris's expression. He placed a kiss on his lips before leaving the room.
Barry's faint smile faded. He approached Wally, reaching his hand into his pocket. "I can't Wally." He said, tired and defeated. "I can't anymore."

"What?" Wally asked him, confused.

Barry grabbed one of Wally's hands. He pulled his Flash ring out of his pocket, placing it into Wally's palm.

"I'm sorry." Barry repeated, a quietness in his voice.

Barry walked past him and towards the door. As it opened, he turned his gaze behind him, placing a hand in the doorway to keep it open.

"Starfire," Barry said "Are you coming home with us?"

Kori's brows perked with surprise. Home. It it been a moment since she heard that word. It had been too long since she was a part of one. And although Tamaran was lost forever, perhaps with the help of a few kind humans, she could find the start of new one. Perhaps, in time, Earth could feel like a home too.

A warmth filled her chest that she hand not noticed faded.

"Yes." She answered with a smile, following behind him.

A ringing played in Wally's ears. His breath sat in his chest as he looked at the Flash Ring in his palm. He couldn't move. It was though the tiny piece of metal in his hand froze every nerve in him.

In his childhood, he had envisioned this moment over and over in his mind. The celebration, the handoff, the praises; all shattered with a fierce reality.

It was not how he wanted it. It was not how he dreamed it. He did not want the cowl of The Flash handed to him with such defeated, willing passing. Wally knew that behind the lightning bolt emblem of the ring, sat the compacted Flash suit. A fear bolted through his chest with a stinging realization that he was not ready. Would he ever be ready? Was he even still worthy?

But how could he let 'The Flash' end with Barry Allen?

And as ring sat weighed heavy in his hand, its responsibility suddenly pressed heavy upon his shoulders.

_Gotham_

_April 15th 2017_

_00:00 EDT_

Tim Drake had seen far more corpses than any average fifteen-year-old should have. It came with the job. It came with the line of work required of Batman's protege; working to stop the deadliest demons Gotham had to spit up.

Overdoses, suicides, murders; Tim worked very hard to never let his humanity fade with each faded life he found. Every crime scene he set foot on, he made sure take a moment sonder. To realize that every person lost; criminal or other, had had a life as complex as his own.

As much as he admired Bruce as a detective; Tim never wanted to be as stone cold as he at the sight
of a body. Tim knew that as long as he still flinched; as long as there was still that small pit in his stomach; there was still humanity left in him.

And that sour pool in his belly bubbled away as he stepped inside an apartment in one of Gotham's deadliest neighborhoods. Five bodies lay motionless on the floor and furniture; chests filled with bullet holes.

Batman and Robin caught word of a new stash house. Authorities reported a growing number of overdoses from a new strain of heroin called 'The Grey Death'. And it did exactly as want it was made to do; kill. Exponentially more potent; unsuspecting users died while barely taking half a hit. To make matters worse, whoever was dealing it cut their product with the last amount of Spark left in Gotham; jacking up prices because of demand while knowing their victims would all be teenagers.

Tim thought about Arsenal in that moment. He thought about his twitching fingers and scars on his inner elbow. It seemed with everything going on, his whereabouts had been put on the back burner. Tim thought what Arsenal would be like now if he had not been captured. He doubted very much that he would have gotten clean, at least not in that short of time. Tim wondered if he'd still be shooting up. He probably would have taken this strain and died.

But would it be better to be dead, than to be a slave for The Light?

Tim shook Arsenal out of his head. There would be a time again to make the search for him a priority. But now he had to focus on the scene at hand.

The bodies were gruesomely murdered. Far more bullet wounds and slashes than what would ever be required for death. Tim's gaze moved to the body on the sofa. The man's neck so sliced, he was nearly decapitated.

They knew that it was the work of Red Hood. The same wounds from his Apokolips guns, the same kind of victims. The scummier the dealer and the more kids they dealt to, the worse their deaths.

And for these intentional child-killers, Read Hood made a horrid, slasher movie example of them and their transgressions.

"He's getting worse," Robin said. He moved his boot avoid a growing blood pool. His remark was answered with silence. He looked over at Batman, "We have to stop him."

Batman knelt down, inspecting one of the bodies. "This isn't like him."

Robin's gaze narrowed with irritation. Perhaps he was biased. Perhaps the fact that he never met Jason before he died, made him a little biased towards him. Perhaps that is why he held Jason under tighter scrutiny. But Tim had grown tired of everyone's lackadaisical action in stopping him.

"With all due respect," Tim said. "Now it seems like you're not even trying."

Tim saw a glimpse of tension in Batman's jaw.

"I know The League has been swamped lately but..." Tim addressed in a softer tone. "It really doesn't seem like you're putting in the effort to catch Red Hood."

"His name is Jason, Robin." Batman corrected, standing. "We need to find him and help him. Ra's had to have done something with his mind. The Jason I knew didn't do this."

Tim's lip twisted with annoyance. "Yeah, well, the Jason that everyone tells me about sounds like someone who would have become this anyway."
"You can't know that." Bruce beamed, snapping his gaze towards him.

"He's a serial killer." Tim remarked, exasperated. "He's mowed down dozens of bodies, and you're wanting to go soft on him?" Tim was tired of sparing his feelings. He needed to hear the cold truth. "He was a poor kid, from a shitty family, with violent tendencies that were never resolved." He tilted his head his head in inquiry. "You really think this isn't his own doing? His own free will? You really think he never wanted to do anything like this?"

"He deserves a second chance, Robin."

"Why?" Tim chirped back. "Why take that chance? What if he uses it to hurt one of us?"

"He was one of us Robin," Batman answered. "We have to trust that part of him is in there somewhere underneath Ra's influence."

Robin went quiet. Batman returned to collecting evidence. After a moment Tim spoke again, gently, "It's not your fault he died, you know?"

Bruce tensed at his words.

"He chose to go after Anton, you didn't ask him to." Robin continued. "You can't let your guilt allow you to let your guard down."

Silence filled the room and Robin skin crawled with nervous anticipation.

"I think it's best if we split up for the rest of the night," Batman finally answered. "Cover more ground."

With swift motions, Batman climbed out and up the fire escape whence they came.

"Yeah, sure." Robin answered to himself, watching him leave. He crossed his arms. "Cover more ground."

Gotham City

April 18th

21:15 EDT

A bright light shown from the massive computer monitor as Jason Todd sat at his oversized desk. The concrete walls of his safehouse wrapped around him. He rested his cheek in his palm as the other hand clasped around a glass of whiskey. His eyes followed the flashing lights of the computer screen. He pulled his drink towards him, clinking the ice in his glass.

Jason Todd had spent the last month, hacking street cameras and placing his own cameras around Gotham. After all these years, it seemed that Batman still kept to his typical routes while on patrol.

But Jason was not interested in Bruce, no. He was interested in his own replacement.

The recordings played Robin's fights in silence. The whisky neat slowed down his perception but he studied Tim's fighting style with ruthless concentration.

What was it? What was it about this boy, that made Bruce forget what had happened to him? Why, instead of being left alone to honor his memory, was the mask of 'Robin' merely recycled.
Jason took a heavy swig from his glass. He wasn't sure if the warmth on his skin was from the whisky or from his budding irritation.

He would prove to Bruce how unworthy Tim was of his cowl. He would prove to Bruce just how stupid it was of him to be replaced.

But first, he had to learn how Tim fought. He had to learn his combat flaws, so he could take him down.

"You know, stalking is a sign of obsession."

Jason jumped from his seat as a voice erupted behind him. He drew a pistol from the holster on his side.

Arms in front of him, he stared down the barrel. At the other end stood a boy.

The boy looked at Jason with a smooth smirk and fiery eyes. This blonde hair was wild upon his head. A tight green bodysuit clenched over his skin. He crossed his arms in front of his chest, barely acknowledging the gun pointed aimed at his face.

Jason recognized him from Ra's al Ghul's description of him. 'A new deadly ally', as he put it. Jason thought he seemed far too young to be a 'killing machine'.

"I think I know who you are. Inertia, right?" Jason asked, lowering his gun.

The corner of his lip pulled into a grin. "You're not as dumb as you look." He mocked.

Jason growled with irritation. He placed his gun back on his hip. He didn't have time to entertain children. "The hell do you want?" He asked, sitting back in his chair.

"Thought I'd introduce myself," Inertia answered.

"Nice first impression," Jason scoffed.

Inertia came up next to him him, his arms crossed. He looked up at the screen, eyes following Tim's moves. "He's good," he noted.

Jason's lip flashed with a snarl, "Not as good as me."

Inertia sported and ornery grin. "You can't be that good if you got yourself killed."

A twinge of irritation shot through Jason's nerves. He huffed through his nose. "How 'bout you fuck off?" Jason barked, eyes still glued to the screen.

"What's it feel like?" Inertia asked. "Seeing someone else in your cowl?"

After a moment of quiet Jason answered, "Like betrayal."

"You know what's funny," Inertia said. "Bats watched that psycho gut you like a fish and he still got another kid to fight for him."

Jason's hand clenched tight around his glass.

Inertia placed a hand on the back of Jason's chair. He leaned in with a daring and cocky motion. "You think it's just because he forgot about you?" He asked, mockingly. "Or that he doesn't care?"
Jason's eyes flashed over to him. His armed tensed with anger at Inertia's closeness "I'm going to beat the shit out of you if you don't shut the fuck up." Jason spat at him.

Inertia smiled at his response. "Or maybe, the person you should blame is him." He tilted his head towards the monitors.

Jason gave the recordings his attention again. Tim battled a group of thugs in a dim alley way.

Inertia stood upright, walking behind him. The mockery in his voice never faded. "I doubt he doesn't know about you. Maybe he wanted everyone to forget about you. Over shadow your legacy. Make everyone forget what a failure of a Robin you were," Inertia stood a meter to his left, crossing his arms. He smiled. "Nothing honors a dead kid like burying every trace of him."

"Shut up!" Jason screamed, throwing the glass at him. It shattered against the wall as Inertia supersped to his right side.

"I mean, it's not like he cares anyways." Inertia continued.

Jason jumped at the sound of his voice, realizing he'd moved. He jumped his feet, fists clenched at his sides.

"He's never known the danger that comes when you parade a child in a costume like a moving target." Inertia said. "I doubt he's ever known the horror that can comes from being a sidekick."

Inertia closed the space between them. He tilted his head, grinning. "You've seen that horror first hand, haven't you?"

Jason shook with a roaring rage. His lips pursed into a fine line, wanting so bad to punch that little shit in the jaw but didn't have the speed required.

New movement on the monitors caught Inertia's attention. He gasped in amusement as he turned towards the screens. "Well would you look at that?"

Jason followed his gaze back to the video feed. It played a scene of Robin dismounting stopping his Robin Cycle in front of the Zeta Tube hidden underneath a bridge in a small Gotham slum.

But in this recording, Tim was not alone.

Jason watched as Tim stood there Robin uniform. A young, blonde girl floated from the sky and on the ground next to him. Wonder Girl wrapped her arms around his neck as he placed a long kiss on his lips. When they were done, she stepped into the Zeta Tube and disappeared into the light.

"I don't know about you." Inertia chimed, flashing teeth. His voice sat high in his nose. "But that seems like an opportunity, to make him hurt."

"I don't kill kids," Jason snapped back quickly.

"No, but you can use her to send a message." Inertia suggested. "To the Team, The League, The world."

Gears whirled away in Jason's mind. He rewound the video, pausing on Wonder Girl's and Robin's embrace.

"Believe me," Inertia chittered away at him; the devil on his shoulder that Jason could not shake. He continued, "Whenever your enemies do die, your revenge is so much sweeter knowing that they
suffered."

Inertia's slimy smile pulled on his lips knowing he had just cemented his second move. A flash of violence flickered in his eyes as he said, "In more ways than one."

_Gotham Harbor_

_April 21st 2017_

_23:00 EDT_

Tim growled to himself as twisted the throttle on his Robin Cycle. Smoke bellowed into the sky, the harbor flickering with a glowing flame. The docked ship set ablaze gave warmth to the crisp spring air.

Robin had gotten word of a ship coming in that night smuggling drugs. He tried reach it before they unloaded but it seemed that someone else had beaten him to it.

Robin pulled up as close the the fiery ship as he could stand it. He let his bike idle as he put down his kickstand.

He found Red Hood standing on the dock. He stared at the blazing ship, his hand on his hips as he watched it crackle with fire. His red helmet clasped tight around his head.

Robin dismounted, placing the helmet on his seat, "I suppose this is your doing?"

Robin tensed, ready for a fight but Jason seemed to take no mind of his presence. It made Tim nervous. It made it seem as though Jason had already won, but at what game? Tim's eyes scanned the concrete below them. Blotches and streaks marks of blood lay around them, but no bodies could be found.

"Where's the crew?" Robin asked sternly.

"Oh don't worry yourself too much, replacement." Red Hood responded with a smile in his voice. "I'm sure the fire's probably taken care of them by now."

Robin grit his teeth, "Just like you took care of those dealers at the stash house?"

Jason turned towards him, "You should be thanking me, there was about three hundred pound of heroin on that ship."

Tim twitched in agitation. He was tired of Jason's vicious and callous demeanor. He reached for his utility belt, pulling out and extending his electrified staff.

"You don't wanna do that," Red Hood warned.

Robin charged after him.

Jason had spent far too long studying his recordings to have Tim best him. He was much more prepared than Tim realized. A realization that did not strike Tim until his staff was knocked from his hand. Jason snatched his wrist and with swift movements, twisted Tim's arm behind his back. Jason grabbed at the base of Tim's hair with his other hand.

"You don't deserve that cowl," Jason snarled in his ear.
"I'd say you're a disgrace to it!" Robin spat back.

Jason released him, shoving him away.

"What did you say!?" Red Hood yelled.

Robin stumbled, regaining his footing. He turned to face him. "You're a disgrace to this symbol." Robin said, pointing at the 'R' on his chest. "You're nothing but a murderer."

"Yeah? And?" Jason was unbothered by his words. "So I should just toss scumbags like them in jail? Why? So they can just get out and do the same thing over and over? I'm actually cleaning up."

Tim scoffed at him. "I can't believe he wants to give you a second chance."

"What do you mean?" Jason asked.

"Bruce," Tim informed. "He told me to take it easy on you. To give you a second chance. He thinks the 'old' Jason in is there somewhere."

Jason found himself filled with a strange stillness. After all the people he killed, Bruce still felt that there was some resemblance of the boy from years ago?

His body was resurrected, but that boy could never truly be brought back.

"I still think you're the old Jason," Robin added with a challenging tilt of his head. "Just doing what you've always wanted to do but couldn't in the 'Robin' uniform."

"The name is 'Red Hood'," Jason barked.


Jason fell quiet.

"Look, I'm going to do what he asked me and give you a second chance." Tim said, breaking the silence. "But this is the only time. Turn yourself in. If I see you on the streets again, I won't hold back." He jumped back on his Robin Cycle. "Now if you don't mind, I'm running late."

Jason watched as he disappeared into the night.

Hours later, off in the shadows Jason hid beneath weathered bridge. The bridge housed a Zeta Tube beneath it.

Like clockwork, Wonder Girl and Robin arrived at 3am, just as Jason's recordings revealed they would.

Wonder Girl kissed Robin goodbye as their night patrol together came to an end. He drove his cycle off into the night. Cassie scratched her head in confusion as the Zeta Tube would not open to her voice commands. Little did she know that Jason sabotaged the Zeta Tube earlier that night.

Cassie flinched, smacking the back of her arm. She expected to find a mosquito, but pulled her hand away to find she had been hit with a small dart.

Her knees wobbled. White spots danced in her vision as she suddenly found herself unable to stand. She fell to the ground, fighting back the pull of sleep with savage claws.
Desperately, she tried to move her limbs to run, to jump, to fly away. But her efforts were futile. Her eyes followed the sound of footsteps. Beneath her cloudy vision, she could see the shape of Red Hood closing in on her.

He knelt down next to her. The feel of the cold metal of an inhibitor collar slipped around her neck.

"Get ready Blondie," Jason said to her. His voice began to fade as she slipped into unconsciousness. "You're gonna win us this war."
Rain tapped with a relentless vigor on the window. The clouded sunlight seeped into Rose's room as she held her utility belt in her hand. She rummaged through the pouches, refilling needed supplies and gadgets. She opened the final empty pouch and placed the utility belt on her bed.

Her heartbeat thumped in her ear as loud as the rain on the window pane. She stood silent and still, jaw clenching as she stared at her nightstand. With quiet movements she opened the top drawer, pulling out a small safe. She punched the numbers in the lock, heart jumping at the 'click' of its undoing. She raised the lid.

Inside the tiny safe rested the three capped Mirakuru syringes she stole on their latest mission. The neon green entrails sat bright against the black box.

She reached out her hand, shaking as she placed diligent fingers around one of the syringes. She picked it up. Her heart rate climbed at its closeness; at its feel.

Thoughts whirled in her head as memories flooded through her.

Why? Why did she take these? Why did she take them after everything she had done while on the Mirakuru's rage and bloodlust. Why, after everything she did, did she still crave it in her veins?

She wondered if this was how addicts felt. To have something tear you into a shredded pile of nothing yet still crave more of it.

The Mirakuru turned her into a killer. This she knew. But what she knew most, what she hated most, was that she was nowhere strong enough without it. The moment she placed a small dose in her veins at the Gotham Halfway Home, she realized what she had been missing.

Her fingers twitched and breathing hitched. Adrenalin filled her as her body knew what she held in her hand. Her body knew what could come next.

She hated what it did to her. But god damn did it feel so good.

She proved to herself she could control it in tiny doses. Just a few milliliters, that's all she needed to bring her strength back to where it used to be. Back to where it needed to be.

Back to where it needed to be, to keep Deathstroke from taking her and Joey away again.

Rose jumped at the sound of her bedroom door creaking open. *Fuck!* Why didn't she lock the door? She grabbed the other two syringes in her palm and tried to stuff them in her utility belt.

But a hand grabbed her wrist, yanking her.

"Ow Jesus!" She snipped, snapping her head to her right. Her grip tightened around the Mirakuru syringes.

She stood breathless. Joey's gaze stung her as hard as his grip around her wrist.
Her nose flared with irritation. No one. *No one.* Was allowed to grab her anymore.

"Joey. Let. Go." She snarled. Had he been anyone but her brother, he would have already been unconscious on the floor. "It's not what it looks like," She beamed. "Let. Go."

But Joey did not adhere to her order. If anything, he tightened his hold. His teeth grit behind pressed lips. An shaky anger rose in his limbs.

Rose took her free hand and in return clasped it on Joey's wrist. His face squirmed with pain as she finally managed to loosen his grip and tossed his hand towards his chest. She quickly placed the syringe in her utility belt.

*What the fuck are you thinking?* Joey signed to her, his face creased with a fiery disbelief.

"I wasn't going to use it!" *Right now.* She meant to add.

*Why do you even have it?* He asked, sneering.

Rose stood, stoic and silent. Her mouth full of answers with lips sewn shut around them.

*Where did you get it?* He asked, realizing he wasn't going to get a response to his first question.

"At the Meta-youth home in Gotham," she answered. "I took it so they couldn't use it on those kids anymore."

His only movement was the rise and fall of his chest. Until he finally gave her one single sign, *Liar.*

"Fuck you Joey," she spat back.

*Did you forget what it did to you? Did you forget what it turned you into?* He asked. He paused, his hands shaking, knowing that his words were cruel, but damnit they were true.

*Monster. Killer.* He signed.

"I'm not using it the way Deathstroke made me use it." She said, quieter. "Just small doses when The Team's in trouble." Now she panicked, scraping her head for excuses. "I need it."

*You're strong without it.* He signed.

"Not strong enough." She answered, defensive, turning away from him. An itch of worry dance beneath her skin as she placed the syringes in her utility belt. She looked over her shoulder asking in a soft voice, "Are you gonna tell Nightwing?"

Joey stared at her, unmoving. He looked at her with a small furrow of his brow and a slight pout of his lip. Rose had known him long enough to know his answer was *'no'.* Whenever Joey was sure he always answered affirmatively, enthusiastically. Any stumbled, delayed, or missing answers always meant *'no'.*

A sadness pulled on Joey's expression. His eyes fell to the ground before he looked back up at her and signed, *I just got you back Rose, I don't want to lose you again.*

Rose watched him leave, closing the door behind him. An ache filled her gut as she wondered if he meant her being kicked off the team. Or dying. Or becoming that monster once again.

She wasn't sure which was worse.
"Uhh..." Barry walked into his home, puzzled. He found several large boxes of disassembled furniture in his living room and one at the top of the stairs. A new, plastic-wrapped mattress sat askew against the couch.

He heard the clacking of a hammer, a swear, and a baby's laughter from upstairs.

"Honey? You okay?" Barry called up the stairs, putting his jacket in the closet.

He wondered what it was that Iris and Kori could be up to now. The two had become so close in such a short amount of time that Barry joked of Iris leaving him for her. To which she responded, 'Oh we couldn't do that. Her spaceship is wrecked.' It did not ease his mind but at least they were getting along.

In fact, they only quarreled once. When they discovered that Tamaraneans apparently received their powers from sunlight. Meaning that they had to recharge during the day...in the nude.

Two fiery red cheeks on Barry's face and one stern talk from Iris was all it required for Starfire to adjust her recharging habits. But Barry promised to build her her own privacy wall in the backyard.

Barry walked up the stairs. He looked into the twin's room to discover Iris and Starfire putting together a bed frame.

"Iris, what are you doing?" Barry asked, watching her as she fought with a screwdriver.

"Setting up Kori's new bed," she answered.

"Why?"

"She's staying in here with the babies."

"Why? We have an extra bedroom."

"No, Bart's going to be staying in there."

Barry's words died in his throat. He had to replay her words in his mind before asked again, "What?"

"Are you going to help me?" She huffed, irritated. "I need you to put his dresser together." She pointed towards the unopened dresser box in the hallway. "I have to take him clothes shopping tonight."

"Uh, Iris, we never talked about this." Barry said with a shake of his head.

"What is there to talk about Barry?" Iris chimed back. "His home is burned to the ground, he needs a place to live."

"Iris." He shook his head again "I'm not comfortable with this. He's supposed to be staying at The Warehouse. We need to think about this."

Iris's face scrunched with inquiry at his hesitation. "Why?" She asked, standing. "There's nothing to think about."
"Inertia killed Jay and Joan, Iris." Barry stated needlessly. "If he finds out Bart lives here-" His mind danced with nightmares. "What if he comes after us even harder? We need to keep a distance from him."

He felt sick talking about Bart in such a way. Though it only hurt because it was true. Barry continued, "Inertia killed them to get at Bart. Inertia is here because he's here-"

"That boy is not responsible to Jay and Joan!" Iris snapped at him.

Her voice sparked an uneasy squeal from Dawn. Starfire walk to the crib and picked her up to soothe her.

Barry was jarred by Iris's foreign tone. It brought about a small wave of fear in him. It was rare that he ever saw Iris lose her temper. She always took a moment to think before she spoke. He must have rumpled her den too many times for her to finally bare her fangs at him.

"He is not responsible for them dying." Iris lowered her voice but the intensity of her timbre remained. Her lip and her nose twitched. Something Barry noticed always happened when she tried to fight back the rising tears in her eyes.

Her voice cracked. "I am so tired of hearing that from everyone. I don't want to hear another word about, about 'what if, what if'."

There was so much in her life that Iris could control; had control of. But one thing she couldn't not control were people's thoughts and poisonous whispers. She had only spent a few days in The Watchtower. She had told Barry that she couldn't stay there because of boredom. But in reality, it was that the people that passed through it, made her ill.

Her stomach curdled hearing the absurd accusations made about Bart. Disgusting, ignorant things said by the other League members and even Bart's own teammates. Putrid, desperate whispers of blame, talk of suspension from hero duties, even conspiracy theories of double agency and guilt.

Disgusting, all of it.

Iris threw her hands up in irritation. "Everyone is connected to everything. Everyone has had good things and bad things happen because of them, just for existing." She shook her head. "No one has any control over it, just like Bart has no control."

Her voice struggled against her shaking composure. "He is our grandson. He is our family. And I will not turn him away knowing he doesn't have a home."

"The ware-"

She jolted her finger at him as she interrupted. "Don't you dare say anything about that damn warehouse. You know that that place is just a-a a collection bin for the kids that don't have anyone left." She knew that it was a cruel thing to say. But it was true, and if everyone else was going to state their raw and hurtful opinions, so would she.

"Bart still has family. He has us." She voice cracked on her final word as she placed her hand on her chest. She took a moment to gather herself but her gaze still pierced right through Barry.

"So you do whatever you need to to get whatever you're feeling out of your system." She said as she motioned haphazardly at his figure. "Talk to Canary. Talk to a counselor. Talk to a stranger, I don't care." Her jaw clenched as she huffed away the anger in her chest. "But I will not let you take out your feelings on Bart. I will not let you be like everyone else."
Barry looked down at the floor, sullen. She was right.

"You think you're the only one who's sad, Barry?" Iris asked, the irritation in her voice giving way to empathy. "Bart lived with them. How do you think he feels? Inertia didn't just take away some of his family. He took away his stability, his home, his new life. He needs to rebuild that life with us. With family that loves him."

She swallowed hard. "But if you're willing to let that little boy live in an orphanage before welcoming him in our home-" She cut herself off not knowing if she should continue.

But she did. "Then you're not the man I married."

Barry looked at her, wide eyed with a slacked jaw. Iris brushed past him, not wanting to continue the fight for fear she may say something more cruel. She grabbed the box containing the dresser pieces and attempted to push it down the hall towards the guest bedroom.

"Iris," Barry quietly called after her. But she continued to push the heavy box, not wanting to fight anymore.

"Iris," he supersped up to her grabbed her arm, gently.

Iris closed her eyes, bracing herself for more arguments.

"You're right," he said.

She turned towards him, eyes wide with surprise.

He looked at her with sorrowful eyes "You're right. I'm sorry." She was Iris West-Allen. She was always right. And she was the only person who could ever see right through him.

"It's not his fault. It's not Bart's fault." He hated how hard it was for him to say it out loud. "I'll talk to someone. I'll fix this." He shook his head and added quietly. "I don't like who I am right now either."

Iris placed a soft hand on his cheek and gave him a tiny smile. "Then we'll work on it. Together."

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Bludhaven - The Warehouse

April 22nd 2017

17:00 EDT

The Zeta Tube whirled in the basement of The Warehouse. M'gaan appeared inside the bright spiral of light. She stepped out of it with a relieved sigh. She rubbed the fatigue from her eyes, knowing that after today she could finally have a peaceful sleep.

She left Mars just moments prior. J'ornell's suicide bombing had killed all but three Martian Council members. B'arzz managed to survive as well but still recovered from his injuries.

The truth was out about J'ornell's betrayal. It was now known that there never was any White Martian terrorist attacks; that J'ornell hired A'monn and A'morr to fake them for their own personal gain.

The surviving Martian Councilmen promised to testify that A'monn and A'morr posed as Wonder Woman, Martian Manhunter, and Miss Martian to discredit them; making them seem like killers. She wasn't sure how well their testimony would be received by the American government, but it was a
Tension still lingered on Mars but no where near the severity of just a few months ago. It was about time that something, anything, went their way. It was a shaky win. But a win nonetheless.

"So, how’d it go?"

M’gaan looked up to see Nightwing by the computer monitors. Artemis stood next to him, clicking away at the keyboard as she put together the lesson for the training today.

Nightwing found it might be good bonding and "steam blowing" activity for some of the younger members to spar with some of the original Team. Artemis put together some files on their newly discovered opponents. Everything from Inertia, to Red Hood, to Deborah Morgna. Having them study their moves might finally give them the upper hand in battle.

"Tiring, long." M'gaan answered. "I'll have my report done later tonight. But, things have seemed to calm down on my planet. Now that the truth's out."

"Probably the best news we've heard in months," Nightwing said.

Boots patted on the ground as they were joined by Rose, Joey, Tim, Jaime, and Virgil.

"That everyone?" Artemis asked.

Jaime looked around the room. "Well, Bart said he'd be late." As per usual. "Um, but we're still missing Cassie."

"That's weird. She's never late," Tim said. He pulled out his phone, calling her. It rang and rang until it went to voicemail.

They waited a few more minutes until Tim's phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket. Cassie's name popped up on the caller ID.

"Cassie? We're are you?" He asked, pressing the phone to his ear. "Training's about to start."

Silence filled the other end. There was a small sound of breathing. A man on the other end responded.

"Hello, replacement."

The voice shot a shiver down Tim's spine. A sudden rage coursed through him as heat filled his chest. Why? How, did he have Cassie's phone?

"Jason." Tim hissed through his teeth. "Where is she?"

Tim's savage tone caught the attention of the room. Nightwing snapped his head up at the sound of Jason's name.

"Well, that would ruin the fun now, wouldn't it?" Jason mocked.

"Give her to us, now." Tim demanded.

Nightwing ordered him to put his phone on speakerphone. They all crowded around Tim, silent.

Jason's crude voice spilled from Tim's speakers. "What's it feel like?" He asked. "Having something taken away from you?"
"Jason," Nightwing interrupted. "Whatever bad blood you have between us stays with us. Cassie has nothing to do with this."

"Oh, but she does. She has everything to do with this. She will be used to take you all down."

Jason's threat cast a cloud over them.

"And Robin," he addressed Tim again. A savageness caked his tone. "I will use her to make you hurt. You want to be a Robin, then you'll be shattered like one."

Artemis pushed herself towards the phone. "Jason, it's Artemis."

A quiet sat on the other end.

Artemis continued. "This isn't you." She said said with a soft tone, remembering that small, star-crossed boy that once followed her around. "The Jason I knew would never hurt any kid. Superpowered or not." A soft plea coated her words. "Please, give Cassie back to us."

Silence again fell for a moment. Jason's words were quiet and sorrowful. The left trails of regret and longing. "You should have gotten out when could have, Arty."


"Kids shouldn't wear costumes."

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**Infinity Island**

**April 22nd 2017**

**16:30 ECT**

A pounding rose in Cassie's head as she groaned. The searing pain made opening her eyes a formidable task. Bright lights clouded her vision as she tried to blink away the blurriness.

A sluggishness reset in her limbs. As her sight to come to, she realized she was sitting on a heavy chair. Her legs were bound to its legs and her wrists tied behind her. She couldn't move.

"What?" She groaned, groggily.

The fog finally cleared. Cassie found herself in the middle of a room. Cabinets lined the walls with various surgical instruments and weapons. In front of her a video camera sat still and daunting on a tripod.

A pang of panic shot through her. She pulled on the restraints but the heavy iron chair wouldn't budge. Her heart pounded in her chest as she became all too aware of the Inhibitor Collar tight around her neck.

"Relax," a masculine voice commanded behind her. She yelped as a hand clasped onto her shoulder. "It's alright," he assured.

She looked from the hand and up to the man next to her. She squinted under the bright light behind him. He walked away from her and towards the cabinets. He leaned against it, an apple in his other hand. He took a bite out of it with a deafening 'crunch'. He spoke before he finished chewing. "M'not gonna to hurt you. I'm just here to babysit."
She had only seen Jason without his mask in photos. Images long ago buried in Batcave archives and at the bottom of cloud storage.

She stared at him with a curious wonder in her eye. Without his helmet, he became all too real. The lines on his face, the tiny scars on his knuckles; details toying with the impossibility of his existence. A once bloodied corpse; now moving, breathing, being.

"Jason?" Cassie asked in a hoarse voice.


"You died." She stated, still in awe. "How did you come back?" She had an inkling of how from Batman's deductions, but wanted to find out for herself.

Jason groaned. "For some reason Ra's decided I was worth sharing his Lazarus Pit with." He tossed is apple into the trashcan in the corner of the room. "I haven't decided if I appreciate his...generosity."

"Where am I?" She asked, looking around her. He eyes glossed over the menacing instruments on the counter. "What are they going to do to me?"

"Location's confidential." Jason answered. "I'm not going to let them hurt you." He assured in a softer voice. "They just need you to send a message."

"Why are you working for them?" She demanded, her voice raised.

"What?" Jason was taken aback by her tone.

"What are you doing?" She asked, astounded. "You used to be Robin. You used to be one of us."

"I am nothing like you." He snarled. "And being 'Robin' is what got me killed. Something that apparently meant nothing to Batman, since your little boyfriend now wears my old cowl."

He closed the space between them, crouching down in front of her. "If you keep doing this. This...amature superhero teeny-bopper bullshit, they're going to get you killed. Bruce saw me slaughtered in front of him and it did nothing."

Jason stood with his rising anger. "He still runs The Team, he still has proteges. He does not give a shit about any of you. Can't you see that? You are all pawns for his dirty work." He growl as images of Tim flashed in his mind. "And when one of you gets killed he just plucks up a brand new one off the street like nothing ever happened."

"Are you kidding me?" Cassie snipped back. "Bruce was devastated when you died. Dick said he nearly hung up his cowl, Tim had to fight so hard to get Bruce to let him become Robin."

"Shut up," Jason barked back.

Sweat trailed down his brow. A trembled danced in his hand. A sickness began to rise in his gut as the room became uncomfortably hot. All were signs that he was due for his next dosage. He reached into his pocket, pulling out an orange pill bottle. He twisted off the cap.

Fuck. Empty.

The flash of orange caught Cassie's attention. "Stop!" She exclaimed. "Why are you taking those?"

"Side effect of the Lazarus Pit." Jason answered, taken aback by her outburst. "Special pills I need to take to keep my body functioning."
"Who told you that?"

"Ra's...Luthor..." He answered, slowly.

"They're lying!" Cassie declared. "Those pills are nothing but Spark ground into powder and put into tablets."

Jason looked down at the pill bottle in his hand then looked back up at her.

"If you don't take some for a while, do you run a fever, sweat, shake?" She asked.

A quiet overcame Jason. His eyes raced from left to right, piecing together every moment just before every dosage. There hadn't been a time since he was brought back that he didn't take them. The more the fever ignited his skin, the more images played in his mind of his mother going through withdrawal.

"They're drugging you, Jason." A pleading caked Cassie's words, begging him to understand. "They're addicting you so you'll do whatever they say. They're making you dependent and addicted so you won't leave them."

"Stop," he cawed. He grit his teeth in irritation. But was he irritated because of his fever? Or was he irritated because she could be right? "Stop. Making. Shit. Up."

"How can you be so blind?" Cassie scolded. "You think Bruce is using us for his personal gain? What about them? What about The Light?" Cassie's tone hardened with painful truth. "You think Ra's al Ghul just brought you back out of kindness? You think him and Luthor don't have an ulterior motive?"

"Shut up!" he screamed as the door to the room slid open. "You don't know anything!"

"Wooooaaaah what's going on in here?" In blur of green, Inertia raced up to them from the doorway. He stood with his hands on his hips. He looked down at Cassie with a condescending snarl. "I told you to keep her gagged, she'll never shut up."

"What do you want?" Jason snipped at him.

"It's my turn to babysit the babe." Inertia answered. "Plus, Ra's called for you. Says you might be runnin' low on your dosage."

Jason stayed quiet. His eyes met Cassie's intense gaze. The orange bottle weighed heavy in his hand.

Inertia tossed him a new bottle filled with fresh pills. "Get goin'," Inertia snipped at him. "Take your pills, rest up, get some sleep." He flashed Cassie a hungry smile. "I'll take care of her."

Cassie's stomach filled with a cool sickness. There was a certain savageness that prowled in Inertia's eyes that she had to look away from.

Jason chewed on the inside of his cheek in thought. He huffed with uncertainty and frustration as he trudged out of the room.

"Jason, don't!" Cassie tried to call out after him. "I'm telling the truth-"

Inertia cut her off by placing a hand over her mouth. "I think that's enough out of you. Did anyone ever tell you your voice is super annoying?" He glanced over his shoulder, waiting Jason to leave.

Jason paused for a moment in the doorway. He took one more look at Cassie before leaving the
room. The door slid shut behind him.

Inertia supersped up to the door and locked it. He sped back up to Cassie. "God I thought he'd never leave." A mischievous smile pulled on his lips. "Now, we can get to the fun part."

Inertia walked over to counter, picking up some of the blades and inspecting them as he spoke. "Did you know, these walls are soundproof?" He informed. "No chance of a broody, angsty, bad boy interrupting our playtime."

A chill flushed down Cassie's cheeks. A tremble rose in her lip. "W-What do you want with me? Jason said I wouldn't get hurt."

Inertia picked up a dagger from the counter. His fingers gripped tight around the gold handle. He turned around. "Well, Jason isn't exactly informed of every detail." He enlightened.

Inertia moved in front of her. His free hand snatched her jaw with a tight grasp, pulling her gaze up at him. Cassie tried to wiggle out of his hand.

"You," Inertia brought his face in close. "My supple, blonde, punching bag are going to be a major turning point of history today."

A savage smile pulled on his face as he let go. "But first, we have to get you camera ready."

Cassie saw black as his fist collided with her mouth.

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Bludhaven - The Warehouse

April 22nd 2017

18:00 EDT

Disorder teetered on the edge as tension flooded the basement of The Warehouse. Nightwing, Artemis, and M'gaan stood at the computer. A cable connected Tim's phone to the mainframe, doing what they could to pinpoint the location of Jason's call.

Jaime, Vigil, Rose, and Joey did what they could to placate Robin's worried mind. They tossed around ideas as to where she might be and planned a course of action.

But their words fell silent on Tim's apprehensive ears. "Anything?" He asked Nightwing, his heart fluttering in his chest.

The sound of static erupted around them. The screen of the computer danced with a cloud of white and gray pixels. They snapped their gazes up at the computer monitor. Choppy remnants of a voice popped in and out on the speakers. A video monitor flashed to life as a video transmission blurred in an out on the screen. Nightwing tapped away on the keyboard, trying to find the cause of the computer's malfunction.

"What's going on?" Artemis asked.

"Someone's trying to broadcast something to us." Nightwing answered. "They're overriding our monitor feed."

"Hello? Is this thing on?" An airy voice spilled from the speaker. A facial close up sharpened on the monitor.
Jamie twitched at the sound of the voice. He had only heard it once. But that was all it took for him to remember.

"Stupid 2000s tech" Inertia's voice rang clear from the video broadcast. "Ah, here we go." He chimed as he backed away from the video camera.

In the live stream, Inertia stood in a room. His green uniform sat snug on him. He snapped his translucent orange goggles from over his eyes onto his forehead. He supersped just far enough away for the camera to get his full figure on screen.

"Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce myself." He motioned towards himself in a dramatic fashion. "I, am Inertia, professional evil badass and speedster soldier for The Light."

Their nerves twinged and lungs froze as he paused.

His lips curled into a wicked smile. "And I have somebody I'd like you to meet," he said.

With a quick blur of green, he ran to a spot behind him.

A collective gasp filled the room.

If they had blinked, they would have missed Cassie tied to a chair and Inertia tearing off strip of cloth tied around her mouth.

"Help!" Cassie yelled as soon as the cloth was gone, shouting out around her. "Help me. Somebody." She cried, desperation dripping from her hoarse voice. "Help." She sounded like she'd been yelling.

"Oh my god," M'gaan gasped. "Oh my god. No." Her jaw fell agape as Cassie's damaged condition finally registered.

Cassie winced in pain as a stream of blood fell from her lower lip. A purple bruise already swarmed under her eye.

M'gaan trembled as she spotted the Inhibitor Collar around Cassie's neck.

She was helpless, defenseless.

And she was sitting right in the clawed paw of a monster.

Inertia leaned over next to her, crossing his arms. "Pretty ain't she? Well, besides all the blood." He cooded.

Cassie's eyes went wide, realizing the camera was on. She did want she could to tuck her face away from the lense.

Artemis's phone chimed wildly. She looked at the screen to see a multitude of push notifications from GBS. She gasped, looking up at them. "Guys, it's not just us getting this." Her face plastered with concern. "This broadcast is global."

"Citizens of the world," Inertia continued with his dramatic showmanship. "This is high school freshman and metahuman..." He grabbed the base of her hair and yanked her head upward, exposing her full face to the camera. "Cassandra Sandsmark."

"No!" M'gaan called out.
"Shit," Nightwing swore.

A ringing filled Dick's ear. The synapses in his brain sparked with a slow comprehension. It was a moment that seemed so undoubtedly impossible that his mind did everything it could to convince him it wasn't real.

The only sound he heard was his breath, and Inertia's voice ringing in his hear.

'Cassandra Sansmark'

'Cassandra Sansmark'

Nightwing's shaky gaze stared at Cassie's image on the screen. Inertia cocked her head in clear, undoubted view. Nightwing watched the growing glossiness of her eyes. He followed the small stream of blood from her nostril down to the bloodied gums of her teeth.

The world came back to him as it finally clicked that this was real. Inertia's broadcast was happening. Cassie was in the hands of a killer.

And he had just told the world her identity.

....

Nothing was ever going to be the same.

"Also known as Wonder Girl, protege to Wonder Woman," Inertia informed to the camera. "Unknown to the public, The Justice League has a team of consisting of minors. Children, some of which who have died, doing The Justice League's covert dirty work." A snarl flickered on his lips and he glared into the camera. "This message is from my boss, to The League. You have twenty four hours to disband your team of covert operatives or..." Cassie yelped as Inertia pulled her head up by the base of her hair again.

"She dies," he said with a smile.

His pause weighed heavy in the room.

"What'll be, earth's heroes? Will you disband your team of protoges, or...will you sacrifice, a third child for the sake of your organization? The timer starts." He let go of Cassie and pointed to the wall behind him. "Now." A 24 hour countdown timer lit up on the wall. The milliseconds ticketed away with an ominous speed.

Inertia chuckled to himself behind his slimy smile. "But while we're waiting, why don't I give a little incentive?"

He reached to his right, grabbing a gold-handled dagger. He superspeed behind Cassie and looped his arm around her neck in a headlock. With his right hand, he slowly and mercilessly, drug the blade across her chest from shoulder to shoulder. Tears burst from Cassie's eyes as the speakers flooded with her anguished scream.

Inertia's smile pulled tighter.

"CASSIE!" Tim screamed at the television.

"Oh my god!" M'gann called out. Her eyes watered as she placed her hand over her mouth.

The room erupted with their distressed and angered cries.
"Hope to hear back from you soon." Inertia chirped at the camera. "Let me know if you can hear her screams all the way up to The Watchtower."

"Trace that video feed, NOW!" Tim yelled. "We have to find her! We have to get her out!"

"Tim just take a deep breath-" Nightwing tried to calm him.

"No! Don't you tell me what to do!" Tim barked at him.

Nightwing grew fearful. A side of Tim was roused that none of them had seen before. A side of him awakened that make Nightwing afraid of what Tim might do. He had never seen Tim's emotions snake through his composure. He had never seen Tim with such a rage in his eye.

Nightwing's wrist computer rang. A small video of Batman projected onto the space in front of him.

"Have you-" Batman's words were cut off by Tim's shouts.

Time jumped in front of Nightwing, grabbing his wrist, pulling his video feed towards him.

"I trusted you!" Tim yelled at Bruce. Artemis jumped at him, trying to pull him away as Nightwing tried to push him off. But the words shot from Tim's mouth with unbridled betrayal. "I trusted when you said to give Jason a chance. I trusted you when you said to let him go. And he took her! He took her and now she's in the hands of a psychopath!"

Artemis yanked Tim away, slamming him up against the wall. She held him with a tight grip around his biceps, pushing him against the wall. He was irate, he was emotional, he wasn't himself, he was embarrassing himself. And worse of all, he wasn't helping.

"Get it together," Artemis hissed as she brought her face close to him. "Get your shit together."

She understood. She had seen that type of fire many times from Wally. She has seen that look of desperation many times when Wally was distressed over her safety.

"You can't help her like this." She looked at him with softer eyes but her words were still stern. "Her boyfriend can be mad all he wants, but right now we need Robin to help find her, okay?"

Harsh breaths fired from Tim as his nostrils flared. He trembled beneath Artemis's palms. In her eyes he found reality; he found reasoning. Anger still sat below his skin but he managed to push it away. At least for a moment. His shaking subsided, realizing that Artemis was right. He had his whole life for anger.

But they did not have long to find her.

Infinity Island

April 22nd 2017

17:30 ECT

Jason sat in the dark confines of his bedroom. He tried to sleep but his mind replayed Cassie's stunning accusations. He was hot under this leather jacket. Sweat caked his skin. He had to blink back the focus in his eyes as he looked down at the full pill bottle in his hand.
He held out his left hand. His fingers trembled in the air like an amatur trapeze artist. He grit his teeth in anger as he found he could not steady his hand. He clasped it over the bottle, his eyes shutting tight.

Was he ill from The Pit's side effects? Or was he ill from withdrawal? Did his body tremble from sickness? Or from anticipation of his next dose?

Was Ra's trying to keep him alive or was he just pumping him full of drugs to keep him placid? Just like….

Just like he had seen them do to Arsenal.

Jason jumped from his bed and charged out the door, placing the pill bottle in his jacket pocket. There was only one way to find out.

He marched down the hallway of the compound, passing by the occasional ninja guard as he trudged past them. His knees waned to buckle beneath him but he ignored their persistence. He breathed heavy as his fever boiled his skin.

Jason slammed open the door to Ra's's study. Two guards in the room jumped at attention, drawing their swords. Ivo and Ra's stood on either side of Ra's desk. Their backs had been turned, watching the security screens behind the desk.

Jason went to speak but his words shriveled in his throat. He looked at the main screen to see a video feed of Wonder Girl, collared and bound, helpless to the violent onslaught of Inertia's insatiable torture. Inertia's cackle rang from the speaker and he struck a crowbar down on her arms, her gut, and her knees at superspeed. As a demi-god, It would take far more swings from that slimey green maggot before he broke Cassie's bone or damaged organs. But that did not mean it didn't hurt. It did not mean she wouldn't eventually bruise or bleed.

Inertia dropped the crowbar and went for a gold-handled knife. He placed the blade on the corner of her mouth and moved to her side, giving the camera an unblocked view. Cassie's eyes went wide. Inertia looked at her with a predatory grin.

"Why don't you give the good folks at home another good scream?" He asked.

He sliced the knife from the corner of her mouth and through her cheek. Blood poured down her jaw as her piercing scream speared through the speakers and through Jason's chest.

Only Inertia's heinous laugh could be heard above her.

"What are you doing to her?!" Jason yelled.

"Don't act so surprised, you had to have known it would come to this." Ra's answered cooly. He looked at him with cold, unabashed eyes. "We cannot achieve change without the occasional bloodshed.

"She's just a little girl!" Jason yelled, exasperated.

"Oh now we all all know she is much more than that." Ivo smirked.

Jason grit his teeth. He pulled his gun from his holster and aimed it at Ra's. "Let her go. You let her go right now!" He demanded.

Ra's bodyguards jerked at Jason's movement Ra's motioned to them to stay put.
"And what will you do? Hum? Run away?" Ra's said. "You and I both know that won't survive without your medication."

Quiet fell between them. Jason's mind whirled again with Cassie's words. He looked at Ra's with a dark glower and answered, "And you and I both know that that 'medicine' is bullshit. Want to tell me why it shares the exact same chemical makeup as 'Spark'?"

The words fell from Jason's mouth before he had a chance to think on them. Bluff, bluff, bluff. His strong tone didn't give away his uncertainty, but would Ra's be able to see behind the cloud of smoke?

Ra's took a moment before answering. He smiled. "You know, as a former sidekick to the world's greatest detective, I'm disappointed that you didn't figure it out sooner."

Jason's eye went wide.

Cassie was right. It had all been a lie.

Jason's body trembled with a mix of rage, fear, and fever. The gun felt incredulously heavy in his hand. His weak muscles couldn't hold it upright any longer. The barrel fell from Ra's head to his stomach.

With a quick flick of his tongue, Ra's commanded to his guards, "Kill him."

Their swords nearly sliced off Jason's head as he dodged their movements just in time. He knew he wasn't strong enough to fight them. He knew to take on any of them would be a death sentence. So he did the only thing he could: run.

He burst through the door and down the hallway. His legs burned as they struggled to pull up his boots. The ninjas followed him. He picked up speed as he closed in on the window at the end of the hallway. He fired a few sloppy shots behind him. Judging by the yelp he thought he may have got one of them, but he wasn't certain.

He covered his face with his arms as he jumped out the window, glass shattering around him. It was loud. His legs stung with pain as he hit the ground and fell. He groan, picking himself up onto his feet, trying to run through the limp in his joints.

He was in the courtyard. He was a sitting duck. Something that was solidified by the sound of an arrow flying just past his temple.

Jason looked around him as he ran, a handful of archers emerged within their stone lookout pillars. He dodged into the shadows, hoping to impede the archers' accuracy. He would never understand Ra's absurd love for ancient weaponry.

He reached for his utility belt and pulled out his Father Box. It sparked in his hands, the fall damaging it.

Jason cried out as an arrow pierced the side of his thigh. He swore pulling it out of him and tossing it to the ground. But his voice had given way to his position. Floodlights illuminated around him and Jason found himself in the spotlight.

He saw the archers reach of the arrows in their quivers. Jason shook the Fatherbox ferociously, desperate to get it to work.

"Come on. Come on!"
The Fatherbox glew with a red light. Jason knew the damaged thing only had one teleportation left in it. He held the Fatherbox up to his mouth to make sure it could hear him clearly.

He knew where to go.

It was suicide to go there. It was absurd to go back there.

But it was his only option.

It was the only place that Jason knew he could go to where Ra's wouldn't dare follow.

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*The Watchtower*

*April 22nd 2017*

*16:45 EDT*

The frantic aura of The Watchtower soaked into Artemis's nerves. Cassie's hoarse wails rang in her ears and dug at her gut. A video of the live feed floated on the virtual monitor. She tore her eyes away, water rising within them. It had already been an hour since the start of Inertia's broadcast and Cassie's pain did not get any easier to stomach.

Desperation ran through the veins of her team. This wasn't like when La'gaan was kidnapped by Manta. This wasn't a long term investigation. Inertia tortured Cassie, in real time, for all of them to see with a morbid joy that made them all too certain on the reality of his threat to take her life.

Everyone did what they could. Emily and Garfield sniffed through the streets of Bludhaven, trying to catch her scent. Nightwing and M'gaan scoured through Gotham, shaking down any villains and gangsters that could lead them to clues of Jason's whereabouts.

Bart and Wally did the same in Central City; badgering The Rogue's to find out what they knew about Inertia, to see if they've seen him around the city.

Batman worked on decoding the encryption on the video's encryption with The Batcave's computers while Robin did the same with The Watchtower's.

Artemis walked up next to him, watching him work. She felt it best she stayed with him, to be his voice of calm and reason. He didn't speak as he worked on decoding the video. But she knew it wouldn't take long before Cassie's bloodied face would cause him to snap again.

She looked over her shoulder. Black Canary scoured over another video of the live footage with Green Arrow, deducing what they could about her whereabouts based upon clues in the video.

Blue Beetle, Static, Ravager, and Joey stood behind them. They were prepared, in uniform, as they fidgeted. They chose to follow Tim up to The Watchtower, confident in his hacking skills. They were ready and armed to zeta to whatever platform was nearest to Cassie's location. She was one of theirs.

They were going to bring her home.

A bright golden light illuminated around them. The floor rattled as a Boom Tube opened up in the air. Artemis yelled for the other members to ready themselves; preparing for an attack. She jerked Tim out of the way as a barrage of arrows shot through the portal and onto the ground.

A man thumped to the ground as the portal closed and dissipated. Heavy breathing bellowed from
his chest as he stayed for a moment on his hands and knees. He lifted his head up at Artemis.

A chill filled her chest. It was Jason; maskless, breathless and sweaty. Dark bags reseted under his eyes. Eyes never thought she would ever meet again.

Tim yelled as he leapt at Jason. He swung his staff down onto him. Jason rolled out of the way way but Robin's persistence never wavered. With bared teeth and a crushing grip he went after Jason as he struggled to dodge him.

"Where is she?!" Tim yelled.

Jason groaned as Tim's staff hit him in the gut. He folded over. Tim struck his staff down onto his back.

Yells and footsteps emerged from his other teammates. Jason crumpled onto his side.

"I DIDN'T KNOW!" Jason screamed. His voice shattered the air around them.

Tim, fueled with rage, raised his arms and swung his staff down at Jason's head.

With the last of his energy, he snatched the staff in the air with a painful 'clunk' in his palm.

"I didn't know!" Jason yelled again, struggling to keep the staff in pushed up and away from him.

Tim jerked the staff from Jason's hand. He roared as he raised it into the air again, ready to bear it down.

Artemis came up behind him and laced her arms under his armpits and laced her fingers behind his neck. She pulled him back while in a headlock, yelling at him to calm down.

Static and Jaime approached Jason. Blue's cannon lit up as sparks flew in Static's hands.

"Stop! Stop!" Jason said wide eyed, holding out his hand and he pushed himself onto his knees. "I DIDN'T KNOW! I didn't know they were going to do that to her I swear!"

They jerked still.

Jason breathed heavy. "Stop. Just stop ok? Here."

They took a defensive stance as Jason reached into his jacket pocket.

"Look! Look!" He tried to calm them as he reached for the pill bottle in his jacket pocket. He yanked it out and shook the bottle frantically in front of him. The pills rattled as he threw the bottle at their feet. "They've been lying to me too. They've been drugging me just like those other kids."

As Tim still huffed away in her headlock, Artemis exchanged glances with her other team members.

"They told me they were just going to hold her for ransom." Jason's voice was quiet. The memory of Cassie's scream chilled his veins.

His eyes watered. "I didn't know, I didn't know."

A soft look came over Artemis. And for the first time in years, she finally saw a glimpse of the teammate; a glimpse of a boy that she remembered.

"I'll take you there. I'll take you to her." Urgency soaked Jason's words.
"I'll tell you whatever you need."
If Artemis had to be honest with herself, she really had no idea what the fuck was going on anymore.

She stood, rigid and astonished. Tim Drake struggled to break free of her headlock. And Jason, Jason Todd, looked up at her with pleading blue eyes. He held his hand out in front of him, desperate for her belief.

Robin's boisterous complaints spilled across the cold laminate of the common area. But his words dissipated to soft white noise as Artemis's mind flooded with a tornado of questions and scenarios of impossibilities.

She continued to hold Robin in check as she looked down at her feet. The orange pill bottle sat there; the rattle within it long gone. The Spark capsules inside sat quiet and tempting.

Robin's voice came back to her. She looked around to find the rest of the team tense, growing into a pounce.

She looked to the left to see Black Canary and Green Arrow on guard. With clever hand work, she pried Tim's staff out of his hands and it toppled to the floor. She drug him a few steps away and pushed him towards Green Arrow who caught him with a stiff grip.

She pointed a finger at Ollie. "You, keep him in this room. He does not leave your sight."

She turned towards Dinah. "Give me five minutes, then call the others."

Artemis turned and picked up Robin's staff. She shoved it towards Jaime's chest. "You, do not give that back to him."

She marched towards Jason. "You, on your feet. Let's go," she barked.

She pulled him up by his arm. He limped alongside her. The others' voices and complaints fell quiet behind them as she lead him down the hallway and towards the infirmary.

The infirmary door opened and closed behind them. Artemis lead him into the room and released his arm. He turned towards her and a quiet fell between them. Her gaze was unmoving and indecipherable. He wondered what twirled in her thoughts.

He waited for a sound or some kind of movement.


"Take off your pants," was all that came out of her mouth.

Jason let out a surprised sound that was certainly unflattering.

"What?" He asked, jaw had time in his childhood where he'd fantasized about her speaking a line like that.
Artemis's gaze fell downward. She pointed at his leg. Blood pooled around his boot, dripping from the bottom hem of his BDUs.

"You want that bandaged, don't you?" She asked, emotionless as she brushed past him towards one of the cots. She rummaged through the end table beside it.

"Oh," He said with a hoarse voice. "Y-yeah." He finally regained his thoughts.

Jason walked to the nearest cot. He went to unzip himself but found it ridiculous to be in only compression shorts and kevlar. So he slipped off his jacket and armor and placed them on the foot of the bed.

Artemis made no attempt to look at him as he pushed off his BDUs. He stepped out of them and lay on his side on the cot, his injured thigh on top.

Artemis rolled a wheeled stool over to him, supplies in hand. She never once looked him in the eye as she began to clean and stitch the wound on his leg.

"Do you believe me?" Jason asked, quietly. He could no longer take the silence. He propped himself up with his elbow as she worked. "I don't agree with what The League has these kids do. What they had *us* do. But I wouldn't..."

"I really didn't know," Artemis answered quickly. She continued to work.

But her answer did not satisfy. He looked at her in disbelief. "All the times we fought side-by-side against The Light. After all those times we tracked, fought, and locked away traffickers, abusers, and crimelords you really think I'd do something like this?"

Artemis remained quiet once more. And this time her silence stung. Hers was the only forgiveness he couldn't bear to not have.

"I'm a fucking idiot." He looked away, shaking his head in self-disappointment. "I should have known they'd do something like this." He hissed as she dabbed the final bit of rubbing alcohol around his fresh stitches.

"Well," Artemis answered, peeling off her latex gloves. Her eyes looked over at him for a moment before she rolled herself over to the trash can. "Enough drugs can warp your sense of reality."

He sat up, "You believe me? About the pills?"

"Robin already had a report on it." She stood, putting the extra supplies away in the end table. "He found some in your jacket when you fought him at Arkham."

Her eyes trailed over to him as he stood. Only a few feet separated them.

"I've been reading everything I could on you, since they told me you're alive." She said in a soft voice.

*Alive*, he thought. *What an interesting choice of word.*

There was something more relaxed about her features. He found himself unable to pinpoint where she fell on the venn diagram of relief, sadness, and exhaustion.

"*You* did this Jason," she told him. "*You* need to help us *undo* it."

"I will," He said with a nod of his head. "I promised you I would." His eyes fell to ground as he
remembered Cassie's bloodied face.

"That girl...that's not what I wanted for her." He tied to explain, "They said they just wanted to broadcast her ransom to try to disband The Team and The League. I didn't think it would come to this." He snarled, thinking of Inertia's meniac cackle. "I put her right in that freak's hands."

"How did you come back?"

That was not a question that Jason was prepared for. He looked back up at Artemis. She eyed him with a slight tilt of her head.

"The Lazarus Pit," he answered. His voice as cold as the depths from which he was dragged from.

Death only hurt for a moment. The searing heat across his throat only flicked his nerves before the shock took over.

It was the drowning that terrified him during. It was his inability to breathe while air sat all around him. It was the warm suffocation from his own blood that no lifesaver could pull him out of.

He was so warm, and then everything went cold. An iciness overcame him as a darkness seeped into his vision.

What had scared him most, is that he knew he was dying. And that all there was, was the cold. A vast and empty, icy darkness.

Forever falling, floating.

Stuck.

Until a wretched green light seared his eyes and scalded what little was left inside him. Blisterious, boiling blood had suddenly coursed in his veins. He remembered trying to breathe as liquid filled his lungs once more.

Crazed, beastly, panicked; he shot up out of the water around him. Air scraped his lungs like talons.

He screamed.

He screamed until the pain of regrowing organs had subsided.

He screamed until the water of The Lazarus Pit no longer felt like acid on his skin.

He screamed until he could no longer speak.

He remembered looking up.

The dark underground caverns carried the footsteps of Ra's al Ghul as he looked down upon him. The green light from The Pit danced on Ra's face as a smile pulled on his lips.

Jason tried to pull himself out of that memory. But as his screams faded in his mind, Cassie's just played over them, louder.

Jason closed his eyes and let out a heavy exhale. "I should have stayed dead."

He felt winded as arms wrapped tight around him. He looked down to see Artemis holding him in a tight embrace as she buried her face into his chest.
Jason stood there for a moment, unsure and awkward. His arms held out at his side, uncertain what to do with them.

A shaky sob escaped Artemis as she held him tighter, rubbing his face against his chest.

Jason's expression eased. "Arty…” He said to her softly. He was was not someone who deserved to be cried over.

She shook again, and this time Jason embraced her back. He nuzzled his face into her hair. She smelled of the same scent of lilac he had known long ago.

She pulled away slightly, looking up at him with wet eyes. She placed a hand on his cheek.

God fucking damnit did she miss him.

"You get a second chance," She said with a shaky voice. "You get a second chance too." She swallowed the sob in her throat and smiled. "We got you back too."

He answered her with a small nodd. But her smile riled a sadness inside him. He knew that Artemis was remembering the Robin from five years ago. The one who she helped train. The one whose side she always stood by. The one she helped show that tainted blood, did not make for a tainted future.

But he was not that boy anymore. He was not that doe-eyed child anymore. The Lazarus Pit had changed him.

How could she still think he was worthy of her love?

Five minutes passed and Black Canary did what Artemis asked. M'gaan arrived within minutes, followed by Connor and Aqualad. They bounced with anticipation, eager as to what it was Dinah called them for.

Recognized, Nightwing B01

Dick stepped onto the platform, trying his best to keep his irritation at bay. He had turned Gotham upside down but there was no sign of Red Hood or anyone who had seen him. He hoped someone finally caught wind of Cassie's whereabouts.

Black Canary, Connor, and M'gann watched his approach. Behind them stood the younger members of the group. They stood jittery and intense, ready to run on command. They made eyes at him and then towards one another.

Clearly they knew something he didn't.

In a harsh, hushed tone, Robin snipped on and on at Green Arrow. His hands worked as furiously as his voice. Nightwing heard fragments of 'ridiculous', 'stupid', and 'traitor' before Robin noticed his arrival.

Robin opened his mouth and took a step towards Nightwing. But Green Arrow clasped a hand on his shoulder, pulling him back to silence him.

Nightwing narrowed his eyes. Before he could say anything, the Zeta platform erupted again.

Recognized, Starfire A15
They were surprised to see her. The light of her presence filled around them. She walked up to them with heavy strides in her armored boots.

"I saw on the television, about your teammate." She said, her lip twitched with a snarl. "I have small tolerance for those who prey on children." She nodded, "I am here to help you rescue her. Barry is home with the babies."

The Zeta tube spoke once more.

Recognized Kid Flash, B23

Recognized Flash B03

Dick snapped his face at it with a furrowed brow. Apparently there was a lot he didn't know lately.

A streak of yellow and a streak of red ran up to them.

"Any update? Do we know where she's at?" The voice came from The Flash suit. But the voice was undeniably Wally's.

They answered him with silence and slacked jaws.

M'gaan was the first to find her voice. "Oh. Oh! Congratulations!"

"Oh, yeah...Surprise!" Wally tried his best to fein his pep. He cocked his head and placed his hands on his hips. "Always thought I looked good in red."

"So, what's going on?" Conner asked Black Canary, tired of waiting.

Dinah looked over and Ollie and then back at them, as if looking for the right thing to say. She did not agree with Artemis's request but she respected her judgement.

"Artemis needs to see you five in the infirmary," she said.

With uneasy steps they walked by the younger members who shared knowing looks at one another.

Blue Beetle sood with his arms crossed, Robin's staff still clenched in his palm. He looked up at Wally and then leaned in towards Garfield.

"It's like everyone's coming back from the dead these days." Jaime said quietly as they walked past. His words left a sickness in Wally's belly.

They made their way down the hall. The wide infirmary doors slid open.

They held their breath as they saw Artemis, her arms wrapped tight around the chest of a dark haired man. She turned at the sound of their arrival. He looked up.

The face was unmistakable. And for the majority of them, it was the first time they'd seen him alive in five years.

A tidal wave of anger rushed through them. Remembrance at what he had done reflected on their snarling faces.

"Hell no!" Conner boomed.
"Where is she?!" Nightwing yelled, pulling out his own electric staff.

They tried to close in but Artemis placed herself in front of Jason. She stood firm, placing a hand on Jason's chest and the other palm out towards them.


"You have about 2 seconds to give me a reason to," Conner said with an icy glare.

"He knows where Cassie is." Artemis responded, standing her ground.

"I can rip that out of him," M'gann snarled.

"You won't make it through there without me," Jason said.

"We'll try." M'gann responded, her eyes glowing.

"Stop!" Artemis yelled, taking a step forward. M'gann reeled in her powers.

"Jason's here to help us," she said. "He came here to help us. Please, just listen to what he has to say."

The door opened behind them.

Wonder Woman entered the room with heavy steps. The room went silent and she stared down Jason with an intense gaze. She walked towards him. Like the Red Sea, the rest of them parted out of her way. Artemis included, for she was not one to stand in the path of an angered Amazon.

"No," Wonder Woman spoke. "I don't want to hear what he has to say." She reached for the lasso on her hip. "I want to hear the truth."

In a few quick seconds, Diana had her magic lasso wrapped around Jason, pressing his arms against his side.

The lasso began to glow, and Jason cried out in pain and he fell to his knees.

"You don't need to do that," Artemis pleaded with her. "He's going to tell us everything."

Wonder Woman's Lasso of Truth, a gift from the gods, forced the truth from any speaker it wrapped around. It also caused the speaker great discomfort, even pain, in its embrace.

Jason grit his teeth as he looked up. A fire shot through all of his nerves. He looked over at Artemis and forced a laugh, trying to ease her concern.

"That's alright," he said. "I don't mind being tied up sometimes."

But Diana did not find his humor, well, his confession, amusing. She pulled on the lasso tighter. He tensed under the riling heat in his nerves.

"Why did you take Cassandra?" Wonder Woman boomed.

Jason groaned. He found it hard to push out words with the throbbing torment inside him. "They told me they were just going to hold her for ransom."

"Did you know that they would do this? That they would torture her?"
"No," he grunted. "I didn't. Or I would never would have brought her to them." He shot her a dark look. "I just wanted to get back at Robin. And to make the League look bad. To get you disbanded. To get The Team disbanded."

"Why?" she asked.

Jason tilted his head, scrunching his face. He moaned, trying to desperately claw back what The Lasso was about to rip out.

"The lasso compels you to tell the truth!" she yelled, pulling him closer to her. The Lasso flared in vibrancy.

"Because Bruce watched me die!" Jason spat out. "Bruce watched Anton slit my throat and he still replaced me."

There was a short, tense quiet.

Sweat dripped from his brow. "I was angry." he breathed heavily. He looked over at Nightwing then back up at her. "Angry that you all forgot about me."

Artemis looked to Dick, whose anger had slipped from underneath him. His jaw slack as a sadness filled his face.

Diana looked down at Jason with a sullen tilt of her head.

"You really thought that we'd forget about you?" she replied. Her voice quieter, remember the long weeks after Jason's death.

She remembered how broken and reclused his death left Bruce. How he wouldn't eat, how he wouldn't sleep. She saw pain flow from the pores of a man who would never ask for help. She and Clark nearly lost him to the sea of his own sadness before yanking him ashore.

She still sees how Bruce struggles to swallow his own forgiveness.

She will never forget the first child funeral she ever went to.

"Yes, because if you had remembered," Jason hissed. He nodded towards the door. "You wouldn't still have those kids out there in costumes. You wouldn't continue to have kids die for The League." He trembled at the unshaking pain. "That's why I was angry," he spat.

Diana decided to leave it be. He had suffered enough.

"Where is she? Where is Cassie?" she asked.

"Infinity Island." Jason answered. "Ra's has the whole place crawling with soldiers and booby traps. You're going to need all the help you can. I can lead you through it without getting caught."

"And why should we trust you?" Diana replied. "Are you are not angry anymore?"

Jason scrunched his nose with a grunt. It wasn't much use fighting The Lasso. But at least for his own pride, he tried.

"I'll always be angry." he looked down, the back up at her. "But not angry enough to let that little girl die. She's worth more than whatever issues I have with Bruce."

That was enough for Diana. She withdrew her lasso. Jason groaned with relief as he collapsed to his
hands and knees. Artemis came to his side to help him up.

"Get dressed." Wonder Woman told Jason. "You will be accompanying this rescue party."

"But Wonder-" Kaldur tried to retort.

Diana snapped around to face them. Intensity slathered her face. "I will lead this team. Is that understood?"

She was answered with nods and silence. It would be moot to tell an Amazon who can and cannot rescue her dying protege.

"Gather the younger members I know are eavesdropping outside." She said.

A small clamor rose from behind the door. They heard hushed voices of 'Shit!' and 'I told you!' that sounded far too similar to Blue Beetle and Beast Boy. Hurried footsteps died down the hallway.

A smirk flashed on Diana's lips. "Something tells me they will refuse to be left out."

She looked over to Jason, all signs of humor gone from her. "If you betray us again Jason." She beamed. "You understand what will happen to you?"

Jason stood with Artemis's help. He looked over at Diana, answering with a nod.

"Good," she said. "Now tell us what we need to do."

Chesapeake Bay

April 22nd 2017
17:30 EDT

Within 30 minutes of Inertia exposing Cassie's secret identity, a swarm of news crews surrounded the Sansmark residence. They were starved vultures on the hunt for a story, and Helena Sandsmark, Cassie's mother, boarded herself up in her home. The news crews' badgering belted outside, while the screams of her daughter played on the television inside.

Her knees wobbled beneath her. She nearly dropped everything she grabbed as she threw her essentials into a duffle bag. The moment she saw Cassie's face on the television, a call came through from Black Canary:

Gather your things. Someone is coming to get you. We'll get her back.

It was as though time raced around her.

A sound reminiscent of a jet engine rumbled in her backyard. She opened the back door to find it occupied by a running spaceship. The hangar door opened and Zataana Zatara ran out of it. She rushed to the back door.

"Mrs. Sandsmark?" Zee asked. Helena nodded. Zataana continued and motioned her towards the
ship, "We have to get you out of here. We don't know if you're safe here."

Helena nodded again and ran inside the ship with her.

Hawkwoman sat at the control panels. With quick motions they were out of her backyard and into the sky.

"What is going on? Where is she? Where are we going?" Helena fought to keep her panic suppressed. Why had no one told her anything?

"We've just found out where they're holding her. She's on an island in the Caribbean." Zataana answered. "We have a rescue party organizing now and deploying soon. We have orders from Wonder Woman to take you to a nearby safehouse. Then we'll rendezvous with them at a nearby island and bring Cassie and Wonder Woman to Themyscira."

"What? Why?" Helena snipped. "Why is she going all the way there?"

Zataana went quiet for a moment, choosing her answer carefully before speaking. "Since Cassie's not fully human, the Amazonians are going to be the only ones who can tend to her injuries." She placed a soft hand on her arm. "We'll drop you off, then."

"No! Absolutely not. Take me there now! You're taking me to that rendezvous point." Helena's words were fast and determined.

"No!" Helena beamed. "My daughter is not taking one step on that island without me."

"Helena," Zataana tried to reason. "You'll get to see her when we bring her back-"

"Don't patronize me!" Helena yelled. "I have two PHDs I'm not an idiot." Her breath trembled in her chest. Her eyes peered at Zataana with a watery gaze. "You watched the same broadcast that I did. You saw what he did- what he is doing to her-" Helena stopped herself before her sob rose. "If they get my baby girl out, if she withstands what he's doing-" She paused. "Her mother is going to be the first thing she sees, even if it's the last thing she sees. Got it?"

Maternal desperation fumed off Helena like a forest fire. Helena's delicate frame; deceiving, as no superpowered being could destroy her stance.

Zataana only answered her with a nod.

Infinity Island

April 22nd 2017
17:30 EDT

A heave swelled in Cassie's throat. She battled for her breath, Intertia's punch to her gut left her gasping. She leaned forward in her chair, hunching over the pain. Her arms were still bound behind
her. Blood spattered from her beaten gums as she coughed.

Thad looked down at her. A tight, smug smile planted on his lips as he crossed his arms.

"Inertia," Ra's voice spill in the room from the intercom. "Slow down. We gave them 24 hours, she needs to last 24 hours."


He bent his knees, placing his hands on the top of his thighs as he addressed Cassie. "Guess I have to slow down. Can't have you dying just yet," he said with a mocking tone. He stood. "You're lucky, if it were up to me you wouldn't last another hour."

Cassie caught her breath. She spat the blood from her mouth onto the floor. She looked up at Inertia with a snarl.

"Take off this Inhibitor Collar and we'll see who'll last the longest." She growled.

Inertia answered her with a closed, cheeky smile. "Oh, that's right. He teased. "You're nothing without your powers."

Cassie flinched at his closeness as he brought his face to hers. She squeezed her eyes shut in anticipation of a blow, turning her head away from him.

"How does it feel, knowing that beneath it all, you're just a weak little girl?" He asked.

Cassie's eyes slid open.

Inertia pointed toward the camera. He brought his lips to her ear as he whispered, "From now on all the world will ever knows you as, is just a weak little girl."

Cassie's eyes clenched shut again. She tilted her head down as her shoulders jerked with a sob. The blinking red light of the video camera still shined in her mind. She wanted to vomit. Not from pain, but from the biled embarrassment brewing in her gut.

When she began her career as 'Wonder Girl', Cassie's mind ran wild with daydreams of who she would become. Fantasies of the legend she would make for her 'Wonder Girl' persona. Visions of the hero that she would grow to be.

Foolish. All of it. With the simple snap of a Inhibitor Collar, she was reduced to nothing. And now the world could see her in all of her bare nothingness. Every scream, every wail gave truth to what she was beneath the surface.

Nothing.

Cassandra Sansmark was nothing, and the world knew it. Cassandra Sansmark was stupid enough to allow herself to be captured. Cassandra Sansmark couldn't break free. Cassandra Sansmark's pitiful screams floated all around the world.

This was now her legacy. This would be forever what she, what Wonder Girl, would be remembered by.

She hunched forward, doing what she could to curl into herself as she sobbed.

Inertia scoffed at her. "Child of Zeus, ha!" He snatched her face between his hand, forcing her look
"I am your god now," he snarled.

He released her face, pressed a button on the camera, superspeed to the door, and left the room.

In the quiet, Cassie became all too keen to the whirling mechanics of the video camera just a few feet away. She looked at it with a sullen pout.

She tilted her head back and closed her eyes over her running tears. It had been far too long since she prayed. Well, maybe...maybe it wasn't prayer. Maybe it was more a wish; a plea to Hades.

Because for Cassie, there were far worse things for her fate than death.

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_The Watchtower_
April 22nd 2017
18:15 EDT

"You can't think of this as just a rescue mission."

Jason's voice carried over the table in the middle meeting room. The entire attention of The Team reset upon him. He waived his hand in the air, bringing up on a virtual monitor. It was reflex. It may have been years since he'd step foot in the WatchTower but his memory still held clarity.

He continued, "If you want to strike a huge blow in The Light's resources and plans, you'll need to do it tonight."

"If you have a plan Jason, share it." Wonder Woman commanded, arms crossed.

Jason enlarged the monitor and placed it behind him for everyone to see clearly. "What do you know about Infinity Island?"

"Not much," Nightwing answered. "Other than Roy discovering that it's The League of Shadows's headquarters."

Jason groaned with irritation. "Jesus, alright we'll start from the beginning." He pointed towards the screen, bringing up a birds-eye-view of the island. "The entire island is owned by Ra's al Guhl. There are three main locations to the island." He zoomed in. "You have the castle, where we'll find Cassie. You have the factory just southwest. And the village just west of that."

"Village?" Artemis asked.

"Yes." Jason answered, sliding the view of the map to the south west corner. "The island is full of natives that Ra's has enslaved. The island is full of rare gems that he forces them to mine. Then he sells them to fund whatever he needs money for. The natives he doesn't have working in the mine, he has them working in the factory."

"What do they make there?" Conner said.
"Weapons, explosives, but lately they've been focusing on some kind of cybernetic armor Ivo calls 'Warhound'."

Superboy and Nightwing exchanged a worried look. It hadn't been too long ago that they discovered blueprints for Ivo's curious creation.

"Ivo." Nightwing repeated, placing pieces together in his head.

"Which brings us back to the castle." Jason continued, changing the view on the map. "On the east side Ivo has a lab where he's been developing armor and weapons and testing them on human subjects. We need to destroy this lab and the factory. If Ivo can't work then he can't create."

Nightwing grit his teeth. It seemed that Ivo had been infesting the world like a cockroach these days. Destroy one of his habitats and he just burrows in somewhere else.

"First thing is the village," Jason address them. "We'll need to destroy his labor source. The villagers are housed in a huge work camp surrounded by guard towers and an electric fence. We'll need at least two people to take them out and free the natives."

"I'm in." Static answered, electricity sparking in his hands. "I can fry that fence."

"And me," Artemis. "I can take out those guards long range."

"Next is the factory. We'll need to take out the guards, get the natives working out, and destroy it." Jason advised. "And I mean destroy it. We can't leave anything standing."

"Count me in for that," Conner answered.

"I'll join Superboy," Jaime added. "I could really blow some stuff up right about now."

"We'll need to take care of Ivo's lab next. Take any data you want then destroy it," said Jason. "Count me in," Emily answered.

A quiet lullled for a moment. Emily replied to their concerned stares. "I'm ready. I know I am." She smiled, "Plus I think it's time that 'Looker' officially made her debut yeah?"

Beast Boy smiled at her. "I'll go too," he said.

"And me." M'gaan chimed, unsure of Emily's preparedness.

Jason changed the view on the map. "On the north side of the castle there's an underwater dock. Ra's has makeshift subs going out to export the gems undetected." He pointed at Kaldur and La'gaan. "I'll need you two to get inside there as soon the doors open. There's a skeleton crew of three people working the underwater dock. You two will need clear it so I can get inside."

"What you will be doing?" Robin asked, skeptically.

Jason looked around, thinking. "I need someone strong who isn't assigned yet." His eyes fell upon Starfire. "You." He said, pointing. "You look like a powerhouse."

She looked at Jason with narrow eyes and a tilted head. "I hope for your sake that is a compliment."

A smirk flashed and faded on Jason's lip. "What is it that you do?" He asked.

Starfire brought her hand out in front of her. A green light grew from her palm. "If it has a face, my
"You'll be coming with me then," Jason ordered. "Once they clear the dock for us they'll stand guard while we sneak through the caverns underground to the Lazarus Pit. Ra's has cheated death for too many centuries. I'm going to destroy it."

"You're an idiot if you think I'm letting you do anything unsupervised," Tim snipped at him.

"I figured you'd want to be part of your girlfriend's extraction team." Jason snipped back.

Tim fell quiet as he fumed.

"I'll go with them." Wally answered, trying to ease the tension. "Besides," he pointed at his goggles; an upgraded pair from the ones he wore as Kid Flash. "Sounds like you need someone with night vision."

Jason cut right to the main course, "Which leaves us with Wonder Girl."

Jason changed the view of the map again. "The room she's held in is in the same floor of Ivo's lab on the east side."

He looked at Nightwing. "I assume you still have something that can freeze cameras?" Nightwing nodded back.

Jason continued, "The main cable system is on the roof. You'll be dropped off so you can freeze the cameras for them before they get inside. Now, Inertia will have to take a break eventually to refuel."

"You," Jason motioned at Bart. "He's your clone right? You've seen the broadcast right?"

Bart's breath caught in his throat. His eyes avoided all the others in the room. "Yeah. To both."

"How often do you thing he'll need to eat to restore his energy?"

"Probably about every hour, hour and a half." Bart answered quietly.

"We're going to have to time this right." He pointed at Tim, Bart, and Rose. "You, you, and you are going to have to get in there and get her out while he dips out to eat. You need to time it right. You don't want to be locked in a room with that maniac."

Bart's eyes fell to the floor. Jason' needn't remind him. He knew all to well of Inertia's capabilities.

"And Wonder Woman-" Jason began.

"I will be facing Ra's." Diana stated. "I will be taking him in for his crimes."

They dispersed from the meeting room after Jason's final details. They were told they had time to prep, as they needed to wait for sun down before heading to Infinity Island.

Rose stayed behind, watching as each of them filed out the door.

Her gaze migrated to Bart, whose eyes had yet to leave the floor. A twitch played in his fingers as his jaw flexed behind his tight lips.

Irritation overcame her in a massive wave. Whenever Inertia was mentioned in conversation Bart turned into…this. This, fragile, frightened thing wound so tight inside his own mind. They were about to conduct one of the most important mission of their careers. And Bart was letting his enemy
break him; turning into something small and useless.

When the rest of The Team left, Rose marched up to him. She brought her face in close to his.

"You need to get out of your head." She snipped. "Shit is getting real Bart, and you can't be freezing up."

But Bart did not look up at her. She hardly recognized the person before her. She huffed a confused sign. "Why the hell does he scare you so much?" She asked.

Bart looked up at her with curious, morose eyes.

"How did you do it?" He asked softly. "In that underground lab. How did you fight Deathstroke like that?"

Rose flinched at his question.

A small gap parted his lips as the memory still left him astonished.

"You just... went for him." He struggled to regain his words. "He-he killed your mom. He ruined your life. He tortured you."

Rose's nostrils flared. She did not need to be reminded.

"The things he did to you." Bart said pitifully. "How are you not afraid every time you see him?"

Rose was then jarred with realization. She was overcome with a striking connection with Bart. She wasn't mad at Bart's dread for Inertia. She was angry, because in him, she saw a little girl living with the horror of her father.

He reminded her of what frightened, beaten child she used to be.

Guilt spiraled up in her stomach. She had been so mercilessly rude to him. She always treated him in an ill manner that his kind heart did not deserve.

She remembered how when she first joined, all of the others openly mocked and excluded her. Yet Bart never treated her like everyone else. He reached out more than the others did. No matter how much she yelled and berated him for digging into her business and facade, he would always come back.

When her past came to light, he was the only one that stood up for her.

She remembered their kiss. His playfulness, his breath, his hands on the small of her back. It had been the first time in a long time that a male made her feel anything other than...anger.

She remembered how it scared her. How she masked her fear by breaking Bart's heart. It killed her to know that she had caused him more pain. She had no idea of his life before.

She played with the idea of what they could become, together. But was she only feeling this, because she now realized that he was broken too?

She couldn't. That wouldn't be fair to him. For it is far too cruel to only love a thing for its damage.

Sure, they were olive oil and vinegar; didn't mix yet could go together. But the taste they created, was still acidic.
Rose closed her eyes. In the darkness, she dug up every jagged memory she could of her father. She clawed at the emptiness for what it was that drove her to such ferocity.

"Whenever I think of all the things he did to me, all people he took from me. It's easy to turn that fear into anger." She opened her eyes and looked at him. She was quite for a moment as an intense hate grew in her eyes. "Stop being afraid Bart."

She snarled. "And get angry."

Infinity Island
April 22nd 2017
20:00 EDT

Once they arrived in airspace of Infinity Island, The Team made haste at securing their positions.

In the Super Cycle rode Artemis, Static, Blue Beetle, and Superboy. They made their way to the west end of the island, securing their drop points at the factory and the village.

The others rode in the Bioship. It hovered just above the castle's main roof, cloaked. Nightwing dropped down onto it. He sped towards the main cable box with diligence. He connected his wrist computer, clacking away on the virtual keyboard. A small chime gave indication the the system was hacked.

'Computers are froze,' Nightwing ordered on the pyschic link. 'Ready your positions.'

Rose, Robin, Kid Flash, Miss Martian, Beast Boy, and Looker jumped down from the opening in the hole of The Bioship, dawning all black uniforms.

With team Alpha and Beta dropped off onto the roof, Kaldur steered The Bioship towards the shore. It began to rain. Under the darkness and rumbling thunder, they made it into the water unnoticed.

'Delta, Epsilon, Zeta,' Nightwing continued. 'Begin.'

On the other side of the island Blue Beetle and Superboy snuck inside the factory while Artemis and Static arrived at the village.

The village was a collection of dilapidated boxes surrounded by a tall high voltage fence. It reminded Artemis far too much of an internment camp. She drove the Super Cycle, dropping Static at the fence's electrical box.

The Super Cycle disguised herself in all black as Artemis took position in the air. She stood from her seat in the Super Cycle, bow in hand. She fired her taser arrows at the four guards in their observance towers at each corner of the fence.

'You're up Static,' Artemis advised.

Static placed his hands on the electrical box and shorted out the fence. They pried open the doors, ushering out the natives. Static placed small explosives around each corner of the fence.
Inside the factory, massive machinery clanked away as the native slaves hurried with their metal working. Superboy recognized the armor as the same in the previous factory. The slaves loaded the Warhound armor onto trucks. Then the trucks drove off down a dirt trail.

In the shadows, Superboy stuck explosives on each piece of machinery. With the help of The Scarab, Blue made quick work of taking out all five of the factory’s guards. They ushered the natives out the back.

‘Epsilon’s finished,’ Blue chimed in. ‘Bombs are set up, natives are out.’

On the other side of the island Team Delta; Aqualad, Lagoon Boy, Red Hood, Flash, and Starfire, arrived at the underwater dock in the Bioship. Using the ship's cloaking, they snuck through the underground dock, waiting for the doors to open as a submarine left.

The loading bay was held within the underground caverns; an air pocket in which gravity kept the sea out. They breached the surface and jumped out of the ship, knocking out the four man crew. Aqualad and La'goon Boy stayed watch for any other incoming submarines. Red Hood lead Flash and Starfire to the back of the underground dock and to the back towards a series of tunnels.

'Delta Squad is in position,' Wally said over the psychic link. Damn did it feel good to do that again. 'We're headed to The Pit now.'

'Copy,' Nightwing responded. 'Ok Teams don't detonate any bombs yet. There's no cameras in the room Cassie's in, but Inertia's nowhere in sight.'

Red Hood, Starfire, and Red Hood stopped abruptly within the tunnel. Jason looked around them in frustration. The tunnel veered off in numerous directions. String lights hung at the top of them but their light was still far too dim. Starfire held a green starbolt in her hand to see better. The tunnels dripped with condensation.

"Soooo…" Wally said, waiting for them to move "Where do we go?"

Red Hood huffed. With a groan he said, "I didn't exactly come this way much…"

"What!?" Flash exclaimed. "You mean you have no idea where we are? You said you knew now to get there!"

"From inside the castle, yeah." Red Hood admitted. "But I've never been in the tunnels coming from the docks before."

"Hey, actually you know what?" Flash chirped with a smile. He pointed to his new goggles. "I'll scope out the place at superspeed at find the fastest route." He winked at them and clicked his tongue, "Back in a flash."

Jason groaned with a heavy roll of his eyes and Wally was gone.

Starfire hummed with amusement, "He is a charming human, isn't he?"

Jason looked over at her. The green energy in her hand played and pounced on the uneven walls. Her hair rustled around her with small movements, even though there was no wind to be felt. She was breathtaking in her strange beauty; as fantastical aura of power shined off her like the bolt in her hand.
He had never seen a creature so raw with might and elegance.

"So what's the deal with you?" Jason asked. "Future Justice League recruit?"

Starfire examined the walls of the cave as they waited. "I fled here after my planet was destroyed and all of my people killed by Darkseid and Vandal Savage." She answered bluntly.

"Oh," Jason replied. "I'm sorry to hear that." It was not an answer that he was expecting.

An awkward quiet fell between them. Jason cleared his throat and let out a nervous chuckle.

A nervous chuckle? Good lord, she turned him into a school boy.

Jason staved off the weird feeling in his stomach my breaking the quiet. "So uh," Jason said with a click of his tongue. "So you came here to ask The League for help in bringing them in? Make'um face lady justice?"

Starfire looked at him with a tilt of her head. She was still growing accustomed to things like metaphors and similes and other odd constructs of the English language. She did not understand why earthings did not just say what they meant, in the simplest of terms.

"I will say 'no' because I do not understand what you are saying." She looked up, watching the water drip from the ceiling.

A moment of quiet passed before she spoke again, "I plan on killing them."

Jason snapped his gaze over to her in surprise.

Starfire looked over to him, giving him a small smirk. "But do not tell the others," She nodded back towards the entrance. "They seem far too….fragile with the idea of death."

Jason stayed quiet for a moment, a small space between his lips. "Why did you tell me that?" He finally asked.

"I have heard about you, Red Hood, very much since I arrived on this planet." She answered. "I understand why it is that you do what you do."

She looked down for a moment, lips twisted with conversation in her head as she tired to find her words.

"The others do not understand that some foul deeds, do not deserve to be rewarded with life. Sometimes even a lifetime of imprisonment can be a reward. Their sense of lawfulness is...charming but misguided."

A tiny smile crept up on Jason's lips. "You know, you and me, we're not so different."

Wally rushed to them and pointed at the wall in front of them. He examined it intently through his goggles. "Alright, so there's a lot of round about paths. But, honestly, the quickest way is going to be straight through this wall in front of us if we can manage it."

Starfire and Jason locked eyes for another moment, until Starfire's gaze trailed all the way down to his toes and back up to his head.

A huskiness rested in her voice as she spoke, ignoring Wally's interruption. "Yes, it seems we are both excellent specimens of our kinds."
A fire ignited in Jason's chest.

She smiled, "But I am still far stronger."

She growled as she turned, blasting her starbolts at the wall before them. The rock melted beneath the heat of her green energy. She walked forward as the rock faded away. Red Hood and Flash followed behind her.

Within a few minutes, the rock dissipated and soon they found themselves in the room of The Lazarus Pit.

The Pit glew with a green light. Not like Starfire's, no. There was something much more...toxic to it. There was no shimmer, no beauty in its wondrous form. It was almost as though its light radiated as a warning; Damned be ye that step within me.

Jason looked upward. A spiral stone staircase was etched into the wall. It went from The Pit to a door a few stories above.

Jason remembered screaming inside the pit. Burning, boiling as Ra's looked down at him from that staircase. The taste of iron still sat in his mouth.

Jason shook the memory from his head. He approached The Pit, kneeling down next to it.

"Woah, spooky." Flash commented, looking around. His eyes fell to Jason who unclipped a canteen from his utility belt and placed it in the water.

"What are you doing?" Flash asked.

"I don't know what state Wonder Girl will be in when they find her." He pulled the full canteen out and sealed it tight. "This will heal her."

Jason began to lay his bombs around The Pit. Starfire flew to the ceiling to stick hers up top.

Wally bit his lip in thought. He his eyes trailed to the floor and back up to Jason. Jason's lasso-induced confession had yet to leave him.

"Hey, uh for the record. We didn't forget about you, you know." Wally said. Jason clenched under his words. Wally continued, "None of us did."

Jason let go of his tension and returned to setting up his explosives. He groaned to himself, dreading hearing any more pity from Wally's mouth.

"You're mad that they still kept us around? Kept The Team?" Wally asked, a statement that he already knew was true.

Wally huffed as Jason still refused to answer. "Even if they told us we couldn't be on The Team anymore, do you really think we would have listened? If Dick had died instead, would you have stopped fighting crime?"

Jason froze, the thought had never crossed his mind before. He snapped his head over to Flash, looking at him with piercing eyes. All his work, all his efforts to get The Team broken up; if he had succeeded, would it have really matter?

He thought about his time on The Team as a boy.

Since when did those kids ever listen to orders? When did he ever listen to orders? It didn't matter the
danger. If he knew something was right, he went and did it without a second thought to his own safety, no matter what was commanded of him.

It's what got him killed. But if any of them died in his place, would he have hung up his cape?

No, it would have only fueled his fire.

Jason growled at the turmoil in his head. "Just set up your bombs and shut up." He turned away.

"Jason." Wally beamed.

"What, West?" Jason turned, barking at him. "What?"

The tension in Wally's face was replaced by a sullen sadness. He looked up at Jason with glossy eyes. Jason looked at him with a confused tilt of his head.

Wally squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them. "I'm sorry I wasn't fast enough to save you," he said in a quiet, broken tone.

A small noise fell from Jason's throat. "What?" He responded, dumbfounded.

"When we heard what Anton was doing to you over the communicator," Wally's voice cracked. He turned his head away for a moment to gather himself.

"I ran so fast," Wally choked in almost a whisper. There was no combination of words that could express his guilt eloquently, but he had to try. "I ran so fast to that fucking factory but I wasn't fast enough."

Jason's breath shook in his chest.

"But I had," Wally's voice cracked again. He sucked in a breath, "I had to get those kids out of those cages first. And by the time I did that, Batman got here, and then-"

Wally stopped himself as he felt a tear pool at the corner of his eye. He wiped it away. "I'm-" Wally looked at the ground then back up at him, eyes still glossy. "I'm so sorry I wasn't fast enough to save you."

Jason couldn't find his voice. He stared at Wally with a slack jaw.

"None of us were fast enough that night," Wally said with a morose tone.

'None of us.'

They came for him….

They had all come for him?

Jason furrowed his brows as a tingle rose in his nose. He swallowed hard as he tried to dissolve the lump in his throat.

When he had nightmares of that night, all he thought of was his loneliness in death. But even then, Bruce was still there. And they had been too, even if too late.

He had become so obsessed with the idea of him being replaced that he couldn't even fathom the idea of his remembrance. Wally remembered with such clarity, with such vivity, with such heavy guilt of that night that it soaked his soul like an oil spill.
And Artemis, how she clung to him. He still remembered her warm tears on his chest.

'\textit{We got you back.}'

There was pain around their memories of 'Jason Todd'. He had become so engulfed in his self loathing that he refused to believe that any part of his past was loved. Was \textit{still} loved. Jason Todd was replaced, but he was never forgotten. Jason Todd was a burden of guilt they had carried inside them, every day.

Jason huffed, trucking past Wally towards their makeshift entrance. He was not about to have a moment, here, with Wally West and a stranger.

He looked over his shoulder at Wally. "You got those kids out." He said. "That's all that matters to me."

Jason walked through the tunnel and Starfire followed behind him.

Wally stood for a moment before setting up and activating his explosives at superspeed. He trailed behind them in the tunnel.

He wasn't sure where he stood with Jason. But at least now the weight on his shoulders, felt a little bit lighter.

Nightwing sat on the roof, watching the cameras on the first floor to make sure no one loomed in the hallway below. He pulled up a small screen of Cassie's torture broadcast.

'\textit{There's no cameras in the room Cassie's in, but Inertia's nowhere in sight,}' he said. '\textit{Alpha, Beta. Go.}'

Kid Flash vibrated himself through the roof and down onto the fifth floor. M'gaa\n
nit made herself invisible and slid through with him as well. Ravager, Robin, Looker, and Beast Boy crawled quietly through the ventilation system entrance on the roof. With swiftness they slipped down and quietly landed on to the fifth floor.

They split up. Beta headed to the West. And Alpha, Cassie's rescue party, ran to the East.

Beta ran with quiet footsteps to Ivo's laboratory. At the door, M'gaan punched in the code on the key pad that Jason gave them. It worked. The door slid open and they crept inside.

"Holy shit," Beast Boy swore through a heavy breath.

"Oh god," Looker placed a close fist up to her mouth as she gagged.

An coldness filled M'gaan's gut as she looked at the room with wide eyes.

An eerie green glow encompassed the room. It was much larger than they had expected. Three steel tables sat in a row in the middle of the room. Bloodied surgical equipment rested about on top of them.

M'gaan took a step forward. Sweat poured from her brow. Heat plagued the room.

Six cylindrical glass tanks rested on a long counter on the far end of the room. They were filled with a green liquid. Each held large body parts. Two with an arm and partial torso. One with a leg. One
with two legs and pelvis. The middle two held two complete bodies.

But there was something peculiar about the bodies and the particular parts. Black mechanics with whirling red lights crept in, on, and outside them. It was as though they were perverse trophies of cyborgs freshly hunted.

Garfield swallowed the lump in his throat. With cautious movements, he leapt over to one of the bodies in the tank. He placed his shaky hand on the glass, looking up at the naked, pieced-together man.

A metal, cybernetic armored arm replaced his right. Where the skin met it, it almost looked to be...welded. The black armor crept from his arm, up his neck, and half his face and head. His eyes were open, but did not blink.

"Is-is he alive?" Beast Boy asked.

"Oh no my boy," a voice answered from the right. "He died a long time ago."

They snapped to attention, turning. Ivo stood in front of another exit. His hands here crossed behind his bad. And intrigued look sat on his face.

"W-what is this?" M'gaan slipped over her words. Light-headedness filled her skull. Why was it so damn hot?

Ivo smiled, he took a step out of the shadowy corner. "You see, Ra's so graciously offered me a sample of The Lazarus Pit for all of my experimental needs." He answered. "I managed to modify some of the water. It keeps the tissue viable for surgeries. Building a cyborg takes a lot of resources you know." A spark ignited in his eyes. "Even when the 'rats' die, I can still use their bodies."

Beast Boy growled.

M'gaan jolted her hand in front of her, attempting to use her telekinesis to restrain Ivo. A flash of heat rushed over her and she stumbled, falling to her knees. Garfield jumped to her side.

"What are you doing to me." M'gann growled, shaking.

"Oh, it's not me my dear." Ivo answered. He looked to the shadows on his left. "Arsenal?"

Heavy boots clunked against the tile floor. With smooth movements Arsenal appeared in the strange light.

He was much different than the last time they encountered him. He stood poised. When he walked, it was with accurate, deliberate movement. Much different than the crazed animal at the Utah mine.

The only movement the came from him was the smooth rise and fall of his chest, as though even that was calculated. His arm glowed with the harsh red of the Apokoliptian arm. He donned the Warhound armor yet again. His wolf-eared helmet snaked down his neck, down his back and over his chest, covering them in the red and black armor. The front of the helmet reached down to cover his eyes with glowing red lenses.

Ivo tapped his finger on Arsenal's forehead. "Each one of these is now equipped with a brain wave disruptor." He flashed them a cool smile. "With an enhancement I'm sure you're feeling the effects of."

The eyes on Arsenal's lenses brightened. M'gann groaned in pain, clutching her head. It was as
though her brain was in a glass box that was slowly shrinking.

Beast Bow growled, "Knock it off Arsenal! Stop!"

Ivo laughed. "Oh sweet child. He can't hear you anymore. He only listens to me."

Ivo backed up, the door slid open behind him.

"Arsenal?" He chimed, his rodent-like smile still plastered on his lips. "Kill them."

Above the castle Wonder Woman flew in her jet. The near-silent engines and cloaking ability made her a mere rush of wind in the night sky.

"Are you ready?" Green Arrow asked in the communicator. He monitored their status from The Watchtower.

"I'm ready, take the controls." Diana ordered as she undid her seatbelt from the pilot's seat. Diana walked to the back where the hanger door fell open. Green Arrow remotely took control of her jet from above.

Wind swirled around Diana, her face encompassed by her hair. She went to step out of the plane.

"Wonder Woman?" Green Arrow asked.

"Yes?" Diana asked, annoyed.

Ollie's heavy breath could heard on the other end. "Give him hell," Ollie finally answered.

Diana smirked before determination furrowed her features. "And more," she said.

She jumped from the plane, diving towards the ground. As she got closer, she slowed herself. She flipped herself around, landing on her feet with near silence. She crouched, looking around. She landed just and the end of the lavish garden. Where the greenage met the cold stone of west courtyard.

A fountain sat in the middle of the courtyard. Its intricate display of spouts shot around a statue of Ra's himself in the middle of the fountain. The courtyard was surrounded by a ring of grass. Wavy stone paths cut through it and towards the garden.

Diana looked up at the fountain again. She scoffed.

*Ugh, how vain.*

"It's been a *long* time Diana."

Wonder Woman jumped to attention at the sound of Ra's voice. She looked around.

"Actually, it's been a long time since I faced down *any* Leaguers." Footsteps could be heard with his voice this time.

Diana stepped out of the brush and into the courtyard. "Step out of the dark and face me," she sneered.
Ra's stepped out from behind the fountain. He stood stoic as his green cloak wrapped around him.

"I should say the same to you and your... children." He said, "Sneaking around and trespassing about my castle, no doubt. All because I have something of theirs."

A flush rose on Diana's face at the mention of Cassie. "How could you do that to Wonder Girl?" She snarled. "How could you kidnap and torture her, she's just a child?!"

"One of the first of many children in the plan my dear."

"So it was your idea?"

"Well, I can't take all the credit. Inertia did help with the idea. I merely fetched her and gave her the tools he needed to make our broadcast... convincing."

"You're a monster."

Ra's grinned this time. "Being alive as long as I have, makes me more like a god." He tore off his cloak.

He pulled out a thick sword sheathed around his waist. "I've been sitting on the sidelines for far too long. Even a king must draw his sword now and then to prove his might."

Ra's grinned, he took a step forward. He nearly lost his balance as the ground rattled for a small, strong moment underneath him. He looked around, perplexed, as earthquakes were not known there.

Diana smiled, confident the bombs had done their job. "Hard to be a god now, with your Lazarus Pit destroyed."

Ra's gasped. He looked at her. With his anger, rose the veins in his neck.

Two more explosions erupted behind them. He turned to look to find his factory and work camp up in flame. He turned back towards Diana.

"What did you do?!" He yelled, terrified. "What do you think you're doing?"

" Winning!" Diana yelped back as she charged at him.

With quick steps, Alpha team arrived at the door that held Cassie. Robin pulled a wire from his wrist computer and placed it on the door's key reader lock. He typed away on his wrist computer, staring at it intently while Kid Flash and Ravager stood beside him on lookout.

Robin's screen finally flashed green and the key card reader beeped.

"Go!" Robin commanded in a harsh whisper. They jumped inside.

They froze. Sickliness clawed at their bellies as their muscles shook with fear and fury.

Quiet encased the room. Cassie was no longer in the chair, but on her knees. Her ankles were still bound together along with her wrists behind her back.

Inertia stood behind her. His right arm looped around the front of her neck and clasped her left
shoulder. His other hand grabbed her jaw, twisting her gaze far to the right. Pain shot through her from the strain.

"You come any closer," Inertia said in a near whisper. Darkness reseted under his eyes. "And I'll snap her neck."

A growl almost rumbled in Bart's chest. Rose's words of 'Get. Angry.' shouted in his head.

Inertia would not take anyone away from him day. He would not take anyone away from him again.

"Not if I snap yours first," Bart hissed at him behind clenched teeth.

Inertia perked his brows. A spark ignited in his eyes.

"Now that's the part of you I like to see Bart." A smile already pulled on his lips. "That dark, violent part that you share with me."

Creases disappeared from Kid Flash's face. He remembered why he always chose to live in fear of Thaddeus Jr.

Because he never wanted to become him.

"How did you even get in here without us knowing?" Robin asked, bidding for time as he thought up a plan.

Inertia tilted his head. "You're not the only one who can freeze a camera. I never left."

Robin's eyes went wide. He looked over at the camera, realizing that Inertia had set them up.

"I knew it wouldn't take long for you to find her," he explained. "So I wanted to be here for the moment you adorably tried to rush in and save her." His tone dripped with condescension. He grinned, "And now you'll get to watch her die."

Cassie squealed as he tilted her head ever-so-slightly. She strained as best to could to look at them, tears running down her cheek. She was far too damaged, too weak to try to shake him off. She didn't know if she even had the strength to run.

"Let her go Inertia, it's over." Robin commanded.

"For Ra's maybe." Inertia said. "But for me? I'm just getting warmed up."

He shifted her head another centimeter. Cassie felt a joint in her neck pop and she began to sobb.

"Just let her go!" Tim yell, slowly reaching for us utility belt.

"Humans are so, utterly, frail." Inertia asserted. He looked over at Bart. "Have you ever twisted a neck in your hand? Almost like breaking a twig."

Tears fell from Bart. Shaking rattled through him as he realized his utter uselessness. He wouldn't be fast enough to save Cassie. He wouldn't be fast enough to pry her from his psychotic hands. Cassie was going to die and it was going to be his fault.

"Please," Kid Flash shuddered, a sob croaking in his throat. "Please, please don't do this."

Inertia narrowed his eyes. "That's right, beg." He barked. "It's the only thing you're good at isn't it? You stupid slave scum!"
"Don't fucking talk to him like that you little prick!" Rose bellowed. She had had far enough of this little weasel.

Bart looked over at her, mouth agape.

"Bash him one more time and I'll shatter your fucking jaw!" Rose wasn't threatening, she was promising.

There was so much about Inertia that reminded her of Deathstroke. She was not about to stay quiet while he treated Bart with the same degradation.

A confused look overcame Inertia that resembled much of a snarl. The act of being lashed back at was not something that he experienced often. And idea sparked in his mind. He looked at Bart, back at Rose, then back to Bart.

"You got yourself you little girlfriend hun?" He smirked, "Let's make it interesting."

At superspeed he tossed Cassie onto her back on the floor. He grabbed the gold-handled knife, holding it above him with two hands as he straddled her.

"I'm going to stab her in the heart." He said. "And you're going to be too slow to stop me. How embarrassing this going to be for you in front of your girlfriend." He mocked. "How does it feel knowing that someone's going to die and it's going to be your fault, again?"

Panic struck through Bart, "Please, don't!"

While they talked, Rose had been slowly been working a hand to the back of her utility belt. She undid the clasp and grabbed one of the Mirikuru syringes. Her breath hitched as she injected it.

A hot wave flushed through her. Her eyes dilated into fine points as her vision turned vibrant shades of green.

The Mirikuru heightened not only her physical senses, but mental senses as well. Those feeling you get when you know someone is watching you, when you know from first meeting that someone is dangerous, or that sickness in your gut when you know a situation is wrong.

With every action, every movement, we guess as to what may happen with the people around us. When you walk down a hall and someone is walking the other way, your mind can predict when you will pass by one other.

The Mirikuru allows Rose to see those predictions faster.

"You can't catch me." Inertia teased.

Rose ran. She sprinted the short distance between her and Inertia. The Mirikuru gave her the 5 second warning as to when Inertia would slam his dagger into Cassie's heart.

A look of surprise flashed on Inertia's eyes the moment she ran up to him. Her energy sword sliced him across his chest. He fell off of Cassie, spasming as the tazing electricity shocked through him.

"Fuck you freak!" Rose shouted. Power pumped through her veins. She reached down, pulling Cassie up to her feet. Remarkably, she could stand. "Let's get you out of here."

Rage consumed Inertia's face. He pushed through the spasms as he Shakily reached for the dagger beside him.
Rose gasped as another vision swept through her mind.

Inertia got to his hands and knees.

"NO!" Rose yelled as she turned around, placing herself in front of Cassie.

"ROOOSE!" Bart screamed.

Inertia's face was only inches from her's.

The air ripped from Rose's lungs. She found herself frozen; at the mercy of her windedness as Interia's stiff punch slammed into her gut. She shook, struggling for breath as she stared into Inertia's wild, crazed eyes.

Why couldn't she move? Why hadn't he moved?

She grabbed his arm, wondering why Thad had yet to pull back his fist. She looked down. A rushing cold fell from her head to her toes as she found the handle of a dagger in Inerita's hand.

The blade sheathed itself in her stomach.

She looked back up at him, shock dripping through her nerves, causing her to tremble. She wanted nothing more than to look away from those yellow, ravenous eyes but found she couldn't fucking move. A tangy taste of copper rose on her tongue.

A darkness clouded Inertia's face a he asked her, "How does your own blood taste, bitch?"

With a hard thrust, Inertia drug the dagger up towards her diaphragm. Blood shot from her mouth and spattered onto his face. A vile smile pulled on his lips and his rage was placated with revenge.

His jaw fell open with a wicked cackle as he let go of the dagger. Cassie fell to the floor in shock and fatigue. Rose fell onto the floor next to her. Rose's eyes were wide as blood streamed from behind her lips.

Bart gasped for air as he watched Rose's body fall. It happened so quickly yet took so much time. Blood spilled from her an pooled onto the floor.

A ringing coated his ears. Ringing that blocked out every sound. Except for that laugh. Inertia's laugh.

Something primal took a savage hold inside Bart. His fearful trembling transformed into a foreign rage. Something dangerous. Something venomous.

Something murderous.

Bart no longer cared if he became his own clone.

A thunderous anger shot through Bart. He sped at Inertia and his fist collided with his jaw.

Shock swept through Inertia. The pulsing pain on his face reminding him that someone had yet again been faster than him.

Bart lept at him again. Inertia scrambled to his feet as Bart chased him out the door and down the hall. No matter how fast he went, Bart closed in on him. He looked at Inertia with ferocious, glazed eyes. His jaw clenched as he struck his fist at him, barely missing.
Inertia finally smiled. "Look at that." Maybe now he'd actually get a challenge. "Looks like you finally grew some balls!"

"Oh my god." Cassie stammered out. "Oh my god, Rose."

She crawled to Rose's side. Pushing through the pain of broken bones and lacerations, she sat up next to her, putting pressure on her stomach. She panted, tears falling onto Rose's shiny navy suit.

Robin jumped to the other side. Panic shot through him as he realized the lethality of her wound.

Rose looked over at Cassie. "And you thought.. I hated you...Barbie." Rose gurgled with a faint smile. It faded as quickly as blood flowed from her throat and down the corner of her mouth. She looked over at Robin with wide eyes. "The serum. Back pocket."

Robin looked at her for a second before he realized she meant her utility belt. She cried out in pain as he lifted her up the open the back compartment of her utility belt. He pulled out four green syringes of Mirikuru.

"Inject me," She said with bubbled words. She looked up at him with crazed eyes, her skin already pale. She grabbed at the front of his uniform. "Inject me!" She commanded as blood fell from her mouth and down her chin.

"A-all of it?" Robin asked.

Rose nodded.

Robin looked over at Cassie. Her confused, scared expression gave him no assurance as to if he was doing the right thing.

But it was the wish of a dying girl.

With shaky hands he pulled the cover off the first syringe and injected it into Rose's thigh.

She gasped. The power of the Mirikuru pumped through her muscles.

Robin did what he was told. Over and over until the all of the syringes were empty.

At the end of the last dosage, Rose let out a yell so coarse and animalistic that Robin and Cassie fell back.

Rose jumped to her feet. She shook with a violent intensity. Every muscle flexed as they grew in size. Veins protruded from her neck and limbs. She snapped her head back at Wondergirl and Robin.

She separated her firecily clenched jaw long enough to yell. "I'M FINE. GET HER OUT."

She chimed in with the same ferocity on the psychic link 'WE HAVE WONDERGIRL. LET'S GO!'

Rose ran for the door. With her newfound strength, she knocked down the metal in three hits. She seemed more beast than girl.

Cassie yelped as Robin helped her onto her feet. She wrapped her arm around his shoulder and did her best to limp with him as she ran.
Rose powered through in front of them, demolishing any enemy that stood in the way of their pickup point. She left behind a massive trail of their blood, and her own.

Bart's pursuit of Inertia took them outside into the back garden. He leapt for Inertia, missing, skitting across the brick path and into a patch of mulch.

Bart groaned, his skin on his right side stung. He looked up. Inertia towered before him, he looked down at him with a black eye and a bloodied lip; the first blows that Bart had ever been able to land.

Bart struggled to stand, his body grasped at every last strand of adrenaline it could find.

Inertia looked down at him with a face that carried both embarrassment and disgust. He turned to walk away.

Bart propped himself up with one arm. He was not about to let him leave without asking him the question he should have asked a long time ago.

"What did I ever do to you!?" Bart bellowed.

Inertia froze.

"Why did take them from me?" He cried out and angry tears fell down to his chin. Rose's bloody body flashed in his mind. "Why do you have to take away everyone that I love?"

Inertia clenched his fist. His nostrils flared as he took a sharp inhale. He spun around.

"Because it's not fair." He spat. "It's not fair that we are the same and I get nothing. While you get everything."

Kid Flash groaned and he pushed through the pain of his cuts and bruises to stand. "We are not the same," he sneered.

"We are exactly the same! I'm made from you!" Inertia barked at him. He drew himself back. A snarl flickered on his lip. He motioned at Bart. "You got everything. You got to have a mommy and daddy that loved you. So much." His mouth dripped with a mocking tone, "You got to have a life where everyone just loved adorable little Bart so much. So much."

Inertia's breath shook in his chest. He pointed between them with an unsteady finger. "Even in this time I come back to find you living in the white picket fence life with your huge west-allen family like some kind of corny Norman Rockwell painting."

He motioned back towards the castle. He spat with spite. "Even now here you are yucking it up with all your little friends, going to middle school, and having a fucking blast doing your little superhero after-school activities for kicks."

For the first time, Bart watched water swell in Inertia's eyes. But he was wary. For even crocodiles could cry.

"You got- you get all of this. While I spent my whole fucking life in a lab and a god damn test tube." He hissed. "I spent years of my life with pain and experimentation while you got to have a 'perfect' family. You got to have playtime with friends while I was beaten into a soldier."

Inertia scoffed. He motioned around them. "Look at you, you're still having playtime. I couldn't even
"get…” His breath hitched. "I couldn't even get my Dad to look at me.” He looked down at his palm. "To even just hold my hand.” He look up at Bart with dark, resentful eyes. "And I bet they all fought over adorable you. I bet Jay and Joan didn't think twice before taking you in."

The rage in Bart's chest exploded. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You want me to feel sorry for you?" Bart snipped, astonished. "YOU WANT ME TO FEEL SORRY FOR YOU?"

How dare he. After everything he'd done. How fucking dare he.

"I knew you wouldn't understand.” A trembled rose in in Inertia's jaw. "But that's the reason. Because is wasn't fair. And if I don't deserve it. You don't deserve it." He let in a sharp inhale before bellowing, "You got everything, while I got nothing!"

"You think want I had was perfect!? You think what I have is perfect!?" Bart screeched, his voice cracking. He took a few steps towards him. "My parents and I spent our lives afraid, running, and imprisoned because of YOU! I will never apologize for what I had. And I will never apologize to you for trying to create a better life for myself." His lip curled into a snarl. "You want me to feel sorry for you? Because I don't."

A newfound courage rose in Bart that he had never felt before. For the first time, he found himself more disgusted than afraid of Inertia. For the first time, he finally saw Thad for what he was; a jealous, spiteful little boy.

Bart took a step towards him. Inertia's eyes went wide at his advance and took a step back.

Bart thrusted a finger towards Inertia. "You chose to do the things you did. You chose monster."

"Yes," Thad snipped with a growl. "But we're still cut from the same cloth. I am the monster inside of you."

Bart fell still and quiet. It was now that Inertia finally spoke some truth.

"I'm everything that you will be." Inertia's face twitched back a sob. "And you're everything I could have been." He added softly.

Inertia turned, putting his back to him. He looked over his shoulder. "Enjoy your perfect life, while you can."

"It's not perfect, thanks to you.” Bart snarled.

Inertia turned to look at him, a savage fire lit his eyes. "I intend to keep it that way."

Inertia sped off. Bart went to run after him but Rose's voice shouted in his head.

'WE HAVE WONDERGIRL. LET'S GO!'

Bart gasped, 'Rose? Rose? How are you-'

'LET'S GO!' She shouted again.

Nightwing took over. 'Everyone, head to the Bioship and Super cycle, now! Move!'

Bart zipped as fast as he could to the ship, his speed significantly slowed by his lack of energy. As he approached he saw the Bioship land in the grassy area to the south of the castle. Robin carried Wonder Girl inside as Ravager fought off the remaining pursuers. She limped inside.
Bart finally reached the door of the ship. Aqualad sat at the controls. He, Red Hood, Flash, Starfire, and Lagoon boy were already inside.

Tim sat Cassie down by the right wall as Nightwing arrived. Rose hobbled against the other side, her forearm holding her up and she leaned against the wall.

"Rose?" Bart called out.

She slid as her knees buckled beneath her and she fell to the floor. Bart called out to her again. He ran to her, rolling her onto her back.

Bart's jaw opened as he hissed in a breath. The gruesomeness of Rose's wound sent a bolt of fear through his veins.

"Nonononono," he cried as he reached for her stomach, tearing away some of the costume by the wound.

Rose coughed, gurgling as she choked on the blood rising in her throat.

"Rose? Rose?" A cold sweat covered his skin. He sat on the ground next to her, pulling her into his lap. He had to get her chest above her stomach so she wouldn't drown. "You're gonna be ok. You're gonna be ok." He squealed, tears cracking his voice. "You'regonnabeok." His voice almost a whisper of desperate self-reassurance.

Blood poured from the corners of Rose's mouth. Desperate, gurgled coughs longed for air.

"No. No. No, stay with me." Bart begged as she shook in his arms.

Footsteps filled around him as Beast Boy, M'gaan, and Looker arrived. Beast Boy nearly carrying M'gaan in as she limped through her injuries. The Bioship took off into the air.

M'gaan gasped. The others looked over and stared in horror at Rose's injuries. Their panicked voices rang in the air as their eyes fell on Rose's butchered stomach. Blood pooled around her.

"Get me some towels! Blankets! Anything!" Bart screeched at them. Anger and desperation ripped through his voice.

He looked back down at Rose. "You're gonna be ok. You're gonna be ok." Bart's cracked tone nearly lost to his sobs.

He sat with his legs sprayed, pulling Rose into his lap in front of him. Her neck rested in the crook of his right elbow. His other hand put pressure on her wound.

Rose looked up at him. Trembling overcame her in her body's last plea to stay warm. Color faded from her skin only to be painted by the red that drizzled from her mouth. Her half-lidded eyes stared at Bart as she coughed and heaved. Her left hand, shook as she reached towards his with weakened movement. Her fingertips grazed against the back of his hand. And Bart interlaced his fingers with hers.

His breathing hitched. He looked at her pale face to see that she too had begun to cry.

It was the first time he had ever seen Rose afraid.

She let out one more breath; then stillness. A glossiness overtook her eyes as there was no more sight behind them.
"Rose? Rose!?" Bart yelled, shaking her. A cry burst from his throat. He nuzzled his face against her head, sobbing.

He lost. Just like like he always did.

He was a poison to anyone he loved. And always will be.

The ship went quiet, save for Bart's crying.

Jason looked down, shaking his head. Another one, gone.

His hand latched onto the canister around his hip. He wondered if it would be enough to bring her back. But it was not his decision to make or gift to give. He took the canister with the Lazarus Pit liquid and handed it to Robin.

Robin snatched it from his hand. With shaky hands he undid the top. Its green glow was bright despite its small amount. He went to pour it on Cassie's wounds but Cassie reached out and push it away.

"It's from the Lazarus Pit, it'll head you." Tim said.

"Tim," Cassie struggled with the word behind her broken lips. "Give it to Rose."

"What?" Tim asked. He looked behind him to see Bart squeezed around Rose's still body. His shoulders heaved with sobs.

He looked back at Wonder Girl, "Cassie...she's gone. We don't know if it'll be enough to bring her back. We don't know how bad you're hurt-"

She placed her hand over his despite the pain shooting through her. "You have...to try." She slurred, exhausted.

Tim chewed on his lip in thought. He nodded, she was right. It's what heroes did. They tried. No matter what the odds.

They always tired.

Tim jumped to his feet. He flipped around, demanding everyone in his way to move. He knelt down next to Rose. Bart shot his head up, looking at him with wet eyes and cheeks.

With diligent fingers he slowly pouring the glowing green liquid over Rose's wound.

The only sound around them was the hissing of the wound beneath the water. Remarkably, the wretched gash healed before their eyes. Yet an emptiness still rested in Rose's eyes.

Until she gasped.

Loud and hard as the others jumped at her sudden movement. Life charged back into her with a bullish ferocity. She panted, eyes wide with terror and confusion. She yelled.

Bart held her tight, "It's alright! It's alright! It's alright!"

Light came back to Rose's vision. She turned her head to the side, coughing out the pooled blood left over in her stomach. She gasped for breath, rubbing her hand along her stomach.

There was no wound, no mark, no indication of her hacked entrails. Only the water from The
Lazarus Pit could have healed her. Water that was supposed to be for Cassie's recovery.

Rose snapped her gaze up over to Cassie. Her bruised eyes were lidded with catastrophic fatigue. Blood trailed from her nose and mouth.

Cassie did the best she could to smiled with her swollen lip. "And you thought I hated you," She chuckled through the pain of speaking. "Asshole."

Her eyes closed; finally able to rest.

But the pain worse than the physical, was knowing that as a sidekick, she was a failure.

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Uninhabited Caribbean Island

April 22nd 2017
21:30 EDT

They landed on the tiny island of their rendezvous point. The inland itself barely able to hold their three ships. Tim put Cassie's arm around her shoulder, helping her limp down the hanger door of The Bioship.

The all exited The Bioship and trailed behind Cassie and Tim. Rose walked to tiny 'shoreline' to wash away the blood on her mouth and uniform with salt water.

Wonder Woman exited her jet and raced to The Bioship. She lost her breath at the sight of Cassie's beaten body. Cassie looked up with what little strength she had.

"M'sorry." She said Diana with a cracked voice.

Tears welled in Wonder Woman's eyes. "No, no, no" she said with a shake of her head. She held out her arms.

"Cassie!"

A voice came behind her. She turned to see Helena racing towards them. Hawkwoman and Zataana trailed in behind her.

"What is she doing here?" Wonder Woman chided.

"She refused to go without her." Zee answered.

Cassie's half-lidded, swollen eyes strained to see in front of her. Her vision faded in and out until she felt a soft hand on her cheek. "Mom?" She asked.

A sobb rushed through Cassie. She sat for so long in that chair wondering when Inertia would kill her. She thought about her death for so long that her rescue had seemed almost like a dream.

But seeing her mother there, that finally made it real. She would finally make it home. Mothers always came to take you home.
"Mommy," she squeaked, tears falling down her cheeks once more.

"It's alright baby," Helena cooed. She pulled her into a tight embrace. "It's alright."

Helena looked back at them. She reached her hand out and cupped Tim's cheek.

"Thank you," She said with a broken voice. She looked around at all of them. "Thank you for saving my girl."

Hawkwoman and Zee rushed to Helena's side. They helped her usher Cassie to Hawkwomen's ship.

"Take her to Themyscira as quickly as you can." Diana called out to Zataana and Hawkwomen. "I'll be right behind you."

"Where are you going?" Nightwing asked.

Wonder Woman stopped to answer. She turned towards him and pointed at her ship. "To take Ra's into custody."

"You got Ra's!?!" Wally exclaimed.

Diana smiled. "Yes, he is unconscious and bound at the moment. I will be taking him to Bele Reve. He is wanted for more than just this." She pointed at her eye. "And I have his confession, right here."

"The contacts!" M'gaan exclaimed with a smile. For the whole mission, Diana had been wearing their Wayne Industries Recording Contact Lense.

"Yes." Diana answered. "Hopefully it will be enough to put him away for a long time." She addressed the rest of them. "Go home team. You did amazing work today." She smiled with astonished gratitude. "I am so proud of all of you. Thank you."

"We would have done it for anyone." Robin said.

"No one gets left behind." Blue Beetle added.

Wonder Woman nodded and walked off to her jet. She jumped inside. It hovered above them and sped away into the sky.

"And, nobody died!" Garfield chimed in once she was gone, trying to lighten up the mood. "Extra brownie points there."

Rose stood, spitting the salt water from her mouth. The taste of copper finally wilted away from her mouth. She walked towards them, wiping away the water on her lips with her arm. "Well, technically I died." She jested. "But I'm not keeping score or anyth-"

Rose was cut off as a pair of hands grabbed the sides of her face. Her eyes went wide as she realized it was Bart who grabbed her. He crashed her lips against his. The Team's jaws fell agape.

Bart broke their kiss. He let go, jolting a finger in her face. "Never ever do anything so stupid like that again! Got it?" His scolding would have held more impact if he wasn't so fatigued.

Rose stared at him, mouth agape. He still felt the traces of his lips.

"You are not-you are not off the hook." He tried to reprimand. Hard to do at someone three inches
taller than you. "You might have died but I am still so mad at you! Quit being stupid!"

"Uh-uh, oh-okay." Rose fumbled out, confused by his tone. It was though he tried to yell, yet didn't know how. Like a new parent.

Bart paused for a moment, unsure of what to say. "Good." He turned away and marched for the ship. "Now one of you, take me home."

"Bart?" Jaime asked him with a raised brow. "You ok buddy?"

He answered wildly with his arms. "No!" He shook his hands out in front of him. "I am physically and emotionally tapped out for the week." He counted on his fingers. "I need a nap, a shower, and a large pizza and noone is getting any!" He marched towards the ship in a child-like fashion. "Adios, let's go!"

Garfield hid his laugh behind his hand. Jaime looked at him with a knowing grin.

"I think Bart's getting hangry." He said to them with a smile.

"Hangry?" Starfire questioned.

"Hungry-angry," Jason answered.

A smile grew on all of their lips.

M'gaan shooed them inside. "Come on everyone, let's go get the diva a pizza."

Bart poked his head from behind the open hanger door. "Diva!?" he scoffed with an offended look.

A laugh bellowed from Jaime's belly. One that was soon followed suit by Tim, Garfield, and Emily as they walked into the Bioship.

The sound brought a lightness to M'gaan's heart. She looked over at Nightwing, exchanging a small smile. It was heartbreaking how long it had been since she had heard one of them laugh. It had been what seemed a lifetime since she heard them laugh like children, like they were supposed to.

After so long, they finally, finally had a win. After so long they were finally able to get something right. And for the first night in a long time, treachery and death didn't rest heavy upon them.

M'gaan allowed herself a small moment to enjoy it, to capture the their worry-free energy.

She allowed herself a moment to enjoy the short quiet, in the eye of the storm.
Sweat fell from Inertia's brow as he walked with quiet footsteps along the warn stone pathway. A sinking feeling pressed in his gut as he walked closer to back courtyard of Darkseid's castle. Roars and crackles bellowed from the river of fire around them.

On each side of him walked Vandal Savage and Gordon G. Godfrey. Tension rested heavy between the trio as Darkseid and Dasaad came into view. They waited with uneasy patience.

"He's going to be pissed." Inertia hissed as Vandal as they walked.

Vandal merely looked over and down at him. "I believe it was you who said we needed to speed up the timeline."

"Yeah, under your orders." Inertia spat back.

Vandal only answered him with a small growl. They reached Dasaad and Darkseid, a silence rested in the air.

"Report," Darkseid commanded.

"I am afraid that we have some...unfavorable updates." Vandal answered. "The League and their juniors are proving to be more of a threat than we were ready for." He tossed a snide look over Inertia. "Our advisement to speed up the timeline prove to have ill effect. Ra's al Gul has been captured. He is being detained in a supermax facility which has since significantly increased its security since its White Martian infiltration."

Darkseid remained emotionless, "And?"

Godfrey took the reins. "Our final weapons facility was destroyed. We currently have no more locations to make more Warhound Armor," He answered. "And during this the girl was rescued. We were not able to kill the child on television like we had planned. Justice League has not made any sort of announcement of stepping down."

A moment of quiet passed before Darkseid spoke. "Tell me, Inertia." He asked. "Were these losses worth it?"

"Yes Lord Darkseid I promise you. We didn't have any choice." Inertia said, his irritation towards Vandal rising. "In the future we were losing. Bart changed so much by coming back to his time. The breaking of The League was supposed to begin with The Flash dying. Then Bart came to your time and saved him and turned Nathaniel to a Cadmus science monkey instead of our wild pawn."

Inertia growled, it seemed as though all was decaying and slowly falling apart. "Then all of a sudden our key players in the turning point in the war weren't on our side anymore. Blue Beetle was supposed to remain on mode but they rebooted his Scarab. Suddenly we didn't have The Reach to enslave the majority of the population on our behalf or keep them imprisoned in the work camps."

"End the story!" Darkseid commanded.

"Don't you think you should listen to them, my Lord?" Inertia asked. "They are the ones that are going to save us!"

"Odinson," Darkseid commanded.

"Bart," Inertia growled. "Maybe we should consider this."

"End the story!" Darkseid commanded. 
"And Looker was supposed to be our... valuable double agent. She was supposed to fall to our side, lose herself in her fucked up mind, and eventually kill part of The League and nearly all of The Team from the inside." It took all took all his might not to grind his teeth. "But they 'fixed' her too. She snapped to the other side and gained control of herself. And the people she killed, all those heroes who were supposed to be dead, came back."

Darkseid still stood in silence, stoic. His unreadability pulsed a growing panic on Inertia's nerves.

"We didn't have a choice." He spat, trying to validate himself. "You didn't have a choice. Vandal didn't have a choice. We had to speed it up. I was under his orders!"

"I'll ask you to not put the blame on me for...saying things I have not yet said." Vandal sneered. "More so since I have no way to verify the validity of your story."

"Are you kidding me? Now you're throwing me under the bus?" Inertia snarled. He pointed an accusatory finger at him. "You need to fix this. This mess was all you. I didn't come here to play on a losing team."

"If you want to be the all-star on this team that you claim to be," Vandal answered. "I suggest start performing like one."

A fury boiled in Inertia's blood. "Are you fucking joking me? Are you fuck-are you fucking kidding?" His anger caused him to stumble over his words. "I have carried your piss poor sorry excuse for a team on my fucking back the minute I got here. I've done more fucking shit for this war than you have the the last thirty-"

In his rage and engrossment of chewing out Vandal, Inertia did not notice that Darkseid had stepped right up to him. That is, until a flicker of movement caught his eye. His stomach went cold at Darkseid's closeness.

Darkseid's massive hand snatched Inertia by the throat, engulfing part of his chest and shoulders in his palm.

Inertia squealed and gasped as Darkseid effortlessly picked him up by the neck and brought his face close to his.

"Absolving oneself," Darkseid said. "Is something that just irritates me so." A flicker of a snarl twitched on his lips. "Almost as much as failure."

"But—but I haven't failed," Inertia squeaked between breaths. "I killed—I killed the original Flash and his wife. The League has to blame Bart now, they have to. To them, he kept me a secret, that's why they died." He coughed as he took strained breaths. "I tortured Wonder Girl on camera for 4 hours. There's no way The League won't—" He coughed. "Won't completely lose all their credibility now."

Heat rushed in his cheeks as his face turned red. Perhaps it wasn't Darkseid choking him so, but the possibility that he could crush his spine, brought about his a rising panic. "And I killed one of the kids on their team. I—I gutted that bitch like a fucking fish."

Darkseid remained quiet, merely narrowing his eyes at Inertia.

Godfrey cleared his throat. "Sire?" He addressed, grabbing Darkseid's attention. "As much as I do love seeing mouthy children get their just desserts, I can say that his plan with Wonder Girl has proven in our favor more than we thought. Now that the public knows for certain The League has underage proteges, some of which who have died, and are put in danger, The League virtually has no credibility. The public does not trust them anymore. It's safe to say that they would be looking for
more trustworthy saviours."

Godfrey took a moment to make sure he truly stood by his words before he spoke. "If there were any
time to implement The Hounds, this would be the opportune moment."

Darkseid's eyes slid from Godfrey of Inertia who still struggled under his grasp. He remained quiet.
Inertia gasped under his grip. "So you'd still kill me?" He asked with grit. "Even after I did all that?"

A moment of quiet passed before Darkseid answered, "No. For you do not seem like the type of boy
who fears death."

He dropped Inertia to the ground. Inertia coughed and heaved and pulled himself onto all fours,
trying to catch his breath. As his struggling quieted, he looked up at Darkseid with watery eyes.

"You fail me again." Darkseid continued, a darkness encompassing his face. "I will snap an Inhibitor
Collar around your neck, and I will turn you into a slave. The same type of slave, that you've so
cravenly mauled and tortured."

Inertia hissed in a small breath. His jaw fell agape as a tremble danced on his lower lip; breath short
with panic.

Vandal leaned down, Inertia winced as he cowered below him on the ground.

"Yes, that is what you fear, isn't it?" Darkseid said. "Powerlessness."

Panic closed Inertia's throat tighter than Darkseid's grip. It was falling apart. It was all falling apart
around him and for the first time in his life he was losing. Inertia, was losing. He was not created to
be a failure. It was not spliced into his DNA. Yet here he was; slipping from a feared, malicious
general to a fuck up pawn. A few more mistakes and he would lose everything.

And he had no doubt that Darkseid would make good on his word.

"Vandal," Darkseid addressed, standing straight. "What is the status of my Master Helmet?"

"Perfected," Vandal answered with a smile.

Darkseid turned away from them and walked to the edge of the stone pathway, looking over the fiery
river.

"What is it?" Vandal asked after a few moments of quiet.

"I am calculating our status. Even with these setbacks, we are still on the right path. I still have no
doubt of my victory." Darkseid answered. "Set a course for Earth."

He turned, stepping over the still-cowering Inertia. "I believe the earthling saying is, if you want
something done right," He walked towards their passenger ship. The War World loomed in the sky.
"Do it yourself."

Godfrey, Inertia, And Vandal looked at one another, smiles pulling upon their lips.


Inertia snapped his head up at him and scrambled to his feet

Darkseid turned to them. "This Bart creature. He seems to be the main plague upon our future
victory. I assume you will be disposing of him, quickly."

"Yes." He replied quickly, nodding. "Absolutely."

Darkseid went to turn away but stopped himself. "And," He continued, the gears in his mind turning. "I have one more task for you."

Inertia had his full attention.

"In every Planet that I have conquered, I have learned that children always shape the future." He reminisced. "And you, more than anyone here, know which children will grow to be detrimental to our future."

Inertia narrowed his eyes, decypering his words.

"So I suggest if you wish to remain a general, you secure the victory for our future." A tilt pulled on Darkseid's head. "For what better way to kill a child, than with a child killer?"

A slow, venomous smile pulled on Inertia's lips.

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*The WatchTower*

*April 26th 2017*

*17:30*

"What do you mean The Warhound armor is perfected?"

Nightwing's question rang through the conference room. Discomfort hung in the air and they murmured in frustration. Dinah sat at the head of the table while Nightwing, Superboy, Artemis, Aqualad, M'gaan, Starfire, and The Green Lantern John Stewart sat around her.

"Dick I- I can't think of another word for it," M'gaan said. Images of their latest battle on Infinity Island played in her mind. "Arsenal was...so different than the last time we saw him. Ivo was in complete control of him. There wasn't- there wasn't any trace of Arsenal left really he was just- all machine. Ivo had installed a Brain Wave Transmitter in his helmet and I was useless. I was powerless against him, I could barely walk let alone fight."

Dick asked, "How did you guys escape?"

"Emily was able to protect us with her Energy Shields long enough until we heard that Cassie was out." M'gaan answered. "The Disruptor didn't seem to affect her as much as it did me. She blasted him off his feet with her shield and we ran for it. I don't know how long we would have lasted."

Dick let out a heavy sign as he planted his face in his hands. "Fuck-" he breathed.

M'gaan perked in surprised, "Dick Grayson did you just swear?"

"Extreme circumstances call for extreme language," he said.

"Ok can we just- ok back up," Artemis stumbled. "What is the deal with this Warhound armor again? What is Ra's making it for? Isn't it Apokoliptian? And what is this Darkseid person we are supposed to be worried about?"

"He is not a person. He is and enslaver and destroyer planets." Starfire chimed in. "You should not
just be worried about him. You should be afraid of him.”

"Ok, can we just take the time to piece everything together, from the beginning?" M’gaan said. "Maybe we're missing things we didn't realize that someone knows the answer to."

"Good idea." Dick agreed. The waived his hand, bringing up controls for the virtual monitor. Images of the recent alien attacks floated around them. "Okay, so about eight months ago we experienced our first alien attack in Bludhaven. Aliens that we now know to be from Apokolips. They're also soldiers for Darkseid."

"And experiments of Desaad." Starfire added.

"Maybe, you should take the part Starfire. You seem to know the most about it." Dick said.

Starfire nodded as she began. "I will start with Darkseid. He is an evil creature. A conqueror and enslaver of worlds. The 'aliens' that you have been fighting are not just aliens. They were his prisoners of war, turned into violent, obedient, beasts by Desaad. His scientist, his...head warlock."

"We've verified with the Green Lantern Corp." John Steward chimed in. "Reports of Darkseid had never been anywhere close to this corner of the galaxy. But the planets he does come in contact with lose contact with other planets or completely disappear all together."

"Yes," Starfire continued. "He has the power to destroy worlds. Darkseid is unlike any enemy you have ever faced. His tactics are more...advanced than just force." A darkness crept over her face. "He is a...poison. An infection. He does more than just use soldiers to fight. He uses politics to take down whoever the heroes are on a current planet, have their people distrust them, and rule over them with his own manipulators. He attempted this on my planet of Tamaran. He has two witches that are masters of mind manipulation."

Dick brought up two profiles on the large monitors. "Known here on Earth as G. Gordon Godfrey and Grace Godfrey," he said.

"The real names they call themselves are 'Glorious Godfrey' and 'Amazing Grace'." Starfire said. "And they are not humans, they are of Apokolips. They disguised themselves as Tamaranian political elites. We did not have television on Tamaran but we did have a sort of radio."

Starfire fell quiet for a moment as bloody memories danced in her mind. "Darkseid's suicide soldiers arrived and began killing off our people in mass, their self-exploding armor made them impossible to fight and capture without killing civilians." She looked up at the monitors with a snarl. "Grace and Godfrey used this speak out against the my Royal Family and my Royal Guard trying to convince my people that we were….inept, it that the right word? Yes, inept at protecting them."

M'gaan hot a knowing look over at Dick. "Sounds familiar," she said.

"Yeah," Dick said. "Grace and Godfrey have been adamant on their talk shows about how The Justice League has been unable to protect Earth alien attacks. How, people dying has been our fault. We even have been given the blame for The Sink of San Diego."

"They were setting us up for failure," Dinah realized.

"Exactly," Starfire responded."But it is not just Grace and Godfrey he has manipulating planets. He has some of that planets own people working for him."

"We saw this on Mars." M'gaan said. "J'ornell, a Martian councilman, used a few White Martians and weapons and bombs bought from Intergang to try to incite a Civil War on Mars. He tried to
"blame us, the White Martians, for all the attacks."

"I assume it was to throw Mars into chaos." Conner said. "That way he could imprison half the population and rise to power, making the public think that he was the one who solved the war. Even though he was the one he began it?"

"Yes," M'gaan affirmed. "Apparently Vadal, under orders from Darkseid promised him he'd be head of Mars's 'New world order' if he did so. They even had Martians disguised as members of The League to create violence and destruction to further damage their reputation. Even has some of them barred from duties."

"So what happens after he discredits a planet's leadership and gets the people to follow his cronies instead?" Dinah asked Starfire.

"I do not know," Starfire answered. "But what I do know is that after my sister had me exiled and sold into slavery on The War World, Desaad experimented on me. He forced me to take many drugs. Drugs that were supposed to make me docile and enhance my powers"

"Sounds a lot like Spark," Nightwing groaned.

"It may have been the same, but it did not work on the Tamaranian body." Starfire answered. "And my people did not fall for his ruse. They resisted, tried to rescue me, and as a result he destroyed my planet with the War World."

"But before that he tested some sort of armor on me." She added. "I remember him using the word 'Warhound'."

"Woah woah woah," Dick interjected. "Warhound? He tested Warhound armor on you too? Why is this the first I'm hearing about this?"

"Well, we haven't exactly had a moment to reconvenie." Artemis reminded.

"Yeah what...is that again?" M'gaan asked. "And it's related to Spark?"

"So it sounds like in order to get the armor to work they wearer needs to be drugged." Dick added.

"What makes you say that?" Dinah asked.

"Every instance that we've seen a metahuman wear the armor they've been on Spark or some other kind of medication." He said. "Arsenal for example is a prime example."

"Do we know what this armor does?" Kaldur asked.

"We've seen it in action on Arsenal and we've taken some prototypes." Dick answered. "But we can't seem to activate it. And we don't want to risk putting it on anyone."

"And the newest feature has a Brain Wave Disruptor that makes it almost impossible for the wearer to be reached psychically." M'gaan added.

"What we do know from the blueprints is that the armor connects to the wearer's brain stem. Making it almost...sentient." Dick said. "We saw definite Reach influence in the blueprint designs."

Dinah rubbed her temples in frustration. "So you're saying that our enemy, The Light and Darkseid, have created a deadly semi-sentient armor with Apokolips weaponry, telekinetic resistance, remote activation, and is worn by a drugged, highly malleable wearer?"
Everyone sat still and quiet for a moment before Dick answered with a simple, "Yes."

The silence was deafening. The weight of everything they were up against, finally crashed upon them.

"What the fuck are we gonna do?" Artemis asked, mind racing. "Do we go public?"

"Yeah I'm sure that will go over great." John advised. "Considering The League's public approve at this point is practically non existent."

"Every little thing we do right now with be under complete scrutiny." Dinah said. She sighed. "As much as I hate it....we have to wait. We have to wait until Darkseid makes his next move. Then we can step in and stop whatever it is that they're planning."

"I really don't like that idea." Dick looked at her with pleading eyes.

Dinah sighed again, shaking her head. "We don't have a choice anymore."

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_Dakota City_

_April 27th 2017_

_18:15_

Pink rose in the skyline as evening swept across the city. Frieda shivered as a chilling wind rustled her hair. She clung tight to the casserole dish in her hand. She let out a shaky breath as she walked up the stairs to the tiny, white home on the street corner. Bubbles floated in her stomach as she knocked on the door.

A middle aged woman with bobbed blonde hair opened the door. It opened only just a sliver, just enough for her to see Frieda but still hide behind the sliding lock.

"Uh, hi!" Frieda let out a nervous smile. "My name's Frieda, we talked on the phone?"

"Oh! Hi, yes. Come in Frieda." The woman closed the door, undid the lock, then opened it wide. She motioned towards the living room.

Frieda stepped inside, taking off her jacket.

"Thanks for taking the time to talk to me, Mrs. Brauer."

"Please, call me Katie." She said.

Katie was a quiet woman. She spoke with soft, almost defeated tone. It was a voice that was nothing at all like her daughter Gerri.

Frieda handed her the casserole dish she carried. "Oh, here. It's lasagna my mom made." She cleared her throat, drowning in nerves. "How are things for you today?"

"The same." Katie answered with sad honesty. She motioned to the coffee table in front of the sofa. "Would you like to set up here?"

"Yes, right." Frieda answered. She placed her backpack on the table and pulled out a notebook and tape recorder.
Frieda took in the room around her. It seemed disheveled in a way that didn't seem normal. There were family portraits on the wall; perfect photos of a 'perfect' blonde hair blue-eyed family.

The coffee table, end table, and bookshelves were lined with wilted flower bouquets. They soured Frieda's stomach. What was it about death that made people send beautiful things to people with hearts so ugly?

Frieda looked from the doorway connecting the living room to the kitchen. Katie put the lasagna in with other casseroles in the fridge. Frieda's eyes slid to the fireplace by kitchen entryway. Above it on the mantle, sat a large, white marble urn.

Frieda sat on the couch when Katie returned to the room. She sat in an armchair to the left of Frieda.

"Are you ready?" Frieda asked her.

Katie sniffled, pulling a tissue from box on the table and holding it in her hand. Her eyes were bloodshot from two weeks of tears.

"Do you mind if I record this?" Frieda asked, pointing to the voice recorder on the table. "It helps me take notes so I have don't have to worry about missing anything."

Katie nodded. Frieda started the recording, opened her notebook, and read over her bullet points.

"So," Frieda began. "Could you start off by telling me a little about your daughter, Gerri Brauer?"

The question was more of a peasantry. Something just to break the ice and begin the interview on a soft note. For Frieda did not need Katie to tell about who her daughter Gerri had been. Frieda, already knew exactly what Gerri had been like.

Gerri Brauer hadn't been a good person. In fact, Frieda couldn't remember a time when Gerri wasn't a cold, cruel, and well frankly, a bitch. It was a opinion that Frieda would stand by even in Gerri's untimely death.

Frieda had known Gerri since pre-school and was too aware of her reign of terror. Gerri had been gorgeous and terrifying. Tall, blonde, athletic, life of the party. Made her way to the top of the school food chain with her bad attitude, superiority complex, and her father's credit card.

But of course, that was not a side of her that her mother saw. To her, her daughter had been her angel even before death. Frieda listened with patience, hearing every one of Katie's sweetly tainted traits and tales of her daughter. Frieda gave small smiles and nodded, waiting for her to finish her embellished reality.

You see, The Brauers were Neo-Nazis. Unapologetic ones at that. And Gerri had made that very clear by the constant scribblings of swastikas in her notebooks and boisterous opinions of minorities in class discussions.

Frieda didn't really want to hear her mother talk about how Gerri loved painting, ballet, and fishing trips with her father. None of those things made up for the fact that Gerri had been a raging fascist.

And now she was dead. Her rampant partying had lead her to overdose on Spark two weeks prior. But the circumstances around her death and what happened to her after, Frieda needed more information on.

So she called Gerri's mother, under the guise (a much prettier word than 'lie') that Frieda wanted to interview her for a piece on Spark she was doing for the school paper.
"I know this is going to be really hard to talk about. And I want you to know if I come off the wrong way at any point in the interview, it's not intentional. I'm looking to understand. To make sure I know the whole story." Frieda explained, Katie nodded.

"I'll just start with the hard questions first." Frieda said. "Did you know that Gerri was doing Spark?"

"No, no of course not."

"Did you know if she did any other drugs?"

"Look, I-" Katie began. "I'm not so dense that I didn't know my daughter would cut loose with her friends now and again.

_That is an understatement_, Frieda thought.

"I couldn't be with her 24/7. She was a smart, responsible girl. I trusted her." Irritation rose in Katie's voice.

"Do you think," Frieda tried to approach softly. "Maybe she was getting into Spark and you just didn't know it?"

Katie took a moment to cool herself off, remembering Frieda did not mean her any harm. "I suppose it's possible."

As the room fell quiet, Frieda's eye fell to the urn above the fireplace. How disparagingly fascinating it was that all complex, biologically intricate beings, would ultimately be reduced to ash.

Katie followed Frieda's wandering gaze. "It's a beautiful urn, isn't it?" She said, staring at with a sullen remembrance. "White, gold, and perfect, just like her."

Frieda made the extra effort to keep her facial expressions in check.

Katie turned back towards her. "You know-" She began as water welled in her eyes. She shook her head. "No, never mind."

Frieda felt a tug on her line.

"What is it?" Frieda asked. "You look like you want to say something else."

Katie wet her lips in thought, cautious as to what to say. "There was something, _off_ about what happened after she died."

Frieda's heart fluttered. She leaned in close. "Can you elaborate more on that?"

"It's just- you're going to think I'm crazy."

"I promise you, I won't." Frieda reassured. She reached out across the coffee table and held Katie's hand. "Something isn't sitting right, is it?"

Katie looked up from the ground and met her gaze.

"I think there's something weird going on too." Frieda said. "If you talk to me, maybe you can help figure it out."

Katie let out a shaky breath as she nodded. Frieda let go of her hand.
"I-I think-" She stammered. "I think there's something more. It's just- there was no- no closure." A tear fell from her eye as she shook her head. "It didn't- none of it made any sense. Christ they wouldn't even let me see the body!' Her composure faded. "I couldn't even just touch her one last time."

"What do you mean?' Frieda asked with a tilted head. "I know it's going to be hard, but can you walk me through step by step, what happened when you were told she died."

"I received a call from the police, stating that they found Gerri's body. They told me and my husband to meet at the hospital to identify the body, but- I couldn't even go in the room to see her.'"

"What do you mean, how did you identify her then?"

"They took pictures of her and asked us to identify her that way. They had the whole coroner's wing of the hospital blocked off with plastic and people with those full body suits."

"Who is 'they'?"

"This company came in- they said the Spark in her body was toxic. They said it made her toxic. I couldn't get near her. They wouldn't even let me bury her, I had to get her cremated. They made me burn up my own daughter, and I didn't even have a choice!' Katie's yell shook the room as she finally cracked beneath the memory.

"I'm sorry," She said through her tears. "Give me a moment."

"Yes, absolutely," Frieda said with a nodd. "Take your time. I'll be right here."

Katie grabbed another tissue as she walked out the living room and towards the bathroom. Her sniffles died as she walked away.

Frieda's heartbeat pounded in her ear. Her breath shook as she looked up at the urn again. A wild notion overcame her.

She reached into her backpack, quickly rummaging through the contents inside. She dove through her lunchbag pulling out a ziplock baggie. She pulled out the unopened peanut butter sandwich and tossed in back into her backpack. She furiously shook out the crumbs. It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do.

Her heartbeat grew louder as she stood, peaking at the doorway to make sure Mrs. Brauer was nowhere in sight. She rushed up to the fireplace.

Her hands shook as she reached for the urn. She grunted as she hoisted it up and brought it gently down to the floor. *Fuck* was it heavy.

She lifted the lid off the urn and carefully tipped it, pouring some of the ashes into her ziplock bag. She grimaced as she turned her head away to avoid the rising ash from touching her face.

She heard a click of a doorknob from down the hall. Frieda gasped as she snapped to attention. She closed the baggie and shoved it in her pocket. Her ears drowned in the sound of her heartbeat. She stifled her groan as she hoisted the urn back up onto the mantle.

She brought hands to her front pockets, pretending to look at the family photos as Katie entered the living room.

She sniffed as she tried her best to put on a smile. "I'm sorry Frieda, could we continue this another
"Of course!" Frieda exclaimed, her heart pounding against her sternum. "Just let me know whenever you finish the casserole and I'll come get the tupperware. Thank you for everything! I'll do some research and get back to you, I promise!" She rambled and shook as she furiously gathered her things. Her cheeks felt hot as she rushed out the door.

As the front door closed behind her, she let out an audible sigh of relief. She marched down the sidewalk, heart still fluttering. She felt one third relieved, one third sick, and one third like she wanted to piss herself.

"Holy shit what did I just do?" She whispered to herself. She looked over her shoulder, the Brauer house faded in the distance. She pulled out her phone. If she was going to run with this absurd, ridiculous hunch, she was going to have to run with it 100%.

The phone clicked on the other line. "Virgil?" Frieda asked.

"Yeah? Is everything ok?" Virgil sounded confused. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing, I- just running errands." Frieda winced at herself. Why did she lie? She cleared her throat. If Vigirl could be brave every day, then god damnit she could be brave too.

"Hey, I went to the courthouse today." She admitted.

Virgil paused before asking, "Why?"

"Because I got a letter from in the mail today saying the charges against Francis were being dropped."

"What? A letter? From who?"

"Homeland Security."

"What?"

"I actually- I went to the jail first-"

"Frieda!"

"He wasn't there and neither was Leonard." Frieda cut him off. "They're gone, the but the police wouldn't tell me anything."

He tried to retort but Frieda cut him off.

"Virgil listen!" She snipped. "I need- could you ask your teammates to check in on the other metakids they've gotten arrested?"

"Why?"

"Could you just-" She stumbled over her words as she grew flustered. "Could you just ask them to check to see if they're still there."

"I don't know Frieda, everyone's busy already."

"Virgil please," She stopped in her tracks, a plea growing in her voice. "I've got a really bad feeling about this. Please, I need you to do this for me. Please?"
She said it in a tone that she knew he couldn't say no to.

He sighed in defeat. "Fine, I'll see if they can swing by the jails this week."

"Thank you," she said with a small smile. She expected weight to be lifted, but felt as though she only added on more. Dozens of thoughts and ideas swarmed and clashed in her head as she determined her next move.

And she wondered, what new level of crazy she had achieved, with a dead girl's ashes in a ziplock bag in her back pocket.

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**El Paso**

April 29th 2017

09:30 MST

"What do you mean you don't know where they are?" Jamie's words fluttered out with an underlying irritation and rising panic.

He thought that showing up at the El Paso Police Station in his Blue Beetle armour would help him get the answers he sought. He was proved wrong.

The dispatcher sat at her station behind the bulletproof glass. Annoyance fell from her in waves. But Jaime remained persistent.

"I go to Belle Reve and they said they never got them. I go to the juvenile penitentiary for metahumans and they say they don't have them." Jaime failed to hide the sass in his voice. "Those kids were booked here. They were in your custody. Now you're telling me you don't know where they are either? Do they just 'poofed' away then? Disappeared?"

"You *do not* need to raise your voice at me. I shouldn't even be saying anything to you, you're not family to them and you're not legally law enforcement." The dispatcher snipped right back.

Jaime took a deep breath. He allowed himself a moment to cool off before speaking. "I'm sorry." He looked down at her with pleading eyes. "Please. I'm-I'm sorry for being rude. But one of those kids is my best friend and I have no idea where he is. His mom has no idea where he is. She asked me to help find him. She has no idea where her son is and no one is telling her anything. Can you imagine what that must feel like?"

The woman let out a hard breath through her nose. Her lips pressed into a fine line. Her irritation faded away as she slowly accepted his apology. She looked around her to make sure there was no one else around. She motioned Blue to lean in closer as she leaned over her desk.

She answered in a hushed tone. "Look all I know is that a few weeks back some government agents came in with paperwork to take custody of them. Paperwork with very high clearance." She raised her brows at Jaime's confused expression. "I'm taking Homeland Security level of clearance. We didn't have any choice but to release those kids to them."

Questions sprinted through Jaime's mind. He struggled to form words. "I-but..but you didn't give notice to anyone? Not even their parents?"

She shook her head. "The paperwork specifically told us not too. They said they would take over every aspect of their case. I appreciate the work you do Blue Beetle really, but I can't tell you
anymore, I can't risk my job. I have to do what I'm told."

Blue thanked the woman for her help. He stepped outside. The wings on his armor grew and he flew into the sky.

Jaime chimed in on his earpiece communicator, "You were right Static."

Virgil answered on the other end, "Noooo please don't tell me that."

"Let me guess," Dick's voice came onto the com link. "They were picked by a government agency and they have no idea where they are?"

Jaime sighed, "Yeah. Tye, Jenny, Jivan, Summer. They're gone."

Virgil groaned, "I got the same answer when I went to the Dakota City PD. Frieda was supposed to be a witness to Francis and Leonard's trial. But the trial was dropped and now they can't find them. Some mystery government goons came in the middle of the night and snatched them up with no notice."

"It's the same thing over here in Gotham." Nightwing chimed in next. "I just spoke with Captain Gordon. All of those kids from the halfway house. They were taken too."

"Shit," Artemis swore.

"Same news for you too?" Nightwing asked.

"Yeah," Artemis answered, irritated. "I just got out of the Chicago PD. Those two kids we fought at the mall a while back are missing too."

"So you mean to tell me," Virgil said. "That all of these metahuman kids that we've helped lock up, are missing. Someone, something just snatched them up and we have no idea where they are?"

"Yeah," Jaime answered a nervous flutter rising in his gut. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

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Themyscira

April 29th 2017

15:20

Steam of the hot spring waters danced against Cassie's face. She sat in the waters naked as their supernatural healing properties worked their final rounds on her once beaten body.

She let out a slow breath. The trickling and bubbling of the waters filled her ears as she closed her eyes. For the first time since she was brought there, she finally remembered what peace felt like. She'd forgotten what it was like to feel calm.

The sounds of the water echoed around her. The springs sat in the caverns on the mountain side. Her particular spring sat on the edge of the mountain, it had an open air wall that outlooked the ocean. Tunnels wound through the mountain springs in various paths but the Amazons allowed her request of her own private spring. Trauma it seems, didn't call for an audience.

Cassie was so at ease, it seemed, that she did not hear the approaching footsteps.

"Sweetie?"
Cassie opened her eyes to see her mother kneeling next to the spring.

"MOM!" Cassie jerked, covering herself under the water with her hands. "Could you knock?" She barked, annoyed.

"Sweetheart," Helena chirped. "I changed your diaper for years it's nothing I haven't seen."

"Still not ok." Cassie griped. She stepped out of the tub, quickly putting on the robe that lay next to her.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine."

"You don't seem-"

"I said I'm fine!" Cassie snipped at her. A sinking feeling rose in her gut at the look on her mother's face. She turned her head away from her and walked to the open wall. She looked out at the green fields and ocean before her.

Helena sat up, walking up next to her. She looked out as well. "Thymescarya is beautiful, isn't it? I've never seen any other place like it."

Cassie didn't respond.

Helena's tip-toed with her words. She spoke, softly. "I can't help you if you won't talk to me."

"It's nothing that you can fix mom." Cassie answered looking down."You can't fix everything."

"When it comes to my daughter I can try."

Cassie remained quiet again, a stoic look on her face.

A shaky breath filled her lungs as water rose in her eyes. "Why wouldn't you let me see you? It's been a week Cassie, why did you have them keep me out? And Diana?"

Cassie closed her eyes, dreading the conversation she knew would come. It was true, as soon as they arrived the healers tended to her wounds, and she forbade any visitors until she was completely healed.

"You guys didn't need to see me like that. I didn't want you guys to worry."

"I'm your mother I'm always going to worry."

"I just- I didn't want you to see me. I didn't want to be seen."

"Why? We were worried about you-"

"Because I'm embarrassed, mother." Cassie barked, snapping her gaze at Helena's direction.

Cassie's composure began to chip away. "I am so embarrassed." She said with a cracked voice. "The whole world saw-" The took a moment to gather herself as water welled in her eyes. "The whole world saw me. Saw me so...weak and helpless."

Anger filled her cheeks with heat as some of her words jumped out as a hiss. "People all over the world saw me-saw me scream and cry like a weak little girl."
"You don't need to be embarrassed Cassie." Helena pleaded. "You were kidnapped and collared, it could have happened to anyone."

"But it happened to me." Cassie spat. Her tears finally fell with exasperation. "My reputation, my-my superhero career is on the line. How could anyone take me seriously after that?"

Helena's jaw fell, gasped. "Cassie you almost die. And your... reputation is what you're worried about?"

Cassie fell silent, looking at her with piercing eyes.

"I'm sorry, but you need to change your priorities." Helena answered with a stern voice. "You need to focus on the fact that you are alive. You faced down the barrel of death's gun and by the grace of the gods you are alive."

"I'm alive because of my friends." Cassie snipped. "I am alive because my friends came for me. Don't-" She snarled. "Don't shit all over their success of saving me by saying it was some miracle from the gods!"

"Do not raise your voice at me like that!" Helena scolded back.

They both stood quiet for a moment. Cassie's face softened in apology.

"Yes, I'm sorry, you're right." Helena responded, calmer. "Yes your friends saved you."

"Yes, they did." Cassie answered. She reeled back in her anger but were tone was still bold and firm. "Because they are skilled and powerful. And they care about me. Grace of the Gods mother? There are no gods." She scoffed. "My friends and I, we are the gods." She became heated again. "At least we're the ones acting like they should be. We're the ones answering prayers. We're the ones saving this messed up world from all of this shit."

"There are no gods?" Helena replied, confused. "Cassie, your father is Zeus. You know this."

"Yeah, and he's been absent from this whole time. Just like he's been absent from my whole life."

"Cassie," Helena said, astonished. She shook her head. Her daughter stood before her, but Cassie was nowhere to be seen.

"You've changed." She said. "Even before haven't been the same since San Diego."

Cassie's words died in her throat. She was right. Ever since she watched thousands of those people die, the person she was slowly drifted from sight.

She didn't recognize herself either.

"I've just seen the gods for the cowards that they are." She beamed. "And I've realized what I have to become in order to save these people that they won't."

But this new person could be a Cassie that would ensure survival.

Helena fell quiet, looking at her in disbelief.

Cassie closed her eyes, knowing that her mother would never understand. And that their continuing the conversation would be useless.

Cassie walked back to the spring and gathered her things in her arm. She walked to the entrance of
the cave and stopped.

She looked back over at her mother who had been watching her movement, silent.

"You know," Cassie said quietly, eyes to the floor. "I thought that whole time, that I was going to die in that room with Inertia."

She looked up at her mother, a sullen sadness in her eyes. "Maybe a piece of me did."

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**The Watch Tower**

**April 30th**

**12:00**

"Ready to be ticked off?" Bart asked with a jeer. He leaned back in his chair.

"I'm always ticked off." Rose answered, fuming in the chair next to him. "It's bad enough you guys are making me go to regular school, so why the hell do I have to do this sidekick study group too?"

Kaldur sighed as he stood at the front of the conference table. Emily, Garfield, Virgil, Joey, Jaime, and Tim sat on the other chairs around him.

"Because Rose," He said. "It is important for rookies to learn the basics of what we do. Just as detectives and enforcers of the law start their fieldwork in the classroom, so do we."

"A book isn't going to teach you how to knock a guy out," Rose answered.

"I mean, I'm kind of on Rose's side on this one." Jaime said. "Why do we need to listen to a UN Council meeting?"

"Good question," Kaldur said. He waved his arm, a virtual monitor appeared before them. It showed footage of a United Nations meeting room, nearly full with diplomats and representatives.

Kaldur continued, "The reason being is, this emergency meeting they are about to start was requested by Lex Luthor. A man, as we all know, is a member of The Light and an enemy to The League. Announcements from him are important for us to listen and pay attention to. Because international politics, as boring as it may be, can change policies that affect us as heroes."

Kaldur spotted the collective glazing over of their eyes. Unfortunately for them, he was not merciful enough to not deliver the final blow.

He said, "And after the broadcast and a quick discussion. You will all write a one page paper on your understanding of it."

The room filled with their collective groans.

Within fifteen minutes, the rest of the UN meeting chamber had filled entirely. Seen sitting towards the front was Catherine Colbert, civilian liaison for The Justice League. The room quieted as Lex Luthor walked with confident strides towards the front podium.

He began, as poised and polished as he always was.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the UN council, I wanted to thank you all for your diligent speed at arriving to this emergency meeting. As we are all aware, our planet has come under seige." On the
massive projector screens behind him; images of past Apokolips monster attacks.

He continued. "We have experienced attacks from the past year from an unknown alien enemy. An enemy that we have lost countless lives to. And information we have very little on." He paused. "Not only are we facing intergalactic threats, we are also facing violence in our own homes."

The video changed to a montage of news headlines and photos of metahuman attacks. All in typical flashy, Lex Luthor fashion.

He spoke on. "The Metahuman gene is something that has been growing at an alarming rate. It has surfaced among our children. Children who have become in and of themselves dangerous weapons because of it. They have no control and as a result hurt themselves and the people around them."

"Our local law enforcements are trying their best to remedy both of these. But have little knowledge or resources to tackle and control these issues. But it's not their fault. With the world's partnership The Justice League we were promised these issues of alien invasions and metahumans would be something that they would protect us from. But so far, as I think we all can agree, they're failed."

Jaime and Bart exchanged annoyed glaces. A small growl fell from Garfield's throat.

"Two million lives were lost in The Sink of San Diego." Luthor beamed. "An attack that we now know was brought on by these alien invaders. And a conservative statistic of 2,000 meta-human related deaths in just the United States alone."

Tim scoffed, wondering if anyone had fact checked he statistic he boasted.

"I come to you today, not to just rehash our current state of emergency." Luthor chimed, "But to offer a solution."

Small gasped filled the meeting room as the projection behind Luthor changed once again. Kaldur's jaw slacked as he gazed upon the images. They were blueprints of Darkseid's Warhound Armor that he had come to recognize all too clearly.

"This is the prototype of Lexcor's latest invention." A smile threatened to surface upon his lips as he said, "Warhund."

Murmurs erupted as the doors of the UN Councilroom swung open.

"What?" Virgil gaped.

They watch in eerie stillness as seven figures in full Warhound armor, marched towards the podium.

Luthor spoke fully over the rising voices of the councilroom. "Inspired by the Molossus war dogs of ancient Greece. The Warhund is a new way for governments to provide protection for our cities with wearers of undying loyalty. Just as we see in our everyday canine companions."

"This armor is used by and is exclusively designed for metahumans as a means for them to harness and control their powers. Every helmet has a failsafe device which renders the wearer unconscious should they ever show any sign of disobedience or violent intent."

The Warhunds stood at attention on each side of Luthor.

"The armor not only allows the wearer to use their metahuman powers, but also contains weaponry. Weaponry we have duplicated from the enemy aliens themselves. With this armor governments can
utilise their own metahuman law enforcement."

His voice boasted with pride. "Protecting citizens with their own citizens, using the enemy's technology against them. And more importantly while completely under their control." He cleared his throat. "For a nominal fee to Lexcorp, of course."

Concerned, confused voices grew in the chamber. Luthor raised his voice over them, but still maintained a steady timbre.

"With this this technology governments will no longer have to wonder if The Justice League will be able to make time for their emergency. They will be able to tackle it in real time without any of the casualties we are so used to seeing. In fact, I am confident that the effectiveness of this technology, will disintegrate the world's need for The Justice League all together."

"What did he just say?" Jaime said in awe. He looked at the flabbergasted look on his teammate's faces.

Over the roar of voices, Catherine Colbert called out to Luthor raising her hand, trying to get his attention for a question.

"Yes, miss Colbert?" He addressed.

Murmurs still loomed under her as she spoke. "Mr. Luthor, I:" She lost her verbal footing, mind racing. "You-you have thrown so much at us. And to-to say that these Warhunds would replace The Justice League that is-that is a stunning prediction." She gaped. "How do we know to trust those people in that armor? Who is even under there?"

"Oh of course," Luthor said with a click of his tongue. "Why don't you hear the testimonials from our employees themselves. Warhunds, if you could retract your armor please?"

The black and red Warhound armor slithered up their chests and back. He pulled all the way up until it covered only the tops of their heads.

They all gasped at the familiar faces.

Jenny, Summer, Jivan, Tye, Francis, Leonard, and Debora; all once incarcerated metateens, stared back at them on the other side of the screen.

"Dude." Jaime breathed, his mouth agape, looking over at Virgil. It seemed they now knew where their missing friends were taken to.

"Francis?" Luthor said. "Why don't you say a few words?"

Francis walked up to the podium. He cleared his throat and said, "Hello, my name is Francis Stone."

A anger ignited beneath Virgil's skin. Sparks danced in his closed fists and the image of Francis on top of Frieda replayed in his mind.

There was a look to Francis that seemed odd. There was a gloss to his eyes and a calm to his voice that made him seem like he were far away. He continued. "Earlier this year my meta-gene activated. And I didn't know how to control it. Some people that I care about were almost hurt because I couldn't handle my new powers."

Virgil wanted to punch him in his fucking throat.
"And I, unfortunately was not selected by The Justice League to be a protege. So I was locked away in jail cell because no one knew what to do with me." He smiled a distant sort of smile. "Mr. Luthor gave me a second chance. Now I can give back to my community by helping to protect it."

The murmurs in the UN councilroom rose again. Luthor motioned for another teenage Warhund to take the stand.

Rose snarled. "No fucking way. Her?"

"My name is Debra Morgna." Debra took the stand, the same glossy eyes and clouded expression. She was a ghost of the volatile firebird that had attacked them at the Metahuman Halfway House in Gotham.

"The reality that we live in is that this metagene is here to stay. Ours is here stay." She sid. "The other reality is that it can make us violent. It did for me. I hurt my classmates, I hurt my mother. But the training with the Warhund armor gave me control. A control when I didn't think I could ever trust myself again. I have full trust in Lex Luthor and his Warhund initiative. Let us be apart of your trust. Let us protect you in a way The Justice League can. With full knowledge and full control of our actions."

The concerned faces of the UN officials turned from concern to intrigue.

Rose turned to her teammates, aghast. "Is she fucking joking? She's one of the worst. Who does Luthor think he's fooling?"

An icy chill fell down Kaldur's spine as Luthor took more of the UN official's questions. It wasn't The League or The Team Luthor had to fool, it was the public.

And the public, unfortunately, is always much more malleable.

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